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WELCOME.

Victory in the Pacific Day — also known as ‘VP Day’ — is commemorated across Australia and the world, as the anniversary of the end of World War II. It’s a date that we’ll never forget.

On 15 August 1945, Japan accepted the Allied Nations’ terms of surrender and Australia’s Prime Minister, Ben Chifley, announced that the war was over.

On 15 August 2020, Australia will commemorate the 75th anniversary of the end of WWII. In Victoria, due to COVID-19 restrictions, this occasion won’t be marked with the traditional service at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance. There will be no gatherings at local RSL Sub-Branches, and for many of us, we will mark the occasion alone, but united by the ANZAC Spirit and our solemn commitment to remembrance.

RSL Victoria has produced this booklet in the spirit of remembrance. It contains seven stories; five interviews with WWII veterans, and two stories about Melbourne and what our city looked like during WWII. I thank the Victorian Government for providing funding to make this special commemorative booklet possible. I also hope that you will read and enjoy these stories, and use them as an opportunity to reminisce, start conversations and even educate.

For me, on VP Day I will be thinking of my parents, who both served during WWII, and all the of the WWII veterans that I have had the immense privilege of meeting, and even calling friends, over my more than 40 years of RSL Victoria membership.

Lest we forget.

Dr Robert Webster OAM
Crowds were so big that trams were the only traffic on the street, slowly making their way through the crowd. The city was finally experiencing “illuminated shops, bright Neon signs, and a large number of lighted windows,” in stark contrast to the brown out conditions during the war.

Similar scenes played out across Victoria. In the tiny township of Merbein, in north-west Victoria, Bill Case was just eight years old when the war ended. He recalls the night news spread around Merbein, and his father’s surprising reaction.

“So next minute, he jumped in the car in his pyjamas and dressing gown and went up the street and started dancing around like everyone else.”

In Melbourne, crowds slowly gathered over several days as people anxiously waited for the news that never seemed to arrive. Unofficial reports circulated on August 14 about Japan’s surrender, met by incredible scenes in towns and cities alike across the country.

There was spontaneous rejoicing in streets around the nation. “Wild excitement” was reported in city streets, with around 500 people gathered in Collin Street near The Block by 5pm. In less than three hours crowd numbers grew to more than 4,000, people singing and dancing as the news spread. Many remained past midnight.

The Argus reported that in the area around The Block in Collins Street, “hundreds waved flags, blew cardboard trumpets and battered cornets, tossed around confetti, and hurled occasional fire crackers into the air and at passersby,” with torn paper floating down from the surrounding buildings.

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“So next minute, he jumped in the car in his pyjamas and dressing gown and went up the street and started dancing around like everyone else.”

“He was happy it was over. His two brother’s and brother’s-in-law were coming home safe and sound.”

On the frontline, and for those servicemen and women who’d already returned home, their recollections of hearing that the war was over give a unique insight into the war itself. The late
Vin Horsfall had served with the 39th Battalion in New Guinea, before joining the 2/2nd Australian Infantry Battalion in July 1943. He recalled being at Wewak where he again fell ill with malaria and was sent to hospital.

“That’s about the time they dropped the atomic bomb,” explained Vin. “We were standing outside listening to the wireless, and the doc said they’d dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. Just wiped it out. There was no more fighting after that.”

Jack Braidie, of Mildura, was a signalman in the 3rd Division Signals in Bougainville when the war ended.

“I can remember exactly where I was,” Jack said. “I was in Bougainville when the war ended, and I didn’t get home until May the next year.

“They had a Beaufighter and it had ‘Japan surrendered’ written in Japanese under the wings, “I was in Bougainville when the war ended, and I can remember exactly where I was, ” Jack said.

“Rabaul had about 30,000 Japanese there but they were no trouble, they wanted to get home just as much as we did.”

Norm Furness was one of approximately 400 men from the 1400-strong Lark Force on the island of New Britain that survived the Japanese invasion on January 23, 1942 before escaping the island and returning to Australia. Norm’s thoughts turned to his mates from Lark Force who had been captured in 1942 and were never heard from again.

“Tremendous” was how Norm felt at the time. But his excitement and relief would soon be shattered when learning of the fate of his mates from Lark Force.

“I thought, at that time, that all these mates that I knew nothing about, what happened to them, would be coming home,” explained Norm. “But three and a half years before that, they were all dead. But we didn’t know.”

The return home for many would be a mix of emotions. While many would be relieved and excited, returning home after years of war wasn’t easy for many service personnel. After four years of service in New Guinea, Vin Horsfall recalled returning home in November 1945.

