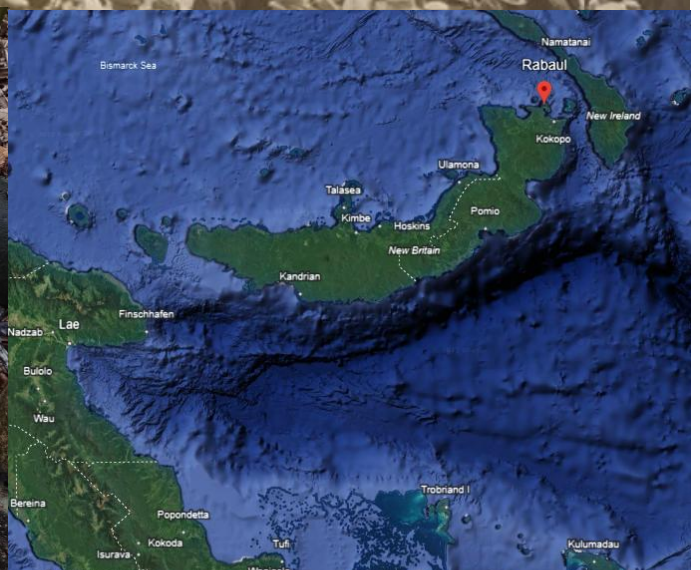
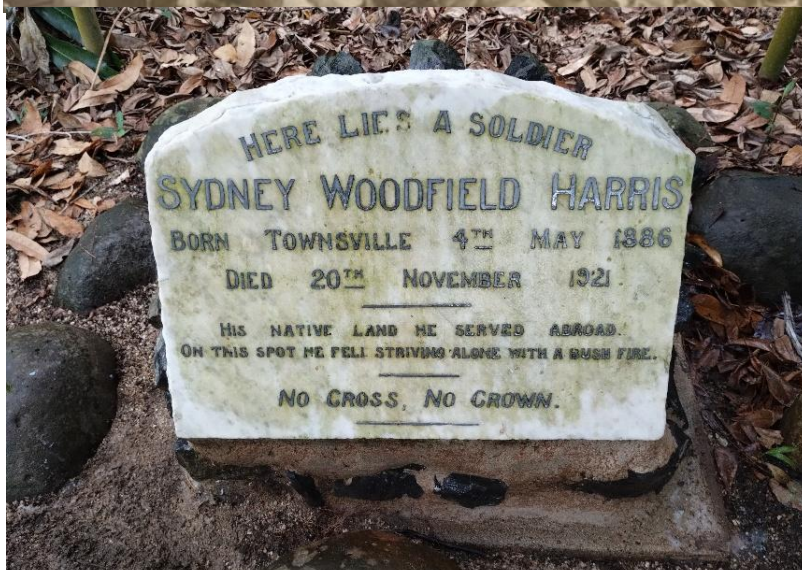


# SOLDIER #27

## SYDNEY WOODFIELD HARRIS



KEN GRAY

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Cover

Top: Troopship HMAS *Kanowna* being farewelled at Townsville wharf, 8 August 1914, Australian War Museum P00481.001.

Bottom Left: Syd Harris' headstone located in the *Norm Byrnes Arboretum* in Mission Beach. Bottom Right: Map of New Britain from *Google Earth*.



## SOLDIER #27: SYDNEY WOODFIELD HARRIS

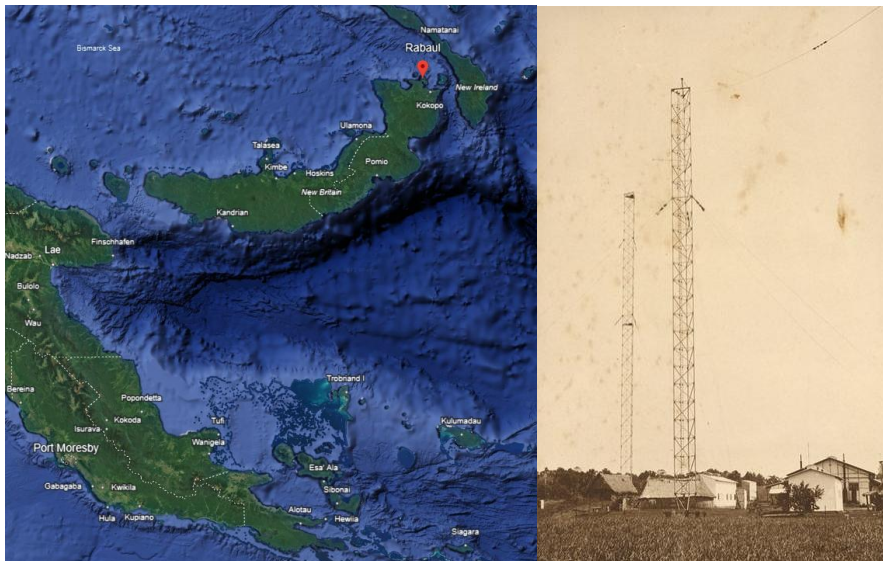
Syd Harris was a soldier with a dream to have a tropical horticultural plantation at Mission Beach north Queensland on a beachfront property he acquired before the war.

