

JACK DEBERT (C 1A) - A LOST CENTURION PERFORMANCE

C1A Jack Debert Centennial Park, Sydney 15-16 Oct 1937 23:59:00 (approx)

When the Australian Centurions were setup in 1971, the founders searched for any retrospective 100 mile walk performances and found **Gordon Smith's** 1938 walk of 113 miles 1390 yards at Bankstown Oval in Sydney. In fact, they were even luckier as the newspaper article that they found confirmed the date and actually quoted his 100 mile split which was 20:58:09. They were then able to retrospectively award him AC Number 1 and that was added to the centurion honour board when it was created.

Back in the 1990s when I was browsing through the scrapbooks of the late Bert Gardiner, I came across a further cutting which talked of a NSW Amateur Walkers Club 24 Hour Walk held the previous year in Centennial Park in Sydney, which had also been won by Gordon Smith. On that occasion, he had achieved a total distance of 110 miles and 831 yards. Unfortunately the cutting did not include a 100 mile split or give the exact date. I made a decision to keep the honour board and the club records showing C1 for 1938, but did document this additional earlier walk in my centurions history archive.

The founders did not find any info on his earlier 1937 centurion walk when doing their research, mainly because the NSW Racewalking Club had lost all its archives in a fire in the early seventies. It was a tragic loss which meant much of this sort of historical information had been lost.

I was doing a few things historical in November 2019 and decided to search in Trove (the Aust online repository in which many of the old newspapers can now be accessed in digital form) to see if I could find out any more about that 1937 race. A lot of additional papers from years past have been added in recent times and I thought I might get lucky.

Lo and behold, when I browsed Trove, I found multiple newspaper reports of the 1937 NSW Amateur Walkers Club 24 Hour race. The newspaper reports all confirm the race date as 10-11 October 1937 and confirm Gordon's winning distance of 110 miles. The articles also identify one additional fascinating fact - Gordon was one of two walkers to complete in excess of 100 miles on that day in Centennial Park in Sydney. **Fellow NSW walker Jack Debert is recorded in the news reports as having covered 100 miles 266 yards to finish second.**

See for instance the article below which was published in the Sydney Morning Herald of Monday 11th October 1937: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/17418034>.

THREE COMPLETE TASK. WINNER COVERS 110 MILES.

Eleven hardy members of the New South Wales Walking Club set out at 1.30 pm on Saturday on the first 24 hours' endurance walking contest held in Sydney. Three of them having braved the cool night air and the rain that fell yesterday morning completed the one-day test yesterday afternoon. Some of those who started on Saturday on the first of the two-mile laps set in Centennial Park took advantage of the fact that a 30-mile event had also been arranged, and retired when they had covered that distance. Among these was a woman competitor, Miss D. English.

The winner of the one-day contest was the favourite, Gordon Smith, who is 38 years old, and has been a successful walker for 14 years. He is the holder of all the State's distance records and also the 50 kilometres championship. Smith established an early lead from Jack Debert and Dave Stead and finished strongly having covered 110 miles and 831 yards He had set himself a schedule for 110 miles.

Two officials remained at the park all night to check the walkers at the end of each two miles and to attend to their wants. Three other officials assisted them at intervals. The competitors were supplied with coffee, energising fruits and other specially prepared food. Smith consumed a considerable amount of glucose.

Massage treatment was available to the walkers and they had the option of adjourning to snatch a brief sleep if they so desired. Those who completed the full day had little rest. An official stated last night that Smith had received some massage treatment, but had not been off the course for a total period of more than 15 minutes.

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| 1. G. A. S. Smith | 110 miles 831 yards |
| 2. J. Debert | 100 miles 266 yards |
| 3. D. D. Stead | 80 miles 371 yards |
| 4. C. N. Smith | retired at 20 miles (4hrs 11m 3s) |
| 5. M. D. English | retired at 30 miles (7h 11m 45s) |

The winner's sectional checkings showed:

10 miles in 1h 54m 10s; 20 miles, 3h 51m 1s; 30 miles, 5h 49m 55s; 40 miles, 7h 56m 48s; 50 miles, 10h 7m 50s; 80 miles, 17h 2m 14s; 100 miles, 21h 38m 4s; 110 miles, 23h 55m 20s.

