

THE SEVEN WILLIAMS BROTHERS OF KING ISLAND, TASMANIA AND THEIR WORLD WAR 2 SERVICE

Introduction

King Island, situated on the western fringe of Bass Strait, midway between Victoria and the north western tip of Tasmania, has always stood tall when it came to serving the nation during war. During World War 1 the island had the greatest enlistment rate per capita for the British Empire. Support during World War 2 (WW2) was similar and included the only civilian Service (Comfort) Fund that was approved to operate independently.

On Anzac Day 2019, during the King Island's Returned and Services League Main Service, descendants of the seven Williams Brothers proudly spoke of their service to the nation. The brothers, all born in Tasmania, decided to enlist in Victoria; all volunteered to join the Second Australian Imperial Force (2AIF) for overseas service; four served in the same unit, as did another two; and they all returned home after discharge.

Like many veterans, the brothers seldom spoke about their war service; however, with the public release of Service Records by the National Archives of Australia it is possible to gain an insight of each man. Their appeared to be errors in some of the ages stated on their Attestation pages and it was noted that their military offending appeared to be in a similar timeframe.

Aim

The aim of this study is to analyse the service and related records of the Williams brothers – Ernest John, Cyril Norman, Malcolm Wesley, Lindsay Herbert, David Harold, Alan and Ivan – to provide a greater understanding of their lives during World War 2.

Scope

The study concentrates on the life of the seven brothers and does not cover the purpose of units they served in. Further information on the units can be found on-line.

Early Life

The brother's parents, Edward John Williams and Alice May (nee Harman), married on 13 July 1909 in the Methodist Parsonage, Burnie¹. They arrived on King Island, with their first two sons James and Edward John (Ernest)², in 1912 along with Edward's parents James and Sarah Williams. The family survived through manual work including timber splitting, farming and living off the land. The couple had more children – Cyril, Malcolm, Gladys, Lindsay, David, Alan, Ivan and Vera – giving a total of 10, not including a female who died³.

¹ Tasmanian Name Indexes (marriage):1942614.

² Tasmanian Name Indexes (birth):2107284 (4 Jan 1912) states Edward John but he was known as Ernest John.

³ Tasmanian Name Indexes (birth):1815038.

To supplement the family income their children worked and some forfeited their education and were barely literate. They also moved off King Island to Victoria, but returned in the late 1920s. It would not be disparaging to refer to them as 'proud battlers' taking on whatever work they could obtain.

Enlistment and Attestation

Australia introduced compulsory enlistment for males during WW2 for service in the Militia, which was intended for home defence only. Eligible citizens could also volunteer to serve in the 2AIF indicating they were willing to fight offshore. The service number of an 2AIF volunteer has an X as its second letter, just prior to the numerals; the first letter will indicate the State where the person enlisted.

The Attestation Form, used by the Australian Military Forces, was where the person recorded their key information and swore the Oath of Enlistment, provided they were medically fit. Not all information stated by a person was correct particularly with the date of birth. To meet enlistment age limits, older men tended to state they were younger while younger men did the opposite. The exception was Ernest who unnecessarily made himself 10 years older, but gave his correct age of 29. It is obvious on some Attestation Forms, such as Ernest's, that another person filled in the information as the signature is almost a scrawl. This is how errors can occur on documents in the oral to written translation, as the individual is unable to read what was written.

Six of the brothers served in the Royal Australian Artillery and all remained Gunners – the Private soldier equivalent for Artillery. Ivan, the youngest, was a Private and served in the Australian Army Service Corps. It is possible that their education standard limited their promotion, but it is also known that many soldiers preferred not to seek promotion or reject it if offered. Gerard Manion, who served as a Trooper in the 2/4th Armoured Regiment during WW2, when interviewed in 2015 stated, 'I was also quite content to remain a Trooper as I hadn't grown up and I didn't want the responsibility anyway. There were a lot of us who had put our age up and we might have been found out if promoted.'

