

## Transcript of Private A. Webster's Letter to Mr J. Marshall

Gordon Channel  
Tas  
April 18 [1943]<sup>i</sup>

TX12  
2/32<sup>nd</sup> Batt.

Dear Mr Marshall<sup>ii</sup>,

Received your welcome letter dated April 13. yesterday & as it seems you have received so many different versions of John's passing, I thought I'd write straight away & give you the correct version as I had it from the others who were there on the spot, as it were, at the time.

At dawn on the 22 July [1942] we attacked "MAKHKAD Ridge" – the carrier platoon going forward with the infantry, – getting near the top of the ridge, the troops were held up by particularly heavy fire from a machine gun post, – a call came from a carrier to go forward & silence it & the carrier with John as Gunner, Sgt. Jeff Nichols as commander & a West Australian chap named Alan Curtis driving, dashed out to do the job. About half way to the post they ran into a land mine which blew up and disabled the carrier, (Nichols had his arm broken in 3 or 4 places & Curtis had his ear drums injured & his back or legs jarred badly). John<sup>iii</sup> jumped out to attack the post on foot & was immediately struck in the leg above the knee with an anti-tank bullet or shell.

Not much time was lost getting him to the R.A.P. [Regimental Aid Post] & although it was a pretty nasty wound (having broken the leg of course) he didn't seem to be suffering much & we didn't consider it to be dangerous at all, – however next day [23 July 1942] while I was the R.A.P. for a dressing I inquired from the Sergeant how John was progressing & when he told me that he had died that morning at the M.D.S. [Main Dressing Station]. I knowing the nature of the wound, refused to believe it until it was confirmed by our M.O. [Medical Officer] who came on the scene a few minutes later, he said that the wound alone didn't kill him but coupled with the shock of the land mine & loss of blood, it all seemed too much for poor old John & he passed on, but, we were glad to know painlessly, as he was unconscious when he died.

I had the regrettable job of conveying the news to the rest of the platoon, & never have I seen news received with such regret by the boys as then, – I think he was the most popular man in the platoon & the most respected.

He and I shared the same dugout for a long time in Tobruk & were together in every action, except one, there & as you being an old soldier yourself will understand how chaps become as close as brothers under such circumstances, & I think I knew John better than any of the other chaps.

Our carrier Commander, Capt. [Captain] Jack Fahey<sup>iv</sup> of Hobart was also wounded in the leg near the thigh the same morning as John, by a piece of shrapnel & he also died a day or two later under anesthetic while they were amputating the leg because of gangrene, that also was a surprise to us because his wound was nothing serious either.

Our unofficial opinion as to why such wounds were proving fatal was that prior to going to Alamein we were doing a 3 weeks manoeuvres under battle conditions in the Syrian desert which means subsisting on a ration of bully beef & biscuits & a quart of chlorinated well water a day, in heat that rose as high as 124° [F] in the shade when even the carrier engines would stop & refuse to function because the petrol would vapourize in the pipes before it could reach the carburettor. We finished that and had 2 days back in camp near Tripoli, then were rushed to Alamein where again we were living on bully [beef] & biscuits, we weren't there a week before we broke out in sores on our hands, faces and legs, & the

least tiny scratch would fester and spread into a big sore, & as many as 10 a day were being sent out with yellow jaundice & Wog fever. It is not hard to imagine how when even the smallest scratch became a big running sore, what effect it would have on a big wound, with your blood condition so low.

As a matter of interest perhaps – after the show on 22<sup>nd</sup> Col. Whitehead<sup>v</sup> was awarded the D.S.O. for the battalions work and later he was promoted to Brigadier, we got another Colonel named Balf [Balfe]<sup>vi</sup> but he was badly wounded in the head in our last stunt in November when we captured the coast road & railway line, and smashed the Jerry when we beat off counter attack after counter attack for 4 days before he finally quit & pulled out with the 8<sup>th</sup> Army on his heels – incidentally Kennedy whom you spoke of & whom I knew well, was wounded then & not at the same time as John.

The 32<sup>nd</sup> had 620 casualties through the campaign & earned the name of the crack battalion of the 9<sup>th</sup> Div. – of the 600 originals who formed the Battalion in England only 53 are left.

I knew Angus McKenzie<sup>vii</sup> well, but have heard nothing at all of him since he transferred to another unit after we came out of Tobruk, I would like to have his address if you'd be kind enough to send it, I might have a chance to look him up one of these days. I also knew Archie Jackson<sup>viii</sup> who was a great friend of John's but have not heard or seen anything of him for about 2 years.

Well, I have just counted up the pages & found that my pen has been running away, hope much of this has not proved boring to you.

Thank you for your kind wishes, my kind regard to yourself & rest of family.

Yours sincerely  
Arthur N. Webster

P.S.

Thanks for snaps.

Answered 23<sup>rd</sup> April

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The letter did not state the year; but it is known that the writer, Private Webster, was in Australia in April 1943 having returned from the Middle East, and prior to embarking for New Guinea.

<sup>ii</sup> John Ernest Michael Marshall (ex WW1 Service Number 14659) of King Island, Tasmania; the father of TX424 Private John Elliot Marshall.

<sup>iii</sup> TX424 Private John Elliot Marshall, died 23 July 1942.

<sup>iv</sup> TX2008 Captain Jack Patrick Fahey, died 25 July 1942.

<sup>v</sup> NX376 Lieutenant Colonel David Adie Whitehead.

<sup>vi</sup> NX12329 Lieutenant Colonel John Walter Balfe.

<sup>vii</sup> Yet to be identified.

<sup>viii</sup> Yet to be identified.