

John Henry Charles Bennett – extracted from 90<sup>th</sup> birthday reflections – 4/3/2019

I was fortunate to get immediate work with the local newspaper “The Sunraysia Daily where initially I was the message boy, then assistant to the Compositor where I was later offered an apprenticeship. I declined this offer as I was close to my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday and had heard that boys younger than 18 years could enlist.

I was like many boys growing up in the war time years. The war in the Pacific was widely reported . We valued our heroes and hoped to emulate their heroic actions. Worn away by my perpetual whinging, my father, after a few beers had consented to my enlistment, perhaps I was one less to care for. I duly went into the Army and was sent along with others for six weeks basic training at the Recruit training camp located at Greta in the New South Wales coalfields. A bitterly cold place in winter. Like all recruits I hated the place immediately. Out of bed by 6 a.m. bullied by instructor corporals and Sergeants from sunrise until dark, you generally fell asleep exhausted before lights out at 9 p.m. Six weeks of endless drill, rifle and bayonet training and physical exercise each day until 5. 30.p.m. I was fortunate to make many friends who hated the place as much as I did.

As a country boy I was miserably unhappy and wrote to my father saying that I intended to leave the Army. A swift reply told me that there was no way he would allow me to desert.

I survived the brutality of recruit training designed to break your spirit and was initially posted to Brisbane. Having applied to go to Japan, with the Commonwealth Occupation Force within a couple of months I was posted back to Sydney to board the vessel, Kanimbla which soon sailed to Japan.

Life on a troopship with several hundred other soldiers saw us with hammocks and soon learnt how to stay below decks reasonably comfortably during the 10 day cruise. When we passed through the tropics you were granted the luxury of sleeping on the deck.

On disembarking in the port of Kure some 20 miles from Hiroshima I was disappointed that rather than going to an infantry battalion I was posted to the Docks Operating Company, the most undisciplined body whose role was to supervise the loading and unloading ships coming into the port. The company only worked when ships came into the Port and the rest of the time could be spent however they cared. I was to learn fast that there was a no fraternizing policy issued by the Army which was totally ignored by the troops., and the Japanese were always called Noggies.

I soon noted that the Army regulation, that a soldier saluted an officer was totally ignored by the unit. The rare times they did salute was when collecting your pay you needed to salute before the paymaster would release your money.

As I mentioned earlier, If you wanted to be a soldier the worst fate was to end up in base units like the Port Operating Company. The Army then, and perhaps now, lived on paper work. Since I had reasonable English and could use a typewriter I got lucky. I was made assistant to the Orderly Room clerk who was a Corporal and my additional duty was the operation of the wireless set in the case of an emergency. After two weeks, the Corporal disembarked to return to Australia. Tossing the keys to the safe to me he said "It's all yours Mate." and was gone. A couple of days later the adjutant noted that I was a only a private soldier doing the work of a Corporal so he promptly promoted me. A corporal at 17 years and 7 months was most unusual and would have been most unlikely in an infantry battalion. I had never given an order and was afraid to do so in case I was laughed at. Little wonder the Japanese staff/house keepers called me "Baby Faced Corporal.

I was fortunate in my 12 months in Kure to visit Hiroshima, Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto, and much of the inland sea when the unit boat needed to go to Takamatsu. *In Tokyo I was able to attend the War Crimes Trials and saw and listened to Tojo and others giving their testimonies. Amongst the evidence I heard one day that it was normal behaviour for a superior soldier to bash soldiers of lower rank. I also saw much Sumo wrestling,*

*.However my first visit* after arriving in Japan was to Hiroshima some 20 miles from Kure. Consider this was fourteen months after the bomb had been dropped on the City. I can still remember with eternal shame of my friend and I arrogantly walking down narrow paths between the beds of what were former army barracks where people were daily dying of radiation sickness. Whilst one hundred thousand were killed in the initial blast, wiping out all hospitals, medical & other facilities, a further hundred thousand were estimated to have died by radiation sickness in the next couple of years .

I was able to visit the large concrete building which was the target of the bomb and have a good look around what was left of the city. In Kure you became used to Japanese funerals always at night, the deceased lying on a stretcher and mourners walking beside or behind the body. It was a fair hike to the crematorium and sometimes you saw a wheeled cart with the body strapped on board. Thankfully fellow soldiers mostly stood aside as a mark of respect. This respect was also shown when a ship carrying the ashes of dead Japanese arrived at the Port. By this time any Japanese suspected of war crimes was held in custody in the Islands.

What was evident in my first days in Kure was that most soldiers in the unit were operating on the black market. Pilfering/stealing was rife until one day a truck load of sugar disappeared between the Wharf and the Commonwealth store. A distance of less than a mile. Provosts immediately commenced an investigation and hit a brick wall.

Nobody knew who the truck driver was, nobody knew what truck's number was involved. The tally clerk only remembered signing off on the manifest, the truck being loaded under guard and being sent off to the store. It was dark anyway ???.

Events moved swiftly after the loss was discovered and the whole Company was ordered to be on an identification Parade. Since the others and I who had sold goods on the black market we were terrified of being identified when the Japanese man who had brought our goods was marched along our ranks. Supported by Japanese policemen one on each side, evidently severely bashed

AS Kabuki

in police custody with eyes barely open, and followed by two Australian Provosts, we braced for the worst as he was ordered to stop in front of each soldier. The senior Japanese policeman ordered him to look at each of us for a minute before ordering him to move on. We held our breath as he looked at us with our hats on then face to face. To every man on the parade he just shook his head. We all knew the main person behind the black market in the unit was a Corporal, who that day, aware of the compulsory parade managed to get himself referred to the local medical unit before the parade started.

When my twelve months were up I declined to stay on in Japan for another term and returned to Australia. Like all other Corporals we were sent to Puckapunyal to 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Royal Aust Regt. then being formed. The Government had introduced National Service and all corporals were to become instructors to train National Service men. Having never been in an Infantry Battalion I was soon moulded into shape as an instructor.

I soon met great friends who remained my close friends. They have all passed away, Vince Healy on the snow slopes of Korea, 68 years ago on this Wednesday, Buck Buchanan still with a bullet close to his heart later died on the Golf Course with three doctors in attendance, and Jack Gallaway last year with dementia.

These were happy times. Pay was miserable and we needed to pool our money to go to Melbourne, to have a couple of nights in the YMCA and be on deck for Monday parade. Healey and I were soon in the Battalion sports team, he as a discus thrower, pole vaulter and sprinter. I was a sprinter and often long jump competitor. Gallaway was in The Brighton Rugby club and Buchanan on some Melbourne golf course. They were carefree and happy days. Annual leave was four weeks spent in my case partly in Mildura to visit my father and then in Sydney lying on the beach.

This all ended with the start of the Korean War. In 1950. Australia has committed a battalion to the United Nation Peace Force as well as Air Force and Naval commitments. In total under 20,000. Vince Healy and Jack Gallaway were both in what could be called specialist categories. Vince a Machine Gunner, and Jack Gallaway a signaller. Buck Buchanan, a rifleman. We were all Sergeants.