

# Reg Saunders Way

By Noah Gladdish

Not far from Canberra's Australian War Memorial lays "Reg Saunders Way". The road in Canberra's central eastern suburb of Campbell is a testimony to the Australian war hero Reginald Walter Saunders. Reg was born 7 August 1920 in rural Victoria near the town of Framlingham. In 1924, Reginald's mother passed away of pneumonia while he was just four years old, which later prompted Reginald, his brother Harry and their father to move to Lake Condah. There, his father Chris took up a job as a labourer, from which the Reg and Harry would be largely raised by their maternal grandparents. Reg received a formal education at Lake Condah State School and Hamilton High School and left at age 14 to join the lumber and dairy industry.

Military service and a love of country were strong in Reg's family, as both his father Chris and uncle William fought in World War One. Tragically his uncle passed away on campaign in France. Prior family military service and his love of Australia were strong motivators for Reg to enlist into the Australian Army in 1940; however, Reg was not fighting for king and country, he fought for his Aboriginal Guditjmara land. Reg's daughter, Glenda Humes, said in an interview with the ABC, that "Dad was an aboriginal man who loved his country [...]. If it was under threat, he had to go and defend it as well. So, it really wasn't about king or what the government was saying, it was really about this land".

Reginald enlisted into the 2/7<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Australian army on 24 April 1940 and was sent to the Middle East campaign for reinforcements. Within six weeks of fighting, Reg achieved the rank of Lance Corporal, and three months later he became Sergeant.

Reg assisted in the North African offensive and experienced German air attacks race to Benghazi. Furious German air attacks rampaged above the dry deserts of Libya and Egypt, and Reg recounts his fright in the first few weeks of campaign. On 9 April 1941, Reg relocated to the defense of Greece from Italian and German troops. The defense of Greece was acknowledged by Reg and other critics as underequipped considering the overwhelming Italian and German bombardment and infantry force. Reg and the other Allied forces retreated to Crete for a full evacuation of the campaign; unfortunately, Reginald was left behind on the island, where he would survive 12 months of German occupation.

After escaping Crete in May 1942, Reg returned to Australia briefly and subsequently rejoined the 2/7<sup>th</sup> battalion in Papua New Guinea. In 1944, Reg's military skills were recognised by his commanding officer, prompting Reg to undergo a 16 week-long lieutenant training course. Reg was the first ever

Indigenous Australian to obtain the officer rank. WWII ended soon after Reg became an officer, though he could not enjoy his savour his title for long, another conflict was brewing in Korea for Reg to join. Reg enlisted as a Captain in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the Australian Army, in which he fought at the battle of Kapyong. Reg later resigned from military duty in 1954.

Although no longer part of the military, Reg helped further the rights and recognition of military veterans and Indigenous Australians. Reg joined the St Mary's RSL sub-branch in Victoria 1962 and was later selected as a liaison officer for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1969. Reg was awarded the Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1971 for his service to the community. In 1985, Reg was appointed to the Council of the Australian War Memorial.

Reg died on 2 March 1990 at the age of 69.

Reg was an outstanding military serviceman who faced great adversity in World War Two and Korea, as well as his home country. Surviving a year of German occupation in Greece, achieving the rank of captain and furthering the rights of veterans and soldiers is nothing short of momentous, especially before his own country recognised him as 'human'. The legacy of Reginald Walter Saunders should be remembered for his contribution to the Australian Army, but more importantly, he should be remembered as a man who fought for his Aboriginal country and a paragon for every Australian to aspire to.



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