On enlistment all the brothers stated they were labourers and three would be subsequently discharged before the war was over, to return to farm work. They were Ivan (March 1943), Malcolm (July 1944) and Alan (November 1944). Table 1 shows the enlistment information for the seven brothers, based on their date of enlistment and service number, along with the units they served in, Days on Active Service, Theatres of War and dates of death. It should be noted that until 1974 Bougainville was part of the Solomon Islands.

Five brothers served outside Australia and they are Lindsay (Solomons – 2 Mountain Battery), David, Ernest and Cyril (North Africa, New Guinea and Borneo – 2/12 Field Regiment), and Alan (North Africa and New Guinea – 2/12 Field Regiment). Further information on the 2 Mtn Bty and 2/12th Fd Regt is provided as it lists the campaigns.

Table 1 Williams Brothers Service Record Summary

Name (nickname)	Date of Birth⁴	Enlistment Date	Locality (Victoria)	Service Number	Units (in bold saw active service overseas)	Disch	Active Service (Days: Australia/ Overseas) and War Theatres	Died
Lindsay Herbert (Splinter)	25 Jan 1920	29 Jul 1940	Royal Park	VX38162	4 TA Regt 111 TA Regt 2 Mtn Bty 2/11 Fd Regt 2AOD	27 Feb 1946	1067/348 NT (8/1941-1/1943) S (2/1945-2/1946)	26 Jan 2009
Malcolm (Max)	19 Dec 1915	29 Jul 1940	Royal Park	VX38165	4 TA Regt 111 TA Regt	21 Jul 1944	829/nil NT (8/1941-5/1943)	7 Apr 2000
David (Ginge)	28 Feb 1919 (28 Feb 1921)	11 Mar 1941	Royal Park	VX51070	2/12 Fd Regt	18 Feb 1946	595/978 NA (11/1941-2/1943) NG (7/1943-3/1944) B (4/1945-1/1946)	4 Jan 2004
Ernest John (Johnno)	4 Jan 1902 (4 Jan 1912)	18 Jun 1941	Royal Park	VX57972	2/12 Fd Regt	12 Feb 1946	589/976 NA (11/1941-2/1943) NG (7/1943-3/1944) B (4/1945-1/1946)	4 Jul 2002
Alan (Allan) ⁵ (Ack)	23 Aug 1919 (23 Aug 1922)	18 Jun 1941	Royal Park	VX57974	2/12 Fd Regt	24 Nov 1944	409/711 NA (11/1941-2/1943) NG (7/1943-3/1944)	28 Nov 1980
Cyril Norman (Snow)	15 Apr 1913	18 Jun 1941	Royal Park	VX57987	2/12 Fd Regt	15 Mar 1946	600/996 NA (11/1941-2/1943) NG (7/1943-3/1944) B (4/1945-1/1946)	23 Apr 2009
Ivan (Ike)	09 Mar 1923 16 Mar 1924	16 Feb 1942 7 Nov 1942	Brunswick Cressy	V311045 ⁶ VX121444	6 SPC 13 SPC	30 Mar 1943	351/nil (remained in Victoria)	12 Apr 2008

Abbreviations:

Units: TA – Tank Attack, Regt – Regiment, Mtn – Mountain, Bty – Battery, AOD – Advanced Ordnance Depot, Fd – Field, SPC – Supply Personnel Company

Locations: B – Borneo, NA – North Africa, NG – New Guinea, NT – Northern Territory, S – Solomons (Bougainville)

⁴ Date in Red is what the person stated on the Attestation Form. Correct dates are in Black.

⁵ He enlisted as Alan but Birth Certificate records his name as Allan.

⁶ On 16 Feb 1942 Ivan enlisted in the Militia (Brunswick) and served until 6 Nov, then volunteered for the 2AIF on 7 Nov 1942; hence the two service numbers.

