

= Tom Derrick =

Thomas Currie " Diver " Derrick , VC , DCM (20 March 1914 ? 24 May 1945) was an Australian recipient of the Victoria Cross , the highest decoration for gallantry " in the face of the enemy " awarded to members of the British and Commonwealth armed forces . In November 1943 , during the Second World War , Derrick was awarded the Victoria Cross for his assault on a heavily defended Japanese position at Sattelberg , New Guinea . During the engagement , he scaled a cliff face while under heavy fire and silenced seven machine gun posts , before leading his platoon in a charge that destroyed a further three .

Born in the Adelaide suburb of Medindie , South Australia , Derrick left school at the age of fourteen and found work in a bakery . As the Great Depression grew worse he lost his job and moved to Berri , working on a fruit farm before marrying in 1939 . In July 1941 , Derrick enlisted in the Second Australian Imperial Force , joining the 2 / 48th Battalion . He was posted to the Middle East , where he took part in the Siege of Tobruk , was recommended for the Military Medal and promoted to corporal . Later , at El Alamein , Derrick was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for knocking out three German machine gun posts , destroying two tanks , and capturing one hundred prisoners .

Derrick returned to Australia with his battalion in February 1943 , before transferring to the South West Pacific Theatre where he fought in the battle to capture Lae . Back in Australia the following February he was posted to an officer cadet training unit , being commissioned lieutenant in November 1944 . In April 1945 his battalion was sent to the Pacific island of Morotai , an assembly point for the Allied invasion of the Philippines . Engaged in action the following month on the heavily defended hill Freda on Tarakan Island , Derrick was hit by five bullets from a Japanese machine gun . He died from his wounds on 24 May 1945 .

= = Early life = =

Derrick was born in the Adelaide suburb of Medindie , South Australia , on 20 March 1914 to David Derrick , a labourer from Ireland , and his Australian wife , Ada (née Whitcombe) . The Derricks were poor , and Tom often walked barefoot to attend Sturt Street Public School and later Le Fevre Peninsula School . In 1928 , aged fourteen , Derrick left school and found work in a bakery . By this time , he had developed a keen interest in sports , particularly cricket , Australian Rules Football , boxing and swimming ; his diving in the Port River earned him the nickname of " Diver " .

With the advent of the Great Depression , Derrick scraped a living from odd jobs ? such as fixing bicycles and selling newspapers ? to supplement his job as a baker . When in 1931 , the Depression worsened , Derrick lost his bakery job and , with friends , headed by bicycle for the regional town of Berri , approximately 225 kilometres (140 mi) away , in search of work . Jobs in Berri were hard to come by and Derrick and two friends spent the next few months living in a tent on the banks of the Murray River . When the annual Royal Adelaide Show opened that year , Derrick went to the boxing pavilion to accept a challenge of staying upright for three rounds with the ex @-@ lightweight champion of Australia . Although he was knocked down in the second round , he immediately got back to his feet and won the bet ; albeit at the cost of a black eye , and a few bruised ribs .

Eventually , towards the end of 1931 , Derrick found work picking fruit at a vineyard in Winkie , a short distance outside Berri . He later moved on to a full @-@ time job at a nearby fruit farm , remaining there for the next nine years . On 24 June 1939 , Derrick married Clarence Violet " Beryl " Leslie ? his " one true love " whom he had met at a dance in Adelaide seven years earlier ? at St Laurence 's Catholic Church , North Adelaide .

= = Second World War = =

Derrick did not join up when war broke out in September 1939 but , like many Australians , enlisted after the fall of France in June 1940 . He joined the Second Australian Imperial Force on 5 July 1940 , and was posted to the 2 / 48th Battalion , 26th Brigade , as a private . Derrick first joined his unit at

the Wayville Showgrounds , before basic training at Woodside . Derrick thrived on military life , but found discipline difficult to accept .

In October , the 2 / 48th Battalion paraded through the streets of Adelaide to Mitcham railway station prior to its embarkation for the Middle East . The battalion 's voyage overseas was postponed until 17 November , when the unit boarded the SS Stratheden . The ship made a stop at Perth , where Derrick was confined on board for going absent without leave to sightsee . He was soon in more trouble , and was charged and fined for punching another soldier who taunted him over this incident .

= = = North Africa = = =

On arrival in Palestine , the 2 / 48th Battalion encamped at El Kantara and began training in desert warfare . For relaxation , the battalion set up athletic events , and Derrick became well known for often winning cross @-@ country races ? and for organising a book on the outcomes . In March 1941 , the unit went by train and truck to Alexandria , Egypt , then along the North African coast to Cyrenaica , in Libya , to join the 9th Australian Division .

