

David Murdoch

In early 1966, the names of eight local servicemen who lost their lives during the Second World War were honoured with street names in a newly established estate within Altona North. One of these was Murdoch Court, which runs north from Harris Street and ends just before the West Gate Freeway. It was named so to acknowledge the ultimate sacrifice given by Altona resident, Private David Murdoch.

David Murdoch was born on 13 January 1923, in the Melbourne suburb of Carlton, to James Murdoch and Elizabeth Reid Murdoch (nee Murdoch). David's parents and elder sister, Isabella, had migrated from Scotland, via London, in August 1921 aboard the *SS Euripides*¹.

Shortly after David's birth, the Murdoch family moved to the small seaside suburb of Altona, where they first settled in Blyth Street. Both James and Elizabeth Murdoch served in World War 1, James within the British Army and Elizabeth, together with her sister Mary, within the nursing corp. Shortly afterwards the Murdoch family moved to Altona, and their third child, Janet, was born.

The family resided in Blyth Street for about eight years before moving to Romawi Street, then Sargood Street in about 1939, and finally Pier Street in about 1942. These residences would have ensured that they were close to their Baptist church and the Altona Primary school. We do not know when David finished his schooling, but in these years, it was usually after completing year eight. However, we do know that he soon took up employment within the furniture trade as a French Polisher². Before the commencement of World War 2, the Murdoch family had settled into a very different, yet new and exciting way of life in Australia, especially when compared to what they would have had in Scotland. Unfortunately, life was about to change dramatically for the family.

In October 1941, David Murdoch enlisted into the Citizen Military Force or Militia³ and was assigned to the 32 Battalion, which was stationed on the Mornington Peninsula at Mt Martha. With Japan's entry into the Second World War, the 5, 6, 14 and 32, Battalions were called up and placed on defensive duties at Westernport and Port Phillip Bay. The 14 Battalion was sent to the Bellarine Peninsula, on the western side of Port Phillip Bay and spread out between Grovedale and Mt Duneed. The 32 Battalion remained on the Mornington Peninsula.

This was the beginning of the 14/32's history of garrison work. However, the threat of Melbourne being invaded by the Japanese was deemed minimal, with other parts of Australia then considered to be at a greater risk. So, in August 1942, the 14 and 32 Battalions were transferred to Western Australia, specifically to the Geraldton area. In September 1942, the 14 and 32 Battalions merged and became the 14/32 Infantry Battalion. Private David Murdoch was assigned to this new merged battalion. In February 1943, the newly combined 14/32 returned to the eastern seaboard of Australia and underwent amphibious landing⁴ and jungle warfare training on the Atherton Tablelands in Queensland.

¹ During World War 1, the Euripidis had been utilized as a troop transport ship. Following the end of the war, it reverted back to a passenger liner.

² French polishers use traditional skills to treat wood, as well as restore furniture and items like staircases, doors, and musical instruments.

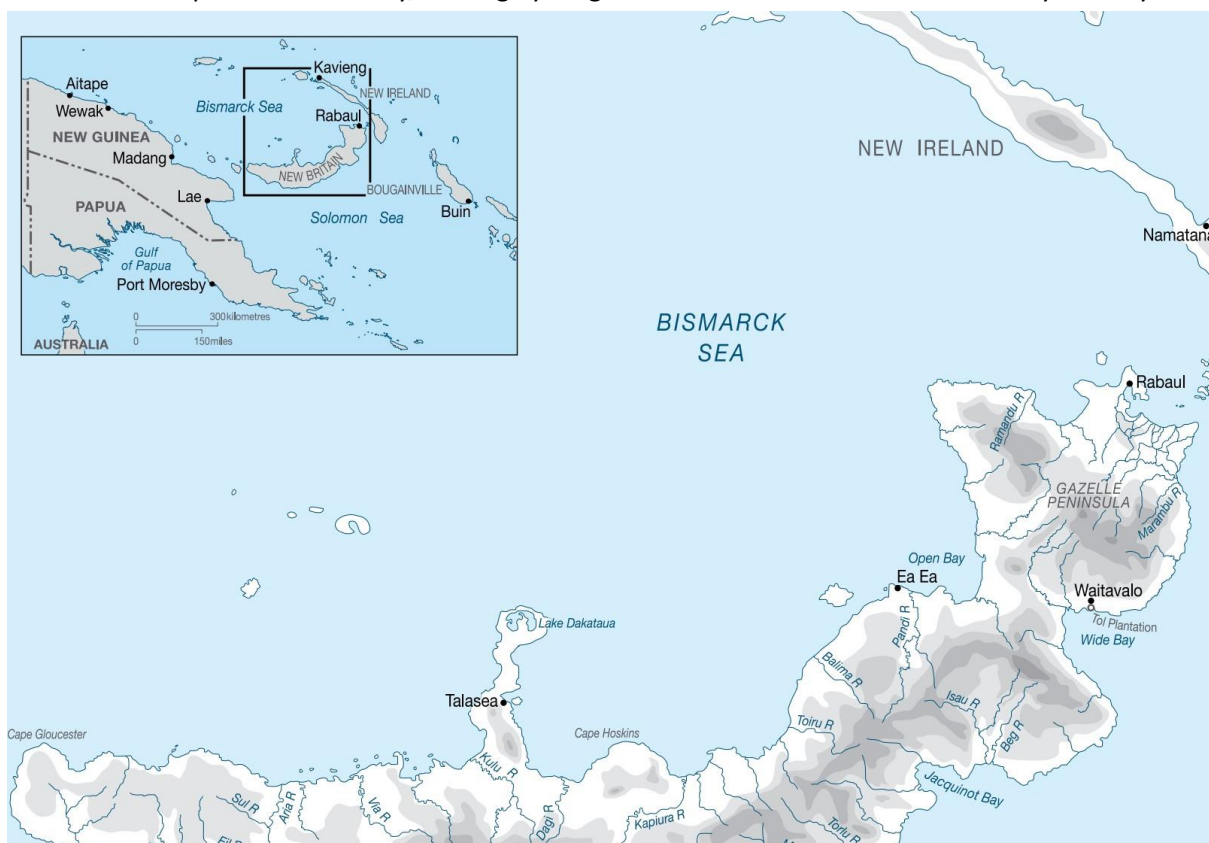
³ Following the outbreak of the war, on 5 September 1939, the government's immediate response was to announce that it would begin calling up 10,000 militiamen at a time. This decision was made in order to provide sixteen days of continuous service manning guard posts at selected points around Australia.

