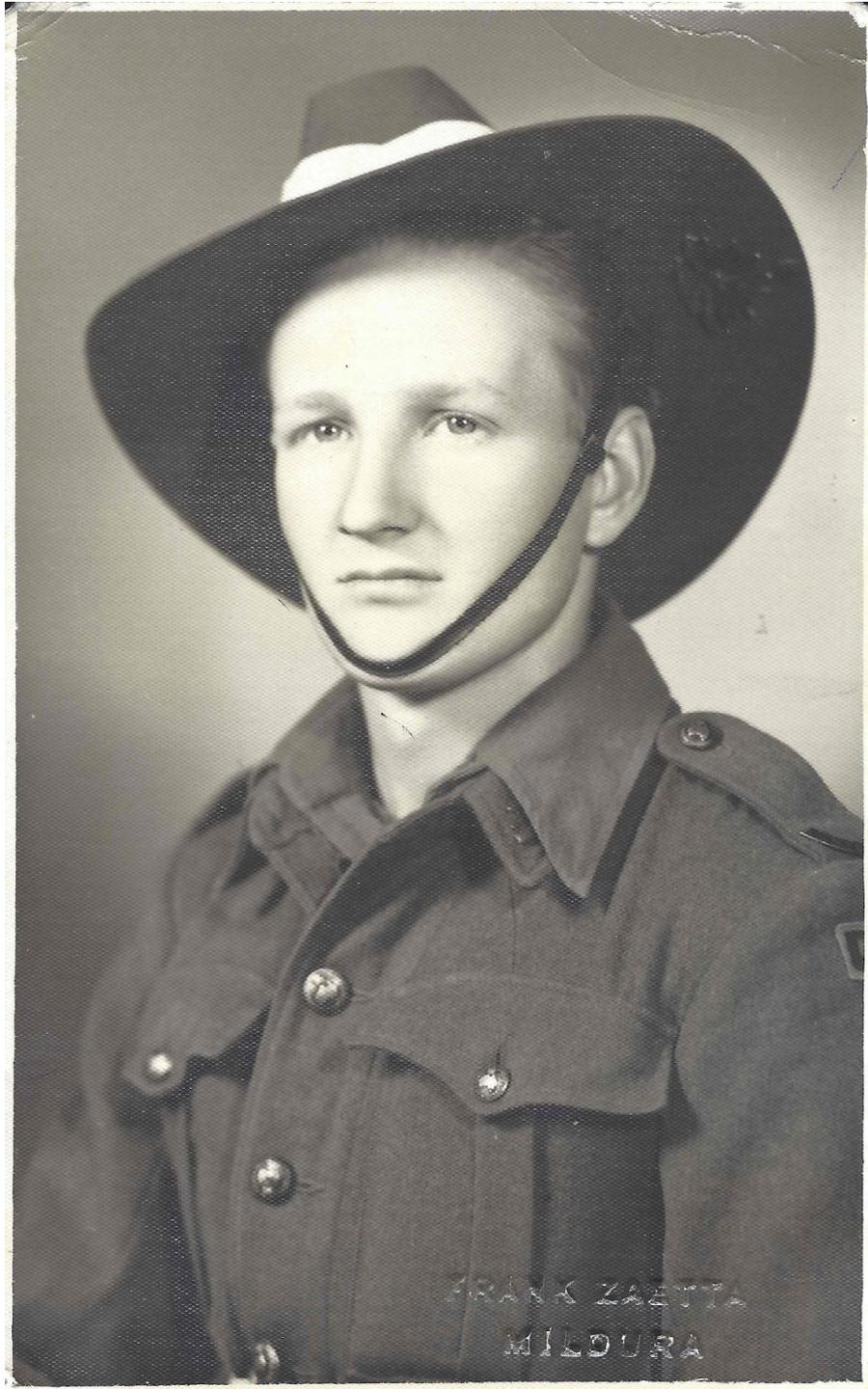


SIGNALMAN JAMES OWENS



(HIS STORIES AND SOME THOUGHTS AS REMEMBERED
BY HIS DAUGHTER SHERRYL STILES

Jim was born in November 1928, at Mildura, which is situated in north-west Victoria on the banks of the Murray River. He was the first-born of four children, the only son.

Obviously keen to see places further afield, he joined the Army in March 1946 – too late to see action in World War Two. However, by falsifying his birthdate by 8 months, he was declared “old enough” to serve in the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces in Japan, despite being only 17 years old in actual fact. Many young Australian men did likewise during the war years in their haste for “an adventure”.

Jim and his fellow recruits, after their initial training, embarked for Japan on the Kanimbla on 19th November, 1946, disembarking at Kure. On 18th March 1947, he “marched out” to the 88 Australian High Speed Wireless Section. From there, he was sent to the US Army School of Signals in Yokohama in April 1947 for training in operating a keyboard and wireless for approximately 3 months, from what I can see on his Service Record.

