

An Ellam-Innes Collection Publication

**Private David John  
Simcock**

Gallipoli Star



**11<sup>th</sup> Battalion  
Australian Imperial Force**



**‘The bloke with the Pink Top’**

Shortly before dawn on 25 April 1915 Western Australians from the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Australian Imperial Force, made an opposed landing on the Gallipoli peninsula. Among them was thirty-two year old Private David John Simcock, a larger than life character whose subsequent death would touch the lives of many Australians.

David, son of Edward and Bertha Simcock, was born in Callington, South Australia, in 1883. From the available information the family moved to Perth about 1904-5. In 1906, the same year his father died, David met and married Ellen Jane Collins. The couple bought a house in Derby Street, West Leederville opposite Ellen's parents, and had their first child, Doris Evelyn, in 1907. A second child, Norman David, was born in 1911.

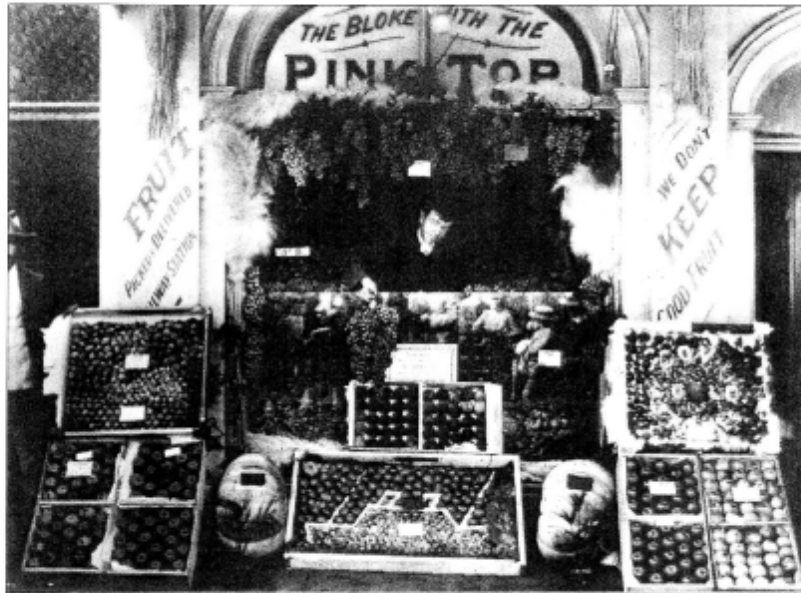
David tried his hand at a number of jobs before purchasing a barrow license and selling fruit from the corner of High and Market Streets, Fremantle. His lively banter and keen sense of humour ensured his barrow was always well patronised. People crowded around, watching him sell his wares or reading his entertaining and amusing signs.

Having red hair, David promoted himself as 'the bloke with the pink top'. The nickname stuck. Good salesmanship and quality produce ensured Pink Top's business would prosper.

In 1909 he took a lease on a former bootmaker's shop at 126 Barrack Street, Perth, and registered it as a fruit shop. The *West Australian* newspaper subsequently reported that his 'altogether novel methods of effecting rapid sales, his known wit and his no mean gift as an orator, made him a conspicuous figure and he soon became one of the identities of the city'.



*The intersection of Barrack and Wellington Streets c1909*



*David, the bloke with the Pink Top and his shop-front display*

On Saturday nights, in order to clear his stock, he would sell a bag of fruit for a shilling. Special customers would find threepence in the bottom of the bag. Trams, which ran past the front of his shop, were often held up by the crowds he attracted. Business, however, was seriously affected by a tramway strike in 1910. David told a newspaper reporter that 'there has been a falling off of 12 or 13 pounds a week. As for fish, I often have to give it away in order to get rid of it. When the trams were running, the people would purchase a crayfish or a 'coute. Now it is difficult to induce many of them to buy even at their own valuation'.

A Pink Top specialty was lemonade. A penny gave you the pick of his lemons, which he would squeeze into a glass with water and a spoonful of sugar sometimes with a powder to make it fizz. The customer's natural inclination to pick the largest lemon would often be tempered with David's advice that 'the biggest is not always the sweetest!'

In 1912 Pink Top travelled to the wheatbelt town of Tammin and did a roaring trade selling fruit to militia troops at their annual camp. Two months later he ventured to the south-west, taking a ton of fruit to the Kojonup show to secure sales.

According to a *Sunday Times* newspaper reporter, Pink Top, whom he described as 'one of the greatest hustlers on the crust of the continent', sought admission to the show grounds but was promptly refused. In consequence David set up his stall opposite the show ground gate. 'In a quarter of an hour he not only had a lot of people drawn across from the adjacent town, but had almost drained the show ground of its patrons - the stalls and booths inside doing absolutely no business while the picturesque Pinky spruiked'.

