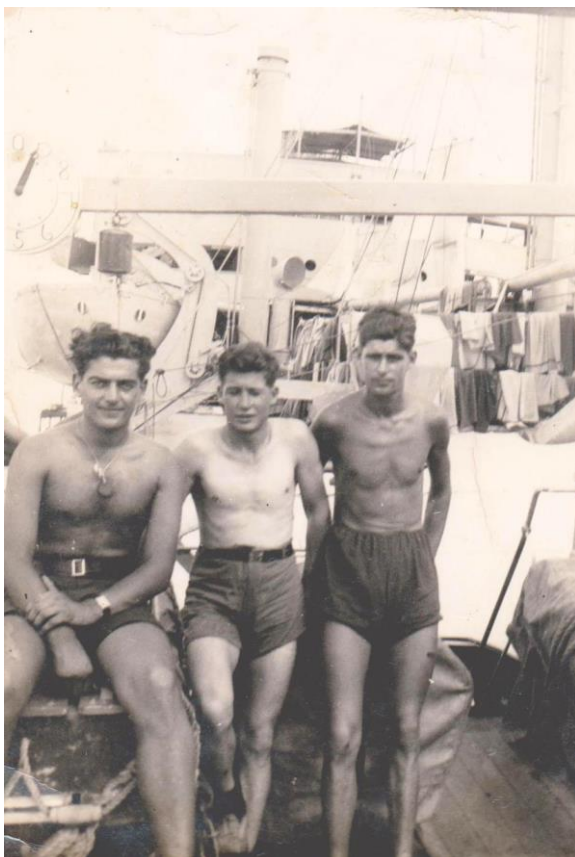


Charlie Gilbert VX1077 War Service WWII



Charlie Gilbert VX1077 in 1940

Charlie Gilbert VX1077 was born 31 August, 1917 in London to Charles 'Web' Gilbert sculptor and official WWI Australian war artist. He grew up in Melbourne through the Great Depression and left home early 16 years of age. There was little work about through those years so he was among the first to join up. C.W. Gilbert was an original Thirty Niner, he served from 17th November 1939 to 6th September 1945. He trained at Puckapunyal, Victoria, specialising in Morse code and became a specialist signaller for the 2/2nd Field Regiment of the 6th Australian Division. He embarked on April 14th, 1940 from Port Melbourne on "Dunera".



Charlie Gilbert on the left, aboard the Dunera bound for the middle East.

One of Mary Gilbert's (nee Quennell) described him as just like Tarzan, but better looking!

The Middle East

Following disembarkation at Egypt, he made visits to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The troops exercised with hardened British regulars and enjoyed the display of the Black Watch pipes and drums. Pipe music was an abiding interest for him to the end of his days and it was played at his funeral service. He did more signals training at Nathanya, where they were bombed by the Italians.



In Signals training school in the Middle East. He was described as an average student, but "a good type - pleasant personality"

Bardia - Tobruk

In the Middle East Major-General Iven Mackay "Ivan the Terrible" controlled the plan of attack against the heavily fortified Italian garrison town of Bardia. This was the Australian forces first action since the end of WWI. It called for the 16th Brigade (2/1st, 2/2nd and 2/3rd battalions) to cross the anti-tank ditch, blow gaps in the wire and take the posts west of Bardia. At daylight the tanks and the 2/5th and a Battalion of the 17th Brigade would follow. The third battalion of the 17th Brigade, the 2/6th, was to create a diversion at the southern end of the objective. The 19th Brigade (2/4th, 2/8th and 2/11th Battalions) was held in reserve in Alexandria.

In January 1941 the major assault began and the troops moved out. At 5.30 am the guns opened fire and the two leading companies advanced. In under 30 minutes the infantry had gone through the ditch and the wire. The Italian line was already breached. The men were heavily laden with weapons, tools, ammunition and three day's rations. They were dressed in greatcoats and leather jackets over their uniforms. The Italians at some posts and bunkers fought with determination but elsewhere they surrendered with little resistance. At the end of the day the Australians were in a position to encircle Bardia the next morning. A battalion and a troop of tanks cleared the area south of the town and Charlie with the 2/2nd Battalion entered the lower town. The 2/3rd Battalion entered upper Bardia and the fortress had been cut in two. The enemy occupied an area only about one mile deep by two miles wide and the 2/6th Battalion pressed forward. The Italian commander hoisted the white flag. The allied forces had taken the 40,000 prisoners and had captured about 500 field and anti-tank guns, about 120 light tanks and 700 motor vehicles. The Australian losses totalled 130 killed and 326 wounded.



