

*Oatley Heritage Group Projects.*

<i>Month &amp; Year of Topic</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Written &amp; Spoken Presenters</i>
November 2011	Ex Service men and women of Oatley	Alec Leach and Rodger Robertson

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# **Oatley Heritage Group November 2011** **Servicemen and Women from Oatley at** **War.**

Alec Leach and Rodger Robertson compiled this study. It was done by interviews with the people concerned. It was not possible to provide an exhaustive list of ex service people from Oatley. They can always be added at a later date to the records.

The subjects who have been interviewed are below. It was not the intention of producing a detail account but rather to record some stories and a few graphics from their respective times in the forces. Some are parents of local Oatley people.

**Joyce and Jack Marks**

**Jim Forbes**

**Dorothy and Jack Walker (and fathers H Mallard and S Walker WW1)**

**Jim Nicholson**

**Glenn Stevens**

**Jim Keating and father**

**Bill Wright**

**Douglas Wickens**

**Sandy Auld WW1 from records of Joy McMillan**

**Davidson family**

Thanks to all those who participated.

# Oatley Heritage Group – Servicemen and Women in Oatley.

## Jim Forbes



Commenced military training march 1940 with 56<sup>th</sup> Militia battalion at Wallgrove and enlisted in AIF from that camp on 3/7/1940. He was drafted into the 2/19<sup>th</sup> Battalion, which was then being formed. The battalion was part of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 8<sup>th</sup> division together with the 2/18<sup>th</sup> and 2/20<sup>th</sup> Battalions. He was appointed Orderly Room Corporal “C” Company and shortly after promoted Lance Sergeant. The Brigade moved to Ingleburn where better training facilities existed and then to Bathurst.

It was from here that the Brigade went by train to Sydney and with supporting units embarked on the Queen Mary leaving Sydney on 4/2/1941. It was a memorable experience. The ship, together with the Aquitania, New Amsterdam and

Mauritania formed a convoy, which proceeded via Perth into the Indian Ocean escorted by a destroyer. It was only after leaving Sydney that troops were informed of their destination was Malaya. The other three ships were headed for the Middle East. The Queen Mary docked in Singapore naval base on 18/2/1941 and the Brigade was billeted in various locations in Johore. The 27<sup>th</sup> Brigade and 2/15<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment arrived in Malaya in August 1941.

The 2/19<sup>th</sup> was initially based in the township of Seremban and quickly settled into a training regime, learning new techniques applicable to warfare in tropical areas. The Battalion, while in Malaya, came under the command of Lt Col C.G.W Anderson VC MC. He was a WW1 officer who had experienced somewhat similar conditions in Africa. He was an outstanding Commander. The Brigade went out to train in various areas around Johore, finally ending up at Jemaluag. “C” Company was manning a boom on the Sedili River. Shortly after, Jim was promoted to Battalion Orderly Room Sergeant and seconded to 2<sup>nd</sup> Echelon then situated at Kuala Lumpur with Divisional HQ. This was an administrative unit processing the records of the various units in Malaya. After war with Japan commenced, 2<sup>nd</sup> Echelon moved to Singapore.

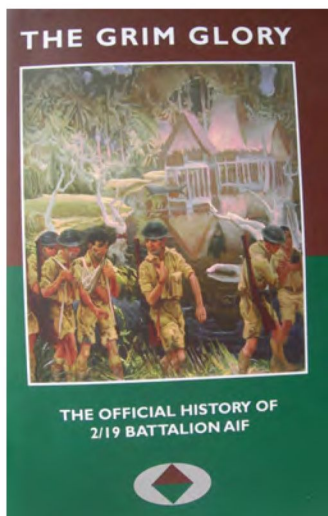
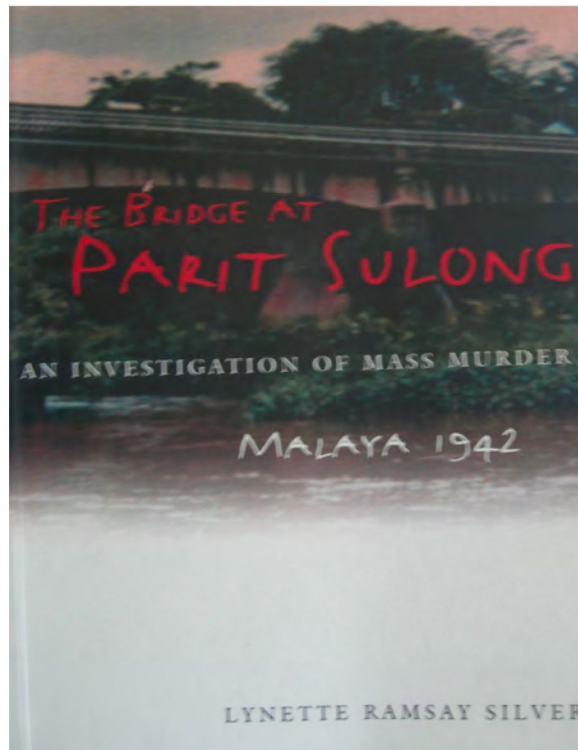


Jim in Singapore 1941.

Jim rejoined the Battalion for only a brief period to assist in its reformation after the battle of Muar,

in which it had suffered very heavy casualties. 650 reinforcements were taken on strength, 400 of these arrived in Malaya with little, if any training, and in a few weeks were to be involved in the battle for Singapore Island, and in its capitulation. Jim's brother was one of the reinforcements officers.

When Japan attacked Malaya it had established overwhelming superiority in the air and on the sea. It landed troops in Thailand unopposed and attacked down the east and west Coasts of Malaya. The 2/19<sup>th</sup> Battalion went into action on 19/1/1942 in what became known as the battle of Muar. It was in this action that Lt Col Anderson won the VC. General Percival considered this week long battle to be "one of the epics of the Malayan campaign". The culmination of the battle was a massacre of wounded by the Japanese and is told in a recently published book "The Bridge at Parit Sulong". The book "Grim Glory" is the official history of the 2/19<sup>th</sup> and it deals with it in detail and further happenings in Singapore.



The Japanese continued to push

the Allied troops down the Malayan peninsula until the whole force had withdrawn to Singapore. The Island was subjected to heavy shelling and bombing. The Japanese commenced invasion of Singapore Island on 8/2/1942 and after intense and confused fighting the Allied forces surrendered on 15/2/1942 and then 3 ½ years of POW life in Malaya.

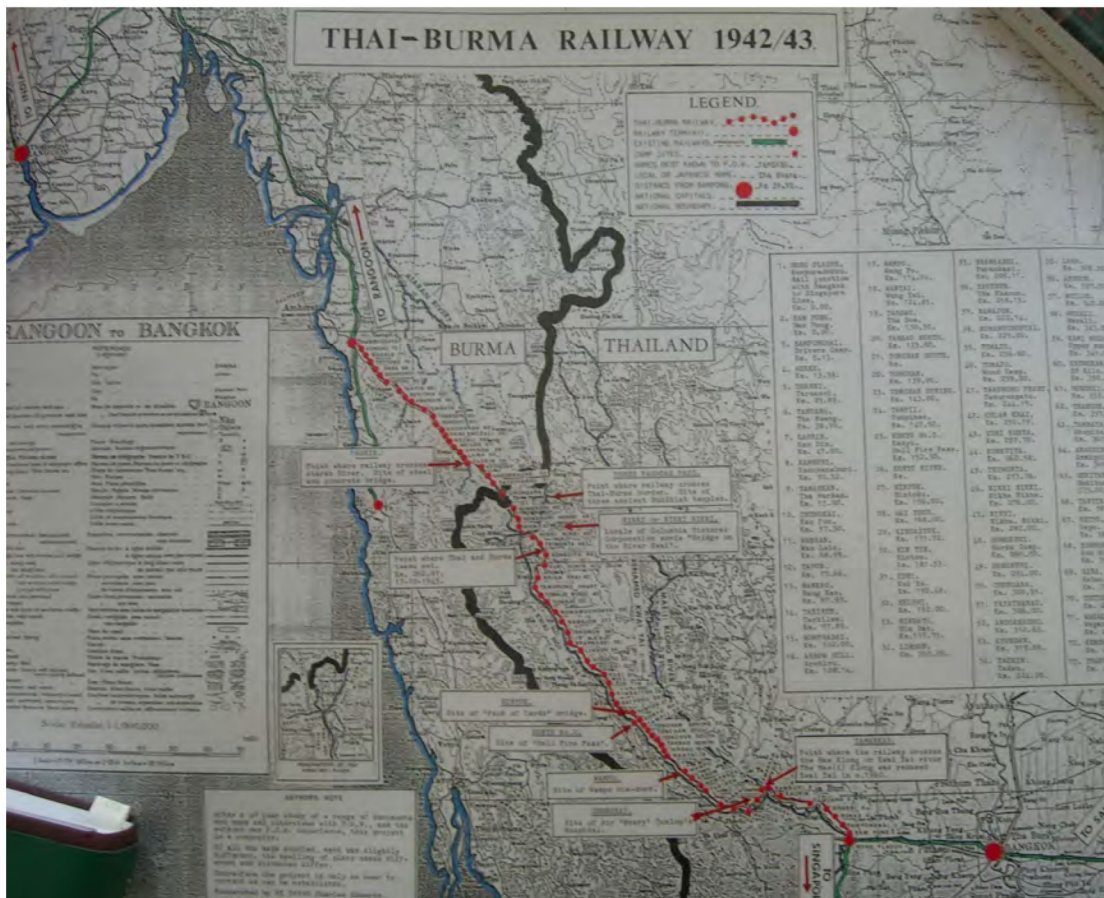


The Australian troops were initially confined in Selerang barracks an old British barrack that had been bombed out during the attack. Whilst guards patrolled the barrack boundaries, the POWs were allowed to organise their activities in the camp. Working parties were supplied as demanded and for the first few weeks troops existed on rations they had been able to bring in with them. When rice was substituted for their usual rations, the cooks made a most unpalatable mess of the meals, however they learnt to cook it as required even in most primitive circumstances.

