

# PIONEER NEWS

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Official Organ of 2/1 and 2/2 PIONEER BATTALIONS ASSOCIATION

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## EPIC STORY OF FAMOUS "PIONEERS"

Excerpts from this article have been reproduced using a Kyogle newspaper published 9th July 1943 and sent to us by Mavis Blanch, widow of the Ray "Joe" Blanch mentioned in the article.

"This is a story of 18 boys from Kyogle. The story of boys who, torn by war from peaceful homes, became such soldiers that not only Kyogle, but the world could be proud of. Inextricably woven with their story is the epic story of their battalion, now an integral part of the history of the A.I.F.

The Kyogle boys were posted to 2/1st Pioneer Battalion. To the layman this doesn't mean much. "Pioneer Battalion" he says to himself and imagines a lot of men digging. Yes, the pioneer is a digger all right, but he is infinitely much more. He is the jack-of-all trades of the army. Must you move a cargo in the middle of a bombing raid? The pioneers will do it. Do you want a bridge built - a bridge destroyed - trenches dug - barbed wire entanglements? The pioneers can do all these jobs and many others.

But do you want a soldier who can fight on, as well as build a road or dig a hole? That IS a pioneer. Their battalion was no exception.

Among the many Kyogle boys who sailed with the unit was a group who had already brought soldierly fame to the district. Between them they had formed part of the crack troop, of the 15th Light Horse, which trained in the district in days of peace. But their fame went further than that, for as well as being the crack troops of their regiment, they were also the crack Vickers machine gun team of all Australia.

Nowhere in Australia was there a better-drilled Vickers troop and there were none to beat them as marksmen or in stripping their guns. They also won the Beaver Cup for five years in succession. The men in that team in the battalion were: Lieut. Ray Smith, Lieut. Leo Ferris, Sgt. Albert Brown, Privates Brian Gray, Jack Boyd, Bruce McNaughton, Marshall ("Scotch") Aitken, Tom Welch, Ray Blanch and Jack McMahon.

Their first taste of fighting was on the roads in North Africa between Tobruk and Derna. However, by April 1941 they were back in Tobruk and there they stayed for seven long and bitter months. No pick and shovel now - they took the rifle, hand grenade and bayonet and hit back hard at the Germans as they hammered the perimeter. Then the Germans began to hammer from the air - the men in Tobruk had no ack-ack guns and no planes - so had nothing to stop him. The men of Tobruk went underground - they dug themselves trenches and holes and caves.

By night the Kyogle boys and others from their unit had their revenge. The German pilots came so low they could be seen laughing at the "Australian rats" burrowing into the ground, but by night the Germans on the perimeter didn't smile. They listened and listened for the Australian patrols, but it didn't matter how much you listened, you never knew when out of the pitch-black dark came the swinging sandbag which could break a neck without a sound, the bayonet stabbing from nowhere, the noisy life shattering grenade. The Aussie boys got their own back.

Not only by night, either. Famous throughout the battalion are two stories which show that the winning of the Lord Forster Cup was no fluke. Idly one day when they didn't have much to do, Leo Ferris and Albert Brown and others rigged up a mounting for their anti-tank gun, known amongst all infantrymen as the "elephant gun". Made to be fired from the lying position, it had never been considered as an ack-ack gun. However, this didn't deter Ferris and Brown, and by the end of the day there it was, pointing into the air ready for anything.

They didn't have to wait long. Droning in at the usual 2,000 feet came a flight of nine Junkers twin-engined bombers. Without much

interest the pioneers watched them pass on and drop their bombs. But a German pilot had seen their position and he peeled off on his way out to do a little strafing for good measure.

Ferris went to the anti-tank cum ack-ack gun and Brown to the Bren gun on its ack-ack stand. The old drill with the Light Horse in Kyogle steadied them against the Nazi. Down came the great Junkers and when about 150 feet from the ground Ferris let him have it with the hard hitting 55 plugs. Brown let go with the Bren, giving him magazine after magazine. Ferris got the port engine, Brown got the starboard and the instrument panel. The Nazi crashed hundreds of yards away. That was one Nazi that didn't get away.

It wasn't the first the Kyogle troop had got that way. A few weeks earlier, they had been posted with Brens on the roofs of Derna to fight off the strafers. This time a Messerschmitt dived from right to left across their zone. The troop reacted as a troop, the fire from the Brens converged on the hurtling Nazi. He flew lamely out to sea, smoke pouring from under his cowlings.

A fortnight before Tobruk was relieved, the Pioneers, despite their entreaties to stay and see the siege to a finish, were evacuated. After a brief stay in Palestine they were on the boat again. Like all soldiers they didn't know where they were going, and were happy when they arrived back in Australia. The boys from Kyogle were home for seven days, then off again to New Guinea."

## 2/1 BAND CONDUCTOR - OAM

Michael Butcher who is the conductor of the 2/1st Band on ANZAC Day was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in the Australia Day Honours List.

