

White over Green

JOURNAL OF THE 2/4 INFANTRY BATTALION ASSOCIATION

PATRONS:

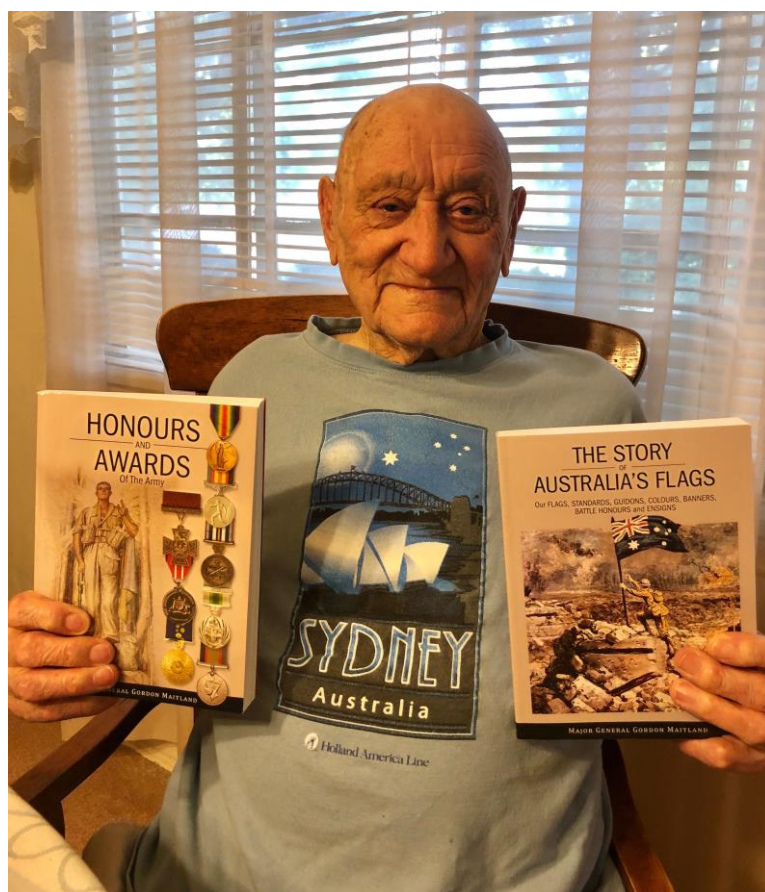
Major General Ray SHARP, AO, RFD, ED (RL) ** Lieutenant Colonel Vin HALLINAN, OAM, RFD, ED, (RL)**

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Happy 100th Birthday Henry.

For the 19th September

"White over Green" printed courtesy of Senator Marise Payne, Parramatta, NSW

The photo of Henry with Alf from the Reunion 2017
2/4th Australian Infantry Battalion Honours WWII



-Battle Honours-

- *Palestine:** July 1940: Haifa: defence of oil storage tanks vs Italian bombers, manning 3.7in Anti-aircraft guns, as X & Y Regts RHA
- *Libya:** January 1941: Bardia, Derna Wadi, Tobruk, Benghazi
- *Greece:** April 1941: Vevi, Brallos Pass, Megara
- *Crete:** April/May 1941: Heraklion
- *Syria:** 1941/1942: Gjedrie: Garrison Duty
- *Darwin:** 1944/1945: Larrakeah Barracks: Defence of Darwin
- *New Guinea:** 1944/1945: Wewak, Wirui Mission

ASSOCIATION MONTHLY MEETINGS

4th Tuesday or Saturday every month except April (ANZAC Day) and December (Christmas)

Venues: (4th Tuesday) Club York 95-99 York St. Sydney 1st Floor and (4th Saturday) South Newcastle Rugby League Club, 46 Llewellyn St. Merewether (Newcastle)

Time: 1100 hrs. Refreshments provided. ALL WELCOME

NEXT TWO MEETINGS: . Saturday 26th September 2020 – Merewether Newcastle.

Saturday 24th October 2020 Merewether Newcastle.

If you would like to receive the Monthly meeting minutes, please contact the editor.

