

# A Quiet Achiever: LT Leith Donald

By Elaine Towers

Lt Leith Eric Donald was one of a number of 7th Battalion men who led patrols into enemy territory looking for intelligence on enemy movements, enemy camps and often to ambush enemy patrols.

He was awarded *Mentioned in Despatches (MID)* for his "Exceptional service in the field in the South West Pacific Area".



Leith Donald, my uncle, was born in Red Cliffs in 1917, the third child of Jim and Nell Donald and in time one of 6 children, three boys and three girls.

Leith was a reserved person who didn't say much, possibly because he couldn't get a word in amongst his more extrovert siblings! He loved reading, especially history, had a good sense of humour and a lovely smile.

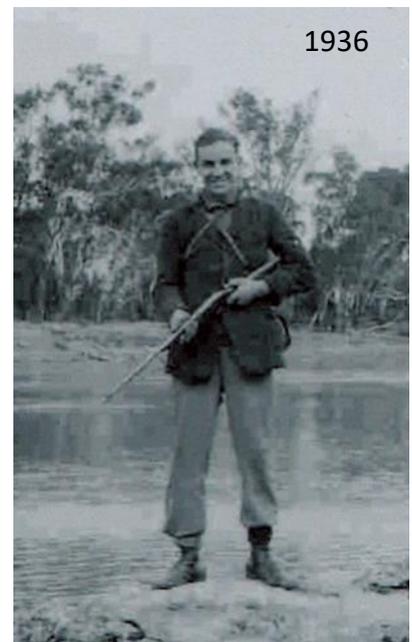
His father was an experienced and keen bushman who took his sons camping to fish and shoot rabbits and ducks. On one of these trips when he was about 18, Leith developed rheumatic fever and it took him a long time to recover.

On 28th November 1939 Leith enlisted in the 7th Battalion, then a Citizen Military Forces (CMF) unit. He served with the 7th Battalion in Darwin for 9 months, during 1942 when the Japanese bombed Darwin on a regular basis. At the end of 1942 Leith was seconded from 7th Battalion to the 23rd

Australian Infantry Training Battalion and then to 3rd Australian Recruit Training Battalion. Leith's fitness had originally been rated as A2, probably due to his earlier bout of rheumatic fever. However in March 1944 he was upgraded to A1 and he promptly volunteered for service in the Australian Infantry Forces so he could serve overseas. His wife Joyce later told the family that she suspected Leith had bought the Medical Officer a few drinks and convinced him to upgrade his fitness assessment!

Leith re-joined the 7th Battalion in August 1944 in time to be posted overseas to Lae with the Battalion. From there he was moved to Treasury Islands and, in March 1945 he led a special platoon on a 17 day recce of Choiseul Island in the Solomon's. The platoon trained under Leith and the Battalion's Intelligence Officer for a week prior to leaving for Choiseul. The recce platoon estimated that about 400 Japanese soldiers were located on the Island. In April 1945, Leith moved with the Battalion to Bougainville and remained there until the end of the war.

While serving on Bougainville Leith was one of many men who led or took part in patrols into enemy territory looking for intelligence on the Japanese forces and/or to conduct ambushes. The Battalions' War Diary includes six reports submitted by Leith on patrols he led into enemy territory between 6 June and 6 August 1945 and brief mention of another patrol on 9



-10 August. Orders came on 11 August to cease hostilities (other than in defence of their own positions and men) in anticipation of a Japanese surrender.

There were many patrol leaders although it seems that most led one or two patrols. Patrol leaders who led three or more patrols include LT Bonde, Lt Rush (also awarded MID), Lt McPhee and Lt McKenzie (one of his patrols was for 5 days).

Leith Donald appears to have led more patrols than any other officer or senior non commissioned officer. However it is hard to be sure because some patrols are mentioned in the war diary but with no report attached and some are not mentioned in the diary but reports are attached to the diary. A number of patrols are mentioned as being conducted by a particular platoon and no patrol commander is named and there are no written reports of these other than the entry in the war diary.

Below is a summary of the patrols led by Leith Donald. 7th Battalion had taken control of the Central Bougainville area from 27th Battalion on 4 June 1945.

**Patrol 6 Jun 1945:** 7 Platoon (A Company) — 1 Officer, 9 Other Ranks (ORs)

Duration: 7.5 hours                      Casualties: 1 enemy killed, Nil patrol

Object was to recce enemy positions in OP 5, leaving from Keenan's Ridge.

Report details topographical features and vegetation and condition of tracks. Suitable areas for ambushes, dropping zones and bivouac areas are all noted. A map of route taken and enemy infrastructure submitted with report.

**Patrol 7 Jun 1945:** 1 Officer, 9 ORs (presumably 7 Platoon but platoon number is not stated)

Duration: 6.5 hours                      Casualties: 1 enemy wounded, Nil patrol

Object was to recce Japanese positions and approaches to these in OP 5.

