

Kenneth John (Ken) McHarrie

WX36207 Staff Sergeant 29th Infantry Brigade Bougainville



Ken was born 30 December 1923 and completed his education at Hale School. It was there he joined the cadet unit and began his lifetime association with the school



Ken as a Hale School Cadet



Ken as a Hale School Old Boy 2018

Following school and being employed in the Commonwealth Bank Ken was “called up” for military service on 23 January 1942. Following his basic training, Ken thought he was to be assigned to the Ordnance Corps, but soon discovered it was Infantry. He was assigned to the armoury and undertook a number of training courses in the storage & maintenance of ammunition.



Ken in uniform

Ken's early training centred in Bushmead, Guildford and Merredin before transferring to the AIF on 30 December 1942. He qualified as an Ammunition Examiner before being transferred to the Ammunition Depot at Albury, NSW on 17 June 1944. Four months later came a transfer to Townsville and then on the "Fairisle" (a converted cargo ship that operated in both the Atlantic and Pacific) to Torokina, Bougainville on 1 January 1945 to join Headquarters of the 29th Brigade.



Group portrait of personnel of 244 Supply Depot Platoon.

Identified left to right are:

back row:

VX109555 Driver (Dvr) John Samson; N24483 Dvr Albert Millen; VX88037 Corporal (Cpl) John Bourke; NX140919 (N256020) Dvr Kenneth Hemsworth; N263378 Dvr Norman Barrett; NX153445 (N240191) Dvr Derek Gadd; VX137796 (V321759) Dvr Keith Odell; NX157811 (N119526) Dvr Albert Bottle; NX124660 (N352309) Dvr Roy Bonnington; NX194399 (N437932) Dvr Keith Milwain; NX167141 (N238838) Dvr Ronald Huckel.

Middle row:

NX136642 (N225979) Dvr William Carrall; N101905 Dvr Kenneth Penman; NX122796 (N256062) Staff Sergeant (Ssgt) Frank Kingsbury; NX131852 (N131061) Ssgt Clifford Ryan; QX47715 (Q137007) Warrant Officer Class 2 Leslie Sheppard; NX121934 (N27214) Captain James O'Donnell; NX131850 (N10978, N42310) Lieutenant Raymond Bernasconi; WX34661 (W31319) Sergeant (Sgt) Frank Smith; VX87503 Sgt Ronald Callander; **WX36207 Ssgt Kenneth McHarrie**; QX50978 (Q45642) Sgt Robert Williamson.

Front row:

N205859 Dvr Ronald Leet; VX142023 Dvr Leslie Little; N262571 Dvr Rowland Gibb; NX157945 (N130159, N205860) Dvr Leslie Lewis; N444020 Dvr Charles Sharpe; NX120812 (N229024) Cpl John Mackay; S48976 Dvr Murray Bryant; NX149215 (N352230) Dvr Roy Kuhner; NX175313 (N319318) Dvr Raymond Macdouall; N479089 Dvr Charles Rapley.

On Bougainville, the Australians had taken over from the American garrison in late 1944 in order to free up the US troops for the Philippines. Prior to their arrival the US garrison had maintained a

defensive posture, but the Australians launched limited scale offensives on the Island that evolved into three main drives in the north, south and centre of the Island. The 29th Brigade relieved the US 182 Infantry Regiment and was assigned to the southern drive towards Buin, where the main Japanese force was based.

The 29th Brigade comprised 3 battalions (15th, 42nd and 47th) and the headquarters in Torokina. The 15th Battalion commenced the Brigade's campaign on Bougainville, being committed to the fighting in December 1944, while the 42nd and 47th joined them later the following month. During the initial stages, the 15th patrolled along the western coast clearing the Japanese from the area between the Jaba and Tavera Rivers. In early January 1945 about the time of Ken's arrival, the 15th joined the 42nd and 47th and advanced to Mawarak, fighting a series of minor actions in the jungles and swamps before it was relieved by the 7th Brigade in the middle of the month. The 29th moved back to Torokina for rest.

