

# Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

## Lieutenant Sir Arthur Roden CUTLER, VC, AK, KCMG, KCVO, CBE (1916-2002)

Roden Cutler was born at Manly on 24 May 1916, the eldest son of Arthur, a travelling salesman, and Ruby Cutler, nee Pope. He was educated at Sydney High School and the University of Sydney where he studied economics. He joined the Sydney University Regiment and transferred to its field artillery battery in 1939 where he was gazetted as a lieutenant in the same year.

When WWII was declared, Cutler and his colleagues encouraged many from 118th Field Battery, 18th Field Brigade, to volunteer for service with the 2/5th Field Regiment. Cutler was 'A' Section Commander (of two guns) when his regiment sailed for the Middle East on 20 October 1940. On 8 June 1941, the 2/5th deployed with the 7th Division and some British and Free French units into Vichy Lebanon and Syria. Cutler was Wagon Lines Officer with 9th Battery and was directed to establish an observation post with Captain 'Joe' Clark on 17 June at Merdjayoun. He took over when Clark was mortally wounded. Nineteen days of furious action later Roden had distinguished himself and nearly succumbed to serious wounds.

His citation read, in part:

*“For conspicuous and sustained gallantry and for outstanding bravery during the bitter fighting at Merdjayoun supporting the infantry attack. He established his Observation Post (OP) ahead of the infantry and in the fighting that followed his Bren gunner was killed and Cutler and another man manned the Bren gun and an anti-tank rifle and fought back, driving the enemy infantry away. He had been ordered to establish his OP to register the only road by which enemy transport could enter the town. An enemy attack was imminent and he was in danger of being cut off. Nevertheless he registered his battery on the road and enemy posts. He was forced to go to ground but at night made his way back through enemy lines. On 23 June he was in charge of a 25 pounder sent forward to silence an anti-tank gun and post. This he did and next morning Merdjayoun was captured. Later at Damour on 6 July when our infantry were pinned down by heavy fire, Lieutenant Cutler regardless of all danger went to bring a telephone line to his OP when he was seriously wounded. 26 hours elapsed before rescue necessitating amputation of his leg. Throughout the campaign this officer's courage was unparalleled and his work was a big factor in the capture of Merdjayoun”.*

He was lucky to survive and made a good recovery at the 2/1st Australian General Hospital in Gaza. He returned to Australia on the *Oranje* and heard of his award of the Victoria Cross in a news broadcast on board. He received his award from another VC recipient, the Governor General, Lord Gowrie, on 11 June 1942 at Admiralty House, Sydney.

When demobilised he first became State Secretary of the Returned Services League and next entered the Commonwealth Public Service as Assistant Deputy Director of the National Security Service and later as Deputy Commissioner of the Repatriation Department. He joined the Department of External Affairs and between 1945 and 1966 held a series of appointments as high commissioner or ambassador to several countries.

In 1966, Cutler was appointed Governor of New South Wales, an appointment he held for the next 15 years. He popularised the role of governor without compromising its dignity. He and his wife visited nearly every town in NSW at least twice in his tenure and every politician envied the high esteem in which he was held by people from all walks of life. They visited schools, clubs and institutions of all kinds, and met with an enormous number of people. The more formal occasions required stature and presence acquired during his diplomatic career. He gave them a sense of occasion, and he was equal to any situation. Cutler believed that a constitutional monarchy brought stability, continuity and tradition to his country.

Cutler was Honorary Colonel of the Sydney University Regiment and the Royal New South Wales Regiment, Honorary Air Commodore of the Royal Australian Air Force, and was Overseas Vice Chairman and Deputy President of the VC and GC Association from 1986–91. On retiring as governor, he was appointed Chairman of the State Bank of New South Wales from 1981 to 1986. He cooperated with novelist Colleen McCullough to produce a biography in 1998.

As the Regiment's only VC recipient, Cutler accompanied the Queen and Captain General of the Regiment in officially opening the Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery Memorial on Mt Pleasant in 1977. Whitelaw said of Cutler, that: 'No one but Sir Roden could have carried out that role on behalf of all Australian Gunners with greater style and certainty'. On Sunday 2 December 1990, he also formally opened the Royal Australian Artillery National Museum at North Fort.

In 1946, he married Helen Morris, who died in 1990, and they had four sons: Richard, Anthony, Mark and David. He later married Joan Goodwin.

Cutler died after a long illness on 21 February 2002 at Sydney. On 28 February, he was given a State funeral and private interment commemorated at St Andrew's Cathedral. The centre of Sydney was at a standstill as thousands paid their respects. At South Head Cemetery, 7th Field Regiment fired a 19 Gun salute as the casket of the Royal Regiment of Australian Artillery's greatest son was laid to rest. Official mourners were the Chiefs of the Defence Forces, Ted Kenna and Keith Payne, the last surviving Australian Victoria Cross holders. It was the biggest military funeral in Sydney since that of Lieutenant General Sir Leslie Morshead in 1959, and the Regiment spared no effort to make it a grand, solemn and fitting spectacle worthy of a great Australian.

Sources: J. Whitelaw, *Gunfire*, Issue 2/2002, p.3; Alan H. Smith, *Cannonball, Journal of the Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company*, No. 47, June, 2002, pp. 3-5; C. McCullough, *Roden Cutler, VC – The Biography*, Random House, 1998; extracts from eulogies by Norman Tinkler, former major, John Firth, former captain, Peter Gibson, former lieutenant and gun sergeant of 25 pounder A-1, all with Cutler in Syria; David Wood, former lieutenant and friend from SUR days.