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NEWSLETTER

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Vietnam – Before, During and After – an address by Ron Goward at the April Meeting.

Ron, who grew up in ChermSIDE, gave a succinct account of what the rapidly changing 1950s & 1960s were like for him. He led up to the Vietnam War and set it in the context of both the world and ChermSIDE.

On 29th January 1969 he became a soldier and began training as an Infantryman at Singleton in NSW. Eventually he was drafted into the 8th Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment. The Battalion sailed on HMAS Sydney in November 1969 after the TET offensive saw the beginning of the end of the war and the growing disillusionment of the public with the war. There was a feeling of great uncertainty in the public mind and this did not help morale among the soldiers.

Ron sums up the men's feelings about Vietnam. It was another world, an unreal world. We referred to being in Vietnam as being in-country. If you were referring to anywhere else other than Vietnam, you referred to "the world." For most of us, time was sort of suspended, as we set about what we had to do, and always, just hoping to do our time and get back home safely, alive and well. Most of us hadn't seen a lot of Australia, and even fewer of us had ever been out of Australia. The heat and the humidity were a shock, the living conditions of the Vietnamese were a shock, the constant threat of danger was a shock, and the tensions of an all-male community were a shock. And each one of us had different experiences, and we all have different memories.

The Australians operated in Phouc Tuy Province in the south of South Vietnam, at Nui Dat, which was home to about 6000 Australians. It was a fortified camp, with an airfield, a helicopter pad, a lake for water supply, and my battalion lived amidst rubber trees, banana trees and other fruit trees and scrub. And the guys out in the bush routinely carried anywhere between 30 and 45 kilograms of gear on their backs. (That is the weight of a bag of cement); rations, water and ammunition, enough for several days.

They lived in the sound of gunfire and war machines by day and night but the thing that he remembers most vividly was the continual presence of helicopters. Their wock-wocka sound was somehow comforting. The choppers took us out into the bush; they supported operations, they re-supplied us with food and ammunition; they took out our wounded and dead; their machine gunners fired at the enemy. There were little ones for reconnaissance, and big ones to lift heavy stuff.

Ron recounts an eerie event experienced by his sister at the unveiling of the Vietnam memorial in Canberra in 1992 which conveys something of the place of the helicopter in the minds and lives of the Vietnam Vets.

My sister said that as the crowd gathered, there was a subdued murmur of conversation. She was suddenly aware that there was a tension in the crowd, and that all of the Vietnam Vets were suddenly alert. She asked her husband, my brother-in-law, also a Vietnam Vet, what was happening and he replied, "can't you hear them?" She was quite puzzled because she couldn't hear anything except

the murmur of the crowd as she asked “hear what?” “The helicopters” he replied. My sister said that it was probably another twenty seconds before a flight of Iroquois helicopters thundered overhead.

In the Vietnam bush (front) Ron was stationed at a fire support base from which the artillery operated giving support to the infantry patrolling outside.

The reality for us was that any one of the South Vietnamese we saw could have been the enemy. And many ended up being just that; ... this guy worked at an enemy dispensary, and this woman was a cook at an enemy camp. We heard lots of stories about atrocities happening in Vietnam, but I believe the Australians treated the enemy well.

And it wasn't all bush work; we had a couple of parades; on Anzac Day, our Battalion birthday, a memorial service led by our Chaplain Stan Hessey, and a special parade when the battalion was presented with a citation from the Vietnamese Armed Forces, the first time it was presented to an Australian unit. The Unit Citation of the Cross of Gallantry with Palm is a streamer which was attached to our Battalion's colours, and all of us in the battalion wear the citation emblem. The award was made for the battalion's military operations, and for the civic action program aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the local people. But it was particularly awarded for the battalion's operations in the Long Hai Mountains, a sanctuary for Viet Cong Regular army units. The Long Hai operations were arguably as significant as the Battle of Long Tan and the Battles of Coral and Balmoral. Thanks to the battalion's operations in the Long Hais, the enemy suffered heavy losses and were repelled, allowing the local populace to live in security.

