CAPTAIN REG SAUNDERS, MBE: AN ABORIGINAL WARRIOR AND AUSTRALIAN SOLDIER

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A wooden shack facing Bunyip Lane in the Framlingham Aboriginal Reserve, adjacent to Lake Condah in Victoria, was the birthplace of Reginald Walter Saunders. Assisting at the birth was his Aunt Mary, Lionel Rose's great-grandmother. Little did she realise at the time that she was bringing into the world an Aboriginal warrior who would be the first of his race to become a commissioned officer. Those who served under him in Korea expressed openly the view that he was 'the best officer in the world'.¹

What made Saunders so unique? Gordon suggests he was a misfit,² and when his upbringing and military service is examined such a description is not without some justification. If his Aboriginality set him apart from others how lucky Australia and the Australian Army were to have such a 'misfit'.

Reg's father, Chris Saunders, contributed significantly to his son's upbringing. After leaving school, where he had been captain of the cricket and football teams, had won the long-jump championship and had had his name inscribed on the Honour Roll, Chris worked for a travelling circus. His ability as a footballer and runner soon enabled him to join the North Melbourne Football Club in the Victorian Football Association. Just prior to the First World War he began coaching a Western District team.³

He enlisted in the First AIF and served as a machine-gunner in the Third Division. On returning from the First World War Chris returned to Lake Condah and married a 'full blood' Aboriginal girl of the Wannan tribe. Reg was born on 7 August 1920 at the time his father was working as a ganger on the Mount Gambier rail line. A brother, Harry, was born two years later. In 1924, when their mother was giving birth to a baby girl, she died of pneumonia and the baby girl died a few days later.⁴

It was Chris Saunders who taught Reg and Harry how to recite the Lord's Prayer before they went to bed; which tree to select for posts, palings or rails; what wild bee-hives to rob and how to hunt.⁵ Completing his merit certificate (grade eight) in 1934, Reg left school and began working at a saw mill. Following in his father's footsteps he played Australian Rules football for the Western District Junior League, where he was promptly given the nickname of 'Snowy'. He continued to hunt, play football and, as a consequence of the centenary of Portland (Victoria) in 1934, was exposed to a visiting boxing troupe. Boxing provided Reg with the kind of excitement he loved; it also would prove to be an important attribute for his future army career.

The bush-fires which swept south-eastern Australia in mid-January 1939 were to affect the Saunders family. The fire of 13 January 1939 galvanised Reg and his co-workers in the timber-mill community into frantic action: building firebreaks around their homes and fighting the fires with hessian bags soaked in water. A fire of a different kind was smouldering in Europe and Reg, like many fellow-Australians, would be called on to help extinguish the flames ignited by a fascist dictator.

1 Gordon 1962:14.

2 Ibid.:13

3 Ibid.:36.

4 Ibid.:32.

5 Ibid.:35.

Plate 1. Pamela Thalben-Ball, *Captain Reg Saunders*, 1978 (AWM, oil on canvas, 76.4 x 61.6 cm, 28159).

SAUNDERS: ABORIGINAL WARRIOR AND AUSTRALIAN SOLDIER

Top: Captain Reg Saunders, MBE.

Bottom: Reg Saunders receiving his commission from Lieutenant-General Sir John Northcott at the OCTU graduation ceremony, Seymour, Victoria, on 25 November, 1944.

It was the bush-fire of early 1939 which encouraged Chris Saunders and his two sons, Reg and Harry, to establish their own timber contract business. They worked throughout the district lopping stringybarks and splitting posts. Despite a lucrative contract at Oakbank, Reg announced he had decided to enlist in the army. Some months earlier he had applied to the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) for acceptance as an aircrew trainee. Not having heard from the RAAF, Reg decided to enlist in the army and proceeded to the recruitment office at Portland in April 1940.

Army life appealed to Reg Saunders. At the training camp established at the Caulfield racecourse he attended every course that was being offered, including NCO courses in leadership and instruction techniques. As he had demonstrated when a youth, he applied himself with dedication and enthusiasm. He enjoyed the drill, weapon training, field firing and the night marches.⁶ Six weeks after enlisting he was made a lance corporal and three months later was promoted to the rank of sergeant.

In September 1940 Reg sailed for Palestine as a reinforcement for the 2/7th Battalion, 17th Brigade, Australian Sixth Division. His initial period in Palestine was spent at the small village of Beit-Jirja with the 17th Infantry Training Brigade. It was at this village that the legend which was subsequently to surround Reg Saunders began.