After the 2 / 48th Battalion completed its training with the 9th Division at Cyrenaica , they were moved further along the coast to Gazala . Then , just as they began to dig in , the battalion was abruptly withdrawn to Tobruk in response to the German Afrika Korps ' advance . They entered Tobruk on 9 April 1941 , and spent the following eight months besieged by Axis forces . While there , Derrick acquired an Italian Breda machine gun and regularly led fighting patrols against both German and Italian troops . Although Derrick 's bravery was noted during the siege , he wrote in his diary about his constant fear of dying .

On the night of 30 April , the Axis forces assaulted Tobruk 's outer defences and managed to capture substantial ground . In response , the 2 / 48th Battalion was ordered to counter @-@ attack the following evening . During the ensuing engagement , Derrick fought as a section member in the far left flank of the attack . After suffering heavy casualties in what Derrick described as " a bobby dazzler of a fire fight " , the battalion was forced to withdraw . Praised for his leadership and bravery during the assault , Derrick was immediately promoted to corporal , and recommended for the Military Medal . The award , however , was never made .

In late May , Derrick discovered a German posing as a British tank officer and reported him to company headquarters ; the man was immediately arrested as a spy . Following a period of heavy fighting in June , the 2 / 48th Battalion was placed in reserve for a few days the following month . Promoted to platoon sergeant in September , Derrick ? along with the rest of his battalion ? was withdrawn from Tobruk and returned to Palestine aboard HMS Kingston on 22 October . Disembarking at Tel Aviv , they were given three days ' leave in the city , before returning for training .

Following a period of rest and light garrison duties in Syria , the 2 / 48th Battalion was rushed to El Alamein , Egypt , to reinforce the British Eighth Army . During the First Battle of El Alamein on 10 July 1942 , Derrick took part in the 26th Australian Brigade 's attack on Tel el Eisa . In the initial assault , Derrick , against a barrage of German grenades , led an attack against three machine gun posts and succeeded in destroying the positions before capturing over one hundred prisoners . During the Axis counter @-@ attack that evening , the Australian line was overrun by tanks . As the German infantry following the tanks advanced , Derrick 's company led a charge against the men . During the engagement , Derrick managed to destroy two German tanks using sticky bombs . Commended for his " outstanding leadership and courage " , Derrick was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his part in the fighting at Tel el Eisa . The award was announced in a supplement to the London Gazette on 18 February 1943 .

Promoted to sergeant on 28 July , Derrick led a six @-@ man reconnaissance on 3 October , successfully pinpointing several German machine gun positions and strongholds ; this information was to be vital for the upcoming Second Battle of El Alamein . The El Alamein offensive was launched on 23 October , with the 9th Australian Division taking part . At one point during the engagement , Derrick jumped up onto an Allied gun carrier heading towards the Germans . Armed

with a Thompson submachine gun and under intense heavy fire , Derrick attacked and knocked out three machine gun posts while standing in the carrier . He then had the driver reverse up to each post so he could ensure each position was silenced . By the following morning , Derrick 's platoon occupied all three posts . The members of the 2 / 48th Battalion who witnessed Derrick 's action were sure he would be awarded the Victoria Cross , though no recommendation was made .

For part of 31 October , Derrick assumed command of his company after all of the unit 's officers had been killed or wounded in fierce fighting . On 21 November 1942 , Derrick was briefly admitted to the 2 / 3rd Australian Field Ambulance with slight shrapnel wounds to his right hand and buttock . Twelve days later , the 2 / 48th Battalion left El Alamein and returned to Gaza in Palestine , where , later that month , Derrick attended a corps patrolling course . In January 1943 , the 2 / 48th Battalion sailed home to Australia , aboard the S.S. Nieuw Amsterdam , along with the rest of the 9th Division .

= = = South West Pacific = = =

Disembarking at Port Melbourne in late February 1943 , Derrick was granted a period of leave and travelled by train to Adelaide where he spent time with Beryl . He rejoined his battalion ? now encamped in the outskirts of Adelaide ? before they went by train to the Atherton Tableland for training in jungle warfare . Brought up to full strength by the end of April , the 2 / 48th Battalion completed its training following landing @-@ craft exercises near Cairns . On 23 July , Derrick was attached to the 21st Brigade Headquarters but admitted to hospital for old injuries to his right eye later the same day . After hospital , Derrick returned briefly to Brigade before rejoining the 2 / 48th Battalion on 27 August .