And then we came home. The return voyage on the Sydney was a time to just do nothing. We slept. We watched movies, we played volleyball against the sailors, but mostly we just wound down. On arrival in Brisbane, we were allowed a short time with our families, and then we were taken to the Botanical Gardens where we formed up for our march through Brisbane. You must remember that at the time the anti-war demonstrations were in full swing, but nothing – absolutely nothing - was going to stop us from giving a salute outside King George Square. I know that for most of us, it was one of the proudest days of our lives.

I was discharged, and I got on with my life, back to the public service, night school, and eventually became an architect. But there were memories that would not go away - still will not go away.

Vietnam Veterans, like veterans of other conflicts, experienced their share of trauma, and a Royal Commission acknowledged as much in 1985. Each of us has different experiences, and each of us deals with the results of those experiences differently. I still deal with mine - on a daily and a nightly basis.

I never marched on Anzac Day, or joined the RSL or any of the unit associations. I didn't go to the Welcome Home March in 1987, or even watch it on TV. My late wife died the week before the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial was opened in Canberra, but the needs of my young family came first. I remarried and, in 1994, and at the gentle urging of Marjorie, I marched in our local Anzac commemoration in Samford Village. The following year we were living at Shorncliffe and I attended the march at Sandgate.

Each Anzac Day, Marjie and I go to Sydney, and I march with my old colonel in Sydney. Initially I marched behind him, mixed in with the other blokes. But each year he was getting older and frailer, so I moved up to the front rank, so I was closer to him in case he had to fall out. Last year I marched just one pace behind him, and this year I suspect I'll march at his elbow, as his knee is getting very dicky.

Each year on 28th February, members of my old battalion gather in cities and towns across Australia to remember the eighteen members of the battalion who were never able to wear the Cross of Gallantry citation. These men did not come home with us, and you will note that many of them died on the same day. It was a terrible day, a sad day, a frightening day, as a series of mines were detonated in the Long Hai Mountains. It is our day to remember, just as we as a nation remember all the sacrifices made in all wars on Anzac Day.

As we contemplate the histories of wars, the enormity of the enterprise can be overwhelming. These histories are sprinkled with statistics: numbers of participants – in the millions: numbers of bombs fired – in their billions: numbers of casualties in the hundreds of thousands.

The beaches at Gallipoli now hide the blood and gore of that fateful April day, 93 years ago, when our Anzac tradition was born. We have grown up with the stories of the thousands of men struggling to climb the steep slopes under heavy fire. Many of the Anzac veterans of Gallipoli moved on to France to the Western Front. Tens of thousands of Australians joined hundreds of thousands from other Commonwealth countries, and

from France and Belgium to defend the 760 kilometres of front against the German invaders.

The sands of the African deserts cover the bodies of more Anzacs, and the jungles of New Guinea have swallowed up even more. Just some more battlefields, but no less horrible, were Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq – more battlefields.

It is not nations that go to war. Bullets are fired by people; grenades are thrown by people; even “the button” that fires the missile is pushed by a person. It is people who go to war.

Plato said: “Only the dead have seen the end of war.”

In the final analysis, the Anzac spirit is about having the courage to persevere when the going gets tough; it is about never letting your mates down. This spirit has been handed down over the years, from one generation of Australians to the next. We must ensure that this continues, and we continue to remember:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow
old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We will remember them.

Grace Beecher from the Sandgate Historical Society spoke at the May meeting on the sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur* on the 14th May 1943. Grace has spent many years researching this tragic event, culling information from local newspapers, interviewing survivors and reading the results of inquires. The Sandgate Society has a large archive on the *Centaur*.

The *Centaur* was a passenger ship and, ironically, in the late 1930s had rescued the crew of a Japanese whaler which had got into difficulties off the West Australian coast. During the war she was known as ‘the luck’ ship since she had survived air attacks in Singapore, the bombing of Darwin, and several near misses while at sea. However, that luck ran out one night in 1943.

The *Centaur* was converted into a Hospital Ship in 1943 for the duration of the Second World War. The first voyage in its new role was to sail from Brisbane to Townsville, pick up wounded and bring them to Brisbane. The next voyage was to bring wounded from Port Moresby and transport them to Brisbane and Sydney.

A Hospital Ship was protected by the Geneva Convention and had to be treated as a vessel of a neutral nation. It had to display large Red Crosses which were lit up at night so that it was

clearly identified. The *Centaur* fulfilled these requirements and the Japanese government had been notified of the status of the *Centaur*.

