

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Major General Norman Alfred VICKERY, CBE, MC, ED

(1917-1998)

Norman Vickery was born at Lakemba, NSW, on 28 July 1917, the son of Mrs L. E. Vickery. He was educated at Lakemba Public School and Sydney Church of England Grammar School (Shore), and matriculated into the faculty of law at the University of Sydney.

He joined the Sydney University Regiment in which he was commissioned on 7 March 1938. When the 2nd AIF was being raised he enlisted in the 2/2nd Infantry Battalion but soon transferred to the Regiment, being accepted as a troop officer in 2nd Battery, 2/1st Field Regiment. He quickly became popular and gained the respect and trust of the men under his command by virtue of his character and ability. He was promoted temporary captain and made troop commander in 1940.

During the 6th Division attack on Bardia on 3 January 1941, when his regiment supported 2/2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry Brigade, Norman was reconnoitering in his Bren gun carrier with Gunners J. Fairleigh, B. Anley and its British driver, L/Cpl S. Barker, Queen's Own Regiment, south of the battalion area. They came upon the rear of an Italian gun battery that was busily being engaged by his battery. Vickery ordered his driver to charge the gun position. This show of bravado alarmed the Italians who, believing Vickery's vehicle to be the head of a larger force, surrendered. He was surprised to find about 1,000 Italians waiting to surrender. He 'drove' them toward 2/5th Battalion and capture. He was awarded an immediate Military Cross, the first for the Regiment in WWII. He later cut his ribbon in three, giving both Anley and Fairleigh a portion. Barker was awarded a Military Medal. After Bardia it was off to Tobruk and then Greece and Crete for more action.

Back in Australia, Captain Vickery was promoted to Major on 9 November 1942 as a battery commander in 2/1st Field Regiment, slimmed down for jungle operations in New Guinea. On 31 October 1943, he was seconded to the newly formed 1st Naval Bombardment Group, RAA, as a Liaison Officer and second in command before being promoted Senior Bombardment Liaison Officer of the group, then commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Bruce Watchorn, OBE MC, until April 1945, covering most of the amphibious landings of the 7th and 9th Divisions at Lae and on Borneo. He was awarded the CBE for his distinguished work with the RAN and United States Navy.

Post-war, Vickery resumed his legal studies under the CRTS provisions and graduated in 1950. He then studied for the Melbourne Bar, as well as resuming his military interests by becoming a battery commander again with 2nd Field Regiment in 1948 and commanding officer of the Melbourne University Regiment from 1951-54. After his term expired it was back to the Gunners as SORA1, CMF, Southern Command and following that, CO of 31st Medium Regiment during the expansion phase of the CMF fuelled by the 1950s National Service Scheme. From 1956 he was Commander 2nd AGRA for the Victorian gun regiments not under 3rd Division. He was also appointed ADC to the Governor General.

He was Deputy Commander 3rd Division 1961-63, then commander, following which he was appointed CMF Member of the Military Board 1966-70. This appointment coincided with the steep decline in CMF volunteer strength, something Vickery believed could be arrested by making training and annual camps more imaginative and interesting for its members. He saw great scope for improvement in conditions, more modern equipment on which to train, modernised depots and a length-of-service pension scheme. His was a voice in the wilderness as the ARA strove to maintain a field force without the benefit of some form of conscription, which came to pass in 1964. Notwithstanding the increase in CMF strength as an alternative to conscription into the Regular Army, this did not survive the end of the Vietnam commitment when the government abolished the scheme. Not one of Vickery's recommendations ever saw the light of day.

From 7 to 29 January 1967, he visited Malaysia and South Vietnam on FTD. He was one of 628 officers to undertake such visits during the course of Australia's involvement in the war in SVN.

Vickery's legal career was crowned with success. He established his reputation as a criminal lawyer, as a result of which in 1961 he was appointed to the Victorian County Court, the youngest jurist ever so appointed. Prior to this he co-authored 'Motor and Traffic Law'. He was appointed Chairman of the Workers Compensation Board in 1981, from which he retired in 1985.

In his leisure time he interested himself in painting and surfing, and was a member of the Naval and Military Club. He married Helen, daughter of Mr and Mrs A. H. Cuming. They had one son and two daughters. He died on 4 August 1998 and was accorded a funeral with full military honours.

Sources: Obituary, P. N. Vickery; Army List; G. Long, *To Benghazi*, p.193; D. Horner, *The Gunners*, p. 413; A. Palazzo, *The Australian Army, 1901-2001*. p.296; C. Vivian, *Kibbles Post, Newsletter of the 2/1st Field Regiment*, RAA October 1998; E. Hewit, MC, letter 4 September 1990; G. Farley, letter 10 September 2007; Alan H. Smith.