Lt Andrew Kirkwall-Smith, DSC, MM

Distinguished service in two wars

He hid amongst the mangroves, his face buried in the mud. They were so close he could see the stitching on their boots. He dared not breathe. Discovery would undoubtedly result in his death.

Andrew Kirkwall-Smith was born and raised in the tiny Scottish town of Kirkwall on the Orkney Islands.[1] In the early 1900s, his family decided to escape the harshness of the Orkneys and try their luck in Australia. After a six-week journey, the Kirkwall-Smiths landed in Melbourne to begin a new life. The sunshine and warm weather appealed to young Andrew, who soon developed into a steady, robust lad with a wicked smile, a keen sense of humour and a larrikin streak a mile wide.

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In 1914, he entered the workforce but the dreary, mundane factory life was not to his liking so, with the outbreak of war, he immediately tried to enlist. His father was not the least bit sympathetic to the 19-year-old Andrew's wishes and refused to sign the enlistment papers.[1]

As Andrew read of the Gallipoli landings and of the spirited fighting by the ANZAC forces, he yearned to be part of the action. Again he asked his father to sign and again his father bluntly refused. Andrew threatened to use a false name and sign up anyway. His father thought long and hard about young Andrew's determination to serve and realised the lad could not be swayed. Reluctantly, he signed the papers.[1]

Andrew enlisted in the AIF on 5 July 1915 and was allocated to the 7th Battalion's 9th Reinforcement Draft. he completed his initial training at the AIF Training Camp at Broadmeadows on Melbourne's outskirts.[2]

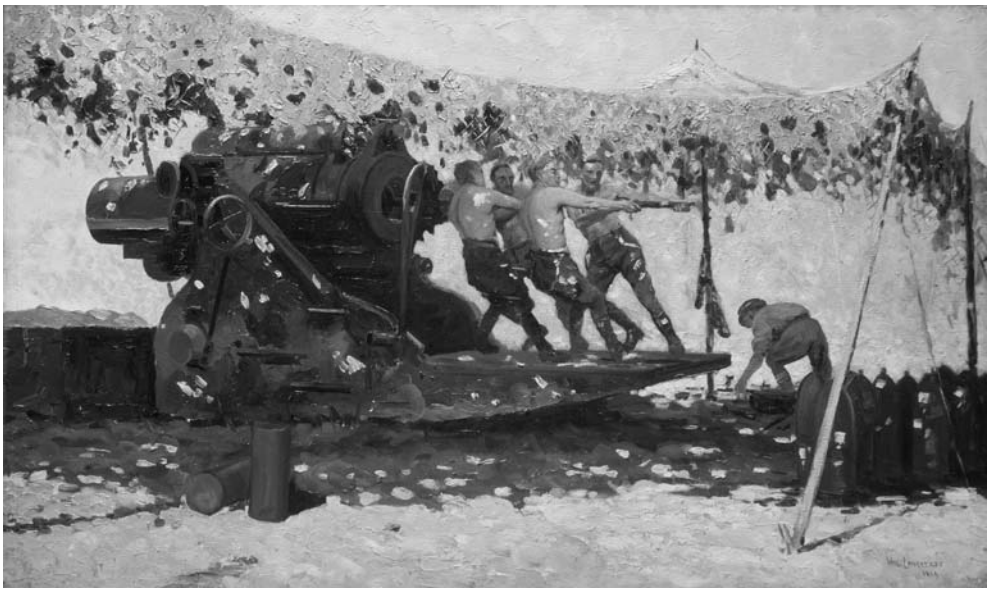
Andrew relished the training—it was tough, hard and straight to the point. It had to be, as the men were preparing to kill or be killed. He was determined not to be the weak link in the chain and whether with rifle, bomb, bayonet or fist, he was going to be better than the next man.

With his chest thrust out, the young recruit marched with his mates to the waiting ship. On 10 September 1915, the *Star of Victoria* weighed anchor and sailed down Port Phillip Bay bound for Egypt.[3]

In the sands surrounding Mena Camp, Andrew threw himself into his final training. He knew that his next stop was Gallipoli and the war, and he again vowed that he would be ready.

