

IN SEARCH OF A QUIET MAN

The Second World War Service of

VX94769 Keith Campbell WEIR

Z Special Unit · Services Reconnaissance Department



Enlistment photographs, Royal Park, Victoria — April 1944. Age 18.

From NAA: B883, VX94769

A Note Before You Read

This document gathers everything we have been able to establish about the WWII service of Keith Campbell Weir. It draws on his official Army service file — released by the National Archives of Australia — along with local memory preserved at the war museum in Cairns, and the broader history of the secret unit in which he served. At the end is a step-by-step guide showing any family member how to obtain the same records for themselves.

Keith was eighteen years old when he enlisted. He was part of one of the most secret military formations in Australian history. He came home, was discharged on medical grounds, and — like most Z Special men — was legally forbidden from speaking about what he did for thirty years. Whatever he did not say in life, these records now help to say for him.

Part One · The Facts of His Service

Keith's official Army service file (NAA: B883, VX94769) has been obtained from the National Archives of Australia. What follows are the facts recorded on that file.

Personal details

- **Full name:** Keith Campbell Weir
- **Service number:** VX94769
- **Date of birth:** 8 April 1926
- **Place of birth:** Glenferrie, Victoria
- **Pre-war occupation:** Salesman (the enlistment form lists McPherson's Pty Ltd, 546 Collins Street, Melbourne)
- **Marital status:** Single
- **Religion:** Methodist
- **Next of kin:** Alice Irene Weir (mother), 311 High Street, Ashburton, Victoria
- **Physical description:** 5 ft 9 in, medium-dark hair, blue eyes, scar on right shin
- **Medical classification on enlistment:** Class A1 (fit for all service)

Enlistment

Keith signed his *Attestation Form for Special Forces Raised for Service in Australia or Abroad* at Royal Park, Melbourne on **24 April 1944**, sixteen days after his eighteenth birthday. The form is specifically for special forces — the distinctive heading at the top of the page reads "For Special Forces Raised for Service in Australia or Abroad." The witnessing officer was A. McCloskey, Major.

He was taken on strength of the Recruit Reception Depot (R.R.D.) at Royal Park the following day, **25 April 1944 — Anzac Day**.

Part Two · A Timeline of His Service

Reconstructed from the Service and Casualty Form (B103) in his file. Dates and locations are as they appear on the record.

1944 · Training and preparation

- 24 Apr 1944** Enlisted and taken on strength, Recruit Reception Depot · *Royal Park, VIC*
- 25 Apr 1944** Taken on strength, A.I.F. Recruit Reception Depot · *Royal Park, VIC*
- 27 Apr 1944** Qualified for grouping as I class, M/G III · *Royal Park, VIC*
- 1 May 1944** Marched out to Australian Recruit Training Centre, Cowra · *NSW*
- 29 Apr 1944** Marched in, 2nd Australian Army Training Battalion, ex Victorian RRD · *Cowra, NSW*
- 3 Jul 1944** Disciplinary note: "Being found beyond the limits of camp 1825 hrs 30.6.44 — fined £2" · *NSW*
- 8 Jul 1944** Marched in from 2 Australian Recruit Depot · *Bonegilla (Light Infantry Battalion)*
- 7 Aug 1944** Marched out to Australian Army Ordnance Corps 3/Bn for 4 weeks training (LHQ Training Instruction No. 3A) · *Bonegilla*
- 11 Aug 1944** On detachment from 1 Australian Training Battalion to 1 AAOC T/B
- 21 Aug 1944** Marched in ex detachment to 3 Base Ordnance Depot (3 BOD)
- 18 Sep 1944** Returned from detachment with 3 BOD
- 18 Sep 1944** Marched out to Australian Light Infantry Battalion
- 20 Sep 1944** Marched in ex 1 AAOC T/B

