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OBITUARY

Private Edward Kenna, VC

Private Edward (Ned) Kenna, a Victorian, while serving with the 2/4th Australian Infantry Battalion, 6th Australian Division, won the Victoria Cross during an attack on the Japanese at Wirui Mission (near Wewak), New Guinea, on 15 May 1945. He died last July and was accorded a State Funeral at St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Cathedral, Melbourne, at which the following eulogy¹ was delivered by



Major General G. L. Maitland, AO, OBE, RFD, ED (Retd)

Australians are proud of their country's egalitarian character, and it is a source of gratification to recognise those who have laid their high office aside this morning in order to attend this service.

To be awarded the Victoria Cross requires a super-human effort. But that is not the end of it, for then comes the challenge of living up to it. Not only did Ned Kenna meet that challenge but so did his ever loyal wife, Marge. Ned was a down-to-earth character who abhorred airs and graces; on the other hand he was not self-effacing. He appreciated the stature that went with his Victoria Cross and he wore it with quiet dignity.

He gave thought to how he should handle his situation, and he and Marge set out on a life of giving freely of themselves to what they saw as their responsibility for holding Australia's most precious award. They attended army units to inspire young soldiers; they attended schools to help instil a balanced sense of values in young people; they attended public functions to ensure that the war and its sacrifices would not be forgotten; and they attended ex-service activities in order to honour veterans.

They sought neither glamour nor reward. Ned was no speech maker, but he knew his limitations and coped with a few appropriate paragraphs that always earned him more applause than given to the others on the programme.

But I am running ahead of myself. On behalf of his life-long friends, I would thank you for your presence here. We appreciate the honour you have accorded him by acknowledging *what he did*; while this small group here wearing their 2/4th Battalion ties, honour him for *why he did it*. Not that he ever told us. Not that we would have ever asked – he had a quirky sense of humour and you would have got some ridiculous answer. But if you knew the man four reasons were clear:

- Here again was his sense of responsibility. He was the Bren-gunner; and it was his responsibility to either kill the enemy or keep their heads down while the remainder of the section – the riflemen – did whatever they had to do. The tall kunai grass was stopping him from carrying out his responsibility and it was inevitable that he would do something about it.
- Also, the section was part of his family, his mates. Unless you have experienced it, it is hard to explain what being in a battalion was like – you were there for years – you loved to hear from your own family back home, but the battalion was your new family. You did everything with it. And you would do anything for it.
- The third reason was his 'matter of factness' – something which Marge shared with him. Things tended to be black or white for them. Problems were met and solved simply at every stage of their lives. To Ned crouching in the kunai the answer was simple. He had to stand up.
- The fourth reason was more conventional. The 2/4th only half-laughingly, said it was the best. Those more diplomatic like their once commander, Major General Sir Ivan Dougherty, said: "there was none better". Whatever – when the Japanese stronghold of Wewak had to be captured, the approach to it was so narrow that the assault had to be restricted to a single battalion. That battalion was the 2/4th and its capture of Wewak was an astounding victory. Ned wasn't going to let the side down.

There is, however, one aspect that still leaves one baffled. Ned was a feisty character who, according to his battalion's football team, was 'as game as a bull-ant', so where did the calmness come from? The Japanese were in their usual bunkers, which left little exposed to shoot at. It required a precise aim, yet as Kenna rose to shoot, the adrenalin must have been surging – how could one calmly aim? And when lifting the rifle up causing the shirt to blouse out and with Jap bullets going through the shirt, how much harder to take careful precise aim – which Ned did, and he repeated

¹A brief biography of Ned Kenna and a detailed account of the action in which he was awarded the Victoria Cross may be found in: G L Maitland (1992). *Tales of Valour from the Royal New South Wales Regiment* (Playbill: Pymble, NSW) at pp. 230 – 241. A copy is in the Ursula Davidson Library cal no. 503.2/33834. Photo of Private Kenna: Australian War Memorial negative 134485A.

the performance when a second Japanese machine-gun opened up.

Ned's Victoria Cross action was on 15 May, but there was no special treatment for him, and the battalion pressed on into the mountains. There, early on 5 June on Mt Kwakubo, Ned's luck ran out. As he was crawling forward to reconnoitre, an explosive bullet hit him in the face taking much of it away. The bullet came out his neck; re-entered his chest and came out near his stomach. For more than 50 years, he never told the full story of his evacuation and treatment, but when people watching television came to believe that a helicopter turned up and you were in hospital in a matter of minutes, he agreed it should be told.

The battalion's medical officer, Doc. Williams, who would himself be killed within days, couldn't do anything for his face except to bandage it, but there on the track, without anything to dull the pain, he sewed up the two chest wounds to stop him bleeding to death. Then for the whole of that day fuzzy wuzzies carried him down the mountain on an improvised stretcher to a casualty clearing station. It would take ten days before he was in Heidelberg Hospital with his wounds too serious to have been treated in the interim. Marge, who was to become his wife, had the job of removing his bandages – but the stench and appearance was temporarily too much for her and she was physically ill; however she returned and finished the job. You are to be spared the details, but for nine months he lived with wires, plaster and screws in his head, and a two-straw slit in front through which he was fed.

That story has been recounted so that you may better appreciate his final assessment: *"I wasn't alone in this pain and misery; we had so many wounded; so many worse than I was; and a lot not so lucky. I consider myself one of the lucky ones as I met Marge, have had a long happy life, and have a great family."*

I was fortunate to have Sir Roden Cutler as a friend and I would regularly have morning coffee with him. He and Ned attended many functions together, both here and overseas, and needless to say we talked about Ned. Sir Roden had a particularly high regard for him – he valued his integrity for never seeking to gain advantage through his award, he shared his intolerance of pretension, he enjoyed his hint of larrikinism, and admired his generosity of spirit. In all, he saw Ned as the quintessential Australian.

After many years without a new Victoria Cross holder, since Keith Payne in Vietnam, we recently acquired a new one – Trooper Donaldson. After seeing and listening to him, I couldn't help but think that in many ways he was a young Ned Kenna.

Isn't that the pattern of life? The old depart and the young arrive. However, pattern or not, it doesn't lessen the sadness of the departure. The Kenna family has lost a loved and loving husband, father and grandfather, his friends have lost 'a mate' who cannot be replaced; and all here have lost a very special Australian.