

GORDON SMITH - AUSTRALIA'S FIRST CENTURION



Paybook photograph, taken on enlistment in June 1940, of NX26819 Private Gordon Archibald Smith, 2/19th Battalion, Australian Infantry ¹

Gordon Archibald Smith, born 18 January 1902 in Burwood in NSW, was one of the most consistent racewalkers in NSW for a long period from the early 1920's right up to the outbreak of war.

Winning his first State Championship medal at 20 years of age, his 17 year career saw him accumulate 17 Gold and 5 Silver Medals in NSW State Championships, a silver in the 1935 Australian 50 km championship and a swag of State and Australasian records for distances from 15 miles upwards. The following list shows his wonderful championship record over this extended period.

1922	NSW 20 mile title	2 nd
1925	NSW 20 mile title	2 nd
1926	NSW 20 mile title	2 nd
	NSW 50 km title	2 nd
	NSW 15 mile title	1 st in 2:20:45 (New State road best time)
	NSW 50 mile title	1 st in 9:17:32 (New Australasian record).
		Course was from Sydney to Camden
1928	NSW 20 mile title	1 st in 3:23:23
	NSW 50 mile title	1 st in 9:24:08
	New state record for 15 miles	(2:18:15)
1929	NSW 50 km title	1 st in 5:10:27
	NSW 50 mile title	1 st in 9:28:49
		Course was from Sydney to Camden
	NSW 15 mile title	1 st in 2:08:10
	NSW 20 mile title	1 st in 3:15:31
1931	NSW 20 mile title	1 st in 3:07:49 (new State road best time)
	NSW 50 km title	1 st in 5:07:02
	NSW 15 mile title	1 st in 2:11:40
1932	NSW 50 km title	1 st in 5:35:08
1934	VIC 50 km title	3 rd in 5:01:32
1935	NSW 50 km title	1 st in 5:08:30
	AUST 50 km title	2 nd in 5:11:52
1936	NSW 30 km title	1 st in 2:56:15
1937	NSW 30 km title	1 st in 2:55:06
	NSW 50 km title	1 st in 5:28:03
	NSW 20 km title	2 nd in 1:55:03
1938	NSW 50 km title	1 st in 5:18:15

But it was when the first NSW 50 Mile Championship was scheduled in 1926 that Gordon really found his forte. On this occasion, he was second to Victorian Jack Lewis ² who set a new Australasian record of 9:20:24. But in the next scheduling of this championship in 1927, he won easily and broke Lewis's record with an excellent 9:17:32.4. The following newspaper cutting gives some details of the walk

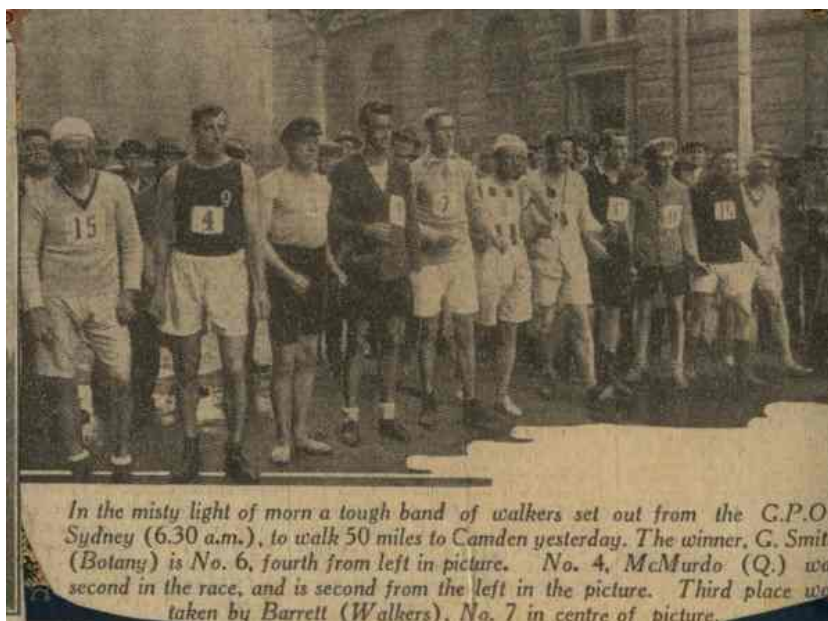
¹ Source: <http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/P02467.160>

² See <http://vrwc.org.au/tim-archive/wv-jack-lewis.pdf> for further details of Jack Lewis

In winning the 50 mile road walking championship of N.S.W. last Saturday in 9hr 18min 32 2-5sec, G. A. S. Smith clipped 2min 51 3-5sec off the Australasian record. The contest was over a course from Sydney to Camden, and at the finish the winner was enthusiastically cheered.

