



DISPATCHES

War Veterans Village (Narrabeen) RSL sub-Branch Newsletter

October 2025



In this issue:

More on the Vietnam War - the speech given by Colonel David Wilkins OAM at the Vietnam Veterans' Day Service.



PNG celebrates fifty years of Independence - a look at Australia's military involvements in the country.



Two new members inducted at our last meeting. Steve Gambley (left) and Bram Pollack



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DISPATCHES

War Veterans Village
(Narrabeen) RSL sub-Branch
Newsletter

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Dispatches is published monthly by the War Veterans Village RSL sub-Branch.

Opinions expressed are those of the individual authors and not necessarily those of the sub-Branch.

Through an active membership we keep the ANZAC spirit alive and growing.

Dates for the diary

Thursday October 9: Monthly meeting in the Lone Pine Lounge.

Tuesday November 4: Committee meeting.

Tuesday November 11: Remembrance Day.

Thursday November 13: Monthly meeting in the Lone Pine Lounge.

Thursday December 4: sub-Branch stall at the Village Markets.

Thursday December 11: Christmas Lunch.
See details on page 3.

So that meetings can commence at 09.30 sharp members are asked to arrive, collect their badge, sign in and get their raffle tickets prior to the meeting time.

Cover:

Troops from 5RAR with armed personnel carriers (APCs); the flag of PNG, adopted on 1 July 1971; new sub-Branch members welcomed at the September meeting.

Our President

Geoff Seis was born on 20 January 1953 in Bathurst, but was adopted by Nina and Alexander Seis, wheat and cattle farmers from Historic Gulgong, who also adopted sister Janet. When Geoff was five the family moved to Binnaway, where Geoff attended school from kindergarten to sixth class.



Next move was to between Neilrex and Coolah, where Geoff started in a 15-student high school, playing rugby league and cricket at weekends. In 1969, while in 3rd year, his father was diagnosed with a tumour, meaning that Geoff, aged 16, left school to work on the farm - cattle, sheep, pigs and 2,000 acres of wheat. His Dad's two brothers helped where they could.

Two years later, another move, to Gunnedah, where Janet finished school and then did an accounting degree at TAFE. Dad was hospitalised in January 1972 and the farm sold; he passed away three months later. Geoff, at nineteen, worked to look after Mum and Janet, driving cattle trucks.

Then, in October, came the big change: after at first successfully evading a police chase he was pulled over in his truck next morning. The magistrate offered two alternatives - six months gaol or three years in the military; Geoff took the latter.

He joined the Army and spent three years in the Catering Corps, posted to a support unit at South Head. During this time he spent some months in Darwin after Cyclone Tracy.

When his enlistment period ended Geoff moved back to Gunnedah and worked on a farm, but then accepted an opportunity at a community housing project in Beaudesert, Qld, tending two golf courses. That did not last long; he missed the mateship, so rejoined the Army.

After a few months at Kapooka in late 1980 he was posted to the School of Military Engineering at Moorebank to do a six-month field engineering course. On its conclusion Geoff was posted to 15 Troop, 18 Field Squadron, in Townsville, as a field engineer and driver - mainly Landrovers and M5 dump trucks. Then another move, to a support troop as a semi-trailer driver and plant operator, before returning to Holsworthy's 17th Construction Squadron. He married in 1988.

After periods at Holsworthy, Kapooka, Bogan Gate, Singleton, Puckapunyal and Denman Geoff was assigned to the UN Transition Assistance Group, Namibia, with the motto "A little Bear will fix it."

To enable the cooks to have their ten-day break Geoff would take over the kitchen. On his own break he enjoyed three days at Victoria Falls, although it was a two-day drive each way. A couple of years later, after time at Holsworthy, Geoff was on his way to Iraq with a human aid team in support of the English 35 Field Engineer Regiment, where he spent five months. It was an unsafe area, but all that Geoff will say about Iraq is "What happened in the Country stays in the Country". *To be continued in the next Dispatches.*

Vietnam Veterans' Day Address

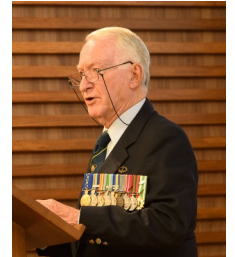
It is now almost two months since we saw two significant and well-attended events in the Village: the Vietnam Veteran's Day service in the Chapel and the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the War in the Pacific.