Andrew finally landed at ANZAC Cove on 7 December—at last he was at the front and spoiling for a stoush. Ironically, it was the day before the British Government made the inevitable decision to withdraw all forces from the Gallipoli Peninsula.[4]

Kirkwall-Smith felt that he had been robbed of his right to fight. He yearned to be part of the action and when word came that the 7th was to be split to form a new



AWM ART03004. Longstaff, Will, 1919 'Australian 9.2 howitzer' Oil on canvas, 92 x 153 cm . Although 'Australian 9.2 howitzer' was painted in 1919, immediately after the war, it clearly represents a scene from the last phase of the fighting. The centrepiece is a large howitzer, the heaviest gun used by the Australian siege batteries. It is appropriate that Longstaff recorded the artillery because massed artillery barrages, with infantry and tanks, were an essential element in finally breaking the stalemate on the Western Front. The howitzer was a hard taskmaster for the artillerymen. Longstaff's painting shows four gunners straining to ram home another shell. The men are stripped to the waist, reflecting the exertion of their task and the hot, dry weather that was so characteristic of that time. The gun and artillerymen have been portrayed hidden under camouflage netting. The shade emphasises the sinister bulk of the gun and contrasts sharply with the surrounding brilliant sunlight. For Longstaff this would have been a familiar scene, as he would have been trained in camouflage work and was officer in charge of camouflage for the 2nd Division, Australian Imperial Force. The camouflage was an essential precaution at this stage of the war, as each side tried to conceal the nature and extent of its artillery.

AWM E00717. A loaded limber passing the ruins of the Cloth Hall at Ypres. Note the three artillery drivers astride their horses.

battalion, the 59th, he jumped at the chance to serve. He spent a short time in another battalion, the 60th, before a call went out for volunteers to join one of the fast-growing artillery brigades. These units were being hastily formed for service in France. It was the promise of action that appealed to Andrew and he went for it like a shot.[2]

He was allocated to the 13th Field Artillery Brigade's 113th Howitzer Battery and arrived in France in June of 1916.[2] He loved the guns. They were good, reliable weapons that, when the call for fire was initiated, could deliver their projectiles with deadly accuracy.

He fought through the winter of 1916–17, through Bapaume, and towards the impregnable Hindenburg Line. He was a cool, efficient soldier who showed his worth both in battle and when enjoying a break in the billets. His efforts were rewarded with promotions to lance bombardier and bombardier respectively.[2]

In late August 1917, 13 Field Artillery Brigade was advancing towards Ypres.[5] The guns were already in action and ammunition was vitally needed to feed the hungry breeches. At this time, Andrew Kirkwall-Smith was part of a resupply column which had its limbers filled with ammunition.

As the horses pulling the limbers galloped forward, the men with them were unaware that their every move was being watched by a German observation party. Suddenly the Diggers heard the scream of incoming rounds. The German

AWM E03497. Limbers of the 6th Brigade of Australian Field Artillery bringing up ammunition to the guns through the Hindenburg Line near Bellicourt.

gunners had the road registered to within a few metres and sent a barrage of 4.2 and 5.9 inch shells to destroy the valuable ammunition.

Deadly red-hot splinters tore into both drivers and horses alike. Many of the Diggers were wounded and three gunners lay dead in their seats. The surviving panic-stricken horses struggled to escape the torrent of fire, hindered by the weight of dead and wounded animals still harnessed to the wagons.

Galloping forward, Kirkwall-Smith took control of the situation as he and a driver by the name of Brown jumped from their horses and set about freeing the men and animals.[6] 'Brownie, you get the boys to some cover while I try to get this lot out of here', he ordered.

Whipping out his pocket knife, Kirkwall-Smith went to work. He cut the harnesses of the dead and wounded animals free, and then shooed the remaining teams forward and away from the killing ground.[6]

With shells bursting all around him Kirkwall-Smith continued his work. As he freed the last dying animal, an officer galloped forward with Smith's mount, 'Good work, Andy; looks like we saved a few. Now let's get the hell out of here!' the lieutenant screamed.

For his actions that afternoon, Bombardier Andrew Kirkwall-Smith was awarded the Military Medal, with a portion of the citation reading 'showed utter disregard for his own safety, as well as setting a splendid example…'[6]

In April 1918, Kirkwall-Smith was promoted to the rank of sergeant. He continued to serve with distinction until the war's end that November. Following the cessation of hostilities, he decided to stay for a while in England and France. Andrew took full advantage of the soldier-education programs, studying European farming techniques.[2] He also visited the place of his birth in Scotland. He returned to Australia on the troopship *Orontes* and was finally discharged in August 1919.[2]

The lust for adventure was still in Andy's blood and he chose to seek a life in the wild, untamed jungles of New Guinea. He purchased a plantation on the north-east coast, near Rai and proceeded to lead a very quiet life until the early 40s—totally oblivious to the growing Japanese presence in the Pacific.[1]

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Suddenly the cauldron boiled over, and the radio brought the news of the attacks on Pearl Harbor, Malaya and the Philippines. Though Andrew was now aware of the impending conflict, he was quite confident that the mighty naval base at Singapore would stem the Japanese tide and secure the British bastion in Asia.

But Andrew had misjudged the tenacity of the enemy as the tentacles of the Japanese Empire continued to spread south, finally threatening the north-eastern coast of the island. Anticipating the approaching danger, Kirkwall-Smith destroyed everything that could be of use, loaded up his battered schooner and sailed to the nearby harbour of Madang.[1]

He arrived off the harbour entrance in time to see the retiring Japanese bombers that had just devastated the area. As he tied up alongside what remained of the wharf, he was met by a sergeant of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles who was in charge of a small contingent tasked with guarding the nearby airfield. The sergeant's name was Emery and the two would soon become firm friends.[1]

Despite his age, Andy was enlisted into the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles.[1] His intimate knowledge of the islands would prove invaluable to the Allied cause. He was soon involved in a number of dangerous covert missions behind the lines, hell-bent on keeping the Japanese off-guard. One operation included the evacuation, by small ship, of refugees from the beleaguered outpost of Rabaul, under the very noses of the Japanese.

As the Japanese web closed around Kirkwall-Smith and Emery, they decided to attempt to reach the safety of the Allied lines, taking their chances travelling across country rather than by ship.

After arriving in Port Moresby, the two parted company and Andrew, now a Warrant Officer Class Two, was selected to become a coastwatcher.[5] He was sent to his old stamping grounds in the Rai area where, from his concealed vantage-point, he observed and reported on troop, aircraft and ship movements around Buna and the neighbouring islands.

In early 1943, he received orders to take up a post at Cape Gloucester, in New Britain. His mission was to monitor the enemy build-up in preparation for the US Marine landings scheduled for later that year.

Accompanied by a small party of loyal natives, Andrew carried out a close reconnaissance of enemy fortifications by canoe. As they returned to the safety of their hideout, they were ambushed by a barge-load of Japanese soldiers. The party was helpless against such odds, but Andrew managed to escape the carnage that followed by diving overboard and swimming to the nearby bank. Unarmed and barefoot, he hid in the mangroves, playing a game of cat and mouse with the searching Japanese. Over the ensuing days, he made his way overland, headed for the outpost of a fellow coastwatcher.[1] Days later, he stumbled into the camp, suffering from sickness, exhaustion, and with his bare feet cut to ribbons by the harsh jungle vegetation.

With little time to rest and recuperate and with the Japanese hot on Andrew's trail, the pair made their way across the strait to New Guinea by small boat where they met up with a group of survivors attempting to cross overland to the Allied lines. Andrew immediately took charge of the group and led them across the mountains to safety.[1]

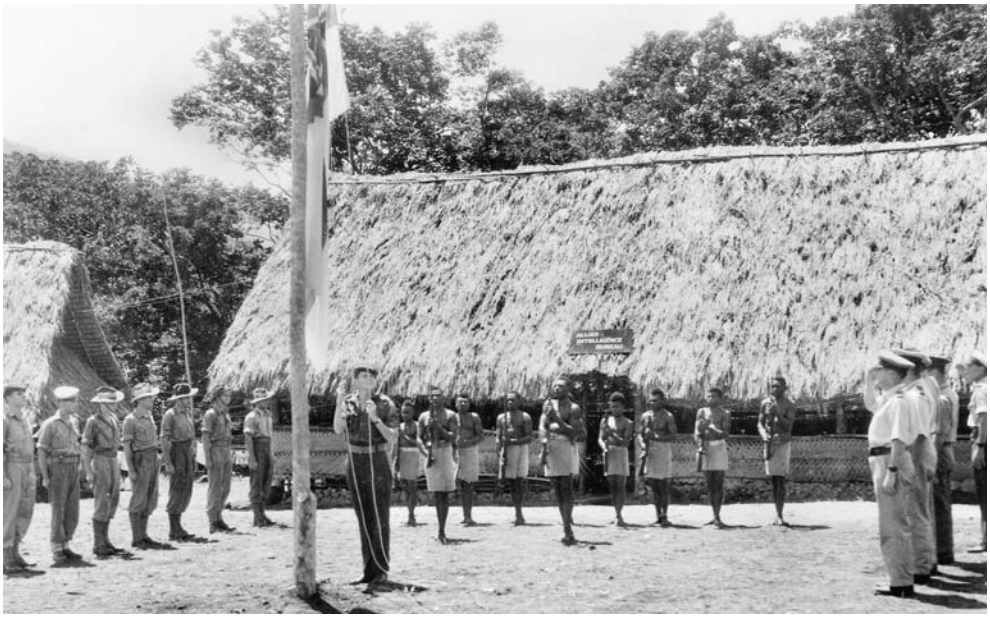
It was now late 1943 and Andrew left the army and took up a commission in the Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve.[7] With his knowledge of the beaches and unpredictable currents, Kirkwall-Smith was seconded to the newly formed Amphibious Force. He again returned to Cape Gloucester to report on the enemy build-up as the Japanese prepared to oppose the marines. After nearly two weeks in the area, much of it under the very noses of the Japanese, he was evacuated by an American patrol boat to pass on this vital information to his superiors.[1]

A number of US landings occurred along the island chain, designed to cut off and starve out sections of the Japanese force. Andrew was now attached to the Americans, to act as a guide for long-range patrols into the depths of the jungle. Their mission was to report on the likelihood of Japanese resistance and identify possible evacuation routes. On one such patrol, the commander was seriously wounded in a skirmish and Andrew was called upon to take charge. It was due to his outstanding leadership that the patrol was able to break contact and extract themselves—along with the wounded—and return to the safety of their own lines.

In early 1945, Andrew learnt he had been awarded the coveted Distinguished Service Cross for 'bravery and enterprise in reconnaissance operations…'[8]

As the Allied noose tightened around the Japanese forces, the end of the war was in sight. Like others, Andrew read of the atomic bomb attacks on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and he joined in celebrations as the war in the Pacific spluttered to an end.

He took his discharge in December 1945.



AWM 304757. Goodenough Island, New Guinea. 1 Jan 1944. Allied Intelligence Bureau (AIB) Personnel at AIB Headquarters—included in the photograph is Sub Lieutenant A. Kirkwall-Smith RANVR.

A pleasant surprise came to Kirkwall-Smith in the form of a letter from the Director of Naval Intelligence in which he said: 'You have made history. Your work as a coastwatcher had a direct bearing upon operations and, in the opinion of the highest ranking Allied officers, was invaluable'.[1] On 13 November 1946, Andrew stood before the Governor-General of Australia to be invested with his Distinguished Service Cross.

Post-war, he again returned to the land, this time in Victoria. This gallant soldier/sailor passed away on 7 January 1973 and was laid to rest in the Swan Hill Cemetery.[1]

Notes

1 Article by Michael Downey, date and origin unknown, in possession of author

2 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, A Kirkwall-Smith, MM

3 AWM 8, Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls, 7th Battalion AIF, 1914–1918 War

4 Dean A & Gutteridge EW, *The Seventh Battalion, A.I.F : Resume of the Activities of the Seventh Battalion in the Great War, 1914-1918*, W & K Purbrick, Melbourne, 1933

5 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume IV, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936

6 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914–1918

7 National Archives of Australia, WW2 Service Records, P456 Private A Kirkwall-Smith

8 RAN Honours and Awards, World War 2, A Kirkwall-Smith