We congratulate Michael on his award and we appreciate the effort he puts into the Castle Hill RSL Youth Band and his attendance every year on ANZAC Day for the 2/1st march.

## PIONEER ACTIVITIES 2001

### WREATH LAYING - Tuesday, 24th April

On Tuesday, 24th April the Association will conduct their Wreath Laying Service at 4.10pm, and all members are to assemble on the corner of Martin Place and Pitt Street, on the G.P.O. side at 3.45pm. Wreaths will be placed on the Cenotaph at 4.10pm.

### ANZAC DAY MARCH - Wednesday 25th April

On Wednesday 25th April the march will be held and the forming will be the same as last year - 2/1st in Phillip Street head on to King Street and rear of 6th Division - 2/2nd in Phillip Street near Martin Place and rear of 7th Division.

Pioneer News subscriptions will be collected prior to the march by Gavin Todd for the 2/2nds, and Don Crawford for the 2/1sts, who will also accept subscriptions at the Occidental Hotel.

### ANZAC REUNION - Wednesday 25th April

The Occidental Hotel, 43 York Street Sydney is the venue for the ANZAC Day Reunion Dinner, so after the march board the train at Museum Station and travel to Wynyard Station. Then proceed up the escalators, turn right into York Street and the hotel is on the next corner.

### ANNUAL MEETING - Friday, 25th May

Redfern RSL Club, corner of Redfern and Gibbon Streets, Redfern is the venue for the Annual General Meeting on 25th May 2001 at 1pm. A cordial welcome is extended to all Pioneers.

## THANKS TO FINLAY FAMILY

As we prepare for ANZAC Day our thoughts turn to members on whom we depend to make the day a success. Therefore it is only fitting that a vote of thanks be extended to Gordon and Olive Finlay for the work they have carried out in past years for the Association.

Since the move of venue to the Occidental Hotel in 1994, Gordon had always been on duty in the foyer with the late Bob Lake. With Bob's death, Olive has been helping out until Geoff Finlay arrived to help his dad, and over the last few years has been assisted by Gordon's grandsons, Craig and Darrin Reynolds. They have carried out the duties of collecting fees for the luncheon and issuing name tags. Last year was the first time Gordon and Olive were not on deck, due to Gordon's ill-health.

Gordon has been a committee member for many years - Vice-President since 1963 and Social Secretary from 1985 to 1990. Together with Olive he has also been on the Pioneer News wrapping committee for nearly 40 years.

On behalf of all Pioneers, we extend our sincere thanks to Gordon, Olive and family for their service to the Association.

## LAST POST

**BILL HODGES** 2/1 of Greenacre passed away on 12th August 2000 but we were not informed of his passing until 27th November so no Pioneer attended his funeral. However, upon notification a sympathy card was sent to his wife Irene from whom we received a "thank you" card.

**BRUCE CHAMBERS** 2/1 of Turramurra passed away in hospital on 22nd Sept 2000 at the age of 81 years. The private funeral service was conducted at Northern Suburbs Crematorium.

Bruce was a regular correspondent always with a generous donation together with all the news of his family and of his business as an Estate Agent. He was a keen golfer and played with Pymble Golf Club right up to the time of being hospitalised.

While in the unit he was a close friend of the late Bill Gamble, in fact Bill was godfather to Bill's son Ian, to whom we are grateful for passing on these details.

**VALDA PEARCE**, wife of Committeeman Jack 2/1 passed away in hospital on 9th November 2000 at the age of 94 years. Sincere sympathy was extended to Jack from the President and Executive of the Association.

**DAVE DENNY** 2/1 of Lismore, passed away at the age of 84 years on 1st January 2001 in Lismore Base Hospital and the funeral was attended by the following Pioneers - Terry McGuire, Alec George, Bob Barraclough, Ossie Carter, Dick Walker and Neville O'Connor to whom we are grateful for supplying these details. Neville also expressed sympathy to wife Joyce on behalf of the Association.

**BILL FALLON** 2/2 of Barraba passed away on 6th January 2001 and the funeral was conducted at the Barraba Anglican Church on 9th January. The Poppy Service was carried out by the local RSL of which Bill was a member.

Sympathy on behalf of the Association was extended to wife Daphne and her family by Bill Lewis, whom we thank for supplying these details.

**SID KENT** 2/1 of Narrabeen War Veterans Home passed away on 17th January 2001 at the War Veterans Nursing Home. A private funeral was conducted at Dee Why Funeral Parlour on 19th January.

**MUFTI** of Victoria, reported by Eric Causer - Deceased: 2/2nds, Basil Pugh, Leogatha; Albert Reid, Box Hill.

**REVEILLE** - Deceased: Bill Lanyon 2/1, R. Miller 2/2, Ted Wilcox 2/1, Alec Rossiter 2/1.