## Burma Railway

In May 1942 the Japanese shipped the first batch of prisoners out of Singapore. It was known as “A” Force and comprised approximately 3000 men from all units. Jim was in this force. The POWs were loaded into the holds of two small steamships, the “Celebes Maru” and “Toyohashi Maru” with sitting room only for each man. It was an omen of things to come. The ships proceeded up the Malacca Straits, stopping at Medan in Sumatra to pick up further POW including RAAF personnel and survivors of the sinking of the HMAS Perth. They then proceeded to Burma dropping POW at Victoria Point, Mergui, and Tavoy. Jim was in the Mergui group, which became known as Ramsay Force under the control of LT Col G Ramsay. Working parties were required to repair the aerodrome. It was at this camp Jim suffered his first attack of dysentery, followed by Beriberi (swelling of the body due to dietary deficiency). This was common amongst the POWs.

After several months, Ramsay Force was shipped further up the coast to Tavoy to a camp under the control of two WW1 Japanese veterans who showed some compassion towards the POWs and the conditions became more reasonable. From



here in late 1942 Ramsay Force was trucked and marched to Thanbyzuyat and it was from here that construction of the railway line began.

The conditions under which the POWs worked during the construction of the line has been well documented and required no elaboration. Ramsay Force worked from three camps in Burma. These were located at 25, 75 and 105 kilometres from Thanbyzuyat. The works lasted over 12 months and conditions worsened over time and distance. Other groups of POWs worked from other camps. Lack of food, and subsequent illnesses took toll of the POW. Complaints such as dysentery, malaria, beriberi, tropical ulcers were rampant. No clothes, boots or personal items were issued. The men lived with what they carried on their backs. In December 1943 a memorable event was the distribution of some Red Cross rations, one parcel was shared between 12 men. The only news received was that which the Japanese issued for propaganda purposes. However a RAAF Leading Aircraftsman captured in Java had with help of other airmen cleverly constructed a wireless disguised as a water bottle that he brought with him and carried along the line. He operated it at great personal risk but the news he received was conveyed only to Lt Col Ramsay and Senior Officers, even though those around him were aware of his actions. It was an essential precaution and his actions were recognised with an award after the war. POWs worked from both Burma and Thailand ends of the line and of course a large number of natives were conscripted as labourers and they suffered as well. A saving grace for the Australian was the discipline observed in the camps, the dedication and skill observed by medical Officers and staff and the efforts of senior officers even under duress. In early 1944 Ramsay Force went by truck like cattle down to Tamarkan in Thailand. Coming out of the jungle into habituated areas was utter relief. Most were shadows or their former selves. Jim weighed about 7 stone.

Bridges over the River Mae Klong (later renamed KwaiYai in 1960) and Tamarkan POW camp, at Tha Ma Kham in Thailand. The picture was taken by 684 Squadron, Royal Air Force, on January 2, 1945

The construction of the railway line was an amazing achievement. Its purpose was to give Japan a land route into Burma but in the long run it proved of little value. As the



Allies gained supremacy it was regularly bombed. Indeed Tamarkan camp with its adjacent steel bridge over the river Kwai Yai became a target for bombing with resultant casualties. At this camp the Officers were separated from the other ranks and dispersed to separate camps. Working parties were shipped to Japan and other areas in Asia. The sick were moved to a large hospital camp. Jim ended up in central Thailand and was there when the Japanese surrendered. POWs were so attuned to the moods of the Japanese they were aware that something had happened or was about to happen. They were informed of the great news when an English Commando Officer and corporal walked into the camp unopposed. Later an American Commando Officer drove into the camp with the same news. All personnel were evacuated by plane to Singapore. From there Jim came home on the "Highland Brigade"- arriving in Sydney late October 1945. Jim had the pleasure of being reunited with his family at Ingleburn. Jim left Army in Feb 1946.



Jim at home with family late 1945 at Ingleburn Camp.



Jim has had an association with Oatley since he joined the staff of Kogarah Council in 1954, more particularly during he last 16 years of his employment as Town

Clerk. He has lived in Oatley since the marriage to Margaret Swift (nee Morrison) in 1993.

## **Conclusion**

The above is typed from Jim's manuscript written for this project.

Thanks to Jim for his interview, words and other material provided for the above story. The experience is one that we are grateful to hear about.

A sidelight the POWs were paid their regular pay whilst prisoners. Later there was a sale of some Japanese assets and the proceeds went to ex POWs. Many years later (circa 1990s) the Australian Government gave a grant to all ex POWs.

Rodger Robertson November 2011



## Jim Nicholson



Joining 1941



Bombay 1944 note the nicely trimmed beard.

In Jim joined the Navy in 1941 and went to ASDIC school (Anti Submarine Detection Sonar) at HMAS Rushcutter. He did two courses and qualified as a Higher Submarine Detector (HSD). His first ship was HMAS Whyrallah, a former North Coast steamer, engaged in convoys of shipping along the East Coast of Australia. This ship escorted a tanker to Nauru to refuel fighting ships after the Coral Sea Battle. His first major posting was to HMAS Hobart a Light Cruiser.

### **HMAS HOBART (1)** (Ex-HMS *Apollo*)



This ship was on patrol when torpedoed in July 1943 but they limped to New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) for repairs and eventually back to Sydney.

His next post was on the Corvette HMAS Ipswich (below) that was escorting convoys around India and the Middle East.

In February 1944 the convoy was attacked but Jim in his ASDIC role identified an echo and a submarine was sunk. In 1990 Jim wrote enquiring about the sunken sub and it was identified as RO-110. This



submarine was built in Japan in 1943 and was operating out of Penang and 46 men died in the action. In 1944 he joined HMAS Gawler and continued the escorting work in the same area with some diversions to the Seychelles, Muscat and Karachi (the latter raking pilgrims to Mecca).

In 1945 Jim was back in Australia to learn about new ASDIC equipment that provided depth information as well as direction. As the war had ended Jim was on HMAS Barwon off Darwin, but as a single man he was not discharged. But in March 1946 he was summoned back to Sydney and he flew in a Catalina via Alice Springs



back to Sydney. He then travelled to London on HMAS Shropshire to attend the June 1946 Victory parade. The journey to the UK was via Capetown.

HMAS Shropshire



On this journey, he was accompanied by Jim Keating representing the AIF and the “Rats of Tobruk”.



The Victory parade passing the King- first group is the RN then the AIF and the last group is the RAAF group. These Australians were amongst 21,000 marchers. Jim says the Australian needed a deal of training to get ready for the real thing.

It was on this visit he met his future wife. She followed him to Australia and arrived in early 1947 and married a few weeks later in Oatley.

Jim was discharged in September 1946 as Leading Seaman James Nicholson DSM.

As a sidelight, he tells the story of his beard- you had to get permission from the Captain “not to shave” and two weeks later you reported back to get further permission to continue or to return to shaving. Jim passed the test and its still continuing.



Thanks to Jim for the wealth of material- only partially covered here.

Rodger Robertson November 2011.

## Dorothy Walker



Dorothy joined the army in 1943. She was trained in Kapooka and they were accommodated in tents with 200 women and 2000 men there at the time. She was charged with other women to operate the searchlights at a house in Bronte.

She tells the story of when on guard they had 303 rifles and one night, two rather drunk soldiers were walking past, and they decided to drop into the property where the searchlights were situated. Dorothy challenged them with the rifle. One of the surprised men shouted- "it's a sheila with a gun" and they quickly sprinted away.

The photos below are not of Dorothy but a similar unit.



In their spare time they knitted material especially socks for prisoners of war. Although they operated the lights for over a year the only aircraft they "spotted" were a regular aircraft from Sydney late at night and they delighted at putting the big light on the aircraft.

Dorothy was married to Jack (see below) on 3 June 1944. She lived in Douglas Haig Street with its WW1 connections. She left the army in 1945.



## **Jack Walker**

Jim Keating and Jack Walker. Jim was in the 13<sup>th</sup> Inf Batt. We sailed on the Queen Mary together. Jim saw action in Africa, was a Tobruk Rat and saw action on the Kokoda track. He was a great mate of Jacks.

Jack joined the army in June 1940 and was in the regiment 2/5th Australian General Hospital. He was a corporal. His unit left Australia on Queen Mary in October 1940.



They went via Bombay and Suez where they unloaded and stayed in Palestine for 6 months before going across to Greece.



Captured in Greece 27 April 1941- The photo on left shows Jack discussing motorbikes with their Austrian soldiers after the Australians had been captured.



Jack was in was a medical group and they treated wounded and generally looked after them including repatriation etc.

They stayed in Greece for 8 months looking after Australian wounded but then in December transported by train up to Poland with 40 men per truck for 13 days. One bowl of soup per day and ten minutes beside the train for natural outlets and in December there was so much snow and cold weather. Their prison was Fort 15 Stalag 20A near the town of Turon in Poland. The place was an old 15 Century fort and part of a chain of forts to protect the region. The Germans used a number of them as POW camps. 160 men of the 2/5 AGH stayed in Greece after capture for 8 months looking after Australian wounded but were then

Their prison was Fort 15, Stalag 20A in the town of Turon (Thorn) in Poland.

The place was an old 15 Century fort and part of a chain of forts to protect the region.



The Germans used a number of them as POW camps. 160 Australians of 2/5<sup>th</sup> AGH were caught and 3000 wounded Australians, Greeks, Poles, NZers were transferred as POWs. The camp had French and English from Dunkirk. The picture is of the wall at the prison and below shows the old moat around the prison.