Smith was faster throughout than last year. Harper retired before 15 miles, Stone at 19 miles, Darke at 25 and Kingston at 30. At 27 miles, Smith was ahead of the best previous record by 2min 23sec, and he established new figures from there right to the finish. The best previous figures were: 30 miles 5.24.29 Barrett (1926); 35 miles 6.27.02 Barrett (1926); 40 miles 7.24.6 Lewis (1926); 45 miles 8.26.9 Lewis (1926); and 50 miles 9.20.24 Lewis (1926). Smith also shifted various kilometres and "hours" records. ³

Repeat wins in 1928 and 1929 stamped him as Australia's leading long distance walking exponent. Alas, although we do know that NSW 50 mile championships continued to be scheduled throughout the 1930s, the results are not available ⁴. But given that he continued to win the NSW titles over the shorter distances during this period, we can assume that he continued to excel in whatever long distance events were available.



The start of the 1929 NSW 50 Mile championship. Gordon Smith is fourth from the left in the dark top.

In particular, three outstanding long distance racewalks that Gordon did in 1937 and 1938 stand as his greatest achievements. More about these later on.

Like many walkers of the era, he also had an interest in bush walking and joined the Sydney Bush Walkers ⁵ in 1928 as a foundation member. In the early days of the Club he pioneered, with fellow club members, a number of routes, some of which are now popular walks. They included the first traverse of the Gangerang, where his name was given to the pass leading to the range from Kanagra ⁶ and the first trip down the Colo River.

In fact, he was one of the "Tiger Walkers" of Sydney Bush Walkers, a list that included Dot Butler and Max (Maxwell) Gentle (among others). The Tiger Walkers travelled light and fast in their explorations of new areas for which topographic maps did not exist. They were among the many who assembled information for the several Myles Dunphy sketch maps of the Blue Mountains. ⁷

He used his knowledge and experience of walking, together with a capacity for detailed planning, to organise a number of very enjoyable trips for his club mates. It would have been much easier for him to go on long walks with a few strong walkers, but he usually preferred to take a large party of average, or even weak members. By good team work they were enabled to enjoy walks they could never have done on their own. He lead his parties

³ Bert Gardiner Archives, Victorian Race Walking Club

⁴ When fire destroyed a Sydney pavilion in the 1970s, most of the archival materials of the New South Wales Amateur Walking Club were lost.

⁵ See <http://www.sbw.org.au/> for further information on the Sydney Bush Walkers

⁶ When Sydney Bush Walkers was formed in 1927, vast areas of now well known bushwalking country such as Kanangra Boyd National Park were still unexplored.

⁷ This and related information on the areas named after Gordon were written by Keith Maxwell (NSW Confederation of Bushwalking clubs) and passed onto me by Belinda Keir of the Sydney Bush Walkers

