

Understanding Australian Identity Discs Part 3 : Second World War, Army

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WEARING IDENTITY DISCS

During the [First World War](#), the army came to realise the importance of issuing two identity discs to each person so one could remain with a body and the other be collected for record keeping. In the Second World War, the identity disc remained the primary, and frequently only, method of being able to identify the dead. It was noted in various General Routine Orders (GRO) that not wearing identity discs would be treated as a breach of discipline and all units were ordered to periodically check (in intervals of no more than three months) that discs were being correctly worn and had been correctly marked. Disc No. 1 was worn around the neck on a piece of cord, with Disc No. 2 attached to it with a shorter length of cord.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P05968.003

[Accession Number: P05968.003](#)

A member of the Second AIF wearing his compressed fibre identity discs, Australia c 1944.

REMOVAL FROM THE DEAD

Any member finding and / or burying the body of an Australian soldier in the field, would, unless impractical, remove the No. 2 (round) identity disc (for recording purposes), with the No. 1 disc (octagonal) remaining with the body. If there was only one disc on the body, then it was to

remain there and the inscription noted. A report was given to his superior officer, along with the identity disc and other items removed from the body. The officer or non-commissioned officer (NCO) would then forward them to the deceased's unit headquarters.

COMPRESSED FIBRE DISCS



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

REL/11816.002

[Accession Number: REL/11816.002](#)

Nurses compressed fibre identity discs.

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For the first few years of the Second World War, the army continued to use the same fibre discs that were used in the First World War, with the green octagonal disc (No. 1) and the red circular disc (No. 2). However, in some sets the No. 1 disc is white, cream or light brown in colour rather than green (this might be a reflection on rationing of dyes during the war) and the No. 2 disc is sometimes more brown than red. Some sets are only made up of two copies of the one type of disc.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

REL25240.002

[Accession Number: REL25240.002](#)

Collection of two named and three blank identity discs. Note that two of the octagonal discs are white, not green.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

REL30593

[Accession Number: REL30593](#)

Two No. 1 identity discs issued to one serviceman, instead of one No. 1 and one No. 2.

CHANGE TO METAL DISCS

Unfortunately the fibre discs did not cope well with the humid tropical conditions of the South West Pacific Area. Quotes from soldier's correspondence to friends and family back home, referring to the challenges of identifying bodies due to the deterioration of the fibre discs in the tropics reached Defence. In response, in late March 1943 a supply of 16,000 sets of stainless steel identity discs – the same type as used by the RAAF, was sent to New Guinea by air freight. A further 45,000 sets were sent by the “normal route”, presumably by sea (MP742/1, 52/3/23, National Archives of Australia). These appear to have worked better in the tropical conditions as GRO 87 in March 1944 stated that stainless steel identity discs would be issued to personnel.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

REL25240.001

[Accession Number: REL25240.001](#)

Set of metal discs, issued c 1944.

While the composition of the discs changed, they retained the two shapes with the octagonal disc continuing to be called Disc No. 1 and the circular disc, Disc No. 2 in all orders.

MARKING DISCS



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

017238

[Accession Number: 017238](#)

June 1944, marking the new metal identity discs.

Second World War army discs do not include unit or rank. Unlike the First World War, all officers were allocated a service number and this was recorded on their discs, like other ranks and NCOs.



[Accession Number: REL29184.002](#)

Officers metal discs. Unlike the First World War, officers had service numbers and these were recorded instead of rank.

In 1942 GRO 649 describes the details that were clearly stamped on the discs as follows:

Front side:

Army number

Initials and name

Index letter/s of religion

- B - Baptist
- C - Congregational
- CC - Church of Christ
- CE - Church of England
- CS - Christian Scientist
- GO - Greek Orthodox

- J - Jewish
- L - Lutheran
- M - Methodist
- P - Presbyterian
- RC – Roman Catholic
- SA – Salvation Army

Reverse side:

Blood group letter and number (which was also recorded in their pay book).



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

REL30150

[Accession Number: REL30150](#)

A Chaplains identity disc with the blood type (A2) on the front.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

REL30537

[Accession Number: REL30537](#)

Identity disc for a member of the Australian Army Medical Womens Service, which grew out of the volunteer Red Cross and St John Ambulance Voluntary Aid Detachments in late 1942.

This was reinforced in GRO 700, Part IX, published in October 1943, and in GRO 191 Part IX, published in July 1945.

Most discs are marked using 1/4 inch letter and number punches, but you also find 1/8 inch punches used on some discs.

BLOOD TYPES

With the introduction of blood transfusions, blood type was usually recorded on the reverse of the identity disc but you do sometimes find it on the front with the other details. The letter and number stamped on the back of identity discs are the combination of two different blood identifications schemes, the Moss System and Landsteiner's original scheme (International System). The Moss System was a classification of blood groups that labelled blood groups 1 through 4 and the International Scheme used letters we are familiar with today (O, A, AB etc). Using both systems on the discs could speed up transfusions and avoid any adverse reactions. Further information about blood transfusions and the use of the two systems is in Chapter 34 of [Australia in the War of 1939-1945: Series 5 - Medical, Volume I - Clinical Problems of War](#).



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

REL/15747

[Accession Number: REL/15747](#)

Reverse of identity discs showing blood type (A2).

IMPROVISED DISCS



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

REL31813

[Accession Number: REL31813](#)

Improvised metal identity disc, c 1941.

Improvised discs tend to be rarer in the Second World War than in the First, presumably due to officially issuing two discs instead of one. However, you sometimes find privately sourced identity discs replacing lost ones, or identity bracelets to supplement issued discs.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

REL33840

[Accession Number: REL33840](#)

Unofficial Second World War identity bracelet.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

REL42330

[Accession Number: REL42330](#)

Unofficial identity discs made in the shape of issued discs from Mother of Pearl, probably in the Middle East.