Battalion Association Ties are available



The price is \$25 per tie if you would like to pick up your tie at an Association Monthly Meeting in Sydney or Newcastle or \$30 posted anywhere in Australia. Please send your cheque to our Treasurer Wayne Finch or make a direct deposit to the Battalion Association's Bank Account and advise Wayne Finch by phone or email, and Keith Morris will send you your tie or ties.

Keys dates for 2020

Saturday 26th September 2020 – Monthly Meeting, Merewether Newcastle.

Tuesday 27th October 2020 – Monthly Meeting, Merewether Newcastle

Saturday 7th November 2020 – Association 4th Infantry Battalions Commemorate Remembrance Day Reunion.

Wednesday 11th November 2020 Remembrance Day.

Treasurer's Report

The following have been most generous with their Subscription and Donations: Mrs Beverley Dreier (Daughter of NX5554 Charles William Yow) Miss Jeannie Shephard (Grand Daughter of NX5554 Charles William Yow), Ian Cade (son of NX28964 Peter Cade)

At the February 2020 General Meeting, a motion was passed that if Members have not paid their Membership fees, they will be removed from our mailing list. If you have problems or queries, please contact Wayne Finch (Treasurer) to make an agreement.

Saturday 24th October

Meeting times 10.30am for a 11.00am start

The Club has put restrictions on our meetings numbers also, I must confirm numbers to the club by the Monday before our meetings, if you are attending please contact Parriss or myself either by phone or email.

From the Editor,

In the past years we have all enjoyed stories and biographical sketches from descendants about their family history of the Battalion members. Please continue to send them in so our 2/4th family can enjoy.

If anyone would like to help with sourcing history of the 2/4th, please contact one of the committee.



Association 4th Infantry Battalions

Patrons: Major General R.J. Sharp AO RFD ED [R]

Major General S.V.L. Willis AM CSC [R]

Advance Notice – Remembrance Day Reunion

Date: Saturday, 7th November 2020 from 11am

At: Sydney Brewery Surry Hills [Rydges Hotel], 28 Albion Street, Sydney

Due to the cancellation of the 2020 Sydney ANZAC Day March, our discussions with the Manager, Sydney Brewery Surry Hills to reschedule our Reunion for Saturday, 7 November 2020 from 11am.

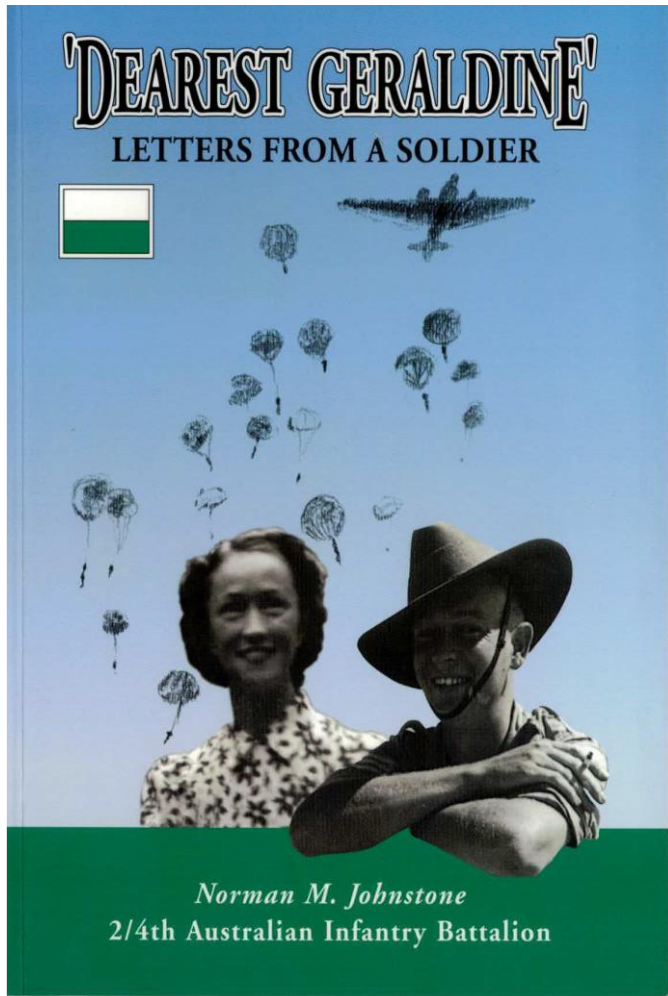
This invitation is for all former and current serving members along with family members to join with us on this occasion to commemorate Remembrance Day 2020. The 4RAR [NSW] Association, the 2nd/4th Association & their members have also indicated an interest to attend and are most welcome.

