

Alpha Company PNGVR

Good morning to everyone, on this social gathering of A Company PNGVR members, wives, partners and friends: it is my pleasure, and that of Dawn's, to be with you on this significant day. On behalf of everyone here I thank those responsible for organising this event and also say thanks to the Caloundra RSL for providing these facilities. I acknowledge the presence of Brigadier Peter Moses, the son of Lieutenant Peter Moses who served in A Company and also of the President of our NGVR PNGVR Ex Members Association, Phil Ainsworth.

As this is probably the last time I will parade with you, I want you to know that one of the great happenings in my life was my 21 years of service with the PNGVR, which, of course, included members of A Company: the memories are precious to me! I am also pleased that I had the privilege to write the history of our iconic military unit. And this is where I take the opportunity to thank Dawn for the support she has given me over those many years of military matters: I also pay tribute to all friends, wives and partners of A Company members.

Alpha (A) Company was **the first** Rifle Company to be raised in the Papua New Guinea Volunteer Rifles. It was formed with Company Headquarters and two Rifle Platoons at Lae and a Rifle Platoon at Bulolo and Wau. After the Bulolo/Wau platoon was disbanded, 2 Platoon was formed at Madang in 1954 under Peter Harbeck. Stan Gould eventually became the platoon's stalwart commander for some time, as did Chick Hutson: our Association secretary Colin Gould also well served the Madang platoon. Later, when Charlie (C) Company was formed, the Madang platoon became part of that Rifle Company. After becoming part of C Company, 2 Platoon was re-raised at Kainantu under Graham Gilmore: Barry Wright was a prominent member parading with that platoon. For a short time both Kainantu and Madang platoons were simultaneously part of A Company. Later the Kainantu platoon was deactivated and eventually the Madang platoon returned to the fold.

The first parade for A Company was at Emery House, when the first members of A Company were enlisted in April 1951. Even though the majority of enlistees were veterans of WW2, all were listed as Recruit Privates starting with Routine Order Part 2, number 71/51 for John Bretag, the first A Company member taken on strength; John's brother Brian also joined as number 10. Twenty six were enlisted plus Bill Symington, the first member transferred from the CMF in Australia to A Company and the last processed on that eventful day. Captain Harry Wright, the PNGVR adjutant and Warrant Officer

Holding, brought clothing and stores to Lae and assisted by Warrant Officer Jim Oldham carried out the administration; Jim Oldham remained in Lae as the first Regular Army warrant officer instructor to A Company: both veterans were part of the first Regular Army soldiers to return to Papua and New Guinea after WW2.

Emery House was the ARA Instructor's residence, Q store, armoury and parade ground. The property was part of Emery Plantation and was purchased by the Army from Robert Emery who had served with the NGVR and ANGAI; Bob Emery had had to leave his plantation to the Japanese. The Army also purchased a building adjacent to Emery House known as the Black Iron Building which became the A Company Training Depot. Eventually all matters military were carried out from the training depot.

Here are the names of the first group of A Company enlistees, 26 in all: JW Bretag, EC Moyle, RA Edwards, RG Hayes, EL Waddell, EN Venning, FC Martin, CJ Hall, IW Smith, JM Bretag, P Hirst, J Hill, AJ Watson, HStC Johnston, SE Schrieber, JP Kelleher, IJ Gee, JG Martin, WA Lovi, J Rowbotham, EA McKinnon, CJ Middlebrook, A Nuttall, HD McKenzie, JP Feeney and RH Tann. Roy Edwards, the third recruit, said he was given the impression that the aim of the PNGVR training was to provide a cadre of trained officers and NCOs to be available for expansion. The recruiting program continued through May and June.

The first promotions in A Company were to Corporal, made in September 1951. These men qualified: JC Martin, E Moyle, FG Hoeter, FG Martin, W Symington, J Hill, SE Schrieber, KA Miller, IW Smith and N Nelson. Very soon John McKean, Ernie Moyle and Jim Oldham really got the company members boots on the ground by planning and executing over a weekend, a minor tactics exercise around the rugged Busu River, culminating in a BBQ with beers, in what became a standard happening after bivouacs.

Major Harry Leslie Thompson MC MID was the first commander of A Company; he was enlisted in June 1951. Lieutenant JJ McKean, the local chemist, was the first officer to **administer command** of A Company on the retirement of Harry Thompson, followed by myself when John McKean returned to Australia in 1954. Several other Lieutenants and temporary Captains **administered command** of the rifle company. I became company commander on promotion to Captain, prior to which I was administering command. Laurie Kelly took over in 1969 when I became battalion second in command of the PNGVR and Jess

Hansford became commander when Laurie Kelly returned to Australia. Noel Serafini and Mal Zimmerman, both there at the somewhat bitter end, were in the fore over several years as was Peter Barlow as CSM and later Lieutenant. Lieutenant Karl Franz Josef Aschhoff was the last officer to command A Company prior to the disbandment of PNGVR in December 1973.

These Warrant Officers Class 2, all veterans of WW2, served as ARA Instructors with A Company:

Jim Oldham, Bill Shillaker, Ron Diggins, Chick Henderson, Jim Doaks, Taffy Reece, Bill Guest, Ken Brodie. Ross Wormold, Terry Egan, S Welsby and Tom Robb. As the first Storeman, Corporal Tom Foster served A Company well when there was no instructor available. We had assistance from several PIR storeman soldiers prior to 1964.