⁴ An Amphibious Landing is - a military action of coordinated land, sea, and air forces organized for an invasion.

In April 1943, the 14/32, previously a Militia Force, was transferred into the Australian Imperial Force, and could now be employed overseas as, and wherever, it was needed. This soon led to the members of the battalion being assigned into their first overseas operation. At the start of July, this infantry battalion embarked from Cairns for New Guinea and, after reaching Port Moresby, was flown to the Buna-Gona⁵ area. It was just prior to this that David's father, James, passed away at the considered young age of 49. This left Elizabeth Murdoch at home with her two daughters and her son away fighting in New Guinea.

The 14/32 ultimately spent over a year conducting garrison duties and long-range coastal patrols as far north as Nassau Baying. During early November 1943, Private Murdoch was diagnosed with having dengue fever and was transferred back to the 106 Australian Casualty Clearing Station, located at Oro Bay in New Guinea, about 24 km from Buna. By January 1944, he had been transferred back to Brisbane to recover. In April 1944, having now recovered from his illness, Private Murdoch rejoined his battalion in New Guinea, who were still undertaking patrols along northeast coast of New Guinea at Buna. The 14/32 remained in the Buna area until the end of October 1944. On 4 November 1944, the 14/32 Infantry Battalion carried out an amphibious landing at Jacquinot Bay on the island of New Britain⁶.

In late December, two companies from the 14/32 Battalion were sent east from Cutarp to Sampun, on the southern expanse of Wide Bay, moving by barge. These forces were bolstered in early January with



The island of New Britain, part of Papua New Guinea

the arrival of the remaining two companies of the 14/32 Battalion, along with a troop of artillery from the 2/14 Field Regiment. Between late January and early February 1945, they advanced eastwards