Fred Butterfield took many of these photos hiding his camera in the bottom of his water bottle

Film was traded with their guards for socks and other items that came in Red Cross parcels.



### SLY GROG

Australian prisoners of war could stand many hardships during their captivity, but the lack of grog sent many men to extreme lengths in order to get a 'drink'.

Two young soldiers from the 2/5th Australian General Hospital, Private Bill Sharp and Private Johnny Walker, built a secret alcohol still in their camp, Stalag XXA, Thorn. Using potato peels, millet seed, rotten swedes, cabbage and dried fruit from Red Cross parcels, the mixture was first boiled then left to ferment for about two weeks. Some men drank this, but Sharp and Walker distilled their grog for 'better' results.

The still was constructed from Canadian *Klim* milk tins and an old trumpet acquired from British soldiers. The end result was an extremely volatile spirit coloured pale green. "When swallowed," Walker recalled, "it nearly burned a hole in your socks. But if broken down it only rotted your guts."



Private Billy Sharp (left) demonstrates his illicit still with Private Johnny Walker. The photo was taken by a camera hidden in a water bottle.

The conditions were bearable and the photo below shows Jack and a mate making "green" beer from potatoes and other material they obtained. Jack maintains the practice today of brewing but produces a far superior drop!



Letters were regularly written and below does Dorothy maintain one of those today. Note the German and the censors stamp.



There were sports and music etc in the camp- the commandant had been a prisoner of war in WW1 and held in Scotland and presumably well treated. Below is Jack coming third in a long distance race- he is the darker one!

In December 1943 a group of prisoners including Jack went by train to Marseilles. Then a boat to Barcelona and we were shipped from Barcelona to Alexandria where we stayed for a few weeks spending too much money.

By June 1944 he and Dorothy had married. Jack then worked for 6 months at Concord Hospital as a storeman. Later he went to Ingleburn for training then to Victoria. He was offered a job of guarding POWs but it was thought unsuitable for ex-POWs to do this job. He left army in 1945.





# Hedley Mallard



(Dorothy Walkers father left sitting)

Hedley joined the 2nd battalion in 1916 at age 17 and went to Belgium. He was a bugler and did the wake up calls etc. He used to practice the bugle in the bush near their home in Douglas Haig Street. He also served as a sergeant in WW2 in the records department in Sydney from 1939 to 1945. He was third President of Mortdale RSL and he played the bugle at the Anzac ceremonies for a number of years.

On right Dorothy and father WW2





## Sydney Walker ( Jack's father)

As a supplementary item – In his British Army uniform of the 7<sup>th</sup> Manchester Regiment 1915 to 1918. He fought in Africa and Syria.



With thanks to both Jack and Dorothy for their interview and access to the graphic material.

Rodger Robertson November 2011

## Joyce Marks



Joyce joined in 1943 and her first posting was at Harrow Road Bexley, where they were looking after the Tasmanian soldiers who were temporary stationed at Oatley Park. Joyce was PA to the Major in charge of supplying the soldiers with all necessities, before the soldiers were sent off to jungle training at Cunungra (inland from Surfers Paradise). They went in batches of 250 men from Oatley to Cunungra over a two year period. When one group moved out another moved in to Oatley Park.

In 1945 she then moved to Victoria Barracks where she worked in high security, where she tracked the strengths of all military groups in New Guinea. She assisted in the planning of the sending of new troops and specialist personnel to replace the losses. Here she was able to track Jack's movements throughout his northern experiences (see below).

In 1945 and 1946 she then worked at bringing people home from the war and remembers the "bones" as the POWs from Japan were brought back by Flying boat. She left in the middle of 1946 and had a rank of corporal.

The 22 women at Ingleburn training that slept in one room.



We shall say more about this photo later.





## Jack Marks



Conscripted into the army November 1941 and went to Canterbury Racecourse for initial training for about 3 months and later to Oatlands Golf course. Morse code was taught and experts went into a specialist group. Jack was sent to the "Line Section" (2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Line Maintenance Section) in the Atherton Tablelands and after Pearl Harbour in early 1942 he joined the AIF. The Line Section was responsible for communication line construction and maintenance. Jack learned to construct lines between various army bodies in the field, including the front line when required. Then by 1942 he goes to Southern Queensland and later in 1943 to Northern Queensland near Cairns. Here they did jungle training – and as an exercise they put a telegraph/phone line from Ravenshoe to the coast at Tully. In mid 1943 he is sent to Port



Moresby by boat. The Battles on the Kokoda Track are in their final stages, with the Allies having forced the Japanese back to the northern coast. Jack was involved in constructing communication lines up the northern coast of New Guinea from Buna to Lae and inland to important sites like the airfields at Dobadura inland from Buna, and Nadzab inland from Lae. These lines were on poles or between trees. The heavy rains often saw the poles falling and if one went down the many did. In November 1943 the famous Thomas "Diver" "Derrick won a VC when fighting at a place called Satelburg near Finchhafen some 80 Kms from Lae. Again communication lines were constructed to these places.



In early 1945 Jack is taken by boat from Northern New Guinea to Bougainville. Here the Australians took over from the US Communications groups who were moving north.



Jack's group continued to lay lines around Bougainville till March when he was granted leave after 2 ½ years away. He went to Sydney for 10 days leave and there he got married to Joyce before a brief honeymoon and then back to Bougainville. Joyce tells that Jack's whereabouts were a secret and it was not clear he would arrive back in time for the wedding. But he did!



The Jack came back to Sydney in January 1946. He left the army with rank of Signelman Group 2.



Above photos of Jack in New Guinea and Bougainville

Thanks to Jack and Joyce for their cooperation and information.  
Rodger Robertson 2011

# Jim Keating

Below is an extract from an OHG study on Jim Keating. It is appropriate to repeat it here.

Jim Keating attended Penshurst Public School (as did some other Oatley boys) and later Sutherland Intermediate High School. On leaving school he joined the PMG. At the outbreak of World War II he sought to emulate his father by joining the AIF but was too young. Not to be outdone he tried the Navy, which accepted younger lads for training, but by the time his call up arrived he had succeeded in enlisting in the 2/13Bn of the 9<sup>th</sup> Division AIF by putting up his age.

In October 2009 author Peter Fitzsimons wrote in his column in the Sydney Morning Herald:-

*On the moonlit night of November 29, 1941, 161 soldiers of the AIF's mighty 2/13<sup>th</sup> battalion were at the base of a small hill on the edge of Tobruk called Ed Duda. They were told to fix bayonets, for they were about to charge 450 Germans on top of the hill. And one thing as you go boys, make a lot of sound, so they think we're a thousand strong. The whistle blew and they charged, shouting "Here come the Aussies" as they went, indeed overwhelming the Germans for one of the more notable victories of that campaign. Two of the heroes of the piece were Sergeant John Seale-who was decorated for his heroics that night- and the 17-year-old Private Jim Keating, also in the thick of the action. I was honoured to get to know both men in the course of writing a book on Tobruk. Typical of that generation, both men came home, married their sweethearts, raised their children and never boasted of what they had done. Sadly both men have died in the last fortnight and it was only at their funerals that their deeds could be spoken of without them downplaying it. Vale.*

Whilst on leave on return from the Middle East, Jim met Marjorie the sister-in-law of one of his army mates, and they later became engaged, but the war continued with the 2/13<sup>th</sup> battalion fighting the Japanese with great distinction.

On discharge Jim Keating returned to the Commonwealth Public Service. However his mother drew his attention to advertisements for ex-AIF personnel to apply to join the Australian contingent to the 1946 London Victory March. In doing so his mother told him that this was a chance for him to visit relatives in the UK and he did not hesitate to re-enlist and wedding plans were delayed.

By coincidence Jim Nicholson, (also ex Penshurst Primary & Sutherland Intermediate High) an Oatley resident since 1925, who was still serving in the Navy, was invited to join the contingent which embarked on HMAS Shropshire departing from Melbourne on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1946, returning to Sydney on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1946. Then there was a crisis in that Jim Keating had to be discharged from the AIF for a second time before his wedding to Marjorie on Saturday afternoon 14<sup>th</sup> September. This was achieved at 11am that very day.!!!

-2-



## Wartime history is on parade

By Jim Gainsford

FOR World War II veterans, lifelong friends and Oatley residents Jim Nicholson and Jim Keating, an important anniversary in wartime history is in danger of slipping by unnoticed this month.

June 8 is the 60th anniversary of the victory parade where 21,000 allied troops marched through the streets of London to celebrate the end of World War II.

It was hailed by *The Times* of London as the greatest victory parade in history, watched by nearly nine million people from every corner of Britain.

It was watched by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, King George VI and the then Princess Elizabeth.

Mr Keating, 83, and Mr Nicholson, 84, were part of the 250 strong Australian contingent in the parade.

During the war, Mr Keating fought in Palestine, Tobruk, Lebanon, Syria and at the battle of El Alamein before coming back to Australia to fight at Milne Bay and in North Borneo.

Mr Nicholson served in the navy in the Indian and Pacific oceans as operating ASDIC (sonar) submarine detecting equipment.

While they don't forget their wartime experiences, the memory of the victory parade has left a lasting impression.

The Australian contingent left Australia for the march on April 23, 1946, on a former British war



March of history: Jim Nicholson (right) and Jim Keating.

Picture: Jane Dyson

cruiser called the Shropshire for the 25,000 mile round trip, sailing via Fremantle and Capa Town. Legend has it that the Australians spent more than 10,000 pounds sterling while ashore in Cape Town.

Mr Keating made one of those purchases: a wedding ring for his fiancé Marjorie. Both men described the atmosphere in London during the parade as unforgettable.

Mr Nicholson even had his own close encounter with Winston Churchill.

"Churchill was there when the Queen, then

Princess Elizabeth arrived. I was trying to get a closer look at Princess Elizabeth, but Churchill kept getting in the way," Mr Nicholson said.