“We were sailing into Sydney Harbour,” said Vin. “There were crowds there on the wharf cheering and carrying on, and we were all standing there. Wasn’t a murmur out of anybody, not a murmur. Not a bloody sound out of anybody, we just watched them. I don’t know what was wrong with us. You’d think we’d be cheering with them, but we weren’t!”

Though the war was officially over, the logistics of bringing Australia’s service personnel home was a monumental task. The demobilisation the thousands of personnel still on active duty took several months, with priority given to long service personnel.

While many Australians were returning home after active duty, more than 16,000 Australians would serve in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) in Japan between 1945 and 1952, enforcing the terms of Japan’s surrender. It marked the first time Australians were involved in the military occupation of a sovereign nation which it had defeated in war.

However, foremost on the minds of many were those prisoners of the Japanese, many of them from the 8th Division, from whom no word of their whereabouts or safety had been heard for more than three years.

No sooner had the end of war been announced that newspapers reported that the first POW relief parties were leaving Australia for Manila to trace and rehabilitate Australian’s who had been missing since the fall of Singapore in February 1942.

Optimism was high. The Horsham Times newspaper wrote in August 1945 that peace meant “those unfortunate members of Australia’s Eighth Division, who have so long awaited the moment of their liberation, will be enabled speedily to return to their native land, hearth and home.”

However, the reality would be far different. Of the more than 22,000 Australians captured by the Japanese in south-east Asia, most of whom become prisoners after the fall of Singapore and were scattered across the Pacific, over 8,000 died whilst prisoners of the Japanese in the three and a half years since their capture.

For POWs who survived the war, their homecoming was marked by great excitement. The first prisoners of the Japanese to make it home arrived in Melbourne in mid-September 1945. Crowds gathered at Spencer Street station eagerly awaiting their return before they were paraded through Melbourne’s CBD, crowds cheered and waved as the survivors were trucked passed.

The Melbourne Herald reported that, “Their passage through the city was marked by scenes of emotion. There was something bigger than mere joy in the demonstration. Pride was there, and with it deep thankfulness for their return.”

But for all those who experienced the joy of greeting a returned loved one, there were those who would never experience such relief. For years during the war, many families heard nothing of their missing loved ones once they become prisoners of the Japanese. Countless numbers died whilst POWs with families not learning the dreadful news for weeks and months after the war ended.

We’ll never know just how many wives and mothers, sweethearts and siblings met returning
SIGNIFICANCE OF VP DAY

Victory in the Pacific Day, or VP Day, commemorates the end of the Second World War on August 14, 1945, when Japan accepted the terms of the unconditional surrender set by the Allied Nations.

Also known as VJ Day, or Victory over Japan Day, it is commemorated on August 15, the day that Australian Prime Minister Ben Chifley announced the end of the war in a radio broadcast, before the signing of the official surrender took place on board the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay, Japan, on September 2, 1945.

It came after Victory in Europe Day, or VE Day, which marked the formal acceptance by the Allies of Germany’s unconditional surrender on May 8 1945, bringing an end to the Second World War in Europe. VP Day meant an end to Australia’s war against Japan in the Pacific, a war that had begun half a world away in Europe that was brought close to home after Japan’s unprovoked attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

troops at Spencer Street station in the hope of seeing a once familiar face in the crowd of uniformed men after years of silence.

As more families received official news from the authorities that their loved ones, who had been reported “missing presumed POW” and were now “presumed dead,” newspaper columns would fill with thousands of tributes to the dead, their unique kind of grief recorded for the world to see.

Just as it was in the Great War just two decades earlier, family homes across Victoria, indeed across the nation, would have hanging upon their walls or sitting on side tables the photographs of loved ones proudly wearing their uniform; those who had served, those who had died, and those who would remain missing. Haunting reminders of yet another world war that had caused such immense grief and loss.


On this 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, may we remember all those men and women who served their nation, for many of whom the war never truly ended. May we remember those whose lives were lost and those who remain missing, and the families at home who spent those dreadful years “soldiering on” with their lives despite their desperate worry and heartache. May we, and generations to come, never know war like this again.
One of those who remembers that time clearly is Cec Driscoll of Mildura – the last remaining veteran of the famed 39th Battalion from the Second World War in the Mallee.

At 99 years of age, his body may have slowed but his memory is sharp. Recalling his time in the army, Cec tells of high times and low, all as if they happened yesterday.

The second eldest of seven children to Cecil and Alice Driscoll, and the eldest son, Cec was born in Merbein in October 1920. When Cec was in second grade, his family moved from Merbein to Moonambel, near Avoca, where his father worked as a shearer and beekeeper.

