

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Brigadier Harry Blamyre SEWELL, MC

(1896-1943)

Jan Sewell was born in Bendigo, Victoria, on 30 November 1896, the second of a family of three. His father (of the same name) and mother Carol Olivia Lee, came from Northern Ireland and Cumberland respectively, and had a colourful history. Harry inherited his Celtic complexion and some well-known character traits as a result. His 'Ginger' nickname eventually became 'Jan'. He was four years of age when his father died, and the family moved to Kew, a Melbourne suburb. He was educated at Trinity Grammar, played competitive sports and was a sergeant in the Cadet Corps.

In 1914, he was accepted for a shortened course at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, and two years later was posted to 8th Australian Field Artillery Brigade, then in France. In 1917, while manning an OP for a gun group, communications broke down so Sewell went forward to reconnoitre and get in touch with the infantry. The battalion commander told him that the infantry were consolidating their line except at one point where they were being held up by machine guns. He took the message back to the guns and the post was bombarded and captured shortly afterwards by the infantry. Jan was awarded the Military Cross for his exploits. He ended the war as Staff Officer for Reconnaissance on HQ Australian Corps. He returned to Australia in 1919 and resumed a peacetime career with the Permanent Military Forces. He married Lillian Crowther in 1922, and they had two sons.

Between the wars Captain Sewell's most important post was his appointment from 1931 to 1937 as OC of 1st Field Cadre, RAA (the restricted Depression era nomenclature of 'A' Battery). His influence on 'A' Battery through its link to RMC and the School of Artillery at South Head was a unique and positive one. His ability and untiring enthusiasm set its mark on the battery, regarded as the elite element of the Permanent Military Forces. He also contributed substantially to the mechanisation of the artillery and the attraction of pre-war Tattoos. His achievements in these matters are all the more meritorious for being attained at times of great financial stringency during the Depression.

After secondment and training with the Royal Artillery in 1937-39 he was posted to the School of Artillery as Chief Instructor. Many of those who passed through his hands during this time and later when he was CO of the School of Artillery in 1940 were to form the nucleus of Gunner officers who manned the four original AIF divisional artilleries of WWII. As a result of his uncompromising approach to standards of gunnery he was respectfully known as 'God' in military circles. During course shooting he extracted every ounce of training value from each round. His insistence on correctness did not earn him any friends in some circles but many officers were all the better gunners for it.

Thus, when he was promoted lieutenant colonel and CO of the 2/14th Field Regiment, a unit of the 8th Division, it was known as 'God's Chosen'. His early influence initiated the high standards and traditions of the 2/14th which were to be maintained within the unit for the five

years of its existence. He was instrumental in restructuring the colour patch for his first regimental command to give it a distinctive 'break' through the body of the oval of the 8th Division patch.

In April 1941, Sewell was promoted brigadier and took command of 2/1st Anti-Aircraft Brigade, I Australian Corps in the Middle East, serving in the Delta and at Tobruk, and was appointed CCRA (AA) soon afterwards. When I Corps returned to Australia he went north, first to Darwin to reorganise the AA defences, thence to the Atherton tableland with First Army HQ. He next went to Port Moresby (New Guinea) as CCRA New Guinea Force for two years. Here he was able to influence the campaigns towards the coast and in the Markham Valley using amphibiously landed guns and air-lifted guns to support the infantry. It was here that he began to feel the debilitating effects of tropical service. On home leave in June 1943 he was thin and listless, ('most unlike him", noted his son Bob). He was suffering the effects of malaria. On return to New Guinea a couple of months later he was most unwell, and died from Scrub Typhus on 5 October 1943 and was buried at Bomana Cemetery.

Lieutenant General Lavarack would have trusted him with a division and he certainly had Blamey's confidence. According to his contemporaries, Sewell was not a man of great warmth or one to suffer fools gladly. He was reserved by nature but had a dry sense of humour and enjoyed a party and a few drinks. His sons remembered a devoted father and his very supportive and much loved wife Lillian.

Sources: H. M. Ponsford, *'The Drum', 2/14 Field Regiment Newsletter, The Founding CO, August 1984, p.7*; Robert Sewell, *'The Drum', A Son's Recollections*, (October 1999), p.4; Alan H. Smith, *Cannonball, Journal of the Royal Australian Artillery Company, No. 44, p.13-15*.