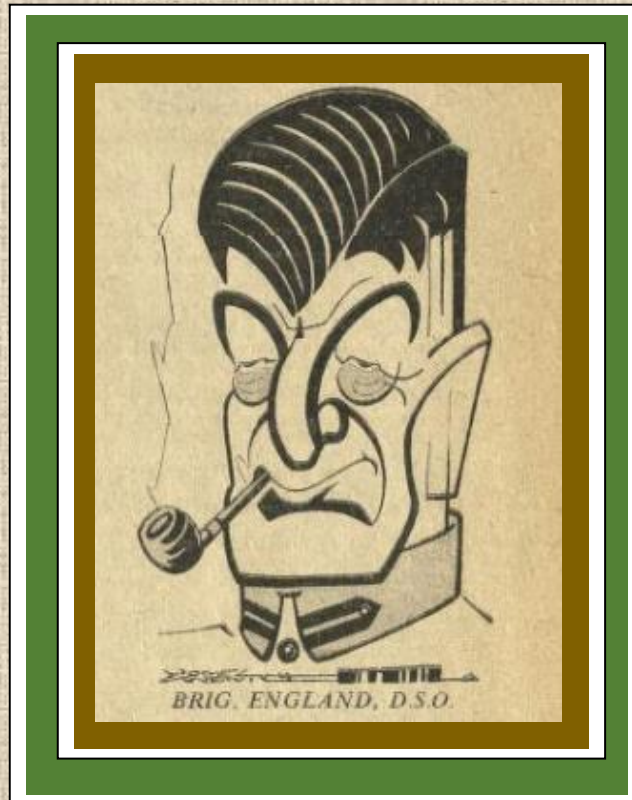


## Lieutenant Colonel Vivian (Panther) Theophilus ENGLAND DSO MID ED

4.6.1894 – 19.9.1951



Ken Clift wrote the history of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion in 1980. His book was called 'War Dance' The first part of the story are excerpts from this book. (Kenneth Clift War Dance pp 1-23) The commander chosen for the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Bn was Lieut. Col. T.V. England, a keen amateur soldier who had commanded the 55<sup>th</sup> in the Militia and was a civil engineer with the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission. He was a big man, well over six feet tall, of an athletic build and a with a dark complexion and a thick head of jet black wavy hair that soon earned him the sobriquet of the "Black Panther". This was the type of man choses to mould the officers and men of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Bn into an efficient well-trained fighting force. Lieut. Col England had been a member on the 17<sup>th</sup> Bn in the Great Warm later transferring to the Australian Flying Corps where he was commissioned. He was one of a group of officers that gathered at Victoria Barrack's Paddington, Sydney on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1939. At this time there were no A.I.F. troops attested (i.e., those who had volunteered for overseas service and duly sworn in). This small group included officers from Militia units, they were Major Buckley, Captains Lamb, Abbott, Stevenson, Gibson, McGregor and Keith Carey. Not long afterwards some of the officers were sent to Ingleburn Camp to establish Battalion lines while others directed to Liverpool to assist in the process of training newly enlisted men who enlisted on 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> October 1939.

Chook Fowler describes his first meeting with Lieut. Col. *"The formidable 'Black Panther' was slapping with 'swagger stick" a jodhpur-clad sturdy leg as 'Chook' made his tentative approach outside 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Bn orderly room. The massive figure surmounted with black piercing eyes and hawklike bold countenance fixed the new recruits with his famous stare. "Yes soldier, what is it." "Sir, I'd like to apply for a transfer,". A pregnant pause. "There'll be no transferers from the 2/3*



*Figure 1 Waiting for more troops to arrive. Major Goodwin, Lt. Col England and Captain Stevenson, Ingleburn 1939 (Clift 2)*

*Battalion*". The words uttered in low menacing growl. Of course, there were transfers as many were deemed unfit or required in civilian jobs or transferred to the 2/1 Machine Gun Bn (16<sup>th</sup> Bde). Spring to summer 1939 England and his officers with cooperation from training staff set about turning the new recruits into a fighting unit.