When aged 11 years old, Cec and his family suffered a tragic loss. His father passed away after an abscess formed in his ear and surgery failed to fix it. “It wasn’t good, not for mum anyway. We don’t know how she did it. She was a wonderful woman,” recalls Cec.

The death of his father would not only impact Cec as a boy, with the family selling up and moving back to Merbein, but also as a young man during wartime. Like many young men at the time when the Second World War broke out, 20 year old Cec was eager to enlist. Several of his mates from Merbein had been called up, leaving Cec waiting for word on his own enlistment.

“I was so disappointed, I went rushing in there on the Saturday and I asked, ‘what’s going on?’ and the Captain said, ‘we can’t call you up, you’re like a married man’.”

“They treated me like a married man because I didn’t have a father and I was the eldest son.”

“I said, ‘well how am I going to get in the bloody army?’ and he said ‘volunteer.’ He said, ‘put your hand on that bible and I’ll swear you in,’ and he swore me in on the spot.”

With that, Cec had volunteered to serve, and soon joined the 39th Australian Infantry Battalion which was already in training.

Joining the 39th late in the piece meant Cec missed out on a lot of training himself. Bonegilla camp was Cec’s first real taste of army life, and it came as a shock.

“The day we went down to join the 39th was the day they marched through Melbourne. So we weren’t part of that. We had to go to Bonegilla and I got the biggest fright I’d ever seen.

“We were like kindergarten soldiers [compared to the others]. We’d only done five weeks in the bull ring, that’s what we called it. It was like the first few weeks of school.”

Originally part of the 39th Battalion’s C Company, Cec was transferred to B Company just as they were about to make their way across the Kokoda Track – the first group to do so.

The 39th were ordered over the Track when the Australian command learned of the possibility of the Japanese landing on the north coast. They eventually would, at Buna and Gona on the night of July 21-22, 1942. Cec and his mates were nearby when the Japanese landed.

“We walked over the mountains and we’d been at Kokoda about a week, and they told us, ‘you’re going to do a forced march.’ You had to keep walking until you dropped. No stopping. And we had to carry our own gear, ammunition, food, everything.”

“Then we got down to Oivi and we could hear bombs dropping. And we said, ‘what’s going on?’ They told us a Japanese convoy had landed at Buna, and B Company was to head down there to meet them.
Amongst that first group from the 39th Battalion to encounter the Japanese on the north coast, Cec would be involved in all but one battle that the 39th was involved in.

"Brigade Hill was the only one I missed. That and the bloody parade where Blamey called us rabbits!"

"After we got out of Isurava, I don't know when, I woke up one morning and I was on the bloody ridge on my own. I didn't know they were going. They didn't leave me behind, I think I passed out."

"Well that night, we got back and these 14th Battalion fellas, one bloke gave us a tin of bully beef between three of us. Gawd we rammed that down. They gave us water, too."

"I had a boil on my lip. I didn't know at the time, but I was also rotten with malaria. Anyway, we'd been battling two days hard and I couldn't move. I think I passed out, because at 11 o'clock at night a bloke tripped over me and he just said, 'oh sorry mate.' I said, 'that's alright cobber.' And I just curled up and when back to sleep.”

They were withdrawing. I woke up in the morning and I was looking around, nobody here, I'm on my own. And I thought 'oh god this is great.' So, I got a grenade in this hand, and a rifle in this one and I'm getting down the hill and got out about three mile and come to our blokes."

Cec made it back to Port Moresby weeks later. He was treated for malaria, the doctor weighing him for the first time after weeks on the track.

"He told me I was six stone eight. I said, 'that's bloody wrong.' When I got to New Guinea, I was ten stone four. I weighed that after thirteen or fourteen weeks on the track."

Cec may have escaped being seriously wounded while in New Guinea, but he wasn't left completely unscathed. Like so many others, Cec casually describes his many near misses, including an incident out on reconnaissance with three others near Gona when he tripped and fell.

"I must have fallen down in a low spot because they started shooting across my back and of course I got hit on the clip. I had a bandolier around my waist, spare ammo, and it hit the clip and dug into my behind and bruised it."

"It was a beauty. I put my hand down there and there was no blood. The bullets were pretty close,
Victory in the Pacific Day

Cec and Ab Driscoll in uniform with their sister, Verna.

“Oh, I don’t think we were heroes. We just done what we were asked to do, or told to do. We had no option. We were just ordinary people. We did what we had to do at the time.”

came out of the machine gun and flame was out between my legs. Oh, I was lucky.”

Cec also recalls a near miss with a “drop short” from Australian lines.

