

Stories from the Honour Boards

Stories of those who served and are remembered on the Honour Boards in the Merrington Anzac Memorial Peace Chapel at Saint Andrew's Uniting Church

Booklet Number 199

REGINALD STEPHEN BEST 1892—1948



An ammunition dump on fire near the Menin Road in Belgium in 1917

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Please see a Guide if you would like a copy.

Cover Illustration: *The 2nd Division Ammunition Column, of which Reg Best was a member, was in action in the Battle of Menin Road in September 1917.*

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Sergeant Major Reginald Stephen Best MM

Reg Best was an acting Sergeant in the 2nd Divisional Ammunition Column when his bravery and leadership in October 1917 led to the award of the Military Medal. The recommendation said:



For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. Whilst acting as N.C.O.-in-Charge of INFERNO AMMUNITION DUMP (East of Ypres) on three occasions (5/10/17, 11/10/1917 and 18/10/1917) when enemy shells fell in the vicinity, his coolness in assisting to control the men was of the greatest value.

Although several shells fell very close to the Dump he remained at his post thereby setting a fine example to all present.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H09724

Soldiers inspecting the crater resulting from the explosion of an ammunition dump

One wonders whether Reg used singing to keep the men from panic – music seems to have been an important part of his life. He came from a musical family and although after World War 1 he worked as a commercial traveller, he also became a well-known singer around Brisbane and the Darling Downs, and was an active member of the Saint Andrew's (then Presbyterian, now Uniting) Church choir.

In World War 2 he served as a Lieutenant in the Queensland Garrison Battalion and in the Army Amenities Service, with part of this service involved with a concert party to entertain and boost morale among the troops.

Family background

Born in Brisbane on 14 May 1892, Reginald Stephen Best was the second of three children of Stephen Best, a bookbinder and Annie Mattiell née Newman. Reg had an older sister Elsie Maud (whose later married name was Munro) and a younger brother Kenneth Alexander. (born 1907)

Their father Stephen had been born in Canterbury, England and came to Queensland with his parents when a child. In Brisbane Stephen worked as a printer and bookbinder in Elizabeth Street, and was later associated with the firm of PA Briggs Ltd. An obituary said of Stephen:

Well known in musical circles, he possessed an excellent tenor voice, was for many years a leading member of the St Andrew's Presbyterian Choir, and was a foundation member of the Brisbane Austral Choir.

As a prominent member of the Rechabite Friendly Society Stephen was also 'an enthusiastic worker in the eisteddfodau arranged by the body'.

Stephen died in 1931, aged 67, and was buried in the Toowong cemetery, with the Rev WH Greenwood officiating and the Rev Norman S Millar (from Saint Andrew's Church) present. Annie passed on nine years later, in 1940.

Early life and enlistment

After completing secondary education in Brisbane Reg initially worked as a clerk with the retailers Allan and Stark. However, by the time he enlisted on 13 September 1915, aged 23 years and three months, his occupation was recorded as farmer.

On enlistment Reg was 168cms tall, weighed 60kgs, and had a fair complexion, blue eyes and dark brown hair. As next-of-kin he nominated his mother and gave his religion as Presbyterian. He embarked on the HMAT *Nestor* A71 in Sydney on 9 April 1916 among reinforcements for 3rd Field Artillery Brigade.

Service WW1

After arriving in Egypt in May 1916 Reg went to a training depot, and by October 1916 was in England, promoted to Bombardier and transferred to 119th Howitzer Battery. In January 1917 he was further promoted to Corporal, and in April proceeded to France where the next month he was taken on strength with the 2nd Division Ammunition Column.

The 2nd Division artillery was in action in the Battle of Menin Road in September, and immediately before the attack was launched Reg was made a temporary Sergeant. The 2nd Division was then engaged in the Battle of Broodseinde in early October, and it was while the Battles of Poelcappelle and First Passchendaele were raging later that month that Reg's bravery and leadership led to the award of the Military Medal. The award was formally announced in December, the same month when he was confirmed as a Sergeant.

In April of 1918 the 2nd Division was engaged in defensive operations around Bethune, Hazebrouck and Meteren during the second attack of the German Spring offensive in that year. Reg

fell ill in late May 1918 with severe fever and that was effectively the end of his front-line service. He was moved from the hospital to a convalescent depot five months later.

On 28 February 1919 Reg was made a temporary Warrant Officer Class 2, a rank he held until June when he reverted to Sergeant – although he was given the status of Honorary Company Sergeant Major. On his return to Australia on the HMAT *Anchises* A68 Reg was a Warrant Officer class 1 for the purposes of the voyage. He arrived back in Australia on 13 October 1919 and was formally discharged two months later.