Warren Barnes OAM

President

NX 6306 : Lance Sgt Norman M. Johnstone — and his family

"Along the road of memories, their old battalion swings",



Many a branch line links up with the 2/4th's memory road. My journey started on home turf at Woodford in the Blue Mountains, some 80 kms west of Sydney. A friendly neighbour offered personal tuition in the use of computers.

His name was Ian Johnstone and I learned that he had seen extensive active service with 6th Division Signals. Almost six decades after war's end, the Johnstone brothers, Norm and Ian, were still struggling to self-publish a book of Norm's many wartime letters for the benefit of a large extended family. Through Ian the path led me to Norman and the 2/4th Battalion.

Born in Moss Vale NSW, Norm was the younger brother, one of six surviving children, two boys and four girls. When war broke out in September 1939, he was working as a bank clerk in Wagga Wagga. Aged 23, he enlisted promptly, as did his brother Ian. Norm was posted to the newly formed 2/4th Infantry Battalion, then being raised at Ingleburn, just weeks after war was declared. He thus qualified as a 'thirtyniner'

and an 'original', twin terms reserved for the earliest volunteers in the 2nd AIF.

For the next six years his life kept in strict lock step with the new battalion, from its inception to its eventual disbandment. The first three years were spent as A Company's Orderly Room Clerk; thereafter as Battalion Quartermaster Sergeant.

His vivid accounts of action in Libya, Greece and Crete, all written while fresh in his memory, were addressed to 'Dearest Geraldine', his eldest sister. She faithfully preserved his correspondence, both hand and type written, in pristine condition for over sixty years.

He recorded a frontline soldier's combat experiences and emotions. His accounts were graphic, articulate, detailed and brutally honest without a hint of bravado. He saw action at company level but displayed an excellent grasp of the 'bigger picture' — at battalion level and above. Blessed with exceptionally accurate recall, his letters gave his family rare insight into life in action, far from home, which is precisely what Geraldine had asked of him.

It was a privilege to be shown some of the original letters. Even the most cursory glance transports the reader back in time to the heat (and cold!), the agonising tension prior to contact with the enemy and then the confusion and turmoil of action on the battlefield.

THE JOHNSTONE BROTHERS IN WORLD WAR TWO



*The Johnstone men, 1940.
L-R Ian, father, Norm*

Back in Sydney, I had seen Norm's war through a schoolboy's eyes, growing up alongside wartime Sydney Harbour. It fired a lifetime interest in Australia's military history. In 2002 the University of Sydney offered a course on Australia's part in World War 2, through its Centre for Continuing Education. The opportunity was too good to miss.

The lecturer, Lieutenant Colonel Owen O'Brien, was a career officer, 1957 -1979, in the post war Royal Australian Infantry. In the early 1960's he saw active service in Malaya, Malacca and with the SAS. In 1966-67 he commanded a rifle company in Vietnam. He retired in 1985.

And so, by a roundabout route, Norm's unpublished

letters found an enthusiastic mentor when O'Brien was introduced to the Johnstone brothers. Years apart in age and having fought in different wars, they shared a common heritage — and found an instant rapport — exclusive to infantrymen who have seen frontline action.

With Norm as author and Owen as editor the book was launched in 2003. It contains selected letters written in February, March, August and September 1941 with introductory chapters setting the scene. It also features a foreword by Alf Carpenter. Alf recalls that he was Company Sergeant Major (CSM) of Headquarters (HQ) Company and later Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM) in each of the campaigns Norm describes.

Both Norm and Ian's marching days are over, their duty done, but not before enjoying the peace and freedom they and their comrades had won for a grateful nation. Sadly Wilma, Norm's wartime bride and lifetime partner has followed them.

All three were products of that splendid generation which met the challenges of a world war, head on, and overcame them. Their warm friendship and hospitality are sorely missed but their values live on through the many branches of the family. Those values are encapsulated in Norm's book.

