

FR PATRICK (PADDY) O'KEEFE



B/W photograph (reproduction).
Dated: 10th December 1943
BDHC archive collection

Fr Patrick O'Keefe was born at Yangery (near Warrnambool) and was educated by the Good Samaritan Sisters at St Patrick's College, Ballarat and for the priesthood at Springwood and Manly, NSW. He was ordained by Bishop Foley at Ballarat on December 3, 1913 and celebrated his first Mass in the Church of Infant Jesus, Koroit.

Following the defeat of the Japanese at Buna and Gona, attention turned to preventing the capturing of Wau in PNG. Fr Patrick O'Keefe arrived to the 2/6th Battalion as the battle for the airstrip was underway. He was at first, not warmly received by the nearly 90 percent Protestant troops due to his appearance and the fact that he was a Catholic however his personality soon won the troops over. During a compulsory service it is recorded in Tom Johnstone's book *The Cross of Anzac: Australian Catholic service Chaplains* (p. 158):

I congratulate this unit on its honesty. Last week I had a case of communion wine and 500 hymn books flown in from Moresby. Not a hymn book was missing.

Fr O'Keefe was admired and respected for his strength and determination. Johnston records that a server at a Mass celebrated by Fr O'Keefe said:

He performed the most amazing acts of bravery, going out into areas where the enemy was known to be slinking, so that he might recover the bodies of fallen youths and give them a Christian burial.

For his service and dedication to troops during the New Guinea campaign, Fr O'Keefe was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE). The award citation says in part:

He is always to be found where the fighting is the heaviest and where spiritual comfort and aid is required most...He has fearlessly and needlessly exposed himself on innumerable occasions to render aid to the wounded and the dying in the forefront of the battle. His constant attention to the sick and wounded in the advanced dressing station was outstanding...His complete lack of regards for his personal safety under all conditions has been an inspiration to all ranks.

In 1958, the Parish of Cressy was formed with Fr P O'Keefe as first Parish Priest. He had extended St Joseph's Church, Derrinallum and contributed to the building of the school at Coragulac. Fr O'Keefe died on July 3, 1967 whilst tending to the sanctuary lamp at St Joseph's Church at Cressy where he collapsed and died. He had been battling ill health for many years. He was buried in Colac. He was 59.