On a personal note, Mr Nicholson met his future wife Joan during his visit and they were engaged within a month.

He bought an engagement ring in Colombo on the way home.

Mr Keating arrived in Australia on September 14 and was discharged officially from the victory parade contingent in the morning.

He married Marjorie in the afternoon.

## War's horrors recalled as desert Rats reunite

By Jim Gainsford

A REUNION of the Rats of Tobruk this week has brought back many memories – not all of them good – for three St George diggers.

Bert Bryant and Jim Keating of Oatley and John Dickson of Allawah attended a rare reunion of the Rats to help celebrate the publication of *Tobruk* by Peter FitzSimons, at the Four Seasons Hotel, Sydney, on Monday.

The 1942 Australian infantry's defence of Tobruk against Adolf Hitler's Afrika Korps's armoured division is part of Australian legend and one of the great battles of all time.

About 14,000 young Australians withstood General Rommel and his Panzer tanks in a siege that lasted 242 days, one of the longest in the annals of British military history and only one day longer than the Anzac Cove campaign in World War I.

Mr Keating, 83, had his 18th birthday in Tobruk, serving in the 2nd 3rd Infantry Battalion.

"I was a brash young teenager when I joined the army," Mr Keating said. "It all started as a big adventure but it ended up much more than that. We weren't going to surrender. I knew we would get out of it eventually."

Mr Keating said the reunion brought back a lot of memories, some of them not so good. "As well as the fighting, there



Old warriors: Bert Bryant and Jim Keating of Oatley at the Rats of Tobruk reunion this week.

was the dysentery, the fleas and the flies," he said.

Mr Keating went on to serve in El Alamein where he was wounded, and then went to New Guinea.

Mr Dickson, 86, was 21 when he went to Tobruk with 2nd 13th Battalion. He served in El Alamein and New Guinea.

Mr Dickson described the conditions in Tobruk as pretty tough. "The only shelter we got was when we dug holes in the ground and covered them up. We lived there a bit like a rat in a hole," he said.

Mr Bryant, 89, served in the 2nd 3rd Anti-Tank Regiment at Tobruk. He was 25 years old when he was sent in as a reinforcement.

"I was there for the last two months and things had quietened down a lot by then," Mr Bryant said. "Even after all those months the spirit of the men was remarkable. They had suffered not only the effects of the war itself but also the extreme temperature and rationing of food and water. These men who had endured so much were still prepared to go on."

After Tobruk, Mr Bryant fought in El Alamein, New Guinea and Borneo. He feels it is important that as many people as possible read the story of Tobruk.

"If the story isn't told now it will be lost and never told because there will be no veterans left to talk of their feelings and experiences," Mr Bryant said.



## Frank Keating (Jims father).

Frank was born in Liverpool, England but immigrated to Australia in 1911. He joined in the AIF in the First Australian Field Ambulance Unit with service number 3, on 28/8/1914 and had the rank of Sergeant. He left for the Middle East on 15/10/1914 via



Albany. He served at Gallipoli and in Europe. In 1916 he was granted leave and went to England where he meet his future wife and they were married in 1916. He was discharged in 1920.



Frank wrote a long letter describing his experiences in the Gallipoli campaign. The letter was never sent and perhaps survived the censor's cuts because of this. He was in the Ambulance section looking after the wounded but served near the front line and he describing shells exploding adjacent to his area, and his ships being bombed by aircraft. His writings are of high quality. He further told of his views of war

"I recollect saying to myself during those few days that if anyone come yarning to me about the glories of war, or even running down the lads who are fighting and suffering, I would knock them down.

It only needs a trip like ours from Gallipoli to Alexandria to realize that War is Hell."

Thanks to Frank (Jim's brother and son of Frank above) and Ida Keating for their information. The letter and photos are now in the OHG records.

## Glenn Stevens



- Glenn joined the AWAS the day she turned 18 in June 1943. She went to Ingleburn for training and remembers the cold! (see photo below).
- She went to the 2/2 Field Bakery Unit in Kensington School of Arts building. She did some clerical jobs and general help like throwing the bread out a window to a truck! She then went to the DAAGO (Deputy Assistant Adjutant General Organisation at Victoria Barracks where she spent the rest of the war. She remembers the trenches at the front of the Barracks and the necessity to wear your hat so you could salute the officers! She left in 1946 to get married.





# Sapper Alexander (Sandy) Auld



4th Field Engineers 4th Division AIF  
1915-18

He joined the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion of AIF to go to Gallipoli in 1915 at age 23. His occupation was stated as “joiner” hence the alter story about wooden tank dummies has meaning. After withdrawing from Gallipoli he was transferred to the Western Front. He immigrated to Australia from Glasgow Scotland in 1912 and lived in Woronora Parade Oatley.

His war movements are shown below in great detail. He was always in the action at the front areas of the war in Belgium and France including the famous Villers-Bretonneux.

NAME OF PLACE	DATE	NAME OF PLACE	DATE	NAME OF PLACE	DATE	NAME OF PLACE	DATE
LEFT SYDNEY	1915	LA-BOISSELLE	1916	WALLEN GABELLY	1917	ROSKERS, EN. SOMM	1918
SUEZ "A. 32"	JUNE 17	MOQUET FARM	" 31	STEINVOORDE	" 20	LONGUE	" 25
HELIOPOLIS	" 13	" "	" "	DICHEBUSCH	" 22	DIACHES	" 26
ALEXANDRIA KHEDI	AUG 31	ALBERT	" 30	PASSCHENDAELE	" 23	CATELET	" 10
LEFINOS "THORUS"	" 01	VADENOURT	" 40	" TAKEN	" 20	HEBECOURT	" 23
GALIPOLI "ESMADIAN"	" 15	MONTRELET	" 51	DICHEBUSCH	" 30	GASSIEVAL	" 24
EVALUATED PRINCESS	DEC 13	LONCAVALETTE	" 01	YPRES	" 01	WANEL	" 27
SARKY	" 14	DOULENS	" 01	LEFT YPRES	NOV 13	PORT-LE-GRAND	" 28
MUODOS WEST	" 16	DOBERDOM	" 01	CASTRE	" 13	RUE	" 28
EVACUATION	" 20	VOORMEZELLE	" 10	CAMPAGNE	" 14	HOSPITAL	DEC 10
AT SEA "SINIA"	1916	SPOILBANK	DEC 12	DILLETES	" 15	LE HAVRE	NOV 11
ALEXANDRIA	" 01	BOESHOPPE	" 24	BRANDVILLERS AIR	" 15	HANGAST	" 11
TALUS REBR	" 10	BEALE	" 26	COUMELLE NEUVE	" 17	TICOURT	" 14
FRASAR	FEB 11	SAUCOURT	" 27	HEGMOND	" 16	MERICOURT	" 15
TROUCOURDIR	" 21	VAUCHELLE-LE-DONNE	NOV 11	MAINTENAY	" 20	ST SOUPEL	" 23
FRENCH MARCH	MAR 21	YZEURY	" 01	WADICOURT	" 21	PRECIES	" 24
ARRIVED MOASKAR	" 23	CARDONETTE	" 01	BUIGHT ST MAJOR	" 22	SAINES	" 26
SERAPHEUM	" 25	BIURE	" 01	RIBAS	" 23	SIVERY	DEC 14
LEFT SERAPHEUM	MAY 24	LONGUEVAL	" 01	DOUVAINCOURT	" 24	CHAUMONT	" 16
ALEXANDRIA	MAY 11	BAZENTIN-LE-GR	JAN 11	WAINCOURT	DEC 31	CHARCROI	1919
AT SEA CANADA	" 21	BECCOURT	1917	MOISLAINS	" 01	ENTRAIN	JAN 11
MARSEILLES	" 01	DRESLE	" 25	PERBONNE	1918	HARFLEUR	" 01
BAILLEUIL	" 12	SHELTER WOOD	MAY 23	DAILLIEU	" 11	LE HAVRE	" 25
NOOTE BAUM	" 13	SAPAUME	" 24	VOORMETZELLE	" 12	FOVANT	" 24
ERQUINGHEM	" 15	FAVRIEUL	" 23	NEUVE EGLISE	1917	GLAGGOW	" 23
BOIS GRENIER	" 23	VELU	APR 17	LA CAUCHE	MAR 23	FOVANT	FEB 12
ERQUINGHEM	JULY 7	NOREUIL GULLY	" 01	FORCEVILLE	" 21	DEVONPORT	MAR 23
BAL-SO-PIAUX	" 01	FAVRIEUL	" 24	BAIZELUX	" 20	AT SEA "LIGHT CASTLE"	" 24
NOOTE BAUM	" 11	DENNANCOURT	MAY 7	BLANGY-TRONVILLE	APR 27	CAPT TOWN	APR 19
BAILLEUIL	" 12	DAILLEUIL	" 11	VILLERS-BRETONNEUX	" 29	ADELAIDE	MAY 24
BENNEVILLE	" 13	ROMARIN	" 20	FOUILLOY, HANGAST	" 30	MELBOURNE	" 22
RUBEMPREY	" 21	DE SEUL	" 23	VILLERS BRETONNEUX	MAY 12	SYDNEY	" 23
WARLOY BAILLON	" 21	HYDE PARK	JUNE 26	RIVERY-CANON	" 01		
ALBERT	AUG 4	DE SEUL	JULY 11	GORBIE	JULY 11		
OVILLIERS	" 01	DOULIEU	" 15	HAMEL	AUG 11		
LA-BOISSELLE	" 01	WOLVERGHEM	AUG 4	HANGAST WOOD	" 01		
ALBERT	" 15	NEUVE EGLISE	" 23	LA NEUVILLE	" 01		
SERLIS	" 17	CASTRE	SEP 11	CERISY	" 01		
COMFY	" 18	RECHLINGHEM	" 21	SMALLY LBRETTE	" 10		
ALBERT	" 22			HARBONIERES	" 15		

The photo below is of a tank in 1919 in Martin Place Sydney where the Cenotaph is now. On the back of the photo in handwriting is “our Dinkum tank ‘Grit’”. The “dinkum” refers to the fact the tank is real, as during WW1 the Field Engineers built a number of dummy tanks. The purpose of the dummy tanks was likely to confuse the enemy. He was discharged in May 1919 after taking many months to get back from Europe.