*Figure 2 Lt. Col. V.T. England and Captain J.R. Stevenson with troops outside Bn Orderly Room Nov. 1939 (Clift 6)*

We are thankful to the Adjutant of the 2/3 Battalion to have so much information available as the 2/3 Bn unit War diary lists in great detail the names of those who were allocated. This includes 80 men from the 55/53<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, who followed their Co Lt Col Vivian England. The 2/3 Bn war Diary between includes some interesting facts. A summary follows:-

Officers called up on strength 3 Nov 1939	<b>14</b>
Taken on strength at Liverpool Reception Depot 3.11.39	<b>47</b>
Taken on strength from 34 <sup>th</sup> Battalion - 5.11.39	<b>59</b>
Taken on strength from 45 <sup>th</sup> Battalion	<b>51</b>
Taken on strength from 55/53 Battalion.	<b>118</b>
3 <sup>rd</sup> Battalion 5.11.1939	<b>37</b>
34 <sup>th</sup> Battalion 5.11.39 additional	<b>33</b>
2/4 Battalion 5.11.39	<b>30</b>
54 <sup>th</sup> Battalion 5.11.39	<b>160</b>
3 <sup>rd</sup> Battalion 5.11.39	<b>16</b>
	<b>565</b>
Taken on strength – called up 8.11.1939	<b>259</b>
Total enlisted & in camp say	<b>824</b>

A few days later the 2/3 Bn issued the following:-

Summary of war Diary 2/3 Battalion AIF as of 12<sup>th</sup> November 1939

<i>COMPANY</i>	<i>OFFICERS</i>	<i>OTHER RANKS</i>	<i>TOTALS</i>
HQ WING	7	170	177
A COMPANY	5	175	180
B COMPANY	4	186	190
C COMPANY	3	186	189
D COMPANY	5	170	175
	24	887	911

In November 1939 when WWII had begun to seriously impact Australia, having such large numbers of trained troops being removed from the militia, undoubtedly had serious effects on the capacity of the Militia to be effective units. Men from the militia battalions composed of about 55.5% of the strength of the 2/3 Bn as of 5.11.1939. Records are not available for the other 16<sup>th</sup> Brigade battalions. So having this information available is extraordinary. Of those soldiers of the 55/53 Battalion on 3<sup>rd</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> November 1939 enlisted into the AIF (2.3 Bn), they fought with great distinction. They had proper training and up-to-date equipment. Some were captured in Greece, some killed and many wounded, and made a name for themselves as 'The Rats of Tobruk'. They also served in New Guinea including Sanananda, when the 2/3 AIB was reduced to less than 90 men and replaced by the 55/53<sup>rd</sup> Bn on 5.12.1942.

Training of the 2/3 Bn continued until when on 9.1.1940 the men boarded at train from Ingleburn to Sydney where they marched along the same streets as did the 1<sup>st</sup> A.I.F. 25 years before. They embarked on the H.M.A.T Orcades at Pymont 10.1.1940 in a convoy that included Empress of Japan that joined at Melbourne carrying the 6<sup>th</sup> Division, stopping at Fremantle on the voyage to Ismailia in the Suez Canal. Lieut. Colonel England was Voyage Officer in Command of the Orcades. Hard early morning training and rifle and machine drill in the afternoons.

There was an incident on board known as the 'Cheese Pie Episode' which involved throwing of feed around the mess room when soldiers objected to the quantity and quality of the egg and cheese that was served. The next day the Panther at compulsory parade asked the nurses to depart and then used strong language to the assembled troops, out of earshot of the female nurses. He said "*There are men on this boat who will never make the hair of an old soldier's arsehole, and you will rue the day you condemned that cheese pie.*" There would be many times in the future that the men of the 2/3 Bn would be grateful for a helping of their much despised 'cheese pie', Ken Clift says that the Panther later retracted his famous remark. He was that type of commander. He became a legend not only in his own battalion but with the whole A.I.F. in his lifetime.

Those interested in the history of the 2/3 Bn should read Ken Clift's book.

Lieut. Colonel England led his battalion with distinction in Palestine. He enabled his junior officers to rise and take leadership of the battalion these included, Lamb, Stevenson and Ian Hutchison who would lead the battalion later in WWII.

He was a strong and decisive leader. On one occasion soldiers who overstayed their leave paid the penalty of twenty-eight days in a Jerusalem gaol.

