

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Major James Essington LEWIS, ED

(1911 – 1973)

Jim Lewis was born at Port Pirie, SA, on 13 January 1911, the eldest of four children of Essington Lewis and Gladies Rosalind (nee Cowan). Essington was a mining engineer and later, general manager and deputy chairman of The Broken Hill Proprietary Co. Ltd. steel, manufacturing and mining industries. Jim was educated at Geelong Grammar and the University of Melbourne (BSc Met), and was a very capable student and all-round sportsman, like his father. He called 'Landscape', Tallarook, his home but his father dispatched him to learn about mining and steel making at its grass roots in Newcastle.

In Newcastle he joined 1st Field Artillery Brigade as a gunner and quickly mastered the gunner's arts. He was promoted through the ranks and was commissioned in the Militia on 7 November 1939. He was allocated to 2/9th Field (Army) Regiment that sailed for the Middle East in April 1941 to support both 6th and 7th Divisions of I Australian Corps. Lewis was Gun Position Officer of F Troop in 18th Battery when the unit went into the Syrian Campaign in June 1941. He was later appointed adjutant. The 2/9th returned to Australia and reformed in Woodside, SA. By March 1943 Lewis was BC 59th Battery at Merauke until the end of the war.

Lewis enjoyed army life – the comradeship, the challenges, the variety, and an embodiment of the regimental system with its corporate responsibilities. He had an empathy with his gunners and he lived by the credo of 'equipment, men, self' in his approach to his responsibilities. He was a popular officer, and attentive listener, and a meticulous planner – especially of training.

In 1951, he carried these attributes into his peacetime service as battery commander of R Battery, 21st Field Regiment, based in Hamilton, NSW. Lewis persuaded five ex-service officers and three NCOs to help him. In a matter of two intakes of National Servicemen the battery was 90 plus strong (with the help of volunteers). He spared no effort, and on many occasions no personal expense, to improve the training and readiness of the unit.

He was unstinting with his time to get his new gunners trained, giving up numerous Saturdays and/or Sundays to coach potential officers and NCOs and to maintain his guns. His subordinates pitched in enthusiastically to help. Inter-battery and regimental competitions covering all aspects of operations were held at Annual Camps and R Battery always won more than its fair share. For example, in 1956, they won the Bardia, Benghazi and Tobruk Cups, Jezzine Trophy, D and M and Bombardier Cups. The Gordon Bennett Trophy (best divisional shooting battery in 1956) and the AIF Trophy all graced the Hamilton Drill Hall over the life of the battery. His battery was always in the top third in these competitions within 2nd Division.

The GOC, Major General Denzil Macarthur-Onslow, often sought Lewis' counsel on the Newcastle CMF scene. Normally a tolerant man he could be scathing about sloppy and misguided training. Jim often boasted that he even had his BHP female Secretary skilled in army staff duties.

When Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip visited Newcastle Steelworks in 1954 his father chose his son, now Executive Officer Administration, to organize it. It received accolades for its excellence. His civilian role brought him into wide contact with the community – health and welfare, university, technical college and secondary schools, media and the churches. Lewis was active in Newcastle Legacy and many other organizations. On top of all this, he commanded a detached battery and raised a family. When he retired from his command at a hand-over parade in January 1959 he was in tears. Those who had soldiered with him for that time also felt a great personal loss. In retirement he indulged his penchant for wine and cheese tasting, pistol shooting and fly fishing. Lewis died from a heart attack on 1 September 1973.

He was a gentleman who made great changes to the culture of the steel industry recognizing the importance of the individual in the work force. Newcastle Anglican Cathedral was packed for his funeral service, a measure of his esteem in a city he had made his home. Lewis was the epitome of 'a gentleman of the artillery'. He was survived by his wife Mary (nee Hewit) whom he married in 1943, three daughters and a son

Sources: Army List; Alan H. Smith, *A Personal Memoir*, Cannonball No. 35, April 1999; 2 *Bar 9 Nooz*; R. Lewis, correspondence, 28 May 1999; Letter, S. G. Lane (7 June 1998); family correspondence.