

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Major General Kenneth MACKAY, CB, MBE

(1917-2004)

Ken Mackay was born at Parkville, Victoria, on 17 February 1917, the son of Robert Mackay, a Commonwealth Audit Inspector, whose employment took him to the Northern Territory, Papua New Guinea, NSW and Victoria. MacKay attended school at Darwin, Port Moresby, Wollongong and Melbourne. He had an outdoors childhood and was an acute observer of nature, a good shot, proficient in Pidgin English, and was uncommonly self-reliant. He completed his secondary schooling at Melbourne University High.

He entered the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in March 1935. On graduation he was posted to 1st Heavy Brigade at North Head. Whilst learning coast gunnery he was awarded the Royal Humane Society Bronze Medal for rescuing a seriously injured young man from the base of the cliff below the fort. It was an effort requiring innovation, decisiveness, judgement, practicality, strength and raw courage. Mackay was to draw on these qualities several times in his career.

When WWII was declared, he was appointed adjutant of 2/8th Field Regiment at Puckapunyal, Victoria. It was a composite Tasmanian/Victorian unit, mostly volunteers from the Militia, initially allotted to Corps Troops. However, other considerations saw it sail for the Middle East, arriving in April 1941, where it was allotted to the 9th Division via a short stint with 6th Division. While the division was at Tobruk, Mackay's regiment was attached to the 22nd Guards Brigade based on Mersa Matruh and took part in several 'Jock Columns'.

Mackay was transferred from RHQ to Troop Commander in 16th Battery. He buried supplies of water, had his gunners abstract a new truck from an adjacent British unit and transform it into a well-worn and battered campaign relic. His reputation was enhanced when a Messerschmidt fighter swept over one of his sniping guns, a precursor to a strafing run. Mackay took off his hat and shirt, and as the aircraft came roaring towards him he stood up and waved his arms frantically. Thus nonplussed the pilot flew away. Mackay ordered 'hook in' and his group left poste-haste. He found the desert an enchanting place, and his ability to accurately navigate the desert was a source of great satisfaction to him. This short posting was his last gunner command.

Mackay attend the British Army Staff College at Haifa, and while there, with a fellow Australian, rescued from drowning two of the British instructional officers. One he later met remarked: 'You gave me my life back'. After Staff College he raised and trained the 9th Division Commando Unit before he was appointed Liaison Officer HQRAA 9th Division, and then brigade major of the 26th Brigade (Brigadier "Torpy" Whitehead). He was heavily involved in the brigade's part in the 9th Division's brilliant and tenacious battle against their German and Italian adversaries at El Alamein.

Back in Australia, Mackay trained for amphibious operations before landing with his brigade for the advance on Lae in New Guinea. In that campaign, he was always well forward with the infantry and in the attack on Sattelberg his 'office' consisted of a sheet of canvas, a map board, signal pad and torch. For his service he was awarded the MBE, his citation stressing that: 'an excellent system of communication was developed and maintained despite countless difficulties'.

Mackay's next posting resulted from a request for an AIF major 'with experience working with British and American Forces and amphibious operations'. It was a fascinating appointment in the War Office in London where he was privy to the most secret and highest direction of Allied war effort, drafting succinct briefs for Winston Churchill's attention. In July 1945, he attended the famous Potsdam Conference as a member of Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke's staff. With a British Prime Minister Clement Atlee's (Russian) interpreter Major Theakstone he wangled a visit to Berlin. They made a beeline for Hitler's bunker and got as far as his office before they were chased out by Russian soldiers.

Next MacKay was promoted lieutenant colonel and secretary to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Joint Planning Committee for the British Commonwealth Occupation Force of Japan. He later took command of the 67th Infantry Battalion at Kure (later renamed 3RAR). Despite difficulties, he trained his unit well before being posted to the Directorate of Military Operations and Plans. Except for a short sojourn in Korea in late 1952 he remained at AHQ before becoming Chief Instructor of the School of Tactics and Administration at Seymour, Victoria. Posted to AHQ he was involved in personnel, maintenance and quartering until he was promoted brigadier and Director of Military Plans and Operations.

With the Australian Government's commitment to Vietnam, Mackay led the initial planning team and became the first Commander, Australian Force Vietnam, on promotion to major general. He proved to be a good military diplomat and convinced the American commanding general that Australians should take control of Phuoc Tuy Province. He eschewed the practice of 'body count' and instead saw the broad picture of helping to restore government to the province. He recognized the deficiencies in his initial planning but disdained 'red tape' and ensured that the 1st Australian Task Force had the means to fulfill its role and frequently visited them.

In January 1967, Mackay returned to Australia and, to his great credit publicly admitted the deficiencies in the initial planning of the deployment of forces to Vietnam at a CGS Conference. After several appointments in Canberra, he became the Commander 1st Division and later GOC Eastern Command, both in Sydney. This command was re-designated Field Force Command when the Army implemented the Hassett Report 'functional' command system instead of historical geographical commands.

Mackay retired in 1974. His contemporaries described him as tough, uncompromising, decisive, and straightforward with a prodigious memory. His sense of humour, his ability to adapt his approach to people and problems – often with a touch of the larrikin – were the attributes of a person of great integrity and determination who always did what he said he would.

He retired first to Canberra, then Port Macquarie and finally Sydney (Belrose). He was a member of the Australian Club, NSW and Gordon Golf Clubs, and he listed golf and fishing as his recreations. He was closely associated with the RAA Historical Company at North Head. In his later years his sight deteriorated. He died 18 May 2004, and was accorded a full military funeral at the Garrison Church, Millers Point on 27 May with Anglican rites. MacKay married Judith Littler, of Launceston, Tasmania on 6 March 1943. There were three children of the marriage, Kenneth, Prudence and Euan, all of whom survived him.

Sources: B. Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, pp.363-4; C. & M. Morton, *2/8 Field Regiment Remembers WW2*; *Army List and History of RMC, and Archives*; I. McNeil, *To Long Tan*, p.22; *Eulogies* by Euan Mackay and Major General K. J. Gillespie; D. M. Horner, *Australian High Command in the Vietnam War*; Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence, No.40; *Funeral Order of Service*; *Oral History* by R. W. Raxworthy, *NSW State Library, 1995*; J. Whitelaw.