

Sergeant Eric Saxon



Katsuyama, Okayama Prefecture, Japan. 1947-04. Sergeant (Sgt) Eric A. Saxon, Australian Army and part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF), and his two Ghurka drivers with their jeep during the election campaign. After the surrender of Japan the country's first democratic elections were held in April 1947. There were four elections held about a week apart, two for the National Parliament, the Upper and Lower Houses, one for the Prefectural Governors and one for Local Government bodies. The election was supervised by teams from the occupation forces. This team led by Sgt Saxon was responsible for Maniwa-gun in Okayama Prefecture and was based at Katsuyama. Each team was responsible for supervising the election campaign, the ballot and counting the votes.

(Courtesy AWM)

Eric Saxon was a happy and relieved man when he sailed into Kure Harbour in Japan on 9 April 1946 with the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces (BCOF). The voyage from Australia on MV Duntroon had been full of drama with an emergency dash to port with a dangerously ill soldier, the ship surviving typhoons, a shortage of water and a journey which should have taken just a couple of weeks lasting four weeks. "As we were driven through Kure I was impressed by the crowded

streets, the very heavy bomb and fire damage, the number of bicycles and the many unaccustomed smells - food, dried fish, garbage and so on," Eric recalled. "There was an odd mixture of western and Japanese dress, most working women wearing mompei (a sort of loose baggy trousers)." New members of the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation

Centre (CSDIC) were required to attend a 12-week intensive Japanese course, something Eric took to with relish, particularly as he had already studied Japanese for his role in intelligence activities during World War II. At the end of the course CSDIC members were attached to various units as official interpreters. Before leaving his native Tasmania, Eric contacted the editor of the Hobart Mercury, suggesting he could write some articles for the paper while he was in Japan. As he was not a journalist, the editor was non-committal but agreed he would look at what he sent through. In the end, the paper published more than 20 of his articles which were attributed to 'A Special Correspondent with the British Occupation Forces in

Japan'. Having completed his language training, Eric was thrown into the deep end as an interpreter with 36 Field Security at Onomichi. "Our duties involved trips through the district in a jeep to interrogate people suspected of being involved in smuggling or other illegal activities," Eric said. "One operation involved boarding a ship to search for contraband. Although the boarding party was armed, I carried no weapons. My job was to interrogate the captain and others while the ship was being searched." "We found little of consequence but somehow a report on the operation reached the Australian press where it was blown out of all proportion. The headline was 'Australian Troops Seize Vessel in Onomichi Port' or something like that. In reality it was a very low key

exercise." One of Eric's early articles for the Mercury referred to the devastation at Hiroshima. "Early in August 1945, Hiroshima was in the headlines of every newspaper in the world," Eric wrote. "Much has happened since then but the day of the first terrific demonstration to the world of the tremendous energy in the atom will long be remembered everywhere. It will probably be remembered for ever in this part of the Japan." "Recently I have seen Hiroshima two or three times and have seen what modern war can mean. On approaching the city, the first visible effects of the blast are seen in the tiles on the roofs, which are moved as if some giant hand had swept them from their places. At first only a few here and there are moved but on going further into the city, more and more are swept away, uncovering woodwork underneath." "Then the plaster on the walls is missing here and there, so that the bamboo slats underneath are revealed. Further on again whole roofs have fallen in and walls have jagged gaps. Most of these houses still have people living in them but only a few have been repaired. By the time the first branch of the river is reached, the houses which remain lean shakily. Many have been demolished." "Across the river there is utter destruction as the tremendous fires which started in the centre of the city spread through areas only partly destroyed by blast, and were stopped by the various river mouths. The outskirts, both east and west, are similar and from the lean on houses, and twisted iron framework, it is possible to judge where the bomb struck." "In the centre of the city there is complete desolation. - piles

of rubble, rusting tins and ironwork, masses of fused metal and glass, including the scarcely recognisable framework of tram cars, bicycles, cars and sewing machines." "Trees are merely charred stumps while steel electric standards