“You’d hear them coming and you’d hold your breath. I had one land in the side of my trench but he landed on his flat, he didn’t explode. If he’d landed on his nose I wouldn’t be hero.”

Cec would eventually join the 2/2nd Australian Infantry Battalion in New Guinea after the 39th was disbanded in July 1943.

While Cec was in New Guinea, his brother, Albion ‘Ab’ Driscoll was also in the Forces. Ab first served in New Guinea with the 2/32nd Battalion before being transferred to artillery, in the 2/12th Field Regiment at Morotai and Tarakan, and in the landings at Labuan. Ab returned to the 2/32nd at the end of the war, guarding Japanese prisoners at Rabaul.

Today, there are just eight known surviving veterans of the 39th Battalion from the Second World War.

Loved and respected by his family and friends, Cec loves a chat but is modest when it comes to his time in New Guinea. When asked how he feels about the 39th being regarded as heroes, Cec had this response.
Andrew Bishop was just 16 when he enlisted to serve in the Australian Army during World War Two. Andrew was motivated to enlist by the belief that soldiers were provided with three meals a day. Little did he know that his service would lead to an epic trek across Papua New Guinea, with almost no food and water, and only the company of a few good mates to keep him going.

Andrew Bishop was born in England in 1924 and immigrated to Australia with his family when he was a toddler. Working from the age of 13, but keen to enlist with the Army during the war, Andrew lied about his age. So, on the 11th of July, 1940 aged just 16, Andrew signed up at the Melbourne Town Hall. Having spent his early years scrimping and saving, he was motivated by the belief that soldiers were paid good wages and provided with three meals a day.

After completing his basic training in Balcombe and Trawool, he was posted to Rabaul, New Britain in early 1941. In the early hours of the 23rd of January 1942, Andrew heard the first rumblings of the Japanese landing. As flare guns lit up the dark, Andrew could see the Japanese dressed in dark singlets and shorts. With their motors off, they were paddling their barges into the beach. "When our guns were firing at them there was a lot of yelling and squealing. It seemed they got a surprise."

"We kept firing and used quite a few belts of ammunition as the barges were coming in. I could then see they were trying to land on our left flank. The Japanese were firing quite a few shells from their war ships."

As the hours went by and daybreak came, they were given orders to get out. With no plans in place for a withdrawal, it was each man for himself. And so began the next three harrowing months, which saw Andrew team up with a handful of mates to fight for their lives. They covered treacherous terrain on foot in tropical weather and faced repeated enemy attacks. "The next thing there was a Jap seaplane painted red flying towards us and dropped a bomb in the plantation. It shook the hell out of us."

At one point in his escape, Andrew and three mates had to make it to Pondo on the other side of the island, where there was hope of getting on a boat. But hope faded when the boat they boarded broke down just a few kilometres out to sea and got stuck on a reef. "When we did get the boat off the reef we still couldn’t get the motor running and were drifting. We pulled floorboards off the deck to use as paddles."

They had to muster everything within themselves to soldier on for over 300 kilometres to Talasea, further south on the island. "One of the boys shot a water buffalo. A few of us gave a hand to get the carcass off, so we could get a good slab of steak to put on hot coals. It was the first bit of fresh meat we tasted for months. We suffered after as most of us got dysentery."

Andrew eventually arrived back in Cairns in April 1942 – suffering from starvation, malaria and wearing the same clothes he’d been wearing for the past 3 months. "We marched up the main street of Cairns looking like hobos. The people watching us must have wondered where we came from."

Not home for even a day, Andrew became so ill his father called for an ambulance. He was taken to Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital and then to recuperate in an Army hospital near Ballarat. He transferred to B Coy 2/2nd Battalion and was posted to New Guinea as a machine gunner. Wounded during an invasion, he was unable to return to the front line, suffering from bullet fragments in his one lung.

Andrew has special memories of the mates he served with. "Friendships were important because when we were going into fight, none of us knew whether they were going to survive, so they relied on each other. It might be the last time we saw our mates."

"One of the boys shot a water buffalo. A few of us gave a hand to get the carcass off, so we could get a good slab of steak to put on hot coals. It was the first bit of fresh meat we tasted for months. We suffered after as most of us got dysentery."

Andrew Bishop at 17 years old at Trawool training camp.

Andrew Bishop and his late son, Vietnam Veteran Murray Bishop on Anzac Day 2016.

