

# WE WILL REMEMBER THEM...

Story: Scott Wilson

This story is a bit of a fishing expedition, in that for many years I haven't been able to identify the soldier's connection to the area. **Maybe someone locally knows something.** Regardless, his story is worthy of remembrance.

**"For Us, Remembrance For You, Eternal Rest"**

So reads the epitaph upon the grave of **Corporal Jack Clifford Hirst**, a young man of twenty-one years who lies at rest at *Rookwood's Sydney War Cemetery*. Jack is remembered there and upon **Berowra's War Memorial**. *Oddly, for many years, I have not been able to identify his connection to the Berowra area. Hopefully, writing of his short life may prompt some reader to shed some light upon this mystery.* Jack was the youngest son of **Arthur Percival and Irene Lottie Hirst** of *Woollahra*. Born on 1st October 1922, Jack had eight siblings and little else is known of his early life. His attestation papers to enlist with the *Australian Military Forces* do state that he completed his *Certificate for Entry to Secondary School*. Interestingly, upon that same enlistment form of 8th October 1941 he raised his age to twenty years to enlist and listed his trade as a *laundry hand*. Jack enlisted in *Paddington* and was given the service number 214620. He named his mother as his next of kin, her address being

41 Rush Street, *Woollahra*. He was taken on strength by 1st Division Signals on 23rd January 1942 and undertook training as a signaller. On 24th March 1942 he was attached to *111th Anti-Tank Regiment* for three months service with them as a signaller. This was an interesting unit that had been formed at *Ingleburn* on 7th February 1942 by combining the equipment, weapons, vehicles and stores of two existing Anti-Tank Regiments. They were part of the Royal Australian Artillery and used light guns towed by trucks to directly engage enemy tanks. These units had been effective in the Middle East and they were now training for operations against the Japanese who employed light tanks with infantry as they invaded countries on their southward drive into the Pacific.

On 10th September 1942, whilst back with 1st Division Signals he was appointed to the rank of Acting Corporal. On 8th October 1942 he transferred from the Australian Military Forces to the AIF and was issued with service number NX135273, no doubt in order that he could serve overseas. In late November 1942 he was sent to a three week long Junior Leaders Course at Seymour in Victoria and on 22nd January 1943 he was confirmed at the rank of Corporal.

**A TRAGIC ACCIDENT** Jack spent the first half of 1943 attached

to HQ 1st Infantry Brigade before being attached once more to 111th Tank Attack Signal Section (Australian Corps of Signals) of the 111th Anti-Tank Regiment. The unit was based at Narellan Camp where an RAAF airfield was in operation. At the time 78 Squadron RAAF were in training, familiarising themselves with the *Curtiss P-40 Kittyhawk* fighter aircraft for operations against the Japanese in New Guinea.

**A Kittyhawk of 78 Squadron operating in New Guinea.**

The Kittyhawk had been found to be a stable gun platform in the ground attack role and so it was that at around 1635 hours on the afternoon of 26th August 1943 Jack was playing hockey with other members of his unit in the camp whilst overhead the Kittyhawk's of 78 Squadron were formation flying at low level as part of their training when tragedy struck.

**A statement from a Coronial Inquest held several weeks later at Camden Court House provided the following details concerning Jack's death:**

*"From information obtained, it appears, that the deceased in the company of seven other military personnel from his own unit, were playing hockey, in the precincts of the Narellan Military Camp, when an aeroplane, crashed into some trees nearby, and after striking the ground, fell to pieces. The cockpit struck the deceased*

*and carried him for about 500 yards. The cockpit of the aeroplane stopped at some trees and the deceased was thrown about five yards in front of it. He was killed instantly, death due to internal injuries.*

*"The aeroplane in question was piloted by Sergeant O'Connell. He was one of a formation of four aircraft under the command of Squadron Leader Walker. The flight was an authorised one and left the aerodrome at Camden, about 4pm on that day for one hour's flying practice. After about 40 minutes of flying, the pilots of the aircraft were ordered to do low flying by the Squadron leader, this low flying took the aircraft over the Narellan Military Camp. When he noticed that he was approaching the camp, the Squadron Leader immediately pulled up to a height of 600 feet from 200 feet and expected the other aircraft to follow.*

*He was informed soon after that the aircraft flown by Sergeant O'Connell was missing. He did not know that it had crashed until he had landed at the aerodrome. It appears that the aircraft in question flew so low, that it struck the stay wire, that connected the electric wire pole to another pole, across the road."*

Jack was transported to the camp's hospital but was pronounced dead on arrival. A fellow signaller, N185567 **Private Benjamin Clayton**, suffered a fractured humerus and clavicle from the accident and was hospitalised until early April 1944. The pilot, **Sergeant John Edward O'Connell**, suffered back injuries and shock but returned to flying.

**Jack Hirst had been in the wrong place at the wrong time and had been killed in a training accident.** Training accidents were far from uncommon, particularly where aircraft were involved. Many airmen considered it to be the most dangerous part of their service and not without reason.

Jack was buried soon after at Sydney War Cemetery at Rookwood, his parents choosing his epitaph. *That is Jack's story and I can find little to link him to Berowra.* There is only one J Hirst named among the Australian service men and women listed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Jack Clifford Hirst; so, it seems that he is likely to be the man named on Berowra War Memorial.

Another clue supporting this exists within **Mick Joffe's book**

F/Sgt Gadsden

F/Sgt O'Connell



Photo courtesy of the Australian War Memorial