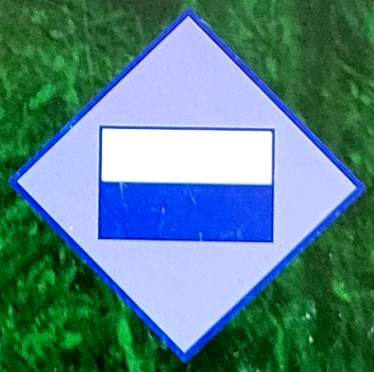
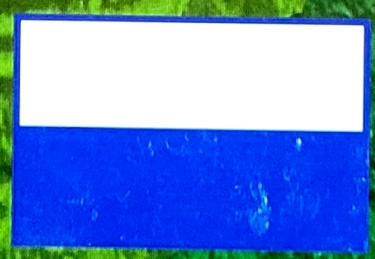




# “THE FIGHTING 16<sup>th</sup>”

A History of the Australian 16th Battalions





# “THE FIGHTING 16TH”

(A History of the Australian 16th Battalions)

by  
**Bill Edgar**

(with additional notes by Jim Richardson)



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**ISBN No.** 0-9580766-0-X

## **We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of:**

- The 2/16th Battalion Association of Western Australia
- The Australian Department of Veterans' Affairs

Front page cover: Australian War Memorial image 026837.  
(*The Golden Stairs*, Imita Ridge, New Guinea)

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## COLONIAL BEGINNINGS:

The 5<sup>th</sup> (Goldfields) Battalion, Western Australian Infantry Regiment, was raised on 7<sup>th</sup> June 1900 and was located in the Kalgoorlie goldfields region. A strong affiliation remains to this day. The volunteer militia status has existed in an unbroken line through many changes of name and numeral identity to be, today, the present 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Western Australian Regiment.

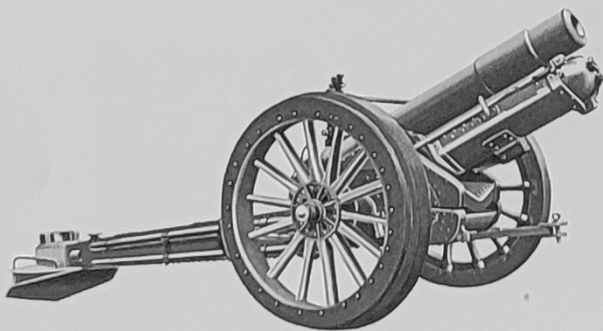
Detachments of the early unit served in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and earned the Battle Honour, "SOUTH AFRICA 1902", which is carried on the Regimental Colours of the present day Army Reserve unit.

In 1914, prior to the outbreak of the Great War, now named the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry (Goldfields) Battalion, the unit became a training unit, Commonwealth regulations restricting militia units to service only within the Commonwealth of Australia and its territories.

## THE GREAT WAR (1914-1918):

The outstanding history of the Western Australian 16<sup>th</sup> Battalions became legend during the Great War. Late in 1914 the Australian Government decided to raise another force to supplement the 1<sup>st</sup> Division already in training. The new formation was to be known as the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, commanded by Victorian, Colonel John Monash. To Western Australia was allotted the task of raising the new 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion headquarters, a machine-gun section, signal section and five companies of infantry; the remaining three companies were to be filled by South Australians. During the course of the war the Battalion fought on Gallipoli and in France and Belgium along the Western Front.

**BATTLE HONOURS** include the landing at *Anzac Cove, Sari Bair Ridge* (Gallipoli 1915) and at the Western Front, *Poizieres* (1916); *Bullecourt, Messines, Ypres (Passchendaele) and Polygon Wood* (1917); *Le Hamel* and finally, *Mont St Quentin* on the Somme (1918). In its last engagement, which ended on 21 September 1918, it was led into battle by Major W. (Bill) Lynas DSO MC who had landed on Gallipoli as a private nearly four and a half years before.



