

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Warrant Officer Class 1 Charles Gilbert MCKENZIE, BEM

(1920-2003)

Charles McKenzie was born in Launceston on 24 October 1920, the son of William Gilbert McKenzie and Harriet Maria. His father was a sergeant and, from 1916, BSM of 9th Battery in WWI. As a gun detachment commander at Gallipoli on 19 December 1915 he was the last to report his gun clear for his battery prior to the evacuation.

In 1938, Charles joined as an unpaid volunteer before being enlisted as a gunner on 5 February 1939. He joined 16th Battery, 6th Field Brigade and did his basic training before enlisting in the 2nd AIF, in 16th Battery, 2/8th Field Regiment, on 3 May 1940.

Prior to boarding the *Strathmore* on 27 November, the Tasmanian and Victorian components of the 2/8th (RHQ, 15th and 16th Batteries) under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Alan Crisp were brought together at Puckapunyal. While the 9th Division was locked up in Tobruk the 2/8th (and 2/7th) supported the 22nd Guards Brigade around Mersa Matruh for several months in 1941. McKenzie celebrated his 22nd birthday in July 1942 with the reunited 9th Division at the First Battle Alamein. He would later say: 'No cake. No candles. No grog – but oh bruvva, didn't I have some fireworks!'. He was to have more of the same when on 23 October, the first day of the Second Battle of Alamein, his regiment was part of the biggest artillery preparation of the war to that date. McKenzie emerged unscathed and returned to Australia with his unit in February 1943.

Back in Australia it was more training, this time for jungle and amphibious warfare. It proved a frustrating period for 2/8th, as they were not immediately required for the Finschhafen and Lae campaigns. It was not until June 1945 that amphibious landing techniques were required for the 'Oboe' campaign in Borneo.

After the war, in 1948, McKenzie joined the Launceston based 6th Field Regiment, RAA, Citizens Military Forces, which in a few short years (1952) was to absorb National Servicemen. His enthusiasm and knowledge was sorely needed to bring new gunners up to scratch, first as a sergeant and later as a warrant officer. He retired from the CMF as an honorary Warrant Officer Class 1 in 1966.

For more than 30 years McKenzie was known to the community as the Anzac Day Parade Marshall. He was a member of the RAA Association of Tasmania (Historical Wing) and he compiled for his own enjoyment and satisfaction a record of the Battle of El Alamein, based on his own memorabilia and extracts from official histories and *The Tannoy*, the 2/8th Association newssheet. A copy of 'Gimme the Guns' is held at the National Artillery Museum. Copies of the book were awarded to high achieving gunners of all ranks as a prize.

In recognition of his service, McKenzie was awarded the British Empire Medal on 1 January 1953.

In civilian life, McKenzie trained as an apprentice plumber at Launceston Technical School but after the war he delivered petrol as a Shell Company driver for many years until he went into the metal trades as a driller. He was a keen sea fisherman, enjoyed building model boats about which he knew much, but his enduring love was music. He played the guitar with dance bands and on one memorable occasion at 16th Field Battery's ORs Christmas party he contrived with the Mess Manager to prolong the enjoyment until 0330. Thirty years later those involved still talk about that night.

Charles married Myrtle May Bryan on 15 March 1946 at St. John's Anglican Church, Launceston. He died from pneumonia in the city of his birth on 6 December 2003, and was cremated. His ashes were placed in a water garden at Carr Villa cemetery. He was survived by his wife and son Roger, and two grandchildren. It is a matter of record that three generations of McKenzie, William, Charles and Roger had all served in 16th Field Battery, RAA.

Sources: G. Petterwood (RAA Historical Society of Tasmania); C. McKenzie, Biography *Gimme the Guns* (MS) at RAAHC; obituary; Mr Roger Mc Kenzie letter 50804; *Official Histories*.