After Norm's death, Wilma gave instructions that any sales proceeds from copies surplus to the Johnstone family's requirements, be donated to the Battalion Association. She and Norm had much enjoyed the post war camaraderie at reunions and other gatherings.



Norm Johnstone in the 1990s

Through book promotions to RSL Sub-branches and at Association functions, her bequest has resulted in some \$1440 being raised. "Dearest Geraldine" doubles as a gift for younger generations. From it they can learn to appreciate the role played by the 2nd AIF, as Anzacs in their own right, in World War 2. This year - 2020 — marks seventy five years since that war ended. But time has not diminished its significance in the course of human history.

It is fitting to conclude with a quotation from the book (vide page 99):

"I have always been grateful for the opportunity my service in the Army gave me to meet, and for so many years to enjoy, the company of many wonderful men especially those of A Company who participated in the campaigns I have described in my letters."

Norm's book ends with the words: "I am proud

to have been one of them."

VALE I Norm, Ian and Wilma

Joe Elkus, CMF 1953-1967

Copies of the book are still available: 105 pages with maps, photos, artwork, fully indexed.

Signed foreword by Alf Carpenter (makes it a collector's item!).

All Australian production (rare nowadays): published, printed, typeset, artwork in Sydney.

Price: \$25 including postage anywhere in Australia.

Proceeds to 2/4th Australian Infantry Battalion Association courtesy of Wilma Johnstone.

White over Green Website

"As part of a technological change made by the company that hosts our website, our White over Green website (www.whiteovergreen.org.au) had to be transitioned to a new platform in May 2020. As a result, there has been some upheaval with the content and a rebuild is underway. This includes the need to manually reload copies of the old White over Green Journals. Please stay tuned for improvements during the coming months. Thank you for your understanding".

Regards

Keith Morris

Historian / Custodian / Public Officer



The photo of Henry with Alf from the Reunion 2017

"This is an extract from Henry Wheeler's Book on his life that will be continued over the next several Journals. Henry was a Barnardo boy and was sent from England to Australia at the 10 years of age. After the war Henry and Rachel married and lived in Australia but then settled in USA".

World War II and the Next Six Years

Shakespeare wrote:

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.

They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts. These acts are seven ages."

Shakespeare talked about first the infant, then the schoolboy, then the scholar, then the lover, then the soldier, then the father, then the aged, which finishes with sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. I think the pattern of my life follows much the same way; however, instead of scholar, I was a worker, and then a soldier before a lover.

The day arrived when I marched into Ingleburn camp, thirty miles from Sydney, to begin army training in earnest. Again, I had to get permission to join. The world was at war. Germany was overrunning countries. Young men were needed, but one thing was unique about the Australian soldier. He was a volunteer. There was no conscription for overseas service. When you signed and took the oath, it was for the duration of the war, and twelve months thereafter. But who knew then that it would take six years before we saw civilian life, if you were a lucky one.

The camp was new, not quite finished. I was one of the first to go there. During the war, many thousands would pass through that camp. We were allotted our huts. Those who had been in the militia wore their uniforms with many different insignias. Civilians who came were given "giggle suits," just plain khaki pants and shirts. It was going to be a while before our real Australian Imperial Forces uniforms would be issued.

It was October 1939, and it was going to take a few weeks to organize into battalion units. It was decided that the first division would be the Sixth Division. All in all, Australia, with only a population of six million people, put four divisions together to send overseas. Because of my previous military training, I was made a corporal, and until we received our sergeants from the permanent army, I was an acting sergeant, which meant I was in charge of forty-eight men, a complete platoon. A lot of training was going on. I had to drill and instruct in rifle and machine gun, go to the rifle range to practice shooting, and do long route marches. Many of the new recruits were not used to wearing army boots and suffered from blistered feet. To harden the skin, they would have to bathe in "Condies Crystals," ending up with purple feet. Medical exams, shots, and vaccinations were given. Those who didn't pass were sent home or to a non-combatant unit. When all was finished being organized, my battalion was the 2nd/4th. I was in "B Company #10 Platoon."

