

= Walter Peeler =

Walter " Wally " Peeler , VC , BEM (9 August 1887 ? 23 May 1968) was an Australian recipient of the Victoria Cross , the highest award for gallantry " in the face of the enemy " that can be awarded to members of the British and Commonwealth armed forces . He was decorated following his actions during the Battle of Broodseinde in October 1917 . Then a lance corporal in the Australian Imperial Force , he repeatedly took the lead in the 37th Battalion 's advance on well @-@ defended German positions , destroying four machine gun posts and killing more than 30 German soldiers during the battle .

Born in Castlemaine , Victoria , Peeler worked at various jobs in his home town and in the Melbourne area before enlisting in the Australian Imperial Force in February 1916 . Posted to the 3rd Pioneer Battalion , he arrived on the Western Front during November . In June 1917 , his battalion participated in the assault on Messines ridge , where he was lightly wounded . Eight days after his Victoria Cross action , Peeler was severely wounded in his right arm and spent the next seven months recuperating in the United Kingdom . Following the armistice with Germany , he was discharged from service with the rank of sergeant in December 1918 .

Peeler re @-@ settled with his family in Victoria , and was appointed the inaugural custodian of Melbourne 's Shrine of Remembrance in 1934 . In May 1940 , Peeler enlisted for service in the Second World War , understating his age by fourteen years to avoid the upper age limit imposed on volunteers . He was posted to the 2 / 2nd Pioneer Battalion and initially saw action in the Syria @-@ Lebanon Campaign . However , with the entry of Japan into the war , his unit was one of the first sent to the Netherlands East Indies in early 1942 . Originally destined for Sumatra it was diverted to Java and after disembarking assisted in the Dutch defence of the island . When Dutch resistance collapsed in March , allied forces in Java signed a formal surrender with British , Australian and American troops becoming prisoners of war . After three @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half years as prisoner of war , Peeler was freed in August 1945 and returned to Australia in October , resuming his duties at the Shrine of Remembrance . He retired in 1964 and , aged 80 , died at his home in South Caulfield on 23 May 1968 .

= = Early life = =

Walter " Wally " Peeler was born at Barker 's Creek , near Castlemaine , Victoria , on 9 August 1887 . He was the eighth child of William Peeler , a farmer and miner , and his English @-@ born wife Mary Ellen (née Scott) . As a youth Peeler worked in his parent 's orchard , before gaining employment with Thompson 's Foundry in Castlemaine . On 10 July 1907 , he wed Kathleen Emma Hewitt ; the couple were to have five children . An active sportsman , Peeler was a member of the Castlemaine Cricket Club and , briefly , secretary of the Wesley Hill Football Club .

= = First World War = =

By 1916 , Peeler was living in the Melbourne suburb of Richmond with his wife and three daughters . On 17 February , he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force for service in the First World War . Posted as a private soldier to the machine gun section of the 3rd Pioneer Battalion , Peeler underwent his initial training in Victoria , before departing from Melbourne headed for England aboard HMAT Wandilla on 6 June . The battalion arrived in Plymouth seven weeks later . During the three months Peeler 's unit spent in England undergoing additional training , he was charged with being absent without leave for six hours on 3 July , and fined a day 's pay . He was nevertheless promoted to lance corporal on 6 November .

Two weeks later , the 3rd Pioneer Battalion was posted to the Western Front . Sent to the Armentières sector , the battalion spent several months working on trench and railway construction . In mid @-@ December , Peeler attended a week @-@ long course at the Machine Gun School in Le Touquet , and in early 1917 , accompanied the battalion north in preparation for the upcoming Messines offensive . However , on 8 May 1917 , one month before the offensive , Peeler found

himself the subject of a court @-@ martial in the field . Following an incident that occurred during a training session on 26 April , he was charged with " careless and negligent handling of a Lewis Gun whilst instructing " that led to " grievous bodily injury " to Private John Martin Fife . Found guilty of the charge , Peeler was stripped of his lance corporal stripe .