Sandy Auld's medals.

Kindly provided by Joy McMillan his daughter. Joy has an excellent file on her father and uncles war records. She recalls her visiting the sites of Gallipoli and Villers-Bretonneux in her poems.

Rodger Robertson November 2011.

## Davidson Family

The stories below are from information and graphic material supplied by Bill Davidson and wife Shirley, both who both grew up in Oatley. Bill lived in 47 Letitia Street. Bill's grandfather was William and father Hugh, and Shirley's father was James Brown and Bills uncle William or Fraser Davidson's military history are described below.

## William Davidson



He lived in 34 Algernon Street at house called "Oraraville". He was a Major in WW1 after immigrating from Scotland where he was in the Seaforth Highlanders in his early service. He volunteered for service in the AIF in August 1914 after beginning his military career in Australia in the NSW Army in 1891. He was a Lieutenant and Adjutant of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion that left Australia in October 1914 and went via Albany in the major convoy of that time (see map below of Albany Harbour). He was wounded in the Gallipoli landing of April 25, 1915 but recovered. He had been promoted to Captain and then Major and fought at

Lone Pine in August 1915 but the died from wounds at that battle a few days later. He was buried at sea and mentioned in despatches by Sir Ian Hamilton a month later. He received several medals- 1914-15 Star, British War medal 1914-1918, 1914 -1919 Victory medal with Oak Leaf, Long Service medal, and Meritorious service. He also

had received the Hazara medal and clasp for his service in the Seaforth Highlanders in 1888.

The Oatley Role of Honour shows other Oatley identities that served in WW1.



## Sapper William John Fraser Davidson

Fraser, as he was known, was the son of the above William. He volunteered in the AIF in 1914 at 17 years of age in the First Divisional Signal Company. He was on the HMAT Karroo, which departed Albany November 1 1914 in the same convoy as his father. He took part in the Gallipoli landing on 25th April 1915 but was a month later transferred to Egypt with Typhoid and Enteric fever. He was later repatriated back to Australia and discharged in January 1916 but re-enlisted in July of that year as a driver in the First Wireless Signals Unit and went to Mesopotamia and later to France. Here he was badly gassed and was finally discharged in June 1919. He received the following medals. 1914-15 Star, British War medal 1914-18, Victory Medal 1914-18.

The story opposite is from a 1930s. It is about Fraser's lost bibles that fell out of his bag on the slopes at Gallipoli. One bible had been given to him by his parents. Fraser had bought another one in Egypt and had inscribed it "to his mother and my sisters and brothers". The lost bibles had been taken back to England but finally returned to Oatley.

## Hugh Alexander Campbell Davidson



Hugh was another son of William. He was born in 1903 and hence too young to serve in WW1. He lived in Oatley from 1911 to 1992 at 34 Algernon, 47 Letitia and finally 8 Wonoona Parade West. He was a Chief Engine Room Artificer and served in the RAN from 1927 to 1949.

During Hugh's 22 years of service he stood by the building and commissioning of HMAS Sydney in Scotland (1935) and HMAS Maryborough in Maryborough Queensland (1940-41). On Maryborough they were based in Singapore taking part in the Singapore-Java Campaign. Later escorting the Queen Mary to Hobart. His service on HMAS Kapunda saw them assigned to the New Guinea area, Milne Bay in particular. HMAS Gladstone was also assigned to the New

Guinea Area. In many areas he was under continuous air attacks.

He served on the following HMA ships and Shore Establishments-Cerberus, Australia, \*Burnie, \*Penguin, HMS London, \*Kapunda, \*Brisbane, Sydney, \*Gladstone, Platypus, Vendetta, Rushcutter, \* Canberra, \*Maryborough, Culgoa, Kuttabul. (\* represents war service).

He received the following medals- 1939-45 Star, Burma Star with Pacific Clasp, War Medal 1939-45 with Oak Leaf, Australian Service Medal, Long Service and Good conduct medal (Navy).



## James Thompson Brown



James is Shirley's father. He lived at 25 Herbert Street Oatley from 1937-1993. He enlisted in June 1942 in the RAAF with the rank of Pilot Officer. Surveyor attached to the Radio Radar Installation and Maintenance Unit. Duties included surveys in conjunction with aerodrome construction, drainage works, road locations and the calibration of radar installations throughout Australia and in particular the Northern Territory. Promotions were awarded during his service to Flying Officer and then Flight Lieutenant.

During his service in North Queensland became seriously ill with left basal pneumonia and pericarditis and was hospitalised for three months in Townsville Base Hospital. Whilst in hospital Japanese Air Raids took place, necessitating the evacuation of all patients. As Jim's condition was so serious he was unable to be moved, as indeed not expected to "pull through," he was left to weather out the air raid in the hospital. However recover he did and spent several more months recuperating before resuming his duties.

He was discharged in October 1945. Jim worked for the NSW Railways and spent quite some months seeking permission to be released from his position to serve in the Australian Forces.

## *Oatley heritage group*

### *Topic: Members of the Group who served in Warfare.*

**Member: Douglas Wickens.**

**Compiled by Alec Leach from an interview with Douglas Wickens.**

**Presented to the quarterly meeting of the *Oatley heritage group*, on Friday, 25<sup>th</sup> November, 2011.**

Douglas (Doug) enlisted about ten months before World War 11 was declared. He would have dearly loved to be a Fitter & Turner, however, times were tough as the world was still feeling the effects of the depression years early in the nineteen thirties and he could not gain an apprenticeship. He joined the Navy. Initially he trained at Flinders Naval Depot and then was assigned to HMAS Australia. His Rank being an Ordinary Seaman Second Class. Doug said one could not be of a lower rank in the Navy.

Three days after War was declared, Doug was on his way by ship to foreign waters. This entailed escorting convoys to Colombo and Aden. From there, they were detailed to go to England via the Cape of Good Hope and join the British Home Fleet. Their duties were in the North Sea and the Arctic. Doug swears that whilst in the Arctic waters, he saw a Polar Bear shivering. Seriously, on one mission they rescued a downed Sunderland Flying boat in the far North Atlantic Ocean. Substantial damage to the ship was made in the rescue.

It was dry docked at Brockle Bank Dry Dock in Liverpool. Mercy country. While the Ship was being repaired, the crew helped out after Air Raids, by putting out fires and helping the locals as the needs arose. After repairs to "HMAS Australia" they were detailed to Africa where the conflict was with the Vichy French. Here the ship was holed twice. The Ship returned to England for repairs, then back to Africa before returning to Australia. During his time on "HMAS Australia", Doug obtained the rank of Able Seaman.

A three month stint at Flinders Naval Depot saw Doug return to duty as a Leading Torpedo Operator. He was transported from Sydney in the "Queen Elizabeth" together with five thousand Soldiers, two hundred Airmen and another forty nine Sailors to the edge of the Suez Canal, Port Tufic. They made their way via Cairo to Alexandria where they picked up their second ship the "HMAS Nestor".

In the Mediterranean they carried out a couple of sorties, then moved out of the Mediterranean to Trincomalee, a Port in the Eastern Coast of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. Here they were attached to the British Eastern Fleet. The Fleet consisted of old Battleships and an old Aircraft Carrier named the "HMS Hermes". "Nestor" was one of the modern Destroyers in the Fleet.

Trincomalee became under threat of invasion by the Japanese and the Fleet had to leave. They knew a Japanese Fleet was waiting to annihilate them. "HMS Hermes", "Dorsetshire", "Cornwell" & "HMAS Vampire" had been sunk. A tactical mistake by the Japanese, saved their skin and the Fleet sailed to see another day.

*Crew of "HMAS Nestor" with Doug Wickens third from the left.*





*"HMAS Nestor" - From a copy of a painting.*

"Nestor" served around Ceylon. At one stage they were holed up in Mombassa, Africa, before being detached to Port Sedan. Here they loaded Spitfires onto an Aircraft Carrier, then together with two other Destroyers, escorted it to what they thought would be Singapore. By the time they arrived, Singapore had fallen. The Planes were flown off to Batavia. They returned to Port Sedan for more Spitfires, this time Sumatra had fallen and the planes had to be flown to Ceylon.

Their next assignment was back into the Mediterranean to Alexandria and Haifa. Large ships could not navigate the Suez Canal. They were detailed to move over to Malta.

The minute they poked their noses out of Port, they were under attack. Malta desperately needed supplies as they were starving. Merchant ships going to their aid were being sunk first, followed by their escorts. Doug recalled how he witnessed a tanker being hit, it blew up in a huge ball of flame similar to one we would see when the atomic bomb was later exploded.

"HMAS Nestor" was in their line of fire. She was two hundred miles south west of Crete at the time. As Doug said, they were skittled by two bombs that hit her. One on her mast, which slid down and blew a hole in the ship's Port side. This caused major damage. The other on the starboard side only did minor damage. Fire broke out, everything was disabled. When asked about being scarred at the time, Doug's reply was that they didn't have time, for each man had a job to do and got on with it. The fires were put out but the ship was taking water and was beginning to sink.

In the midst of this, they sighted a Torpedo Bomber approaching them head on. The torpedo was dropped and everyone including the Captain held their breath, luckily it was too deep and went harmlessly under her. Soon afterwards a second one approached in the same manner. The crew had time to retrieve some 303 rifles. They were prepared for its arrival. With the help of the Close Range Weapons they all fired. Shortly after the planes departure after dropping another torpedo too deep, it fell out of the sky. Doug could see the pilot's unshaven face and the whites of his eyes.



The British Destroyer "HMS Javelin," was assigned to render assistance to the disabled "Nestor", firstly trying to protect her, then taking her under tow. This became an almighty task, for as "Nestor" was half full of water she would spear off in all directions whilst under tow. Eventually "HMAS Nestor", on the 16<sup>th</sup> June, 1942 sank.

Although only having a short life, she was commissioned on the 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1941, she sank, a very proud ship. Her motto to the end was, "I know not how to retreat".

On arrival at the Dakeila Fleet Air Arm Base, they were given three days leave and one pound, before being sent on an old dilapidated train to Port Tupic. Incidentally, the train caught fire on the way. Our heroes sat themselves on a sand dune, saying, "Let the bloody thing burn" and watched as the Egyptians attempted to extinguish it. They returned to Port Tupic to be assigned to the "HMAS Norman", another "N" Class Destroyer. This was late in 1942. They joined the British Eastern Fleet at Mombassa, then on to Cape Town. Along the way, they were attached to the South Atlantic Station, where they patrolled up the South African Coast looking for German Submarines. Madagasca was thought to soon be invaded by the Japanese. The Fleet was assigned the task of invading the Port. "HMAS Norman's" task was to sneak into the harbour, hold a position without dropping anchor, then beam a blue light out to sea to guide Landing Barges in. Madagasca was successfully invaded. The aftermath of this was to be greeted by the locals in canoes, selling monkeys at a very cheap price,



resulting in the ship being overrun with monkeys until the Captain in typical Australian language ordered, "Get these bloody monkeys off my ship".

The Mediterranean was closed as Burma had been invaded by the Japanese and India needed supplies. Fleets bringing troops, supplies etc had to sail via the Cape of Good Hope. Massive fleets had to be employed to protect ships with up to ten thousand troops on board. When forming a fleet, "HMAS Norman's" job was to be first out to sea. They would assist in assembling the ships. When the troops were safely despatched, "Norman" would go to the rear of the fleet to make sure every ship was herded safely back into port. "HMAS Norman" returned to Australia for repairs in late 1944.

Doug was hospitalised and in his typical dry sense of humour, said it wasn't through any sexually transmitted disease. In hospital the doctor commented that he had had a fair old innings. Doug's reply was "Yes". Doug was discharged in 1945 due to the fact that his father had died in New Guinea and his mother was dependent on him.



*Doug and his Father.*

*Doug 2011.*

***Who would have been a sailor in Doug's day?***

***"Toothy" Gets To Work***

***(Copied from a wartime newspaper clipping)***

*During 1945 the R.A.N. gave thought to attaching dentists to the smaller ships.*

*For a long time dentists had been attached to Cruisers and Battleships, but cases of toothache on destroyers and smaller craft usually had to wait until they reached port for attention. For the first time in its history the Seventh Flotilla had a dentist when it travelled North in June. Never have I seen a dentist work under such difficulties and do such an amazing job.*

*All his equipment including the specially constructed chair, could be collapsed into four separate portions, only two of which required more than one man to carry them. His drill was driven by foot, while the dentist balanced himself on the other to the movement of the ship. Two boxes of equipment, measuring about 4ft by 2ft by 1ft deep opened out like a large edition of a lady's dressing table jewel case. The dental officer, a Surgeon Lieutenant, wears pink between his gold braiding, and is known to all and sundry officially or unofficially as "Toothy". Our dentist used one assistant especially trained for the work. There was no lovely soft carpeted, delicately painted-walled consultation rooms for our "Toothy". Most of his work was done during the day on deck under a tarpaulin, with his customers sitting on small arms ammunition cases.*



*My thanks to Doug for agreeing to be interviewed by me and to Betty for talking him into it. He spoke about things he had not revealed before, even to his family.*

*Alec Leach.*

*Oatley heritage group*  
**Topic:- Members of the Group who served in Warfare.**

**Member: William Wright.**

**Compiled by Alec Leach from an interview with William Wright.**

**Presented to the quarterly meeting of the Group on Friday, 25th November, 2011.**

As World War II was in its dying months, William (Bill) Wright was born. His Grandfather, in 1910, saw the land Bill now lives on, from Oatley Station. Grandfather bought it, began building in 1912 and moved into a one bedroom house in 1913. Bill is now a very proud custodian of 85 Waratah Street, Oatley, although John Alfred would not recognise it, for it is a delightful well manicured modern home and grounds.

Bill, after completing his education, was apprenticed as a Sheetmetal Coppersmith in 1960, at Waratah Sheetmetal in Arncliffe. National Service Training was reintroduced in Australia and Bill was initially called up in the 1st ballot of the second National Service Intake in 1965. He was allowed a deferment of twelve months to allow him to finish his apprenticeship. At a date which many folk remember as being the introduction of decimal currency, 14th February, 1966, Bill joined the ranks of the Army as a conscript.

Army life suited Bill from day one. Initially he attended the Marrickville Barracks in Addison Road, Marrickville. He was transferred to the Recruitment Training Centre at the Kapooka Army Base, Wagga, for an initial three months training period, then transferred to Singleton Army Base for another three months. In September, 1966, after completing his training, Bill was assigned to 1st Battalion Holsworthy in September, 1966, attaining the rank of Private.

Here he promptly joined up to serve six years in the regular Army. For the next eight months, he served as an infantry man, before being transferred to the RAEME Training Centre, Bandiana Army Base, Wodonga, Victoria. Bill, the qualified Sheetmetal Coppersmith was to be trained as an Electronic Technician.



**Bill Wright 1966**

In January 1970, Bill was commissioned to serve in Vietnam. There he was to spend the next twelve months based at Fung Tau which is located approximately one hundred kilometres north east from the southern tip of Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh City is another one hundred kilometres inland. Upon arriving by plane, they had

each been given a lunch pack of revolting sandwiches on the plane. This was promptly thrown in the garbage, immediately the local children scavenged it. Bill had had his first taste of a culture shock which has remained with him today. Leave was not granted to go into Vung Tau. It was only after a couple of months and they had acclimatised, that they were allowed into town. This was mainly in organised groups who would undergo aid work, such as working in orphanages, repairing water troughs and windmills. A dreaded word was Kaka Dow, meaning to slit ones throat. Apparently the Australians were reasonably safe, however, the Americans weren't very popular.



**RAAF Base 1970**

Bill was attached to Light Aircraft, which acted as spotters to locate targets. At night, they would drop flares and on many occasions they would be under attack from ground fire.

Bill had only been in Vietnam for a few weeks when he was detailed to go on patrol. This entailed going out into the jungle for about one thousand yards, then remain there for hours not making any noise. The purpose was to listen for any movement from the enemy. On this occasion after being there well into the night, there was a loud crack from a rifle. They dare not return fire, for there were only twelve Aussies and an unknown number of Viet Cong. They retreated. Bill said it was stated that one could not run through the jungle, his words to that were "Bull Shit". Back at camp the two Corporals in command that evening, convinced the powers to be, that retreat was the better part of valour. That episode will never be erased from Bill's mind.



Their main job was to act as spotter aircraft, either flying in helicopters or Cessna's. When flying at about thirty to forty feet off the ground, they would tilt the chopper slightly to cause a blowing effect on the ground. This would part the undergrowth or jungle to reveal enemy activity in the area. In the rice paddy fields at a higher altitude they could spot tracks through the fields. From that they would access the activities and then request that the sight should be targeted. When out of a night time, their mission would be to drop flares, for safety reason they had to show a light so other aircraft could spot them, yes, so could the enemy. At times they could see the green tracers approaching them. In turn they would report where they were coming from and leave the rest to the big boys.

When the red kangaroo man was shipped out, he designated the job to Bill. This entailed sticking a little red kangaroo sticker onto any foreign aircraft that flew into the base. By the time Bill left, he was known far and wide. Aircraft would fly in with any feeble excuse, to know that the phantom had attached a kangaroo to their plane when they flew out - they were known as red rats.

Bill applied to have his service in Vietnam extended by six months. this was flatly refused as there was a waiting list of volunteers wanting to serve. As it was it took Bill four years before he could do his line of duty.



*The Phantom Red Kangaroo Sticker*

On returning to Australia, Bill was posted to the 16 Aviation Regiment, west of Toowoomba. This only lasted a couple of months, for he and the hierarchy didn't see eye to eye. He was given a choice to remove himself south or north. In August 1971 he went north to Townsville, 162 Ricky Flight, to form a new unit on the RAAF Base. They were not accepted by the RAAF personnel, who thought they were a cut above the Army.

This would be highlighted when they would be drinking in the mess with the RAAF personnel. Bill's mate Mick Connor, after having a few too many, would bring out the little red book 'Thoughts of Mao' and would begin to read it aloud. He would persist in reading, eventually this would result in an all in fight and the boys would be barred from the mess for a couple of weeks.

After a couple of months they were moved over to the Army Base. They landed themselves into a highly regimented Artillery Group, who's RSM demanded discipline, such as saluting and marching everywhere. Our boys knew nothing of this and rode push bikes to get to their aircraft they were working on, which to the RSM's disgust were on his parade ground.

Christmas 1971 a cyclone hit Townsville. Bill and another two mates had not taken leave and were on hand when it struck. Their aircraft were destroyed, they managed to make one aircraft out of two and get it into the air. For the next couple of weeks they performed search and rescue operations.

Bill vividly remembers that it was the 19th June 1972 when they were requested to assist to find the body of a fisherman who had stepped off the back of his boat in Townsville Harbour and drowned. They found him and landed on the water over the top of him. The pilot lifted the Sioux helicopter slightly and at the same time the swell caught the aircraft, toppled it and it exploded. Luckily no one was injured.