Captain W.J. (Bill) Lynas  
D.S.O., M.C. (x3)



The men of the 'Old 16<sup>th</sup>' were a tough breed. They had adapted a verse by Edward Vance Cooke called, 'Be Men'. It was to be their credo for the four and a half long years of the war:

*Did you tackle the trouble that came your way  
With a resolute heart and cheerful?  
Or hide your face from the light of day  
With a craven heart and fearful*

*Or, trouble's a ton, or trouble's an ounce  
Or troubles is what you make it;  
And it isn't the fact that your hurt that counts  
But only, how did you take it?*

*You are beaten to earth? Well, well what's that?  
Came up with a smiling face.  
It's nothing against you to fall down flat,  
But to lie there - that's the disgrace.*

*The harder you're thrown, why the higher you'll  
bounce  
Be proud of your blackened eye.  
It isn't the fact that you're licked that counts  
But how did you fight, and why?*

*And though you be done to death, what then?  
If you batted the best you could;  
If you played your part in the world of men  
Why the critics will call it good.*

*Death comes with a crawl, or comes with a pounce;  
And whether he's slow or spry;  
It isn't the fact that you're dead that counts  
But only - how did you die?*





## 'FROM THE RANKS'

Arguably the most remarkable pair of 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion men were Harry Murray and Percy Black. They joined up around the same time in 1914 as private soldiers, Murray from the south-west of Western Australia and Black from the Eastern Goldfields. They trained together at Blackboy Hill (Greenmount) camp, outside Perth, and subsequently landed with the machine-gun section on Gallipoli during the evening of 25<sup>th</sup> April 1915.

Murray was to later win the Victoria Cross as the commander of 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion's "A" Company at Gueudecourt (France). At Bullecourt (France) on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1917, '...both Murray and Black were again an inspiration leading the men through the wire. But after leading his men through the "hurricane fusillade" to the first line of trenches, Major Percy Black DSO DCM Croix de Guerre, was shot through the head and killed while looking for a gap in the wire on the next advance.'<sup>1</sup> It was an action which cost the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion 650 casualties of the 800 who went into action. Captain Arnold Potts (later Brigadier A.W. Potts DSO OBE MC of Kokoda Track fame) led his 45 men of the 4<sup>th</sup> Light Trench Mortar Battery in the action and lost 34 of them, some from the 'friendly' fire of the new-fangled British tanks. The 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade lost a total of 2450 men of the 3000 who were committed on that fateful morning.



*Major Percy Black D.S.O., D.C.M.*



*Lieut.-Col. Harry Murray  
V.C., C.M.G., D.S.O. & bar, D.C.M.*

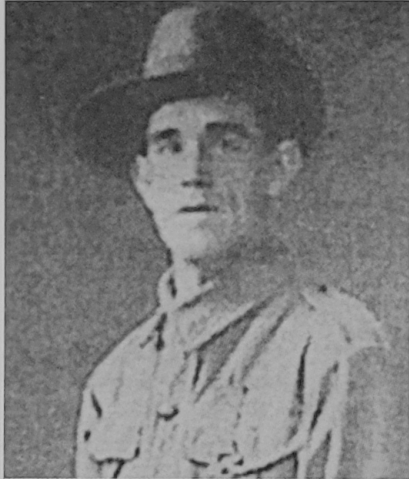
The Battalion then moved to the Ypres sector in Belgium and took part in major engagements at Passchendaele and Polygon Wood towards the end of 1917. The last year of the war saw the battalion transferred back to the Somme sector in France and further fierce fighting in the face of the last major German offensive around Villers-Brettoneaux during April. Finally they were involved in the offensive push along the Somme Valley through Le Hamel in July and finally at Mont St Quentin in September, 1918, before the armistice was declared on 11<sup>th</sup> November. It has been estimated by some that close to 10,000 men passed through the ranks of the 1000 man 16<sup>th</sup> battalion during the course of the war.

<sup>1</sup>Chalk in *Wartime*, Volume 8, p29



## DECORATIONS:

The 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Imperial Forces, was one of the most highly decorated units in the armies of the Allied forces. Three Victoria Crosses were awarded to the 16<sup>th</sup>.