On 7 June 1917 , Peeler participated in the initial assault on Messines Ridge . Manning a Lewis Gun during the action , he was injured twice , suffering shrapnel wounds to his face and eye from an artillery shell , and a gunshot wound to his right cheek . He spent three days in hospital before returning to his battalion . On 22 June , he was once again promoted to lance corporal . The 3rd Pioneer Battalion spent the next four months in a quieter section of the front .

= = = Victoria Cross = = =

As part of the third stage of General Sir Herbert Plumer 's Passchendaele offensive , an attack against Broodseinde was scheduled for 4 October 1917 . The 3rd Australian Division 's 10th Australian Infantry Brigade was one of the assault formations charged with delivering the main blow , and ultimately with seizing the heavily defended Broodseinde Ridge . To provide defence against low @-@ flying German aircraft during the attack , a group of 24 men , including Peeler , from the 3rd Pioneer Battalion 's machine gun section were attached to the 10th Brigade 's 37th Battalion .

The attack on Broodseinde began at 06 : 00 under the cover of an artillery barrage . Armed with a Lewis Gun , Peeler advanced with the initial wave . The Australians rapidly crossed the first 100 metres (110 yd) before becoming pinned down by a party of nine German soldiers , who were situated in a shellhole and sniping at the advancing troops . Firing his machine gun from the hip , Peeler dashed forward across the exposed ground and shot the group of Germans , " clearing the way for the advance " . He performed similar feats on two subsequent occasions , killing several German soldiers and emerging unscathed .

The Australian force continued to press their assault , encountering pillboxes and machine gun positions as they pushed forward . One such machine gun position , situated in the open , held up the advance . Firing a single burst from his Lewis Gun , Peeler killed the gunner and caused the remainder of the gun 's defenders to seek cover in a nearby dugout . One of the Australians then lobbed a " well aimed " grenade into the dugout , driving out ten soldiers whom Peeler then shot . Described as being " particularly prominent in the advance " by historian Charles Bean , Peeler " almost single @-@ handedly " destroyed four German posts in an hour , accounting for more than 30 soldiers .

By 07 : 15 the following morning , the 37th Battalion had captured its objective , having seized eight pillboxes , several concrete dugouts , 20 machine guns and 420 prisoners . Two hours later , the Australians were in possession of Broodseinde Ridge . For his actions during the battle , Peeler was awarded the Victoria Cross ; one of two Australians to be so decorated that day . On 12 October , eight days after Peeler 's actions , the men of the 10th Brigade returned to the front line in an effort to exploit the success of the previous week . The ground in front of their position was dominated by a series of German pillboxes and had been turned into a quagmire by heavy rain . The brigade 's attack was soon subject to a " torrent of machine gun fire " , and Peeler was severely wounded in his right arm . Initially evacuated to the 11th Australian Field Ambulance casualty station , it was decided that his wound necessitated treatment in England so he embarked for the Northampton War Hospital on 15 October , arriving the following day .

While recuperating in England , the announcement and accompanying citation for Peeler 's Victoria Cross was promulgated in a supplement to the London Gazette on 26 November 1917 , reading :
War Office , 26th November , 1917 .

His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to approve of the award of the Victoria Cross to the undermentioned Officer , Non @-@ commissioned Officers and Men : ?

No. 114 L. / Cpl. Walter Peeler , Aus . Imp . Force .

For most conspicuous bravery when with a Lewis gun accompanying the first wave of the assault he encountered an enemy party sniping the advancing troops from a shell @-@ hole .

L. / Cpl. Peeler immediately rushed the position and accounted for nine of the enemy , and cleared

the way for the advance . On two subsequent occasions he performed similar acts of valour , and each time accounted for a number of the enemy .

During operations he was directed to a position from which an enemy machine gun was being fired on our troops . He located and killed the gunner , and the remainder of the enemy party ran into a dugout close by . From this shelter they were dislodged by a bomb , and ten of the enemy ran out . These he disposed of .

This non @-@ commissioned officer actually accounted for over thirty of the enemy .

He displayed an absolute fearlessness in making his way ahead of the first wave of the assault , and the fine example which he set ensured the success of the attack against most determined opposition .

