

# Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

## Major General John William Alexander O'BRIEN, DSO, ED

(1908-1980)

In August 1928, John O'Brien, an engineer by profession, was commissioned lieutenant in the 2nd Artillery Survey Company, Militia. He was acting-adjutant (1932-36) of the 10th Field Brigade and later a battery commander. Promoted major in 1937, he transferred to Army Headquarters in September 1939 as Deputy Assistant Director of Artillery.

O'Brien joined the AIF on 1 May 1940 and was posted to the 2/7th Field Regiment as second-in-command. In Palestine on 5 March 1941 he was promoted lieutenant colonel and appointed to command the 2/5th Field Regiment. His military and engineering experience and his 'almost youthful dash and enthusiasm', won him the respect of the regiment. He led the 2/5th throughout the Syrian campaign during which he repeatedly came under mortar and sniper fire. For his 'courage, driving power and relentless energy' he was awarded the DSO and mentioned in dispatches.

Returning to Melbourne, O'Brien was promoted brigadier in April 1942 and appointed Director of Artillery in the following month. He was made Deputy Master-General of the Ordnance (army equipment) in January 1943. His role was to manage the acquisition and trial of military equipment, including the short 25-pounder field gun, an adaptation which he had suggested when director of artillery. He also provided a link between the army's materiel requirements and the manufacturers who supplied them. With his flair for administration, it 'was as if he sat at the centre of an enormous web that covered businessmen, public servants and politicians'. In 1944, he was on special duty in the United Kingdom and United States, and visited the Pacific, North West Europe, Italian and Burma war zones.

O'Brien led the Australian Scientific Mission to Japan (1945-46) and headed (1945-51) the Science and Technology Division of General Douglas MacArthur's staff in Tokyo. In 1948-49, he presided over an American war crimes tribunal which acquitted Admiral Soemu Toyoda, C-in-C of the Japanese Navy. The trial lasted nine months and was concerned with command responsibilities at the highest level. He wrote *Guns and Gunners* (Sydney, 1950), a history of his old regiment. He transferred to the Reserve of Officers while acting as Australia's supply and defence production representative in Washington (1951-54). In both Washington and Tokyo posts he was 'frustrated by bureaucratic wrangling'.

In 1955 he returned to civilian life. He died on 27 May 1980 at Darlinghurst and was buried in South Head cemetery; his wife, son and daughter survived him.

A.J. Sweeting, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 15, p.510-11. *Australian Gunner*, May, 1981, p. 9; Letter, F K Bray, Mayor, Woollahra Municipal Council to R. J. Ellicott, QC, MP, dated 3 August 1977.

For more information follow this link: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/obrien-john-william-alexander-11275>