The show committee reluctantly agreed to let David set up his stall inside the grounds, provided he paid the original license fee of one pound, one shilling. The offer was rejected 'with scorn' and 'speckled fruit'. Needless to say Pink Top was allowed in free of charge.

The Perth City Council was less pleased with Pink Top's ability to draw a crowd. In March 1912, after being repeatedly prosecuted because his customers blocked traffic in front of his shop, David promised to alter his window signs. Pink Top was quoted as saying, 'No more they'll plant their number nines, to block the tram or steed. He's putting up some altered signs, that they who run may read!'



*Fruiters and greengrocers committee 1st annual picnic, 4 October 1913.  
Bowler hatted Pink Top is standing on the extreme right of the group*

Early in 1914 David opened a second shop in Fremantle, on the corner of High and Pakenham Streets. He advertised the fact with an ad in the *Fremantle Herald* newspaper in which he called himself 'Pink Top - the red-headed Chinaman', an obvious play on the local Chinese market gardeners.

The new shop was managed by Henry 'Snow' Coall who was a trusted employee at David's Perth shop. Upon the birth of Henry's daughter in 1912 Pink Top presented the infant with a ruby topped jug. He gave a second jug on Marion's first birthday. In later years when Marion asked her father why she hadn't received a third jug she was told that Pink Top wasn't able to give her another one because he had been killed at Gallipoli.

On Sunday 10 May 1914 David joined a number of citizens and local dignitaries who had turned out to repair the road between North Fremantle and Mosman Park. Not one to let an opportunity slip by, Pink Top used the occasion to raise his public image by betting any of the curious onlookers that he could smash a lump of capstone with a single hammer blow.

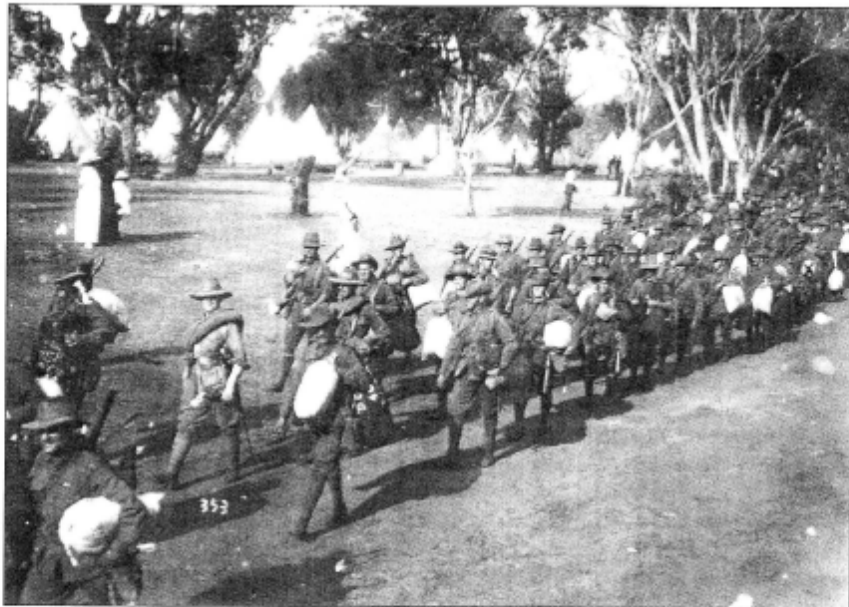
A hammer blow of a different kind fell less than four months later. On 5 August 1914 Australia learned that Great Britain was at war with Germany.<sup>1</sup> The Australian Prime Minister had earlier pledged to support Britain with an offer of 20,000 troops. This offer was gratefully accepted on 6 August.

Recruiting for the expeditionary force, to be known as the Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.), officially commenced on 10 August. Exactly a week later, having got his family and business affairs in order, David Simcock enlisted.

The *West Australian* reported that David's contact with militia troops at Tammin 'probably influenced him to become one of the early volunteers when the first contingent was formed, and his irrepressible humour made him a valuable addition to life in the camp'.

No. 951, Private David John Simcock, H Company 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion, A.I.F., passed his medical on 11 September 1914. He was then thirty-one years of age. The surviving medical report note that David stood five feet eight and a half inches tall, weighed one hundred and forty-four pounds and had a chest measurement of thirty six and one half inches. He was of fair complexion, blue eyes and had 'ruddy' hair.

On his attestation paper, signed at Blackboy Hill training camp the same day, David nominated his wife, Ellen Simcock, of 4 Holyrood Street, West Leederville, as his next of kin.



*D Company, 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion marching out of Blackboy Hill Camp in 1914*

<sup>1</sup> Britain declared war on Germany on the night of 4 August 1914.

On 31 October, barely ten weeks after it had been raised, the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion marched out of camp and entrained for Fremantle. There it embarked in the transports *Ascanius* and *Medic* for overseas service. David was assigned to the *Ascanius* and quickly put his astute business skills to work.

