



Colonel V.C.M. SELLHEIM CMG, CB

(1866–1928)



Colonel Sellheim was a foundation member of the United Service Club, joining as a young officer.

Victor Sellheim served in the Boer War, the Great War, and as Administrator of Norfolk Island from 1928 until his death from a severe heart attack in 1929. He is buried in the Norfolk Island cemetery.

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed. They are intended as casual reading for the benefit of Members, who are encouraged to advise of any inaccuracies in the material.

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*Note that his surname is spelt 'Selheim' in many references,
but he seems to have spelt it 'Sellheim'.*

Victor Conradsdorf Morisset Sellheim (1866-1928) was born on 12 May 1866 at Balmain, Sydney, eldest son of Philip Frederic Sellheim, grazier, and his wife Laura Theresa, daughter of Lieutenant-Colonel JT Morisset¹ of the 48th Regiment.

After Brisbane Grammar School, where he was captain of the school and of cricket and football and an all-round athlete, he was articled to a surveyor working at Charters Towers, on the Herbert River, and at Mackay. Having qualified as a government licensed surveyor, he practised at Gympie and Charters Towers. On 7 December 1890 he married at Townsville Susan Henrietta, daughter of Rev. EM Howell-Griffith; they had no children.

While serving his articles, Sellheim had enlisted in the Kennedy Regiment in which he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1892 and became a Captain in 1893.

He obtained a permanent commission in the Queensland Defence Force in 1896 as adjutant of the Kennedy Regiment and in 1897 he became staff officer, Northern Military District, at Townsville.

Sellheim underwent a series of courses at army schools in Britain in 1899.

¹ Morisset was Commandant of Norfolk Island from 1829 -1834, and has been described as *one of the more notorious of Commandants on Norfolk Island during the Second Settlement*. Others argue that *there is much evidence to suggest that he was no harsher than others and that his conduct was consistent with the attitudes of his time*".

On the outbreak of war in South Africa he was one of a number of Australians attached to British units and headquarters and known as special service officers. Sellheim saw action, as a temporary Major, with British infantry battalions, but later joined the Queensland Mounted Infantry for the advance to Pretoria. For a time, he was staff officer under his friend (and fellow USC member) Major Harry Chauvel². For his services in South Africa Sellheim was appointed CB and Mentioned in Dispatches.

On his return to Australia in December 1900 Sellheim resumed the series of staff appointments which was the lot of virtually all regular officers of his day.

In 1906-07 he spent about a year on attachment in Britain at Aldershot and with the 4th Indian Division at Quetta.

He was promoted substantive Lieutenant-Colonel in December 1909 and appointed Quartermaster General, Australian Military Forces, in 1912.

A story in 'The Argus' (Melbourne) on Saturday 27 Apr 1912 reported this appointment and included mention of Sellheim's service in South Africa: "*Colonel Sellheim began his military career in Queensland, and went to South Africa as a special officer from that state. At the war he distinguished himself by swimming across the Modder River on a reconnoitring work in the face of fierce fire from the Boers.*"



Group portrait of commissioned officers of staff corps and militia units c1913.

Identified, left to right, back row: first three men unidentified; Major Cyril Brudenell Bingham White (a USC Member); Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col) John Monash; Mr J B Laing. Front row: Commander S A Pethebridge; Col R Wallace; Brig-Gen J M Gordon (CGS); Lt Col Harry Chauvel (a USC member); Lt Col Victor C M Sellheim (a USC member), and Col Charles Ryan (Surgeon General).

As a member of the Military Board he was now in a position where he might have some small influence on the army, then in the early stages of the compulsory training system. In 1913 he was promoted colonel.

His appointment as Adjutant General coincided with the outbreak of war in August 1914.

² Later General Sir Harry Chauvel CB, GCMG, KCB

Sellheim joined the staff of the 1st Division, Australian Imperial Force (AIF), as Assistant Adjutant General and Quartermaster General (ie the head of the administrative staff). He was an able and experienced staff officer, highly articulate, and a good administrator.

Unfortunately, he was handicapped by his *presence* - he was corpulent³ and had a stammer, and he quarrelled with his commander, Major General (Sir) William Bridges soon after arriving in Egypt. The latter, deeply involved in training his division, was beset by the growing administrative problems of an expanding force. Bridges' solution was to set up an intermediate base to handle the administration of the AIF in Egypt, but as an Australian section of the British base under General Sir John Maxwell. He sent Sellheim with only his batman and a clerk, but nothing more, to organise and command the Australian section.

'Porky' Sellheim was bitterly disappointed at being relegated to the base when action was impending. Despite Bridges' promise that he would be given the first available command of an infantry brigade, this did not eventuate, and the rest of Sellheim's AIF service was at the base in Cairo and later in London.

