

THOMAS CURRIE (DIVER) DERRICK



PREMIER'S ANZAC SPIRIT SCHOOL PRIZE

By Elise Turtur
Roxby Downs Area School

“General Cosgrove, when asked in 2004 in an interview, who was the best soldier ever, he hesitated for a minute and then said, ‘Diver Derrick’.”

– Colin Stevens (member of the Semaphore Port Adelaide RSL)

Thomas Currie ‘Diver’ Derrick was born on March 20th 1914 in the Salvation Army Hospital in Medindie, Adelaide. He is the eldest son of father David Derrick, a labourer from Ireland, and mother Ada née Witcombe. Growing up, the Derrick family were not well off; Tom and his brothers and sisters often walked barefoot to and from primary school, the Sturt Street Public School in the city and Le Fevre Peninsula School in Port Adelaide (Australian Virtual War Memorial, n.d.). Quick-witted and keen on boxing, Aussie Rules football, cricket, and gambling, he left school as soon as he could in 1928 at age 14, and had a reputation for being a bit of a larrikin around the Port.

When the Great Depression hit Adelaide in 1929, Tom found himself working odd jobs such as selling newspapers, fixing bikes and working at the local bakery. In 1931, he and some of his closest mates got on their bikes and rode 225km all the way to Berri, on the Murray River, looking for work. Here he did a long period of time in the ‘susso’ camp, once living a week just on grapes. In late 1931, he was able to talk his way into work at a vineyard in Winkie, where he ended up working for nine years. He was given the nickname ‘Diver’ by his mates when he dived out of a boat to retrieve an oar (Walker, 2014).

Tom married long-time sweetheart Beryl Violet Leslie (Figure 1) on June 24th 1939, at St Laurence’s Catholic Church in North Adelaide, whom he had met seven years earlier at a dance. Being a newlywed, Tom now felt his life had a more serious purpose.

During his time away at war, Beryl walked to the local post office almost every day, hoping for news of her husband. In his letters, Tom would write many poems and he also collected butterflies from the different countries that he fought in (Walker, 2014).



Figure 1:
Mrs Beryl Derrick and Lieutenant Tom Derrick
Source: (Virtual War Memorial, n.d.)

It wasn't until the Fall of France in June of 1940 that Tom decided to join the war effort. He enlisted on the 5th of July 1940 (Figure 2) in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and reported for duty four days later (National Archives of Australia, n.d.). He undertook basic training at Woodside, and on the 17th of November 1940, his unit, the 2/48 Battalion, embarked Adelaide on the HMT Stratheden, arriving in the Middle East a month later.

CERTIFIED TRUE COPY
 I CERTIFY THAT THIS IS A TRUE COPY OF THE ORIGINAL OF WHICH IT PURPORTS TO BE A COPY, AND THAT I AM THE OFFICER HAVING THE CUSTODY OF THE ORIGINAL.
 Officer-in-Charge District Records Office (On Enlistment), Southern Command (4 M.D.)

B.122
F.200
L.5033

A.F. B.103.—1 (Adapted).

SERVICE AND CASUALTY FORM.

Army No. **52 7964**
 Unit **2/48 Bn** 2nd A.I.F.

Rank **Private** Christian Names **THOMAS CURRIE** Surname **DERRICK**
 (Block Capitals)

Date of Enlistment **5th July, 1940.** Marital Condition **Married**
 Place **WOODSIDE, S.A.** Next of Kin **Beryl Violet Derrick**
 Date of Birth **20th March, 1914.** Address of Next of Kin **BERRI, S.A.**
 Place of Birth **ADELAIDE, S.A.** Relationship **Wife**
 Trade or Occupation **Labourer**
 Religion **Church of England**

Medical Classification **Class I. Excellent** Identification—Colour of Hair **Dark** Eyes **Brown**
 (On Enlistment). Distinctive Marks **Tattoo marks on back of both fore-arms**

| REPORT. | | Record of all casualties regarding promotions (acting, temporary, local, or substantive), appointments, transfers, postings, attachments, etc., forfeiture of pay, wounds, accidents, admission to and discharge from Hospital, Casualty Clearing Stations, etc. Date of disembarkation and embarkation from a theatre of war (including furlough, etc.). | Date of Casualty. | Place of Casualty. | Authority W.2011, B.2060, or other Document. | Signature of Officer Certifying Correctness of Entries. |
|----------|---------------------|---|-------------------|--------------------|--|---|
| Date. | From whom Received. | | | | | |
| 9.7.40 | W.308 26/40 | Reported for duty - R.R.D. | ✓ 5.7.40 | 4 M.D. | 5493/40 | CH |
| 22.7.40 | W.308 26/40 | Marched out from R.R.D. to 1 TD | ✓ 12.7.40 | 4 M.D. | 5532/40 | AM |
| 15.7.40 | W.308 26/40 | Marched in from R.R.D. to 2 TD and 1 TD and 1 TD on 17th | ✓ 12.7.40 | 4 M.D. | 5532/40 | AM |
| 9.9.40 | S.65 26/40 | Marched out from No 2 TD to 2/48 Bn | ✓ 25.9.40 | 4 M.D. | W.111 40 | CH |
| 10.10.40 | W.308 26/40 | Marched out from 2/48 Bn | ✓ 24.9.40 | 4 M.D. | W.308 40 | CH |
| 15.10.40 | W.308 26/40 | Marched out from 2/48 Bn | ✓ 25.9.40 | 4 M.D. | W.111 40 | CH |
| 26.10.40 | S.1049/40 | Pre-embarkation leave 15 to 24.10.40 8 days with subs | ✓ 15.10.40 | 4 M.D. | W.308 67/40 | CH |
| 7.11.40 | A.206 | Embarked on H.M.T. Stratheden for 10 seas | ✓ 17.11.40 | 4 M.D. | A.206 | CH |
| 17.11.40 | 7/48 | Delivered offence committed to the prejudice of good order and discipline | ✓ 17.11.40 | M.S. | A.206 | CH |
| 29.11.40 | 7/48 | Awarded 10 days' leave by co | ✓ 29.11.40 | at sea | B.206 9 | CH |

18-7-40 14070

Figure 2:
 Thomas Currie Derrick's service and casualty form
 Source: (National Archives of Australia, n.d.)

