

# PEOPLE PROFILES Captain Reginald Walter Saunders MBE



**Captain Saunders, a member of the Aboriginal Gunditjmara tribe, followed in the footsteps of his father and uncle who had both fought in France in World War I.**

*Souvenir Pennant of the 2/7th Battalion AIF that belonged to Reg Saunders; it bears badges collected during his service in the Second World War and Korea. It also includes recognition from the USA in the form of the 'US Presidential Unit Citation.'*



*Sergeant Saunders on leave from New Guinea. He was respected and popular among his men. He was accepted unreservedly by the men who served with him because false values do not flourish among front-line soldiers.' Harry Gordon, biographer and journalist.*



*Saunders and 'Diver' Derrick graduated from an Officer Cadet Training Unit in November 1944*

among white people. He worked through these difficulties by becoming a spokesperson for Indigenous Australians. In 1969 Saunders joined the Office of Aboriginal Affairs as a liaison and public relations officer in an effort to make life better for his people.

His uncle William Reginald Rawlings, received the Military Medal for his service with the First Australian Imperial Force. His brother Harry also enlisted for service in World War II. He was later killed in New Guinea.

He travelled all over the country meeting Aboriginal people from all walks of life. He died in Sydney in 1990, leaving behind eight children.

After the war he returned to Australia and worked as a shipping clerk and builder's labourer.

Saunders returned to the Army at the outbreak of the Korean War, where he served as a Captain of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment and fought at Kayong. This battalion won a United States Presidential Citation for the Battle of Kapyong.

On leaving the army he had difficulty settling into civilian life, particularly as an Indigenous man living

In 1971 Captain Saunders was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire.

## Project: For your eyes only



"He was accepted unreservedly by the men who served with him because false values do not flourish among front-line soldiers." What does this quote mean? What does it tell you about Saunders's character?



Design and make a souvenir pennant for Captain Saunders or another person profiled in this book.

## THE GUNDITJMARA

In the early days when the British first arrived in Australia the Gunditjmara fought many battles with the white settlers in an attempt to keep their land.

### FACT FILE

**First Aboriginal commissioned officer in the Australian Army.**

**D.O.B** 7 August 1920

Framlingham, Victoria

**D.O.D** 2 March 1990

Sydney, New South Wales

**Years of service**

1940 - 1954

**Rank** Captain

**Unit** 2/7th Battalion  
3rd Battalion

**Engagements**

World War II  
North African Campaign  
Battle of Greece  
Battle of Crete  
New Guinea Campaign  
Salamaua-Lae Campaign  
Korean War  
Battle of Kapyong

**Awards**

Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE)

**Other work**

Office of Aboriginal Affairs as a liaison and public relations officer

Saunders enlisted on 24 April 1940 and, after his initial training, proved to be a natural soldier. He also found less discrimination in the Australian Army than in the wider community.

He was a popular member of the 2/7<sup>th</sup> Battalion. His unit saw action in North Africa before joining the ill-fated Greek campaign. After Greece, his unit fought on Crete, and when the British evacuated in May 1941, Saunders was one of many men left behind. He was forced to remain hidden on the island for a year, helped by locals, before being evacuated by submarine.

Saunders returned to Australia before rejoining his battalion in New Guinea, as a sergeant. In mid-1944 his commanding officer nominated him for officer training. He was commissioned in November 1944 and returned to New Guinea. For the remainder of the War he was a platoon commander in New Guinea.