

## **LEN SNELL SX 28102.**

### **DARWIN'S FIRST AIR RAID.**

Len was a despatch rider with the 43rd Battalion stationed at Noonamah, Northern Territory, some 42 kilometres south of Darwin. It was his daily duty to take the Battalion's despatches to Larrakeya Barracks, and letters and telegrams to the Darwin Post Office for despatch to Southern States.

The morning of 19th February 1942 started as a usual day, hot and dry, as he left the Battalion area with a cheerio wave to the guard on duty. He was approaching the suburb of Winnelli opposite the R.A.A.F. Station when he had a call of nature. Before getting back on the faithful B.S.A bike he heard a tremendous droning coming from the east and could just make out a large dark area which looked like a rain cloud, he never giving a thought about Japanese bombers.

Len usually went to the Post Office first, but for some odd reason on this day he went to Larrakeya Barracks first to deliver the despatches. On arriving just inside the gate the bombs began to fall. He left the motor-bike and ran to the cliffs on the harbour and there he sat watching the devastation take place. The bombs blew up the oil tanks, the hospital ship Manunda in the middle of the harbour, whilst the poor beggars on the other ships were jumping into the water. One Wirraway went straight across the harbour with a Zero on its tail, the poor devil never having a chance. Next minute it was a ball of fire.

There appeared to be a lull in the proceedings, so Len ventured out and returned to the Barracks and managed to get some lunch, only because he knew the cook. The next minute the air-raid siren went again so he rushed to the spot where he had been before. This time he had a companion, so it wasn't so scary. After the raid he went to collect the Battalion's despatches, but he still had the mail to deliver to the Darwin Post Office. As he arrived, he saw a great hole where a bomb had landed and the remains of the Post Office. What a mess. At the time he did not realise how many had been killed. He had known a few of those people, including the Post-master. He reflected that that was where he could have been if he had not changed his routine that day and had decided to visit the Post office last instead of first. What would have become of him?

The return journey through the streets of Darwin was a sad sight, people walking around not realising what had happened. There were scores of people in the railway yards hoping to get on to the flat top rail wagons to go south. Whilst returning he had trouble with the motor bike so called at the Winnelli L.A.D. workshops. Whilst the mechanic was fixing the trouble, he gazed down the aerodrome and saw all the devastation that had been done. When the bike was repaired, he set out for his home base, his mind fairly turbulent with the events of the day!

On arriving at the gate, the guard said, "Is that you Len? We heard that a despatch rider had been killed in the raids, and we thought the worst." A great cheer went up from a body of troops when they saw him as he passed by. Len said to the Battalion Postmaster "Sorry that the telegrams and letters did not go".

Len has since returned to Darwin and stood on the foreshore. He has reflected on that awful day, February 19th, 1942. He paused and reflected on Adelaide River where some of those who lost their lives found their last resting place.