Many Barnardo boys joined the services. In my battalion there were seven or eight. When leave was granted, I visited the office many times. It was not traumatic for me as it was for many of the troops to be away from home and family.

The training continued. All units were brought up to strength. The full complement of officers and NCOs was completed. New uniforms and weapons were issued. At last we were a complete fighting

unit. Comradeship was building which proved to cement a dependency on each other, and many friendships were made. Besides vigorous training, special courses, lectures and films were held in the evenings for us non-commissioned officers.

Christmas leave was given. Rumors were spreading that a big move was in the making. When leave was finished and all back in camp, final equipment inspections and clothing allotments were made. In late December, 1939, the Division made a march through Sydney, a final farewell. It was estimated over a million people lined the streets. Back in camp that evening, all leave was canceled and orders came to be ready to move. It was supposed to have been a secret, but all along the train route to the docks in Sydney there were crowds of people along the way waving and with signs that read, "Good Luck."

To move a division it took six ships. My unit and I boarded the "Strathnaver," a 30,000 ton passenger liner, which happened to be in Sydney Harbour when war broke out and was commissioned by the government. It still had the civilian crew, and we were all consigned to cabins with four and six bunks. After settling down, we pulled out into the harbour mid-afternoon. The harbour was full of small boats with flags and loaded with people to wish us well. As we moved down the harbour with its beautiful shoreline, I am sure there were many aching hearts, but I could only feel excited. I had no one left behind to worry about me. I was looking forward to the adventure ahead of us. As we passed through the "heads," Sydney was left behind and the six ships were met by naval boats that would escort us to our destination, of which we knew nothing. We knew nothing until we were in the Indian Ocean some days later. Since it was our last time in Australia for the next two and a half years, we had shore leave in Fremantle, Western Australia.

Soon we embarked on the long sailing to Ceylon. Ship board life wasn't boring. We had training in the morning and of course, life boat drills and gunnery practice. There was a pool onboard and it was well used as it was hot crossing the equator. Night was a complete blackout and the convoy would close in.

German submarines were quite active in the Indian Ocean, so all precautions were taken. It was then that we were told we were going to the Middle East to have further training before going on to England. Italy was not yet in the war. We were given lectures on Mid-East customs and culture and how to treat its inhabitants.

Our first port of call was Columbo, Ceylon. We did not go ashore, but vendors came with their small boats trying to sell fruit or souvenirs. A basket with a long rope would be passed over the rail. You would send your money down and they would send up the goods. Looking at the harbour, it had not changed since I was there nearly ten years before as a boy. Two days were spent there before continuing to Aden, at the tip of the Arabian Peninsula. Of course no leave was granted here; after all, we were not tourists. We then proceeded through the Red Sea to the Suez Canal, coming to our destination, Port Tufic. Here we disembarked to board a train that would take us through the Sinai Desert to Palestine.

All this went smoothly, organized by British soldiers. Traveling through the desert was very boring. It took most of the day to travel to Gaza, where British army trucks transported us to our camp at Julius.

The scenery had changed. There were many green fields and orange groves. At our battalion camp, the tents were already pitched by an earlier advance party with help from the British and everything was ready to settle in. This was to be the beginning of an intense training period, and I believe we were ready. For the first three to four months there was no leave. More modern equipment was exchanged for the World War I weapons we had. That meant new training and instruction. It was there I was promoted to the rank of sergeant and sent to the "PRTD" (Palestine Recruit Training Depot) in Sarafand, an English training camp. There were twenty of us from the brigade. We were instructed in all the new weapons. The course lasted three weeks and on our return to our battalion we had a full time job instructing everyone in the new weapons.

Within a couple of months we were doing full division mock battles. We would be gone away from camp living under real war time conditions. We covered many miles through the desert and Hebron Mountains, covering ground where the Australian Lighthorse Cavalry had succeeded in routing the Turkish army during World War I. Many of the defense positions were still there. These maneuvers separated the men from the boys. We had to develop into a strong, well-conditioned force to be reckoned with, and this was proven in later months.