According to 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion veteran Sergeant John McCleery, DCM, David would 'buy goods from the ship's canteen and take them up on deck and sell them at a penny profit'. David also ran a Crown and Anchor board until they were prohibited.

He then 'hit upon the idea of a soup plate, into which, from a prescribed distance, the boys tossed a penny. Any penny remaining in the plate was worth a shilling to the player, and "Pinktop" collected all the misses. Of course, this did not last long either, for "Pinktop" was soon stopped by an officer. "Pinktop" lived up to his name and colour. He flared up and ended up being sent to the cells'.<sup>2</sup>

David's somewhat dubiously obtained funds were put to good use on the morning of 25 November when the convoy called at Aden. Native boats carrying all manner of goods appeared and a brisk trade soon developed. Pink Top had managed to accumulate thirty-five pounds, and with this money he bought up all the oranges from the bumboats and distributed them amongst the men free of charge.

*Ascanius* and the bulk of the convoy reached Alexandria on 5 December, the slower *Medic* not arriving until 11 December. It had been planned that the Australian and New Zealand troops would complete their training in Britain before going to France, but the northern winter and a shortage of accommodation forced a re-think. The decision was made that the troops would complete their training in Egypt.

On 1 January 1915 the Australian battalions were re-organized to comply with British War Office requirements. Instead of eight companies in each battalion there would now be four, designated A, B, C and D. David was re-assigned to D Company.

On 28 February the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> Battalions, forming the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 1st Australian Division, left Mena Camp for the Greek island of Lemnos to prepare for possible employment on the Gallipoli peninsula.

Prior to this the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Lyon-Johnston, had suggested a group photograph to 'commemorate the campaign and be a souvenir of the war'.

All members not on duty were paraded in front of the Great Pyramid of Cheops. It was subsequently reported that as 'soon as the vast crowd had placed themselves upon the lower strata of the said relic of the Pharaohs, someone asked where Pink Top was. "Down here!" called out a private in the foundation layer. "Send him up to the top of all the men!" called out the Colonel. "We must have Pink Top at the apex."'.<sup>3</sup>

Whether the story is true or not, Private David Simcock can be clearly seen standing to attention at the top of his battalion in the historic pyramid photograph.

<sup>2</sup> Belford, Walter C., *"Legs-Eleven"*, Imperial Printing, Perth, 1940, p.27.



*David can be clearly seen at the apex of his battalion on the Great Pyramid of Cheops in this cropped image from the historic photograph of 11 Battalion*

On 2 March, the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion embarked in the transport *Suffolk* and sailed for Lemnos, about fifty miles south-west of the Gallipoli peninsula. Mudros Harbour was reached on 5 March, but due to a shortage of water and limited accommodation on the island, the troops were kept on the ship. Although taken off for route marches and practice landings, *Suffolk* was 'home' for the battalion for the next seven weeks.

During a practice landing one of A Company's boats tried to get away from the ship's side in a choppy sea. In charge of the boat was Captain W.R. (Dicky) Annear, with Lieutenant D.H. McDonald at the tiller. According to one witness:

The men did not shine as oarsmen, but McDonald must have been the world's worst steersman, because he would persist in turning the tiller the wrong way. Annear kept shouting in exasperated tones, "Mr McDonald, I want to go out to sea! I want to go out to sea!" and all the time McDonald would turn the tiller the wrong way and the boat kept bumping into the ship, much to the amusement of the crowd that lined the taffrail.

In the meantime the mess orderlies, who had been left aboard to clean up after breakfast, were tossing the slops overboard, and a most unfortunate accident occurred. Captain Annear's boat had been drifting towards the stern of the *Suffolk*, and as the party got right underneath one of the chutes a mess orderly let fly with a dixie full of slops and the poor Captain collected the lot, all over his hat and clothes.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Belford, Walter C., op.cit., p.54

In about the third week of April, when it was generally known that there would be a landing and that Constantinople was the objective, David decided to have a little fun. He posted a nomination sheet for the 'Constantinople Cup', on which he wrote the names of certain officers. David then gave them riders and pedigrees which were 'allusions to various incidents in the careers or were peculiarities of the officers mentioned'. Captain A.E.J. Croly's pedigree was given as 'Out of Pubs by Midnight'. Needless to say Captain Annear's was given as 'Slops ex Suffolk'.

The honour of being selected as the covering force for the landing on 25 April 1915 went to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade. The four battalions were to safeguard the beach-head by seizing and holding the high ground to the north-east of the landing point.

