

75 YEARS OF SACRIFICE

Guns fall silent for some

WORLD WAR II MIGHT HAVE OFFICIALLY ENDED 75 YEARS AGO, BUT FOR MANY VETERANS IT HAS NOT ENDED

By Charmayne Allison

Seventy-five years ago tomorrow, World War II came to an end.

But not for veterans such as Shepparton's Pat Fitzpatrick, 96.

For them it simply kept going in the darkest recesses of their minds.

Because the guns may have fallen silent when the fighting officially stopped, but the memories have not.

And tragically, neither have the deaths.

Posted to a small artillery spotting and liaison unit in the Royal Australian Air Force in Papua New Guinea, Pat did not lose a single comrade during the war.

But in the peace years since, at least two have taken their own lives, the horrific memories of battle and bloodshed cutting too deep to bear.

"The war affected us in different ways," he said.

"But it never goes away."

Born and raised in Maldon, Pat was a fresh-faced 17-year-old, a year into his teacher training when he decided to volunteer for service.

"I was thinking about it all the time and, in the end, I just suddenly decided it was time to go," he said.

"I just wanted to serve my country.

"But I had no idea what I was getting into."

After completing an eight-month radio training course in Melbourne, Pat joined the RAAF on May 19, 1942.

Following a stint at flying training school in Deniliquin, he was posted to the No. 17 Air Observation Post Flight, a small unit established in Cairns in October 1944.

The unit was led by Flight Lieutenant Ivor Evans, a "remarkable" leader Pat admires to this day.

"He said: 'Never ask anybody to do anything you won't do yourself,'" Pat said.

"So if he said there was a route march on, he was in it."

In the subsequent weeks, Pat's unit was posted to Bougainville Island in Papua New Guinea.

It was the site of repeated fighting that dragged on with the Japanese having invaded the island as part of an expansion into the Solomons and saw a series of land and naval battles between the Allied troops and Japanese forces.

The first phase started in November 1943, when United States troops landed and held the perimeter around the beach head at Torokina until November 1944.

The second phase saw the Australians take over from the Americans; hunting down pockets of isolated resistance defended fanatically by the Japanese.

It only ended in August 1945, when the last Japanese on the island surrendered.

From February 1945, Pat's unit supported the Australian army's advances, its seven Auster light aircraft used for reconnaissance, artillery spotting and supply dropping, as well as evacuating wounded personnel.

They were known as "the eyes of the battalion commanders", working closely with infantry and armoured units.

Pat still considers the Bougainville



"I have no regrets about having done my bit. But sometimes, I couldn't help to think when we were flying over target areas, 'There's going to be some poor mother back in Japan who's not going to see her son again'."

— Pat Fitzpatrick

War goes on: Pat Fitzpatrick was just 17 when he volunteered to serve. (Above) One of the Austers Pat flew in. From February 1945, his unit, the No. 17 AOP Flight, supported the advance conducted by the Australian army's II Corps against Japanese positions on Bougainville.

campaign one of the bloodiest for Australians in the war.

"They lost 500 men in nine months," he said.

"There were some bitter battles. Just shocking."

By the time Pat's unit arrived at Slater's Knoll, where they would be based for subsequent months, mass graves had already been dug for hundreds of Australian soldiers.

"We struggled with the losses. We talked about it a lot at night," Pat said.

But compared to the infantry, Pat and his comrades counted themselves as the lucky ones.

"When the infantry would come out to our strip, we'd say 'rest boys, you boys have gone through it,'" Pat said.

"We knew that what was going on down there was hectic, even though we couldn't see everything from the treetops.

"But then they'd say things like, 'We wouldn't want to be you silly buggers, up there doing what you do'.

"So each person's task was more severe to the other guy."

Pat's job in the unit was to service the radio equipment and instruct pilots on radio procedures and how to operate the equipment.

When they were up in the air, he controlled the radio for the pilots, ensuring it was always working.