At one time during our training, I experienced one of the best periods of my army career. At the Gaza airstrip there was a squadron of Australian fighter pilots. Their planes were of the older vintage. They were waiting for Hurricane and Spitfire fighter planes to arrive. I was sent down there for four weeks of

guard duty with my platoon. It was such an easy job; I had nothing much to do, only make sure all guards were posted.

After the first couple of days, I befriended a flight sergeant who flew a vintage Lysander two-seater plane from World War I on a dawn patrol along the Palestine coast every morning. After a couple of drinks one evening, he asked me if I would like to come up with him. Of course I had never been in a plane before, so jumped at the opportunity. The next morning, he woke me at daybreak, gave me a leather jacket and a helmet. Inside the helmet were earphones and a small microphone. At the plane, he put a parachute on me and told me that I would sit on this. I got into the cockpit, which was just behind the pilot seat, but back to back. Sitting in the cockpit, I found out that I was nearly halfway out. He showed me how to strap myself in and then took a small cable which plugged into the helmet. This was the communication system between us. Right in front of me was a Lewis machine gun of World War I vintage. The pilot's gun was through the propeller shaft.

All strapped in, we tested the intercom, warmed up, and we were on our way. What a thrill it was for me. We only flew at 2,000 feet, but I had a great view of all the settlements and villages along the coast, flying over Tel-Aviv, then to Haifa, and up to the Lebanese border, then out to sea and back to Gaza. Over the strip my friend said, "Hold on Henry, I want to see what this old thing can do." I never forgot how scared I was. He put the plane into rolls and spins, and looped the loop. Though strapped in, my fingers were white from holding on. I was speechless and I'm sure I must have turned green. Finally we landed. I was too shaken to move, but I was not sick. After getting out and a few curse words, I said, "Never again," but that was only the beginning of a great adventure for me. I got over the episode and from that day on, I went up with him nearly every morning.

After the first week, he suggested we go in the afternoons in a two-seat training plane with dual controls. So began my instructions in flying. I was given ground instructions, and we would take to the air over the desert. I was flying! I couldn't believe it. It seemed to come naturally to me. With Bill by my side, I was landing and taking off. I was going through all the motions, and learning to read the controls. I was in another world. My platoon thought it was great. They would come out just to see me go through my maneuvers. I was told by the flight control officer who flew with me to test me, that in a few days they would let me fly solo. I was so excited to think that in such a short while I would be up there all by myself.

But fate wasn't to have it. The very next day I had orders from my battalion that they were sending another platoon to relieve me and we were to return to camp. The platoon came from another battalion. The reason for this was that our battalion was going to move to Haifa.

It was at this time that leave was being given to Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem. My first leave was in Tel-Aviv, which was quite a modern city. It had a lovely beach front with apartments and cafes along the promenade. These were the favorite spots for the troops. The people were friendly and the troops well-liked.

On this leave my friend, Des Finch, and I decided to walk the city and see its sights. We came to the end of Ben-Yehuda Street, where there was a large building. Thinking it a museum, we went in. To our surprise it wasn't and the gentleman that confronted us could not speak English. There were two young girls there, so he called them over. They spoke English very well. When we told them that we thought it was a museum, they laughed and said, "No, it's a seminar for teachers."

Well, we were not to be deterred. Here were two beautiful girls. We were not going to go away easily, so we asked if we could look around. After discussing it with the man in Hebrew, he approved it and the girls started showing us and explaining. Finally, one asked, "Would you like to correspond with us? It would improve our English." Of course we jumped at the idea. After introducing themselves they told us their names were Rachel and Miriam. I chose Rachel to write to. After saying goodbye and a promise to write, we parted. But something had changed in me; I could not get Rachel out of my mind. I believed it was love at first sight. From that day on was the beginning of a lifetime relationship.

After returning back to camp, the battalion moved to Haifa, a big port city near the oil refinery. The war was not going well in Europe and the battle for Dunkirk was raging. The Germans had overrun Holland, Belgium, and most of France. The British had anti-aircraft guns on Mount Carmel above Haifa. Because of a shortage of gunnery personnel in England, they were being recalled. It was decided that the 2nd/4th Infantry Battalion would be trained on these 7.7 anti-aircraft guns and replace the British when they left. This is something that had never been done before; infantry men becoming artillery men.