1945 · Z Special Unit and overseas service

- 15 Mar 1945** Serving with unit
- 17 Apr 1945** Marched in to 5 AARD from 1 APSC · *Queensland*
- 17 May 1945** **MARCHED OUT TO "Z" AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL UNIT.** *This is the day Keith was officially transferred into Z Special.*
- 18 May 1945** Taken on strength from 5 Australian ARD · *"Z" Special Unit, Australia*
- 2 Jun 1945** **DEPARTED FOR SERVICE OUTSIDE AUSTRALIAN MANDATED TERRITORY.** *The file does not name the destination. Given the date and unit, this is almost certainly the Borneo theatre.*
- 18 Jun 1945** Appointed Temporary Group III — Lecture Storeman · *Overseas*
- 15 Sep 1945** Returned to Australia from service outside Australian Mandated Territory

1946 · Transfer out, hospital, discharge

11 Mar 1946 Transferred from Z Special Unit to Directorate of Engineer Stores, Office of Engineer-in-Chief

16 Mar 1946 Transferred in, HQ AMF — posted to Engineer Stores

1 Apr 1946 Evacuated to 115 Australian Military Hospital. Admitted, diagnosis: Neurosis

7 Aug 1946 Discharged from Rockhampton Convalescent Home to AMF DD 3MD for Discharge Class D
· *Victoria*

7 Aug 1946 DISCHARGED from the Australian Military Forces

Total length of service: 2 years, 3 months, 14 days.

Part Three · What the Record Tells Us

The timeline above is dry. What it records is extraordinary. Five points stand out.

1. He enlisted specifically for special forces service

The form he signed was not a standard attestation. It was the *Attestation Form for Special Forces Raised for Service in Australia or Abroad* — A.A. Form A.200, a separate document used to enlist men who were being selected, or were volunteering, for what the Army called "special" service. At eighteen years old, Keith did not drift into Z Special. He enlisted on a pathway that pointed to it from day one.

2. The year of training

From April 1944 to April 1945 — a full twelve months — Keith moved through a sequence of training establishments: Royal Park in Melbourne, Cowra in NSW, Bonegilla on the Murray, and an attachment to the Australian Army Ordnance Corps for specialist stores and logistics work. This was a deliberate preparation. Z Special operatives were not raw recruits dropped into the jungle; they were trained soldiers given additional specialist work before being entrusted with clandestine operations.

The posting to 3 Base Ordnance Depot and the Ordnance Corps training battalion is particularly telling — it matches exactly the appointment he would later hold on active service: Lecture Storeman.

3. The transfer to Z Special · 17 May 1945

This is the date the service file formally records his transfer: "*M/out to 'Z' Aust Special Unit*". Two weeks later, on **2 June 1945**, he was overseas.

The timing is significant. Men transferred into Z Special in May 1945 were, in almost every case, reinforcements for the great Borneo campaign then reaching its climax. Operations Agas, Semut I–IV, and Platypus were all in progress. The parachute drops into Sarawak had begun in March. The main Australian amphibious landing at Balikpapan was set for 1 July. Z Special urgently needed support personnel — signallers, storemen, logistics men — to keep operatives in the field supplied.

4. 'Service outside Australian Mandated Territory'

This bureaucratic phrase is how the Army recorded overseas active service. Keith departed on **2 June 1945** and returned on **15 September 1945** — a deployment of three and a half months.

His role on arrival was recorded as "**Temporary Group III — Lecture Storeman**". In Z Special, a storeman was responsible for the supply of specialist equipment: radios, explosives, medical supplies, ammunition, rations, and air-drop stores that sustained the operatives in the field. The "Lecture" element indicates he also taught the handling of that equipment — likely to operatives preparing for insertion, or to local resistance fighters being trained to use Allied weapons.

Japan formally surrendered on 2 September 1945. Keith came home thirteen days later. His deployment spanned the climax of the Borneo campaign and the immediate aftermath of the Japanese surrender, when Z Special personnel were involved in the critical task of locating, supplying, and recovering Australian and Allied prisoners of war from camps across Borneo.

5. He did not come home undamaged

Six months after returning to Australia, Keith was evacuated to **115 Australian Military Hospital** on 1 April 1946. The admission diagnosis recorded on the file is one word: "**Neurosis**".

