

# Honour and dignity as long-lost Diggers are finally laid to rest

*The Weekend Australian 5/6 Dec 2009*

## Two young Australians killed in PNG during World War II have been given a military burial

SIAN POWELL

THEY never met but their lives ran in parallel, fighting a war they believed in. Now, more than 66 years after they were killed in action, they have shared a funeral. Decades of official neglect, of mistakes and missteps, have finally been rectified, and Lieutenant Talbot Tim Logan and Lance Sergeant James Wheeler were remembered with honour and buried with dignity.

The young men enlisted in the Australian Army within days of one another, soon after Australia declared war in late 1939. They both fought in the Middle East and came back to Australia for a brief respite before they were sent to Papua New Guinea to help repel the Japanese.

They both died in fierce fighting in PNG; within a month of each other and just a few kilometres apart.

Wheeler, from the Royal Australian Artillery, was shot and bayoneted on December 1, 1942, at Huggins Roadblock on the Sananda Track, on the north coast of New Guinea. He had run into close-quarters gunfire in a brave attempt to rescue a fellow Australian soldier who had been shot. Wheeler had just turned 20 when

he enlisted and went to war. He was 23 when he was killed.

One month later, Logan was fatally shot in the neck by a Japanese sniper. He was killed just after he and his fellow soldiers had beaten back Japanese forces at Buna, not far from the Sananda Track, about 150km northeast of Port Moresby.

Born in Kenya, Logan had become a patriotic Australian, and the fair-haired, blue-eyed stockman left a young wife behind him when he joined the infantry. The 29-year-old from Maxwelton, in north Queensland, never saw his son, who was born some time after his death.

Logan's remains were given a temporary battlefield burial in a shallow grave just above the water table near Buna, but even though his records included a map reference noting the grave's location, there was no proper recovery.

Decades after Logan's death, Australian historian Phillip Bradley was told about some unclaimed Australian remains by a Buna villager.

He investigated and wrote a report to the Australian Defence Force, setting in motion this year's retrieval and identification.



Soldiers stand in honour at the Bomana War Cemetery in PNG by the coffin of Lieutenant Logan, pictured right

Wheeler's remains were recovered much earlier, in 1997, from the vicinity of Huggins Roadblock, about 15km southwest of Buna. He, too, had been given a temporary battlefield burial in swampy ground and the spot noted with a map reference, but in the months after the fighting the remains couldn't be found.

Decades went by before they

were finally retrieved but by then they had become anonymous.

In 1995, US forces recovered the remains of American soldiers from the area and notified Australia that there appeared to be Australian remains there as well, found with a brass Australian shoulder flash.

Collected two years later and kept in a cardboard box, Wheeler's



remains lay unidentified in a storeroom in the Australian high commission in Port Moresby for a further 12 years. It now appears the remains of two unidentified Australian servicemen and four Japanese soldiers had also been held in the storeroom for as long as a decade. This neglect is the subject of an inquiry, the findings of which are expected soon.

This year, a thorough investigation determined Wheeler's identity, and at about the same time it was becoming clear that Logan's remains had finally been found.

Last Tuesday both were buried at Bomana War Cemetery in Port Moresby.

ADF researcher Major Jack Thurgar flew to PNG earlier this year to try to identify the fallen Australians.

Wheeler was with the 2/1st Field Regiment of the Royal Australian Artillery, and was one of a two-man forward observation party on the day he was killed, trying to rescue his senior officer, Lieutenant Alfred Daniels, who had been shot almost on top of a Japanese position.

"Wheeler raced forward and he was shot and bayoneted by Japanese forces," Thurgar says. His commanding officer noted Wheeler's valour in a letter to the young man's father. Wheeler's 92-year-old sister Helen Kirton was at the Bomana War Cemetery to bid her brother farewell.

One month after Wheeler's

death, Logan was killed on the coast at Giropa Point, near Buna. Logan had already fought at Milne Bay and Goodenough Island in PNG, but New Year's Day 1943 was the first day the 2/12th joined the battle in a concerted drive to break the Japanese hold on Buna. The battle was fierce; more than 260 Australians were killed fighting for the desolate coastal strip. By 8am, after fierce fighting in the swamps and coconut groves, the Japanese were in retreat, although it soon became apparent that snipers had been left behind to pick off the Australians. Logan moved forward to inspect an abandoned Japanese bunker. A sniper shot him in the neck and killed him.

"The Japanese were deliberately targeting the officers," Thurgar says. The fighting continued and it was two days before Logan could be buried, he adds.

Bradley, author of several books about World War II, including *The Battle for Wau: New Guinea's Frontline 1942-1943*, visited Buna and other World War II battlefields in 2006 to analyse them for a forthcoming book. Because Buna and the surrounding areas are so close to the coast, he says, they are often flooded, and many bodies of battle casualties were recovered and temporarily buried, only to be later lost in the swampy ground.

So when a Buna villager told Bradley about remains he had found when he was sinking a pole

for his stilt house, the historian knew there was a good chance they were those of a fallen Australian. The villager showed Bradley a degraded Bren gun he had found in the vicinity of the remains, some Australian coins and what appeared to be an identity badge. The remains had been reburied in a makeshift grave. Bradley decided he had to make sure this fallen soldier was properly identified and interred. "I went through regulations to make sure I reported it properly to ensure something would be done," he says.

He took photographs of the coins and the gun, and the place where the remains had been reburied, and compiled a list of five 2/12th Battalion men whose remains were never recovered. His list included Logan.

"The main reason I was in Buna was to observe the battlefields fought over by the three Australian battalions of the 18th Brigade, the 2/9th, 2/10th and 2/12th Battalions during the fighting of December 1942 to January 1943. In relation to the specific location of the grave, it is 50m from the coast in a direct line to what was in 1943 the mouth of Simemi Creek and the location of a significant Japanese bunker on an island at the creek mouth. The site of this former bunker was pointed out to me."

Logan and Wheeler shared a military funeral. Logan's son Fred was there to pay his respects to the father he never knew.