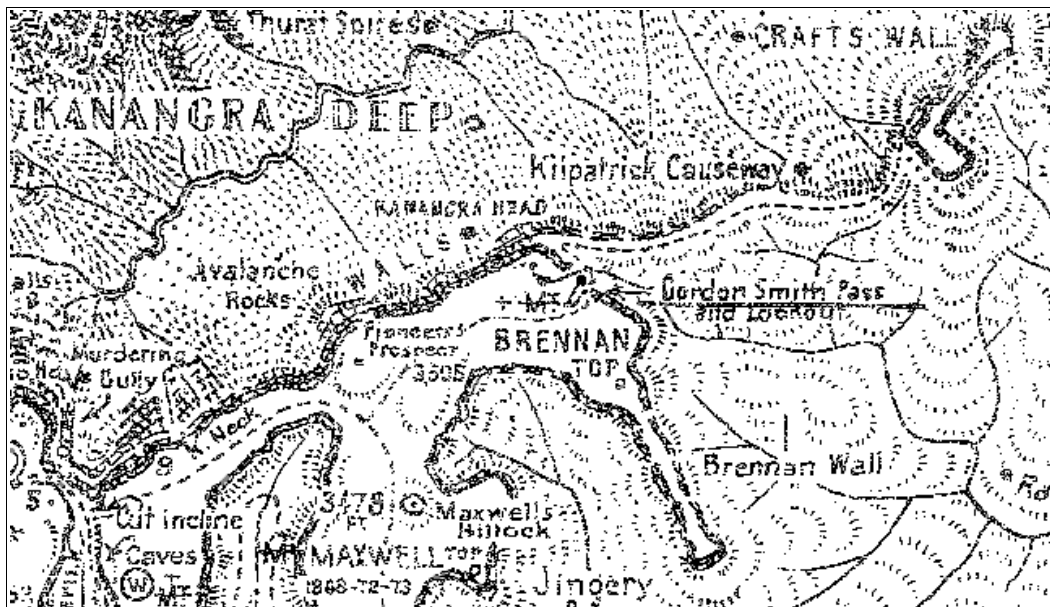
by quiet guidance and encouragement, never by assertion: which capacity is perhaps the measure of true leadership. His unassuming manner and quiet persuasiveness endeared him to all who knew him.⁸



Tigers at Carlons Head, 25 April 1937. Left to right - Jack Debert, Gordon Smith, Bill McCosker, Len Scotland, David Stead, Alex Colley, Hilma Galliot, Dot English, Norbert Carlon, Max Gentle. Photo: Alex Colley.⁹

Gordon's name appears on two localities.

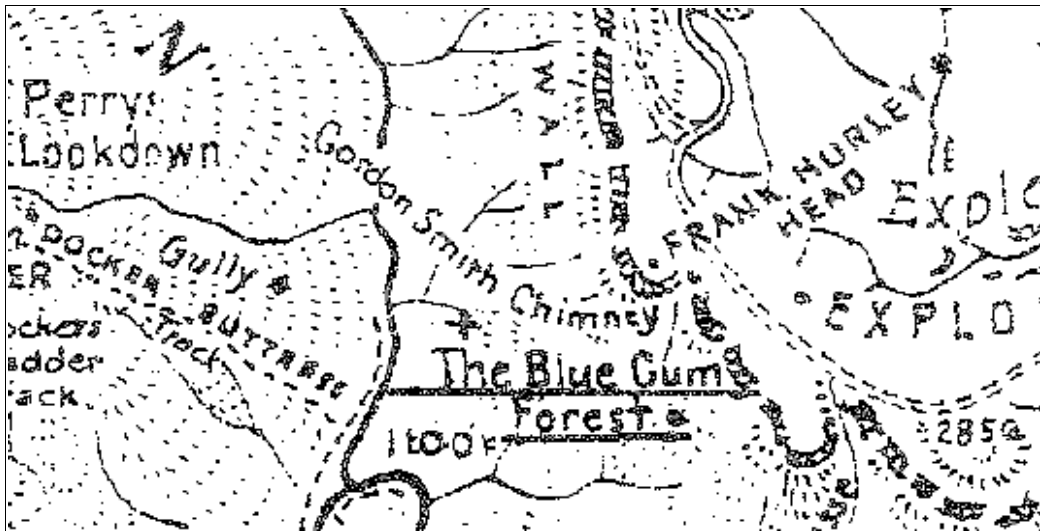
- When you venture towards Mt Cloudmaker from Kanangra Walls you descend **Gordon Smith Pass** off Mt Brennan as the last plateau of the Kanangra Walls massif.



- **The Gordon Smith Chimney** is a difficult pass to ascend from Blue Gum Forest up Banks Walls onto Mt Banks. Thus it is a pass through the high cliffs of the Grose Valley. The pass goes up between the Grose Walls and a tall separate block (to make the chimney) There may have been a rock fall so that this pass is now far less easy than when discovered. In January 1971 a Scout died from a fall while attempting to descend this pass at night. It was a difficult task to rescue his seriously injured companion.

