

CASE STUDY

Reginald Saunders

Second World War



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MEMORIAL
BOX

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TOO DARK FOR THE LIGHT HORSE

Painting of Reg Saunders
by Pamela Thalben-Ball
which hangs in the
Memorial's galleries.
(AWM ART 28159)



Australian War Memorial



Reginald Saunders

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Many Aborigines have enlisted and served in Australia's defence forces, and several have won decorations, but the first to be promoted to a commissioned rank was Reg Saunders, of Victoria.

Reginald Walter Saunders was born a member of the Gunditjmara people just outside Framlingham Aboriginal Reserve in the Western District of Victoria on 7 August, 1920. His father, Chris Saunders, and uncle, William Reginald Rawlings, had served with the 1st AIF. Reg was named after his brave uncle, William Rawlings. William Rawlings 29th Bn AIF was awarded a Military Medal for "displaying rare bravery in the performance of his duty... his irresistible dash and courage set a wonderful example to the remainder of the team".¹ Reg grew to admire the military feats of both his father and uncle.

Reg's mother died in 1924 and shortly after her death he was taken by his father, along with his brother Harry, to the Lake Condah Mission where he received his primary education. Reg did not like being away from his family, and left school at the age of 14 to go to work as a millhand in a timber yard.

As Reg's father and his father's mates talked about the First World War Reg listened with "ears as big as footballs, taking it all in..."² Listening to all this talk made Reg want to do the same. When he was given the opportunity to enlist in the Second World War Reg and his mates "went in swarms" to join up.³

Reg enlisted in the AIF (2/7th Battalion of the Australian 6th Division) in April 1940. His outstanding leadership skills, personable character and sporting skills were quickly

recognised by his superiors, and he was promoted to the rank of lance corporal within six weeks. Three months later, he was promoted to sergeant.⁴



Troops of the 2/7th Infantry Battalion, including Reg Saunders, patiently waiting for the south-bound leave train to start. (AWM 057894)

The first fighting Reg saw was in Libya, where he joined the battalion as a reinforcement, and took part in the continuing push to Benghazi where he says he nearly died of fright. Following this, on 9 April, 1941, Reg accompanied his battalion to Greece, where, under constant air attack, he took part in the fighting. The troops soon withdrew and made their way to Crete. On this trip, the ship on which he was travelling, the *Costa Rica*, was bombed and sunk. Reg managed to scramble aboard a destroyer.

Reg's brother Harry, now nearing his 18th birthday and in a hurry to enlist, convinced the recruiting officer that he was old enough, and joined the 2/14th Battalion. Reg and Harry met up while they were camped near each other in Palestine and took leave together in Jerusalem.⁵

1 Recommendation for Citation of Pte William Reginald Rawlings MM, AWM 28

2 David Moodie, "Soldier Saunders" in *The Australia Way*, April 1989, pp.14-17

3 David Moodie, op. cit.

4 Bob Hall, *The black diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney 1989, p.65

5 Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Forgotten heroes: Aborigines at war from the Somme to Vietnam*, Victoria Press, 1993, p.23

In Crete, Reg again took part in fighting against air attack. This was another ill-fated campaign, which saw the British evacuated from the Island. Reg was one of several troops left behind. After almost a full year of hiding out on the Island, an easy task for Reg, who had dark skin and who could easily pass as being of Mediterranean descent, they were taken secretly off the island.

After returning to Australia, Reg was soon posted to New Guinea in August 1942, where he proceeded to the Owen Stanley Ranges. "I preferred fighting in the jungle. You had more cover in the jungle. And, being a bush boy, I was at home in the jungle, because every time you ducked down you were under cover. In the desert, if you ducked down they'd just bounce bullets off you".⁶

It was while Reg was serving in New Guinea that his brother, Harry, was killed in action on the Kokoda Trail. It was also while he was in New Guinea that he was nominated for promotion to a commissioned rank. He was the first Aboriginal Australian to have reached this level of command in the Australian Army.

Following active service in Libya, Greece, Crete and New Guinea, Reg was selected to return to Victoria and attend an Officers Training School, at the Infantry Wing of the Officers Cadet Training Unit, Seymour. He graduated as a lieutenant in December, 1944.⁷



Lt R. W. Saunders receiving his stars from Lt Gen. J. Northcott, during the graduation ceremony. (AWM 083164)



Lt R. W. Saunders and Lt T. C. Derrick, congratulating each other following their successful graduation. (AWM 083166)

On behalf of the Aborigines' Friends Association Adelaide, the Secretary, the Rev. Gordon Rowe, wrote him a letter of congratulations, to which he sent the following letter in reply:

*14 Glebe Av.,
Cheltenham, Vic
18/12/44.*

Dear Sir,

Thank you very much for your kind wishes and congratulations.

My philosophy is that once a person undertakes to do something, no matter how big or how small, that person should do it to the best of his or her ability. Which may account for my very small part in helping to pave the road to ultimate victory.

Many thanks for your book. Many of the people mentioned in it are very familiar to me.

You mentioned in your letter an attitude towards the people of my race. I am sorry, but neither you nor I can change that attitude, because [the] changing of it rests with the aborigines themselves, and my contribution towards helping them is just simply by setting myself up as an example—not by words, which are cheap, but by deeds.

Once again, Sir, I thank you, and wish you and your fellow workers all the best of luck.

*I remain,
Yours sincerely,
(Sgd.) R. W. Saunders*

⁶ Australian War Memorial, *Media release*, 7 March 1990

⁷ D. Rowe, *Sketches of outstanding Aborigines*, Adelaide, 1956, p.4

After he became the first Aboriginal commissioned officer to serve in the Australian forces, Reg spent the remainder of the war as a lieutenant in charge of a platoon of up to thirty Australians.⁸

Following the end of the Second World War, Reg served in the Korean War, where he was promoted to captain in charge of "C" Company of the 3rd Battalion, and took part in the famous battle of Kapyong in 1951. It was during this battle that the battalion was awarded the US Presidential Citation. When it came time to decorate Reg for his part in the battle he declined the award, saying that "there were twenty-five other blokes in that particular battle with me and they didn't get any recognition so why should I?"⁹

After having fought in the battle for Hill 317, Reg finally departed from Korea in October 1952, and resigned from the Regular Army in 1954. Reg moved to Sydney after the war and soon became the captain of his local cricket team and president of a sub-branch of the RSL.

In 1969, Reg moved to Canberra and took up employment as liaison officer at the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. He remained in this position until his retirement in 1981. Reg died on Friday 2 March, 1991, aged 69.

Among Reg's other achievements, he was awarded an MBE in 1971, and was appointed to the Council of the Australian War Memorial in July 1985. His portrait now hangs in the Australian War Memorial. A scholarship, established in Reg's honour by the RSL, was launched in 1992 for drug and alcohol abuse studies, and is aimed at students of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

OFFICIAL IDENTITY
(For All Ranks)

⁸ Bob Hall, op. cit., p.66

⁹ Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, op.cit., p.20