

Private John Henry Little, VX 61033, 2/2 Pioneer Battalion

John's origins

John Henry Little was born in Coburg in 1913, the second of four children. His father Edwin was an engine driver and his mother Edith May Deane as was the norm, was at home caring for her family.

In 1927 when Jack was fourteen, his mother Edith died. Her family were significant influences in his life. Edith was one of eight children. Four of her brothers had enlisted in the AIF in WW1. They included Percival Edgar Deane who was to become the Private Secretary to Billy Hughes, Australia's Prime Minister. All of Jack's siblings had Deane family names and he named his mother's family as executors and beneficiaries in his will, a sober task all soldiers completed before proceeding to war.

This family legacy must have played a part in his thoughts about duty and his enlistment in WW2.

Life on the Bailey settlement

By 1936 Jack had moved, first to Cobrico and then to the Bailey settlement where he worked for Arthur Langley and Albert Edgar Magilton, on Smokey Point Road, as a farm labourer.

He played an active part in this community that was so vastly different to his inner-city origins. The Bailey settlement, between Timboon and Port Campbell, had commenced at the start of the depression and the new farmers worked hard and struggled in those early years. People were supportive of each other, and he embraced the opportunity to participate. He was an early leader in the Marnsvale Scout Troop, played footy for the fledgling Heytesbury team and MC'd at social events.

It is likely that while working for Arthur Langley, who supplemented his farm income as a builder, he helped build many houses that are still standing in the Port Campbell district.

World War 2 cast a huge shadow over the people of this area. They had vivid memories of the Great war that had ended only 20 years previously. For a vast range of reasons, the men and women of the district responded by volunteering for the AIF, the VDC and the Women's Services.

To illustrate this, in 1941, of the twenty-four members of the Heytesbury Football club, nineteen had enlisted, two were found medically unfit and the other five were below military age. Jack Little was one of these blokes.

Military Service

After enlistment and a short training period, he joined the 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion, embarking in November 1941 for the Middle East.

The 2/2nd Pioneer battalion had recently participated in the battle of Lebanon and Syria against the Vichy French. Despite their lack of training, they functioned as frontline infantry and succeeded in forcing a surrender in July of that year. When Jack arrived, they were engaged in training and garrison duties in places that included Tripoli in the north.

Then in early 1942, the 6th and 7th Divisions were recalled to Australia to prepare for the building Japanese threat from the north and the 2/2nd began the voyage home on the troopship SS Arcades.

En route, when news of the fall of Singapore arrived, they were diverted and landed in Batavia (modern day Jakarta) on the 18th of February 1942 and with other units, they were named "Blackforce". The Japanese launched a major attack on the 28th of February, only days after their arrival, and allied forces, including Blackforce, attempted to block their advance toward Bandung and the central highlands.

Jack fought on the frontline. Initially they held river crossings and as they were forced to retreat, the 2/2nd played a rearguard roll, blowing bridges and damaging roads to halt the enemy advance as the allies retreated. Jack died under enemy fire during this period on the 4th of March as Japanese motorised forces pushed forward.

Heytesbury Shire Tribute

At the Shire of Heytesbury's April 1942 meeting in Cobden, councillors, returned soldiers and friends gathered outside the shire hall to pay honour to Private Jack Little, whose death in action in Java, had been reported during the month.

Emotional tributes were paid by Arthur Langley and A.E. Magilton. They talked of the esteem in which he was held in the community and Mr A. Langley with whom Jack had worked for three and a half years, said "We always looked on Jack as our soldier," The president of Cobden Returned Sailors', Soldiers' and Airmen's Imperial League of Australia **R.S.S.A.I.L.A.** (Mr J. W. Blake) read the returned soldiers' service and placed a poppy on the flag.

"The service of the day is over, and the hour come for rest. This poppy, an emblem of sacrifice, the symbol of a life given for one's country is a link between our comrade and us who remain. We place it here in remembrance. Lest We Forget."



Peter J. Younis 25th April 2026

Bibliography:

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- <https://www.2nd2ndpioneerbattalion.com/index.html>