*Lance-Corporal Tom L. Axford V.C. M.M.  
(Le Hamel, France, 1918)*



*Lieutenant Laurie D. McCarthy V.C.  
(near Madame Wood, France, 1918)*

### Other Awards:

- Two Companions of the Order of the Bath (CB)
- One Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG)
- Eleven Distinguished Service Orders (DSO)
- Thirty three Military Crosses (MC)
- Forty four Distinguished Conduct Medals (DCM)
- One hundred and fifty nine Military Medals (MM)
- Four Meritorious Service Medals (MSM)
- Five Croix de Guerre (French War Cross)



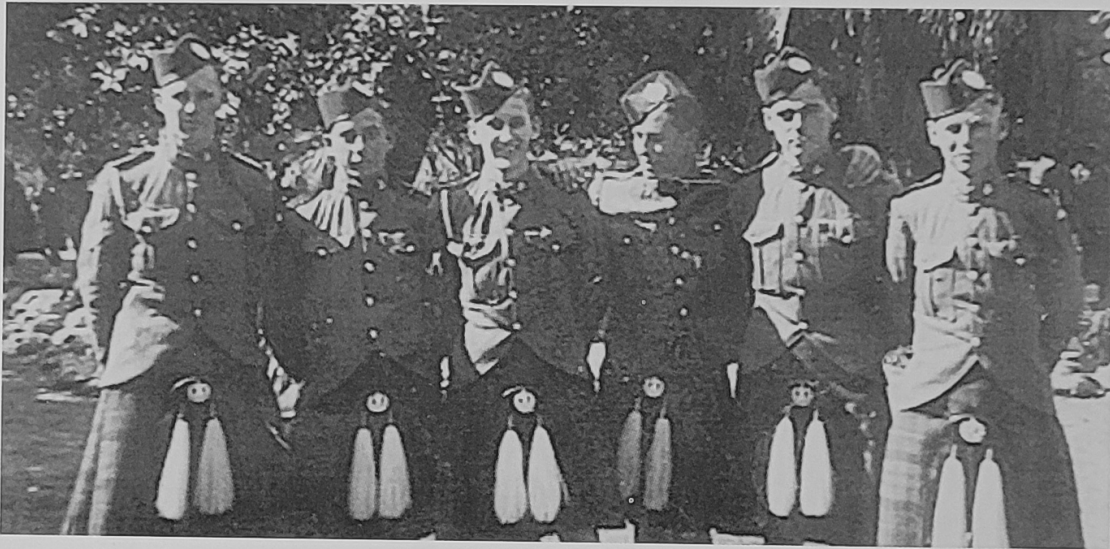
*Private Martin O'Meara V.C.  
(Pozières, France, 1916)*



## BETWEEN THE WARS:

The 'Old Sixteenth' was disbanded in 1918 at the end of the war. In 1921, in order to preserve the history of the great feats of arms of the old battalion, the numeral 16, and the Battle Honours, were transferred to the existing Goldfields Militia Regiment.

In 1936, a new Citizen Military Force unit, *'The 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The Cameron Highlanders of Western Australia'*, was formed. The unit operated out of headquarters at the foot of William Street in the heart of Perth and trained a new generation of young men (resplendent in kilts and sporrans etc) as war clouds loomed in Europe. There were also companies in Kalgoorlie, Merredin and Fremantle. Many *Camerons* joined units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Imperial Force to become officers and non-commissioned officers when war was eventually declared. The contribution of the Camerons to other Western Australian branches of the armed services during World War II (navy and air force) was also outstanding.



L. to R.: Doug Burges, Doug Roe, Peter McMullin, Eric Eastman, unknown, Bob Fitzsimmons

## THE SECOND WORLD WAR:

### 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion

### The Cameron Highlanders of Western Australia

The Battalion, now equipped and almost at full strength, entered camp on Rottneest Island, the day after war was declared in September 1939.

Restricted to service only within the Commonwealth, the battalion provided officers and men to form the nucleus of the 2/11<sup>th</sup>, 2/16<sup>th</sup> and 2/28<sup>th</sup> W.A. Battalions for service overseas with the 2<sup>nd</sup> AIF. Eventually the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion's duties narrowed down to coast-watch duties and the defence of the Fortress Darwin area in 1943.



## 16<sup>TH</sup> AUSTRALIAN INFANTRY BATTALION

Later the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion became an AIF unit (service overseas) and moved, as part of the 13<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, to New Guinea, then New Britain, for operations against Japanese along the Gazelle Peninsular in New Britain. During these operations the battalion was awarded the Battle Honour, "WAITAVOLO" for the action at the Waitavolo Plantation in 1945 (the only individual battle honour awarded to a W.A. militia battalion in WWII).

