

# A SOLDIER'S DREAM

## SYDNEY HARRIS AT MISSION BEACH



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#### Cover

Sydney Woodfield Harris' headstone nestled among *Arenga* palms at the Norm Byrnes Arboretum in Mission Beach. TSS *Kanowna* in August 1914, with Sydney aboard leaving the wharf at Cairns bound for New Britain.

Syd was a soldier with a dream.

Syd Harris was among the first Australians to enlist in WWI and served his country for the duration of the war and longer at Rabaul in New Britain. This was captured from the Germans at the start of the war. Germany was using the island as a wireless station to guide its battlecruisers and submarines during their plundering raids on Allied merchant ships.

Syd's dream started out as a simple desire to own a coconut plantation somewhere in tropical north Queensland. Then, with so much time to think during his six and a half years in Rabaul, the dream quietly evolved. Just after the war, while still enlisted in the forces, he was seconded to the Department of Agriculture, where he learned more about tropical plants and horticulture. Syd was hooked. He now dreamed of owning a beautiful tropical, beachside vanilla farm.

When Syd enlisted in August 1914 at Townsville, his record shows him to be a diminutive man of 5 foot 4 inches height (163 cm) and 130 pounds (59 kg) weight. His listed next of kin was his mother, Mary Russell Harris (nee Woodfield), who lived in Worcestershire, England, and then emigrated to Australia where she married Edwin Thomas Harris in 1885. They lived in Townsville and at Muttaborra in central Queensland for some time before Syd enlisted.<sup>1</sup>



Map courtesy of Google showing New Britain and Rabaul.

Syd Harris joined the Australian Naval and Expeditionary Force (*3<sup>rd</sup> N. & M. Force*) and was transported immediately, without any military training, on the troopship TSS *Kanowna* on 16 August 1914. Their first stop was at Thursday Island. Then they were sent to take part in the capture of German New Guinea (New Britain). They arrived in Port Moresby, but the stokers on their troopship refused to work, so they stayed at Port Moresby then returned to Townsville. The remainder of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ancestry.com.au, *Sydney Woodfield Harris*, accessed March 2022 at:  
[https://www.ancestry.com.au/search/?name=Sydney+Woodfield\\_Harris&event=\\_innisfail-queensland-australia\\_96434&death=1921\\_queensland-australia\\_30096&defaultFacets=PRIMARY\\_YEAR.PRIMARY\\_NPLACE&location=5027&name\\_x=s\\_1&priority=australian](https://www.ancestry.com.au/search/?name=Sydney+Woodfield_Harris&event=_innisfail-queensland-australia_96434&death=1921_queensland-australia_30096&defaultFacets=PRIMARY_YEAR.PRIMARY_NPLACE&location=5027&name_x=s_1&priority=australian)

troops continued on to New Britain to confront the Germans. As it happened, the AIF command deemed the men aboard the TSS *Kanowna* to be untrained and not combat ready. Those with proper training were sent instead.

The initial battle for German New Guinea was at Bita Paka, where the first Australian soldier lost his life in combat during WWI. Seven Australians were killed and five wounded and by 21 September 1914, the small force of 40 Germans and 110 Melanesians surrendered. This was a strategic war asset and had to be neutralized to reduce the loss of merchant shipping in the Pacific.

Shortly after securing New Guinea, the Battalion that Syd was attached to was renamed the *N. & M. Tropical Force* and sent to Rabaul to occupy that territory. This was a force of up to 600 women and men, most of whom were not trained in combat. Syd remained in Rabaul, apart from a few furlough periods back in Australia, until the end of the war in November 1918. The Tropical Force stayed on to administer the territory until 1921, and New Guinea was governed by Australia up until 1975 when PNG became independent.

Syd was seconded to the Department of Agriculture in June 1919, and, during his time serving in New Guinea, he was promoted several times. He was discharged at the rank of Warrant Officer on 28 February 1921.

By that time, Syd had purchased beachfront agricultural land at Clump Point. One of the first land selections in the district was achieved by a Mackay man, W. Hyne, who selected the 1,280 acre property (lot 21A) that straddled the point. Hyne sent Willoughby Smith with his wife Alice and a large number of Kanaka workers to set up a home and a fruit farm on this rich land in 1887. This was the land that the Cuttens had attempted to select in April 1882 but had been beaten by Hyne.

When a small cyclone destroyed the orchards and home of Willoughby and Alice in 1890, Hyne pulled the pin and gave the venture up. He sold the land later to A. J. Bolton who hoped to resell it at a profit. Bolton divided off six small farms and had difficulty selling them but found a buyer in Syd Harris later on.

When Syd found himself struggling to cope with recurrent bouts of fever from earlier malarial infections, he decided to return to Australia and start farming. He took his collection of seeds and plants that he had imported from New Britain to Edmund Banfield on Dunk Island. Banfield offered to plant them in his nursery and get them reproducing while Syd was clearing the land and setting up his farm and home. Oddly enough, the Banfields had known Syd since he was a child in Townsville.<sup>2</sup>

Among the plants he imported were several shoots of two species of vanilla orchids and he hoped to grow four acres of that plant. Other plants he gave to Banfield to nurture were cocoa, cinnamon, nutmeg, five corners, rambutan, avocado, and three varieties of egg plants.<sup>3</sup>

By June 1921, Syd was on his land and busy clearing it. His dream was to live on the seashore in the beautiful, lush forests of Clump Point in north Queensland on his own land and create a vanilla farm, which he thought was soon to be a reality.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Noonan, *A Different Drummer: The Story of E. J. Banfield, Beachcomber of Dunk Island*, UQ Press, 1968, P. 223.

<sup>3</sup> *Tropical Plants, By the Beachcomber*, 30 June 1920, accessed on Trove, March 2022 at: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/63495389?searchTerm=Syd%20Harris%20Beachcomber>



Edmund Banfield, though living out on Dunk Island, was a long-time friend of Syd's and clearly admired him, saying:<sup>4</sup>

*Though not without neighbours, he lived a solitary life. ... Excitable, and to speak the truth, shy and retiring, his off hand response to his country's call was the more commendable in that it was the outcome of sheer force of will acting against natural impulses.*

*... he had been heard to say that he would gladly forgo his projects anytime if his country could again make use of him. This too, quite humbly. He was no sneak or slacker, had nought of bounce or bluff, and blatant self-assertion common at the hour, but in his own quiet way was a patriot with a clear conception of the duties of citizenship.*

Sadly then, after arriving at his paradise only a few months earlier, Syd was killed in a fire accident while clearing his farmland on 20 November 1921. It was Edmund Banfield<sup>5</sup> who reported Sydney Harris to be missing in a letter to the Innisfail police in early December 1921. The police sent a search party from Cardwell and Maria Creek with an Aboriginal tracker and after some days found Syd dead on his allotment.<sup>6</sup>

His clothes were burned by the fire he was frantically attempting to extinguish. The constable surmised that Syd had been burning off long grass to clear the lot and the fire became out of control. It was concluded that it was an accident and some said he had a 'bad heart' and may have died of asphyxiation or heart attack while fighting the fire.

Syd was only 35 years old.

Edmund Banfield with nearby settlers, Charles Morton, George Webb and Rupert Fenby built a cairn on Syd's grave near the main road on the beachfront south of the original school:<sup>7</sup>

*Stones were laboriously dragged from Clump Point on Moreton's (sic) sled and cemented into a cairn. Webb and Fenby erected the four posts and Banfield supplied the hawser looped between them. ... Part of Harris' land was bought by the Hull River Timber Syndicate.*

We are fortunate that E. J. Banfield wrote many regular articles to the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* and *The Northern Miner* (Charters Towers) under the pseudonym, *the Beachcomber*. At times he wrote of local pioneers who he admired, such as Herb and Len Cutten and Rupert Fenby. While Syd Harris had only lived in the district a few months, Banfield wrote two long articles about his venture and Syd as a person. In one column he spoke at length about Syd's goals and character:<sup>8</sup>

*Poor Syd Harris had long dreamt of a home in the midst of a garden of fruit, flowers and spices behind a screen of palms through the fronds of which he would look on the sea. ... Fate waved him away from his ideals with a flaming sword. Those who knew him personally were aware*

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<sup>4</sup> *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 5 January 1922, accessed on *Trove*, March 2022 at:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/62430647?searchTerm=Syd%20Harris>

<sup>5</sup> *Northern Settler Missing*, *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 2 December 1921, accessed on *Trove*, March 2022 at:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/177051780?searchTerm=Northern%20Settler%20Missing>

<sup>6</sup> *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 14 December 1921, accessed on *Trove*, March 2022 at:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/62437147?searchTerm=Sydney%20Harris>

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Jones, *Cardwell Shire Story*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1961, p. 312, 313.

<sup>8</sup> *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 5 January 1922, accessed on *Trove*, March 2022 at:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/62430647?searchTerm=Syd%20Harris>

*that though of active intellect, nature had imposed on Syd Harris a vexatious crown. Like Moses of old, he was 'slow of speech and of a slow tongue,' but such limitations made him, perhaps, more than ordinarily observant, and also free with his pen. It may not be generally known that he was a contributor in popular magazines and that for his sketches he was well paid. Those who were familiar with these facts were wont to conclude that as his plans matured he would be able to record in print valuable information of his experience as a tropical planter for – and again to his credit – he had acquired much practical as well as theoretical knowledge, and was in communication with several of the finest institutions in the world for the spread of such knowledge.*

*While making his own bit of land rich and ornamental with exotics from every other tropical clime, Syd Harris was indifferent to the praise and scornful of the reproof of others for it was his wish to live a peaceful, independent, almost cloisteral life in the self-created garden as changeful as a poet's fancies. Wrapped in a soldier's rug, the body was buried where it lay, and upon the grey mound a military belt and pouch are the only insignia.*

The Mission Beach area has never had a cemetery. There are a few other surviving headstones such as those for the Cutten and Garner families. There is another headstone on the beachfront at Wongaling Beach in Rotary Park commemorating the life of banana farmer David G. Reid who was buried on the Reid farm when he died of a gun accident in June 1914. There are many other pioneers and Djiru people buried in the district without headstones.

The Harris gravesite was initially on the west side of what is known as Porter Promenade in 2022, opposite the Community Hall. Council moved the headstone to the other side of the road later and then shifted it again to the current location in a peaceful corner of the *Norm Byrnes Arboretum* close to the C4 building. The headstone is nestled under the fronds of a lush endemic *Arenga australasica* clumping palm, just the sort of palm that Syd so adored.

Syd Harris was awarded the British War Medal for his service during WWI.

His headstone:

*Here Lies a Soldier  
Sydney Woodfield Harris  
Born Townsville 4<sup>th</sup> May 1886  
Died 20<sup>th</sup> November 1921  
His native land he served abroad. On this spot he fell  
Striving alone with a bushfire.  
No Cross, No Crown.*