

## **Two People's Journey through WW2 and King Island**

The following slightly abridged paper was presented at the King Island 2025 Anzac Day Main Service by Key Note Speaker Ms Jessica Cox. The paper was researched and written by Gary Barker, President of the King Island RSL Sub branch, and includes records from the Hamer Family Collection.

Good morning everyone, today I will be talking about two people who survived the horror and turmoil of World War Two. They were to eventually meet and find solace on King Island. In 1921 a boy was born into a large family in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. His name was Lawton, and he grew up labouring, before deciding to enlist in the Second Australian Imperial Force, volunteering to fight overseas during World War Two. He had a problem as he was underage, so like many he increased his age by 22 months and rearranged his Christian names. It worked very well because it went undetected for 85 years, until a few months back.

He joined on the Eighth of April 1941 and spent the next two months undergoing recruit training at Darley, near Baccus Marsh in Victoria. He was then posted to the Eighth Group of Reinforcements to the Second Eighth Infantry Battalion. There seems to be a trend with him and the eighth, as on the Twenty Eighth of June 1941 he left Sydney and a month later he was in the Middle East where he finally joined the Second Eighth Battalion.

Meantime, unbeknown to Lawton, there was a nine year old girl named Mary who was growing up in the Netherlands. She was also from a large family who were farmers, but their circumstances dramatically changed on 15 May 1940 when the Dutch surrendered to Germany. From then on, the family experienced bombing and the presence and fear of Nazi soldiers for the next four years. Mary has never forgotten seeing British paratroopers land in Holland in 1944, as part of Operation Market Garden.

Before Lawton joined the Second Eighth, the battalion had fought in North Africa and suffered the heaviest casualties of any Australian unit in the Battle for Tobruk in January 1941. Their deployment to Greece in April involved a fierce battle with German troops and they were forced to withdraw. The battalion became disorganised, lost a great deal of its weapons and equipment, and many of its troops were separated.

The battalion was evacuated in late April with 200 soldiers taken to Egypt, while another 400 were landed on Crete after their transport ship was sunk. This party fought German paratroopers on 20 May, but the battalion was finally reunited in Palestine in June, just prior to Lawton's arrival.

For a raw recruit, who was only 19, it would have been a shock to join a group of battle hardened veterans who had been involved with fierce fighting and lost mates. Lawton had to get accepted, adding to the mental strain faced by a reinforcement.

He was soon to see action as his battalion joined the force garrisoning Syria, where the Vichy French had been active. As result of the Australian Prime Minister's demand for our troops to return home, the Second Eighth arrived in Adelaide in late March

1942. In June, the unit was deployed to defend Darwin and in June 1943 was sent to north Queensland.

In July 1943 Lawton was sent on a sniper's course, qualified and was granted proficiency pay. However, eighteen months would pass before he saw action again, meaning the battalion had been, from a soldier's viewpoint, doing little for three years other than training. I was told that to maintain the morale of troops under these circumstances is a major challenge.

Finally, the Second Eighth landed at Aitape in New Guinea on 12 November 1944 to undertake its only campaign against the Japanese. It participated in the Danmap River operations between December 1944 and February 1945, and then the advance on Wewak and clearance of the Prince Alexander Range between April and July 1945. Lawton's photographs of the terrain in New Guinea and the enemy, can only be described as treacherous.

Lawton had been involved in the most successful campaigns conducted by the Second Eighth since its formation in October 1939. There is no record of him being wounded, but he was evacuated at least ten times suffering from malaria and other tropical ailments.

Eight days before the Japanese surrendered on 15 August 1945, Lawton disembarked in Sydney and was posted to the Thirty Second Field Baking Platoon, located in Victoria. This small unit of 34 people could produce up to five tons of bread per day and had detachments at Murchison and Tocumwal. His life would forever change, but it meant he could not take part in the farewell parades for the Second Eighth and say goodbye to his mates.

The war took a toll on him, and he seldom spoke about it. In his story in Marylyn Addison's book, he never mentions his service during World War Two. After his discharge in March 1946 Lawton continued to work as a baker and by the early 1950s was on King Island working for 'Banjo Patterson' at the Camp Creek Bakery. He did go back to Victoria and then returned.

The Mandersloot family, including their daughter Mary, had immigrated from the Netherlands to Australia. Mary, now in her early twenties, had a sister named Carrie who had married Gerald Hommes and lived on King Island. You can fill in the gaps leading up to an event on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 1958 when Lawton and Mary Hamer married on King Island.

Some may remember my grandparents Denis and Mary Hamer, noting that my grandfather's correct name was Lawton Denis Hamer. The couple found their well-deserved peace on King Island, but we will never know the suffering they experienced during World War Two.

I close now with a few words on the contribution that Dutch families have made and continue to make to King Island. I am proud to be a Dutch descendant from both sides of my family, noting that many of the families that arrived here also suffered during the last World War. As for my family, the Hamer family is still baking, over 70 years since Denis first started to mix the dough in the early hours of each morning.