"Neurosis" was the wartime Army term for what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder. It was used for men whose combat experience, or the cumulative strain of active service, left them unable to return to normal duty.

He spent approximately four months in treatment — ending up at the Rockhampton Convalescent Home — and was discharged from the Army on **7 August 1946** as **Class D** — "medically unfit for further military service." He was twenty years old.

Whatever Keith saw, did, or survived in his three months overseas with Z Special, it was enough to leave marks that took the better part of a year to treat, and that followed him home.

Part Four · His Medals

Keith's service entitled him to the following campaign and service medals, recorded on his medal issue card (NAA: B883, VX94769):

- **The 1939–45 Star** — awarded for operational service during the Second World War.
- **The Pacific Star** — awarded for operational service in the Pacific theatre between 8 December 1941 and 2 September 1945. His Borneo deployment qualified him for this.
- **The War Medal 1939–45** — awarded to all full-time personnel of the armed forces who served for at least 28 days.
- **The Australia Service Medal 1939–45** — awarded to members of the Australian armed forces who served for at least 18 months, or overseas.

A note on the medal card is revealing. The record shows that some of his entitlements were initially "withheld" and only finally issued following an authority dated 24 August 1998 — fifty-two years after his discharge. This pattern is common with Z Special veterans: because the unit's records were classified until the mid-1970s, medal entitlements for secret service were often missed, delayed, or only reconciled decades later when families or the men themselves applied for a review.

Part Five · The House on the Hill · Cairns

Information preserved by the war museum in Cairns records Keith as having served at **Fairview House on Fairview Farm at Mooroolooloo** — "The House on the Hill." The house had operated as the Z Experimental Station between 1942 and 1944, the period before Keith's enlistment, but the Cairns base continued to be used by Z Special as an operational staging point right through the war. Keith's posting there most likely occurred either during his pre-deployment preparation in May 1945, or as a transit base on his way to or from his overseas service.

The House on the Hill

Z Force commandeered Fairview House for use as a training facility. Its secretive nature gave it the name by which the operatives themselves would always know it: "*The House on the Hill*".

Used between **1942 and 1944** as the **Z Experimental Station (Z.E.S.)**, the house ran training programs covering demolition and explosives, unarmed combat, signals, map reading, weapons handling, and physical training. This was where men were turned into operatives capable of being parachuted alone into Japanese-occupied jungle.

Operation Jaywick was planned here

The most famous Z Special operation of the war was planned at the House on the Hill. Planning for Operation Jaywick — the mission to attack Japanese shipping in Singapore Harbour — was undertaken at Fairview House. The fourteen British and Australian commandos selected for the raid trained in the Barron River and on the beaches north of Cairns.

An old Japanese fishing vessel called *the Krait* was used for the mission to offer some anonymity. The Japanese flag was flown en route. The team left Cairns on **9 August 1943** and travelled nearly 4,000 kilometres to Singapore. Once there, the commandos attached limpet mines to Japanese shipping in the harbour using collapsible kayaks, sinking three major vessels and damaging several others. The entire raiding party returned alive.

What remains today

There is a plaque at the right-hand side of the main gate at HMAS Cairns base commemorating the Z Special force role during the Second World War. It is worth a visit for anyone in the family travelling north.

The House on the Hill itself had a long second life. After the war it became a popular Cairns nightclub, then later burnt down. The site is now a luxury gated residential complex. For some time the property was owned by Hec Wallace, who was killed in the Mt Emerald plane crash on 11 May 1990.

Part Six · The Unit

What Z Special Unit was

Keith's unit was known by at least four names during the war, all of them cover names or deliberately vague administrative fictions:

- **Inter-Allied Services Department (ISD)** — the original 1942 cover name
- **Special Operations Australia (SOA)** — from April 1943
- **Services Reconnaissance Department (SRD)** — the cover name used from May 1943 to avoid confusion with Britain's SOE
- **Z Special Unit** — the Army's holding unit for SRD personnel; the name most commonly used today

Z Special was modelled directly on Britain's Special Operations Executive and contained several SOE officers who had escaped Singapore. It was a joint Allied formation — predominantly Australian, but including British, Dutch, New Zealand, Timorese and Indonesian members — formed to operate behind Japanese lines in South East Asia. Its specialities were clandestine insertion, direct action, long-range penetration, sabotage, and special reconnaissance.

