



PREMIERS ANZAC SPIRIT PRIZE 2022

ARTHUR JAMES LEE

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Part A : Using a range of sources, research the experience of a South Australian service man or woman who served (Navy, Army, Airforce or Nursing) during World War II



Figure 1
Arthur James Lee at time of enlistment, aged 26 (Service Record)

Arthur James 'Mert' Lee (Figure 1), a proud leader, served as an infantryman during World War 2. Lee was involved in many fields of operation, most notably the conflicts in Damour (Lebanon) and Kokoda (New Guinea). His valiant service evident throughout the war resulted in him being awarded a Military Cross and a second Military Cross to Bar. These were awarded for Lee's "courage and determination,"¹ during his service.

Lee was born on July 30, 1912, in Adelaide, to Mr and Mrs Arthur James Lee. His early years were spent in Glenelg (Adelaide) with his brothers Bob and Jack. In 1925, Lee commenced as a boarder in Allen House at Saint Peters College (Figure 2). While at the College, Lee was an active member of the school's boxing team, house football and Saint Peters College Cadets. In 1935, Lee moved to Berri and became the manager of the Berri Hotel. On January 11, 1939, Lee enlisted in a local militia group. He was put into the 43rd/48th Berri Battalion under the army number 306516.



Figure 2
Allen house photo, 1929, Arthur James Lee (aged 17) in seated row, last on the right (Saint Peters College Archives)

Lee enlisted into the army on the 22nd of May 1940. He was marched into Woodside, Adelaide Hills and posted to the 2/27th Battalion at a Lieutenant's rank (Figure 3) and embarked for the Middle East on H.M.T. Mauretania.



Figure 3
Group portrait of officers of 2/27 Battalion (Australian War Memorial 1940)

¹ Arthur James Lee Service Records

The battalion was involved in the Syria-Lebanon campaign (June-July 1941). The most notable conflict for Lee was the Battle of Damour in which he was "awarded a Military Cross for gallantry in action"¹ and was promoted to Captain for his leadership throughout the campaign. On July 6th, Lee, in charge of the B Company of the 2/27th Battalion, was heavily shelled as they moved through El Battal and El Labiye. When B Company met with D Company, they found them "disorganised in the darkness,"¹ as only one of their officers had survived. Lee chose to push through D Company and take over the second objective. Lee led his men through heavy shelling and machine-gun fire and captured the second objective. The next day, the enemy launched their counter-attack on Hill 560 where Lee led his company and strongly held its position. (Figure 4 and Figure 5)

CAPT. "MERT" LEE
AWARDED MILITARY CROSS

South Australian's Gallantry In Action

Official records received in Adelaide regarding the feat which gained the Military Cross for Captain Arthur James Lee, son of the Federal and State presidents of the United Licensed Victuallers' Association (Mr. A. J. Lee) and Mrs. Lee, of Somerton, describe his conduct in action as "fearless and inspiring."

Captain Lee, who is 29, was educated at St. Peter's College. On July 6 at Damour, in Syria, he was in command of an infantry battalion company. "During an advance the company was heavily shelled, and another company ahead lost all but one of its officers, and became disorganised in the darkness. Captain Lee pushed forward, under heavy shell and machine-gun fire, and captured an objective at the head of his men. During an enemy counter-attack next day Captain Lee again showed great gallantry when leading his company against a strongly held position."

Figure 4
Mentions of Arthur James Lee's Military Cross in local newspapers

Left: Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record 1941
Right: The Advertiser 1941

2/27th Bn.		Regt.	7 Aust.	Division	1 Aust.	Corps	Army	Date Recommendation passed forward	Received	Passed	Approved
Serial No.	Unit	Rank and Name	Rank and Name	Rank and Name	Rank and Name	Rank and Name	Rank and Name	Rank and Name	Rank and Name	Rank and Name	Rank and Name
2/27 No.	51	Capt. Arthur James Lee						On the 6th Jul at the battle of DAMOUR, Capt Lee was in command of B Coy, 2/27th Bn. During the advance to the river the Coy was very heavily shelled as it moved from its position to the objective. B Coy was badly shaken by the enemy fire, and lost all but one of its officers and had become very badly disorganised in the darkness. Capt. Lee quickly seized up the position and decided to push through it, and take over their role which was the capture of the objective. He inspired his men of this section and pushed forward. His Coy was very heavily shelled and machine gunned during the whole of their advance and in addition the men were extremely fatigued by the difficult nature of the terrain. Capt. Lee led them forward and captured the objective by his inspiring and fearless leadership. In the enemy counter-attack on Hill 560 on the following day, Capt. Lee again showed great gallantry in leading his company against this strongly held position. Throughout the campaign in Syria he had exhibited continuously the highest qualities of leadership.	Recommended by	Approved	(To be left blank)

Figure 5
Arthur James Lee recommendation for Military Cross (Service Records)

