

FOR PRESS :

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AWARD OF V. C. FOR GALLANTRY IN VIET NAM

Statement by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt

Her Majesty The Queen has bestowed posthumously the award of the Victoria Cross upon the late Warrant Officer Class 2 Kevin Arthur Wheatley.

Warrant Officer Wheatley, who came from Sydney, was a member of the Australian Army Training Team Viet Nam from February, 1965 until his death on 13th November, 1965.

Warrant Officer Wheatley displayed magnificent courage in attempting to rescue a wounded comrade, Warrant Officer R. J. Swanton of Brisbane, in the face of an overwhelming Viet Cong force estimated at more than a company.

On 13th November, 1965, a Vietnamese Civil Irregular Defence Group Company commenced a search and destroy operation in the Tra Bong Valley, Quang Nai Province. Warrant Officers Wheatley and Swanton accompanied the force with the right-hand platoon. Warrant Officer Wheatley sent a radio message to the centre platoon to report contact with Viet Cong elements. The Viet Cong resistance increased in strength until finally Warrant Officer Wheatley asked for assistance.

While the centre platoon was working towards the action area, Warrant Officer Wheatley reported that Warrant Officer Swanton had been hit in the chest, and requested an air strike and an aircraft for the evacuation of casualties.

Warrant Officer Wheatley refused to abandon his dying comrade when the company was forced to retreat. Under heavy machine gun and automatic rifle fire, he managed to half drag, half carry Warrant Officer Swanton from the open rice paddies to a wooded area some 200 yards away.

During this time he was assisted by Private Dinh Do, a member of the company who, when the Viet Cong were only some ten yards away, urged Warrant Officer Wheatley to leave his dying comrade. Again he refused, and was seen to pull the pins from two grenades and calmly await the Viet Cong holding one grenade in each hand. Shortly afterwards, two grenade explosions were heard, followed by several bursts of fire.

The two bodies were found at first light next morning after the fighting had ceased, with Warrant Officer Wheatley lying beside Warrant Officer Swanton. Both had died of gunshot wounds.

Warrant Officer Wheatley showed outstanding heroism, determination and unflinching devotion to a wounded comrade in the face of imminent threat to his own life. His example takes a place of pride in the story of Australia's fighting men.

CANBERRA,
14th December, 1966.

The Prime Minister today sent the following telegram to the late Warrant Officer Wheatley's widow :-

"On behalf of the Commonwealth Government, my colleagues and I offer you our most sincere commendation of the award of the Victoria Cross bestowed by Her Majesty The Queen upon your late husband. His heroism and unflinching devotion to a wounded comrade should be a source of inspiration and pride to all Australians.

BACKGROUND

Warrant Officer Wheatley, who was born on the 13th March, 1937, enlisted in the Regular Army in 1956. He served in Malaya with the 3rd Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment from 1957 to 1959 and then with the 2nd and 1st Battalions of the Regiment until February, 1965, when he was posted to the Australian Army Training Team Viet Nam. Warrant Officer Wheatley's posting in this area had been distinguished by meritorious and gallant service.

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Warrant Officer Wheatley's award is the 93rd V.C. awarded to an Australian and the first since World War II.

The last award was made on 22nd January, 1946, to the late Private Frank John Partridge for action at Bougainville on 24th July, 1945