On the 12th May 1943 the *Centaur* departed from Sydney and sailed north heading for Cairns and New Guinea. Their main worry was the fear of hitting a mine which could have been laid by enemy activity in Australian waters.

The voyage was uneventful until 4.10 am on the 14th May 1943 when she was torpedoed off Caloundra. The *Centaur* was broken in two by the explosion and sunk in three minutes giving the crew little time to launch life rafts or do anything except abandon ship. The ship caught fire and oil spread over the sea but, because the vessel sank so quickly, the oil did not catch fire. The survivors in the water were coated with oil while many suffered burns from the fire on board.

Stories of miraculous escapes abound; Sister Ellen Savage, the only nurse of the 12 on board to survive, jumped overboard with another nurse, Merle Morton. Ellen hit the water and survived; Merle hit some wood floating in the water and was killed.

The suction of the sinking *Centaur* dragged Sister Savage down into a whirlpool of moving metal and wood. Here her ribs, nose and palate were broken, her ear drums perforated and she sustained multiple bruises. Then she was propelled to the surface in the middle of an oil slick and found her way to a raft that was part of the *Centaur's* wheel-house. During the 34 hours on this make-shift raft, Sister Savage gave whatever medical care she could to survivors despite being badly injured herself.

As a Lieutenant she would have been the ranking officer so she had to take charge of the raft and ration the supplies they had – each person got a little meat extract, a milk tablet and a sip of water. She recited her rosary and generally kept the morale of the company high.

The survivors had little food, water or medical supplies to treat the burns victims but they did the best they could. When a severely burnt person died they were given a sea burial, but since there was nothing to wrap the body in or weight to sink it, they just had to let it drift off rather than commit it to the deep.

The beaches were littered with debris for miles; clothing, wood, containers and maybe bodies unless the sharks would have taken them. Sharks were the main worry of the survivors with one story of a shark actually swimming on to floating wreckage and having to be beaten off.

Of the 332 souls on board only 64 survived and they spent 34 hours drifting in the shark infested waters of the south Coral Sea until they were rescued by the US destroyer Mugford.

Ellen Savage was awarded the George Cross, which is the non-combatant's equivalent of the Victoria Cross. She was the second Australian woman to have 'won the cross'.

The disaster and the heroism of the survivors was commemorated with the dedication of a memorial to the Centaur at Caloundra on the 15th September 1968. May they rest in peace.

Rose Garden Boundaries – In 1975 the boundaries of all Brisbane suburbs were gazetted, ie they became official and could only be altered by the state Government. Prior to this there were at least three sets of boundaries, Post Office, Council and Statistical, the last one being used to count the census.

To make the job of the postman easier the new boundaries were, in all but exceptional cases, not drawn down the middle of roads as had been the practice. Instead they were drawn inside the front fence of the houses on one side of the road so that the people living on both sides of the road were in the same suburb. Since many people had rose gardens along their front fences, the name 'rose' was added to the new boundaries.

In 2002 a further change was made when the boundary was shifted from the front fence to the back fence so that the property was also in the same suburb as the front fence. And today we can rest secure knowing that our whole property is in the one suburb, but what about our back fence?

A Village Icon Vanishes – First it was the Dawn, now Pradella's Barber Shop is no more. The shop opened by Morrie in 1947 has been sold but will continue to operate under the management of Mr Craig Hunter.

When Morrie retired in 1969, the business continued under his sons, Ray and Murray, who are now retiring. The old business weathered the 'long hair' era of the 1960s – 1970s and lived into the era of the 'skin' heads; what new hair eras will it survive to see in the future? I hear that wigs are all the go way up in Ironbark, or is it Blackbutt?

Displays – One was held at **Burnie Brae** recently when they had an open day. The Society showed a series of photos of Chermerside as it was and as it is now. It sometimes comes as a shock for people to realise that buildings that have been part of their

lives were preceded by one or two earlier buildings.

Earlier generations of Chermersiders probably thought those earlier buildings were going to be permanent only to find out that buildings are like people, they come and go. So have a good look around and see what is there now, it may not be there tomorrow.