Since coming away from Vietnam, Bill had been requesting to go to Malaysia, without success. He was now coming up for re enlistment. To do so he insisted that he be sent to Malaysia. They refused but he stuck to his guns and was sent back to Sydney where he spent his last month in the Army at South Head whilst the they sorted out his paperwork.

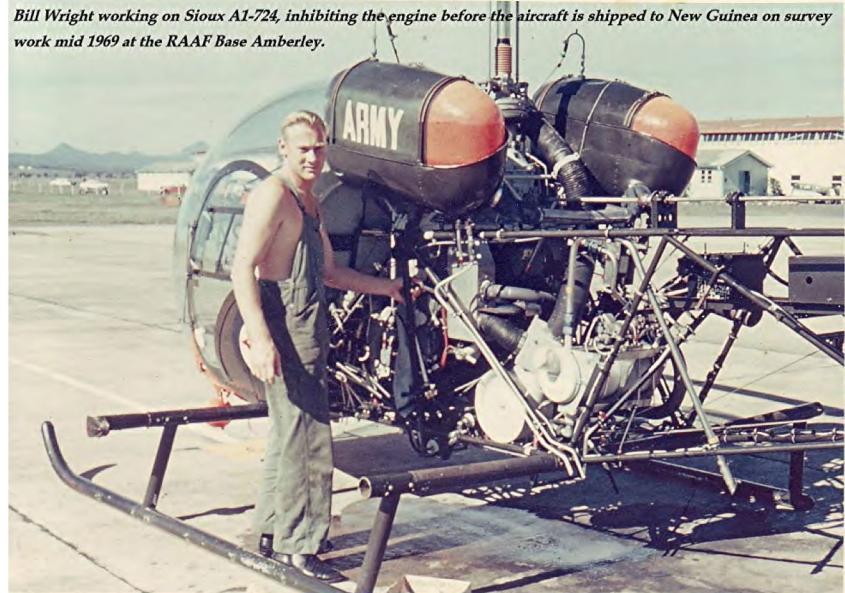


In civilian street, Bill applied for a job at QANTAS. When being taken for a look through the workshop, of about five hundred workman, he recognised about fifty, chaps he had gone through National Service Training with. He began another career with QANTAS that lasted thirty years. Today, he still meets up with those blokes every month.

*Images relating to Bill Wright's service in the Armed Forces.*



*Bill Wright in battle dress uniform on leave from Infantry training 1965*

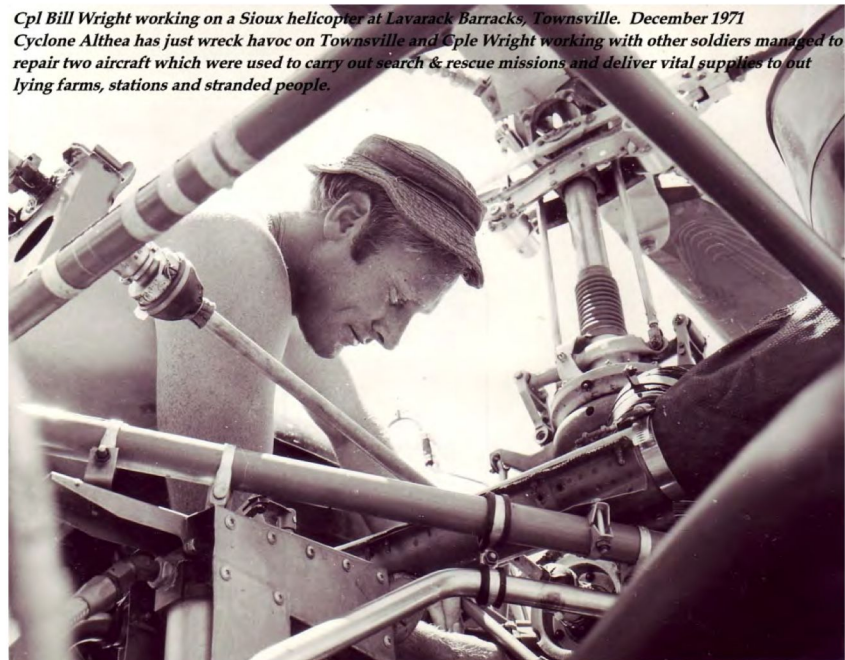


*Bill Wright working on Sioux A1-724, inhibiting the engine before the aircraft is shipped to New Guinea on survey work mid 1969 at the RAAF Base Amberley.*

*Bill 1966*



*Bill 2011*



*Cpl Bill Wright working on a Sioux helicopter at Lavarack Barracks, Townsville. December 1971 Cyclone Althea has just wreck havoc on Townsville and Cpl Wright working with other soldiers managed to repair two aircraft which were used to carry out search & rescue missions and deliver vital supplies to out lying farms, stations and stranded people.*

*My thanks to Bill for speaking freely to me about his experiences which at times I knew affected him.*

*Alec leach.*



**Thomas Wesley “Wes” and Noela Mary (nee Frost) Bentley**  
**Lived in Oatley 1950 to 2004**

**Wes Bentley 1915 to 2002**

Wes was born in Millthorpe near Orange in 1915, the eldest of 7 children. In 1937, at 22 he was working as a shop assistant for Western Stores in Orange, and living with his parents David Henry and Mildred Bentley at their home at 70 Byng Street, Orange.

By late 1937, Wes was listed as a grocer, and now living at 61 Byng Street, Orange. The family moved often after losing their house in the Depression and being forced to rent and take in borders.

In 1941, the year he enlisted, Wes was living at 135 Dalton Street, Orange, shown as Shop Assistant. Shortly after the family moved to Sydney to escape the cold Orange winters.

Wes originally tried to enlist in the RAAF but was rejected because of a heart murmur. Later, he came to Sydney and enlisted for the army and didn't tell them about heart murmur; he was accepted – and lived till 86 with a murmuring heart.

**Service record**

Name	<b>BENTLEY, THOMAS WESLEY</b>
Service	Australian Army
Service Number	NX57694
Date of Birth	31 Oct 1915
Place of birth	BLAYNEY, NSW
Date of Enlistment	16 Jul 1940
Locality on Enlistment	ORANGE, NSW
Place of Enlistment	PADDINGTON, NSW
Next of Kin	BENTLEY, DAVID
Date of Discharge	21 Nov 1945
Rank	Corporal
Posting at Discharge	2/3 Pioneer Battalion
WW2 Honours and Gallantry	None for Display
Prisoner of War	No

Initially Wes' unit, the 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> Pioneer Battalion, was sent to Darwin ahead of the other troops - there they were trained and built huts before returning to Sydney, and then being posted to Middle East on the Queen Mary. Noela said that years afterward writing by some of the fellows from Wes' unit was found on a drawer in a cupboard in the Queen Mary.

- Wes' unit saw action in El Alamein – he had his 27<sup>th</sup> birthday on October 1942 while fighting in the pivotal “*second battle of El Alamein*” in which allied forces breached the German line and drove the enemy back to Tunisia. It was about that allied victory that Winston Churchill said “*Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end, but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.*” After the war, Churchill wrote: “*Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein, we never had a defeat.*”





At this time Noela and Wes rented part of an old house in Letitia Street, No. 56. This very old house with huge rooms is still standing and Noela remembers that at that time it belonged to the Judd family.

Wes & Noela took the two front rooms, and use kitchen and laundry out the back with built in tubs and a fuel, ie wood burning, copper. The remainder of the house was rented to Mrs. Daisy Blanchfield who used to go to work, meaning Wes & Noela more or less had use of the house. Noela remembers the flea plague and sitting up at night cracking them as they hopped up from the bare floorboards.

Their first child Jill was born 17 December 1949.

Wes worked the shop, Noela helped until Jill was born, then Wes was helped by a woman who had previously helped Mrs. Thompson. Their customers became lifelong friends as there were many young families in a similar position to them.

Brother Gordon, who had married Mrs. Thompson's daughter, had bought a vacant block in Park Avenue, Oatley West and built a garage on it but decided to move New Guinea with his work. He offered the garage to Noela & Wes to rent. It was only a shell, empty – no guttering even, they moved in 1950 with a baby in a year of record rainfall. Initially they caught rain in a bucket for water and also had a wood fuel copper.

They knew no one when they first moved to Oatley and Noela's brother said "make yourself known to Bob Heaton and his wife Kath who live in Lloyd St". Bob and Kath and their friends, many of whom were ex-servicemen and wives, formed a close bond over the coming years as they all had so much in common. They played a regular Saturday night canasta where everyone "bought a plate". Noela bought just the plate the first time! Many fun times were enjoyed and those still alive keep in regular contact. There was Jack and Doss Walker, Jim and Marg Keating, Ted and Heather Williams, Geoff and Barbara Hand, Beryl and Peter Hand and Bob and Kath. The Hand brothers had joined the RAAF and were sent to Canada for training where they met their lovely wives who came to settle in Australia after the war ended.

In 1952 Noela and Wes, with a loan from the Rural Bank, purchased a house at 60 Mi Mi St, Oatley West that was to be their home for 52 years.

When second daughter, Heather, was born in 1953 Noela and Wes decided that working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week was not family friendly so they sold the business and Wes took a job with Qantas as a Purchasing Officer.

Wes had developed a love of travel from his time in the Army, so with a staff discount the family would be able to do some more. In 1956 the family took up a two year posting to Darwin, Darwin being the entrance to Australia at the time and with the Melbourne Olympics that year it was a busy and thriving town. The family were housed at Berrima, and ex RAAF camp.

After returning to Oatley in 1958 they reignited friendships and over the ensuing years Wes took on community responsibilities with the RSL, Oatley Bowling Club and the 2/3 Pioneers Association, becoming Secretary and President. Noela acted as his secretary and together they keep the group together, supporting the men as they aged and being there for the many widows as the years passed.