= = = Recuperation and repatriation = = =

As news of Peeler 's decoration spread , it prompted a " wave of celebrations " in his hometown of Castlemaine ; flags flew in his honour , and one of his daughters was cheered by fellow pupils at her school . On 8 January 1918 , Peeler was formally conferred with his Victoria Cross by King George V in an investiture ceremony at Buckingham Palace . Having sufficiently recovered from his wound , Peeler rejoined the 3rd Pioneer Battalion in France on 17 May ; he was promoted to temporary corporal two weeks later .

On 22 June 1918 , Peeler was posted to the Corps Gas School for eight days . He was promoted to sergeant on 30 July . Around this time , Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes invited Australia 's Victoria Cross recipients of the war to return to Australia and assist in a recruiting drive . Among the group who accepted the offer , Peeler was one of ten who embarked for Melbourne aboard HMAT Medic on 24 August , arriving in Melbourne seven weeks later . He would not return to France ; on 11 November 1918 an armistice with Germany was declared , effectively ending the war . Peeler was discharged from the Australian Imperial Force on 10 December .

= = Inter @-@ war years = =

Following his discharge , Peeler gained employment with the soldier @-@ settler branch of the Victorian Department of Lands . He remained with the department for six years , before acquiring an orchard in the Castlemaine district . However , this venture proved short @-@ lived and he soon returned with his family to Melbourne , joining the H.V. McKay Sunshine Harvester Works at Sunshine . Also on the company 's staff was a fellow Victoria Cross recipient , Dominic McCarthy . When Melbourne 's Shrine of Remembrance was completed in 1934 , Peeler was appointed as the memorial 's first custodian . He occupied this post for next 30 years , coming to regard the Shrine as " his second home " .

= = Second World War = =

= = = Enlistment and Syrian Campaign = = =

On 27 May 1940 , Peeler enlisted in the Second Australian Imperial Force for service in the Second World War , giving his date of birth on his enlistment forms as 9 August 1901 , thus understating his age by fourteen years . At 52 , Peeler was twelve years over the maximum age limit , although he later claimed he was not the " oldest fellow in my unit " . Granted the acting rank of sergeant , he was allotted to the newly raised 2 / 2nd Pioneer Battalion . The battalion completed its initial training at Puckapunyal , during which time Peeler was made acting staff sergeant and Company Quartermaster Sergeant of D Company on 1 August .

On 7 April 1941 , the 2 / 2nd Pioneer Battalion embarked aboard HMT Queen Mary at Sydney , bound for the Middle East ; Peeler 's rank of staff sergeant was confirmed as substantive on the same day . After just under four weeks at sea , the troopship disembarked at Port Tewfik in Suez ,

where the battalion entrained for Palestine . There it was attached to the 7th Division in support of the Syrian campaign against Vichy French forces .

The 2 / 2nd Pioneer Battalion was initially divided up , with each company attached to a different brigade of the 7th Division . Peeler 's D Company ? assigned to the 25th Brigade ? was originally tasked with the maintenance and general repair of the road network in its locality . However , when the Vichy French launched a counter @-@ attack on 15 June , the battalion was concentrated in the Merdjayoun area in an effort to prevent any further French gains . On the night of 27 June , after a costly assault against the Vichy French at Merdjayoun earlier that day , Peeler led out a patrol to recover the wounded . Four soldiers were discovered and brought back to the Australian lines . Despite suffering heavy casualties in Syria , the 2 / 2nd Pioneer Battalion served throughout the campaign , including participation in the decisive Battle of Damour in July .

After the Vichy French defeat in Syria , the 2 / 2nd Pioneer Battalion was relocated to Tripoli , Lebanon where it headquartered itself in an olive grove while carrying out training and garrison duties over the next four months . During November , the battalion was moved to Qatana in Syria , but with the entry of Japan into the war in late 1941 , the 1st Australian Corps including the 6th and 7th Divisions were directed to move to the Netherlands East Indies for service in the Pacific theatre . In January 1942 , Peeler was among the men of the 2 / 2nd Pioneer Battalion who embarked aboard HMT Orcades for Sumatra but later diverted to Java . He was promoted to Warrant Officer Class II during this time .