2 Mountain Battery

In August 1943, 'A' Field Battery was reorganized to form the 2nd Australian Mountain Battery, following the successful involvement of the 1st Mountain Battery during operations in New Guinea. Equipped with 75 mm pack howitzers, the Battery arrived in Port Moresby in September. In early 1944, the battery moved to Lae and was re-assigned to provide support in the Finisterre Ranges, and then moved to Dumpu in April 1944, before moving back to Lae in May.

In November 1944, the Battery moved to Bougainville, initially based near Torokina on the west coast. In January 1945, the battery supported a landing around Amun, followed by an attack on a strong Japanese position. Further actions continued through March and April, when the battery came under strong Japanese counter-battery fire. In June, the battery supported the failed amphibious landing at Porton Plantation and remained deployed until August 1945.

Lindsay Williams was posted into the Battery on 3 March 1945 and was then posted to the 2/11 Field Regiment on 19 October 1945. Accordingly, he was involved with part of the operation on Bougainville.

2/12 Field Regiment

Formed in Puckapunyal, Victoria, in early 1940, the 2/12th initially was a medium artillery regiment but was converted to a field regiment due to a lack of medium guns. The regiment's two batteries were 23 Battery and 24 Battery. After completing training in November 1940, the regiment deployed to the Middle East, with just over 700 personnel. They arrived in Palestine in December 1940 and in March 1941 regiment was reorganised into three batteries, each of two troops; the third battery becoming 62 Battery.

The regiment subsequently saw action in North Africa during the Siege of Tobruk and then the First and Second Battles of El Alamein. There was a period of garrison duty in Lebanon between January and June 1942, where the regiment formed part of the occupation force.

In January 1943, the regiment returned to Australia and re-formed on the Atherton Tablelands in April, so the unit could prepare to fight in New Guinea. In July, the regiment embarked for New Guinea to fight against the Japanese. After arriving at Milne Bay in August, they subsequently took part in landings around Lae and then Finschhafen in September. Once Finschhafen was secured, the regiment supported the attack on Sattelberg, before returning to Queensland in early 1944.

The regiment undertook its final campaign in 1945, providing fire support during the Battle of North Borneo. At the end of the war, the regiment was finally disbanded in March 1946. Over 2,000 personnel served in the regiment during the six years it existed, with David, Ernest, and Cyril Williams serving in all the Campaigns. Alan Williams was discharged prior to the embarkation to Borneo, but served in North Africa and New Guinea.

Army Service Records

The Army Records for the seven brothers, all online via the Virtual War Memorial of Australia, detail events for each person by date including: enlistment personal information, postings to units, locations, evacuations, hospitalization, injuries/illness, disciplinary offences, awards and discharge. Post service correspondence was also noted for some brothers, particularly Alan. It is important to note that some of the information is delicate, particularly with diseases, and that Army made maximum use of abbreviations meaning the records can be difficult to decipher.

While it is known that the brothers received parcels from the King Island War Service Fund they never wrote an acknowledgement. Occasionally they would be mentioned by other King Islanders who were serving, but it is believed that their literacy standard was the main reason letters were never sent home.

It was noted that, apart from Ivan, all the brothers were charged with military offences. This was investigated to see if there was a common pattern, where the incident occurred and what could be an explanation.

Military Discipline

The Act establishing the Australian Military Forces gave the authority for Military Law and this was applied through what was known as the Army Law Manual. This listed the offences and authorised certain personnel, such as Unit and Sub unit Commanders to hear charges and award punishments, within set guidelines. Penalties included fines, forfeiture of pay, confinement to barracks, extra guard duty, admonishment, and imprisonment. If the offence occurred While on Active Service (WOAS) the penalty could be increased. Additionally, if a soldier was imprisoned their pay was automatically forfeited.

It is known that boredom due to being left out of operations or undergoing long periods of repetitive training led to soldiers going absent without leave (AWL). The saying was and probably still is 'hurry up and wait'! Of course, the Service Records only record the offence if the person was caught; often they were not. If the person hearing the charge thought the soldier was guilty, but there were other considerations the case could be dismissed.