For much of August , the 2 / 48th Battalion had been in training for the Allied attack on Lae , in Papua New Guinea . The unit 's objective was to land on a strip of land designated as " Red Beach " , and then fight their way approximately 30 kilometres (19 mi) west towards Lae . Following a bombardment by American destroyers , Derrick 's wave landed on the beach with minimal casualties on 4 September . Ten days later , the 2 / 48th Battalion 's C Company ? led by Derrick 's platoon ? captured Malahang airstrip , before Lae fell to the Allies on 16 September . Derrick was scornful of the Japanese defence of Lae , and wrote in his diary that " our greatest problem was trying to catch up " with the retreating Japanese force .

= = = = Victoria Cross = = = =

Following Lae , the 9th Division was tasked to seize Finschhafen , clear the Huon Peninsula and gain control of the Vitiaz Strait . By 2 October , one of the division 's brigades had gained a foothold on Finschhafen , but soon encountered fierce Japanese resistance . In response to a Japanese counter @-@ attack , the 26th Brigade was transferred to reinforce the Australian position on 20 October and , when the division switched to the offensive in November , the brigade was ordered to capture Sattelberg . Sattelberg was a densely wooded hill rising 1 @, @ 000 metres (1 @, @ 100 yd) and dominating the Finschhafen region ; it was in an assault on this position that Derrick was to earn the Victoria Cross .

The Australian attack on Sattelberg began in mid @-@ November , with the Japanese slowly giving ground and withdrawing back up the precipitous slopes . Each side suffered heavy casualties , and on 20 November , Derrick ? who had been acting as company sergeant major for the previous month ? was given command of B Company 's 11 platoon after the unit had " lost all but one of their leaders " . By 22 November , the 2 / 23rd and 2 / 48th Battalions had reached the southern slopes of Sattelberg , holding a position approximately 600 metres (660 yd) from the summit . A landslide had blocked the only road , so the final assault was made by infantry alone , without supporting tanks .

On 24 November , the 2 / 48th Battalion 's B Company was ordered to outflank a strong Japanese position sited on a cliff face , prior to attacking a feature 140 metres (150 yd) from the Sattelberg township . The nature of the terrain meant that the only possible route was up a slope covered with

kunai grass directly beneath the cliffs . Over a period of two hours , the Australians made several attempts to clamber up the slopes to reach their objective , but each time they were repulsed by intense machine gun fire and grenade attacks . As dusk fell , it appeared impossible to reach the objective or even hold the ground already gained , and the company was ordered to withdraw . In response , Derrick replied to his company commander : " Bugger the CO . Just give me twenty more minutes and we 'll have this place . Tell him I 'm pinned down and can 't get out . "

Moving forward with his platoon , Derrick attacked a Japanese post that had been holding up the advance . He destroyed the position with grenades and ordered his second section around to the right flank . The section soon came under heavy machine gun and grenade fire from six Japanese posts . Clambering up the cliff face under heavy fire , Derrick held on with one hand while lobbing grenades into the weapon pits with the other , like " a man ... shooting for [a] goal at basketball " . Climbing further up the cliff and in full view of the Japanese , Derrick continued to attack the posts with grenades before following up with accurate rifle fire . Within twenty minutes , he had reached the peak and cleared seven posts , while the demoralised Japanese defenders fled from their positions to the buildings of Sattelberg .

Derrick then returned to his platoon , where he gathered his first and third sections in preparation for an assault on the three remaining machine gun posts in the area . Attacking the posts , Derrick personally rushed forward on four separate occasions and threw his grenades at a range of about 7 metres (7 @. @ 7 yd) , before all three were silenced . Derrick 's platoon held their position that night , before the 2 / 48th Battalion moved in to take Sattelberg unopposed the following morning . The battalion commander insisted that Derrick personally hoist the Australian flag over the town ; it was raised at 10 : 00 on 25 November 1943 .

The final assault on Sattelberg became known within the 2 / 48th Battalion as ' Derrick 's Show ' . Although he was already a celebrity within the 9th Division , the action brought him to wide public attention . On 23 March 1944 , the announcement and accompanying citation for Derrick 's Victoria Cross appeared in a supplement to the London Gazette . It read :

Government House , Canberra . 23rd March 1944 .

The KING has been graciously pleased to approve the award of the VICTORIA CROSS to : -
Sergeant Thomas Currie Derrick , D.C.M. , Australian Military Forces .

For most conspicuous courage , outstanding leadership and devotion to duty during the final assault on Sattelberg in November , 1943 .