The battalion returned to Australia in 1946 and was disbanded.

## 2/16<sup>TH</sup> AUSTRALIAN INFANTRY BATTALION

After the outbreak of World War II the 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, AIF, was formed in Western Australia as part of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division. Brigadier Alfred Baxter-Cox reverted to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and took up command.

After processing at an office next to Swan Barracks in Francis Street recruits moved up to Northam Army Camp, 100kms east of Perth, to commence their training.

### 2/16<sup>th</sup> Marching Song:

*We have come from afar in the North-West  
From the south where the tall timbers grow  
From the stations and the farms  
We have heard the call to arms  
And we'll join the world's big show*

*From the mines and the wide open spaces  
From the towns and fields of our sport  
We have come with spirits high have a fly - do or die  
To the scenes where the Anzacs fought*

*We're the 16<sup>th</sup> - the fighting 16<sup>th</sup>  
Ready for the job in hand  
Pals together - in all weather  
We'll be there to make our stand  
Meet the 16<sup>th</sup> - the snappy 16<sup>th</sup>  
What the odds are we don't care  
And when its all in just sound the fall  
And the 16<sup>th</sup> will be there*



On the completion of their training the battalion marched in a final ceremonial march down St Georges Tce on 10 October 1940, the men wore their new colour patch for the first time. Among the weathered 'Old 16<sup>th</sup>' veterans who had come to view the new parade, there were more than a few tears.



## MIDDLE EAST 1940-1941:

On 25<sup>th</sup> October 1940 a troop train transported the 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion to Fremantle and they boarded the *Aquitania* for passage to the Middle East. Already aboard were their distant cousins, the Victorian 2/14<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Later, together with the South Australian 2/27<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the three units were to comprise the 21st Australian Infantry Brigade.

They disembarked at El Kantara on 25 November 1940. From there they were moved into Palestine (Julis Camp). Subsequently the unit was stationed at Dimrah (Palestine) for training at battalion and brigade level; then by rail to Mersa Matruh in Egypt where for two months hard work on building defences kept the unit personnel very fit.

In mid-1941 the Allies feared a German presence in Syria would compromise the security of the Suez Canal region. General Charles de Gaulle, the Free French commander, urged Churchill to launch an invasion into Palestine and Syria. In consequence General Wavell began speedily preparing an expeditionary force for Syria in support of *Operation Exporter*.

The core of the hurriedly assembled force was to be two brigades of the AIF 7<sup>th</sup> Division, the 21<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> (the 18<sup>th</sup> was trapped in Tobruk) while other units were the battle-hardened 2/3<sup>rd</sup> and 2/5<sup>th</sup> Battalions of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division, the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Division Cavalry and complimentary units of artillery, anti-tank, machine-gunners and pioneers. There was also the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade and a Free French Force of 5,000, a total of 34,000 men supported by twenty ships and seventy aircraft. Arraigned against them was a comparable force of 35,000 Sengalese, Algerians, Moroccans, Syrians, Circassians, White Russians and a sizable force of French Foreign Legion units.



Forward elements of the 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion crossed the border into Syria at 0200 on the 8 June 1941 with Major Arnold Potts MC in command of the advance guard. Early the following morning they attacked across the well-defended Litani River with great difficulty. It was only superb discipline and training that enabled them to complete the task under heavy opposition against the well-entrenched French Forces. Casualties, however, were heavy.

There was little time to rest. On the following day the brigade marched north again on the coastal thrust. An attack on Sidon was launched on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. The 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion began to move through the orchards and open ground at 1000 hours. The French had prepared well and they had medium tanks at their disposal which caused considerable problems. It was 'pillar to post' fighting, through orange groves and ditches and gullies. Black Friday, 13<sup>th</sup> July 1941, lived up to its reputation.

The next day the navy joined in with a bombardment off the coast and the battle of attrition went on throughout the day. However, by dawn on the 15<sup>th</sup> June the French had pulled out and the town was secured.

On 25<sup>th</sup> June they reached El Harem Ridge and battle preparation for possession of the town of Damour began. Here lay the last pocket of resistance against the Allied advance on Damascus, the Syrian capital, and on Bierut, the location of the Vichy French headquarters.