Colonel David Wilkins OAM (Rtd) was the guest speaker at the first of these and his speech was so well-received that a number of both attendees and those who were not able to be present have asked for copies of the text.

David has very kindly agreed to let Dispatches have a copy of his speech, which is reproduced verbatim below . Ed.

David Wilkins had two main careers, the first for 26 years as a professional soldier, commencing at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, graduating as an infantry Lieutenant.

His service included postings to the 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, then three years in Papua New Guinea with the Pacific Island Regiment, and active service for fourteen months in the Vietnam War with the 5th Battalion where as a Captain he was the unit adjutant, the a rifle company commander.



For medical reasons he embarked upon a new career direction by studying law to become an Army legal officer an later a Defence Force Magistrate and Judge Advocate for trials by court martial.

He retired from the regular Army as a Colonel to then work for the next twenty years as a barrister admitted to the Supreme Court of NSW and the High Court of Australia.

He is now fully retired with interests in history and writing, including membership of the Ku-ring-gai Historical Society. In 2019 he was awarded the Order of Australia Medal (OAM) for services to community history.

Vietnam Veterans' Day Address, 2025.

By David Wilkins OAM

An Australian poet, Geoff Page, grandson of former Prime Minister, Sir Earle Page, wrote a poem called "Small Town Memorials". Its verses describe how Australia remembers both its veterans who served in war and those who were killed in action, how in each town, however small, sometimes not even a town but just a tiny collection of houses, there is a monument with a list of names from that area.

He tells of different monuments from the various wars, be it an obelisk, a plaque, a memorial swimming pool, a park, a garden or a statue of a Digger.

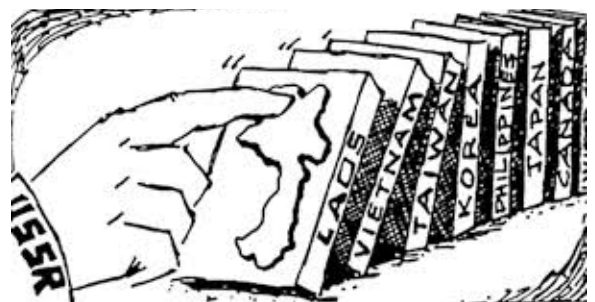


He observed however, that something, SOMETHING in the First World War DEMANDED STONE. We are surrounded by militaria in this Anzac village but wherever you travel in Australia, keep an eye out and you will see memorials, big and small.

Being Vietnam Veterans' Day my talk today is mainly about the Vietnam War and in particular our National Service conscripts.

I will also be touching upon the experiences of reinforcements during that conflict, a conflict that for Australian involvement stretched from 1962 to 1972. That period was a time when, generally speaking, the norm in our nation was to believe a man's word and that a promise was a promise, sealed by a handshake.

It was a time when the Communist domino theory was a constant topic and service to country was rarely questioned. But in that cold war climate and our involvement in the Vietnam War, we needed to build our Defence Force, hence **conscription** became law.



I won't be delving into the political aspects of conscription which divided our nation in the 1960s and '70s, but about the young men themselves.

As part of the Australian Army expansion to meet its commitments in the Vietnam War, the government decided in November 1964 to introduce **selective** National Service training commencing the following year, 1965. The scheme continued till 1972.

All 20-year-old men resident in Australia were required to register for military service. As the number of available 20-year-olds was greater than those required for annual intakes, a ballot was held twice a year. Sufficient marbles were placed in a barrel, each marble inscribed with two numbers (for a month and a day) to cover every calendar day within the specific 6-months' period.

A quantity of marbles was withdrawn, calculated to provide the number of soldiers required for that draft and those men whose 20th birthday fell on the dates revealed by the marbles became liable for military service.