Patrol recce'd bunker area found on patrol on 6 June getting within 35 yards (about 35 metres) and reported on siting of weapons and possible approaches. Patrol remained in Japanese area for about 1.5 hours. Patrol fired on bunker hitting one Japanese soldier. Japanese returned fire as the patrol withdrew.

**Patrol 14-15 Jun 1945:** 7 Platoon (A Company) — 1 Officer, 9 ORs, 1 Native guide

Duration: 31.5 hours                      Casualties: 2 enemy killed, Nil patrol

Object was to recce enemy position at Tokua and approaches.

Day 1 was spent getting to Tokou and then scouting the enemy position (getting as close as 150 metres) and approaches to the position. Observation of Japanese area was conducted on Day 2 and 2 Japanese were killed in one engagement.

**Patrol 19 Jun 1945:** 7 Platoon (A Company) — 1 Officer, 14 ORs

Duration: 9 hours                          Casualties: 4 enemy killed, Nil patrol

Object was to further recce enemy position at Tokua, likely approaches and to inflict casualties on enemy if possible.

A close recce of position was not possible due to a surprise encounter with an enemy party. In the first action one enemy was killed and found to be carrying 2 documents,

matches and chopsticks. A second action against a group of 8 occurred with the patrol eventually withdrawing to avoid being trapped by enemy reinforcements from Tokou.

On the patrol's return the documents were forwarded directly to Brigade HQ and found to be the first information received that the Japanese 81st Infantry Regiment were to hold a flag ceremony on July 14 (formal parade followed by feasting).

**Patrol 26-27 Jul 1945:** 7 Platoon (A Company) —1 Officer, 9 ORs, 3 Native guides

Duration: 26 hours            Casualties: 7 enemy killed, Nil patrol

Object was to investigate reports by natives that Japanese were using Evian as a staging point for food parties and to harass and inflict casualties on the enemy if possible.

Patrol moved to within 30 metres of nearest Japanese hut to observe enemy movement and positions. On second day the patrol got to within 10 metres of Japanese position and observed activity before opening fire on the enemy. Seven enemy killed. Patrol returned to base.

**Patrol 3-5 Aug 1945:** 7 Platoon (A Company) — 1 Officer, 15 ORs, 2 Sigs, 1 stretcher bearer, 4 Native guides

Duration: 55.5 hours            Casualties: 3 enemy ambushed and killed

Objects were to recce a reported Japanese HQ at Resiopaia and to harass enemy if opportunity arose.

Patrol had to cross a number of fast flowing streams with water 18" to 2 feet deep. On reaching target area 3 Native guides left to recce and find a friendly local native. On their return on Day 3 they were followed by Japanese soldiers. The patrol ambushed and killed 3 enemy soldiers before leaving their position. Native guide later advised the patrol was being followed by the enemy. Native guides refused to take patrol closer to Resiopaia due to frequent Japanese patrols in area.

**Patrol 9-10 Aug 1945:** 7 Platoon (A Company) — 1 Officer and 10 ORs

Duration: 31.5 hours

The war diary states that an ambush was set up in the IBU area but after 6 hours no movement by the enemy was detected and the patrol returned to base.

The summaries of these seven patrols give a glimpse into the experiences of those who participated in the patrols—not only the officers but all the men. They spent considerable time in enemy territory and were expected to get as close as possible to obtain information that could be used in the further conduct of the war.

#### **LT. Leith Donald's citation for Mention in Despatches award:**

"This officer commended 7 PI, 7AUST INF BN (AIF) during the Unit's time in action from 3 Jun 45 until the cessation of hostilities. In Mar 45 he spent two months on Choiseul Island with a special recce group gaining valuable information for HQ 2 AUST CORPS on enemy dispositions and strengths. Throughout the Unit's period of action in the CENTRAL SECTOR BOUGAINVILLE, he repeatedly showed personal initiative and gallantry above the average, in patrolling behind enemy lines in the TOKUA and NUMA NUMA areas, killing 17 enemy without loss to his own patrols.

His actions were responsible for much of the freezing of enemy movement in his L of C areas, with consequent damage to his morale and powers of resistance."

## **After the war**

Leith returned to Australia in November 1945. He returned to the Mildura area, settling in the Red Cliffs area as a 'blockie' - the local nickname for a person who owned a property growing grapes, primarily to be marketed as dried fruit. He and wife Joyce had three children.

Leith died young in 1975, aged 57, from the lingering affects of his weak heart. I was only 21 so sadly I never got to know him when I was an adult. However, I have great respect for Uncle Leith and all the men of the 7th Battalion who fought against a much larger Japanese force in difficult conditions similar to those experienced on the better known Kokoda Track.

Elaine Towers (nee Alexander)