The attack toward El Atiqua began on 6 July at 0615. All hell broke loose. Resistance was heavy. Subalterns and corporals took the initiative in many fierce skirmishes, as they had been trained to do. They pressed on hard. It was in this vicinity that Lieutenant Roden Cutler earned his Victoria Cross for gallantry. A little further northward at Djezzine, Private Jim Gordon, the tough Western Australian Gingin farmer of the 2/31<sup>th</sup> Battalion, won his Victoria Cross by assaulting a machine-gun nest on his own and bayonetting the four man crew.

By 8<sup>th</sup> July the battalion, after continued heavy fighting, had managed to consolidate on the ridges at Mar Mikhail and El Atiqua beyond the Damour River, about a kilometre from the outer limits of the city of Damour.

On 11<sup>th</sup> July the French commander, General Dentz, now realising defeat was inevitable, agreed to negotiate a truce with Lieutenant-General John Lavarack, I Australian Corps commander and by the early hours of 12<sup>th</sup> July, hostilities had ceased. On the 15<sup>th</sup> July the 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion led the march into Bierut to great fanfare. People lined the roads all the way from Damour, up the Rue Damas to the Place de Martyrs (or 'Place Tomatoes' as the Australians called it).

There followed a period of well-earned rest in Bierut (the 'Paris of the East'). It was to be a long wait to learn of their next role. Early in the new year, however, to the north of Australia, Japanese forces were moving rapidly down the Malayan Peninsular and spreading their tendrils across the South-West Pacific region toward the Australian mainland.



*The Bridge At Damour*

## **SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC 1942-1945:**

**Return to Australia:** With the entry of Japan into the war after the bombing of Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, Australian Prime Minister John Curtin and his cabinet decided that the A.I.F. 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions should be returned to Australia from the Middle East as a matter of urgency. The 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion arrived back at Fremantle on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1942 and, after a short period of leave and training, were placed in defensive positions in Queensland on the so called Brisbane Line, in case of a Japanese invasion.

While awaiting further orders a group of 2/16<sup>th</sup> soldiers paid an official visit to the 16<sup>th</sup> Motor Regiment at Gympie. The purpose of the visit was to offer the battalion's respects to one of their greatest 'sons', the quiet and unassuming Colonel Harry Murray VC, now the commanding officer of the 16<sup>th</sup> Motor Brigade. This unit which had formerly been the 16<sup>th</sup> Light Horse, the Hunter River Lancers in 1918 (originally the 4<sup>th</sup> Light Horse, New South Wales Lancers in 1907), was subsequently active as a militia unit between the wars and in 1936 was converted to a machine-gun unit, the 16<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Machine-Gun Regiment, Hunter River Lancers. In May 1942 it was converted to a motorised unit.



## THE KOKODA TRACK:

The Japanese landed unexpectedly on the northern coast of New Guinea on the 21<sup>st</sup>/22<sup>nd</sup> July 1942 and, began to march rapidly inland towards the Owen Stanley Ranges with the intent of capturing Port Moresby and the vital airfields there. Had they succeeded the mainland of Australian and the vital Allied lines of communication in South-West Pacific would have come under extreme threat.

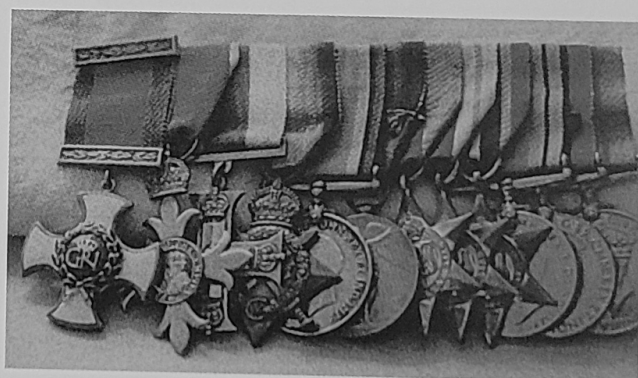
The 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade, now commanded by Brigadier Arnold Potts DSO MC, a Kojonup farmer who had formerly been the commanding officer of the 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, was rushed to New Guinea and, within days, it's 1500 members were climbing into the precarious Owen Stanley Ranges in an attempt to position themselves to stop the advance of the Japanese forces, now building up to over ten thousand men and already engaging the ill-prepared but gallant militia 39<sup>th</sup> Militia Battalion at Isurava in the foothills on the far side of the range.