The 29th was committed to a second effort in July 1945 advancing from the Mivo River to the Oamai River during the final stages of the campaign. Two companies from the 15th lead the advance, setting out from Sisikatekori, while the 47th positioned a company along the river dubbed "Lawne's Track", and the 42nd sat astride the Buin road just short of the Mobiai River. The Brigade's efforts to secure a crossing over the Silibai River was frustrated by determined Japanese defence which held them up between the 3rd and 10th July 1945, when the Australians pushed their way across. Temporary positions were then established on the opposite banks and the patrols began ranging south towards the Oamai River. Further advances were hampered by heavy rain which held up the advance on the Japanese stronghold around Buin until the end of the war.



Bougainville. 1945-07-19. Sergeant K J McHarrie wading through the store as members of Q staff, 29 Infantry Brigade, salvage equipment after flooding. during the last five days, seven inches of rain have fallen in the area making the Buin Road, the main supply route for the Brigade's operations, impassable to traffic.

During his almost 15 months on Bougainville Ken's role took him on treks into the Army's jungle positions to inspect ammunition supplies air dropped to the troops and to ensure good standards of storage. Ken described how mortar shells could become unstable following air drops due to the rough landing. This necessitated him dismantling and resetting the shells ready for use. Ken said, "it was safe – providing you knew what you were doing".

Japan surrendered on 15th August 1945 and the 29th Brigade was disbanded in December 1945. Ken remained on Bougainville for another three months waiting to be demobilised, however was transferred to the 2nd 11th Battalion at Rabaul on New Britain to assist with the disposal of Japanese ammunition stock piles. By the end of the War there was a sizable Japanese garrison of approximately 69,000 troops. It took the Allies over 2 years to dispose of the large quantity of equipment and to repatriate the Japanese troops.

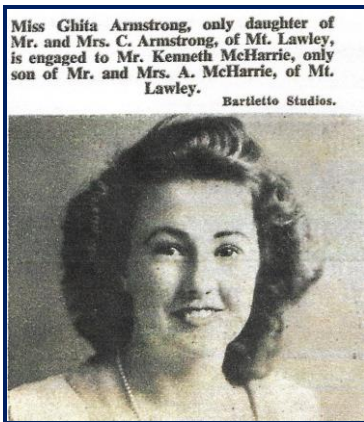
Although interaction with the locals on Bougainville & New Britain was discouraged, Ken had a number of Japanese POWs including a translator assigned to his works. The ammunition was brought in from the country, stockpiled at the beach & then loaded on barges to be dumped into the ocean. There was only one instance when the ammunition dump was compromised and set the night alight.



Ken said the POWs were generally compliant and did as ordered, although lack of a common language prevented much interchange. He remembers asking the interpreter (who worked at a University prior to the war) of his family in Japan. The response was “They are probably dead”, with no further explanation. There was however some humour, as the sign at Ken’s office was “Rest Camp”.

Ken’s duty concluded on 8 June 1946 with his transfer on the “Ormiston” to Sydney, and was discharged on 19 June 1946 with the rank of Staff Sergeant.

Transitioning to life following discharge was, like many service personnel, difficult. Ken returned immediately to his position with the Commonwealth Bank



He met Ghita Armstrong of Mount Lawley just as the Bank posted him to Boulder. That started a long distance romance where Ken would fly to Perth for a weekend every 6 weeks. Ken & Ghita became engaged in 1948 and married in 1949, rearing 3 sons & 7 grandchildren. They spent 14 years in various WA country postings with the Bank before returning to Perth. They both remember their country years as friendly & enjoyable.



Ghita, Ken and Family



Ken is a well respected member of the North Beach RSL Sub-Branch and has been a regular attendee at its meetings.

His service and contribution to Australia will be remembered.

The information in this story was sourced from Ken McHarrie and family, publicly available records of the Commonwealth Department of Veteran Affairs, War Memorial Australia and other records in the public domain.