

Ronald Raymond Hanton – SX22084

As told to Ken Hayes: edited by Paul Spencer and Christine Hancock.

Towards the end of 2010 I received a surprise phone call and subsequent visit from the Almoner (Ken Hayes) of the Brighton R. S. L. (S.A.) Sub-Branch. Ken told me of his responsibilities and what he is doing. Our talk brought back many memories as we shared our military items of memorabilia. Ken took me to the new club rooms and a friendship developed. I first joined the R.S.L on the 18th January, 1946.



In March 2011 Ken asked me if he could interview me regarding my military service as the club wished to record individual member's stories. The club had recently purchased a voice recorder for Ken and I would be the first interview undertaken.

I was an only child born at Sr. Walsh's Private Hospital (18th February, 1920) to Harold Hardy Hanton and Clarice nee Bradshaw. One of the early questions Ken asked was whether my father served in WWI? The answer was positive and this is a brief summary. Harold served in the 10th Battalion and was one of the first to land on the beach at Gallipoli for which he was given a special ANZAC medallion. He also served in France and Belgium. He was reported missing in late 1917 and finally advice was received that he had been taken as a German Prisoner of War for a period of 8 months. Location: 2 Schuttenham. He was released on the 6th January 1919.



I attended Thebarton Primary School starting in 1925 and leaving in 1934 when I began work as an apprentice plumber. I tried to enlist for WWII but Dad would not sign his consent as I was too young. However I determined to enlist as soon as I was old enough to do so. Eventually I enlisted at Fort Largs on the 26th July, 1940. Training took place in local Adelaide areas including Largs Bay. My Regiment was the Royal Australian Heavy Artillery (Largs Battery) and officially taken on strength 3rd September, 1942.

Ron Hanton A Battery

I married Laura Jean Pople (Born Woodside S.A), and lived at Ovingham when on leave in 1943. We were married 13th March 1943 at the residence of B. S. Howland in Fisher St Welland S.A. I have two daughters, Pamela Jean, Margaret Joan and a son Graham Ronald.

I understand that the 2/10th Battalion went to the Middle East but I was then too young to be sent overseas. The unit returned to Australia and then went to Papua New Guinea (PNG). Some members went to places such as Buna, Sanananda, and Balikpapan in 1945.

I embarked with others of my battalion on the "Van Heutsz" for Milne Bay on 11th September 1942 arriving three days later. Milne Bay is located on the south east corner of PNG. Fortunately I was not there for the main battles which took place in March & April 1942, between the Japanese and Australian/American forces. However we were still under attack from the Japanese on many occasions after my arrival.

Convoys of troops and supplies were always escorted into Milne Bay by various corvettes including HMAS Port Pirie and Hobart. I remember one very large American cruiser, the USS Chicago was there. I also remember seeing the Burns Philp ship MV Macdhui in harbour. It had been working in this area for some years prior to WWII.

There was no such thing as a real wharf. Pontoon bridges had to suffice and subsequently it was difficult to unload supplies. Further problems were caused by a reef and a very narrow channel, and bigger vessels could not get in close by.

The weather was very hot and steamy, with torrential rain at times which might last for several days - it just bucketed down! Conditions were atrocious to say the least and we were walking around in heaps of mud etc. We wore long trousers and long sleeved shirts to protect us from the "mossies". We had no need for blankets while on land. We were housed in tents, even those on the wounded or sick list. There were no Nursing Sisters on land but most times there were some on board Hospital Ships such as the HMAS Mununda.

We soon discovered that the Milne Bay area was badly infested by mosquitoes, and illnesses in particular Malaria occurred. I was one of those infected and taken to a Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) (also in tents) on the 29th October 1942. On the 18th November I was discharged to 2/1 CCS.

I was with the Gili Gili Battery. There were Americans there at the same time with heavy equipment to assist in clearing the jungle paths that were close to the airstrips that the Japanese wanted. We used some of the American guns and equipment (125mm). Actually there were two airstrips at Milne Bay. We were located to the west of one, the other being on the left of the bay looking east where two searchlights were located.

We were camped along Gili Gili to defend the airstrip. One day the Japanese attacked from the jungle (they were actually North Korean Marines under the command of the Japanese), and all hell broke loose. One special memory was seeing a Japanese soldier standing in full view playing the bugle during the attack (it was quite strange, I will never forget that sight).

At one stage our Officer said: "Stand up" – "everyman stand fast" – then "every man for himself." We made a combined unit attack, some from the 12th, and the rest from my 10th Battalion. There were approximately ninety of us in the Artillery section of the 10th Battalion. We cleared the strip and the Japs didn't ever come back again from the land after the final exchange of fighting.

