

Harold William Heath 1919-1943

Harold William Heath was an especially brave man. He fought in many battles and led many men to victories even when he knew about his father's deteriorating condition, always putting the future of his country before himself. Though having courage and skill in plenty, he eventually paid the ultimate sacrifice. On the 18th of October 1943, after only a short respite from the battle at Lae and the battle at Scarlet Beach, there was panic because it became evident that a party of the Japanese had cut the supply and communication lines between A Company and the rest. They had infiltrated the lines and there was a danger of them cutting through the beach. Harold was ordered to lead 16 Platoon D Company through the kunai grass to intercept and stop the Japanese.

Harold divided them into 3 sections to fan out through the kunai grass. He led a section of 8 men on the left. Reg Verral, a friend of Harold's, remembers "Harold had always said to never go through the kunai grass, but he had been ordered to do so, so he did". The Japanese were waiting and the section was ambushed. The light machine gun fire took out every second man in the section. Harold was the first to go down. He was killed instantly.



Harold W. Heath was born on the 9th of July 1919 in his parents' bedroom in Cornish Tee, Wallaroo. He was named Harold after his Mother's younger brother who had just returned home from fighting with the famous Light Horse in Egypt during WW1. He grew up quickly, surrounded by his two older sisters, mother and father, and signed the Oath of Enlistment at Wayville, South Australia on the 24th of June 1940, it read:

"I Harold William Heath, swear that I will well and truly serve out Sovereign Lord, the King, in the Military Forces of the Commonwealth of Australia until the cessation of the present time of war and 12 months thereafter or until sooner lawfully discharged, dismissed or removed, and that will resist His Majesty's enemies and cause His Majesty's peace to be kept and maintained, and that I will in all matters pertaining to my service faithfully discharge my duty accordingly to law. So Help Me God!"

On the 2nd of July the new recruits left Wayville and marched into Woodside to begin training where Harold was given the number SX6624 and allocated to B Company, 10 Platoon, 2nd/43rd Battalion and promptly promoted to Corporal due to previous training with the Militia. 2nd/43rd was originally raised as part of 24th Brigade and at this time was part of the 8th Division, but was transferred to the 9th Division on 21/10/1940 before going overseas. If he remained with the 8th, Harold would have been amongst

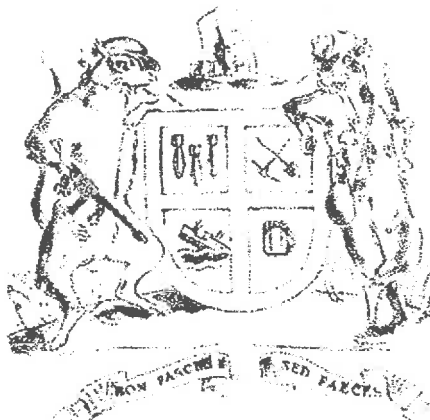
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the troops involved in the fall of Singapore and would have spent the war as a prisoner of the Japanese. Finally leaving on the long trip to war, sporting the 9th Divisions motto of "Nil Desperando" and the original colour patch which Reg Verral stated was a "chocolate over a blue oval on a grey circle" December 28th 1940 the troops left Woodside and entrained for the trip to Melbourne where they embarked on the RMS Mauretania. From Port Melbourne they left to join the convoy in the Southern Ocean and thence to Fremantle, on January 3rd and were granted 11 hours leave, as their last day in Australia. January 5th the Mauretania led the convoy past Rottnest Island and into the open sea. on January 27th 1941 they entered the Gulf of Suez unharmed and on February 3rd the troops entrained to El Kantara, they ferried across the Canal and then boarded another train to El Majdal and thence by truck to Camp Khassa, Gaza where they remained for the next 7 weeks for desert training. After a clean-up of the grounds, B Company 120 men strong, was set the task of guarding 7,000-10,000 Italian, German and Arab prisoners who were kept in a wire enclosure. It was here that Harold killed his first enemy.

He was working with Sergeant Bob Quinn processing a truckload of new prisoners who had been brought in, Bob ordered Harold to guard them. A shot rang out and a German Prisoner fell to the ground. Bob said "Bloody heck Harold, I told you to guard them, not shoot them" (SA, POUP, 1996) But Harold replied "It was him or you Bob, he was going for his gun". Bob searched the body and found the concealed hand gun. It was the first time Harold had saved Bob's life but it would not be the last and this forged a strong bond between them, where Bob knew he could rely on Harold's quick-thinking and cool-headedness. The Bedouin say that "The desert is a fortress to him who knows it – a grave to him who does not" Harold and the men who fought beside him during the two years survived because they were able to make the desert their fortress. Best said by Bob Quinn:

"It was their ability to adapt themselves to living and fighting in the strange and hostile environment that contributed so much to their eventual victory. By their dogged will to survive and their sheer fighting ability they earned the proud title of "Desert Rat" after the little jerboa which made its home in the inhospitable desert". (POUHM, 1948)

The Australians later changed this to the "Rats of Tobruk" and John Dowie, the sculpture and a member of the 2nd/ 43rd created their cheeky Coat of Arms. They wore their title proudly and the caricature of the Rat in a slouched hat adorned their Christmas cards home over the next 2 years.