⁸ This information supplied by Belinda Keir of the Sydney Bush Walkers

⁹ See http://www.sbw.org.au/Content_Common/pg-About-us-Sydney-Bushwalkers-Sydney-Bush-Walkers-Walking-Club-Sydney-Bushwalking-Bush-Walking.seo



And now to move swiftly to the sad end to this story. In June 1940 Gordon resigned from his Public Service position, said good bye to his wife and joined the long list of able bodied men who answered the call, enlisting in the 6th Infantry Battalion with the rank of Private. This was no easy decision – he was 38 years of age, had been married for 15 years (he married his wife Mary in 1923) and had a son Gordon, then aged 12. He was heavily involved in bushwalking and racewalking and had his own career.

Soon he embarked to Singapore and was transferred to 2/19 Infantry Battalion on Intelligence Duties. Able to read maps and negotiate unknown terrains, he was an obvious choice for such a role.



Gordon Smith (in middle, without hat) in Malaya in 1941

Official Caption: Lubok, Malaya. 1941-06. Members of 'I' Section, 2/19th Battalion, beside a truck enjoying a drink and a smoke. Identified are: Private (Pte) V. A. H. (Vern) Benjamin; Pte S. J. (Stan) McAlister; Sergeant (Sgt) W. H. (Bill) Tozer; Gordon Smith; Sgt M. J. (Maurie) Brennan; Pte R. S. (Bob) Evans; Sgt Jack Christie and Pte I. A. V. Melouny (driver, seated on the ground). (Donor R. Newton) ¹⁰

¹⁰ See <http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/P00102.047>



Klang, Malaya. 1941-11. Members of I Section Reconnaissance, 2/19th Battalion AIF, in the jungle near Jemaluang, studying their next move. Left to right: Private S. J. McAlister; ? Murray; Sergeant W. H. Tozer; Private V. P. H. (Vern) Benjamin; Gordon Smith (at rear).¹¹

In February 1942, when Singapore fell to the Japanese forces, he was listed as Missing in Action. By 1943, this had been amended to 'Prisoner of War'. He was one of the unlucky prisoners who was transferred to Sandakan in Borneo. In what was one of the darkest episodes of the Pacific Theatre of the war, he and the other prisoners in that camp endured forced labour, beatings, torture, starvation and illness. In 1945, two groups of about 500 of the fittest prisoners were marched out of the camp to Ranau in what became known as the Sandakan Death Marches.¹² He died on 8 March 1945.¹³ Of the 2345 Australian and British POWs who were imprisoned in this infamous camp in January 1945, only six survived. It is bitterly ironic that Australia's best long distance walking exponent should have died in such circumstances.

When he died, the significance of his wonderful long distance walks of 1937 and 1938 faded and it was not until the early 1970s, when the Australian Centurions¹⁴ were formed, that he was posthumously granted the title of the first Australian Centurion.

At the time of awarding him Centurion membership, the newly formed organisation had not been aware of his 1937 24 hour walk in which he completed 110 miles. So the official Australian Centurion records incorrectly show his 1938 walk as the first Centurion walk on Australian soil. Newspaper cuttings have since been found to confirm that his first 100 mile walk performance was in 1937. Details of his three extraordinary endurance feats of 1937 and 1938 now follow

1937, NSW 24 Hour Trial, Centennial Park, Sydney

1937 saw a unique event - a 24 hour walk. Smith was an enthusiastic starter and the brief reports state that he completed a distance of 110 miles 831 yards for an Australasian best. This was the first time that a walker had bettered the 100 mile standard within 24 hours in Australia in a judged walking contest . We can assume that he would have passed the 100 mile mark in a little over 22 hours.

Now onto 1938 when, in the space of one month, Smith completed 12 hour and 24 hour walks and shattered all existing records. His 12 hour walk resulted in new State records for 50 miles and 100 km and 12 hours. His 24 hour walk broke his own NSW State record set the previous year.