It was a big responsibility.

"My CO said, 'You know pilots are renowned for messing up radio equipment. We can't have that up in the air,'" he said.

Every day, his unit would be up and at it before anyone else.

"Our job was to get the artillery onto an area, and right on 7 am, the bombers would come in and drop bombs — then the tanks and the infantry would move up," Pat said.

Flying behind enemy lines day after day, Pat only now grasps the sheer dangers to which he was exposed.

"The Japanese had a go at us a few times, but we were hard to hit," he said.

"They told us afterwards that they used to hate us, because they couldn't see us until we were almost on top of them.

"But we weren't there long. The idea was to point to the spot and get out of there.

"And we were very lucky — the Americans had destroyed most of the Japanese planes, so we weren't attacked from the air at all."

While Pat put his life on the line every day he flew out behind the lines, it was not until August 12, 1945 — his 21st birthday — that he had his first real brush with death.

He and pilot Jack Williamson were being sent out on an important mission.

The Australian army was about to cross the Mivo River, but locals had tipped them off a large Japanese transmitter hut was lying in wait, hidden on the delta of the island.

That morning, before the sun rose, Pat and Jack took off, equipped with two phosphorus grenades.

"Because we could fly so low, around the tree top level, they sent us in to see if we could spot the hut," Pat said.

"If we did, we were to drop these grenades, and they'd have planes waiting to come in and bomb the area."

The mission was successful. Soon spotting the hut, they dropped one grenade before swooping back to drop the other.

"I don't know what happened after that because we had to get the plane out of the way, otherwise we'd be blown out of the sky," he said.

"But as we were flying back to our base, Jack said, 'This plane is hard to fly'."

Several days later, Jack took the aircraft for another flight — but just as it started to climb, the engine gave out, and it crashed.

While the pilot escaped unscathed, the incident made both Jack and Pat keenly aware of their mortality.

"Each time we met after the war, we mulled over how lucky we were to be alive," Pat said.

"We're so thankful they didn't give us three grenades, because if they had and we'd stayed to drop the third, we wouldn't be here now.

"If we'd made another run, we would have finished in the jungle, hanging in the trees somewhere, probably with the Japanese firing at us.

"There would have been no chance of us getting out."

But thankfully, they did — and arrived back at the base to news which seemed too good to be true.

The war was almost over.

"The fellows all ran out to meet us before we'd even had a chance to taxi in and turn the motor off," Pat said.

"They said, 'Guess what? We've been ordered to cease fire because they think the Japanese are about to capitulate'."

Three days later, it was official. The Japanese had surrendered.

At last, the war — and one of its bloodiest battles for the Australians — was over; although it would be several months before Pat and his comrades returned to home soil.

On January 23, 1946, he was finally discharged, and thrust abruptly back into civilian life.

While he'd only served in Bougainville for a year, Pat, like so many other veterans, returned

a changed man.

"I found it was tough to talk to people about what I'd seen and experienced when I came back," he said.

"In one sense, it was a part of my life I could have done without."

He returned immediately to the job he'd left behind as a teacher, staying in that profession until 1956, when he became a lecturer at teachers' colleges throughout Victoria.

By the time he retired in 1981, he was head of the social sciences department at the State College of Victoria.

For the past 18 years, Pat has lived in Shepparton with his wife Marie.

They are proud parents to two sons, adoring grandparents to 10 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

It seems miles away from the bloody battlefields of Bougainville.

Looking back, Pat still has "mixed feelings" about the war.

"I have no regrets about having done my bit," he said.

"But sometimes, I couldn't help to think when we were flying over target areas, 'There's going to be some poor mother back in Japan who's not going to see her son again'."

Today, 75 years on, it's Pat's greatest regret that war still exists.

"We thought it was going to be a war to end all wars, like World War I," he said.

"But it didn't. War has been going on ever since.

"That's the sad part: man's inhumanity to man doesn't end."

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