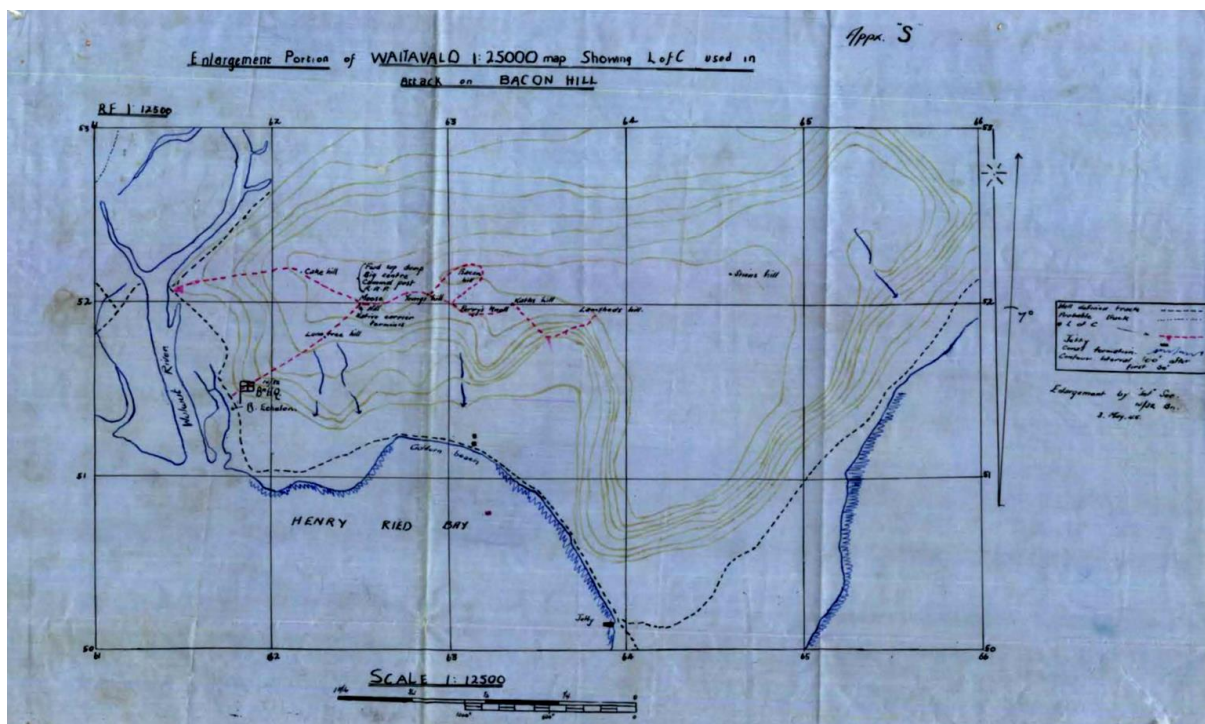
⁵ This is a 25 km stretch of the northeast coast of New Guinea with Gona to the west, Buna to the east, and Sanananda–Giruwa in the centre. Roughly 160 km northeast of Port Moresby.

⁶ New Britain is the largest island in the Bismarck Archipelago, part of the Islands Region of Papua New Guinea, and sits to the northeast of Papua New Guinea.

along the southern coast of New Britain towards Milim, where they established a patrol base with the intention of fanning out towards Henry Reid Bay. In mid-February, the two forces clashed for the first time in the area, but the Japanese were unable to check the Australian advance. Boomerang fighters and Beaufort fighter-bombers attacked Japanese positions to the north of Karlai Plantation on 15 February, and subsequently, the 14/32 took the position unopposed as the Japanese defenders withdrew under heavy artillery fire.

In early March, the Australian high command ordered an advance towards the coconut plantations at Waitavolo and Tol on the northern edge of Henry Reid Bay. Following a crossing of the Wulwut River with engineer support, the 14/32 Battalion moved to the frontline and from 5 March, heavy fighting followed. Over the course of six weeks, Australians soldiers reduced the fortified Japanese positions on Mount Sugi along a series of ridges west of the river and overlooking the bay.

These hills were named 'Lone Tree', 'Bacon', 'Cake', 'Young', 'Perry's', 'Kath's' and 'Moose', and were defended by a series of pillboxes, supported by mortars and machine guns. The most significant action was fought around Bacon Hill, which was captured on 18 March by the 14/32 Battalion. The fighting during this period was made more difficult by heavy rains. The terrain had become seas of mud, proving to be a major hurdle for both infantrymen climbing the steep slopes and soldiers relying on the jeep tracks below to transport supplies between camps. It was during this intensive six-week battle, on 17 March, that Private David Murdoch lost his life, being killed in action. The Battalion unit diary notes the events of the 17 March 1945.



Map of Waitavolo, from 14/32 Battalion unit diary, March 1945, p 69

Heavy rains had fallen throughout the night and the patrols, that included Private Murdoch, came under constant fire from enemy 50mm mortar and rifle fire. At first light, several of the Australian patrols were observed and were pinned down by enemy fire but were later extricated and moved back to safer ground. Australian patrols continued to advance and locate enemy positions throughout the day and short battles took place on several of the key ridges and hills. It appears that up until

mid-afternoon, the enemy seemed to have suffered considerable losses whilst the Australians only encountered injuries. From about 2.30pm until nightfall, both sides began to suffer more losses and injuries, as numerous skirmishes took place across the key positions across the Waitavolo plantation. On 17 March, the Australians suffered considerable casualties with six killed in action and seventeen wounded. Tragically, Private David Murdoch was one of the six fallen soldiers. Initially, all those killed in the battle were buried on the site of Waitavolo plantation, but they were later exhumed and moved to the war cemetery at Rabaul, on the island of New Britain. In the span of less than two years, the Murdoch family had lost a devoted husband and father, and now a brave son and brother.

Shortly after the end of World War Two, Elizabeth Reid Murdoch and her eldest daughter, Isabella, moved from Altona to reside in Elsternwick. The youngest Murdoch daughter, Janet, married and remained living in the Altona area until her death in 2006. The naming of Murdoch Court is a fitting tribute to a courageous serviceman who made the ultimate sacrifice for his country, and his name and deeds will live long through this recognition.



Rabaul War Cemetery, where Private David Murdoch is interred.



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