As a comparatively junior officer, Colonel Sellheim was required to deal with British generals on behalf of a commander representing the AIF. Fortunately for Sellheim, General Maxwell was well disposed and active; he, at least, was on Sellheim's side.

Bridges dealt with Sellheim only through Maxwell or Lieutenant-General Sir William Birdwood commanding the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. Bridges thought so little of Sellheim's organization that he *'did not hesitate, on occasion, to foist on to it officers of whom he desired to disencumber himself'*.

In November 1915, the Minister of Defence, Senator (Sir) George Pearce, having been persuaded to reorganise the base and give it a strong staff, superseded Sellheim by an officer who was his junior and without consulting Maxwell or Birdwood. Fortunately, that officer, Brigadier General GGH Irving, and others acted to redress the wrong.

(Sir) Robert Anderson, an outstanding businessman disguised as a colonel, told Pearce *'that injustice has unwittingly been done ... Sellheim took hold of this thing when it was in absolute chaos ... A great work has been done, and under most discouraging and disadvantageous circumstances'*.

When Irving was appointed to command a brigade, Sellheim became Brigadier-General on 1 February 1916 and resumed his command on 19 February.

However, his troubles were by no means over. After Birdwood left for France, the training of reinforcements, which had been brought under Australian control, was suddenly taken over in April by a British commander and staff by order of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. Sellheim protested immediately but obtained no redress other than some face-saving concessions.

Birdwood was able to have the base, including the training side, moved to England in May where it became Administrative Headquarters, AIF, under Sellheim, who also commanded Australian troops in Britain.

So large and complex had the headquarters become and so numerous were the Australian camps, including those for the 3rd Division at Lark Hill, that the question of Sellheim's suitability emerged again, especially in view of the problems of dealing with the War Office. Prime Minister Hughes, who was in London, favoured the appointment of a businessman, so Anderson, who was totally unimpressed by British generals, was promoted and replaced Sellheim in August.

Sellheim was sent home to become, once again, Adjutant General. His path may have been eased by a mention in dispatches and a CMG.

Service in Australia in 1916-18 was a stiff test for any senior officer. Pearce wrote of the Military Board in 1917, *'we are now carrying on with our third and fourth "elevens"*, and Sellheim agreed.

³ He was nick-named 'Porky'.

Writing to Chauvel in 1918 he said, '*I am trying to dam back some of the crude ideas which sometimes threaten to leave their banks*'.

Yet things were little better when the war ended and the reaction against defence and its cost set in, boosted by talk of disarmament and the League of Nations. Cost-cutting extended to the Military Board so that Sellheim, who was promoted Major General in January 1920, became Quartermaster General (1922-24) as well as Adjutant General.⁴

The post was a struggle of trying to maintain an army that was neither trained nor equipped to fight. Sellheim resigned in January 1927 and took up his new duties as Administrator of Norfolk Island in February. Sellheim's maternal grandfather Lieutenant-Colonel Morisset had gone as commandant in 1829, and it needed a new administrator.

The Sellheims quickly established themselves in the island community but their time was short.

On 25 January 1928 Sellheim died of heart failure and was buried in the cemetery at Kingston with Anglican rites. His wife, who had organised the Friendly Union of Soldiers' Wives and Mothers in 1915, survived him.

Sources included:

- Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 11, (MUP), 1988
- Various web pages, eg: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/sellheim-victor-conradsdorf-morisset-8385> , <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/11671020> , <http://norfolkislandmuseum.blogspot.com/2013/11/lieutenant-colonel-james-t-morisset.html> , <http://www.firstworldwar.com/bio/irving.htm> , <https://remembering-the-past-australia.blogspot.com/2018/03/appointment-of-officers-aif-16-aug-1914.html> , <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2075243> , https://books.google.com.au/books?id=hYCEVPCe4zQC&pg=PT226&lpg=PT226&dq=colonel+sellheim&source=bl&ots=r6u9nbzAT4&sig=LdGgYicPEInloz1IcxABSMxdvFU&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwio5_KTpJ7dAhXNAYgKHRkACTM4ChDoATAAegQIAhAB#v=onepage&q=colonel%20sellheim&f=false
- <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/chauvel-sir-henry-george-harry-5569>; www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/fiftyaustralians/7; <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/1093510>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Chauvel; <https://loredanacrupi.wordpress.com/2015/04/16/harry-chauvel-a-born-cavalry-officer/>
- *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton
- Club Meeting Minutes, Annual Reports and sundry documents

⁴ The joint appointment may have saved £1,000 a year