

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Major General Cecil Arthur CALLAGHAN, CB, CMG, DSO, VD

(1890-1967)

Cecil Callaghan enlisted as a citizen soldier in the Australian Field Artillery in 1910 and was commissioned the following year. On 18 August 1914, he transferred to the AIF and embarked for the Middle East as a captain in the 1st Australian Field Artillery Brigade (FAB). He landed at Gallipoli on 25 April and for his actions on 12 July 1915 as a forward observer he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. In October, he went to Egypt for a month to organise a 5 inch howitzer battery and in December participated in the evacuation from the Gallipoli peninsula. Transferred to 5th Division Artillery in Egypt, he was promoted major to command the 25th Howitzer Brigade in March 1916.

Moving to France in June, Callaghan was posted next month to the 13th FAB as a battery commander. On the Somme and in the Ypres sector (Belgium), his unit performed outstandingly in 1917, despite suffering more casualties than other brigades of the division. In March 1918, he was promoted temporary lieutenant colonel and placed in command of the 4th FAB, 2nd Division Artillery. After serving in June as a liaison officer with French troops at Villers-Bretonneux, in the final advances (August to November) he 'commanded his brigade with marked success'. Appointed CMG and to the French *Legion d'honneur* in 1919, Callaghan was mentioned in dispatches four times. He sailed for Australia in July and his AIF appointment was terminated on 22 January 1920.

Resuming his civilian occupation and Militia service, Callaghan had charge of the 3rd (1920-21) and 7th (1921-26) FABs. On 1 May 1926, he was promoted temporary colonel and appointed CRA 2nd Divisional under Major General H. G. Bennett. A substantive colonel from 1929, Callaghan commanded 8th Infantry Brigade in 1934-38. He was appointed Brigadier, Royal Australian Artillery, Eastern Command in November 1939. On 1 July 1940 he was appointed CRA 8th Division; in September Bennett again became his immediate superior. Callaghan arrived in Singapore to assume his duties in August 1941 when the division minus was committed to the Far East.

In November – December he administered command of the division while Bennett acquainted himself with AIF operations in the Middle East. The Japanese landed at Kota Bharu, Malaya, on 8 December. To meet a possible threat to Endau, Callaghan altered the dispositions of the Australian units. On his return, Bennett strongly disapproved of the changes and ordered a resumption of the previous positions. Throughout the fighting in Malaya, Callaghan's regiments gave fine support to the infantry. Nonetheless, the situation deteriorated so rapidly that on 15 February 1942 Lieutenant General A. E. Percival, British C-in-C, surrendered. Bennett called on Callaghan, who was weak from a recent attack of malaria, and informed him of his determination to escape and handed over the division to him.

Callaghan did not approve of Bennett's decision. Next day, when Bennett's disappearance came to his attention, Percival appointed Callaghan to command the AIF in Malaya and promoted him temporary major general. Callaghan did all he could to raise morale and alleviate the appalling conditions which his men endured in Changi prisoner-of-war camp. Despite the 'starvation' diet, he managed to set aside a three day supply of rations as a reserve for the soldiers. He insisted that discipline be maintained whether in regard to smart turnouts or punctilious saluting. Percival said of him; 'A more loyal and courageous man I never met... he bore uncomplainingly his own sufferings.'

In August, Callaghan and other senior officers were moved to Formosa (Taiwan). There, in Karenko camp, he was beaten by the Japanese and suffered from dysentery and malaria; his weight dropped from 85.3 kg to 53.1 kg. In April 1943, he was shifted to Tamasata and then Shirakawa camp. In October 1944, he was flown to Japan and then to Manchuria. He was freed by the Russians at Mukden in August 1945.

Mentioned in dispatches and appointed CB in 1946 for his leadership and devotion to duty while a prisoner-of-war, Callaghan was appointed major general in 1947 (with effect from 1 September 1942) and placed on the Retired List on 10 April.

He died, unmarried, on 1 January 1967 at Gordon and was cremated with Methodist forms. The 8th Division Association honoured him with a memorial service.

Sources: Ralph Sutton, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 13, p.337-338.

Ralph Sutton, Obituary, the Journal of the Royal United Service Institution, 1968 (pp.35-38, 49); D. Horner, *The Gunners. A History of Australian Artillery*, pp.175, 194, 196, 220, 230, 299-300.

For more information follow this link: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/callaghan-cecil-arthur-9662>