We were at the KB Mission Post at Milne Bay when some natives captured a couple of Japanese. They were brought in on long poles like a dead pig (feet tied one end, hands the other). They were very close to us, inside our overall tent area. Someone said: "Let's kill the bastards" and laughter broke out. We knew the Japanese didn't want to surrender as they thought it shameful to be captured. They preferred to be shot in battle, and did not want to be a POW.

Fresh meat was unheard of so one day we killed a wild buffalo and put the meat in sand bags which we placed in the river to keep it fresh. Unfortunately the "crocs" found it and that was the end of our fresh meat! We lived mainly on bully beef, rice and got some vegetables from the local natives. Tinned fruit was a delicacy but occasionally we were able to get some from the Yanks. It was unusual but the Yanks actually liked our bully beef so we did trades. Food supplies towards the end of the war improved. Cigarettes were precious. The Padre was good in that regard but you had to smoke them right away as due to the humidity they would virtually disintegrate in your pockets.

I was struck off the list and evacuated back to Australia on "SAT Katoomba", a hospital ship, again with Malaria arriving on 26th January 1943. I travelled with many other troops with the same illness. I also spent time at Charters Towers, and about six weeks for recuperation at Bathurst. I was then evacuated to Adelaide General Hospital. It was at this time that I married. On 30th March 1943 I was discharged from hospital and left for PNG again on the "Tarooma" on 2nd May 1943, arriving on the 4th. I reported to the 11th Australia Division Reception Camp.

6th May 1943 I was back with the regiment and transferred from the Gili Gili Battery to Boera Battery, CAM still at Milne Bay. They were difficult conditions and no one had it easy. The conditions were deplorable to say the least. I was in and out of the Milne Bay Hospital or Regimental Aid Post with Malaria attacks at times with many other men, but not bad enough to be repatriated home again.

I suffered a minor injury on the 16th May 1944 and was flown to Port Moresby and then to Townsville on the 10th June. I remember that Townsville had a large Army camp and an Air Force Base with a similarly large airstrip for fighters and bombers. I returned to Milne Bay on the 17th June when I had recovered my health. I was involved personally with battles against the Japanese at both Milne Bay and Boera Bay.

I was evacuated again with another recurrence of malaria on 11 July, returning on the last day of the month to PNG. On the 14 October 1944 I was appointed to the R Heavy Battery and on 11 January 1945 I was transferred to the 1 Australia Base Depot in New South Wales. My official service time in the Army was from the 20th June, 1942 until discharged on the 11th October, 1945.

I returned to Adelaide by train. My father was not one for attending the big marches. I wasn't either so that must have been passed down to me. I didn't attend re-unions either. My wife was also not very enthusiastic about them.

She was concerned about the drinking that would go on. Occasionally I would run into some other blokes in the street, or perhaps receive the odd phone call.

My wife and I lived in a two room flat at Ovingham until we moved to 22 Blackburn Avenue, Glenelg North, 5045. This occurred on Eight Hours (Labour) Day in October 1947. This was the first row of houses to be built on the open land in Glenelg North. I was assisted by an army mate who was with the War Service Homes. He arranged an interview to enable us to relocate and I received a telegram of confirmation about a fortnight later.

I joined the RSL at Thebarton on the 18th January 1946, then transferred to Glenelg when we moved to Glenelg North in 1947. I went to a couple of picnics at the National Park at Belair with some army mates and attended some meetings, but felt I really did not fit in. Later I joined the Brighton Sub-Branch when the Glenelg Sub-Branch amalgamated with Plympton.

After the war so far as employment was concerned I returned to plumbing and did miscellaneous jobs at Michell Wool. Afterwards I did some part time jobs as a "subbie" for Norm Fricker in the building industry whom I had met previously. At one stage I thought I might commence work with the Commonwealth Railways; however my wife was not keen in case I had to go on the East/West railway line with the great distance and the general conditions being a deterrent. I later joined the Public Service and was foreman at Glenside Hospital in charge of maintenance.

History in general plays an important part in my life, particularly family history so that stories can be passed down from generation to generation. I have an excellent collection of my father's WWI archives and of course that of my own involvement in WWII, particularly about the Milne Bay area.

About 15 years ago I put an advertisement in all the Australian papers to see if I could locate my old army mates. I was surprised by the response "Why didn't we do this 50 years ago?" I still have contact with about 7 of my old mates, all now in their 90's.