He was among the first Australians to enlist in WWI and served his country for the duration of the war at Rabaul in New Britain, New Guinea, and later, at the end of hostilities, being seconded to the New Guinea Department of Agriculture. His service number was amazingly low: #27. He boarded the HMTS (His Majesties Australian Troopship) *Kanowna* on 08 August 1914, only three days after war was declared. This was the first troopship to leave Australia in WWI.

One reason for the urgency was that Germany had a powerful radio transmitter at Bita Paka south of Rabaul which would be used to direct its battlecruisers and submarines and plunder British shipping, so Australia was tasked with its urgent removal as soon as war was declared on 05 August 1914.

### W A R

When Syd enlisted in 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 Redditch, England, and then migrated to Australia where she married Edwin Thomas Harris in 1885. They lived in Townsville right up until a tragic event overcame the family in 1905. Syd's father went missing, apparently having boarded a train for Sydney in September 1905. He was never to be found.

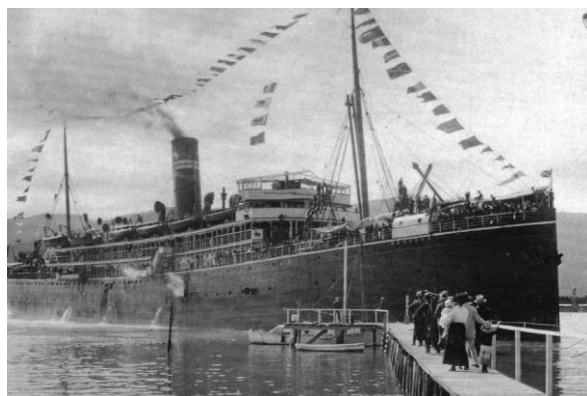


Left: Map from Google Earth showing New Britain and Rabaul. Right: The target - German radio tower New Britain, WWI.

Syd's grandnephew, Dr David G Hay informs us that that in 1910, Syd joined a militia group, *No 2. Company AGA* (Australian Garrison Artillery) Queensland. He also joined the Townsville Rifle Club and became a member of the Kennedy Regiment, a reserve force made up of rifle club members from Cairns, Townsville and many other smaller clubs spread along the length of the coast. The Queensland Government was always wary of an invasion in the north and that fear was heightened after Germany annexed New Britain in the late 1800s.

Because the Kennedy Regiment was already formed and almost ready for action, it was the first Australian infantry unit mobilised for service at the outbreak of WW1. It was made part of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Forces (AN&MEF) which was also to join a large contingent from Sydney.

The Queensland contingent of 1,000 reservists of the AN&MEF boarded the HMAT *Kanowna* in Townsville and was farewelled by a large crowd at the wharf showing what an enormous event this was (see cover image). En route to Thursday Island, they stopped in Cairns to pick up further recruits.



HMAT *Kanowna* ready to leave Cairns.

Their first stop was at Thursday Island. Volunteers for overseas service were sought from the thousand strong contingent and approximately 500, including Syd Harris signed up and were sent to take part in the capture of German New Guinea. They arrived in Port Moresby, but the stokers on their troopship went on strike, refusing to continue unless water was provided to wash off the coal dust. The crew of the *Kanowna* were civilians. This action was named a mutiny at the time, but subsequent investigations deemed it a strike, not a mutiny. They stayed in Port Moresby for almost three weeks before the Sydney contingent arrived. When the fleet arrived at Port Moresby, the fleet commander, Colonel W Holmes, declared the north Queensland troops to be poorly equipped and lacking in military experience. They were promptly sent back to Australia and arrived back in Townsville on 10 September 1914. They were discharged soon after.

The *Dirty 500*, as this group was later named were bitterly disappointed at missing the action in New Britain. They were up for the fight, but the Sydney troops were better trained and received further training en route at Palm Island. They were properly equipped and supported, and their troopship, the HMAT *Berrima*, was escorted by the light cruiser, HMAS *Sydney* and some destroyers whereas the *Kanowna* had no naval support.

The name *Dirty 500* referred to the 500 Kennedy Regiment men who volunteered to go to New Britain to oust the Germans. They were sent in haste by their officers with little equipment and only one set of clothes. When the fleet arrived, they had been there for three weeks without an opportunity to change their clothes or wash themselves or their clothes because there was almost no water available. They were short-changed and, through no fault of their own, excluded from the battle to come.

The battle for German New Guinea was at Bita Paka, south of Rabaul, 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 61 Germans and 240 Melanesian police surrendered after a one-day battle.

Most of the men in the *Dirty 500* soon re-enlisted with the AIF and were sent to Egypt and were to become a core of the troops that ended up in Gallipoli. Syd re-enlisted quickly on 07 November 1914 in Townsville, at age 28 (although his enlistment papers give his age as 30), and sailed from Sydney on 25 January 1915 on the HMAT *Eastern*. Syd noted his occupation at the time of enlistment as *clerk* with the Townsville Harbour Board. He was assigned to Tropical Unit, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, N&M Force, and sent to Rabaul, where he spent the next five years as part of a force of 375 people who administered the territory and defended and maintained the outpost.