A small proportion of the prisoners captured after the battle for Bardia. Sergeant Charles Gilbert on the right

Military Medal

L/Sgt C. Gilbert 2/2nd Fd. Regt. was awarded the Military Medal; his citation reads:-

During the two days of the battle for BARDIA, 3 & 4 Jan 41 this N.C.O. was responsible for the maintenance of the telephone line to the forward O.P. Despite heavy shell and machine gun fire he personally kept the line repaired. On the first day these were cut about 30 times, and on every occasion, Sgt. GILBERT repaired the line himself. His courage was in keeping with the highest traditions of signalers, and his action in maintaining communications kept the battery in action.

I.G. Mackay – Major General G.O.C 6 Aust. Div. wrote on 16 March, 1941:-

Dear Sergeant Gilbert

This is a short note to congratulate you most heartily upon the high honour which has recently been bestowed upon you by His Majesty, the King, in the award of the Military Medal. It is very pleasing to me and to your friends in G Division to know that your splendid service in the Cyrenaica Campaign has been thus rewarded. The Campaign itself has been unique in its success and the fact that you have won personal distinction as well will give you something to remember all your days with pride. I hope that you long continue your good service and that in the not too distant future we may bring the War to a victorious end. I.G. Mackay



Sergeant Gilbert operating the signals for the artillery in North Africa

Tobruk

The forces moved from Bardia to the Tobruk area. Tobruk is ten miles inland, and above an escarpment that rose 500 feet above sea level, ran the track from Capuzzo to El Adem, an airfield eight miles south of the Tobruk defences. The 7th Armoured Division advanced along the Capuzzo track, and the 6th Australian Division moved parallel to it along the main road. The campaign was going so well that the senior officers became worried by signs of what was described as a 'picnic spirit' and all troops were reminded of the realities of the situation and of certain indisciplines that were becoming evident. It should be noted that the men were living under extremely arduous conditions and were sleeping in holes dug in the stony ground.

In the nights preceding the attack on Tobruk, Australian infantry and engineers sent patrols forward to measure the anti-tank ditch, to explore for mines and booby traps and to mark the start line. Before dawn on 21 January the attack opened. Two brigades of the 6th Division had been in position outside the eastern half of the Tobruk perimeter and the armoured division lay across the roads leading west and south-west. The tanks and the entire 16th Brigade moved in the darkness close to a sector of the Italian line supported by an eighty-eight gun artillery barrage. The 2/2nd Battalion moved deep into enemy territory to capture the enemy's support guns.

Palestine - Syria 1941

In February 1941, Western Desert Force which had captured Cyrenaica and reached El Agheila on the border of Tripolitania was ordered onto the defensive while forces moved to Greece. Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Blarney (GOC AIF Middle East), perceiving that the Greece expedition would be hazardous, insisted that the contingent should be formed from his best trained troops. The battle hardened 6th Division was to be the first Australian division to move to Greece.



Ferrying supplies up the mountain tracks in Greece

The three Australian divisions in the Middle East in 1941 saw hard fighting. On May 31st 1941 Charlie arrived in Palestine and continued to train with his battalion, before travelling into the desert later that year. In order to prevent a concentrated axis offensive against the eastern flank in the Middle East, Syria was attacked on 8th June 1941. The 7th Australian Division (less the 18th Brigade in Tobruk) reinforced by units of the 6th Australian Division played a major part in the campaign which ended with an armistice on 12 July.

In early April 1941, the 6th Division was dispatched to Greece, where they fought a very brief campaign following the German invasion of that country in the middle of the month. Overwhelmed, the Allied forces were forced back over the course of several weeks during which the 2/6th took part in several desperate rearguard actions and withdrawals during which the battalion lost 28 men killed and 43 wounded. Finally, they were evacuated by sea at the end of the month, but amidst the confusion a large of the battalion's personnel – 217 personnel from all ranks – were captured, while others were landed on Crete, instead of Alexandria in Egypt, after the ship on which they were sailing, the *Costa Rica*, was sunk. On Crete, 13 officers and 202 other ranks from the 2/6th were organised into a 17th Brigade composite battalion along with men from the brigade's other battalions less the 2/7th. They subsequently fought unsuccessfully to repulse the German invasion that came in May, after which many more became prisoners of war.