Next stop was Amiriya near Alexandria. Battalions were providing protection trains running north from Alexandria from aerial attacks from the Italian air force. 17.12.1940 the 6<sup>th</sup> Division moved forward on the way to Libya. Italian forces had established a fortress at Bardia. 3.1.1941 the siege of Bardia commenced and concluded on 5.1.1941. This was the first British military operation of the Western Desert campaign of the Second World War. It was the first battle of the war in which an Australian Army formation took part, the first to be commanded by an Australian general and the first to be planned by an Australian staff. The 16th Australian Infantry Brigade attacked at dawn from the west, where the defences were known to be weak. Sappers blew gaps in the barbed wire with Bangalore torpedoes and filled in and broke down the sides of the anti-tank ditch with picks and shovels. This allowed the infantry and 23 Matilda II tanks of the 7th Royal Tank Regiment to enter the fortress and capture all their objectives, along with 8,000 prisoners. For his leadership over the 3 days of the battle he was awarded Mentioned in Despatches. Citation in full is below.

On the night of 20.6.1941 the battalion was assembled to attack the Tobruk Fortress. They were supported by men from 2/1<sup>st</sup> Field Battalion (who were formed in conjunction to the 2/3). And the British Armoured Division (Australian Battalions were engaged with the Italians 2/1, 2/2, 2/3, 2/4, 2/5, 2/6, 2/7, 2/8 & 2/11). The 2/3<sup>rd</sup> battalion was in the role of spearhead in this battle which commenced at dawn 21.6.1941.

The Italians suffered more than 24,000 casualties, 18 officers and 750 soldiers had been killed, 30 officers and 2,250 men had been wounded and more than 20,000 men had become prisoners of war. The British captured 208 guns and 87 tanks. XIII Corps (the new name of the WDF) suffered 400 casualties, 355 of them Australian.

The Allied victory in Cyrenaica prompted Germany to intervene in North Africa to support the Italians, and German troops under the command of General Rommel began arriving in Libya from February 1941. In April they suddenly advanced across Cyrenaica, quickly reaching the outskirts of Tobruk and the Egyptian frontier. While some of the Allied troops fell back into Egypt, others, including the 9 Australian Division, remained in Tobruk to hold the base. In April and May, the Germans and Italians made attempts to break into the fortress but were beaten back.

The then Australian Prime Minister Robert Gordon Menzies visited Tobruk in February 1941. There were mixed reactions from the 2/3 Bn. Gordon Terry who was England's Batman had this to say. "I also remember the Old Man nearly choking with rage when Menzies, passed C Company, remarked on what light casualties we suffered. The reply was typical; 'Too bloody light casualties, They passed out of earshot then and I've often wondered is a word was dropped in the right ear about this outspoken commanding officer, for it is still rankles as an injustice that the A.I.F. was denied such a

potentially outstanding divisional commander. The love V.T. England had for his men is reflected in this snap taken (below) by his batman, kindly sent to us by his widow Laura.



*Figure 3. The Panther and his pups - the 2/3 Bn at Tobruk awaiting the arrival of the Australian Prime Minister R.G. Menzies. This photo has England standing at the right-hand side of the image by Gordon Terry. There is a similar image held at the AWM.*

Menzies is quoted of having said *“Some of you think of yourselves as veterans but you are too young for that! I say you’re seasons soldiers; you’re being there and you know what it’s all about. Remember it, you’re seasoned soldiers, for that is what you are now – a seasoned unit.”* (Pp 107 Clift)

Both Menzies and Blamey visited Tobruk after 11.2.1941. It is likely that plans were being made to move the 6<sup>th</sup> Division to Greece. Until evidence is found Lt. Col England appointment was terminated at this time.

Not long after on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 1941 the Panther was preplaced as CO by his able and seasoned No 2 Major Jimmy Lamb.

The Australian 6th Division, was relieved in March, destined for Greece, and replaced by another Australian division, the untested 9th Division to take over the defence of Tobruk. In April the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion were in Greece.