On 24th November , 1943 , a company of an Australian Infantry Battalion was ordered to outflank a strong enemy position sited on a precipitous cliff @-@ face and then to attack a feature 150 yards from the township of Sattelberg . Sergeant Derrick was in command of his platoon of the company . Due to the nature of the country , the only possible approach to the town lay through an open kunai patch situated directly beneath the top of the cliffs . Over a period of two hours many attempts were made by our troops to clamber up the slopes to their objective , but on each occasion the enemy prevented success with intense machine @-@ gun fire and grenades .

Shortly before last light it appeared that it would be impossible to reach the objective or even to hold the ground already occupied and the company was ordered to retire . On receipt of this order , Sergeant Derrick , displaying dogged tenacity , requested one last attempt to reach the objective . His request was granted .

Moving ahead of his forward section he personally destroyed , with grenades , an enemy post which had been holding up this section . He then ordered his second section around on the right flank . This section came under heavy fire from light machine @-@ guns and grenades from , six enemy posts . Without regard for personal safety he clambered forward well ahead of the leading men of the section and hurled grenade after grenade , so completely demoralising the enemy that they fled leaving weapons and grenades . By this action alone the company was able to gain its first foothold on the precipitous ground .

Not content with the work already done , he returned to the first section , and together with the third section of his platoon advanced to deal with the three remaining posts in the area . On four separate occasions he dashed forward and threw grenades at a range of six to eight yards until these positions were finally silenced .

In all , Sergeant Derrick had reduced ten enemy posts . From the vital ground he had captured the remainder of the Battalion moved on to capture Sattelberg the following morning .

Undoubtedly Sergeant Derrick 's fine leadership and refusal to admit defeat , in the face of a seemingly impossible situation , resulted in the capture of Sattelberg . His outstanding gallantry , thoroughness and devotion to duty were an inspiration not only to his platoon and company but to the whole Battalion .

= = = Later war service = = =

The 2 / 48th Battalion remained at Sattelberg until late December 1943 , when it returned to the coast in order to regroup . On Christmas Eve , Derrick noted in his diary that the next day would be his " 4th Xmas overseas " and " I don 't care where I spend the next one I only hope I 'm still on deck [alive] " . On 7 February 1944 , the battalion sailed from Finschhafen for Australia , disembarking at Brisbane . Granted home leave , Derrick made his way to South Australia for a short period with Beryl . In April , he was admitted to hospital suffering from malaria before returning to his battalion the following month . During this time , he was charged with being absent without leave and subsequently forfeited a day 's pay .

On 20 August 1944 , Derrick was posted to an officer cadet training unit in Victoria . He requested that he be allowed to rejoin the 2 / 48th Battalion at the end of the course ; contrary to normal Army policy that prevented officers commissioned from the ranks from returning to their previous units . An exemption was granted to Derrick only after much lobbying . While at this unit , Derrick shared a tent with Reg Saunders , who later became the Army 's first Indigenous Australian officer .

Commissioned as a lieutenant on 26 November 1944 , Derrick was granted twenty @-@ four days leave . Returning to the 2 / 48th Battalion as a reinforcement officer , his appointment as a platoon commander in his old company was met by " great jubilation " . During this period , the battalion had been posted to Ravenshoe on the Atherton Tablelands for " an extensive training period " , before being transported from Cairns to Morotai during April 1945 . It was around this time that Derrick converted from his Church of England religious denomination and Salvationist beliefs to Catholicism ? his wife 's religion ? though he was not overtly religious .

On 1 May 1945 , Derrick took part in the landing at Tarakan ; an island off the coast of Borneo . Under the cover of a naval and aerial bombardment , he led his men ashore in the initial waves of the landing , where they were initially posted at the boundary of the 2 / 48th Battalion and 2 / 24th Battalion 's area of responsibility . The Japanese force on the island mounted a determined resistance , and Derrick was later quoted in the Sunday Sun as saying he had " never struck anything so tough as the Japanese on Tarakan " .

Slowly pushing inland , the 2 / 48th Battalion 's main task from 19 May was to capture a heavily defended hill code @-@ named Freda . Derrick 's platoon unsuccessfully probed Japanese positions on that day and the next , at a loss of two men killed with others wounded . He later recorded in his diary that these setbacks were a " bad show " . On 21 May , Derrick and Lieutenant Colonel Bob Ainslie , the 2 / 48th Battalion 's commander , debated the optimum size of the unit which should be used to capture the Freda position . Derrick successfully argued that a company was best , given the restrictions posed by the terrain . He was in high spirits that night , possibly in an attempt to lift his platoon 's morale . On 22 May , Derrick 's was one of two platoons that attacked a well @-@ defended knoll and captured the position . Derrick played a key role in this action , and coordinated both platoons during the final assault that afternoon .