What followed will forever go down as one of the most heroic defensive actions in the annals of military history. From the 26<sup>th</sup> August to 16<sup>th</sup> September 1942, the 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, [lead by Lieutenant-Colonel Albert Caro] together with their brothers-in-arms of Brigadier Potts' 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade (the Victorian 2/14<sup>th</sup>, the South Australian 2/27<sup>th</sup> and the remnants of Maroubra Force - the militia 39<sup>th</sup> and scattered elements of the ill-prepared 53<sup>rd</sup> battalions & Papuan Infantry Battalion), out-numbered by an estimated 5:1 (and out-gunned by superior weaponry), fought the Japanese to an eventual standstill on the ridges overlooking Port Moresby.

Two main battles were fought during that period (*Isurava*, 26<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> August and *Brigade* [*'Butchers'*] *Hill* [Efogi] from 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> September). At all times the desperately tired but determined force kept themselves between Japanese Major-General Horii's *South Sea Force* and Port Moresby - defending, withdrawing, then ambushing in a masterly display of tactical defence. Conditions were almost indescribable. It rained for much of the time. The weary men endured some of the most difficult and exhausting terrain in the world and, increasingly, they were racked by malaria and dysentery. But they kept fighting, making the enemy pay dearly for every metre of ground. They bought precious time for the troops being prepared to come up from the Port Moresby to relieve them.



Brigadier Arnold Potts  
D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C., m.i.d. (x4)



Another Western Australian, Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Honner DSO MC, who commanded the gallant 39<sup>th</sup> in the action, later wrote of these men in the forward to Peter Brune's book, *Those Bloody Ragged Heroes*:

*'They have joined the immortals...'* he likened them all to King Henry V's soldiers at Agincourt. Of those that did not survive he wrote, *'...Wherever their bones may lie, the courage of heroes is consecrated in the hearts and engraved in the history of the free.'*<sup>2</sup> Their divisional commander, Major-General "Tubby" Allen, later addressed the survivors and called them, *"...the men who saved Australia."*

A sentiment that could be attributable to all who fought in that crucial defence of the Kokoda Track.

## TURNING THE TIDE:

After the 143 remaining men (of the original 1500 or so who went up the track) were finally withdrawn, the fresh 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade took over the struggle to push the Japanese back along the Kokoda Track. The survivors of the 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade were paraded before their Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Thomas Blamey at Koitaki and accused of *'running like rabbits'*.

Some weeks later the Brigade was sent in across open ground against well prepared Japanese positions at Gona on the northern shores of Papua, when it was well known that it was virtually suicidal to do so. The 'long eye' of history has brought into focus now a series of command initiatives and actions which border on the infamous. The controversies about those decisions still rage to this day. It can be strongly argued that Generals MacArthur and Blamey sacrificed many of their own men on the anvil of their own personal ambitions and to ensure the continuity of their careers.

The 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion left the Gona battlefield with less than 50 'fit' men. They were sent to the Atherton Tableland in Queensland to rest and re-equip. Much needed reinforcements came from the break-up of Colonel Harry Murray's 16<sup>th</sup> Motor Regiment. That was disbanded in July, 1943 and its personnel absorbed into the ranks of the 21<sup>st</sup> Australian Infantry Brigade. These men were to become an integral part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade's campaigns until the end of the war - and then in a peace-keeping role in the Celebes for some months after.

**Ramu Valley/Shaggy Ridge:** Later in 1943 the 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion went back to New Guinea and took part in the Markham and Ramu Valley campaign where they fought valiantly again. *Shaggy Ridge* is now a proud part of the battalion's long list of battle honours.

During 1944 and 1945 they waited in their Atherton (Queensland) encampments for General MacArthur to decide how Australian troops might be used in the offensive against Japanese forces through the islands and into Japan. Eventually the 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion was engaged in the successful landing and capture of Balikpapan in the Eastern Borneo region in July 1945.

After peace was declared on the 15<sup>th</sup> August many of the long term soldiers were sent home but the more recent battalion members, with a smattering of seasoned veterans to guide them (such as commanding officer, Major John (Ben) Hearman), acted as a peace keeping force in the Celebes until finally sent home in the early months of 1946.