The military police had arrested an Australian soldier in Jerusalem who, in addition to being AWOL, was boisterous and rowdy. Until he could be transferred to a military prison he was confined to the small guard house at Beit-Jirja. Reg Saunders was the sergeant of the guard and when the prisoner noticed the sergeant was Aboriginal he became more beligerent and offensive in his description of Saunders. Gordon has provided a graphic account of the events which unfolded:

... the adjutant, Captain Quentin Tilley, reported to his commanding officer, Major Henry Guinn, with a fine, ringing phrase that deserves to go down in military history: 'There's a bit of a blue in the clink, sir'. And he added: 'I think you'd better come over straight away'.

The pair arrived back just in time to watch Saunders opening the door of Sharp's cell, with the observation: 'You need a wash, mate. Come and I'll take you over to the tap'.

Replied the prisoner: 'Don't call me mate, blackfeller. You're not taking me anywhere'.

Sergeant Saunders, who had kept his temper fairly well, insisted: 'I'm ordering you out of that cell. You're coming out for a wash'.

'And I'm telling you', said the prisoner, 'that I don't take orders from any black bastard'.

At the door of the cell, Saunders wordlessly began to unhitch his rifle. He laid it down on the floor, then took off the bayonet at his belt, and laid it beside the rifle. Then he unbuttoned the tunic on which were stitched his three stripes.

'Listen, mate', he said, when he had finally stripped to the waist. 'I'm going to show you once and for all what a black bastard can do to a white bastard'.

For maybe five minutes it was a good brawl. Sharp, a year or two older than the Aboriginal, had some experience as a street-fighter - and he hooked, slashed, elbowed, jolted and even kicked with some effect. He lacked the fitness of Saunders, though, and the Aboriginal had learned the right way to

⁶ Ibid.:45.

throw his punches in odd fights against touring side-show troupes in the Victorian bush. He fainted and weaved, and stabbed home punishing left thrusts and vicious rips that opened up Sharp's lip and blackened one of his eyes. The white man went down twice before he jellied into a heap in a corner of the cell, refusing to get up any more. Chest heaving and nose bleeding a little, Saunders put on his tunic and other gear again, then dragged the prisoner by the feet out of the building to a tap nearby. He washed him down, and half-carried him back to his cell.⁷

What became legend, vividly recounted at Anzac Day reunions, is this story of a black sergeant who took off his stripes to whip a white, insubordinate private. The legend was to grow throughout Saunders' army career.

The 2/5th, 2/6th, 2/7th and 2/8th, which made up the 17th Brigade of the Australian Sixth Division, experienced their first combat action against the Italians who had established fixed positions on the outskirts of Bardia. Each Italian outpost was progressively 'neutralised' by the Australians firing Bren-guns and rifles and lobbing grenades. The problem for the Australians was how to cope with the mass of Italians who surrendered. After Bardia was captured Saunders joined the 2/7th as a reinforcement.

The desert campaign saw the 17th Brigade occupy the towns of Derna, Martuba, Giovanni Berta, Wadi Derna, Barce, Benghazi, Mersa Brega and Agedabia. The desert was to Saunders an alien land, as he had been raised in the Western District of Victoria. When he arrived in Derna and noted the lush gardens and the neat colonial settlement he felt pangs of homesickness. After Benghazi the Australian Ninth Division relieved the Sixth Division and the 2/7th returned to Amariya via Derna, Tobruk, Bardia, Sollum, Sidi Barrani and Mersa Matruh.

On 9 April 1941 Saunders' Battalion embarked on the S.S. *Cameronia* at Alexandria a few miles from Amariya and four days later disembarked at Athens. The battalion spent the night at a camp in Daphnis and next day entrained for the front. During the two days Saunders spent on the train he marvelled at the beauty of the countryside through which they travelled, noting the fertile valleys, the numerous hamlets and the farmers toiling in their fields. On reaching Larissa the battalion disembarked and was ordered to take up positions at Domorkos Pass.

The German drive into Greece was supported strongly by the Luftwaffe, and the rail-line the 2/7th had used was bombed and strafed by Stukas. The battalion received orders on 20 April to retire and every usable vehicle was commandeered to move the troops southward. The roads from the north converged at Larissa and the traffic was under constant attack from Stukas. Australian military police were directing the traffic at the crossroads and were achieving a measure of order out of the pandemonium. An Australian MP captain would occasionally halt the traffic and take pot shots with his tommy gun at Stukas venturing too close. (This officer is credited with downing two Stuka aircraft and was later awarded the Military Cross for his coolness under intense fire. Cable No.8176 N1, ex Headquarters, London, 1941.)