The other display "**Coming to Chermerside**" is part of the "Coming to Queensland" celebrations and it is in the Library for the month of May. It is a celebration of immigration to Queensland over a century or so. Photos show people who have newly arrived in the State from overseas or interstate and have become part of the fabric of modern Queensland.

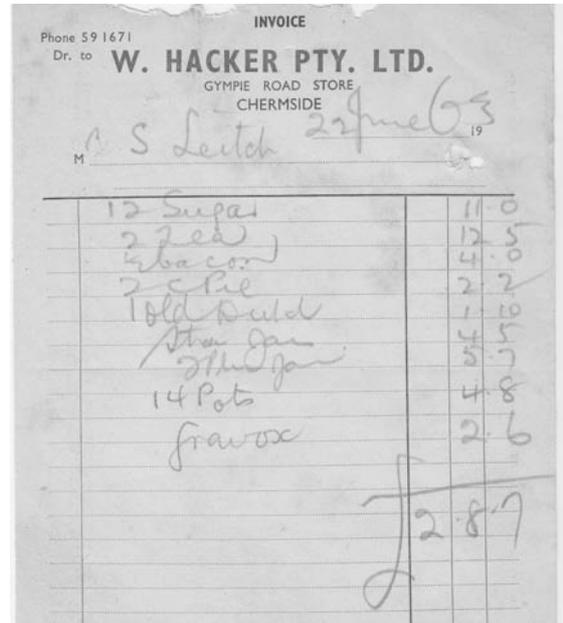
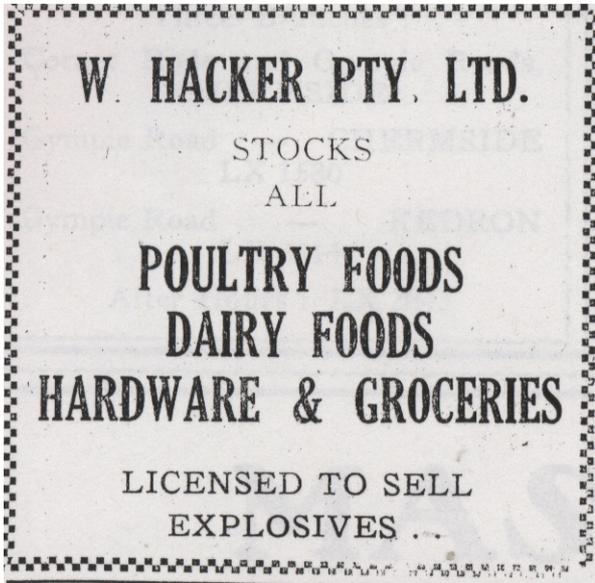
It is a salutary reminder that we are, or our ancestors were, all immigrants to Queensland and that this is a very young, white state compared to most of the world. Perhaps it is only the Indigenous people who qualify as permanents.

Anyhow go and see the show!

Donation – After seeing the display Eileen Kemp from Draper, a niece of William Hacker, left the Society a bundle of his dockets and receipts from the 1960s. These form a valuable archive of the items sold in a local Chermerside store, the prices, paper work and payment. Eileen has also offered the Society electronic copies of dockets from Chermerside stores dating back to the early part of the 20th Century.

Bus Trip – The Society is planning to go to Toowoomba on Sunday 21st September for the annual Carnival of Flowers. Come and see how the gardens have survived the drought and water restrictions. We need to hear from you if you want to go on the trip.

Mother's Day Raffle – was drawn at the May Monthly Meeting, the winners were:
First Prize – A Travelling Bag – Val Cowan
Second Prize – Candle Holder – Brian Luke
Third Prize – Bathroom Set – Zelma Chicken



William Hacker worked for George Early for some years and then opened his own General Produce Merchant store on the corner of Gympie Road and Bouchard Street. The area around and behind the Shop became known as Hacker’s Paddock. The advertisement (1956) was simply informative with no inducement to buy while the docket (1963) shows the type of paper work involved in the business; they used pencils, paper, pounds, shillings, pence, string and added up mentally.



The shop above contrasts strongly with the present occupant of the site below. Drab to bright strident colours, animal to motor transport, gravel to sealed road with electric traffic lights and a large concrete parking area. How the place changes, what will replace Beaurepairs?