Sept 17 1938, NSW Amateur Walking Club 12 Hour Walking Trial, Centennial Park

The first of the two 1938 events was a 12 Hour Trial put on by the NSW Amateur Walking Club and staged in Centennial Park in Sydney. Along the way, he bettered his own 50 mile best time of 9:16, set in

¹¹ Source: <http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/P00102.042>

¹² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandakan_Death_Marches for further details of this infamous piece of Australian history

¹³ See <http://cas.awm.gov.au/photograph/P02467.160> for a brief summary of his war record and details of his last days

¹⁴ See <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~austcent/index.html> for further details of the Australian Centurions

mark in 3 hours 6 mins. 32 secs. to break the record by over 2 minutes and then retired. Smith began to draw away from the 48 year old Barrett while Stoddart walked her own race at the back of the field. Stead dropped out in the 143rd lap and Mitchell in the next, after covering about 38 miles. At a steady pace, Stoddart went round and round the track until she reached the 50 mile mark in 12 hours 16 minutes 45 seconds. Not surprisingly, she suffered from blistered feet and fatigue.

Barrett began to suffer from an ankle that was becoming worse with every step. He rested about 11.45 p.m. and had his ankle massaged with methylated spirits. He had then covered 58 miles and Smith was approximately 5 miles ahead of him. He made a gallant effort to continue, although in considerable pain, until he was persuaded to give in when he had done 78 miles. This left Smith on his own for the remainder of the race, to eventually complete a new Australasian 24 Hours Record distance of 113 miles 1309 yards..

Once the public realised it was illegal to charge for admission on Sundays, a large crowd gathered at the ground around midnight, after the closing of the Bankstown picture theatres. Many stayed through to the finish which was witnessed by a rowdy group of onlookers and supporters. After the race, Smith paid tribute to his masseur whom he said was a key factor in his success.

Again, the newspaper report says it all

Mon 17.10.1938
WALK RECORD IN 24 HOURS TRIAL
G. A. Smith's Effort NEARLY 114 MILES

Gordon A. Smith, of Summer Hill, set what officials of the New South Walkers Amateur Walking Club claimed to be the first official Australian record for a 24 hours road walking trial during the weekend by covering 113 miles, 1309 ½ yards at Bankstown Oval.

Apart from tiredness and several blisters on his feet, Smith showed little sign of his gruelling experience and finished his walk strongly. Smith averaged more than four miles an hour. Last year he covered 110 miles, 871 yards on the Centennial Park Circuit.

There was a large crowd at the ground at midnight, after the closing of the Bankstown picture theatres and there were a large number of people present at the finish yesterday morning.

Smith continued on his lone walk through the night and was given an ovation when he passed his previous best distance of 110 miles at about 9:45 am. He had then walked round the track 450 times in 23 hours, 12 mins 45 secs. He was suffering from the heat and frequently placed a panama hat filled with water on his head. He was given a great reception at the finish.

Smith attributed his fitness to careful massage treatment. He had three-quarters of an hour's massage by his trainer, Mr Victor Revelle, before he started, and said that his muscles were in fine condition. After the event he was again massaged on the limbs.

We remember Gordon as one of our greatest Australian walkers, as tough as they come and as game as can be. He may have died young but his memory lives on in various forms

- The Australian Centurions acknowledge him as Australian Centurion Number 1 and annually award the Gordon Smith Memorial Trophy to the best Centurion performance done on Australian soil.¹⁵
- The NSW Race Walking Club award the Gordon Smith Perpetual Trophy annually to the winner of the NSW 50 km racewalking championship.¹⁶
- He is represented on the honor roll of NSW bushwalkers and is remembered each year at a memorial at Splendour Rock in the Blue Mountains.¹⁷
- His name is remembered with the Gordon Smith Pass off Mt Brennan and the Gordon Smith Chimney, a difficult pass which ascends from Blue Gum Forest up Banks Walls onto Mt Banks.

15 See <http://home.vicnet.net.au/%7Eaustcent/Gordon%20Smith%20Award.pdf>

16 See the Trophies Section of website <http://www.nswracewalkingclub.com/>

17 See <http://www.bushwalking.org.au/SplendourRock.html>