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## OBITUARIES

# Captain Bede Tongs, OAM, MM



Bede Tongs was among the last remaining of the Kokoda Trail heroes, veterans of the bitter fighting across the Owen Stanley Range in Papua New Guinea in World War II. His 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion spent the longest period fighting on the track. Major General Gordon Maitland says that Tongs' account of his platoon's desperate struggle is considered to be the best account of such an action.

On 17 October 1942 near Eora Creek, Tongs, a platoon sergeant, determined to silence a Japanese light machine-gun. "After I commenced crawling down the fire lane I realised that this was the most dangerous thing I had tackled in my life. My rifle was in my left hand. A four-second fuse grenade with the pin removed and striker lever depressed (was) in my right hand ..... Then I saw the Japanese gun position – roughly camouflaged earth, the two gun-crew looking intently to their left, one of them with his finger in the trigger. I was looking down the barrel of their LMG – it was like looking down the barrel of a 75mm artillery piece as it was only 10 paces away. I let the grenade lever go towards the ground making sure it did not fly off into the air and possibly give me away. I held it for approximately one second then threw with less than three

seconds of fuse left ..... Some Japanese fire from another quarter was crackling over my head. I threw another grenade, got to my feet and would have been eligible as a starter in the Stawell Gift foot race, the speed I joined my men."<sup>1</sup> Tongs was awarded a Military Medal. He later also served in the Aitape-Wewak campaign.

Bede Tongs was born in Narrandera in 1920 and became a carpenter in Whitton and then Canberra. After the war, he returned to work as a carpenter. He was later a building inspector and senior building technician for the Department of the Interior. In 1948, he joined the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion, Citizen Military Forces (CMF), in Canberra. In 1953, now a CMF captain, he went to Korea as a front-line observer; and became president of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion Association.

He returned to Papua New Guinea nine times; was an ambassador for the Kokoda Track Foundation; and author of *Poems of an Infanteer*, published in 2011. In 2014, he received the Medal of the Order of Australia.

**Christopher Dawson**

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<sup>1</sup>Maitland, Major General Gordon L. (2002). *The Battle History of the Royal New South Wales Regiment* Volume II, 1939–1945 (Kangaroo Press: Sydney), pp. 231-232.

<sup>2</sup>'Z Special Unit', also a secretive department, paid the soldiers seconded to SRD. There never was a Z Force.

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<sup>3</sup>Secretary, Australian Commando Association, New South Wales

<sup>4</sup>Australian Intelligence Corps Association