

Edgar James Ebsary – The life story of a very unordinary Australian

Part A



Lieutenant Edgar James Ebsary in dress uniform after his final promotion, 1943.

Edgar James Ebsary was born on 15 October 1919, in his neighbour's farmhouse in Barunga, South Australia. Edgar was the fourth born child of Catherine Evelyn Olive Ebsary and Edgar Harold Ebsary, with sisters Ruth, Ila, Joy, and brother Colin. Edgar attended school in Barunga, Mingary and Manahill, but left at 13 to work on the family farm. On the farm he experienced "long hours... with many interesting and challenging aspects"¹. In 1939, World War II broke out when Ed was only 20 years old. After agonising contemplation, Ed's patriotic nature convinced himself and others from the region to make the journey to Adelaide and present themselves for enlistment on 26 July 1940.

Ed commenced training at the Wayville Showground. Ed was drafted to the first group of reinforcements for the 2/27th Infantry Battalion and continued training at Woodside before heading to the Middle East. The Battalion sailed from Melbourne in November 1940 on the troop ship *Mauretania*, landing at Kantara (El Qantara) where they were taken to Julus, the biggest Australian camp in Palestine. In Palestine, Ed was

picked to be a runner by his platoon commander Lt. A. J. Lee.

After acclimatising to Egypt, the Battalion moved to Marsa Matruh where they relieved the British unit in the Libyan campaign. Enduring terrible conditions, the unit faced vicious sandstorms and flea infestations². The Australians were eventually relieved and moved to Northern Palestine, camping next to a Jewish farming settlement. In June 1941, the unit moved in full battle formation to the border of Lebanon, in preparation to invade Syria. However, the troops were disrupted by units of the Foreign Legion, led by Vichy French officers under German command³. Ed's troop attacked the enemies but were met with heavy resistance. Holding position on a large rocky outcrop, the Australians were hit by enemy artillery, with a shell bursting near Ed that left his head ringing for days⁴.

Eventually, Beirut was taken while other units captured Damascus⁵, ending the six-week campaign. By now, Ed had been promoted to Lance Corporal⁶. On 30 January 1942, Ed boarded the ship *He de France* to return home. However, the unexpected fall of Singapore in February meant their destination was unclear. Despite Singapore's surrender, Ed's ship continued the journey home, arriving back in South Australia on 25 March. Although Ed was proud of his achievements abroad, he was relieved to be home, "I will always remember the special feeling of excitement when we were able to see the Southern Cross. It made us feel that we were almost home"⁷.

¹ E.J. Ebsary- Memoir p.8

² E.J. Ebsary- Memoir p.14

³ *K is for Kokoda* p.68

⁴ E.J. Ebsary – Memoir p.15

⁵ *K is for Kokoda* p.14

⁶ National Archives of Australia

⁷ E.J. Ebsary – Memoir p.16

In August 1942, Ed's unit sailed from Brisbane to Papua New Guinea, disembarking at Port Moresby. The soldiers were now limited to half a blanket and a change of clothes to carry more rations and ammunition⁸. Once readied, they deployed to the top of the Owen Stanley Range and relieved the 39th Battalion of young militiamen, who had acquitted themselves admirably and sustained heavy losses⁹. The Japanese placed them under constant bombardment in the unbearably hot sun¹⁰. Food and water were limited, with little chance of replenishment in this remote position. On the morning of September 8, Ed spotted Japanese riflemen as they moved across the gully. He fired a few shots at the enemy, alerting them of his position. A few shots whistled by and there was movement in the grass in front of Ed. He took a grenade out of his utility pouch and as he was about to pull the pin, a bullet came through the top of the mound and struck the finger of his left hand that was holding the grenade. Although shot, Ed knew he was the last survivor of his section, so he courageously picked up the grenade, pulled the pin, and threw it. Ed lost the end of one of his fingers, requiring it to be stitched back together¹¹.



Jungled mountain ranges near the gap in the Owen Stanley's (Photograph taken November 1943.)

By September, the fittest soldiers were sent to form defensive positions in Gona¹². When settling in for the night, a soldier ten feet away from Ed gave a gasp. In a glance, Ed saw fear take over the soldier's body as he stared motionless at a Japanese mortar bomb embedded in the soft earth about a foot in front of him. Luckily, it was a dud. However, it foreshadowed the onslaught to come. The Japanese attack began at first light on 29 December 1942. Ed made the mistake of manning a Bren light machine gun left lying where the previous operator was killed. He began seeing bullet holes appear through the leaves of the Pandanus palm and he was shot in the left foot, just below the ankle, splitting the heel bone on exit¹³. He crawled away to where he was bandaged up and then carried several miles by native carriers, known fondly as the Fuzzy Wuzzy angels¹⁴. He was then evacuated to Port Moresby where they plastered his leg and foot before transferring him to a hospital ship set for Brisbane. Ed was then taken to hospital at Baulkham Hills, NSW, where within less than twenty-four hours, he contracted malaria, spending the night in a feverish sweat and suffered delirium¹⁵.

When recovered, Ed re-joined his unit in Queensland. In August 1943, the unit reached Papua New Guinea where they were instructed to capture Lae in the Finisterre Ridge Campaign. Ed had now become a Sergeant¹⁶. With the capture of Lae by another brigade, Ed's unit marched northward up the Markham and Ramu Valleys. While in a field medical station, Ed was informed by the Commanding Officer that he had been recommended to attend officer cadet training at Woodside in South Australia¹⁷. Ed passed his training and as a Lieutenant, was posted to his unit the 31/51 Infantry Battalion¹⁸. They landed in Bougainville, where Ed and his troops pushed the Japanese to the top end of the island, clearing the Japanese from the important west coast¹⁹. Ed and his troop were finally relieved and headed to Nauru and Ocean Islands near the Equator, where Ed volunteered to collect Japanese prisoners before returning home in a Lancaster bomber. Ed was discharged in October 1945 after completing 1,923 days of service and only two weeks before his twenty-sixth birthday.