The 2/7th was evacuated from Greece at Kalamata in the *Costa Rica* on 27 April 1941. That afternoon the *Costa Rica* was subjected to its third air attack and while no direct hit occurred the bombs exploded so close to the ship that it began to take in water. Three destroyers, HMS *Defender*, HMS *Hero* and HMS *Hereward*, nosed alongside in turn to help with the evacuation, while the port life-boats of the *Costa Rica* were lowered and soon filled with troops. This was Saunders' welcome to Crete as he and his colleagues landed at

⁷ Ibid.:11-12.

Suda Bay with no tents, no arms and no ammunition. Their first night was spent huddled together, cold and hungry.

Saunders' first few days on Crete were a pleasant interlude from the weariness and exhaustion he had experienced in Greece. The weather was similar to his beloved Western District and he was not pestered by flies or mosquitos. The mountain streams enabled the troops to wash themselves and their clothing. Fruit, fresh eggs and chickens augmented the army's rations of bully beef and biscuit.

The 2/7th was assigned the task of digging-in, laying anti-personnel mines and barbed wire on the beach of Suda Bay and then patrolling their sector. German air-raids on Crete intensified. Despite this the local peasants continued to tend their sheep and goats, plough the rich soil and attend to their vines. The relationship between the Australians and the peasantry was excellent and it was this form of relationship that would help Saunders and many of his colleagues in the days ahead.

The German airborne attack began on 20 May 1941. The weather conditions were ideal for a parachute drop: clear and still. As the transport planes circled the drop-zone the sky began filling with an array of coloured parachutes; white, green, red, black, yellow and blue. The first wave jumped from their aircraft at a height of only 300 feet. While descending the parachutists were vulnerable to ground fire and more so because of the colour coding used by the Wehrmacht. Those who reached the ground had to face the bayonets of the defenders. The following day the 2/7th was ordered to mount a counter-attack towards the Malene airfield, now occupied by the Germans whose numbers were increasing steadily by the hour as transports landed on the airstrip with troops and supplies. The use of the Malene airfield also allowed the Germans to increase their bombing of allied positions. In a cable the New Zealand Commander General Freyberg sent to General Wavell he included the observation that: 'A small, ill-equipped and immobile force such as ours cannot stand up against the concentrated bombing that we have been faced with during the last seven days'.

It was on 25 May 1941 that Reg Saunders secured his first 'sure kill'. Saunders, with other members of 'C' Company, 13 Platoon, of the 2/7th Battalion surprised a 400-strong German raiding party close to the battalion's new line that had been established and given the somewhat dubious name of 'Forty-second Street'. He recalled that: 'After a short distance I saw a German soldier stand up in clear view about thirty yards away. He was my first sure kill.... I can remember feeling for a moment that it was just like shooting a kangaroo ... just as remote'.⁸ The enemy party was rushed by a platoon equipped with an assembly of "acquired" weapons and because the bayonets issued were without scabbards they had become a fixture on each rifle. The pent up frustrations of being subject to continuous aerial bombing over the past few days was evident in the ferocity of the Australian attack. Half of the German party was wiped out and the remainder turned and fled. Despite this show of defiance the days of the structured defence of Crete were numbered.

The evacuation process began on 1 June 1941. The following day units of the 2/7th began dispersing; some along the coast, while others headed for the hills. Saunders was with a group of 15 men who, after filling their water bottles and collecting what rations remained, moved to an olive grove three miles from the beach and hid there for the rest of the day. That night the group returned to the shore-line and using a torch attempted to attract the attention of any passing ship. Their attempt was unsuccessful. The group decided to return to the inland and keep in contact with helpful villagers.

The earlier friendship the Australians had developed with the local peasantry began to play an important part in their survival. Obtaining food proved to be the most difficult of

⁸ Ibid.:77.

their tasks. Although the Cretans helped them considerably it was at great risk. German reprisals were extreme. To escape from Crete was every soldier's wish. Allied troops, including some Australians, were occasionally rescued by British submariners.

Throughout the eleven-month period Saunders remained on Crete after the formal surrender he used all of the bushcraft skills his father had taught him when he moved at night, comparatively unnoticed.⁹ But he was also audacious. In an interview he gave Stephen Guest in 1989,¹⁰ Saunders recalled how he and some of his colleagues had entered a cafe one evening to escape the rain that was pelting down outside. A German patrol also entered the cafe to escape the wet weather. Saunders, outfitted in peasant clothing which complemented his obvious swarthy complexion, sauntered over to the Germans and asked in Greek for cigarettes. The German soldiers, always wary of groups of Cretan men, got up and left.