The battalion was then "dispatched to Port Morseby to relieve the militia battalions that had held the Japanese advance along the Kokoda Track"². Later known as "The Battle for Australia," the Kokoda Campaign was significant as it saved Australia from possible invasion by Japan and isolation from the Pacific theatre of war. It was here, on the Kokoda Track where Lee received his Bar to Military Cross (Figure 6). Again in command of the B Company, Lee was placed on rear-guard during the Australian retreat on the 7th and 8th of September, 1942. When the Japanese soldiers weren't following the company between Efogi and Minari, Lee and his men alongside D Company, took the wounded on stretchers from the Track and put them in a valley "with ambulance volunteers who were prepared to look after them until we could...send back help to pick them up again"³. Lee did this even though it slowed down the progress of the company, when he may have been able to link back up with the battalion because "you never leave your wounded,"³. The Japanese caught up to both companies and "made determined attempts to attack...but B Coy held its ground,"

Figure 6
Mention of Arthur James Lee's Bar to Military Cross (Page 638 | Supplement 35889, 2 February 1943 | London Gazette | The Gazette 1943)

SUPPLEMENT TO THE LONDON GAZETTE, 4 FEBRUARY 1943

Bar to the Military Cross

Captain Arthur James Lee, 2/27th Battalion, Australian Infantry, 7th Australian Division, 1st Australian Corps, 2nd Australian Army, for gallantry in action during the Kokoda Campaign in New Guinea, 1942.

Department of National Service, Canberra, 4 February 1943.

² 2nd/27th Infantry Battalion n.d.)
³ (Lee 1988)

(Figure 7). Both companies began withdrawing but Lee and two other men remained, firing at the enemy 20-30 yards away. It was heard that Lee said “They are getting all the young chaps. We old buggers have something to account for. Come on boys, give the bastards a full mag,” (Figure 7). The three of them fired on the enemy, using most of their ammunition. This caused the enemy to pause their attack and enabled both companies to retreat.

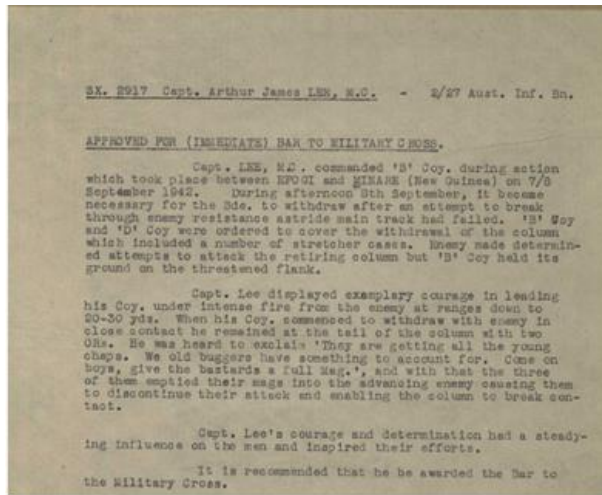


Figure 7
Arthur James Lee
recommendation for Bar to
Military Cross
(Service Records)

Later in the Kokoda Campaign, the 2/27th Battalion was involved in the attacks on Buna and Gona but suffered major casualties and “the battalion was reduced to only 70 men”². Known as a "green hell", the terrain at Buna and Gona was mainly tidal swamps or impenetrable jungles and scrub. Along with treacherous terrain, communication was reliant on runners as telephone lines were frequently cut.⁴

After the attack on Gona, Lee was admitted to hospital for 4 days before he rejoined his unit, taking up the rear guard. On the 30th of June, Lee was appointed Major and transferred to the 2/16th Battalion (Figure 8). Two months later, Lee was appointed command of the 21st Battalion. In April 1944, Lee relinquished his command and attended a Senior Officers course at Land Headquarters Tactical School in Queensland.



Figure 8
Captain T.H. Hodge (left) and Major A.J. Lee MC and Bar (right) of the 2/16th Battalion, waiting for their lunch at the railway station in Cairns (Australian War Memorial 1943)

⁴ (Brien & Summer 1942)

After finishing his course in August, Lee was appointed Lieutenant Colonel and command of the 2/9th Battalion (Figure 9). In April 1945, Lee was accidentally injured for 16 days before returning to his post. A month later, Lee was admitted to 2/2 Australian General Hospital for 11 days as a result of his previous injury.