In 2000 the members of the 2/3 Pioneers Assn applied for an award for Wes but as it was the year of the Olympics it was given to sportsmen. Noela has kept the many glowing letter that were written to support the award.  
The Assn met every month and on Anzac Day, the last meeting being held this year as there are only 6 men left – all in their 90s.

Wes died 2 January 2002 aged 86 from prostate cancer. The service by a Salvation Army Chaplain who was with the 9<sup>th</sup> Division in the Middle East was attended by 200 people, with the wake at Oatley RSL.

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### **Noela Bentley nee Frost**

Noela was born in Nottinghill Road, Lidcombe in 1925 during the depression at a midwife's house.

Her grandfather, James Frost, worked as a stonemason on Prospect Dam and when it was completed bought land in Lidcombe 34, 36 & 38 Raymond St. (so named after 2 councillors Lidbury and Larcombe). As this suburb was the next to Rookwood Cemetery James would be able to get regular work as a stonemason and has many headstones there bearing his name.

James was a great horseman and won many medals with the Parramatta Lancers. Noela's father, Henry James, was also a keen horseman and enlisted with the 7<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Brigade on turning 18 in 1915 and was sent to the Middle East during World War 1. During his time there his father came with remounts (fresh horses) and there is a photo of their meeting in the desert. Henry James was returned to Australia ill and weighing only 6 stone.

Noela's grandfather sold 2 of the blocks of land cheaply to his 2 sons, George and Henry James "Jim", and Noela was born shortly after a house was built on the site in 1925. Her grandfather died of pneumonia from the stone dust when she was a baby, and her maternal grandfather had died in 1900 also from pneumonia – no antibiotics then!

Noela completed her Intermediate Certificate in 1939 aged 14 and did a business course with Stott & Underwood at Parramatta for one year. Starting work with AGE Australian General Electric was convenient as they had a factory at Lidcombe and she stayed until enlisting at age 18 in 1943.

The war had really bought the community together, Noela remembers knitting many socks for the troops and selling tickets for the chocolate wheels conducted by the RSL to raise money for the returning injured soldiers.

A bomb shelter was built under Lidcombe Town Hall and Noela volunteered there doing messages or whatever was needed to help the war effort.

Her father Jim was in the VDC – Volunteer Defence Force – as he had experience from WW1. His and his father's names are recorded on the memorial at Lidcombe Park. Noela's mother Bonnie, worked at the local canteen set up for men on leave, made camouflage netting used to cover guns in the Middle East, and billeted English sailors many times.

Noela applied to join the army the day after turning 18 on 6 May 1943 and was accepted 1 June. She had come from an army family, with both father and grandfather involved and her older brother, Gordon, also having joined at 18.

Noela's mother thought she would be refused on medical grounds as she had been a sickly child, but Noela left the form for illnesses blank so passed the test.

#### **Service Record**

Name	<b>FROST, NOELA MARY</b>
Service	Australian Army
Service Number	NF461185
Date of Birth	6 May 1925
Place of birth	LIDCOMBE, NSW
Date of Enlistment	1 Jun 1943
Locality on Enlistment	LIDCOMBE, NSW
Place of Enlistment	PADDINGTON, NSW
Next of Kin	FROST, HENRY
Date of Discharge	23 May 1946
Rank	Signalman
Posting at Discharge	Australian Womens Army Service
WW2 Honours and Gallantry	None for Display
Prisoner of War	No

After the written test the officer said "You have very good handwriting and with your experience at the Lidcombe bomb shelter we will allocate you to Signals"  
AGE was a protected industry and it was not easy to obtain a release but was pleased to be accepted and became NF461185

"I clearly remember my first day as an AWAS, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1943, when we were transported to Ingleburn Camp and installed in huts - it was freezing! I remember getting up in the night and putting on every item of clothing I had and still feeling cold."

As young women alone for the first time it didn't take long for friendships to form in the camp and those friendships remain to this day, though sadly very few are still living.

After 6 weeks Rookie Camp learning the basics of marching and Army life the trainees were entrained at Central Station for Albury and trucked to Bonegilla Camp nearby (later to become a migrant hostel). Bonegilla was even colder than Ingleburn. This new Signals Unit began to learn Morse Code and after 6 weeks were entrained to Melbourne and a Sigs Operators Course with extensive code practice on the wireless. The camp was in the grounds of Ivanhoe Grammar School, which may sound glamorous but the officers occupied the beautiful old stone buildings whilst the new recruits were housed in 10 long corrugated iron huts, each holding about 20 beds made from fencing wire with straw paillasses (mattresses) and bare timber floors, and it was FREEZING!

"We were a very compatible and happy group and had quite a few wags that were always up to something to stir the officers. I was 18 and very naïve as I had never left



the security of home before so it was great fun to be with girls my own age. We were like sisters and took great care of each other.

It was at the Ivanhoe camp that one funny incident occurred. One very cold night my new found friend in the next bed said "I'm freezing Frosty" – my maiden name was frost so I soon became "Frosty" and retain the name to this day with my Army mates. So she suggested that we get in bed together and in no time we were warm and drifting off to sleep. The next thing I remember was a touch shining in my face and an angry woman officer demanding to know "what are you two doing in bed together?"

Of course we told her the story of how cold we were and wondered why she was so hostile. "Report to the C.O. (Commanding Officer) at 9am and get back in your own beds!" which of course we did but fearing we would be discharged in the morning. At 9am we marched into the C.O.'s office in the main building and there sat a huge man who scared the daylight out of us.

"What was the idea of you two being in bed together?" We told him our story and imagined he would believe us as we were innocent but instead he roared

"Are you two lesbians?" We looked at each other wondering.

"Do you know what a lesbian is?"

Again he roared and again we looked at each other and I meekly said

"Oh yes, that is someone who acts on the stage I think"

"Oh my God" he said as he shook his head

"Go back to your hut – case dismissed!"

I was so pleased that I had given him the correct answer and he had dismissed us as I thought we would be dishonourably discharged – what a disgrace – and all for just being in bed together.

It was only after the war when I was married, had a child and was out with a group of tennis ladies that the word "lesbian" came up in conversation and the meaning was revealed to me, and I understood the C.O.'s reaction! My father always said "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing"

After 6 weeks the group were entrained to Indooroopilly near Brisbane for specialist training. Here the housing was tents with the occasional snake for company.

The group were to be known as the *Wheatstone Section – No. 1 Australian Submarine Cable Section*, and spent many days in an old garage in Brisbane learning the sounder. The cable was a line connected directly from Port Moresby to Townsville as teletypewriters were not yet in use.

The next move was to Townsville where a camp was constructed at Stuart to house the Section (on the road to Charters Towers). The next 18 months were spent there doing shifts of 8 hours each, 24 hours a day, with 9 days on and 3 days off.

The Sigs Office was a concrete bunker of a building built into the side of a hill.

"Days off were sometimes spent on Magnetic Island, where we swam and walked around the island. We had some great times there together, occasionally a concert party would come to entertain us. The girls made 2 piece swimsuits for themselves from tea towels, the time passed very quickly and then back to work".

In August 1944 Noela and another Sig, Rita, were sent for an advanced Sigs Ops Course and passed with distinctions, returning to Townsville.

“Rita was great fun – she had been secretary to Reg Ansett in civvy life and put her age up to obtain more pay – 4 shillings and 8 pence a day was not enough for Rita. One day I remember we were assigned to prepare supper for the officers, and she suggested instead of cheese on the sandwiches we cut up 4”x4” bars of soap – and we did!”

In July 1945 as the war was nearing its end the Section was transferred to Melbourne’s Fawkner Park. This camp was built to house American troops but their officers refused to occupy it as it was so bad – just Masonite huts. So the camp was allocated to the Australian Army!

At the end of the war the Signals Section received via Wheatstone, and passed on the many messages coming from POW’s from around the world to their families who had been waiting to hear if they had survived. This was a very emotional experience.

Noela was discharged on 21 May 1946, having served a few days under 3 years, she found civilian life hard to adjust to at first and missed the company, the sad and the happy times together.

Noela enrolled in a Rehabilitation Course as a comptometer operator and began work at David Jones soon after in the Invoice Control Section.

When Noela met Wes in 1947 they had an immediate affinity. They had much in common and Noela was able to help Wes with his anxious state as she understood what he had been through, they were married in 1949.

Noela loved her 55 years living in Oatley, their beautiful garden with flowers, fruit and vegetables, 2 children she adored, caring and supportive friends and many ways to keep active as she aged taking up bowls (becoming president of the Oatley Bowling Club), U3A classes, craft, theatre and trips locally and overseas.

After Wes’s death in 2002 the time came to make a decision about looking after a house and garden alone.

“My daughter Jill suggested I look at a Retirement Village at Tea Gardens, not far from where she lived. I was reluctant to leave my friends of over 50 years, but on a subsequent visit the CEO of The Grange, Gail, said “ Noela I have just the place for you”. Gail showed us No. 187 which was just being built – immediately I could image myself there with a new house, well-maintained gardens and a lovely courtyard looking onto them. I have been here 7 years now and am very happy. I would love to do more but am grateful for how much I can manage, still going to U3A lectures and outings, Red Cross, RSL Auxillary, Probus, trips locally and I have made some wonderful friends with whom I enjoy lunch and dinner outings. Everyone is so kind I am as “happy as a sandboy” and I count my lucky stars each night and think “Wes would have loved it here”.

Daughter Jill and husband Peter live nearby and we love having time together. My other daughter, Heather, lives in Sydney and has developed a post teaching career doing interesting lectures for U3A, we enjoy long phone calls. I have 2 great grandchildren and another due in February. I am indeed fortunate!”