Ninety men, including Saunders, were eventually taken off Crete by the trawler *Hedgehog* on 7 May 1942 and later disembarked at Bardia. Here he was to learn that he had been posted missing in action on 4 June 1941 and, of more concern, that his brother Harry, with the 2/14th, had been wounded. The news of Japan entering the war also greeted him.

With the Japanese occupation of Rabaul (New Guinea) on 23 January 1942 the Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin, decided that the Sixth and Seventh Australian Divisions should return to Australia. *En route* to Fremantle the convoy spent four days at Colombo. On board the *City of Paris*, one of the ships making up the convoy, was Harry Saunders. Meanwhile, Reg was spending his time at various staging camps in Palestine where he was cautioned not to disclose the means by which he had escaped from Crete to avoid this avenue being closed to others still hoping to escape from the island.

Eventually aboard the Dutch freighter *Skjellved* he sailed from Port Tenfik (Palestine) on 9 August 1942 for Adelaide. The conditions on the *Skjellved* were primitive. Saunders was to observe, 'I enjoyed the trip only twice - when I threw eight heads straight at the ship's two-up school, and when I got off'.¹¹ On arriving in Melbourne he spent some weeks at the Caulfield racecourse military camp, the place he had begun his initial army training in April 1940, and on 28 November 1942 was posted to the 2/17th Australian Infantry Training Battalion located at Cowra, NSW, to undergo jungle training. The following day he learned his brother, Harry, had been killed in the fighting at Gona, New Guinea.

The 2/7th Battalion had arrived in New Guinea during October, 1942. The battalion was flown from Port Moresby to Wau in January 1943. Having completed his jungle training, Saunders was placed in charge of 50 reinforcements for the 2/5th, 2/6th and 2/7th and arrived at Port Moresby on 3 April 1943. Within a week he had joined his battalion as it pushed towards Salamaua, encountering strong Japanese resistance at Mubo and the 'Pimple', a mountain comprising razor-back ridges. Saunders' ability to move silently in the jungle soon cast him in the role of leading long-distance patrols and organising ambushes. At one stage he was attached to the 2/5th Battalion leading patrols against the enemy occupying the area of Nassau Bay.

Saunders rejoined his battalion in time for the attack on the 'Pimple' which began on Anzac Day. The Japanese were well dug in and their strength had been underestimated by the Allies. As well as leading his platoon Saunders directed mortar fire on the Japanese fixed positions. In military terms the attack on the 'Pimple' was a failure. The Japanese had

⁹ Ibid.:923.

¹⁰ Guest 1989.

¹¹ Gordon 1962:103.

the numbers - 700 to withstand a direct assault by 30 Australians. Despite being outnumbered 'A' Company of the 2/7th acquitted itself well until it was relieved by a stronger Australian force. The conditions under which the enemy was engaged, particularly the use by the enemy of the fire lane (a passage 9 metres wide, forty-five metres long and with the foliage hacked to about half a metre above the ground) added further to the mounting list of methods used by the Japanese in jungle warfare.

The condition of the troops was, however, beginning to tell. Malaria, dysentery and exposure was taking its toll on the fighting capacity of the 2/7th. The battalion was withdrawn to Wau and given a month's rest. Towards the end of July 1943 the 2/7th relieved the 58-59th Battalion to man the inside defence perimeter at Salamaua. The troops were immediately in action, repulsing numerous Japanese counter-attacks. Eventually the Japanese abandoned the plan to recapture Salamaua and began withdrawing from the area. Having been in action continuously for the past nine months the 2/7th was taken off the beach at Salamaua and transported to Milne Bay on the first leg of its journey back to Australia.

In early 1944 an army board met on the Atherton Tablelands to select officer candidates. The board consisted of Lieutenant Colonels T.M. Conroy (2/5th), F.G. Wood (2/6th) and H. Guinn (2/7th), all experienced veterans, who decided to recommend Saunders for Officer Training School. More extraordinary was the recommendation that on completing the course Saunders return to the 2/7th. When the recommendation was referred to General Blamey for approval, in view of the 'special significance' of the proposal he ruled '... that if Saunders was acceptable as an officer to the Battalion C.O., nothing else mattered'.¹² These four men were, therefore, instrumental in bringing about Saunders' appointment as an officer in the Australian Army; he was the first Aborigine to achieve a commission.

The three-month infantry officer training course was conducted at Mangalore (Victoria). The course concentrated on leadership and tactics and each trainee worked from 6 a.m. until 10 p.m. every day. During the course Saunders developed a close relationship with two of his class-mates: Lin Bear, DCM and Tom 'Diver' Derrick, VC, DCM. Saunders, Bear and Derrick graduated as infantry officers on 25 November 1944 (Bear topped the course and received the Commander-in-Chief's baton). By March 1945 Saunders was back in New Guinea as the commander of 10 Platoon, 'B' Company, 2/7th Battalion.