David's main anxiety concerning the landing was how he would cope with under-water barbed wire. According to Private H. V. (Snowy) Howe, Pink Top 'paraded one day before the Colonel with his invention: a pair of leggings fashioned from a biscuit tin worn under the puttees. The Colonel was not impressed'.<sup>4</sup>

The leading elements of the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion landed on the northern side of Ari Burnu at approximately 0430 on 25 April, on what was later known as North Beach. A and C Companies were landed first in boats from the battleship HMS *London*. B Company was landed with the second wave, in boats from the destroyer HMS *Usk*. David's company also landed in the second wave and was taken ashore in boats from the destroyer HMS *Chelmer*.

Men from A and C Companies, together with elements of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Battalions, stormed the heights immediately above the beach and drove the Turkish defenders from their trenches on Plugge's Plateau. During the fighting Captain Annear was shot in the head and killed.

B Company, landing further north, together with a half company from the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion, scaled Walker's Ridge and Russell's Top, crossed The Nek and seized the heights known as Baby 700. A number of men from B Company, under the command of Captain E. Tulloch, pushed on and reached the immediate objective – Big 700, better known as Battleship Hill. The position, however, was untenable and the troops were forced to withdraw to Baby 700 and then back across The Nek.

After re-forming in Rest Gully, elements of A, C and D Companies moved up Monash Valley to establish a defensive line along the crest of the 400 Plateau to The Nek. According to the battalion diary, the survivors from the morning's fighting 'occupied [the] forward ridge about three-quarters of a mile from [the] beach and entrenched. Owing to disorganisation consequent on landing on different parts of the beach and being mixed up with other units, it was impossible to get the battalion together as the men were engaged in small parties right along the line of trenches'.<sup>5</sup>

The 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion was relieved on the night of 28 April and withdrawn to the beach for rest and re-organisation. Prior to the landing the battalion had a nominal strength of 33 officers and 994 other ranks. A percentage, however, did not take part

<sup>4</sup> Bush, Eric, *Gallipoli*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1975, p.177.

<sup>5</sup> Belford, Walter C., op.cit., p.83.



Curiously, despite David's popularity, there is an element of mystery about the cause, and even the date of his death. According to one newspaper report David was killed on 25 April. It claimed that 'The officer in charge of his company was shot down and, there being no one to lead the men, "Pinktop" volunteered and took command. He gave the order to charge, and they did not stop until poor "Pinktop" had just gained the top of the hill. Just as he said 'Come on boys', he was hit full in the face by shrapnel and blown to pieces'.

Apparently based on the same source, another report, in the 15 June 1915 edition of the *West Australian* newspaper, claimed that Simcock's end was a gallant one, having been 'killed by shrapnel while leading his company in a charge on the Turkish positions after all the officers had been shot down'.

In 1921, in the second volume 'Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18 - The Story of Anzac', the noted author and war correspondent C.E.W. Bean gave a different account of David's death. He wrote that on the night of Sunday 25 April, Simcock was killed while trying to bring a wounded man into cover during a Turkish attack on Baby 700.<sup>6</sup>

In 1940, Captain Walter C. Belford, author of "*Legs-Eleven*", the unit history of the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion, provided yet another account and a later date of David's death. Belford claimed that Simcock had been killed in early May by a sniper on Sniper's Ridge. He wrote that 'Poor old "Pinktop" was killed early in the action through bobbing up and down in the trench, trying to get a look at what was going on. Unfortunately, he bobbed up once too often'.<sup>7</sup> According to defence department records, however, David John Simcock, 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade, was killed in action at the Dardanelles on 2 May 1915.

David's personal effects were returned to his widow Ellen in April 1916. It was not until four years later she received his identity disc. Described as 'considerably impaired by long exposure', the disc had been recovered from the battlefield by a war graves exhumation party.

Regardless of how he met his end, David Simcock, the irrepressible 'Pink Top', was widely mourned by fruit growers and others in the market industry as well as his countless friends and customers. For many years, however, David's memory lived on, immortalized by his Barrack Street fruit shop which continued to trade until 1979 under the name 'The Pink Top'.

David Simcock is buried in the Baby 700 cemetery, which was established after the November 1918 Armistice. He lies with 492 other Commonwealth servicemen who are commemorated in this cemetery but there are some 450 men who are yet to be unidentified.

David Simcock's final resting place suggests that he was killed in the vicinity of Baby 700 which is about a mile north of Sniper's Ridge. Perhaps then Pink Top did die a hero's death on 25 April 1915.

<sup>6</sup> Bean, C.E.W., *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18, Volume I, The Story of Anzac*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1921, p. 472

<sup>7</sup> Belford, Walter C., op.cit., p. 98-9.



*David Simcock's widow Ellen with their two children, Norman and Doris c1925*

## ***LEST WE FORGET***



*Material for this publication was collected and collated by the late Raye Innes.  
For further information on the 'Ellam-Innes Collection', contact Allan Ellam,  
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*Wes Olson - Editor*