

# Black Jack

By Peter Chinn



I do not suppose there are many Customs officers today who have heard of "Black Jack" Galleghan but, to the generation who lived or served in the forces through World War II his was almost a household name. I have a somewhat special knowledge of the man who was my father's boss in the Commonwealth Investigation Service in the late 1940s-early 1950s and through having met him several times.

I knew he had been a Customs Officer at Newcastle early in his career but had not thought too much about it until recently when, in the course of my duties as History Officer, while examining some ancient records from the old Newcastle Customs House I came across an operational diary which

bore his long-forgotten but distinctive signature. So I pursued some research to learn more about the career of one of our most notable officers.

Frederick Gallagher Galleghan was born in the Newcastle suburb of Jesmond in 1897, the son of a waterside worker, one of whose parents came from the West Indies. Fred was a tall, well-built man of olive complexion whose ancestry was not readily apparent. However, in the earlier half of the century, colour prejudice was rampant and, according to Stan Arneil, Galleghan's biographer, the family had some sensitivity to its West Indian blood. It appears the nickname "Black Jack" was bestowed on Fred by his troops in Malaya and evolved partly from his background but also because he was a strict but respected disciplinarian. Arneil stated that Galleghan was proud to be known as "Black Jack" during the years as a prisoner of war under the Japanese.

Fred completed his secondary education at Cook's Hill High School and, like so many of our officers of yesteryear, joined the Commonwealth Public Service as a telegraph messenger with the Postmaster-General's Department in 1912 on the princely salary of one pound a week. He was an enthusiastic sportsman but also keen on the army, serving in the Cadet Corps. In 1916, at the age of 19, he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force and served in France with the infantry, attaining the rank of sergeant. He was seriously wounded in action and convalesced in England before returning to the front.

At war's end he returned to Newcastle and resumed his career with the Postmaster-General's Department as

a clerk at several Newcastle suburban post offices and later with the Electrical Engineers Branch of that department until November 1926 when he transferred to the Department of Trade and Customs Newcastle office as a clerk on an annual salary of 258 pounds. Looking at the establishment of the sub-collectorate at that time, Fred's position probably could be equated to the equivalent of today's Band 2.

Promotion between the wars was very slow for a number of reasons: people tended to make the public service a lifetime career and retirement at age 65 was the norm. Furthermore, on the threshold of the Great Depression, there was little or no growth in the public service. I remember one senior officer telling me many years ago that, in those times, it was common to remain on the one grade for ten years or more.

In 1926, Newcastle had a staff of 22, ranging from the Sub-Collector, Alfred Henry Gibson (who held that position from 1917 to 1934), through examining officers, clerks, a locker, a typist, launch crew, searchers and watchmen to the lowly messenger.

Looking at the Newcastle staff list published in the Commonwealth Gazette of 18 November 1927, I recognised the names of three officers who were still in the department as recently as the early 1960s:

- J. F. (Jim) Conlon, the patriarch of the famous Customs family who later moved to Sydney to eventually retire as Senior Inspector, Invoice Room in 1964
- Frank Buxton, who saw out his long career at Newcastle
- Joe Temby, one of the longest-serving preventive officers - the latter two whom I met on my visits to Newcastle in the late 1950s.

Fred Galleghan remained at the same grade during his ten years with Customs at Newcastle. While no records are now available to indicate the positions he occupied, it is likely that he performed a wide range of duties both in the Customs House and on the wharves

as an assistant examining officer. Biographer Stan Arneil, a longtime friend and sergeant in his unit throughout the war, dismissed Fred's Customs career in one line in his book, *Black Jack*, focusing naturally enough on the man as a soldier and later as a senior public servant.

While Fred's Customs career did not reach exalted levels, his career in the Militia (today's Army Reserve) was another story altogether. He joined the Militia on returning from France in 1919 and in, 1932, was promoted to lieutenant-colonel as commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion (City of Newcastle Regiment).

In November 1936, Fred Galleghan decided to seek another career path and was promoted to the position of second-in-charge of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch, Attorney-General's Department, in Sydney. This small unit was the forerunner of ASIO and the Australian Federal Police and was responsible for security matters and the investigation of breaches of the Commonwealth Crimes Act. No doubt Fred's character, ambition and position in the Militia were significant factors in his obtaining this position. Had he continued with Customs, it is more than likely that he would have reached the highest levels in this department on the basis of his subsequent career progression.

Fred's military abilities were evidently well-regarded as he was appointed commanding officer of the 17th Battalion (North Sydney Regiment) in 1937, which position he held until 1940 when he took leave from the public service and transferred to the 2nd Australian Imperial Force (AIF) as commanding officer of the 30th Infantry Battalion (2/30th) of the 8th Division which was posted to Malaya in 1940.

During the brief Malayan campaign before the fall of Singapore in February 1942, the 2/30th Battalion under Galleghan inflicted the first major Allied defeat of Japanese forces through a devastating ambush of a large unit at Gemas in southern Malaya.

With the fall of Singapore and the surrender of Allied Forces - and the escape to Australia of Lieutenant-General Gordon Bennett and other senior 8th Division officers - Lt. Colonel Galleghan was the senior Australian officer of the many thousands of AIF personnel in the notorious Changi jail. Outranked initially by a more senior British officer, Fred had the dubious privilege of being Deputy Commander Allied Prisoners of War in 1942, and subsequently Commander of Changi Prison Camp from 1943 to 1945. During the years of incarceration, Galleghan maintained strict discipline within the camp and was fearless in his dealings with the Japanese. As a result, he was respected by all and engendered a fierce loyalty from his troops.

During his incarceration, Fred was promoted to brigadier but did not become aware of this until he was released. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order in recognition of his leadership of the 2/30th Battalion during the Malayan campaign.

Galleghan rejoined the Commonwealth Investigation Branch in 1945 as Deputy Director for NSW and, in 1947, was appointed Head of the Australian Military Mission in Berlin with the temporary rank of major-general, which position he held until returning to Sydney in 1950 to his former job. Fred retired from the Public Service in 1959.

In retirement, he was very active in Legacy and other ex-servicemen's welfare organisations and, in recognition of his work, Galleghan was knighted in 1969. Sir Frederick Galleghan DSO, KBE, ED, died in April 1971.

Though a Customs officer for only ten of his 47 years in the Commonwealth Public Service, Fred Galleghan is nevertheless part of our history and one can only speculate on the mark that this remarkable man might have made on the Customs had he stayed.