A 30-mile scratch race held in addition to the long race

1. *W. Hall* *5h 49m 55s*
2. *M. Gentle* *6h 12m 45s*

After discussions amongst the Australian Centurions Executive, Jack Debert was retrospectively awarded a special Centurion Badge 1A and is now honoured as Australia's second Centurion. As his 100 mile split was not known, his final 24 Hour distance of 100 Miles 266 Yards has been used to estimate a 100 mile time of approximately 23:59:00.

The first two centurion walks in Australia are now recorded as follows

C1	Gordon Smith	Centennial Park, Sydney	15-16 Oct 1937	21:38:04
C1A	Jack Debert	Centennial Park, Sydney	15-16 Oct 1937	23:59:00 (approx)

Like Gordon Smith, Jack Debert was a member of the *Sydney Bush Walkers* and mixed racewalking with bushwalking, as was the done thing in those days. In fact, Jack was the driving force behind the creation of the S.B.W..

Before the Sydney Bush Walkers came into being, there was no mixed recreational walking club in Sydney. Gradually, however, it became apparent that there was a growing need for a new and freer type of walking club than those existing at the time. One of the first moves in this direction came from Jack, who wrote a letter to *The Sydney Sun* suggesting the formation of "a Hiker's club, where hikers could meet and discuss routes, places of interest etc." Interest quickly built and, on 21st October 1927, the new club was created and its objects and constitution drawn up. Thus the S.B.W. came into being, although it was not until a couple of meetings later that the name *The Sydney Bush Walkers* was chosen. Jack was elected Chairman and later President at the meeting of 10/2/1928.

By 1930, he was club secretary, as a snippet in the Australian Women's Mirror of 17th May 1930 confirms (see <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-405976411/view?sectionId=nla.obj-418696101&partId=nla.obj-406126404#page/n41/mode/lup>):

The headquarters of Sydney Bush Walkers' Club is third floor, 258 George-street, Sydney. Intending members of either sex, must be over 16, must attend at least two of the club's scheduled one-day (or longer) walks, and then be nominated by any member; seconded by an other and supported by five others. Annual sub., 10/-; badge, 2/6. Mr. Jack Debert, Ridley Court, Marine Parade, Maroubra, is secretary.

Jack was also one of the *Tiger Walkers* of Sydney Bush Walkers, a list that included Gordon Smith. 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. There are many articles about the Tiger Walkers in the archives of the Sydney Bush Walkers, and both Jack and Gordon feature as central characters in them. Some of the more interesting ones include

Three "Tigers" On A Training Trip ... By Jack Debert
The Sydney Bushwalker, October 1938
https://sbw.ozultimate.com/wiki/193810#three_tigers_on_a_training_trip

The Epic Gangerang Trip ... By Gordon Smith
The Sydney Bushwalker, September 1964
<https://sbw.ozultimate.com/1964/196409.pdf>

82 Miles in Two Days: The "TIGERS" Go for Another Walk ... By D.D. Stead
The Sydney Bushwalker, January 1938
https://sbw.ozultimate.com/wiki/193801#miles_in_two_days

The final of the 3 articles details a gruelling two day walk undertaken on the weekend of 22-23 September 1937 by Gordon Smith, Jack Debert, Alec Colley, Bert Whinier and Dave Stead.

We travelled very light - all wore light rubber shoes or sandshoes - the only equipment being groundsheets and torches, one first-aid kit and last but by no means least, the schedule. ... One of the reasons for the trip was that

it would be part of our training for the 24 hour walk which was held a fortnight later and it was really very pleasant to be training and at the same time to be able to enjoy such scenic beauty.



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.

A couple of other Sydney Bush Walkers photos of that era also capture Jack the bushwalker.



