

The toll of WAR

Curator Ben Wellings searched through the Museum archives to tell the story of three brothers featured in the Nation gallery

Australia's participation in some of the major conflicts during the 20th century created a legacy of loss affecting millions of Australians. Canberra's Eddison family was particularly affected.

When the Second World War broke out in September 1939, the Eddisons' eldest and youngest sons, Tom and Keith, were already in uniform. The third, Jack, enlisted for overseas service in 1940.

Tom, eldest of the brothers, was a keen horseman. He left Australia in 1934, spending several years in Palestine as a mounted policeman. By the late 1930s he had made his way to England and joined the Royal Air Force. He kept in regular contact with his family at Cotter Road. On 23 September 1940, Tom wrote to his mother: 'So Jack has joined up too...! Good show – but I still think he should have stayed to help Dad. Two in the service out of a family is enough when there is a place to be run.'

By 1941 Tom was flying cumbersome Wellington bombers over the European continent – no match for German nightfighters. Tom and his crew were shot down over the Netherlands on 9 May 1941. His body was recovered by Dutch locals and buried in Holland. He was the first of the Eddison brothers to die in active service.

Keith, the youngest brother, had joined the RAAF, graduating from Point Cook in 1939. He was posted to New Guinea in January 1943, flying low-level sorties over Japanese-occupied territory. On 27 May, Keith was shot down over Lae. It was not until 10 years after Keith's death that Mrs Eddison was able to visit his tombstone at the newly unveiled Cross of Sacrifice at Lae cemetery in Papua New Guinea.

Although the absence of his brothers from Yamba created increased concern and work for the family at home, Jack didn't want to be the only Eddison son left behind. Jack joined the infantry and sailed for Singapore in February 1941, where he was taken prisoner the following year.

Transferred to a prison camp near Tokyo, Jack managed to get some news home. On 30 May 1943, Jack wrote to his mother: 'Dear Mum. Hope you and family are in the pink. You must be all pretty busy. Hope there's a good lambing this season. Hope you're not worrying about me, as I am fit and well. Give my regards to all at Eucumbene. Love, Jack.' Unbeknownst to his family, Jack died eight days after writing this postcard.

For the Eddisons, relief at the end of the war was tempered by confirmation of Jack's death. The family had received no news of Jack for two years. His father, Walter, had always feared the worse. With the terrible confirmation came the banality of sorting out Jack's estate through solicitors and the army.

A terse communication from the Cooma branch manager of the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney Limited informed Walter Eddison he was executor of his son's will. However, attached was a far more personal note from the manager: 'It seems so unsatisfactory just to tell you how sorry we all are in the tremendous sacrifice your Boys have made, and my wife and I extend to you and your family our deepest sympathy.'

The three brothers are publicly remembered in several Canberra locations. A plaque was laid at St John's Church, Ainslie in 1946, while the Canberra Grammar School, alma mater of all three, named one of its school houses in their honour. The story of Walter Eddison's emigration from England to Australia is displayed in the Museum's Horizons gallery. The story of his sons' untimely deaths is currently on display in the Nation gallery.

*Photos from top to bottom: Tom Eddison, Keith Eddison, Jack Eddison
Photos: Courtesy Marion Douglas*