His next appointment was commanding training unit: 6th Australian infantry training Brigade. General Sir Thomas Blamey, the Australian commander in the Middle East

His service records not being available as of writing so no further details can be provided.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P10680467>

Service No	414, NX6
Ranks Held	Private Lieutenant Colonel
Birth Date	4.6.1894
Birthplace	Sydney NSW Australia
Death Date	19.9.1951
Final Rank	Lieutenant Colonel
Unit	2/3 AIB
Honours & Awards (recommendation)	Mentioned in Dispatches London Gazette 1.4.1941 Page 1876 at position 2
WWI Embarkation	13.6.1915

#### WWI

Commissioned	2.10.1918 2nd Lieutenant. Lieutenant Air Force
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#### Inter War years (part time voluntary service)

1.10.1920	Lieutenant SUS
1.02.1923	Captain
7.8.1923	Reserve of Officers
1.4.1926	Retired List
29.6.1928	33 Battalion
29.6.1929	Major
1.7.1929	Unattached List
8.1.1932	55th Battalion

**1.7.1935**

**1.8.1937 – 13.10.1939**

**Lieutenant Colonel commanding officer 55th Battalion  
Commanding Officer 55/53rd Battalion**

#### WWII Service

13.10.1939 –	Seconded 2/3rd Rank on appointment.
13.10.1939-13.3.1941 -	Battalion: 2/3rd: Rank on appointment: Lieutenant Colonel. <u>Appointed from Commanding officer 55th battalion.</u> Reason for end of appointment: age new command-training unit: 6th Australian infantry training Brigade.

#### Date and unit at appointment (Officers)

13.10.1939 – 13.3.1941 -	Commanding officer of 2/3 Battalion, 6 Division, 16 Brigade.
16.10.1939 –	Enlisted 2 AIF.
2.2.1940 –	Arrived Middle East
26.11.1940-2.12.1940	Attached 16th Australian infantry training battalion.
5.1.1941 -	Award: For gallantry and devotion to duty during the attack on BARDIA. during the period 3.1.41 to 5.1.1941 see below citation.
7.3.1941 -	Companion of the Distinguished Service Order.
3.3.1941 -	Commanding officer 6th Australian infantry training Brigade.
24.12.1941 -	Medical downgrade 'assessed as fit for duties other than active service with field formations'.
27.12.1941 -	Temporary colonel temporary brigadier commanding officer AIF Middle East reinforcements Depot.
27.12.1941 -	Mentioned in the CiC's Dispatch on Operations Aug 39-Nov 40.
11.2.1942 -	Commanding officer AIF Middle East reinforcements Depot No.2
23.5.1942 -	Returned to Australia (4MD).
23.5.1942 -	Commanding officer AIF Base Area (Adelaide)
24.8.1942 -	Commanding officer Volunteer Defence Corps NSW Lines of Communication Area.
31.1.1945 -	Relinquished command Volunteer Defence Corps...
	6.4.1945 - medical downgrade Class B2 'Const (H) & vision unfit heavy work and mental stress.'
10.4.1945 -	Honourary brigadier Reserve of Officers.
Date of Death	19.9.1951.

Mention in Despatchers citation- He gallantly and successfully led his Bn. on 3 Jan. 41 in an attack on the high ground overlooking BARDIA during which his Bn. captured all objective and several thousands of prisoners.  
 On 4 Jan. he again led his Bn. with dash and determination forward, captured all objectives and many more prisoners. His aggressive action contributed very much to the fall of the town of BARDIA.  
 On 5 Jan. he again led his Bn. and cleared his section of the perimeter of the remaining elements of the enemy.  
 He set a fine example throughout the battle.  
 Ext Sheet DN 4/41 LG Supp 35157/41  
 WWI Service I 12 Light Horse regiments.  
 WW2 Service II Bardia-Benghazi.

**World War Two Service – Nominal Roll**

Name	ENGLAND, VIVIAN THEOPHILUS
Service	Australian Army
Service Number	NX6
Date of Birth	04 Jun 1894
Place of Birth	SYDNEY, NSW
Date of Enlistment	16 Oct 1939
Locality on Enlistment	ROSEVILLE, NSW
Place of Enlistment	SYDNEY, NSW
Next of Kin	ENGLAND, ENID
Date of Discharge	09 Apr 1945
Rank	Colonel
Posting at Discharge	2/3 INFANTRY BATALLION
Prisoner of War	No
Honours	Companion of the Distinguished Service Order

WWII Service file not yet available as of 29.1.2023

Tamworth Daily Observer (NSW : 1910 - 1916), Friday 21 July 1911, page 2

**UNIVERSITY RESULTS. JUNIOR PUBLIC EXAMINATION. TAMWORTH SUCSESSES.**

Vivian Theophilus England, another Tamworth boy—but now Fort-street Public School— was also successful, his pass being English first class. French first class, Latin second class, arithmetic first class, algebra first class, geometry second class, inorganic chemistry first class.