⁸ E.J. Ebsary – Memoir p.17

⁹ *K is for Kokoda* p.42

¹⁰ *The Kokoda Trail* p.26

¹¹ E.J. Ebsary- Memoir p.18

¹² *Kokoda*, p.223

¹³ E.J. Ebsary – Memoir p.20

¹⁴ *Kokoda*, p.129

¹⁵ E.J. Ebsary – Memoir p.20

¹⁶ Virtual War Memorial

¹⁷ E.J. Ebsary – Memoir p.21

¹⁸ National Archives of Australia

¹⁹ E.J. Ebsary – Memoir p.22



Ed's collection of war medals: OAM medal, 1939 /45 Star Medal, Africa Star, Pacific Star, Burma Star, Defence Medal, War Medal 1939/45, Australian Service Medal and General War Service Medal.

After returning home, Ed married Vida Jean Noble in 1947 and had 4 children: June, Peter, Jennifer, and Allan. Unfortunately, in 1983 Vida passed away from cancer. Ed spent much of his post-war life serving his community where he remained well respected for his outstanding service in the war. He was elected as the president and secretary of Barunga Tennis Club and Wokurna Football Club. In 1989 he was Bute's "Citizen of the Year" and received the Australia Day award, followed by an Order of Australia Medal (OAM) in 1991. Most importantly, since 1946, Ed has been a continuous member of the Returned Services League at Pt. Broughton and then Bute. He served 6 years as president and was awarded Life Membership in 1990.

In 2018, Ed was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal by the R.S.L. Ed was awarded a total of eight war medals: 1939 /45 Star Medal, Africa Star, Pacific Star, Burma Star, Defence Medal, War Medal 1939/45, Australian Service Medal and General War Service Medal.

Edgar James Ebsary is anything but an ordinary Australian, sacrificing more for his country than the average civilian. He left his beloved family at only 20 years old to fight for the freedom and safety of his country, never seeking reward or recognition. Australian soldiers were characterised as hard-working underdogs that selflessly sacrificed their lives for not only Australia but also in defence of other nations. Ed encapsulates the essence of the traditional ANZAC soldier as he risked his life repeatedly, even when told it was unnecessary to keep on giving.

Ed has also demonstrated great commitment to Australia in the post-war years, primarily through his dedication to community service. Despite being reluctant to share his emotions regarding lost mates from the war, his exceptional volunteer service to the R.S.L over many years shows his respect for those who have served both past and present. In the citation for his Meritorious Service Award it read, "For those of you who know him well, I'm sure he has left footprints on your soul". He was selfless. He was brave. He was light-hearted.

In a society where the media often highlight the villains of this world, acknowledging the heroics of men like Ed enhance our sense of hope.

(1495 words)



ANZAC Day 2012: surviving 2/27th Battalion members, from left, Ed Ebsary, Eric Sambell, Bert Ward and Ray Baldwin.

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Part B

The Premier's ANZAC Spirit competition was introduced to my school in 2019 and immediately I was interested in entering. After reading the details regarding the entry, I began researching World War II, and more specifically, unheralded South Australian soldiers. To my delight, when discussing the competition with my grandfather, he informed me that I have a great grand uncle named Edgar James Ebsary, who fought in World War II and is still alive. The information I had researched prior, in addition to discovering a relative who served and is still alive, formed the basis of my project. I found out general information about my great grand uncle like his full name and service number, and with this, I found a Yorke Peninsula Country Times newspaper article. The newspaper article focused on the horrors of war and inaccurately described Edgar's injuries, rather than commemorating Edgar's ANZAC spirit. Therefore, to ensure accuracy in my research, I felt the best source was Edgar himself.

Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, I was unable to have a conversation with Edgar due to the restrictions regarding nursing homes. However, with the help of my grandfather's contact list, I was able to have a conversation with Edgar Ebsary's son, Allan Ebsary. I interviewed him regarding his father's life, all of which he knew most details about because of Edgar's self-written memoir. From this interview, I was given a copy of the memoir and photographs. Edgar's unpublished 13-chapter memoir recounts his life and experiences before, during and after the war. Although the memoir was a significant depiction of Edgar's life and experience in the war, additional research was necessary to obtain a deeper understanding of the war itself. I began researching information online at websites like Australian War Memorial, Virtual War Memorial and National Archives of Australia.

The National Archives of Australia website contained primary sources, such as scanned records of war documents, relevant to Edgar. I watched numerous documentaries online, some of which were 'Greatest Events of WWII In Colour' and 'Hitler – A Career'. I discovered books regarding Kokoda and WWII in my school library, including 'K is for Kokoda' by Matt Anderson and 'The Kokoda Trail' by Robert Hillman. From these books, I sourced and annotated further information concerning conditions during the Battle of Kokoda. In April 2021, my family vacationed to Darwin and visited both the WWII Oil Storage Tunnels and the Darwin War Museum. This extended my knowledge on the impact WWII had on Australian society. After a thorough interview and extensive research, I began forming my written submission for the 2021 Premier's ANZAC Spirit Competition.

(431 words)