

26 Battalion Association Victorian Branch

26 AUST. INF. BN (AIF) "NEVER UNPREPARED"

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NEWSLETTER

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Cowra POW Camp, 1 July 1944. Japanese POWs practice baseball near their quarters, several weeks before the Cowra breakout. This photograph was taken with the intention of using it in propaganda leaflets, to be dropped on Japanese-held areas in the Asia-Pacific region. AWM067178

Welcome to Newsletter No. 24

WELCOME to the latest issue of 26 Battalion Association, Newsletter.

As our President mentions in his report, the Melbourne assembly on ANZAC Day has had another change to the meeting place and time. Afterwards, we'll meet at *The George Hotel*, 139 Cecil St, Sth Melb around 12.15pm.

Keith Miles was prompted to

write a letter after reading our last Newsletter and shares with us some of his personal experiences on Soraken Peninsula.

We also have another feature article from our award winning author Laurie Hill, where he describes his experiences following the Cowra POW breakout. The details in

Yesterday's Enemy is Today's Friend, reflects the culture of the time and parts of it may be distressing to some readers. Some forty years on, a Japanese naval officer builds on the respect and friendship towards his former enemy.

Your contributions to the Newsletter are gladly accepted.

- Colin Block, Editor

Letters

From Peter Nowlan

I WAS up in Port Moresby on a trip in November and I went to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery at Bomana. You may be aware that all the Australia servicemen that died on Bougainville were re-interred at the Cemetery at Bomana in Port Moresby. The return trip cost me 50 kina (~\$20) and I got there at 4.30p.m. The cemetery shuts at 4.00p.m. but the taxi driver worked some magic and I was allowed in. A work friend of mine had a relative killed in PNG and I wanted to get a photograph of his grave. By chance I came across the following grave of a 26Bn man killed on Bougainville and I took a photograph of his grave. Thought I would send you a copy. I can not help notice the well maintained Cemetery.



From Keith Miles

THE Soraken Peninsula story (Newsletter 23, Nov 2013) brought back lot of memories of a most unpleasant and sleepless time for us, not to mention the Japs. I can remember our early morning landing on Soraken – pitch black, couldn't see a thing, only feel the jungle around you and we had to wait for sunrise to see anything. We moved inland to a plantation where there was a bit of dry ground. Then we discovered we had no communication with the other companies, so Les Grant and I were given a job to find the problem. So away we went and came to where a big hunk of cable that had been cut by the Japs, but luckily for us they weren't in ambush, but I can tell you, fear was trumps!

President's Report

GREETINGS. It is that time of year again and it has come around just as fast. First I will get the formalities out of the way regarding the 2014 ANZAC day march. I have been told that the 26th Bn AIF is meeting at 0930 hours on the corner of Swanston St and Flinders St north side near St Paul's Cathedral. As usual, we will be there trying to erect the banner. It seems to be getting harder each year, maybe it's just age catching up. We have a car that can seat three, so hopefully we will utilize the vehicle.

We have been informed that two members passed away recently, Kingsley Locke and Jack Vicary. On behalf of 26th Battalion Association, we send their families our sincere condolences and prayers.

I was reading in *Newsletter No. 13*, about Kingsley Locke

Cont ...

Left:
Headstone of Private Leslie Peff, 26 Infantry Battalion, 6th June 1945, Age 24.

Below:
Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery in Bomana, Port Moresby, PNG



President's Report continued

and I would have to agree with him about Canungra being a horrible place. I have trained there myself and I don't think much has changed in the 50 years prior to us being there.

It almost seems surreal that you could join with your mate David Watt, as Kingsley did, and end up together on the same battlefield. These diggers endured life and death encounters constantly. Today's men are not like the type Kingsley was. To wake up to see an unexploded bomb next to you would send shivers down ones spine, but Kingsley took it in his stride. Today a man would be encouraged to seek two years of psychotherapy just to deal with it. Kingsley apparently performed for the troops playing music so the diggers could sing along. It sounds as though his love of music was his therapy. For many years he played in the *Happy Wanderers* jazz band. Now the final curtain has fallen on his most fulfilling 91 years.

I remember Jack Vicary's cheerfulness and energy when he used to come down from NSW to join the Melbourne ANZAC Day commemorations. He would catch up with mates Bob Gaudion and Ray Block and was always had a yarn or two to tell. He lived until 89.

I would like to send my thanks to Colin Block, our dedicated webmaster and newsletter editor. Every year he is totally focussed on the job at hand.

Also, I would like to congratulate him on his retirement from the work force, which I'm sure he has earned. Enjoy yourself Colin.

I look forward to seeing you all on ANZAC Day. As usual, I will be attending the Dawn Service. I am sometimes joined by some mates who feel the same way about our heroic veterans who served with



Above:
Kinsley Locke and David Watt



Above:
Jack Vicary marching on ANZAC Day in April 2004

honour during the wars and I will always remember the great soldiers who served gallantly in the 26th Australian Infantry Battalion.