The first draw was conducted in Melbourne. SMH Image

Some conscripts, acquiescent to their fate, developed the macabre expression:

'My marble has rolled in the lottery of death'.

It is sad to reflect upon the reality of those words.

Each National Serviceman selected by ballot was required to serve full-time for two continuous years (reduced to 18 months in October 1971) followed by three years part-time in the Regular Army Reserve. Two intakes per year created 8,400 conscripts so that at any one time there were about 16,000 conscripts in the Army.

A total of 63,000 young men were called up under this scheme which saw approximately 18,500 conscripts serve in South Vietnam. They were part of a total of 60,000 Australian men and women, both regulars and conscripts, who served in that war.

Of those, 210 conscripts died from a total of 523 Australians who perished in that war.



Remembering our fallen

By comparison, the Americans had 58,000 killed in Vietnam, a similar number to the Australians lost in World War I.



You will recall that there was considerable public opposition to both our involvement in the Vietnam War and also to conscription with such organisations as "Save our Sons" very active in their resistance.

In 1968 I was a captain and the adjutant of the 5th Battalion, building to full strength which, for us was about 800 all ranks. We were training for deployment to Vietnam the following year. Government policy at the time required us to have a 50:50 split of Regulars to National Servicemen or Nashos as they were known.

As we worked towards that goal, I travelled to a recruit training depot at Kapooka near Wagga Wagga to address a couple of hundred



training Nashos. I had gone with a shopping list. Our unit needed: 70 more riflemen, 10 machine gunners, a few radio operators, 8 stretcher bearers, 10 mortarmen, 15 assault pioneers, 3 cooks and so on.

I explained to my audience the state of our Battalion's readiness, my task in obtaining the best personnel and the future role of the unit over the next 18 months, training in Australia and fighting in Vietnam.

I then said:

"Our Commanding Officer does not want any soldier who is unwilling to serve with the 5th Battalion in South Vietnam. Once selected however, it will be tough and there won't be any withdrawing until the job is done. Think carefully. Anyone not wanting to be considered may leave the room now and there won't be any recriminations. That is not the aim. Our aim is to have the best team."

Somewhat surprisingly, only a handful of soldiers left the hall. I therefore had a large number from whom to make my selections. Afterwards, I was talking with some of these Nashos over a cup of tea and asked them what their thought process was. I found their answers fascinating. Almost to a man the response I received was something similar to this:

"Sir, I wasn't all that keen on being drafted, but when my marble rolled, I wanted to do the whole bit: active service in Vietnam, the lot."

Their mothers would not have been pleased ... but the result was a large group of well-motivated recruits joining our battalion.

As our unit built to full strength we trained hard, very hard indeed, became extremely physically fit and well-practised in the various infantry tactical drills. It didn't take long before the Regs and Nashos were working well together as a team, whose members became almost indistinguishable.



Resupply time - 50:50 Regs : Nashos

It was just as Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Daly, the Chief of the General Staff at the time, had predicted in the introduction to a booklet issued to all National Servicemen, quote:

“Each and every soldier is an individual and when he proves himself to be capable, he is welcomed into the ranks of the others as a valuable colleague”.

The next year in Vietnam, heavily involved in combat operations, one of the main things that stood out to me was just how indistinguishable they had become and how well trained they were to be soldiering at such a high standard. Indeed, until I chatted with an individual and heard his background, I could rarely tell if he was a Reg or a Nasho.

For the Nashos returning to civvy life after their two years' service however, all of a sudden there was no more bark of a sergeant to pull them into line, no more sound of a military band to stir pride, often no comrade to talk to, let alone to confide in, no more brilliant warped sense of humour to lift his spirits or to mock the military system they served in. They were often suddenly alone with their past.

But then came the cathartic 1987 **Welcome Home parade** in Sydney and increasing unit reunions. Gradually they emerged from the woodwork and met up with old comrade mates.