Andrew Bishop at 18 years old, after Rabaul 1943.
Melbourne had already played its part during the First World War. So when Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, broadcast to the nation on September 3, 1939, that it was his “melancholy duty” to announce that Australia was at war with Germany, Melbourne was ready to do it again. However, this news brought with it a new set of concerns and a new way of life during this war, which would begin on the other side of the world but would soon end up on Australia’s doorstep. Melbourne, and Victoria, would not escape the impact of the war on its streets nor its people. According to Deborah Tout-Smith, Senior Curator, Home & Community Society & Technology Department, Museums Victoria, the significant role Melbourne played during the Second World War should not be overlooked.

“Melbourne played a significant role in the war. For instance, United States General Douglas MacArthur was based in Melbourne between March and July 1942, when he was appointed Supreme Commander of the South-West Pacific Area. Melbourne was a hive of official wartime activity. Aside from the Headquarters Southern Command being located at the top end of Collins Street, Melbourne was the home of various Defence buildings including Victoria Barracks on St Kilda Road. Initially the administrative headquarters for the Australian Army, the RAAF and RAN would also operate out of the Barracks. It also housed a War Cabinet Room and the Advisory War Council.

Just as in the First World War, Melbourne would experience the popping up of enlistment offices. Although official recruiting was yet to begin, a temporary recruitment office outside Flinders Street station saw 3,500 men enlist by September 19th. The first official recruitment office in Melbourne would open the following month, in October 1939. These more permanent recruitment offices would be established at various points around the city and its outskirts.Various training camps were dotted around Melbourne and regional Victoria including at Seymour and Bacchus Marsh. Puckapunyal camp was established in November 1939 in response to the outbreak of World War Two. The main site of recruit training for the Royal Australian Engineers was conducted at Fort Queenscliff, which formed part of the defence of Port Phillip Bay during the war. Within Division’s filling, soon Melbourne’s city streets would again be filled with service personnel proudly marching through the streets on parade prior to embarkation for service overseas, with onlookers including loved ones waving and cheering them on.

The first march through Melbourne’s streets was held on January 24th, 1940, with “unprecedented scenes.” Victoria’s first 5,000 members of the Second AIF marched through the CBD to the sound of “wild cheers and shouting” from the 500,000 people that lined the streets, some of whom broke
through barriers meant to hold them back, all amidst “showering confetti and the whirling clouds of torn paper.”

It was hailed at the time as being the “largest crowd which has ever assembled in Melbourne streets.”

While little may have changed around Melbourne in those early months of the war, Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, changed everything. War was no longer on the other side of the world but on Australia’s doorstep.

The east coast of Australia was feared most vulnerable to attack, Melbourne especially so due to its munitions and aircraft factories, including an explosives factory located in Maribyrnong and an aircraft factory at Fisherman’s Bend, as well as its location on a major port.

These fears were compounded in the minds of many by the attacks on Darwin and Australia’s northern coast from February 1942, and on Sydney Harbour in May that year.

This signalled the beginning of significant changes not only on Melbourne's streets but to the lives of its people and those around Victoria, brought on by the very real fear of invasion by the Japanese.

Permanent brown out conditions were enforced around Melbourne from December 1941 with wardens enforcing new policy around the city and suburbs. Lighting around the city was dimmed with just one in four streetlights lit and shaded to throw minimal light.

Even light globes outside homes were banned. Any naked light seen from the sea saw residents facing a £5 penalty. Rail and tram lighting were dimmed with headlights covered by hoods.

Air raid slit trenches were dug in various locations around the city and suburbs, including in school yard playgrounds, around public buildings, and Melbourne’s parklands. Slit trenches were dug in the gardens surrounding the Shrine of Remembrance, while Treasury Gardens became an evacuation location.

An air raid shelter was also located in Treasury Gardens though it could only accommodate five people, while another was located under the Royal Melbourne Hospital for use by patients and staff. Melbourne residents were encouraged to build shelters in their backyards, with directions often published in newspapers. Air raid drills became a part of life in wartime Melbourne.

“In Maribyrnong, the explosives factory had a workforce of over 8,000 people, and the site included concrete bunker-type air raid shelters, zig-zag slit trenches, now filled in, and anti-aircraft guns,” explains Ms Tout-Smith.

Incredibly, a handful of these structures have survived. “Surviving air raid shelters built to protect workers include three at Spotswood Pumping Station, now part of Scienceworks,” explains Ms Tout-Smith.

“There’s one in Milford Street, St Kilda, with sturdy concrete walls, and another built into a block of flats in Glover Court, Toorak. Thousands of others have now been covered over in back yards.

“Many public or large buildings were also re-purposed for the war effort. For instance, was the Exhibition Building, now the Royal Exhibition Building, housed thousands of RAAF as well as WAAC personnel.