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Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), Friday 18 May 1923, page 5

**THE UNIVERSITY.CONFERRING OF DEGREES**

**BACHELOR OF ENGINEERING.**

Vivian Theophilus England

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Tweed Daily (Murwillumbah, NSW : 1914 - 1949), Tuesday 21 July 1942, page 2

**THE PASSING SHOW (By "Barnabus")**

Thus comments "The Bulletin," Sydney: Brigadier Vivian Theophilus England, DSO. whose latest job is CO, AIF troops in South Australian base area, first took to soldiering when- he was 18, and thrived so well on it that he's been soldiering, in wars and between wars, most of the time -since. He was a 12th. Light Horse Regiment trooper 1915 onwards, at Gallipoli and in Egypt and Palestine : " figured later in that dust-up as a lieutenant-pilot in the Australian Flying - Corps; subsequently got into the militia and became lieutenant-colonel in command of the 55th Battalion (NSW). With that rank he went off to the present disturbance with the 2/3 Battalion, won his: DSC at Bardia in the first- Libyan . campaign, became CO of 6th Training Brigade and then brigadier to charge of the reinforcement depot in the Middle East. A native of Sydney, he is outside; his soldiering, a NSW Government engineer, with a BE gathered at Sydney University in 1922. Brigadier England is a nephew of Mrs W. L. Murphy, of Hartigan's Hill. Murwillumbah.

<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-532647370/view?sectionId=nla.obj-537252733&searchTerm=Vivian+England&partId=nla.obj-532690481#page/n8/mode/1up/search/Vivian+England>

got his present appointment in 1935.

Brigadier Vivian Theophilus England, D.S.O., whose latest job is C.O., A.I.F. troops in South Aus. base area, first took to soldiering when he was 18, and thrived so well on it that he's been soldiering, in wars and between wars, most of the time since. He was a 12th Light Horse Regt.

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The Bulletin July 15 1942 page 9

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**Death Notice:** Sydney Morning Herald (NSW: 1842 - 1954), Friday 21 September 1951, page 20  
**ENGLAND, Brigadier Vivian, D.S.O., E.D.**—September 19, 1951, at R.G.H. Concord, dear husband of Laura and father of Iris.

**Death Notice:** Sydney Morning Herald (NSW: 1842 - 1954), Friday 21 September 1951, page 20  
**ENGLAND, Vivian Brigadier, D.S.O., E.D., B.E.**—September 19, 2/3rd Battalion, 2nd A.I.F., at R.G.H. Concord, beloved brother of Theodora.



"Ek Dum": Passed on at 57, Brigadier Vivian England, one of the tiny band of War I Lighthorsemen who held high command in War II. A member of the 12th A.L.H. Regiment (his fellow New Englander Donald Cameron's heroes of Beersheba), he switched to the Air Force and ended up in the A.F.C. Afterwards his interest in the forces remained constant; when Hitler's war broke out he was C.O. 55th Militia Battalion and went away in command of the 2/3rd Battalion. The nature of his part in the Libyan fighting which began at Bardia is sufficiently described by his nickname "The Black Panther." He won a D.S.O. and in December, 1941, was promoted Brigadier before his return to Australia, where he succeeded another old lighthorseman, Major-General Richardson, as Corps Commander, V.D.C. in N. S. Wales, after the war becoming chief executive officer in Queensland of Mechanical Equipment for the A.W.C. In private life in the years before War II he was a civil-engineer in the public service who rose to be chief hydrographer to the N. S. Wales Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission. Also widely known as a trout fisherman.

The Bulletin Sept 26 1951.

<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-518396433/view?sectionId=nla.obj-525645454&searchTerm=Vivian+England&partId=nla.obj-518454165#page/n22/mode/1up/search/Vivian+England>