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.

## CLUMP POINT (MISSION BEACH)

One of the first land lots in the Mission Beach district was selected by a Mackay man, W. Hyne, who won the 1,280 acre property (lot 21A) that straddled Clump 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. 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 four buyers including Syd Harris in time.

When Syd found himself struggling to cope with recurrent bouts of fever from earlier malarial infections, he decided to return to Australia and to establish his plantation. He took his collection of seeds and plants that he had imported from New Britain to Edmund Banfield on Dunk Island. Banfield offered to propagate them in his nursery while Syd was clearing the land and setting up his farm and home. The main plants he imported were 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>1</sup>

By June 1921, Syd was busy clearing his land. His dream was to live on the seashore in the beautiful, lush forests and create a vanilla plantation, which he thought was soon to be a reality. His long-time family-friend, Edmund Banfield, though living out on Dunk Island, clearly admired Syd, saying:<sup>2</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 land on 20 November 1921. It was Edmund Banfield<sup>3</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>4</sup>

His clothes were burned by the fire that 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.

Syd was only 35 years old.

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<sup>1</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>

<sup>2</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>3</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>4</sup> *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 14 December 1921, accessed on Trove, March 2022 at: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/62437147?searchTerm=Sydney%20Harris>

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>5</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 in the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* and *The Northern Miner* (Charters Towers) under the pseudonym, *the Beachcomber*. At times he wrote of local pioneers whom 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 about Syd as a person. In one column he spoke at length about Syd's goals and character:<sup>6</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 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.*

After his death, a brass cross and candlesticks were given to the church at Silkwood, which was built in a location close to the position of Syd's grave very near to the place where he died.

The gravesite was on the west side of today's Porter Promenade which was our first caravan park in 1962 (*The Hideaway*). The council relocated Syd's headstone to a site near the Progress Hall on the opposite side of the street then they relocated it later to its current location in the *Norm Byrnes Arboretum*.

Syd's grandnephew, Dr David Hay, has provided us with images and observations on the life of his great uncle, which are copied below.



Left: Sydney Harris aged around 11 years. Centre: Gift box from Princess Mary. Right: Card from Princess Mary.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Jones, *Cardwell Shire Story*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1961, p. 312, 313.

<sup>6</sup> *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 5 January 1922, accessed on Trove, March 2022 at: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/62430647?searchTerm=Syd%20Harris>

*I don't know a lot about Syd's youth. Both he and his younger brother, Bert, attended Townsville Grammar School; Syd was awarded a book Prize, Heroes and Kings, for General Merit, Form II Christmas 1897, and a second book, The Story of the Plants, is inscribed 'Sydney W Harris from his friend C H Hodges, Christmas 1900' (C H Hodges was the headmaster of the school). He must have been athletic, and the family collection includes an inscribed sporting shield as well as a silver christening mug. I have also obtained a copy of the history of Townsville Grammar School, 1888 – 1988, which reveals Syd was rewarded for his prowess, both as a scholar with prizes for Latin, Mathematics etc., and as an athlete with various prizes for running and athletics.*

*During his service, Syd received a small, gold-coloured tin box, with Christmas 1914 inscribed on the lid. Inside is a card from The Princess Mary with Christmas wishes to the troops fighting abroad. The following is offered as background information to the source of this box:*

*'In November 1914, an advertisement was placed in the national press inviting monetary contributions to a 'Sailors & Soldiers Christmas Fund' which had been created by Princess Mary, the seventeen year old daughter of King George V and Queen Mary. The purpose was to provide everyone who would be wearing the King's uniform on Christmas Day 1914 with a 'gift from the nation'. The response was truly overwhelming, and it was decided to spend the money on an embossed brass box, based on a design by Messrs Adshead and Ramsey. The contents varied considerably; officers and men on active service afloat or at the front received a box containing a combination of pipe, lighter, 1 oz of tobacco and twenty cigarettes in distinctive yellow monogrammed wrappers. Non-smokers and boys received a bullet pencil and a packet of sweets instead.'*

*Inside the box, along with the bullet pencil and commemorative card (dated 1915) is a small cardboard box containing a British War Medal (1914-1918) awarded to Sydney Woodfield Harris for his service in WW1.*

His headstone is nestled under the fronds of a lush endemic *Arenga australasica* clumping palm, just the sort of palm tree that Syd so adored.

*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.*

While Sydney Woodfield Harris only lived in this district for nine months before his tragic end at age 35, Mission Beach adopted Syd as their own heroic soldier and his memory, and his important story is nurtured by the Mission Beach Historical Society.

Syd will not be forgotten.

This story replaces an earlier story, *A Soldier's Dream*, Ken Gray, MBHS, H030 Version 1, 2022.

I acknowledge the generous assistance of Dr David G. Hay, who is the grandnephew of Syd Harris. He is a scientist, author and photographer and a partner in bookseller, *Tales from the Treehouse*. <https://talesfromthetreehouse.com.au/about-us/>. David also donated a plaque for the Council to erect at Syd's headstone site.