“The MCG was progressively occupied by the US Army Air Forces, the Royal Australian Air Force, the US Marine Corps and the RAAF, and was considered home base for thousands of personnel. A communications hub was based at the Russell Street police headquarters.”

Even Melbourne’s largest park, Royal Park, was utilised as a Reception Depot for new infantry recruits during the Second World War, reminiscent of activities during the Great War.

Sandbagging of shopfronts and buildings also commenced, with some taping up windows to reduce the chance of shattering during an explosion.

The war was not just felt around the streets of cities and towns but was also felt keenly within the homes of all Australians when rationing was introduced in May 1942. Ration books were issued to each household with strict limits placed on tea, sugar, flour, meat, butter, and paper. Petrol rations would also be brought in.

Shortages of fresh fruit and vegetables were felt in some places, the backyard vegetable garden more important than ever.

Yet perhaps the most poignant vision of war in Melbourne's streets were to see those in uniform walking about. Both Flinders Street and Spencer Street station’s the scene of teary goodbyes as servicemen and women entwined off to war, and perhaps more emotional reunions when those fortunate to survive the war returned home.

Whether in Melbourne’s streets or in country towns, Victorians during the Second World War could proudly lay claim to playing a vital role in assisting in the war effort. As we commemorate those who served during the Second World War and those who lost their lives, we should also remember those on the home front and the impact the war had on Australians everywhere.
Harold George Ristrom was born in Benalla in 1924. His family moved several times during the Great Depression in pursuit of work and eventually settled in Bentleigh in Melbourne's south-east. He was 15 years old working as a newspaper boy when WW2 broke out in 1939. “They put out a special edition and I was riding around the streets yelling out ‘war declared, war declared!'”

When he finished school, he got a job as a junior clerk for the Royal Insurance Company in Collins Street. Inspired by his great-grandfather who was a sailor on merchant vessels, Harold had a hankering for the sea, so one lunchtime, not far from where he worked, he went to the Olderfleet Building and volunteered for the Navy. He was sworn in and then turned away. “I was told we’re not ready for you yet, go back to work and we’ll let you know when we want you.”

As weeks went by, Harold eagerly awaited news from the Navy. Then, on his 18th birthday, he received a letter from the Army. Despite pleading his case that he’d signed up with the Navy, the Army had other plans for him.

After completing eight weeks training at Puckapunyal with the 4th Field Training Regiment, Harold approached his Staff Sergeant to volunteer for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in the hope of travelling abroad like his Uncle George, who had been a volunteer soldier for the artillery and was sent to Syria and the Middle East.

The story goes that it was only then that the Sergeant remembered a letter he’d received from the Navy concerning Harold.

As a result, on the 27th August, 1942 the Army discharged Harold and he transferred to HMAS Cerberus where he enlisted into the Royal Australian Naval Reserve as Ordinary Seaman. Harold was assigned to Special Services.

They put out a special edition and I was riding around the streets yelling out ‘war declared, war declared!’.

800 ships in the fleet. It was a great privilege to be in that fleet!”

Victory in the Pacific was declared on 15th August 1945, marking the end of WW2. The Kanimbla was in Subic Bay, Philippines. “We were waiting to go on a further invasion towards Japan, but the declaration saved us the worry of going further, so we were pleased about that. But the news came through late at night and most didn’t find out about it until the next morning. But nobody was running around dancing and screaming like they did in Melbourne and Sydney. We just got on with the job.”

One of Hiram’s proudest memories of his service with the Kanimbla was repatriating long-serving Australian servicemen from the Pacific Islands. He says it was a privilege to bring those troops home to a tumultuous welcome in September 1945.

After being discharged from the Navy in 1946, he rejoined the Royal Insurance Company. In 1950, he joined the Caledonian Insurance Company, where he worked until he retired.

Hiram often thinks of his very best mate he made in the Navy – a friendship that spanned more than 70 years.

HAROLD RISTROM

Serving in the Royal Australian Navy, during World War Two, fulfilled a lifelong dream for Harold Ristrom. It's an experience he still thinks of fondly, more than 75 years after the fact.

During his time in the Navy, Harold became known as Hiram thanks to his memorable impersonation of the character in a children's radio program. In October 1943, Hiram was drafted to HMAS Kanimbla as Coxswain of one of the landing craft onboard. He spent the rest of the year engaged in training with US troops in amphibious warfare near the Naval Beach Commando School in Queensland in preparation for operations in the South West Pacific.