= = = Defence of Java and prisoner of war = = =

With the rapid Japanese advance through the Pacific and the fall of Singapore in February 1942 , the 3 @, @ 400 troops aboard Orcades were diverted from Sumatra to Java in the Dutch East Indies . Disembarking at Batavia on 18 February , Peeler 's battalion was combined with the other units aboard Orcades to form Blackforce . This ad hoc grouping , under the command of fellow Victoria Cross holder Brigadier Arthur Blackburn , was tasked with defending a series of airfields and supporting the Dutch . Blackburn organised his men into a brigade formation , consisting of a headquarters and three infantry battalions ? the men of the 2 / 2nd Pioneers made up the bulk of Blackforce 's 2nd Battalion .

On 28 February 1942 , elements of the Imperial Japanese Army landed on Java . Blackforce was stationed at Buitenzorg , poised to advance west to confront the invaders . However , rapid Japanese progress pushed the defending Dutch forces in the opposite direction , and Blackforce was assigned the defence of Buitenzorg and Leuwiliang . As the situation deteriorated further , Blackburn was forced to withdraw his men east on the night of 4 / 5 March , and again on 7 / 8 March . On 8 March , the Dutch surrendered , ordering all men to lay down their arms . With supplies running low and unable to contact the Australian Government , Brigadier Blackburn announced the surrender of Blackforce four days later . Peeler and his fellow soldiers thus became prisoners of war . At the time , he was one of three Australian Victoria Cross recipients of the First World War serving overseas , all of whom were " swept up in the Japanese advance " ; Blackburn surrendered with Peeler at Java , while Walter Brown was caught up in the fall of Singapore , where he is believed to have been killed attempting to evade capture .

Peeler was among a contingent of Australian captives transported to work on the Burma Railway . Despite the " harsh treatment " meted out by the Japanese , he later played down his ordeal , stating : " I wasn 't treated too badly , apart from nearly starving ... But what the Japs did to the others on the railway was pretty horrifying " . After three @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half years incarceration , he was freed following the Japanese capitulation in August 1945 and the subsequent liberation of prisoner @-@ of @-@ war camps in the Pacific . On 6 October , Peeler embarked for Australia aboard HMS Highland Brigade ; he arrived in Melbourne fifteen days later . Back in Australia , he learned that his son , Donald , had been killed in action on the island of Bougainville on 31 December 1944 , while serving with the 15th Battalion . Donald Peeler was posthumously Mentioned in Despatches for his " distinguished service in the South @-@ West Pacific Area " . Warrant Officer Class II Walter Peeler was discharged from the Second Australian Imperial Force on

12 December 1945 .

= = Later life and legacy = =

Peeler resumed his duties as custodian of the Shrine of Remembrance on his discharge , guiding visitors around the memorial . In the 1961 Queen 's Birthday Honours , his " long and dedicated service " at the Shrine was recognised with the award of the British Empire Medal . He retired three years later at the age of 76 , stating : " It 's time I had a rest . " In 1966 , Peeler was interviewed for a newspaper article ; when queried on his Victoria Cross exploit , he recalled :

My wartime experiences are nothing to make a splash about ... I 'm just an ex @-@ soldier who did his job . I never saw the faces of those I killed . They were just men in an enemy uniform . It was simply them or me . I don 't think I was brave ? not any more than the other Aussies who were with me . I simply had a job to do and I did it ... Only afterwards did I realise how lucky I 'd been not to get killed myself .

On 23 May 1968 , Peeler died at his home in South Caulfield , Victoria . Survived by his wife , Kathleen , and their four remaining children , he was buried in Brighton Cemetery . Kathleen died the following year . Peeler is commemorated in the Victorian Garden of Remembrance , and a soldiers ' club in Casula , New South Wales , bears his name . His Victoria Cross and other medals are on display in the Hall of Valour at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra .