

Task for Reg Saunders: an Indigenous War Hero

Foreword

IT GIVES ME GREAT PLEASURE TO WRITE THE FOREWORD TO THIS ILLUSTRATED WORK DEDICATED TO THE LIFE OF CAPTAIN REGINALD (REG) SAUNDERS MBE. REG SAUNDERS SERVED THIS NATION WITH GREAT COURAGE AND PROFESSIONALISM IN TWO WARS. SOLDIERING WAS IN HIS BLOOD. BOTH HE AND HIS BROTHER HARRY, WHO WAS KILLED IN ACTION AT GONA IN NOVEMBER 1942, FOLLOWED THE EXAMPLE OF THEIR DAD BY ENLISTING IN THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY ON THE OUTBREAK OF WAR.

THOSE WHO KNEW REG REGARDED HIM AS A SOLDIER'S SOLDIER. HE INITIALLY ENLISTED AS A PRIVATE, BUT HIS LEADERSHIP QUALITIES WERE EVIDENT TO ALL. AS AN OFFICER REG WON THE ADMIRATION OF ALL WHO SERVED WITH OR UNDER HIM. HE LED FROM THE FRONT. HE LOVED HIS MEN AND THEY LOVED HIM BACK.

REG FOUGHT IN THE TOUGHEST OF ENVIRONMENTS. HE WAS INVOLVED IN THE DEFEAT OF CRETE WHERE HE PARTICIPATED IN A FAMOUS BAYONET CHARGE AGAINST A DISORGANISED ENEMY FORCE ON 26 MAY 1941. THAT SAME FIGHTING SPIRIT SUSTAINED HIM AFTER MOST ALLIED FORCES ON CRETE SURRENDERED. REG REFUSED TO GIVE UP AND WITH THE HELP OF SYMPATHETIC LOCALS HE EVADED CAPTURE FOR 11 MONTHS. LATER, HE ESCAPED TO LIBYA ON BOARD A FISHING TRAWLER BEFORE RETURNING TO AUSTRALIA.

REG THEN DEPLOYED TO NEW GUINEA, WHERE HE WAS INVOLVED IN THE FIERCE FIGHTING AROUND SALAMAUA BETWEEN APRIL AND NOVEMBER 1943 WITH THE 2/7 BATTALION AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE (AIF). IN RECOGNITION OF THE CONSISTENT _____ ABILITY THAT HE DISPLAYED DURING THIS CAMPAIGN, REG WAS SENT FOR OFFICER TRAINING BY HIS COMMANDING OFFICER. LIEUTENANT HARRY GUINN. HIS TRAINING WAS DISRUPTED BY SERIOUS BOUTS OF MALARIA, BUT HE WAS EVENTUALLY AWARDED HIS COMMISSION.

HE WAS THE FIRST INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN TO ACHIEVE THIS DISTINCTION AND IT MADE HIM A PIONEER AND ROLE MODEL. AS A NEWLY _____ LIEUTENANT, REG RETURNED TO HIS UNIT IN NOVEMBER 1944. THESE DAYS IT IS EASY TO UNDERESTIMATE JUST HOW SIGNIFICANT AN _____ THIS WAS. IN VERY FEW AREAS OF AUSTRALIAN LIFE DID INDIGENOUS MEN FILL LEADERSHIP POSITIONS WHERE THEY HAD AUTHORITY OF WHITE MEN. IT IS TO THE ENORMOUS CREDIT OF REG, BUT ALSO OF THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY, THAT HE THRIVED IN COMMAND.

MOST PEOPLE WOULD HAVE FELT THEY HAD DONE ENOUGH FOR THEIR COUNTRY AFTER SUCH EPIC ADVENTURES IN THE WAR, BUT THAT WAS NOT REG'S CHOICE. ON THE OUTBREAK OF THE KOREAN WAR HE RE-ENLISTED IN THE ARMY AND JOINED THE FAMED 3RD BATTALION OF THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN REGIMENT (3 RAR) WHICH SERVED WITH DISTINCTION AT THE BATTLE OF KAPYONG. REG COMMANDED A PLATOON AND LATER A RIFLE COMPANY IN OLD FAITHFUL AND ENHANCED HIS REPUTATION FOR _____. SOON AFTER HIS RETURN FROM KOREA, REG LEFT THE ARMY, HAVING DECIDED THAT PEACE-TIME SOLDIERING WAS NOT FOR HIM. IT WAS OUR LOSS.

YET IN SOME WAYS, REG'S GREATEST CONTRIBUTION TO AUSTRALIAN LIFE CAME AFTER HE BECAME A CIVILIAN. AS A _____ FOR INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS HE WAS WITHOUT PEER. HE NEVER STOPPED SERVING HIS COUNTRY AND HE WAS A UNIFYING SYMBOL FOR ALL AUSTRALIANS IN AN ERA WHEN TOO MANY OF US HELD PREJUDICED VIEWS ABOUT INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS. SOME OF THE COMMENTS IN THE BOOK PROVIDE SOME INSIGHT INTO THESE PREJUDICES BY EMPLOYING THE LANGUAGE OF THE DAY IN THE INTERESTS OF ACCURACY. FORTUNATELY, FEW AUSTRALIANS NOW THINK IT IS ACCEPTABLE TO MAKE SUCH COMMENTS WHEN TALKING TO OR ABOUT INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS.

REG SAUNDERS' LEGACY, INCLUDING HIS TRADEMARK BRAVERY IN WINNING THE RESPECT OF HIS FELLOW AUSTRALIANS FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, ENDURES TO THIS DAY. NOT ONLY DO INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS SERVE PROUDLY IN THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND WITH THE _____ OF ALL THEIR FELLOW AUSTRALIANS BUT THEY PROVIDE A UNIQUE CAPABILITY THROUGH OUR REGIONAL FORCE SURVEILLANCE UNITS, WHICH EMPLOY THEIR UNIQUE TALENTS ON THE LAND, TO WHICH THEY FEEL A DEEP AND SPECIAL CONNECTION. IN BRINGING THE EXEMPLARY STORY OF CAPTAIN REG SAUNDERS TO LIFE IN THIS VIVIDLY ILLUSTRATED BOOK, HUGH DOLAN AND ADRIAN THRELFALL HAVE DONE ALL AUSTRALIANS A GREAT SERVICE.

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