Figure 9
 Members of Battalion Headquarters, 2/9th Battalion, Penadjam Area, Balikpapan, Borneo (Australian War Memorial 1945)

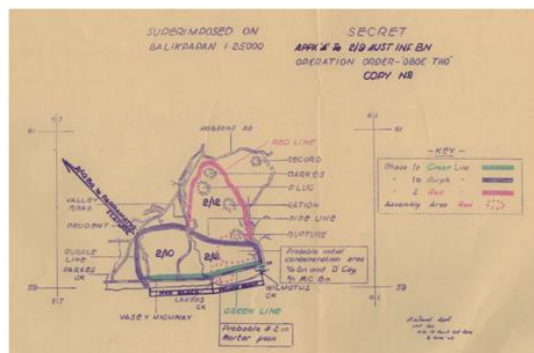


Figure 10
 Map of proposed landing at Balikpapan (AWM52 8/3/9 - 2/9 Infantry Battalion n.d.)

On May 31st, the battalion left for Morotai, Indonesia and on the 20th of June, the battalion left Morotai on the HMAS Kanimbla to disembark at Balikpapan, Borneo or "Oboe 2". "Oboe 2" was the "final large-scale" operation and the "largest amphibious assault ever mounted by Australian forces"⁵. Balikpapan was later considered a waste of men and resources as "it was clear that the Australian operations in Borneo were not contributing...to the final defeat of Japan"⁶. The 2/9th Battalion intended to land on Yellow Beach (Figure 10) and either relieve the 2/10th Battalion of their station at Parramatta or if their attack on

Parramatta failed, to capture Parramatta and the first phase capture of Portee and Potts.⁷ Near the end of the Borneo campaign, Lee was evacuated to the 2/12 Australian General Hospital after aggravating his previous injury. Over the next few months, Lee relinquished his command and was evacuated from Balikpapan and admitted to 2/5 Australian General Hospital in Morotai. Lee was medically discharged on the 24th of October, 1945.

Lee didn't let his injuries stop him after his war ended early. In 1946, he involved himself in the RSL at Glenelg and later became Vice President of the State Board from 1947 to 1954. After he finished his term, Lee was elected as the President of South Australian RSL from 1955 to 1960. While still holding office in South Australia, Lee was elected the National President, the first returned WW2 serviceman appointed to the position. Lee was made a Companion of the British Empire (C.B.E) in 1959 (Appendix 1), awarded a Life Membership for his services to the RSL in 1962 and was Knighted (K.B.E) for his services to the RSL in 1966 (Appendix 2). Lee served and was a member of the Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council, Chairman of the WW2 Services Welfare Fund (SA), Committee of the War Veterans Home, Myrtle Bank, Trustee of the Services Cemetery Trust (SA) and the Poppy Day Trust Fund. Lee also created the A J Lee cup, to raise money for the War Veterans Home.

⁵ (Borneo - Operation Oboe July - August 1945 n.d.)

⁶ (Australian War Memorial n.d.)

⁷ (AWM52 8/3/9 - 2/9 Infantry Battalion n.d.)

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Part B : How did you gather the evidence about your individual in order to tell their story? In your response, explain the process you undertook when researching your individual.

I originally had another serviceman in mind. My Mum knew him from having worked together, and she knew he had also worked at Saint Ignatius College. I got in contact with the archives and received some information on his role as the school's bursar. I made contact with his nephew as well as requested his service records which were not available for public access as they had not yet been reviewed. In consultation with my teachers, I chose a new serviceman. The Virtual War Memorial Australia website listed a number of soldiers from which I chose Arthur James Lee. The VWMA also acted as a research platform for general inquiries about battles and conflicts.

I was drawn to his profile by his rank of Lieutenant Colonel and his Military Cross and Bar. After reading his personal details and the short biography that was contributed by Kathleen Bambridge, I was intrigued and wanted to know more about his story. I then went to the National Archives of Australia and looked through his service record. On his enlistment forms, there was a mention of the St Peters College Cadets, with this information I got in contact with the archivists at St Peters College to see if they could provide me with any information about his schooling. They provided me with a photo from Lee's final year and sports that he was involved in while at the College.

I delved deeper into Lee's service records and created a timeline of events, with this I was able to identify the battalions he was in at particular times, key campaigns and battles he was involved in and the honours and awards he received. Upon finding that he was in the 2/27th Battalion for the majority of the war, I looked at their profile on the VWMA and their Unit Dairies on the Australian War Memorial website. The unit diaries provided a detailed description of what occurred on a day-to-day basis, in rare cases it was hour to hour, that was specific for his battalion. With this, I started to piece together Lee's experience of the war. During this time, I also conducted some background research so that I could better understand the overall picture of the campaigns and the significance behind these major battles. I searched for Lee on the AWM and found many mentions of him. I was provided with 3 photographs, mentions of his honours and awards as well as almost 2 hours of recordings from an interview that Lee did with Peter Brune in 1988 for Brune's book on the Kokoda Track. These provided me with invaluable knowledge that I used in hopes to do Lee's service justice. I looked for mentions of Lee's achievements in newspapers both on Trove and in the *London Gazette* archives as well as an article in *The Last Post* that was written about him by a friend of his in 2017 which confirmed some details that I was not sure were correct.

Word Count : 496