Lindsay and Malcolm. After their service in the Northern Territory they were both posted to the 111th Tank Attack Regiment located in the Sydney area. Apart from one sub unit being sent to the Northern Territory, the 111th never saw active service. For reasons unknown, both brothers went AWL from 16 June until 24 June 1944, noting that Malcolm was discharged on 21 July. There must have been mitigating circumstances or compassion was shown to them, as the case was dismissed and they did not forfeit pay. It is probable that boredom was the issue, due to continuous training.

David, Ernest, Cyril and Alan.

These four brothers offended on a number of occasions from 1942 onwards, including Neglecting to Obey Orders, Conduct to the Prejudice and AWL. The following events only cover the offences when more than one brother was involved.

After returning from North Africa, on 3 Mar 1943 while in Melbourne they were all charged with Conduct to the Prejudice (of Good Order and Military Discipline), WOAS. They were all found guilty with a fine of £3, except for Alan who was fined £1. The larger penalty was approximately a soldier's weekly wage, so was a severe penalty.

Then on 28 Mar 1943 both David and Alan went AWL for 16 days while still in Melbourne. They were found guilty and the award was 16 days forfeiture of pay plus the automatic forfeiture of 16 day's pay while AWL. A total forfeiture of 32 day's pay – over a month's pay.

Their most serious offending occurred during the time the 2/12th Fd Regt returned from North Africa and prior to reforming on the Atherton Tablelands. Their Service Records do not record any wounds, but the war in North Africa was challenging for all who served there. The brothers would have joined the AIF to fight and, with their limited education, would not have enjoyed continuous training. They were not parade ground soldiers and had better things to do.

Photograph



The only known photograph (photographer unknown) of five of the seven brothers, was taken at the Recruit Reception General Details Depot, Royal Park, Victoria, circa June 1941. It was published in a number of newspapers including *The Examiner (Tas)* where it

appeared on 8 July 1941. The inspecting officers (at left) are Lieutenant Colonel H. Rawson and Lieutenant P. Hockenhull MC⁷ and the brothers are **(from right)** Ern, Cyril, Lindsay, David and Alan. The text mentions that Malcolm was in a military hospital.

Another variant of the same photograph, published later, erroneously gives the date as 1940. There is also an inset photo of Malcolm stating that he served in the Darwin Mobile Force in 1938, and also mentions Ivan. However, only two brothers were serving in 1940, plus there is no record of Malcolm serving in the Mobile Force. A check of the King Island News (via Trove) shows that Malcolm was on the island until he enlisted in the 2AIF in July 1940.

Summary

The seven Williams' brothers served their nation to the best of their ability during WW2, and remarkably all survived and returned to King Island. There is no indication of wounds, but those who served outside Australia did suffer from tropical diseases including malaria. Serving in Artillery, because of the exposure to blast, can result in ear damage and one brother is recorded as having suffered from this. What is not recorded is the effects of mental trauma that can develop many years later – often it is only the relatives who see and suffer from the effects in silence.

How close the brothers were is difficult to state, but the fact that their offending was often in unison implies there was a brotherly love. Apart from Malcolm who moved to Westbury in late 1974, the remaining brothers are all buried in the King Island Cemetery in Currie. Apart from Ernest and Ivan who never married, the other brothers had children and a number of their descendants remain on King Island. The proud legacy of the Williams brothers will remain for many years.

Acknowledgements

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Gary Barker
President
King Island RSL Sub branch
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⁷ Both officers served in WW1 and re-enlisted for service during WW2. V84200 Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Rawson was the Camp Commandant at the Recruit Reception General Details Depot, Royal Park, until he was dismissed from the service on 16 Apr 1942 as the result of a Court Martial. V1657 Lieutenant Phillip Hockenhull was a training officer.