Charlie Gilbert was captured at one point by German troops. It was short lived because the Germans temporarily withdrew but one of the only anecdotes that he told after the war relates to it. Charlie had serious diarrhoea at the time, and though he was under close guard he stood up to go to find a place to relieve himself. As he said, he was not going to shit on his comrades. The German guard ordered him at gunpoint to climb a flagpole and set a dog at the foot of the flagpole to prevent him coming down. Although he strove to forgive and forget after the war, his intense dislike of Germans persisted until the day he died.

The 6th Division's campaign in Greece had ended badly, the troops having to withdraw. Many were evacuated on the last destroyer, dodging countless bombs. Charlie reported that he was in fact evacuated by submarine which was incredibly overcrowded. The only place that he could be lodged was in an empty torpedo tube. For a man who had a strong dislike of small spaces this must have been a torment. They arrived safely back at Alexandria. In 1941 Major General Iven Mackay relinquished command of the 6th Division.

Ceylon - Australia

At the conclusion of the Africa Campaign (Africa Star) the Western Desert Australian Forces were recalled to help fight the war in the Pacific. The 2/2nd departed Egypt, then onto Ceylon, before returning to Australia after two and a half years overseas. Charles sister introduced him to Mary Quennell, a beautiful, intelligent woman who captured his heart. He took part in the AIF March through Melbourne in August 1942 and leave reached its end. In October he attended Officer training to become a Lieutenant.



AIF March through Melbourne in August 1942

Leave home again to Melbourne where he married Mary on 2nd April, 1943 (to avoid April Fools' Day!). Charlie wore his army uniform; Mary was in a lacey wedding dress with a long train and carried a bouquet of gardenias. Their hearts fell when he was sent to undertake jungle warfare training in Queensland on the Atherton Tablelands and his battalion was assigned to fight the Japanese in the Pacific.



Charlie and Mary Gilbert April 1943

Kokoda Track – Black Cat Trail

When Blamey relinquished command of New Guinea Force on 30 January 1943, he handed over to now Lieutenant General Iven Mackay. Mackay's watch saw the end of the fighting at Buna and the struggle at Wau. Mackay returned to command of the Second army at Parramatta, New South Wales on 21 May 1943, but on 28 August 1944 he once again assumed command of New Guinea Force.

Charlie served in the New Guinea campaigns of 1942-1945. He was twice assigned to New Guinea (Pacific Star). First, he landed at Lae on the north coast to oppose the Japanese thrust that came over the Owen Stanley Ranges to Salamaua. The Japanese was repulsed by a force composed of Australians and New Guinea Volunteer Riflemen. Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels were the forces carriers and many of them died from exhaustion and the extreme cold. They battled in extremely harsh conditions along the Black Cat Trail and recaptured Salamaua in September 1943. Charlie fought along the Black Cat Trail and saw many terrible things happen that he seldom spoke about.