Yours respectfully
Jeff Collings



Above:
President Jeff Collings with veteran Vin Frawley and editor Colin Block on ANZAC Day 2013.

MARCH PROTOCOLS

The veterans have decided on the following protocols:

- The ANZAC Day Commemoration March is not a military parade; therefore, no vehicle, animal, weaponry or memorabilia (including photographs) may be included without the prior approval of the ANZAC Day Commemoration Council.
- Next of kin should march as a group behind the veterans and be old enough to march the full distance (1.8 km) without assistance.
- Attire should be neat and tidy out of respect for the fallen (torn denim, sporting attire and dirty joggers are not appreciated).
- The use of prams and pushers in the March is not supported.
- Next of kin are to wear medals on the right breast—left breast is reserved for the original recipient of the medals

Yesterday's Enemy is Today's Friend

By MERVYN (LAURIE) HILL

APPROACHING my 18th birthday in 1943 I was employed by a retail store that was not considered to be vital for the war effort. I was then directed to work for a company which was manufacturing bicycles and radar equipment for the military. I was not happy with this situation as five of my older brothers were in the services and I was very keen to join the Army.

After my birthday I pleaded with the company personnel officer for a release to enlist in the Army, only to be told I would not be released as they were making war equipment. Not getting anywhere with him I asked to see the general manager. To my surprise an interview was granted and the G.M. said that if I was so keen to join up he would give me my release.

In October 1943 I proceeded to Royal Park Army Camp for a medical examination. I was very apprehensive about the results as a fellow I knew was rejected because, like me, he had very dry skin which the medical board said would not be suitable for the tropics. To my relief I was passed as A1 and free to enlist in the A.I.F.

During the week we were given an aptitude test and an officer asked what branch of the Army I would like to serve in and he was very surprised when I answered the infantry. Later, when in the islands I wondered why! He suggested other branches were more suited to me considering the results of the tests and my knowledge of radio etc., but as I was so keen on the infantry he would send me there.

When eventually I did get to my Battalion in Queensland I was called to the orderly office and transferred to the Signal Platoon for specialised training in communications, Morse code etc. On completion of the course I was paid an extra sixpence a day. After the week at Royal Park we boarded a troop train from Spencer Street Station for our initial training at Warwick Queensland. As the train pulled out an Army band played

Goodbye Melbourne Town and I was feeling a little emotional as my mother and younger brother were there to see me off. We knew we were going north to train for war but we all thought it was a big adventure and we were indestructible, not even thinking about the possibility of not coming home.

Some weeks later the Platoon was given two weeks home leave but foolishly I overstayed my leave a by a couple of days and was put on open arrest with other minor defaulters. We were then driven to Spencer St. Station for the trip back to Sydney.

On return to New South Wales we were sent to a camp in the Penrith railway yards to load and unload railway trucks. After a few weeks and on the evening of August 4th 1944 an urgent parade was called. We were told of the riot by the Japanese at the Cowra prisoner of war camp. I was chosen in a contingent of troops to be ready to be rushed to Cowra to round up the Japanese



Cowra NSW, 5 August 1944. The morning after the prison outbreak revealed blankets draped over the barbed wire fence.

AWM 067178

escapees. On arrival at the camp we could see smoke still rising from the burnt out huts and there were blankets and mattresses saturated in blood that had been thrown over the barbed wire, where many of the prisoners escaped. The guards told us that many were mown down by machine gunfire and others scrambled over dead bodies to escape. They also told us of one Vickers machine

gun jamming and prisoners armed with baseball bats and sharpened cutlery charging and yelling 'banzai' but one of the gun crew had the foresight to throw the gun's bolt away so the Japanese could not use the gun against the Australians. Early in the morning we were deployed in sections to round up escapees and on scouring the countryside we saw the hideous sights of some hanging from trees and bodies on railway tracks where they had thrown themselves in front of oncoming trains.

There were others who had committed Hara-kiri. After all of escapees were returned to the camp we were told that two hundred and thirty Japanese had lost their lives and over three hundred and fifty were wounded.

Feelings were running very high amongst the young troops because the Japanese had killed privates Hardy, Jones and Lieutenant Doncaster during the breakout. During our training we were taught to kill and the saying at the time was 'the only good Jap. was a dead one'.

After everything settled down the camp Major explained that prior to the outbreak they knew that trouble was brewing. A decision was made to separate the Japanese officers from other ranks and this was why the riot was planned. After the planning the prisoners armed themselves with knives and forks sharpened on stone, baseball bats, pieces of iron or anything they could use for weapons. Then early in the morning of August 4th 1944 a bugle call was sounded, and the charge by the prisoners started one of the greatest escapes by P.O.W's in WW2.

