

AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

Major General Kenneth Mackay

(1917 – 2004)

Extracted from Cannonball
Issue Number 55, September 2004

In a career that spanned five decades, Major General Kenneth Mackay led a military life that constantly saw him in a position of influence and responsibility. He entered the Royal Military College in 1934 and graduated into the Artillery arm of the Royal Australian Staff Corps. During World War II, he served with distinction in the Middle East and New Guinea.

While in the Middle East, he attended the UK Commando Instructors Course, which then led to him raising and training the 9th Australian Division's Commando Unit. In 1944, he was awarded the MBE for his service in New Guinea. Later in the same year he was posted to the War Office in London to work in a top-secret section that directly served the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill.

Post-war he commanded the 67th Battalion in Japan, becoming the first Commanding Officer of 3 RAR when the 67th was re-designated as 3 RAR in November 1948. Major General Mackay later served in Korea with 1 RAR and then went on to serve in a number of command appointments.

In 1966, he became the commander of Australian Forces in Vietnam, and later served as Commander 1 Division. Finally, in 1973, he was appointed the General Officer Commanding Field Force Command, before retiring in 1974.

Major General Mackay was a quiet and private man whose experiences in war made him a champion of peace. He was also a champion of his soldiers, and it was a point of pride for him that he had been the originating officer for the award of two VCs to Australian Soldiers, Thomas Derrick in World War II and Kevin Wheatley in Vietnam.

Perhaps the greatest lesson of his life was learnt before he went to war, back in 1939 when he was a young officer posted to the North Head Fort in Sydney as a coastal artillery officer. A local man had fallen off a cliff and lay stranded and unconscious, with both legs broken. Mackay was lowered by rope with a canvas stretcher to recover the man and guide the stretcher back up over the rocky outcrops. As he was pulled back to the top to the cliff, the ropes cut deeply into him. He realised that if he could not contain his fatigue and pain he would lose his patient.

So, amidst the darkness, wind and pain he found a place inside him where he could contain the pain for just long enough to complete his mission. This was a lesson he would call upon many times later in life, and for his bravery that night he was awarded a Royal Humane Society Bronze Medal.

Major General Mackay was a member of the RAA Historical Company and for several years assisted in the library. North fort, as can be seen for his records, held many memories for him. Not least was his time with the 9.2 inch guns when he was on the ship towing the target for a practice shoot. He said he had a terrible feeling an accident was imminent because of the power of the guns and the fact the shells fell to the target rather than being a direct shot. With a grin on his face he stated how he was forced to remind the firing officer that his boat was pulling the target, not pushing it and that on another occasion he was forced to explain why the target had not returned. The barge in which the target was placed was holed by the falling shell!

AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

With the passing of Major General Mackay Australia lost a most remarkable person. He was survived by his wife and three children.