heel over at every angle. Many concrete and brick buildings still stand but are burned out inside. Some have been moved on their foundations."However, Hiroshima is rapidly returning to life. Sawmills for miles around are working overtime and scores of wooden buildings are springing up among the ruins."Open air stalls display their wares and attract large crowds. Trams are running, crowded to capacity."When he wrote the article Eric was concerned that this work was being done in a haphazard fashion."Yet no plan seems to exist for the reconstruction so that the new buildings probably will become the nucleus for future slums," he wrote. "Very little cleaning up by the municipal authorities has been done but individuals have made shacks of old iron and scraps among the ruins and have planted gardens in areas they have cleared of rubble."No one seems to have the strength or will to undertake the rebuilding of the city on modern lines, so in the future they may expect worse congestion than in the past."Hiroshima paid a terrific price to bring the war to a more speedy end. The fate of tens of thousands who perished in its ruins, by convincing the Japanese Government of the futility of continuing the war, saved the lives of perhaps hundreds of thousands on both sides," he wrote."For this, those now living who might well have died, owe something to the memory of Hiroshima, the city which suffered more severely in proportion than any other city in the world."So while we may forgive its survivors their apathetic looks, especially after having seen the horrible scars left by atomic burns, we must never allow the world to forget its lesson."[Eric's fears for Hiroshima's future back in 1946 were not borne out as he discovered during subsequent visits to the area some years later.]Eric became involved in supervising the reception of Japanese soldiers and civilians coming back from China and South East Asia and the repatriation of civilians to Okinawa and Korea."Cholera was common among returning troops, so we had inoculations and lots of DDT was used to 'delouse' those in the large barracks where they were held while being officially discharged from the forces and despatched to their former home areas," he said.In another article in the Mercury, Eric wrote about the reactions of Japanese people to the foreign troops."The reactions of the men are certainly the most difficult to understand," he wrote. "For the most part the men take little notice of troops passing through. Sometimes they continue their work as though nothing had happened; mostly they watch with expressionless faces."In the country areas where troops pass only occasionally, the men frequently greet troops by smiling, raising their hats and bowing, or waving hoes or whatever they may happen to have in their hands."The women are more actively friendly than the men and many of them, particularly those with children on their backs, wave vigorously to passing troops while their menfolk merely look on."By far the most impressive feature of the attitude of Japanese towards the Allied forces is the behaviour of the children, more especially in rural areas where troops do not pass frequently."The way these children greet the troops has to be seen to be believed, it is so overwhelming in its openheartedness and spontaneity. As a result, almost every Australian who has been in such areas is deeply touched and freely admits that he has 'a lot of time for the kids'."One of the jobs carried out by the occupation forces was to enforce the rule that schools abandon their militaristic teaching and that all books and other materials which contained such material should be destroyed.Eric spent a lot of time at schools and talking to the children."As for the next generation, I am satisfied that the children are our way now, and that their friendship as adults depends entirely on the effectiveness of the new education system, and of the wisdom of the measures which must be taken by the Allied military governments of the future," he wrote.The first anniversary of VJ Day, 15 August 1946 was a holiday for those BCOF troops who could be spared from duty. For the Japanese it was not such a celebration."Today was also a general holiday for the Japanese, but for a

rather different reason, Eric wrote. "Although they make no secret of the fact they are pleased the war is over, even though lost, they have not yet gone so far as to celebrate the anniversary by any special festivities." Today happens to be the main day of the traditional Bonodori festival, During the day the Japanese showed no particular festive spirit, but most spent it in relaxation or in preparation for the evening festivities. [The festival is apparently a Buddhist rite which extends from about [10-15 August](#). On the last night the spirits of departed ancestors are invoked by the living and are supposed to revisit the earth.] "The only open daylight demonstrations in this area were made by Koreans. There is a considerable Korean element in south-west Japan, an element which is now organised into the Association of Koreans Residing in Japan." Headquarters of the Kure branch today was bedecked with Korean and Allied flags, streamers and other coloured materials, while a large notice proclaimed 'Congratulations to the Allied Forces on Victory. Cheers!'" Just before Christmas Eric experienced his first earthquake. "At 0420 hours I awoke amid a loud rumbling and shaking of the hut," he wrote. "One of my room mates shouted 'earthquake' and went outside. I sat up in bed but as I knew the hut was wooden and well constructed, being held together by bolts rather than nails, I considered it safer to stay inside rather than risk loose tiles falling on me as I went out the door." "As I looked out I saw what looked like lightning flashes across the sky but soon realised it was the high-tension power lines swaying and touching to create sheets of flame. Then all lights went out." In the dark we could hear the nearby primary school buildings creaking loudly as they swayed with the movement of the ground. As the shaking lessened I put on my overcoat and boots and ventured outside. The air was still and filled with shouts and activity from the town. The excitement soon died down, so I went back to bed. "Damage to the immediate area was not great. But south of Shikoku there was major damage and thousands died from fires that broke out in the collapsed houses and from the tsunami [tidal wave] that swept from the nearby epicentre and hit the coast, completely destroying many villages. In April 1947, elections were held in Japan and BCOF personnel were involved in supervising them. "It was our duty to observe the pre-election campaign activities and to visit as many polling booths as we could on election days, Eric wrote. "We also had to collect statistics on the numbers voting at each centre." This election duty was the most interesting experience during my time in Japan. Katsuyama was very much a rural centre. It had sustained no war damage and was remote from industrial activity. Very few foreigners visited the area. In places we found we were the first ever seen there so we were the focus of considerable curiosity. I tried hard to find any malpractice in the elections but could not. "One of Eric's most enduring memories of his stay in Japan was his interaction with the locals and, in particular, the children who were intrigued to be able to talk with a foreigner in their own language. He visited many schools, getting to know the teachers and children and was often invited to attend special occasions at the schools. Eric left Japan on 15 September 1947 at the end of his tour of duty and sailed via New Zealand to Sydney. Despite some rough weather on the way it proved to be rather less eventful than the outward voyage 18 months earlier. The material for this article was supplied by Eric Saxon of Queensland 08/01/2002

(Australians at War - Department of Veterans Affairs)