

## OBITUARY – LEN OPIE, DCM

If one reviews the military history of this nation it is commonly thought to have 'begun' on 25 April 1915 when the Anzacs went ashore at Gallipoli, forging a legend that Australian soldiers continue to shape to this day.

For those of us with an understanding of St Peter's College and its lengthy and proud history you may believe, with good reason, that the Boer War was where it all began, indeed an Old Blue, Lieutenant GGE Wyllly, won Australia's second Victoria Cross there.

If we settle upon the middle part of the twentieth century, plagued by conflicts, as our focus of discussion then we can safely say that among the greatest names of Australian military history was another proud son of the School, Leonard Murray Opie, who passed away on 22 September 2008.

For longevity of war service alone, spanning the later parts of the ground campaign against the Japanese in what is now Indonesia, in the Second World War, through to the end of the Vietnam War, his achievements were nothing short of remarkable.

Len was born in Snowtown, in the mid north of South Australia on 23 December 1923. After time at St Peter's College, he enlisted at Woodside in the Adelaide Hills, still a military base to this day, joining the very famous 2/14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion, AIF, perhaps surprisingly as this was an almost exclusively Victorian battalion. What was far less surprising if one knew Len and his habit of being where the battle was at its fiercest, was that that battalion was heavily involved in the desperate Kokoda campaign in 1942. Len, surviving a dose of malaria, missed some of this but was soon back with the battalion seeing fierce action in Balikpapan and many of the later campaigns in the South West Pacific, less well known than Kokoda but no less sanguine an experience for those involved.

Len's greatest days were ahead of him though as he moved up through the ranks. Finding himself with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, an antecedent battalion from the Australian forces involved in the occupation of the Japanese home islands he was heavily involved in Korea, a bitter reminder of war for a weary world barely recovered from the conflict ending some five years or so prior.

Those who think that the world post Second World War has been relatively peaceful would do well to review the Korean War; a desperate and wide ranging conflict fought bitterly on land, sea and in the air for three years with little change in a political or geographical sense as a reward for many, many deaths. Len served for much of this conflict. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was regularly and heavily engaged, in particular at Kapyong and Maryang San, and Len was awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal, [DCM], gazetted in late 1952 and acknowledging actions on his part that were thought by witnesses to be perhaps worthy of a Victoria Cross [VC].

After a relatively peaceful decade, by his standards anyway, after the Korean War he in time became involved in Vietnam as Australia found itself dragged into that fruitless and frustrating struggle. He was a proud member of the Australian Army Training Team, Vietnam, the most decorated single unit in Australian military history, to wit four VCs amongst many other awards.

Len often found himself alone in hostile and isolated parts of Vietnam, the untamed mid central highlands especially, responsible for the training of regional force defence units, at times not seeing another Australian for weeks on end.

Throughout his military career, between and after major conflicts, he was regularly involved with the Citizens' Military Force and its descendant the Army Reserve; as a

proud South Australian he gave great service to units that call this state and the city of Adelaide home.

Being Len though he also found time to serve with the United Nations and in typical fashion did so in Kashmir, another of the world's most precarious trouble spots.

For those who had the privilege of knowing Len, as I did, it was easy to see why these challenges never daunted him. Even late in his life he was a proud Australian soldier, always smartly attired in or out of uniform, with a glint in his eye for sure, but least ostentatious to the end. He was not, it must be said, especially tolerant of incompetence and bureaucracy and even less so of political correctness, that wretched shibboleth of modern society, yet at the same time absolutely fair. In short Len's friendship was earned by deed not reputation and was, thus, of inestimable worth.

His values were old school but of eternal value; courage, honour and friendship were his bywords, but beneath that lay iron determination, unbreakable spirit and morale, a genuine interest in young people and an eternal affection for the School to which he returned enthusiastically from time to time.

Even well into his eighties, if not brisk of movement, he was immaculate, alert, serene in repose and carried his character with utter transparency wherever he appeared.

Vale Len Opie, Old Blue, a great man and a great soldier.

Major Chris Roe