Over the course of the war the unit carried out 81 covert operations in the South West Pacific theatre. Operatives were inserted by parachute or submarine. Their tasks were to provide military intelligence, conduct guerrilla warfare, train and arm local resistance, and disrupt Japanese supply and command.

The thirty-year silence

This is the part of the story most families only discover decades later.

Members of Z Special Unit were bound by official secrecy legislation for thirty years after the war. They did not march on Anzac Day. They did not attend reunions. They did not tell their families what they had done, where they had been, or who they had lost. Many went to their graves without ever speaking of it.

The work of members of Z Special Unit in Borneo was to remain hidden under secrecy legislation for 30 years after the war; the men did not march on Anzac Day and rarely spoke of the events or met with members of their unit.

The Victorian 'Z' Special Unit Association was not permitted to form until **1974** — a full generation after the war ended. The records were declassified only in the mid-1970s. This is why so many descendants of Z Special men know almost nothing: their fathers and grandfathers were not being private. They were obeying an order that outlasted the war itself.

If Keith rarely spoke of his service, this is almost certainly why.

Where Keith likely served overseas · Borneo 1945

Keith's overseas deployment — 2 June to 15 September 1945 — falls squarely within the period of the Borneo operations, which is where the overwhelming bulk of Z Special personnel were deployed in the war's final year. The major operations running during his deployment were:

Operation Semut (I, II, III and IV)

A series of deep-penetration reconnaissance and guerrilla operations in Sarawak, in the island's north-west. Operatives were parachuted into uncharted jungle from late March 1945. They trained and armed Dayak resistance fighters and conducted a highly effective irregular war against the Japanese occupation. Semut I was led by the British anthropologist Major Tom Harrisson. Storemen and supply personnel supported the operation from coastal bases and forward airstrips.

Operation Agas (I through VI)

Parallel operations in British North Borneo (modern Sabah). Intelligence gathering, resistance organisation, and the recovery of downed airmen and escaped prisoners of war. Ran from March to October 1945 — overlapping Keith's deployment exactly.

Operation Platypus

Conducted June–July 1945 in the Balikpapan area of Dutch Borneo ahead of the main Australian amphibious landing on 1 July. Several sub-operations inserted by submarine and aircraft. The timing aligns precisely with Keith's deployment — he may well have been part of the logistic tail supporting this operation.

Post-surrender prisoner recovery

After the Japanese surrender on 2 September 1945, Z Special personnel played a critical role in locating, making contact with, and supplying Allied prisoners of war held in camps across Borneo — work that continued through September and October 1945. Keith's return home on 15 September suggests he may have been involved in the early stages of this work before being rotated back.

Part Seven · How to Find the Records Yourself

For any family member who wants to repeat this research, or extend it, everything above was obtained from publicly available sources — free of charge, from a home computer. The following step-by-step guides show exactly how.

Guide 1 · The B883 Army service file

This is the most important document in the chain. It runs twelve pages, includes two photographs, and is the source of every fact in Parts One, Two, Three and Four of this document.

1. **Open a web browser** and go to **recordsearch.naa.gov.au**
2. On the RecordSearch home page, click '**NameSearch**'. (Accept the guest session if prompted.)
3. **Enter the following:**
 - **Family name:** WEIR
 - **Given names:** Keith Campbell
 - **Service number:** VX94769
 - **Category:** tick 'Defence' and 'Army'
4. Click **Search**. The result is *B883 VX94769* — the Army series containing 2nd AIF personnel dossiers.
5. Click the item title. A digital viewer will open. Use the download option to save the full 12-page file as a PDF.

Guide 2 · The DVA Nominal Roll snapshot

A one-page summary from the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Useful for a commemorative certificate.