After capturing the knoll , the two platoons ? reinforced by two sections of the 2 / 4th Commando Squadron ? dug in to await an expected Japanese counter @-@ attack . At about 03 : 30 on 23 May , a Japanese light machine gun fired into the Australian position . Derrick sat upright to see if his men were all right , and was hit by five bullets from the gun 's second burst ; striking him from his left hip to the right of his chest . His runner , " Curly " Colby , dragged him behind cover , but Derrick could not be immediately evacuated as Japanese troops attacked at about 04 : 00 . Derrick was in great pain , and told Colby that he had " had it " . Despite his wounds , he continued to issue orders for several hours . When day broke , it was discovered that Derrick 's platoon were directly

overlooked by a Japanese bunker ? though this would not have been visible during the assault late the previous evening .

When stretcher bearers reached the position at dawn , Derrick insisted that the other wounded be attended to first . Derrick was carried off Tarakan later that morning , where he was met by the 26th Brigade 's commander , Brigadier David Whitehead . The two men briefly conversed before Derrick excused himself , fearing that he had not much time left and wishing to see the padre . Stepping back , Whitehead saluted and sent for Father Arch Bryson . At the hospital , surgeons found that bullets had torn away much of Derrick 's liver ; he died on 24 May 1945 during a second operation on his wounds . He was buried in the 2 / 48th Battalion 's cemetery on Tarakan that afternoon , and later re -interred at the Labuan War Cemetery , plot 24 , row A , grave 9 .

= = Legacy = =

Tom Derrick was widely mourned . His widow , Beryl , became prostrate with grief on hearing of his death ; many members of the Army were affected , with one soldier lamenting it felt as if " the whole war stopped " . By the time Derrick 's death was officially announced on 30 May , most Australians on Tarakan had heard the news and rumours had spread claiming that he had been speared or shot at short range by a sub -machine gun .

The Japanese force on Tarakan learned of Derrick 's death and tried to exploit it for propaganda purposes . They printed a leaflet which began " We lament over the death of Lieutenant General Terick CinC of Allied Force in Tarakan " and later included the question " what do you think of the death in action of your Commander in Chief ... ? " This leaflet reached few Australian soldiers , and had little impact on them . " Tokyo Rose " also broadcast taunts over " Terick 's " death .

Derrick 's reputation continued to grow after his death , and many Australian soldiers recalled any association , however slight , they had with him . To many Australians , he embodied the ' ANZAC spirit ' , and he remains perhaps the best known Australian soldier of the Second World War . Historian Michael McKernan later remarked that , for his war service , Derrick had arguably deserved " a VC and two bars ... at El Alamein , at Sattelberg and now at Tarakan " . In a 2004 television interview , then Chief of the Australian Defence Force , General Peter Cosgrove , was asked " Who was the best soldier of all time ? " After a short pause , he replied : " Diver Derrick " . This sentiment was endorsed by General Sir Francis Hassett . Hassett , who , as a lieutenant colonel , had served at Finschhafen with II Corps headquarters , stated :

From what I learnt ; not only was Derrick a magnificent soldier , but also a splendid leader who , immediately he saw a tactical problem , fixed it with either personal bravery or leadership imbued with determination and common sense .

Derrick is also remembered for his personal qualities . He was sensitive and reflective . Despite a limited education , he was a " forceful and logical debater , with a thirst for knowledge " . Derrick kept a diary , composed poetry , collected butterflies and frequently wrote to his wife , while on active service . Historian Peter Stanley has compared Derrick 's leadership abilities with those of Edward ' Weary ' Dunlop , Ralph Honner and Roden Cutler .

On 7 May 1947 , Beryl Derrick attended an investiture ceremony at the Government House , Adelaide , where she was presented with her late husband 's Victoria Cross and Distinguished Conduct Medal by the Governor of South Australia , Lieutenant General Sir Charles Norrie . Derrick 's Victoria Cross and other medals are now displayed at the Australian War Memorial , Canberra , along with a portrait by Sir Ivor Hele . A street in the neighbouring suburb of Campbell and a rest stop in the Remembrance Driveway between Sydney and Canberra were also named in his honour . In 1995 , a public park was named the Derrick Memorial Reserve on Carlisle St , Glanville in his honour , and his VC citation is displayed on a plaque there . In June 2008 , a newly built bridge over the Port River on the Port River Expressway was named the Tom ' Diver ' Derrick Bridge following a public campaign .