The battalion was assigned the task of conducting reconnaissance and fighting patrols against strong Japanese positions in the area of Maprik (New Guinea). Saunders used the terrain to advantage when positioning his platoon. Captain Clyde Baird later commented on Saunders and his platoon observing: 'I've always regarded it as a fine performance and a classic example of command. The Japs were strongly entrenched there and in difficult terrain. He [Saunders] always was an exceptionally good soldier and clever in action. Later he fitted into the officers' mess very well. He always conducted himself as a gentleman, and his colour made no difference to him or to his associates'.¹³

By May 1945 the 2/7th was patrolling the Torricelli Ranges behind Aitape. Saunders' platoon had been assigned the task of clearing a track between two Japanese posts. Two long bursts of machine-gun fire badly wounded the platoon's scout and Saunders received five bullets in the knee. He was hospitalised for three weeks and then returned to his battalion. On 23 May 1945 he received news that his friend 'Diver' Derrick had been killed at the landing on Tarakan.

¹² Ibid.:123.

¹³ Ibid.:130.

News of the Japanese surrender was received on 15 August 1945, but disengagement between the Japanese and the 2/7th Battalion took a further eight days to accomplish. With the cessation of hostilities Saunders' career in the Australian Army seemed over.

Reg Saunders was 25 years old when he was demobilised towards the end of 1945 and had a wife (Dorothy) and young daughter (Barbara) to support. He had to face the task of all veterans of adjusting to civilian life. His ambition was to go on the land¹⁴ but this required considerable capital. Reg and his family shared a house at Cheltenham (Melbourne) with his wife's parents and for the first three months after his discharge he helped a builder living nearby with odd jobs. Chris Saunders tried to persuade his son to return to timber contracting in the Western District, but Reg preferred to remain in Melbourne. He accepted a job as tram conductor, operating out of Glenhuntly depot, and kept fit playing Australian Rules football for the tramway depot team.

The need for him to have some form of trade skills weighed heavily on Reg's mind. After nine months with the tramways an opening arose in an iron foundry operated by Harry Deverell. The foundry made parts for lawn mowers, clothes lines and car radiators, and Reg applied himself to acquiring the skills needed for the job. By early 1947 his wife Dorothy, who had served in the Women's Australian Auxiliary Air Force during the war, was experiencing severe bouts of asthma. Reg decided that a move to Sydney and its climate could help ease her suffering. The Gant Foundry offered him a position, where he was to remain for the next two years.

Even though his income had risen with the move to Sydney a shortage of housing forced the family to rent tenement accommodation. This prevented Reg from adding to the little savings he had already accumulated. A second daughter (Glenda) was born in December, 1947, when the family was living in two cramped rooms situated a short distance from the foundry. During a visit to Sydney in early 1948, the famous Aboriginal boomerang thrower, Bill Onus, saw Reg and promised that on his return to Melbourne he would do what he could to secure him a position as tally clerk on the Melbourne wharves.

True to his word Bill Onus obtained the position for Reg, who moved back to Melbourne and began work at Station Pier. Reluctant to live with his wife's parents at Cheltenham the family rented accommodation in North Fitzroy.

A third daughter (Dorothy) was born in April, 1949. The family was barely balancing its weekly budget. A year or so later, when North Korean communist forces crossed the 38th Parallel into South Korea on 25 June 1950, the family's fortunes had not changed.

The United Nations Security Council sought assistance from member nations on 27 June 1950 and, apart from committing naval and air force personnel and materiel, Prime Minister Menzies announced Australia would raise a special force of Australian troops to serve in Korea.

Enlistment to serve in 'K' Force and the reinforcements needed for the 3rd Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR) began on 8 August 1950, the day after Saunders' 30th birthday. There was an enthusiastic response from ex-servicemen and young men. At the time the widespread view held by the Australian community was that it was important to demonstrate to the communist bloc that unprovoked attacks on democratic countries would not be tolerated by the West. Those who enlisted in 'K' Force were given a number in the 400000 series, prefixed by the number of their State. Because Saunders re-enlisted in Victoria he was allocated the number 3400228, with the prefix 3 denoting Victoria. At the time the serial number Saunders was allocated would have been written as 3/400228. All 'other rank' recruits were given the rank of Private 1 Star and a daily rate of pay of 2s 6d.

¹⁴ Ibid.:133.