Men of 5RAR, led by CO Colin Khan DSO



They again felt they belonged to a big happy family where they could talk about things their civvy friends never understood... or even cared about. But their fellow Digger mates understood ... and did care.

Indeed, from my observations the former Nashos have mostly been enthusiastic attendees at these unit reunions.

Reinforcements

I would also like to mention reinforcements.

Complications arose with reinforcements or “reos” as we called them. Reos, this time **both** Regulars and National Servicemen, joined the battalion as a consequence of departing conscripts whose two years' service was complete and also from battle casualties (our battalion of 800 troops suffered 25 killed and 202 wounded, ie, over 28% casualties).



Remembering the fallen

These reinforcements, although knowledgeable in the basics, were unlike those of us who had trained together in Australia and who had generally come to know each other very closely to work as a team and particularly who had become accustomed to jungle fighting.

On the other hand a newly arrived reo didn't know anyone; he was a total stranger, and nearly always he was inexperienced in jungle combat. In a nutshell, he was initially in absolute shock and completely out of his comfort zone.



Jungle fighting is quite different from other types of warfare. In the thick tropical vegetation your vision is often restricted to just 10 or 20 metres, sometimes as little as 5, so that when you strike the enemy it is all very close-range combat. Because of the Australian tactics of stealth when patrolling and ambushing, however, we were usually the ones to surprise the enemy and instigate contact with them.



A captured bunker

Post war statistics showed the converse applied to the Americans. Indeed, some of the recently published unit histories of the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong referred to the Australians they fought as “commandos” and “phantoms of the jungle”. I consider that a compliment.

In that scenario, the reinforcement was often firing his rifle in battle for the very first time within a day or two or maybe even within just hours of joining a combat unit. The learning curve for him was steep and it says a lot for the various fighting units and their soldiers that he was not only taken under the wing of the old boys, some who were fairly fresh Nashos themselves, but he also soon found his feet, and rapidly became a veteran himself.

But it wasn't easy. It was a huge challenge, a challenge that the reos accepted, faced and then **generally** overcame.

To my way of thinking, the reos had it tough in the initial stages, but they were remarkably adaptable and resilient, commendably so.

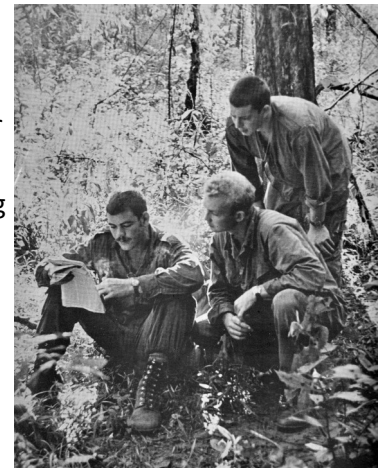
Now, a thought on Camaraderie:

In these soldiers, as in those before them, be they Regulars, National Servicemen or reinforcements, there was the same sense of duty, the same dedication, humour, mateship, suffering, boredom, fear of the unknown, and the same love of nation. And why not? It was just the third generation since ANZAC, and after all, the genes were strong, the pride in those before them was evident, and the traditions and standards of the Australian military were firmly embedded to be embraced.

Like those before them, they sometimes questioned orders but got on with the job. They argued about Aussie Rules and rugby, bet on the Melbourne Cup and called the cook a b—word. Home was wherever they hung their hats or dropped their packs. For many their kitchen was a battered mess tin and a well-used mug, the latter also used for shaving. Their bedroom was often a leaking one- man tent and their mattress a sodden jungle floor or a rocky ridgeline. Like those before them they dreamed of going home, and wondered if they actually would. They shared the dangers, the workloads, the operational sentry duty, even their mail, and at night in the smothering darkness of the jungle, they had similar dreams of their tomorrow.

On occasions there was the need to share their last tin of food or water bottle. At times he might even hold a dying man in his arms

Is it any wonder such indestructible bonds were created within the ranks of those veterans, be they regulars or conscripts?



Common was the immense camaraderie, determination, wry humour and battle discipline which demonstrated that those magnificent qualities of the original ANZACs had not been diluted in this modern age.