The camp being declared secure again, a decision was made to transfer by a convoy of trucks many of the prisoners to the P.O.W. camp in Murchison Victoria. The convoy was led by an Army officer in a Jeep followed by a covered truck of armed troops then a covered truck of prisoners and so on until the end of the convoy.

I travelled in a Jeep in the middle of the convoy armed with an Owen machine gun, the driver

would pull out every now and again and drive up and down the convoy to check that everything was all right. The breakout was kept very secret at the time and the route we took was all unmade back roads, dust being sucked up into the back of the trucks making it a very uncomfortable trip for the troops and the Japanese. The Japanese were clothed in red dyed Army overcoats that were covered in yellow dust and with collars pulled up around their heads all you could see was their eyes.

A barbed wire enclosure had been erected and tents set up at Kapooka Army camp for the prisoners to spend the night. We were told if there was to be any trouble it might be here. The troops were well prepared and our hate for the Japs was more so after the killing of the Australians at Cowra and if there was trouble many of them would be slaughtered, but everything went without a hitch. The convoy continued next morning arriving at Murchison late afternoon and again the transfer of prisoners to the P.O.W. camp went smoothly.

Our next move was to Canungra Queensland for a jungle training course. The C.O. of the camp was a very tough man. For punishment he made a fellow run to the top of a hill with full gear and wearing a gas mask to raise a flag while he watched with field glasses. I saw this fellow when he returned, he was very distressed and his gas mask was full of vomit.

I was posted to the 26th Battalion A.I.F. which was in Queensland and was preparing to be sent to one of the islands in the Pacific. I did further training in the signals Platoon and on December 4th, the Battalion embarked on the SS Mexico an American ship for 'somewhere in the Pacific'. The troops were never told where, but the wharf labourers were yelling out, "Hope you have a good time in Bougainville".

The Battalion was involved in three savage campaigns with outstanding success against the Japanese on Bougainville, the Numa Numa Trail,

Soraken Peninsula and Ratsua/Ruri Bay.

In August 1945 the Battalion was resting in Torokina and during a concert the famous English singer Gracie Fields and the Compere, announced that the war was over. More than a thousand service personnel let out a mighty roar and everyone threw their hats in the air, and when Gracie began to sing the *Lord's Prayer*, you could have heard a pin drop!

In the Bougainville campaigns, 516 Australians were killed and 1572 wounded the, Japanese losses were 8,500 killed.

Although I will never get over the atrocities committed by the Japanese on the Australian prisoners of war, it was not until the 1990's after treatment for PTSD did I overcome my hatred of the Japanese nation, and recently having two trips to Japan I found the younger generations to be very peaceful minded. I am including a copy of a letter written by an ex-Japanese soldier to former members of the 31/51 Battalion Association who in 1945 were attempting a beach landing at Porton Bougainville, they were unsuccessful and suffered many casualties because some of the landing barges got stuck on reefs and the troops came under heavy mortar and machine gunfire.

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February 18 1986

Dear all Brave ex-Soldiers Concerned.

This is our great pleasure to receive your letter of inquiry about us, the survivors of Porton. Above all things, we feel very glad that it has given us an unexpected opportunity to show our hearty respect to all the men who attempted the forced landing on the beach of Porton along the northern shoreline of Bougainville Island June 8th, 1945.

Since this happened, the 'Do or Die' battle between you and us there, forty years have passed and things around us have almost completely changed, though we still have a vivid recollection of what we did and saw then. We are sure all of you do so, too.

Now we think it happy wholeheartedly to inform you of the meeting we had in Yonago City, along

the coast of Japan sea, in commemoration of the very day Feb.18 1946 when, our being demobilized. We stepped back into Japan after a long and merciless struggle we shared in the battle of hell with the jungle.

To think back over our life on the island those days, we all had, in a way, 'beyond-description-like' hard times not only fighting against the men but mostly going through all kind of hardships, particularly such as 'vicious' tropical diseases and the malnutrition, much more dreadful than the bullets, which we suffered most. The awful shortage of medicine, no regular foods but coconuts! In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that almost all of our time there were spent 'hunting' anything edible and moreover battling against our inner thoughts. Who saved our lives, God only knows!

Fortunately these days the relationship between Australia and Japan has increasingly been promoted and those forty years, we believe, have created a new world for us who were once in the same boat.

'Yesterday's enemy is today's friend' is indeed something that can be accepted. Long forty years! we are aged and still getting older, just like you, know a possible worldwide peace must be maintained especially by us, the war experienced as long as there exist human beings all over earth.

We sincerely hope to build a stronger mutual understanding and try quite hard to make good friends with each other by means of communications.

Lastly, we say to you all "May the departed on the beach at Porton rest in peace forever!" No more young lives will be wasted in the jungle, we do pray. Good luck to you all!

Sincerely Yours,

Gemma Katsumata

Ex-naval Sub-lieutenant

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VALE

Kingsley Locke

John Vicary