As a Warrant Officer Class 2, I attended my first parade in January 1952 and became the first company sergeant major (CSM) of A Company, transferring from D Company 25 Battalion Darling Downs Regiment. In 1954 I was commissioned as a Lieutenant and posted to A Company. As a Captain and a Major I was officer commanding A Company and as Major I served for four years as battalion second in command under Lt Colonel Bill Harrington and the last two years in the life of the Regiment, under Lt Colonel Peter Cole. Next to Captain Bill Kelly, I was the second longest serving member of PNGVR. I served in Malaya and also in Vietnam as part of the Maj General Paul Cullen plan to give CMF officers active service experience. Three of my brothers, John, Rod and Warrant Officer Gil who is with us today, served with me in A Company.

Laurie joined A Company as a recruit Private, became a Corporal, was commissioned as a Lieutenant, became the company second in command, then company commander: Laurie and Barbara returned to Australia after the presentation of the colours and before the disbandment of the unit where Laurie continued a successful Army Reserve career. During my service and that of Laurie Kelly's, these men helped to keep A Company operating; Hal Herriot, Don Coffee, Noel Serafini, Mick Davenport, Jack Bax, Frank Cleal, Joe Fisk, Bob Watkins, Doug Laws, Don Chester-Wood (tok pisin and Don's nickname was bokis diwai), Ray Dalton, John Batze, Bill Doherty, Bruce Inch, Bert Hendry, Jim McGettigan, Gil Harvey-Hall, Michael Ahmat, Jesse Chee, Les McAndrew, Alan Jensen (yippy beans), Ron Adams, Casey Jones, Ron Strand, Tony Connor, Peter Moses, Peter Barlow, Joe Hall, Tony St John, Mal and Mike Zimmerman, Tony Boulter, Len Kemish and Jim Lewis and many, many others; most were volunteers and others were national servicemen doing their time, all watching

their mates back. After 1964 the PNGVR strength quickly went to 500 plus and we served with PNG soldiers such as Michael Galore, Marius Ealedona and Palus Wenget and others like some of the members of Mal Zimmerman's platoon, of whom I don't have first names, such as A Pitius, J Abiara, A Sulung, R Karaman, J Sipioni, H Bukka, A Munana, G Fedan Beibi and Y Ninga: look in my history of PNGVR for the names of hundreds of our PNG mates. The one regret I have with the history of PNGVR, is that I was unable to obtain responses from any of our PNG mates for our story.

Finally, I want to leave all of you with this anecdote, which to me was the most significant administrative matter in which I was involved during my service in PNGVR. In May 1955, 2nd Lieutenant Sean McCullagh, a medical doctor and a member of A Company, wrote to me, requesting, if I saw fit, to forward his submission which stated: **Representing the Case for Enlistment of Non-Europeans in the PNGVR**. I certainly saw fit and sent the submission to the commanding officer. The CO sent the document to Northern Command and followed up by phoning me to say that Sean and I were not to pursue the matter. The PNGVR Adjutant wrote me a very worried letter saying, Bob, please do not take the matter any further. In November 1961 Jesse Chee visited A Company Training Depot and after some discussion on the matter, he completed an enlistment form for service in the CMF which I sent to PNGVR headquarters. In response I was told to advise Mr Chee that his application was not approved: ironically Jesse had become an Australian citizen. The confidential memo from headquarters was leaked to the RSL and several members of A Company informed me that the white Australia policy was still with us. To finish a lousy week, I received a large rocket from the commanding officer.

Bill Guest, an ex ARA Instructor with A Company later wrote to me, saying, Bob, I will never forget the time you invited Jesse and Michael to a bivouac and Major John Worley of PNG Command insisted they could not observe our activities that weekend, so you told me to take them away and teach them to slope arms. I really don't know what the three of them did that day.

With the cat out of the bag I began to receive requests from the RSL, the newspapers, including the Pacific Islands Monthly to comment on the matter. I received several telephone calls from politicians in Canberra, including the secretary of the Prime Ministers department related to the matter. In a stinging article, the PIM asked; Are there two grades of Australians? This is the question being asked by several New Guinea born Chinese who, as naturalised

Australians, have tried in vain to join the PNGVR; they have been told politely, nothing doing. The PIM article was not the end of the matter, it was kept alive in other print media. Notwithstanding, it was three long years before Jesse Chee and Michael Ahmat became members of A Company and it was about nine years from the time Sean McCullagh's submission was sent to PNGVR headquarters.

In my last year as company commander, at the annual camp, A Company won all five trophies that were up for grabs. The commanding officer had the Adjutant parade me to his office and informed me he was awarding two of the trophies to other companies, as he felt it was not right for one sub unit to have all the kudos: my protest was brushed aside very quickly.

Like all sub units in PNGVR, in November 1973, A Company received the following Routine Order Part 2 from the Adjutant which stated:

John 11 Verse 35 - 'Jesus wept'

I reckon this was a fitting response to the disbandment of an iconic military unit which stays alive in our Association.

On Anzac Day in 1974 at Canberra the PNGVR Queen's and the beautiful Regimental Colour were laid up and delivered to the Australian War Museum for safekeeping. A Company was represented in the colours ceremony by Noel Serafini, Chris Van Der Peer and Michael Galore. It was my great pleasure to also be at our national capital on that superb day.

Bob Harvey-Hall

23 April 2019.