Twice in 1947, he was hospitalised at the US General Hospital – the first time for Rubella, the second for sinusitis. In August 1947, he was granted Proficiency Pay, so I’m guessing he passed his Signals exams. In September 1947, he was in trouble with the powers that be for neglecting to obey British Com (Command?) Base RO’s. Punishment: three days confined to barracks!

Nine days later, Jim was reclassified to a Sig 1 Star (Signalman 1 Star?) and in April 1948, was promoted again to a Signalman 2 Stars (Operator Keyboard & Wireless). He left Japan on the Kanimbla on 10th March 1948, disembarking in Sydney on 22nd March. He was discharged from the Army on 1st April 1948.

HIS TIME IN JAPAN REMEMBERED

Dad’s stories of his time in Japan were mainly centred around the various exploits and antics which he and his army mates got up to in their free time. Certainly, his photo albums back up the impression of the great comradery and high jinx they enjoyed whilst on leave. Then there were the photos of glamorous Japanese actresses which he sometimes teased my mother about after their marriage in 1950. However, there were several photos which he pointed out to me from his albums which had obviously made a deep impression on him.

The first one was the enormous coil of rope made from human hair which he

saw at the Higashi Hongan-ji Buddhist Temple in Kyoto. The sign under the exhibit explained that in 1880, when the temple was reconstructed (perhaps it was damaged in the 1880 earthquake?) strong ropes were needed to hoist heavy timbers for the work. Many pious women, young and old, willingly cut off their long hair to help make the ropes. In all, there were 53 enormous ropes made for just that one temple.

There were also a series of what could best be described as photo postcards, which depicted some fairly grim scenes of suffering and destruction in Nagasaki and Hiroshima in the immediate aftermath of the atomic bombs falling on those cities. I have included them with his personal photos as they give context to why he and his fellow soldiers were in Japan at that time with BCOF. They also serve as a potent reminder to us, at this very tense time in world affairs, that the cost of warfare is inevitably borne by the innocents.

WHEN JIM CAME HOME.

Dad told us many times around the dinner table about the time an earthquake struck in the pre-dawn hours whilst all the men were asleep in their Nissan-hut style barracks. It was winter and snowing at the time, when the alarm went off, summoning the men from their beds to stand outside – all except Signalmen Jimmy Owens, who decided to stay warm in bed rather than line up in the snow outside, earthquake or no earthquake. He never told us if he was “carpeted” for that exploit!

I only ever saw my father cry when the radio played either of his two favourite musical pieces – “In a Monastery Garden” and “Madam Butterfly”. The Japanese connection to the latter will not be lost on the reader!

My father was a hard-working man after his marriage and provided well for his wife and three children, of whom I am the eldest. He worked hard and, as the saying goes, he drank hard. Each night after work, he would be found at the Mildura Workingman’s Club downing a few beers before the 6:00pm call of “Time, gentlemen please.”

When I was 11-12 years old, he was a passenger in a car involved in an accident and was admitted to Mildura Base Hospital. After a few days without beer, he was experiencing symptoms of alcohol withdrawal. I will never forget my mother’s grief when he was formally diagnosed as an alcoholic.

THE SOMETIMES UNRECOGNISED AND FORGOTTEN EFFECTS ON A YOUNG MAN AND HIS LIFE.

There were no support facilities available to him in the 1960s unlike those we have today, particularly in the country areas where even now, there's precious little help for people with addiction/mental health problems. Life became a see-saw cycle of drying out, getting fit and strong again then an old army mate comes to town, so you have to have a beer (just one) with him, of course, for old times sake. And the whole miserable circus would start again.

He made a final effort at getting free of his alcohol addiction in 1968 when he rejoined the military – this time, it was the RAAF. His first and only posting was to Perth, WA so our family was transplanted to the beautiful Western capital on the Swan River where my mother, my brothers and I still live today. However, when his marriage to my long-suffering mother finally came to an end in 1970, three months after I married my R.A.N. husband, he left the marital home and soon after, the RAAF. In 1972, he returned to Victoria, after a very short second marriage ended up on the rocks and he lived in Melbourne for some years.

Later on, he returned to Mildura where his family were living.

He died from cirrhosis of the liver in 1987, aged 58 years, and is buried in the Mildura cemetery.

SOME THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS.

After his death, I received his two most prized possessions – the photo albums from his time in Japan.

This opportunity to share some of those photos and memories is personally bittersweet. I appreciate the chance to highlight the BCOF, whose members seem to be the forgotten ones in Australia's military history. They may not have been dodging bullets and shells in Europe or Africa, but they still faced many dangers as they worked to re-establish law and order and essential services in post-war Japan and the effect of this lived on with them for the remainder of their lives.



AMERICAN BARRACKS & PORT OF YOKOHAMA



ATOMIC-BOMBED HIROSHIMA

