

Military Cross (MC)

Martin James Knight-Willis

42207. Lieutenant.
Royal NZ Infantry Regiment
Whisky Two Company

NZ Gazette Number 20 dated 2 April 1970

CITATION

Lieutenant Knight-Willis joined the Regular Force in January 1966 and, prior to his commissioning into Infantry in June 1967, saw service as an NCO with the New Zealand Special Air Service Squadron in Borneo.

He arrived in Vietnam in **November 1968** as a platoon commander in Whisky Two Company.

On the 15th April 1969¹, his platoon contacted a larger enemy force well entrenched in a bunker system. Lieutenant Knight-Willis immediately moved to the front of his platoon to direct their fire and that of supporting artillery and mortars. Burdened with a number of wounded and realising the enemy was too large to be overcome he skilfully broke contact, defeating a flanking attack in the process.

As soon as his wounded had been evacuated, Lieutenant Knight-Willis led his platoon back to the enemy position and started to engage it². In the ensuing action he suffered a serious shrapnel wound to the head but continued to direct the battle. It was only after the enemy position had been struck from the air and he had led his platoon back to the company base that Lieutenant Knight-Willis was evacuated.

A search of the area the next day showed that an enemy force, vastly superior in numbers, had vacated its position immediately prior to the air strike, and as a direct result of the determined assaults led by Lieutenant Knight-Willis.

On the 3rd June 1969, his platoon engaged and killed two enemy soldiers. The platoon was immediately engaged from three sides with automatic weapons. Lieutenant Knight-Willis again displayed outstanding courage and leadership, moving constantly amongst his soldiers, encouraging them and directing their fire. Throughout the action he skilfully directed the fire of supporting mortars, artillery and aircraft, and for nearly four and a half hours, until the enemy withdrew, his platoon resisted every enemy attack to defeat it. It was subsequently established that the platoon had encountered an enemy battalion position.

¹ 15-4-69 Pte Illolahia J, WIA; Sgt Hornbrook LD, WIA; Pte Kershaw J, WIA.

² 15-4-69 2Lt Knight-Willis MJ, WIA; Pte Honeycombe GE, WIA.

On both occasions large enemy forces were dislodged and forced to retire because of the aggressive and determined leadership of Lieutenant Knight-Willis, his calmness under heavy enemy fire and the skill he displayed in directing the fire of his own soldiers and supporting units.

His personal example in placing himself in dangerous situations during these actions attests to the courage and outstanding leadership displayed by Lieutenant Knight-Willis.

Additional Notes to the Citation

Martin James Knight-Willis

42207. Lieutenant.
Royal NZ Infantry Regiment
Whisky Two Company

On the 15th April 1969³,
[See 4RAR History]

On the 3rd June 1969⁴, 3 Platoon, Whisky Two Company (2Lt MJ Knight-Willis) had searched a well used enemy track on the edge of a rubber plantation and primary jungle. His 12-man patrol located the track and set an ambush for a few hours. Knight-Willis saw two VC approaching through the rubber plantation, but could not engage the two as his sentries were too close to the VC. Pte R Wihongi saw the enemy and opened fire at a range of 20 metres, wounding one VC, who fell groaning. The other VC returned fire and withdrew back along the track with the wounded man, leaving a heavy blood trail. The return fire from the VC wounded one member of 3 Pl (name?).

Knight-Willis accepted a Tracker team with a dog to follow up on the tracks of the two VC into a rocky re-entrant. Sounds of movement and voices calling out convinced Knight-Willis that there were a number of enemy in the area trying to draw his small patrol into a disadvantageous position.

He withdrew from the area to return later with the whole platoon, the area being engaged by artillery.

Later that evening, the platoon was moving cautiously forward along the same track when a VC walked into the patrol. He was killed by the scout, Pte Wihongi. An AK47 was recovered from the VC, who was later identified as being a squad commander from C195 Reconnaissance Company.

The contact was just before last light and the platoon could hear voices nearby, indicating a VC base camp. Mortar and artillery fire was called down onto the likely target area as the platoon withdrew out of the area for the night.

³ 4RAR history tba

⁴ “We too were ANZAC’s” – Regimental History for 6RAR (ANZAC) Bn. Lt Col Brian Avery, page 93.

On the 5th June 1969⁵, 3 Platoon, Whisky Two Company (2Lt MJ Knight-Willis), patrolling to the north looking for the enemy base camp, had reached a point in thick scrub about 4 km from FSPB Virginia, when voices were heard.

The lead section commander of 3 PI, Cpl JR Gatenby, started to deploy his section into an immediate ambush, when two VC walked into his position from the north. Gatenby killed one VC and his machine gunner opened fire with the M60, wounding the other. 3 PI closed up on the site of the contact and were heavily engaged with fire from their north and north-east.

The enemy fire was low and well controlled, concentrating on the sound of Kiwi voices. The area of the contact was in heavy bamboo clumps, restricting movement, but the lead sections of 3 PI returned fire as the enemy attempted to counter-attack from both flanks.

A light fire team was called in and the area also engaged with artillery fire. The thick canopy and undergrowth made identification of the Kiwi position to the (helicopter) light fire team difficult, and the VC threw red smoke to the rear of 3 PI in an attempt to confuse the helicopter crews.

The helicopters were able to put accurate suppressive fire into the VC position until they exhausted their ammunition and fuel. During one low pass by the fire team, one helicopter was engaged by a 12.7mm heavy machine gun, forcing it down just south of the contact area.

At 1115 hours, after the area was engaged by supporting fire, 3 PI began to sweep forward. The enemy retaliated with a burst of RPD (Light machine gun) fire, hitting Cpl JR Gatenby in the head and killing him. Gatenby had been kneeling, directing his section, and the enemy machine gunner must have aimed at the sound of his voice. Knight-Willis withdrew his lead section; Ptes B Waihua and PD Colville brought Gatenby's body out.

The enemy were entrenched in bunkers to the north and north-east of Whisky Company, and attempted to outflank 3 PI, at one stage getting behind the platoon. 3 PI fought back strongly and the contact continued throughout a very long day. At dusk, the platoon commenced to withdraw from the position, calling down artillery and mortar fire and using a light fire team to break contact.

2 PI (Lt R Milne) arrived in the area to support 3 PI by providing a firm base during its attempts to break contact under constant enemy pressure. 3 Platoon was accompanied by a Mortar Platoon MFC, Cpl ER Blackledge, who adjusted both mortars and artillery throughout the contact.

⁵ "We too were ANZAC's" – Regimental History for 6RAR (ANZAC) Bn. Lt Col Brian Avery, page 97.

Whisky Company returned to the bunker system the next morning in force and cleared the area; a number of VC had been killed. The enemy were identified as a force of up to 100 members of 33NVA Regt; the talking apparently emanated from a political lecture.