6. Go to **nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au** and click the 'WW2' tab.
7. Enter surname **WEIR**, given names **Keith Campbell**, service number **VX94769**. Select service 'Australian Army'.
8. Click search. Print a commemorative certificate directly from the results page.

Guide 3 · The Z Special / SRD operational records

These hold the records of specific operations — who was on which party. With Keith's service file now in hand and confirming his transfer date (17 May 1945) and overseas departure (2 June 1945), it is worth searching the SRD operational records for his name.

9. On RecordSearch, search for series **A3269** — the Special Operations Australia (SOA / SRD / Z Special) records.
10. Within A3269, look for files relating to Operations *Agas*, *Semut*, and *Platypus* — all active during Keith's deployment.
11. Individual operation files often contain nominal rolls of the party. Keith's storeman role means he was more likely based at a rear headquarters (Morotai, Labuan, or Brunei) than on a forward insertion party, but his name may still appear on stores dispatch or training documents.
12. The **Australian War Memorial's collection PR84/119** holds a handwritten SRD nominal roll copied from A3269 — viewable in the Memorial's reading room in Canberra.

Guide 4 · Key books and experts

The definitive unit histories. Check the indexes for 'Weir':

- *Silent Feet: The History of 'Z' Special Operations 1942–1945* by Major Jim Truscott.
- *'Z' Special Unit's Secret War: Operation Semut 1* by Bob Long.
- *On Operations with Z Special Unit – WWII* by Rowan E. Waddy.
- *Semut: The Untold Story of a Secret Australian Operation in WWII Borneo* by Prof. Christine Helliwell, ANU.

Bodies worth contacting:

- **Professor Christine Helliwell (ANU, Canberra)** — the leading living authority on the Borneo operations.
- **Australian War Memorial Research Centre** — online enquiry form at awm.gov.au; typical response 10 working days.
- **Australian Commando Association (Victoria)** — successor body to the Victorian Z Special Association. Holds a significant private collection and welcomes contact from Z Special families.
- **The Cairns war museum** — the source of Keith's confirmed Cairns service connection. They have local records and memory that do not appear in the national archives.

Part Eight · A Family Research Checklist

For anyone wanting to take this further. Tick these off in order:

- Read Keith's B883 service file in full — already downloaded.
- Pull the DVA Nominal Roll snapshot and print the commemorative certificate.
- Apply to Defence Honours and Awards for any outstanding medals the family does not hold — given the note that awards were partially withheld until 1998, there may still be unclaimed entitlements.
- Search NAA series A3269 for Keith's name in operational files from Operation Agas, Semut I–IV, and Platypus (June–September 1945).
- Borrow or buy 'Silent Feet' by Jim Truscott and check the index for WEIR.
- Contact the AWM Research Centre with the service number and dates and ask whether any unit diary or photograph mentions him.
- Write to the Cairns war museum thanking them for the information and asking what sources they drew from — there may be more.
- If anyone is travelling to Cairns, visit the Z Special plaque at the right-hand side of the main gate at HMAS Cairns base.
- Contact the Australian Commando Association (Victoria) — they may hold photographs, unit lists, or reminiscences that mention Keith.
- Write a short family summary — a page or two — from this document and share it with the next generation. This is the history that nearly disappeared.

A Closing Note

Keith Campbell Weir enlisted for special forces service on the 24th of April 1944. He was eighteen years old, a salesman from Ashburton, son of Alice Irene Weir of 311 High Street. Twelve months of training followed. On the 17th of May 1945 he was transferred to Z Special Unit. Sixteen days later he was overseas. He came home on the 15th of September 1945, two weeks after the Japanese surrender. He was admitted to military hospital with combat-related neurosis six months after that. The Army discharged him, medically unfit, on the 7th of August 1946. He was twenty years old.

For the next thirty years, he was forbidden by law to speak of any of it.

These pages, and the file they rest on, are the record of a young man's war. They are not the whole story — the whole story went where he could not bring it back — but they are enough to know him by, and enough for a family to remember him.

Lest we forget.