

Kenneth Ward

(NX127633)

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Who was Ken Ward and what was his connection to the Riverstone District? For this we rely on a report that appeared in the *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate* of 9 September 1942.

KILLED IN ACTION LIEUT.- COL. K. H. WARD

Lieut.-Col. Kenneth H. Ward, former commanding officer of the 20th Battalion (Parramatta), has been reported killed in action in New Guinea.

His wife, who is living at Chester Hill, received the official intimation on Friday. It is believed that he was killed while leading his men on a reconnaissance.

When he was appointed Lieut.-Col. four years ago, he was believed to be the youngest holder of that rank in the Australian military forces. Born at Balmain, 39 years ago, he later went with his parents to Riverstone, where the family lived for many years. He was educated at Marsden Park public school, and Parramatta High School, where a son, Paul, aged 13 is now a pupil.

He was married at Parramatta Methodist Church.

For several years he taught in the Presbyterian Church Sunday School at Riverstone.

His military career was particularly brilliant, beginning when he entered the 20th Battalion as a cadet, at the age of 16.

Eight months ago he handed over command of the battalion, when he proceeded for service in New Guinea.

Tributes to his qualities as a soldier come from men of the 20th Battalion- a sergeant who served under him for ten years, and from Private Harold Wilson, of Parramatta.

"As a soldier he was as hard as iron," the sergeant said. "He had no time for slackers, but he always had time for the man who tried, no matter how many times he failed. The person he drove the hardest in the battalion was himself."

Private Wilson said that, when the news reached the battalion, the men were paraded and stood in silence for two minutes in a tribute to the memory - their former commander.

"He was a great guy, tough perhaps, but a man we would have done anything for," he said.

Kenneth Harry Ward and his story was associated with the 53rd Infantry Battalion. The Australian War Memorial Records provide detail of his service and death :-

After the First World War the defence of the Australian mainland lay with the part time soldiers of the Citizens Military Force (CMF), also known as the Militia. The Militia was organized to maintain the

structure of the First AIF and kept the same numerical designations. The Militia units were distributed in the same areas in which the original AIF units were raised. Thus Sydney's 53rd Infantry Battalion was the "West Sydney Regiment". However, during the 1930s little was spent on defence and the Militia had few volunteers. In 1937 the 53rd merged with the 55th Infantry Battalion, forming the 55th/53rd Infantry Battalion.

In October 1941 the battalions were separated, which proved to be only a short-term measure, as in October the following year they merged again. The 55th/53rd had been camped at Bathurst but with the unlinking it was expected the 53rd would go to Darwin via Sydney. At the start of November the 53rd was reinforced with men from a number of other Militia units. In December, just before the battalion was to sail on the transport Aquitania, it also received 104 18-year-olds who had just been called up for duty.....

More surprises were to follow. While at sea the men learnt they were not going to Darwin but to Port Moresby in Papua. The Aquitania arrived in Moresby on 3 January 1942 and the 53rd, as part of the defence of Port Moresby, was assigned to the area of Boera, Napa Napa, and the Napa Napa Peninsula. This was the worst area in Moresby for malaria and the battalion suffered badly from the disease over following months.

While in Moresby the battalion members received minimal or no training, as the 53rd was mostly used for work parties. The battalion did not receive any major training until July, when B and C Companies were sent to the Kokoda area. B Company went to Koitaki and C Company went to Itiki, acting as reserve for the 39th Infantry Battalion moving to Kokoda.

On 10 August the 53rd was ordered to relieve the 39th at Uberi. C Company moved forward to Uberi and then went on to Kokoda. While at Uberi C Company was given eight new Bren guns but received only a few hours instruction and not even the chance to fire their weapons. Three days later, B Company reached Uberi and also received new weapons with minimal instruction. Meanwhile, the rest of the battalion was preparing to move up the trail.

In the book *The Retreat from Kokoda, the Australian Campaign in New Guinea 1942*, the details of the battle were described as follows:-

Ward, the Adjutant, Lieutenant R.L. Logan and a small guard party, went forward from Alola to take charge. They skirted the waterfall, climbed the hill and walked into an ambush set by the Japanese a few yards from the track junction above the Abuari Village. At 4.20 pm a runner, coming breathlessly up the Alola Spur to Brigade Headquarters imparted the startling tidings that Ward and Logan had been killed.

His mother had died in 1930 and the family had a plaque to Kenneth's memory attached her burial plot headstone in the Methodist Section of the Riverstone Cemetery. It reads

In Loving Memory of
LT COL KENNETH WARD
KILLED IN ACTION NEW GUINEA
27TH AUGUST 1942
AGED 39 YEARS.

Kenneth was survived by his wife Thelma and son Paul. According to an item in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 12 September 1942, *in civil life Kenneth was a clerk at the Registrar-General's Office.*