Post-war 1920-1939

Back in civilian life Reg initially resumed farming at Sherwood, but by 1925 his occupation was commercial traveller, with a residential address of Skew Street, Sherwood. His parents also resided at that address, and they all lived there until at least 1929.

Reg and his brother Ken were active in the Saint Andrew's choir, and facilitated choir activities when the organist and choir conductor, Robert Dalley-Scarlett took leave. In 1928 Reg was appointed the bass soloist in the choir - in that year's Anzac Day Service, with many returned servicemen and women crowding into the Church, he sang 'There Are No Dead', followed by the choir singing 'Greater Love Hath No Man'. Reg also performed at the Anzac Day lunches that Saint Andrew's provided after the Church services - with Ken and Dalley-Scarlett being accompanists for the musical program.

The family musical activities weren't confined to Saint Andrew's – Reg and Ken joined their father in the Austral Choir, and Reg was a frequent performer in the 1920s and 1930s in other

Presbyterian as well as Methodist, Congregational and Anglican Churches, at hospital fund raisers, returned soldiers benefits, eisteddfodau, in radio broadcasts on 4QG, and in Brisbane Bach Society performances. Ken was an accompanist at some of these functions, and was the organist at the City Congregational Church 1944-1951.



Reg seems to have been known primarily as a baritone, but had an unusual range and also sang bass. He won first prize in the second class bass soloist competition at the 1920 Brisbane eisteddfod, but was champion baritone soloist at the Warwick eisteddfodau in 1923 and 1924 and runner-up in the baritone soloist contest at the Toowoomba eisteddfod in 1923. However, in the Brisbane Austral Choir and the Brisbane Bach Society, as well as the Saint Andrew's Choir, he generally seems to have performed as a bass singer.

In 1931 Reg was married in the Albert Street Methodist Church, with Presbyterian rites by the Rev Norman S Millar from Saint Andrew's Church, to Annie Ida Emily Smith. Annie was born in Wolumla, in the Bega Valley, NSW in 1893 (her parents were George Smith, a farmer and Sarah Jane née Wilson) and she and Reg shared a love of music.

Annie was a contralto and they performed some duets together after their marriage, and when they left Brisbane in 1934 to live in Toowoomba the Bach Society noted that they had been 'enthusiastic and hard working members of the choir and their loss will be severely felt'.

World War 2 service

Reg enlisted on 11 October 1939 and was placed in the 1st Australian Garrison Battalion, rapidly being promoted to Sergeant and then Warrant Officer Class 2. From December 1940 he was a temporary Warrant Officer Class 1 in the Battalion.



The following year Reg applied for a Commission and was made a Lieutenant in the 1st Garrison Battalion, with effect from 1 July 1941. Two years later he transferred at that rank to Officer-in-Charge of the Queensland Line of Communication Area

Concert Party - no doubt a happy use of his musical interests as well as leadership and organisational abilities. This group toured in New Guinea performing as 'The Digger Dandies'.



Members of the "Digger Dandies" performing in Port Moresby, 1944

Australian War Memorial. 072644

From August 1944 Reg served as the Amenities Officer at the Headquarters of the Australian Training Centre (Jungle Warfare) at Canungra, retiring from that role in May 1945.

His brother Ken, who had been working as a music salesman, enlisted for the Army in 1941 and served from January 1942. After a period as a Corporal in the printing and stationery area, he joined Reg in August 1943 in the Queensland Line of Communication Area Concert Party - and like Reg his subsequent time in the Concert Party involved service in New Guinea. Ken returned from there in September 1944 and finished his service in December 1945.

Post-WW2

Reg's wife Annie died in August 1946 and was cremated at Mt Thompson with Methodist rites. She and Reg didn't have children, but in October of the following year Reg married Edith Jessie then Heymer formerly Dunbar in the City Congregational Church, and became a step-father to Ken and Marie.



Memorial plaque, Mt Thompson

This happiness was short-lived – at the age of 56 Reg died suddenly on 1 September 1948 in his home in Preston Road, Manly. He was cremated at Mt Thompson with Congregational rites, administered by the Rev Dr Thomas Rees-Thomas from the City Congregational Church, and his ashes rest at Mt Thompson.

Later in that month the family placed a public notice thanking ‘all Relatives, Friends, Churches and Musical bodies for their expressions of sympathy and floral tributes in their recent sad bereavement’.



Choir stalls, Saint Andrew's Church

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Lest we forget