

# WONTHAGGI FOCUS

## Kevin's war service turned into one very long secret

WHEN Kevin McDonnell was 16, he went to the Melbourne Town Hall to join the Army.

He forged his father's signature and was just scooting out the door when a booming voice called "excuse me son, have you got your birth certificate" and drew his attention to the signs on the wall which warned of hefty fines for falsification.

So, Kevin went milking cows and farming instead.

By the time he was of age, he couldn't sign up because the Manpower Act stipulated that those working in essential services should stay put and farming was an essential service.

Nobody was to know at that time how dramatic Kevin's eventual war serv-

ice would turn out to be.

### Enlist

He finally managed to enlist on June 26, 1944. Early the following year, he landed at San Miguel, Luzon, in the Philippine Islands, as part of an advanced party attached to the American Army.

This, despite the fact that General Douglas MacArthur had declared he would have no Australians serving with him. He had had an almighty blue in New Guinea with General Sir Thomas Blamey who was Commander in Chief of the allied forces.

Fortunately for the world, General MacArthur took advice that he'd be a fool not to include a couple of Aussie wireless units with his forces. They ended up being central to the signals intelligence which provided many air

raid warnings and a constant flow of tactical air intelligence.

MacArthur relented and took a number of wireless units, including No 5, to which Kevin McDonnell belonged. They were posted to a spot closer to Japan than any other allied troops.

Their efforts were pivotal to the success of the war against Japan.

Their work was top secret. They were sworn to secrecy and such is a serviceman's discipline, those who took part in that theatre of the Pacific campaign held their tongues for decades afterwards. It took nearly 50 years for the story to come out.

As Kevin said, you could go to the RSL years after the war and say you had fought with MacArthur in the Pacific and other members would laugh at

you.

No Aussies went there, or that was what people thought.

Whilst Kevin was sworn to secrecy like his mates, he had no trouble keeping mum. He fell desperately ill whilst in the islands, was invalided to Borneo, Port Moresby then to Heidelberg Repat.

His young wife Joan received a telegram at home in Adelaide indicating Kevin's days were numbered. Trying to travel interstate at the time was virtually impossible, but when an officer heard of her plight, he gave up his seat and she flew to Melbourne.

Warned that she was unlikely to recognise her husband, she steeled herself. The warnings proved valid. Joan had no idea that the skeletal man in the repat bed was her husband.

Kevin weighed six stone.

To this day, he does not know what ailed him, but he thinks it was probably

dengue fever. He did not remember anything. He didn't know about the warning to keep his mouth shut about his war experiences, but that didn't matter because it had all gone from his memory anyway.

Nevertheless, he is proud to show the visitor a copy of the book "Eavesdroppers" by Jack Bleakley; the story of those Australian men who served with MacArthur and didn't tell a soul.

The secrecy was such that it took Jack Bleakley the best part of six years to research and write the story that had never been told.

In a foreword written in 1991, the then Australian Chief of the Air Staff Air Marshall Ray Funnell wrote: "A graphic illustration of the value of signals intelligence during this period is that it allowed the allies to trace all movements of the Japanese Army Airforce from Japan and rear bases into the airfields of northern New Guinea.

"Central to this was the contribution made by the RAAF Wireless Units and in particular, the skilled and dedicated operators whose main duty was the collection, in forward operational areas, of the material required for analysis and reporting by the signals intelligence organisation."

Kevin and the rest of the Australian detachment landed at Lingayen on January 9 1945. It was immediately attached to the United States Army Advanced HQ Mobile Communications Unit.

The Lingayen invasion and subsequent American drive southwards through the central Luzon plain to Manila, ultimately spelt the end of the Japanese air effort from bases in the Philippines.

The cost was high for the wireless units. Of the 13 Aussies who were detailed to join the Americans, only two came home.

### Medal

Kevin is also proud of the Philippine Liberation Medal that was finally presented to him and his col-

leagues in October 1995. It now hangs beside his other war service medals.

He has framed the certificate-like invitation from her excellency Mrs Delia Domingo Albert ambassador of the Philippines, inviting him to the medal ceremony. The medals were presented before her excellency the Honorable Dame Roma Mitchell, Governor of South Australia.

"They made us wait all those years....." mused Kevin.

He was eventually discharged from Heidelberg Repat and was put on a TPI pension.

Kevin had no intention of sitting back living on a pension.

He turned to sawmilling, employed staff, went to New Guinea to work and to Africa twice because he was having trouble sourcing logs.

Kevin and Joan moved to Wonthaggi from Adelaide five years ago to be close to family. They have four children.