Left: Sydney Bush Walkers in the Blue Mountains in 1941 - Norman Hellyer, Jack Debert, May Boyd, Bert Whillier, Reg Alder and Dick Jackson

Right: Sydney Bush Walkers on an outdoor trip in 1940 - Gordon Smith, Mary Stoddart, Doris Young and Jack Debert are the rightmost 4 walkers

We see a tall wiry bespectacled man, obviously at ease in the bush and physically very fit. It is unsurprising that he should have put his hand up for the 1937 Centennial Park 24 Hour walk and that he should have completed 100 miles.

Mt Debert (sometimes unkindly known as *Deberts Knob*), off the end of *Narrow Neck*, in the *Wild Dog Mountains* near *Katoomba* is named after him. It used to be a popular bushwalking area in the 1920s and 1930s due to the easy

access from Katoomba. Much of the early exploration was done by bushwalkers such as Frank Duncan, Ern Austen and Jack Debert. It is still rugged and challenging country. See more at <https://bushwalkingnsw.com/walk.php?nid=732>.

Interestingly, *the Ultra-Trail Australia 100 track ultra* traverses Mt Debert - somehow a fitting tribute to Jack. See the course description at <https://www.ultratrailaustralia.com.au/races/100km/entry-details>.

Jack Debert features in one further long distance walking race from that period. On 17th September 1938, the NSW Amateur Walking Club put on a 12 Hour Walking Trial at Centennial Park and both Gordon Smith and Jack Debert were amongst the starters. On that occasion, Gordon bettered his own 50 mile best time of 9:16, set in 1927 and went on to set a swag of new records. The final result showed him winning the event by over 5 miles, with Jack in third place with a fine 57 miles 781m (92.45km). Second placed H.W. Barrett was an English walker who had previously competed in the London to Brighton walk. Max Gentle, who finished fourth, was another of the Tiger Walkers who mixed bushwalking with racewalking. The impressive final distances confirm their walking credentials.

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

1. Gordon Smith	65 miles 781 yards	(50 miles in 8:50:25, 100 km in 11:21:30)
2. H.W. Barrett	59 miles 1367 yards	(96.5km)
3. Jack Debert	57 miles 781 yards	(92.4km)
4. Max Gentle	54 miles 414 yards	
5. M Stannett	53 miles 1514 yards	

Jack remained actively involved in the Sydney Bush Walkers until he joined the Royal Australian Air Forces (RAAF) in 1941, rising to the rank of Flight Lieutenant and serving until his discharge on 23 October 1945.

In later years he moved to Forster, where he was involved in the management of *The Advocate* for a number of years. At the time of his death on 13th April 1976, aged 76, he was president of the Forster Arts, Crafts and Gem Society - an organisation he had been instrumental in forming, and of which he was foundation president.

The lives of Jack Debert and Gordon Smith mirror each other in many ways.

- Jack was born 26th January 1900 in Western Sydney. Gordon was born 18th January 2002 in Burwood, an inner Western Sydney suburb.
- Both joined the Sydney Bush Walkers Club as inaugural members in 1928.
- Both were active members of the NSW Amateur Race Walkers Club.
- Both competed in the NSW Amateur Race Walkers Club 1937 24 Hour walk and the 1938 12 Hour Walk in Centennial Park, Sydney, and both finished the races with fine times.
- Both served in the Second World War. 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. Jack joined the Royal Australian Air Forces (RAAF) in 1941, rising to the rank of Flight Lieutenant and serving until his discharge on 23 October 1945. Sadly, the same can't be said for Gordon who died on 8th March 1945 in the Sandakan Prisoner of War Camp in Borneo, from what the Japanese recorded as malaria. He had been just over 3 years in detention in horrendous conditions.

Jack was still alive when the initial Australian Centurion investigations were done. Alas, a lack of timely information meant he was never contacted to ratify his performance.

We have fixed that oversight and now recognise him as the second Australian Centurion.

Tim Erickson
Secretary, Australian Centurions
Sunday 23 February 2020