Kanimbla had a ship’s company of 650, however when it took on troops of 1,000 or more, the living conditions became spartan. Hot, tropical temperatures forced many to sleep on the decks and when it came to meal times, it was standing room only. “Fresh water was rationed, the showers would only be on for two ten minute periods a day. You soaped yourself up and dashed back under to wash off.”

Hiram was part of seven landings during his time in the Navy, including to New Guinea, Philippines and Borneo.

He was involved in what became a symbolic moment of the war as part of the Landing Squadron that returned American General Douglas MacArthur to the Philippines in October 1944. “That was a highly exciting fleet to be in. There were over
For weeks, the relentless Malaysian jungle had been closing in on him. Aged just 17, he was numbered among the last fighters in a band of gutsy Aussie troops sent on a defence mission as the Japanese forged deeper into south east Asia.

It was supposed to be a perfectly planned ambush. But the Battle of Muar – the last major clash of the Malayan campaign – was a bloody and ruthless affair.

Australian and British forces had been hopelessly outnumbered in January, 1942. Expecting a small contingent of enemy troops on the banks of the Muar River, they instead confronted the Japanese Imperial Guards Division.

In the madness that followed the Australians were ordered to retreat but Mr Kerr was separated from his gun crew, members of the 4th Antitank Regiment. "They ordered us to withdraw so we had to leave the truck and gun behind and cross a clearing to safety," Mr Kerr said. "But the Japanese set up machine guns and were mowing men down."

He made the dash successfully and joined up with 44 other soldiers from the 2nd 29th Battalion as they navigated through the jungle, desperate for survival.

“We tried to get food from the natives but there was just too many of us so we decided to split up into three groups,” Mr Kerr said. “Some of us wanted to make for the west coast, steal a boat and head to Sumatra.”

But then word filtered through that Singapore had fallen when Gunner Jim Kerr was forced to give himself up to the Japanese.

The men knew there were out of options. "We realised we should probably give ourselves up. It was nerve-wracking wondering if we were going to be shot on the spot."

Taken into custody, he still remembers the journey as they arrive as POWs in Kuala Lumpur.

"There were heads on poles as we drove into the city," Mr Kerr said. "Chinese dissidents who had been executed by the Japanese. It wasn’t a very pleasant sight. There is no forgetting that."

The teenager was among 150 Australian troops and 1500 Englishmen first locked up in Pudu Prison then transported to Chungi and by March 1943, set to work in gruelling conditions on the infamous Thai-Burma Railway.

It was here that Mr Kerr says Aussie mateship mattered the most. He said having somebody by your side was key to staying healthy and focused.

"If you had a mate, or mates, they were there to help you when you were sick. If you managed to scrounge something or steal something you would share it with your mates. All we had was each other."

Back home, Mr Kerr’s parents didn’t know if their son was dead or alive. “From January 1942 until March 43 they had no information of my whereabouts. They were tremendously worried.”

When the railway was completed in 1945, Mr Kerr was still standing. He was then shuffled between working camps until the end of the war.

Now aged 95, he admits his memories are somewhat faded. Like so many veterans he clings to any detail, as the faces and voices of war become increasingly distant. He still remembers contracting malaria for the first time. How could he possibly forget? He endured it 20 times during his imprisonment.

Then there was the daily brutality. "If you didn’t show any fighting spirit you’d be gone," He said. “With the terrible conditions and food you were surviving on, if you were weak and you didn’t have that fighting spirit, unfortunately, many men would just throw in the towel."

Mr Kerr was at Nakon Nai prison camp, about 80km outside Bangkok when he was lined up and told the war was over.

He was free.

“They told us a bomb had been dropped in Japan, the war was over. I had survived three and a half years and I was going home,” he recalled.

To this day, the cheering and shouting and shaking of hands still reverberates. With the surviving POWs he was taken to Bangkok, then Singapore and onto a ship bound for Australia. His father was waiting for him at the Melbourne Showgrounds when they were transported in by bus from the port.
Remarkably, no sooner had the young soldier been discharged – he signed up for the Navy. It had been an ambition before the war broke out and he intended to fulfil it. He was dispatched to Japan as part of the occupying forces in 1947. In the years to follow, Mr Kerr would find love and have a family of his own. War had taken its toll – but this was a man determined to never let it rule his life.

“I never had any hang ups, no flashbacks or nightmares, other blokes did of course. They couldn’t even sleep. But after sleeping on bamboo and concrete I was just happy to be back in a comfortable bed.”

Each and every Remembrance Day since, Mr Kerr has spared a thought for all those Aussies who weren’t so lucky to return. Of the 22,000 Australian troops taken prisoner – 8000 died.

That’s one in three,” Mr Kerr said. “A tremendous casualty rate.”