After fighting many battles,

in December the 9th division finally

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moved out of the Western Desert and the battalions moved further eastward towards Gaza and the hospitals in Palestine.

Three days before Christmas on Gaza Airstrip, Alexander addressed the troops describing the part played by the Australians.

"The battle of Alamein has made history and you are in the proud position of having taken a major part in that great victory".

He acknowledged that war was a "hard and bloody affair" and that "your losses have been heavy indeed". He concluded:

"There is one thought I shall cherish above all others – Under my command fought the 9th Australian Division". (Allen & Unwin, 2009)

They had every cause to be proud. They had fought the German juggernaut to a standstill at Alamein, they had been recognized on the world stage as magnificent fighters and their adversary Field Marshall Rommel, The Desert Fox, had paid them the supreme compliment. When Hitler telegraphed him asking why he was held up at Alamein by a "Division of colonials" Rommel replied

"These are not just colonials, they are Australians. Give me 2 Divisions of Australians and I will conquer the world for you." (Oxford University Press, 2002)

On February 27th 1943 the 9th Division finally came home though even with the knowledge that his father, Herb, was dying, he left once again to protect the children of Australia.

Harold was then sent to Queensland for training to prepare for the jungle fighting to come in New Guinea and the islands to the North.

By now Harold was a WOII and had many difficult times and had trouble keeping the troops moral high but eventually, at 10:00am on August 8th 1943 the 24th Brigade consisting of 2nd/28th, 2nd/32nd and 2nd/43rd Battalions and support groups embarked at Cairns aboard "H.M.T. Manoora", and after an uneventful journey they passed Samarai island, through the Torrens Straits and into Milne Bay and dropped anchor about half a mile offshore.

After a few days they were soon sent forward and embarked on the American L.S.T's ready to move up the coast to Cape Endaile near Buna in preparation for the attack on Lae.

At Buna the Battalion came one step closer to their next objective and first encounter with the Japanese and on September 3rd the 2nd/43rd left Buna in a convoy aboard small invasion barges (L.S.I's) manned by the American 532nd and landed without incident on Red Beach and by September 19th Lae had fallen. After landing at Scarlet beach and a tragic loss of roughly 537 lives the 2nd/43rd lost more lives than in Torbruk.

Finally, on the night of October 16th and 0400 hours, 3 enemy barges were spotted heading for Scarlet Beach. All hands that could use a rifle did so, cooks, wounded, sick, everyone. After the use of 2 anti-tank and a number of machine guns and estimated 70 Japanese landed but were hunted down. Harold, along with Sandy who was a relatively young soldier who had gotten a reputation for being slack with everything and being overall messy, were put out to assess the dead Japanese. Harold looked at a dead Japanese soldier Sandy claimed to have shot and said laconically "I think we'll put this one down as

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blood poisoning, Sandy".

After this Harold then took part in his last mission where he tragically lost his life following orders though the platoon was later withdrawn and no section achieved its objective that day though they had been able to keep the Japanese pinned down.

Harold was buried 3 times.

Firstly on the battlefield.

Secondly on the 4th of April he was reburied at Finschhafen War Cemetery.

He was last buried at the Lae War Cemetery in Section E, Plot E, Row C, Grave 9.

His plaque reads

SX6624 W.O.2

H.W.HEATH

2nd/43rd Infantry Battalion

18th October 1943 Age 24

For the children of Australia, his life he gave.

The ANZAC soldiers showed courage in the face of adversity, they always took care of each other and formed bonds stronger than blood. I believe that the ANZAC spirit means doing the necessary when you just want to turn around and run away and going above and beyond for others just simply because you are able to. Living selflessly and for others rather than yourself.

Harold displayed the ANZAC spirit all throughout his army years, always fighting to protect the people of Australia no matter what. During his last confrontation with his enemy he showed his colours and did what he was told even though he had did not agree with it. He led another man's platoon and took a path he was extremely uncomfortable with and because of this he lost his life. Through it all he only ever thought of protecting his country, his family and his mates and his army mates still talked about him as "one of their boys" until their end as well.

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This scroll commemorates
Warrant Officer 11 H. W. Heath
Australian Military Forces

held in honour as one who
served King and Country in
the world war of 1939-1945
and gave his life to save
mankind from tyranny. May
his sacrifice help to bring
the peace and freedom for
which he died.

*The enclosed Scroll is sent
by Command of The King*

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Personal interviews of the 2nd/43rd men Conducted: Jane Heath Date: 2003

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|-------------------------|---------|
| • Bev Allen | SX5069 |
| • Bob Quinn | SX5559 |
| • Buck Ferguson | SX13533 |
| • Colin Bradshaw | SX18169 |
| • Irwin Jericho | SX17834 |
| • Lawrie Catchlove | SX9947 |
| • Norm Clayton | SX6186 |
| • "Poss" (F.T.) Hardy | SX11192 |
| • Reg Verral | SX14834 |
| • "Smokey" (Ron) Searle | SX11179 |

Memoirs Completed by: Jane Heath Date: 2004

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| • Mason Clark | B Company 2 nd /43 rd | SX5055 |
| • "Poss" (F.T.) Hardy | B Company 2 nd /43 rd | SX11192 |
| • Rex Kidman | B Company 2 nd /43 rd | SX5536 |