David RUSSELL, GC
22nd Infantry Battalion, 2nd New Zealand Division

Born in Scotland in 1911, David Russell came to New Zealand from Australia in 1938. He worked as an orderly at Napier Hospital for two years before volunteering for the 2nd NZEF at the outbreak of WW II.

Russell first saw service in Greece and Crete. Then in 1942, at Ruweisat Ridge in North Africa, he was captured, with most of 22nd Battalion, and was taken to Italy as a Prisoner of War. In 1943 following Italy's capitulation, Russell escaped and was befriended by a sympathetic peasant family. He was recruited into an escape scheme to assist other escaped Allied prisoners back to safety.

Russell assisted in the movement of escaped prisoners until he was recaptured and his Italian friend, Guiseppe, was arrested in February 1945. Guiseppe was later released after Russell denied knowing him. Russell was then told that if he did not give information about the underground movement he would be executed in three days. Russell's response was; "let them shoot me!" A German warrant officer at the resulting execution stated; 'the prisoner died very bravely.' A week after Russell's execution, 47 New Zealanders, Americans, South Africans and Australians made it to safety through the network he had been operating. Russell had details of all these soldiers' locations when he was captured.

After the war, during the War Crimes trial of a German officer, Russell's story came to light. After an investigation, in 1948, he was awarded a posthumous George Cross for gallantry. The George Cross is usually awarded to soldiers for actions 'not in the face of the enemy'. You can't get much closer to the face of the enemy than to be shot by a German firing squad, so the choice of this award instead of the equivalent Victoria Cross is quite interesting.David Russell is buried in Italy at Ponte de Piave, with a large headstone erected by the local people. He is buried between two Italian Patriot leaders and is remembered as a hero by the town.

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