But he’s a realist. After all these years, he doesn’t look back in anger.

“I know many veterans hated what happened, what they experienced. But I don’t like to use that word. I don’t use the word ‘hate’. It can be all too consuming and I’m not going to let that eat away at me.”
JOHN HOOK

John Hook enlisted to serve in the Second World War. But it is when the war ended that his story began.

John Hook was born on 20th October 1925 in the United Kingdom and came to Australia with his parents a year later.

With no intention of going to university, he finished year 11 at Melbourne Boys High School in 1941 and got a job at the Commonwealth Bank as a junior clerk.

But a strong sense of duty to his country led him to enlist with the Army in January 1944. “That’s really what it was, I think we all had that feeling and wanted to do the right thing. Not to ever glamorise it, but that’s probably what motivated us.”

Breaking the news to his mother is his strongest memory of that time. “She was horrified, particularly that I’d volunteered, I hadn’t been called up, she found that a bit hard to take.”

He completed his Infantry Training at Gowna in New South Wales and was eventually deployed to Lae, Papua New Guinea, and then to the War Crimes Commission in Rabaul, New Britain, where he worked as an interpreter as part of the Allied Translator and Interpreter Service, having learnt Japanese.

Whilst the then teenager was lucky his service did not put him on the front line, it proved to be horrific, nonetheless. “Shortly after the end of WW2, I was at Rabaul, capital of New Britain, attached to the War Crimes Commission operating there.”

It was his job to act as an interpreter for the trials of Japanese soldiers accused of war crimes. Many of them were eventually executed for their crimes. “The very first time it was pretty traumatic. They’re fellow human beings and although guilty of some horrific war crimes, you’re still telling someone they’re going to be executed tomorrow.”

In one of the major trials he was involved included the officers responsible for the deaths of Australian Prisoners of War during the well-known Sandakan death marches in Borneo.

He tells stories about his encounters with likes of General Imamura, who was the Senior Japanese General in the South West Pacific during WW2. General Imamura was eventually tried on the charge of having been responsible for all the war crimes committed in the entire South West Pacific.

In the course of John’s interpreting duties on Rabaul, he also encountered Lieutenant Hideo Katayama from the Imperial Japanese Navy. Lieutenant Katayama surrendered himself to Allied authorities in February 1946, after discovering that he was wanted for questioning, accused of killing a Royal Australian Airforce pilot. Apparently feeling sorry for Lieutenant Katayama, John gave him 3 cigarettes. “When our paths next met shortly afterwards, he gave me 3 Japanese bank notes, with the comment that ‘a man about to die has no need of money.’”

After discharging from the Army in 1947, keen to get back home to his parents and wanting to be a civilian again, John gratefully but unexpectedly went to study Commerce at Melbourne University under the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Training Scheme. “I could make a bit more of myself because I was just a working class kid at that stage, well, I still am, but it meant that greater opportunities in life beckoned.”

It gave him the opportunity to have a stable career for many years thereafter, working for Shell and Repco, and combined with his Japanese expertise, he was tasked with developing international business relations.

He is grateful for the tight bonds he formed with a few mates during his service years. “We called ourselves the ‘We Three!’ They were going through similar experiences. It was quite an important relationship.” They continued their friendships long after the war ended.

He was married to Mary for 62 years. They had 4 children, 10 grandchildren and 7 great-grandchildren.

In this, the 75th year since the War ended, John is reflective. “Looking back at all the experiences I’ve had and the fact that it was such a brutal, pointless war. I think that’s the main thing about it because most soldiers really think war is just a terrible thing.”

A young John Hook after he enlisted to serve in the Second World War in 1944.

“…he gave me 3 Japanese bank notes, with the comment that ‘a man about to die has no need of money.’”
15 AUGUST 1945
Melbourne

Rejoicing broke out spontaneously when the surrender of Japan was announced: the war was over.

Lois Anne Martin (centre) knitted the red, white and blue vest especially for VP Day and never wore it again. The vest is on display in the Australian War Memorial’s Second World War Gallery. Image courtesy of the AWM.

ABOUT OUR COVER IMAGE

To help commemorate and celebrate the 75th anniversary of the end of WWII, RSL Victoria has created a special illustration that we hope all our members will enjoy. Based on a real photo taken in Melbourne on August 15, 1945. Our commemorative image aims to capture the mood of the day that it was announced that the war was over. RSL Victoria invites you to print our commemorative image and display it in your homes on VP Day, 2020.
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RSL Victoria’s VP Day commemorative booklet is supported by the Victorian Government to recognise the 75th anniversary of the end of World War Two.