



My Story

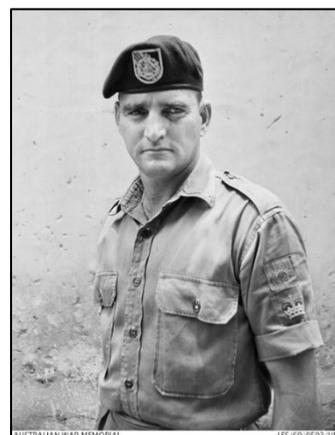
Keith Payne VC

On 24th May 1969, in Kontum Province in Vietnam, Warrant Officer Class II Keith Payne was Commanding 212th Company of 1st Mobile Strike Force Battalion when the battalion was attacked by a North Vietnamese force of superior strength. The enemy isolated the two leading companies, one of which was Warrant Officer Class II Payne's, and with heavy mortar and rocket support assaulted their position from three directions simultaneously. Under this heavy attack the indigenous soldiers began to fall back.

Directly exposing himself to the enemy's fire, Warrant Officer Class II Payne, through his own efforts, temporarily held off the assaults by alternately firing his weapon and running from position to position collecting grenades and throwing them at the assaulting enemy. While doing this he was wounded in the hands and arms. Despite his outstanding efforts, the indigenous soldiers gave way under the enemy's increased pressure and the Battalion Commander, together with several advisors and a few soldiers, withdrew.

Paying no attention to his wounds and under extremely heavy enemy fire, Warrant Officer Class II Payne covered this withdrawal by again throwing grenades and firing his own weapon at the enemy who were attempting to follow up. Still under fire, he then ran across exposed ground to head off his own troops who were withdrawing in disorder. He successfully stopped them and organised the remnants of his and the second company into a temporary defensive perimeter by nightfall.

Having achieved this, Warrant Officer Class II Payne of his own accord and at great personal risk, moved out of the perimeter into the darkness alone in an attempt to find the wounded and other indigenous soldiers. Some had been left on the position and others were scattered in the





area. Although the enemy were still occupying the previous position, Warrant Officer Class II Payne, with complete disregard for his own life, crawled back on to it and extricated several wounded soldiers. He then continued to search the area, in which the enemy were also moving and firing, for some three hours. He finally collected forty lost soldiers, some of whom had been wounded, and returned with this group to the temporary defensive perimeter he had left, only to find that the remainder of the battalion had moved back.

Undeterred by this setback and personally assisting a seriously wounded American advisor he led the group through the enemy to the safety of his battalion base. His sustained and heroic personal efforts in this action were outstanding and undoubtedly saved the lives of a large number of his indigenous soldiers and several of his fellow advisors.

Extraordinary Valour and Gallantry.

There is no greater courage than to risk one's life in the defence of others. In the Australian military, extraordinary acts of bravery in the face of the enemy are recognised by the Victoria Cross (VC). Warrant Officer Class II Payne's repeated acts of exceptional personal bravery and unselfish conduct in this operation were an inspiration to all Vietnamese, United States and Australian soldiers who served with him. His conspicuous gallantry was in the highest traditions of the Australian Army.

The Queen was graciously pleased, on the advice of Her Majesty's Australian Ministers, to approve the award of the Victoria Cross to Warrant Officer Class II Keith PAYNE, 12222. Royal Australian Infantry Regiment in 1970.



In the Service of Others, Always

Keith Payne is the oldest living Australian recipient of the original Victoria Cross. He earned 23 service medals over the course of his military career, as well as a Medal of the Order of Australia.

He is one of the most decorated soldiers of Australia and continues to inspire others.

Birriliburu elder Rita Cutter with Keith, who is a strong advocate for Wiluna and the Martu people.
Photo taken in 2020.





Keith was born at Ingham, in Queensland, (between Townsville and Cairns) on 30th August 1933. He attended Ingham State School and afterwards became an apprentice cabinet-maker. During this time he also served with the 31st Australian Infantry Battalion in the Citizens' Military Force. Seeking greater opportunities, he joined the Australian Regular Army in August 1951 and after his basic and initial employment training was posted to the 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (2RAR) in December 1951.

He was transferred to the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR) in July 1952 and later that month was sent to Japan as an infantry reinforcement. In September 1952 he was sent to Korea, where he joined his unit. He served with the battalion until they were rotated out of Korea in March 1953, whereupon he was taken on strength of Headquarters, 28th British Commonwealth Brigade. He remained with this formation until the end of the Korean War, and returned to Australia in August 1953.

In December 1954 he married Florence Plaw, a member of the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps. He was promoted to corporal the following year and spent much of the next five years attending various courses and schools of instruction to further his army career.

In February 1960 he was posted to the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), then based at Enoggera in Queensland. He was promoted to sergeant in July 1961 and deployed to Malaysia in August 1963. During an operation on the Malay-Thai border in October 1964, he was slightly injured when he fell into a river as he was crossing. He remained on duty and returned to Australia with 3RAR in February 1965.



Later that month Keith was posted to the 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment. However, the posting was only brief and in June that year he was appointed as an instructor to the Officer Training Unit at Scheyville, New South Wales.

In February 1967 he joined the 2nd Pacific Islands Regiment in Papua New Guinea. He was promoted to warrant officer class 2 in May that year and returned to Brisbane at the conclusion of his posting in March 1968.

On 24 February 1969 he was appointed to the Australian Army Training Team in Vietnam. In May that year he was commanding the 212th Company of the 1st Mobile Strike Force Battalion when it was attacked by a strong North Vietnamese force. His company was isolated and, surrounded on three sides, Payne's Vietnamese troops began to fall back. Payne, by now wounded in the hands and arms and under heavy fire, covered the withdrawal before organising his troops into a defensive perimeter.

Years later, asked whether he was afraid, Payne replied, "My God yes, yes, I was." Payne's actions that night earned him the Victoria Cross.



He was evacuated to Brisbane in September suffering from an illness, receiving a warm reception at the Brisbane airport before entering hospital. He had recovered by November, and in January 1970 was posted as an instructor to the Royal Military College, Duntroon.

Keith Payne received his VC from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II aboard the Royal Yacht, Britannia in Brisbane on 13 April 1970. He was made a Freeman of the city and of the shire in which his hometown was located.



A park in Stafford, Brisbane, where he lived, was also named after him. He received the Distinguished Service Cross and the Silver Star from the United States, and the Republic of Vietnam awarded him the Cross of Gallantry with Bronze Star. He retired from the army in 1975, but saw further action as a captain with the Army of the Sultan of Oman during the Dhofar War.

He returned to Australia and became active in the veteran community, particularly in counselling sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder.

So many people these days are too judgemental. I can tell just by looking at them.