

LESLIE JOSEPH THOMSON: 1923– 2024

Even though it all happened nearly a lifetime ago, Leslie Joseph Thomson had vivid memories of World War II in the Pacific, but like so many other veterans, he never liked talking about them.

Les, who turned 100 the week before Christmas – celebrating with a large gathering of family and friends, and a message from King Charles III – died on February 5 at a Central Coast aged care home after a short illness.

Until his death he was one of the few surviving Australian WWII veterans, now rapidly reducing in numbers, and was one of the last three of the 3653 men who served with the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion AIF during WWII.

He was also one of only two living survivors of Australia's worst air disaster, the crash at Port Moresby on September 7, 1943, of a US Army Airforce Liberator bomber into a convoy of trucks parked at the end of the runway and carrying three companies of the battalion about to be airlifted into battle.

The crash claimed the lives of 60 2/33rd battalion soldiers and injured another 90. There were horrendous scenes when the two 500-pound bombs on the Liberator and 13,000 litres of fuel exploded in a sea of fire. Les witnessed the horrifying scene of mates trying to escape the inferno, their clothes on fire, but being blown up by their own ammunition which exploded in the fierce heat.

Les was guest of honour at a service at the Anzac Memorial in Hyde Park on September 7, 2023, marking the 80th anniversary of the crash. "It was terrible," he said at the time. "I don't think I will ever get over it."

Born in Balmain on December 20, 1923, Les enlisted in December 1941, eight days after his 18th birthday. He was almost 22 when he was discharged in 1946. He served for 1444 days in the army, 479 of them overseas in action or preparing for action against the Japanese in Papua, New Guinea and Borneo.

"I'm pleased I did my bit to help save Australia, but I was thankful when it was all over," he said. As well as surviving the Liberator crash, Les survived and saw many other horrors serving for the 2/33rd as an infantryman in the battles for Lae, the Ramu Valley and Shaggy Ridge, and as a mortar man in Balikpapan, Borneo.

Little wonder he preferred to forget rather than remember what happened in combat. Like all frontline soldiers, Les never forgot the sights and sounds of war, the incessant bombing, artillery, mortar fire and gunfire – especially the distinctive, staccato rattle of Japanese machine guns that Australian soldiers nicknamed 'woodpeckers'.

His baptism of fire was on the road to Lae when Japanese machine gunners opened up on his platoon, with bullets flying everywhere. "We wasted no time hitting the dust," he said. He hit the "dust" many more times before the war was over.

In true Anzac spirit, he never forgot his mates – those who made it home and those who didn't. He took part in Anzac Day marches ever since his discharge. In recent years, he was the last surviving member of the 2/33rd to lead the Battalion contingent at the march. He had been looking forward to doing so again this year.

Les was patron of the 2/33rd Infantry Battalion AIF Association. Although quietly spoken and reserved, he was tough by nature. Balmain-born Neville Wran, former premier of NSW, once famously remarked: "Balmain boys don't cry", referring to their toughness and strength of character. Les was out of the same mould.

He had to be. The inner-Sydney working-class suburbs of Paddington, Balmain and Marrickville where he grew up were tough neighbour hoods at any time, but more so during the poverty-stricken years of the Great Depression, when long dole queues were part of everyday life and many families struggled to put food on the table.

Les' upbringing was made even tougher by having a violent alcoholic father. For years, Les, his sisters Bonnie and Betty, and mother, Eileen, lived in fear of his father's violent, alcohol fuelled temper and merciless assaults – mental as well as physical. For several years Les' mother was the only breadwinner, working long hours as a cleaner in hotels on meagre wages. At one stage she was forced to put Les and his oldest sister Betty into childrens' home care because she couldn't look after them. "I was only a nipper at the time, about five or six years old," Les said.

Thankfully, not all of his childhood was dominated by the dark shadow of his father.

He had plenty of happy times playing with his mates from St Brigid's Catholic school in Marrickville. Life was simple. "Back in those days, my mates and I had to make our own fun to keep ourselves amused." They swam in the Tempe River, made canoes from sheets of iron and played street cricket.

Because all houses had open fireplaces and fuel was expensive, one of his regular jobs was to go to the railway line at Tempe to gather coal that fell off the steam engines, sometimes taking wheelbarrows to collect extra coal to sell at sixpence a bag. Les left school when he was 15 to become a bellhop at the Great Southern Hotel near Railway Square.

Although joining the Army was a welcome escape from his hard early years, he was keen to serve his country as best he could when called up in 1941. He was expecting to fight the Germans in the Middle East, but Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbour three weeks before he enlisted brought World War II to Australia's doorstep in the Pacific. Instead of the sand and deserts of the Middle East, Les' war was in the jungles of Papua, New Guinea and Borneo against the Japanese.

After the war, he returned to live with his father and mother for two years in Marrickville, but no longer lived in fear of his father.

"He started at me again when I came home from the war but I wasn't prepared to put up with it any more. I'd had enough, so I flattened him," Les said. He saw very little of his father after that. Les' father died at the age of 76. His mother died of a heart attack when she was 57 – worn out, according to Les.

Not long after his discharge Les met the love of his life, Marrickville dressmaker Margaret Veronica Knight. They married two years later. Les worked as a contract painter and lived in Sydney for more than 30 years before retiring to Buff Point on the Central Coast where he became well known for his Bonsai growing and woodworking skills on a lathe.

Les and Margaret were married for 74 years. They had two children, Anne and Mark. Margaret died in 2023, aged 93. Les is survived by Anne, Mark and their families.