Today we are here to remember all the men and women who served their nation on active service in Vietnam, especially those who were killed in action and wounded in action. There were also of course those who returned home but were psychologically scarred from battle traumas.

To them all we should remember them ... and **I pay them this respectful tribute:**

Lest we forget



Secretary's Report

September has been both a challenging and an exciting month for the sub-Branch. The general meeting was the first time, I believe, we as an RSL ANZAC Village organization had dared to host a guest speaker for Village residents on our regular monthly meeting day.



The speaker was excellent and those present commented what a great speaker John Vaughan OAM was in talking about "Flags." We all now know the meaning of vexillologist and vexillographer (one who studies flags and one who designs/makes flags respectively).



I think we attracted about a dozen residents to join us for the talk and morning tea. It may have exposed the sub-Branch to the Village a little more than usual which is a good thing.

It's a tough time health-wise for some of our members – David Picknell, Doug Smyth, Max Marvin (in NBH and would welcome visitors) and Keith Boog are in hospital and our thoughts and prayers are with them.

Also please think of our members in the Care Homes who are unable to get to meetings and we thank Pam Ward who attends from her Peter Cosgrove residence and passes on information to members there – Ray Green and Pam Boyle.

Between now and Christmas we have activities and functions that you are requested to note in your diary. Please try to attend if you can –

Thursday October 9th – 9.30AM in Lone Pine Lounge – monthly meeting with guest speaker resident Hette Mollema talking on "The Harbour Bridge".

Tuesday November 11th – Remembrance Day – Commemoration service here in the Village – remember to look in October Village Voice for details and times. Also please consider volunteering to Leigh Haines (our Fundraising Coordinator) to assist with the sale of badges and pins at Warriewood Square, Augusta Shops or in the Dug Out. The fundraising benefits your organization.

Thursday November 13th – 9.30AM in Lone Pine Lounge – last formal monthly meeting for 2025.

Thursday December 4th – Village Market Day – the sub-Branch will have a stall and requests members to make/bake slices, biscuits, cakes, etc. for sale. This will be discussed in more detail at the October and November meeting. We will have copies of Dispatches to give away, as well as selling badges/pins for general support of the sub-Branch and application forms for membership.

Thursday December 11th – sub-Branch Christmas Lunch – menu, cost and location will be announced at the November meeting. Cost will be subsidized by the sub-Branch to enable as many members as possible to be able to attend.

John Sowden - Secretary

Chaplain's corner

Devotional on 1 John 4:19:

This simple verse carries a profound truth. Our love for God and for one another does not begin with us—it begins with Him. Before we ever thought of God, He loved us. Before we knew His name, He sent His Son to die for us. His love is the fountain, and our love is the overflow.

In daily life, love can feel costly—showing patience, offering forgiveness, or extending kindness when it's hard. But John reminds us that we are not asked to love out of empty reserves. God has already poured His love into our hearts through Christ.

When we rest in the knowledge that He first loved us, we find strength to love others—even the difficult ones. His love frees us from fear and fuels us to live lives of compassion and grace.

Prayer: Lord, help us love as You have loved us. Amen.

Keith Walker, Chaplain



Dates for the diary:

Tuesday September 3: Merchant Navy Day.

Thursday September 11: Monthly meeting in the Lone Pine Lounge at 9.30am. The special guest speaker will be Vexillographer John Vaughan OAM.

Tuesday October 7: Committee meeting.

Thursday October 9: Monthly meeting in the Lone Pine Lounge at 9.30am. There will be a presentation from Hette Mollema on the history of the Harbour Bridge.

Both the September and October meetings will be featured in the Village Voice and all Village residents will be invited. Why not invite a friend or neighbour so they can see the sub-Branch in operation.

Thursday December 4: We intend having a stall to promote the sub-Branch - will members please think about baking cakes, slices, biscuits, etc to make this a successful fundraiser.

PNG

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was in Port Moresby recently, meeting his PNG counterpart James Marape during the celebrations for the country's 50th anniversary of Independence.