<sup>2</sup>Brune P., *Those Ragged Bloody Heroes*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991, p viii



## POST WORLD WAR II

**BACKGROUND:** The Citizen Military Forces (CMF) began raising new units on 1st July 1948. The infantry units in Western Australia were the two linked battalions, the 11/14<sup>th</sup>, *The City of Perth Regiment*, and the 16/28<sup>th</sup>, *The Cameron Highlanders of W.A. (Cameron's)*. These groupings continued until the National Service Scheme was introduced in 1951. The 16<sup>th</sup> and the 28<sup>th</sup> Battalions separated and the 28<sup>th</sup> resumed its original title of *The Swan Regiment*. The three battalions (11<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup>/28<sup>th</sup>) then formed the basis of the Western Australian 13<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade.

Many of the veterans of WWII joined the Camerons. Notable among these was Lt. Col. Frank Sublet D.S.O. M.C., who commanded the 2/16<sup>th</sup> in New Guinea. He was appointed the first commanding officer of the Camerons in 1948. The 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion spirit, which had first inspired men such as Percy Black and Harry Murray to greatness during the Great War, continued within the ranks of the Camerons following the second World War.

With the introduction of State Regiments in 1960 all battalions in WA were amalgamated into *The Royal Western Australian Regiment (1RWAR)*. This large infantry battalion formed the nucleus of a new formation called *The Battle Group*.

In 1966 the old unit numbering system was re-introduced and the 11<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Battalions were again on the Order of Battle. The 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, *The Royal Western Australian Regiment (16RWAR)* has retained the same name and battalion identity since. Both other infantry units were reduced to independent rifle companies and linked to form the 11/28<sup>th</sup> Battalion RWAR. In late 1998 the 16<sup>th</sup> became the only unit in W.A. to have a regular army rifle company integrated into an army reserve unit under a reserve commanding officer.

**CURRENT ACTIVITIES:** Annual field exercise and special overseas combined exercises in New Zealand, Hawaii, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea, as well as training at the army schools in Queensland and New South Wales, give the reserve soldier an opportunity to travel away from W.A.. The 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion has supported many ceremonial occasions such as the Empire and Commonwealth Games in 1962, royal tours, the opening of parliaments and, in 2000, was heavily involved in security operations supporting the Olympic Games in Sydney. Many individual members have also actively served with the United Nations Forces in Korea and with the Australian Army in Vietnam; a large contingent went to East Timor as part of Sixth Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment in 2000.

**THE ASSOCIATIONS TODAY:** *The 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion Association of W.A.* and *The Cameron Highlanders Association of Western Australia* join with *16<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Western Australian Regiment* to preserve and promote the fine traditions of the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalions' hard won, one hundred year history.



Lieutenant-Colonel Frank Sublet  
D.S.O. M.C.



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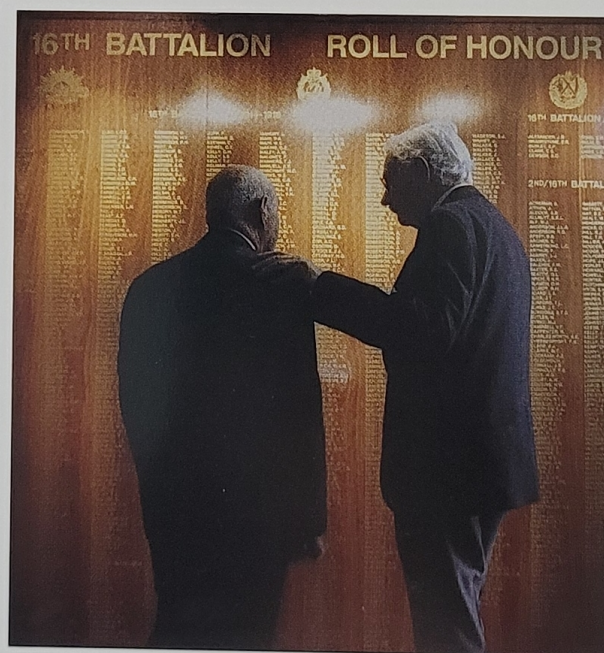


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