While Saunders was proud to be an Australian his financial circumstances, rather than his political convictions, encouraged him to enlist in 'K' Force. At the time Saunders observed, 'Where else can I get £21 a week, all hospital expenses, three meals a day and an allowance for my wife?'¹⁵ Returning to active service on 28 August 1950 Saunders reported to Puckapunyal (Victoria) and began intensive training.

The first 'K' Force draft left Victoria on 4 September 1950 and boarded a Qantas DC-4 at Sydney airport bound for Iwakuni Air Base, Japan. On arrival at the air base the draft was then taken by train to Hiro, passing *en route* through the devastation of Hiroshima, where the 3 RAR was based. The training became more concentrated. During a six day exercise at Haramura (later to become known as the 1st Commonwealth Division Battle School) a typhoon interrupted the exercise and the troops involved had to force march back to Hiro, 25 miles away. On the evening of 27 September 1950, with steady rain falling, the Battalion embarked on the American Liberty ship *Aitken Victory* and they arrived at Pusan the following morning. What surprised all members of the Battalion was the large reception committee waiting to greet them. A cheer squad of South Korean girls and an American negro band playing the 3 RAR's march, 'Our Director' had not been expected. However there was a job to be done. The troops of the battalion were transported by train to Taegu, 100 miles to the north. The night was spent in a dry river bed and the following day 3 RAR marched to Hill 282 and occupied the charred defensive positions which had earlier been taken by the Argylls (1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlands Regiment) and then, mistakenly, napalmed by United States aircraft. Meanwhile the battalion's heavy equipment, 17-pounder anti-tank guns and Bren gun carriers, followed by road or rail.

The Argylls and the Middlesex Regiment and the 3 RAR brought into being the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade which, on 30 September 1950, was assigned to patrolling the hilly country of the Songju Waegon area. Four days later the troops of the brigade were flown to Kimpo airstrip, outside Seoul, leaving the vehicle transport to make the long journey by road in very poor conditions. Advancing to Kaesong the brigade came under the command of the 1st US Cavalry Division and began patrolling operations. The brigade was assigned the task of leading the advance to Sariwon and captured approximately 1900 North Korean troops in the process.

The North Korean capital Pyongyang fell to the 1st US Cavalry Division on 19th October. A few days later Australian troops crossed the Chonchon River at Anju and attacked a strong enemy force which had surrounded those who remained of the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team.

The ensuing contact with the enemy, later referred to as the 'Battle of the Apple Orchard', resulted in 'C' Company inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy and taking many prisoners. Australian troops of 3 RAR had also crossed the Taeryong River at Pakchon to hold the bridgehead at Sinanju, while 'D' Company rounded up guerillas found hiding in a school yard at Pakchon. By 29 October Australians had entered Chongju, the most northern point Australian troops reached in the Korean War. 'D' Company came under heavy fire when crossing open paddy fields. The following day the battalion lost its Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Green, killed by a mortar shell. This loss was felt deeply by all the men of 3 RAR.

On 1 November 1950 communist Chinese forces joined their North Korean comrades and began pouring over the Yalu River. Within a few days it has been estimated that 26 Chinese Divisions, or 200,000 men, had crossed into Korea.

¹⁵ Ibid.:142.

The next five months of the Korean War became confused as the overwhelming numbers of Chinese troops made their onslaught on the United Nations forces. The fighting occurred during a winter period considered the most severe for 20 years, with temperatures falling as low as - 27° centigrade. Despite the severe conditions the Chinese thrust to cut the highway to Seoul had been thwarted, but in this action the US 8th Cavalry Battalion had suffered 75% casualties. For the Australians the issue of American winter clothing brought some relief in the freezing conditions. To ensure they could be readily identified the Australians wore the 'Rising Sun' badge on the up-turned peaks of their fur-lined caps. A variety of beards began to appear amongst the troops because, apart from all water having frozen, razor blades stuck to a person's face. The American 'Snow-Pak' boot was sought eagerly by the Australians to replace the boots with steel-studded soles of their regular issue. But this brought a further problem. While ideal during the day the insoles became wet with perspiration and then froze at night causing frost-bite.