Tom took part in the Siege of Tobruk in Libya in 1941, where he proved himself to be an excellent soldier, showing his enthusiasm and aggression in patrolling enemy positions, which brought him a promotion to Corporal. He was then sent to reinforce the British army at El Alamein. In July of 1942, Tom was in Tel el Eisa in Egypt, where he pursued forward through a cascade of grenades and destroyed three machine gun posts and captured over one hundred pioneers. Along with this success, he was able to lure the defence into a counter-attack, destroying two tanks with grenades. He had been slightly wounded during this action, however, disregarding his physical state, he destroyed three more machine gun posts. For his inspiring leadership and daring during a week of horrendous battle, he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (Figure 3) and was promoted to Sergeant on 28th July 1942 (Gammage, n.d.). He then returned to Australia in February 1943 to begin jungle training in preparation for the war against Japan. In August of the same year, he embarked for New Guinea, arriving in Milne Bay three days later.

On the 22nd of November 1943, Tom's battalion began an attack on Sattelberg Ridge. They trudged through thick jungle ground and ascended upon the sheer cliff-face. After continuous struggles on the New Guinea soils, they were met with heavy machine-gun fire and a vicious downfall of hand grenades, and so the battalion were ordered to withdraw. Quick to object, Tom was determined that with one last effort, they would be able to complete their objective. Going against direct orders, he continued, singlehandedly throwing grenades and conquering an enemy post. Noticing that some of his men were in danger due to enemy fire, Tom continued to advance forward, throwing grenades at the Japanese until they fled, destroying another three posts (National Archives of Australia, n.d.).

The 2/48 Battalion captured Sattelberg once and for all the next morning. After much praise and attention from the Sattelberg victory, Tom later wrote in his diary *"the Colonel had great praise for the splendid work of the platoon and insisted I hoist the flag on the hard fought for town, the next three hours I was pestered by war correspondents and photographers - just like being king for a day – and all for disobeying an order"* (Derrick 1945 in Walker 2014). He was awarded a Victoria Cross (Figure 3) for conspicuous courage, leadership and devotion to duty during the attack on Sattelberg.



Figure 3:

Tom Currie Derrick's medals as displayed in the Australian War Memorial (L-R) Victoria Cross, Distinguished Conduct Medal, 1939-45 Star, Africa Star, Pacific Star, Defence Medal, Commonwealth War Medal 1939-45, Australian Service Medal 1939-45

Source: (Australian Virtual War Memorial, n.d.)

On the 20th of February 1944, Tom returned to Australia to undertake officer training and was then commissioned as a Lieutenant in November. Six months later, Thomas Derrick was called back to action in Borneo, arriving in Tarakan, Indonesia on the 1st of May 1945. His battalion were immediately involved in action against a heavily defended position.

As night fell on the 22nd of May, Tom and his men dug into the dense jungle soil, where they awaited the next enemy attack and, as dawn greeted the plains of Tarakan, Japanese forces fired a machine gun into the Australian lines (Walker, 2014). Just as Tom sat up to check on his men, a second wave of bullets hit, five of which struck him in an arc across his torso from his left hip to his right chest. He knew that these wounds were fatal, however he continued to direct operations until mid-morning, with his courage and a grin never leaving him (National Archives of Australia, n.d.).

He died the next day, just months before the end of World War II, at the age of 31. Tom is buried at the Labuan War Cemetery in Malaysia (Figure 4) and in the year 2000, was commemorated on a postage stamp by Australia Post (Figure 5).



Figure 4:
Lieutenant Thomas Currie Derrick's Burial Stone
Source: (Australian Virtual War Memorial, 2019)

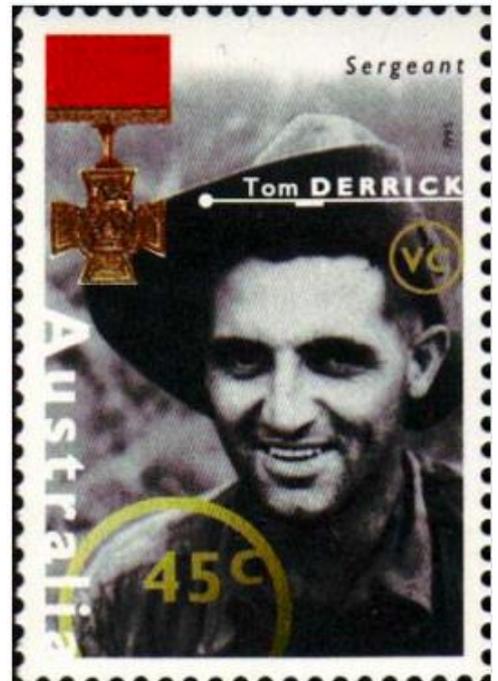


Figure 5:
Postage stamp of Tom Currie Derrick
Courtesy of Australia Post
Source: (Department of Veteran's Affairs, n.d.)



Figure 6:

Tom having a beer with a few of his Battalion mates in Tek Aviv, January 1942

Source: (Australian Virtual War Memorial, 2019)

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