We moved on and our camp was to be on a small airstrip right in the middle of the oil storage tanks and close to the refinery. We pitched tents and settled in. Training started the next day. We had only two days of training when Italy came into the war. That was May 1940.

We had just come off the guns and were back in camp one afternoon when from the back of Mount Carmel came this formation of bombers flying very high. We thought they were ours and all came out to see them, but to our surprise they started dropping bombs. It turned out that they were Italian and their target was the oil refinery and storage tanks. We were situated right in the middle. We ran for cover not knowing where the bombs would hit. Luckily, they were off target. There were lots of explosions, but when all was clear, only one storage tank was hit and it was empty. This was our first experience of the real war. It wasn't much of an honor but my battalion claimed to be the first Australians under fire.

Things changed drastically after that. It was no place to be camped in case more planes came, so the battalion was split up. Half went to Acre, an ancient town about eight miles away. The other half was sent to the barracks on the top of Mount Carmel. I was lucky. My company was one of them.

Our next experience was different. A few days later, while we were at the guns, another flight came over, but this time they did damage and many civilians were killed. It was early morning when workers were just starting to work. The bombs that were aimed at gasoline tanks missed and hit the workshops of the municipality. Large fires were started. We fired artillery at them but they were too high. When they were gone we were transported down to help put out the fires and remove the dead and wounded. This was our first experience of what bombs can do. We removed over 100 bodies, mostly Arab workers.

There were no more raids after that and our training continued. Other than the two air raids, our two months in Haifa were enjoyable. There was leave every evening for those not on duty.

As I had promised, I wrote Rachel, my new found friend, and she responded. But we did not meet. She had finished her studies as a kindergarten teacher and was already teaching. This was all new to me. Female company had been very limited during my life, and only when I was with the Anderson family. Rachel and I got to know each other more through our letter writing. My friend Des was not a letter writer, so things got cold in his relationship with Miriam.

The day came when our battalion had to return to Julius and to our brigade and divisions. The war had turned for the worst. Now that Italy had joined Germany, the whole situation had changed. Libya, in North Africa, was an Italian colony. They had six to seven divisions stationed there. It was a threat to the vital Suez Canal and the Middle East. All chances of my division going to England and the European war zone were out. We were to remain in Palestine for the time being.

So very serious and intensive training continued. There were different classes and schools that we had to attend, being non-commissioned officers. I attended a strategy school during this period. There were only two of us sergeants and the rest were officers. We were given a number instead of rank so all were equal. We had theory and practical training, planning maneuvers with company to battalion strength. The school lasted two weeks. The final results, I had a score of 78 on theory and 94 on practical. I was highly recommended for officers training, but I refused it on my return. My reasons were obvious. I would never come back to my battalion. I would be put in a pool for officers and sent elsewhere when they needed one. This situation happened a few times.

Leave was being granted in a rotation system. My next leave was Jerusalem, which, in my eyes was a fantastic city, especially the old city and the bazaars. But my mind was toward meeting Rachel. It had been over five months since we had our first brief meeting and I wanted so much to meet her again.

My chance came late in November. There had been a strong rumor that we were going to move to Egypt. The Italians were amassing on the Egyptian border and had moved into Sidi Barone and Mursa Matru, just inside the Egyptian border.



Henry & Rachel at the Veterans Day March 2018

Sadly Rachel passed in October 2019

I asked for leave and I was granted a forty-eight hour leave pass. I had written Rachel to let her know. I was excited. Her family lived in Ramat Aharon, near Rehovot.

She asked me to buy civilian clothes because it was not nice for local girls to be seen walking with soldiers. In Rehovot I bought a shirt and pants then went by taxi to Rachel's home. On the way through the orange groves, I saw Rachel and Esther, her sister. They were surprised to see me. We rode together to her home. There I met her mother and father, who was a policeman. I spent a lovely twenty-four hours with them before I had to return to camp. That meeting bonded Rachel and me. I knew that she was the person I wanted to share the rest of my life with.



Alf receiving his Commemorative Medallion and Certificate by WO1 Warren Barnes OAM .

The Special award is to all Surviving World War 11 veterans to mark the 75th Anniversary of the end of the conflict.

ASSOCIATION OFFICE BEARERS 2020- 2021

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