Saunders joined the battalion in late 1950 and was posted to 'A' Company. Taking out a patrol on his first day with 'A' Company he was somewhat nonplussed when the soldier on his right, who was equipped with a walkie-talkie, informed him that Comic Court had won the Melbourne Cup. 3 RAR benefitted greatly from Saunders' previous combat experience. Major Ben O'Dowd, then 'A' Company's commander, regarded Saunders highly. Of Saunders he later observed: 'He [Saunders] rapidly built up his platoon into a wonderful fighting unit. He was a bloody good platoon commander, and he had the respect of his men. It's on patrol work that you see a platoon commander at his best or worst, and that's where Saunders was outstanding. He was always willing to go out, and when he got out, he was always keen to go further. He was never worried by any situation'.¹⁶

Having become used to a constant diet of 'C' ration cans of frankfurters and beans, or ground meat and spaghetti, the Australians were bewildered on Thanksgiving Day (24 November) when their rations were replaced by turkey and cranberry sauce, asparagus, hard-boiled eggs, stuffed olives, tinned fruit and nuts. Few Australians knew what Thanksgiving Day meant to their US allies. As 3 RAR had spent 54 days continuously in the front line Thanksgiving Day was supposed to be the start of a rest period. However, the following day the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade was ordered to hold the Chinese thrust at the rail junction of Kunu-ri. It was at Kunu-ri that the Australians met troops of the Turkish Brigade and later came to admire the bravery of the Turkish soldiers who repelled wave after wave of Chinese infantry when their positions were attacked, with each wave accompanied by what had become the familiar bugle calls and whistle blowing the Chinese used.

The Australians also experienced the American technique of 'buggin' out'. This entailed the American troops disengaging the enemy if they were in an unfavourable position and heading south (as in Korea) with all speed to establish a new defensive line. Saunders' view of this disengagement procedure and the conduct of the war would have been shared by many Australians when he remarked: 'We were cold and puzzled and pretty bitter about the conduct of the war. We were disgusted with the behaviour of many units around us, although we had tremendous admiration for the Middlesex and the Argylls, and we were fed up with the business of buggin' out. We were retreating under orders, and we couldn't question that, but found it hard to have to keep quitting before an enemy we considered inferior'.¹⁷

By early January 1951 3 RAR acted as the rearguard at Seoul while UN troops passed through to safety. So rapid was the Chinese advance that as members of 'D' Company

¹⁶ Ibid.:147.

¹⁷ Ibid.:151.

withdrew from the southern outskirts of Seoul they exchanged fire with elements of the advancing Chinese troops. The Australians crossed the Han River and regrouped at Hayu-ri. Following a number of brief forays in the Inchon area the Australians took up new positions at Changhowan, some 70 miles south of Seoul and were joined by a New Zealand gun battery (163rd Royal New Zealand Battery). 'D' Company, 3 RAR, was assigned the task of occupying for a night the forward position in a series of low hills. The one night stretched into twenty-three and proved trying for the troops, who were without their equipment. Ammunition was also in short supply. When the dressed carcass of an ox was sent up to the Australians by the South Koreans the troops quickly named the feature 'Ox Hill'. The wounding of Captain J.W. Callander resulted in Saunders being given command of 'C' Company, 3 RAR.

In mid-February the United Nations forces launched the spring offensive. The Australians, who had now been joined by the 2nd Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, when it became part of the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade, were successful in securing Hills 614 and 410 located north of the Yoju area as the offensive gathered momentum. What did come as a surprise, but was not entirely unexpected, was the replacement of General Douglas MacArthur by Lieutenant General Ridgway on 11 April 1951.

For 3 RAR the fighting continued. Just north of the 38th Parallel the hill nicknamed 'Sardine' was taken and then 'C' Company, led by Saunders, was responsible for securing 'Salmon' hill. Later Saunders was to tell a correspondent: 'It was just hill-fighting. Pretty steep in parts, a lot of Chinese, plenty of grenades and 50-calibre machine-gun fire. Nothing more to it than that'.¹⁸ Following these actions 3 RAR was stood down in reserve at Kapyong, situated on the Pukhan River.

The Chinese and North Korean forces regrouped and on 22 April, with bugles sounding and whistles blowing, attacked the 6th South Korean Division. The ferocity of the attack enabled the communist forces to penetrate the defensive positions and 30,000 troops of the 20th Chinese Army to break through and head south. The 27th British Commonwealth Brigade was ordered to take up a position some miles north of the Charidae area. 3 RAR, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel I. Ferguson, was given the task of occupying a ridge at Chuktun-ni overlooking the cross-roads of the highway and the fords of the Kapyong River.

It was mid-spring in Korea and the countryside was covered in greenery. The Australians were preparing for an Anzac Day service and had invited members of the Turkish Brigade to join them. Wild azaleas were being picked and fashioned into wreaths for the Dawn Service on 25 April. A grove of chestnut trees provided a serene haven for a number of Australians as they relaxed and enjoyed the balmy spring air. The wreaths would never be used and the serene surroundings would soon become killing fields.