This seems to be an appropriate time, therefore, to look at the relations between the two countries and some of Australia's military milestones in PNG.

Papua New Guinea is the largest and most populous country in Melanesia. It shares its mainland with Indonesia's Papua and West Papua provinces (*Don't talk to me about the 'referendum' - Ed*).

It is a country of great geographical, cultural and political diversity: mountains, rivers, and amazing wildlife. Up to 800 different languages are spoken.

Probably the best-remembered event in Australia's PNG military history is the Kokoda Trail (*Or Track? That hot-button issue will be discussed in a future Dispatches - Ed*).

But our involvement began well before that. Australia was given possession of the southern part of the country on 18.3.1902, following federation. It was then named The Australian Territory of Papua; it had been a British protectorate named British New Guinea. The Australian administration commenced in 1906, with a small contingent of Australian troops there. The northern region was under German control.

Early in the First World War German New Guinea was seized by the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force. The battle of Bita Paka saw the first Australian deaths in the Great War.

At War's end PM Billy Hughes pleaded in Paris: "Strategically the northern islands (such as New Guinea) encompass Australia like fortresses. They are as necessary to Australia as water to a city."

German New Guinea was mandated to Australia, but the two territories were administered separately until the Papua and New Guinea Act was passed in 1949.

WW2 saw major conflict in PNG. The Japanese invaded the Territory of New Guinea in December 1941, capturing it, including the Islands of Bougainville and New Britain (*where I would live six or seven years later .. Ed*). It was recaptured towards the end of the War, with all three arms of the services involved, and later ANGAU, but those stories must wait for a future *Dispatches*.

From 1945 Australia administered the country from Port Moresby; by the 1960s a movement away from virtual colonial rule began to grow. By November 1973 PNG had attained self-government, with independence coming on 16 September 1975.

Welfare

This seems to be an unusual time of year with many sub-Branch members being in hospital or having some health issues which keeps them away from sub-Branch activities and functions.

David Picknell, Doug Smyth, Max Marvin, Margaret Galea, Keith Boog, Diana Roper OAM and Scott Tate are all in either hospital or a rehabilitation facility and away from their residence. We have been receiving updates about some of these members at our monthly meetings – President Geoff has updated us regularly on Linda Byron's progress and that she is back home in the Village.

Tom Hart and Ray Green have moved into Peter Cosgrove House. Rob Garing is back home after his emergency visit to hospital and is on the mend although not as speedily as he would like to feel. Janette Williams is home and also in recovery mode.

There are also those members who find it extremely difficult to get to meetings and we think of them as well.

We should also think of those in the care homes – Irene Axton and Andrew Jackson (Phyllis Stewart House); Pam Ward, Pam Boyle, Tom Hart, John Connell and Ray Green (Peter Cosgrove House); Lindsay Dufty, Margaret Ferrier and Maureen Picknell (Connie Fall).

Some of these members would be able to attend a meeting if a volunteer could collect and return them to their care home as it is almost impossible with personnel shortages to expect a staff member to do this. All offers are welcome and not necessarily on a permanent basis.

Welfare and Visitations is currently part of the Secretary's job in our sub-Branch but is a most rewarding part of the bigger role and it would be great if someone would take this small activity under their wing – President Geoff would also be helped to know members who are going through rough times were being followed up each month.

Please see Geoff or John if you could take on this very small but important position. *John*

From the Editor

This edition of *Dispatches* was prepared earlier than usual as the Editor will be away for a while, so please forgive me if anything changes before this is read.

The layout is different, as I wanted to make David Wilkins' speech a free-standing four-page section. My thanks go to David for his help with pics, etc.

Space has run out, so President Geoff's profile will be concluded next month. Likewise the PNG topic; I did want to mark the 50th anniversary of the country's independence, but proper coverage of our military involvements there must wait until next year.

I will just finish with a quote from Sir William Slim.
Ralph

"Some of us may forget that, of all the Allies, it was the Australians who first broke the spell of invincibility of the Japanese Army."