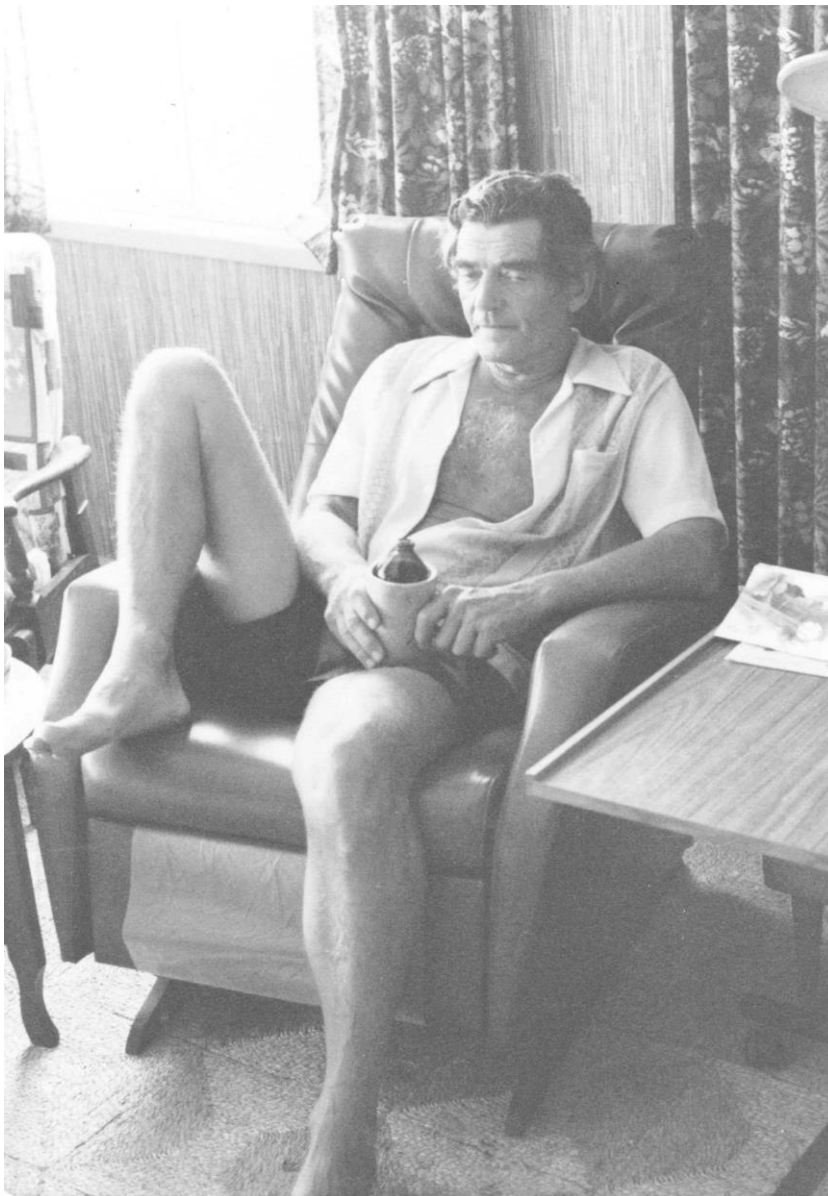
He was withdrawn to Australia, returning for a second time for the final New Guinea campaigns. Later in life he said at the time he dreaded going back with good reason. He was washed away down a fast-flowing river off the Black Cat Trail and lived in the jungle with the natives and contracted malaria. When found he rejoined his regiment – weighing 6 stone on his 5'11" frame.

Back in Australia Mary was pregnant with twins. Tragically they were still born - Mary grieved for them all her life. In despair, not knowing if Charlie was alive or dead, just having lost her twin boys, she recalled later that Charlie had organize the delivery of a large bunch of flowers. Clearly he had done this before he left for New Guinea, but Mary saw it a sign that he was alive.

He was repatriated to Australia in 1945. Wewak, the last of the Japanese strongholds, was eventually captured on the 11th May 1945. After the fall of Wewak, the Japanese retreated westward and by June were totally defeated. In hindsight the offensives had no bearing on the outcome of the war, and even at the time many soldiers resented the loss of lives in the unnecessary battles.

Charlie was discharged after 6 years in the Australian Infantry Forces in September 1945. He was awarded for his service with the Australian Army and issued with 1939/45 Star, Africa Star, Pacific Star, Defence Medal, War Medal 1939/45, Australia Service Medal 1939/45 and Returned from Active Service Badge. From the Greek Government he received: 1940-41 Greek Campaign Star and Greek 1940/45 War Medal.

Following his discharge Charlie trained as a painter and decorator. He and Mary had three children, Roderick, Steven and Morna. In 1961 they moved to the country for a healthier environment, arriving at the railway stop of Yarroweyah where they operated the general store for eight years. Charlie enjoyed RSL meetings with fellow returned soldiers who were farming under the Soldier Settlement Scheme. His main interest was fishing on the Murray River, it soothed his soul. Charlie fished and Mary painted to the end of their days by the sea at Keppel Sands in Queensland.



At peace in Keppel Sands 1980s