

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Brigadier Lewis Ernest Stephen BARKER, CBE, DSO, MC

(1895-1981)

Les Barker entered the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in the fourth intake in March 1914. World War I caused Barker's class to graduate early. Posted to the 8th Field Artillery Brigade (FAB), he left for overseas service in May 1916. His unit was transferred to the Western Front in December and he also served with the 37th Battalion from June 1917 before transferring to the 12th (Army) FAB in May 1918. It was here that he showed conspicuous gallantry as a captain liaison officer with the infantry in the vicinity of Bellicourt in September 1918. He bombed along a trench under heavy machine gun fire and re-established an important post for which he was awarded an MC.

Decorated and twice wounded-in-action, he returned to Australia to a round of regimental postings. Promoted in 1936 to major, for a time in 1939 he commanded Newcastle fixed defences.

WWII saw him appointed to command the new 2/4th Field Regiment, 7th Division on 2 May 1940. He stayed there only four months, but had an enduring impact on standards. In September 1940, Barker took over the 2/1st Field Regiment in the 6th Division. Barker retrained it on the new 25-pounder guns.

With rapid and sometimes daring advances, "Barker's Bedouins" distinguished themselves in the capture of Bardia, Tobruk and Benghazi. The campaign concluded and the regiment withdrawn, Barker received notification of his promotion to colonel and his appointment as Director of Artillery at Army Headquarters, Melbourne. For his bold leadership and technical proficiency, Barker was awarded a DSO and was mentioned in dispatches.

Barker had less than a year as Director, in April 1942, he was promoted to brigadier to command I Australian Corps artillery. With the Japanese threat looming, Barker was sent to Port Moresby where he had a 'three-hatted' command: CRA 7th Division; CRA New Guinea Force; and CCRA. As such, Barker was responsible for all artillery operations in New Guinea.

Until March 1943, and again from September 1943 to May 1944, Barker was in New Guinea. In between, he was the senior artillery brigadier (BRA) of First Army in Australia. In New Guinea he initially had few guns, and these were of different calibers and capability. He moved these forward by barge, air or manhandling. As his resources increased, artillery proved decisive. Japanese prisoners said artillery was the most potent factor in their defeat.

There was one discordant note. To provide more effective artillery support, a lightweight Australian 'short' 25-pr gun was developed. Barker strongly opposed its introduction,

believing it offered no advantage but accepted the contrary decision by his superior, Major General John Whitelaw, MGRA. Barker finished the war in senior artillery appointments in Australia. In April 1946, he became Commander 4th Military District (South Australia) from where he retired on 12 March 1949.

Barker died, survived by his family, at Corryong on 13 December 1981 and was cremated with Anglican rites.

Barker was the model for a plaster relief *Bringing up the guns* by sculptor May Butler-George. A bronze casting is in the AWM's sculpture garden, and a drawing by her is in the collection.

Sources: S. N. Gower, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, M.U.P., Vol 17, p.642-3. E.W. Haywood, *Six Years in Support*, Merrin Press. 1950.; David Horner, *The Gunners*; C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914/18 Volume 3 to 6*; Gavin Long, *To Benghazi*; Dudley McCarthy, *The South-West Pacific Area, First Year*; David Dexter, *The New Guinea Offensive*; *Who's Who in Australia* (1965); CARO Service Record and attachments; AMF and AIF Gradation Lists, London Gazette, Australian Military Orders, Australian Army Orders, General Orders and Commonwealth of Australia Gazette; Letter from Brighton Grammar School Director of Development dated 13 March 2002; and AWM Private Records 84/323.

For more information follow this link: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/barker-lewis-ernest-stephen-12175>