Under the command of Major Ben O'Dowd 'A' Company occupied a position on a high rocky spur. The ground was so hard and rocky that the digging of trenches proved a slow process. To the left and slightly to the rear of 'A' Company, Saunders, commanding 'C' Company, positioned his troops on a connecting spur. Captain Nick Gravener, in command of 'D' Company, dispersed the troops of his company over the high ground north east of 'A' and 'C' companies; while 'B' Company, under the command of Captain D. Loughlin, took up positions south of the other three companies but overlooking Battalion Headquarters (BHQ). The defensive perimeter of the four companies lacked barbed-wire entanglements and a minefield 'cushion'. This was subsequently to prove a considerable handicap and, when

¹⁸ Ibid.:153.

wave after wave of Chinese troops attacked, close hand-to-hand fighting reached a state of savagery which those involved would prefer to forget.

On the Australians' left flank was the Canadian 2nd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Light Infantry, and between them was positioned the 16th New Zealand Field Regiment and a platoon of Company A US 72nd Heavy Tank Battalion. Initially the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade did not appreciate that their position was directly in the path of the Chinese advance on Seoul. However, when South Korean troops began to pass through the Australian positions, abandoning their equipment, defying the orders of their officers and showing no signs of rallying to make a stand, the situation became clear. For the UN forces the added problem was the inter-mingling of Chinese troops with the South Koreans. This had the effect of creating a Chinese fifth column which successfully created confusion and disorganisation. Late on the evening of 23 April the advancing Chinese troops reached the perimeter of 3 RAR. BHQ was cut off from its four companies when the Chinese concentrated the focus of their attack on the US Sherman tanks. Accompanied by bugle calls and whistle blowing, wave after wave of Chinese troops assaulted the Australian positions, only to be repulsed repeatedly by the bayonet charges of members of 'B' Company.

Despite the gallant defence of their positions the overall situation of 3 RAR was precarious. It was possible for the Chinese to encircle the Australian positions by penetrating the flanks. Colonel Ferguson recognised the danger and ordered a withdrawal to a new position south of the one established originally. The withdrawal was not without difficulties as the Chinese now held the high ground west of the highway. A nearby river bed provided some cover from Chinese sniper fire.

Chinese troops began a sustained assault on the new positions occupied by 'D' Company. Artillery fire from the New Zealand 25-pounders directed on the ridges up which the Chinese troops were advancing proved effective, as did the crossfire of Saunders' 'C' Company. By early morning each of these sustained attacks had been thwarted. A new position, a mile or so south west of the scene of this fierce fighting, was established and each company was directed to withdraw to the new position when an orderly disengagement proved possible. In fulfilling these orders 'B' Company was involved in fierce hand to hand fighting that followed a bayonet charge. 'D' Company had the task of covering 'B' Company's withdrawal, but was subject to sustained Chinese mortar fire. An air strike requested by Captain Ryan resulted in the US Corsair aircraft dropping napalm on No.10 Platoon, 'D' Company, causing considerable damage.

By 2100 hours that evening the Australians had established themselves in their new position shared with the Middlesex Regiment. US troops had also arrived and took up positions for the advance to be made against a demoralised and weakened enemy. The enemy breakthrough was halted on Anzac Day.

The action of 3 RAR at Kapyong delayed the Chinese advance by at least 24 hours. This was to prove sufficient for the UN forces to retire to prepared positions north of Seoul from which the UN counter-offensive pushed the Chinese forces back across the 38th Parallel in late May 1951. Although 3 RAR was awarded a US Presidential Citation the cost had been high, with 31 killed and 59 wounded. Kapyong was the last battle that involved the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade, and 3 RAR then became part of the 1st Commonwealth Division.

Saunders' 'C' Company was subsequently involved in the savage fighting to secure Hill 317 and a mountain called the 'Hinge', which were important features of the Chinese defensive line.

In October 1951 Saunders was posted back to Australia and was stationed at Puckapunyal to train members of 2 RAR for service in Korea. He was later assigned the task of training National Servicemen, a task he did not enjoy for he queried the value of the training scheme. On 4 October 1954 Saunders resigned from the Australian Army.

So concluded the army career of one of the most colourful soldiers who ever served in the Australian Army. Those who served under him would never have regarded Saunders as a 'misfit', for he was revered and respected both as a man and as a professional. One of Saunders' prime qualities was that he understood the art of leadership. He led by example and would never ask his troops to perform a task he would not undertake himself. He contributed significantly to developing the motto of 'Duty First' of the Royal Australian Regiment.

Reg Saunders was an Aboriginal warrior who had never learned to throw a boomerang.¹⁹ He was a soldier of rare ability, more comfortable as a warrior when using a rifle or tommy gun. He regarded himself an Australian and, in serving his country with distinction, has been assured a place in the annals of the Australian Army's history.

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¹⁹ Ibid.21.