

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Lieutenant Colonel Jack Alfred ROBINSON, EM

(1910-2006)

John Robinson was born on 23 April 1910, the only child of William Denyer Robinson, a draper, who was born in 1877 in Christchurch, New Zealand, and who married Grace Whitburn (nee Lean), of Sunny Corner, NSW, on 9 June 1906 in Perth, WA. Whilst he was christened Jack, he preferred and indeed was known universally as John and changed his name by Deed Poll in 1946. After secondary schooling he qualified as an electrical and mechanical engineer with the diploma from the Sydney Technical College (ASTC) after completing a five year electrical fitting apprenticeship. He gained an American post-graduate certificate in air conditioning. He also completed two years of an architecture diploma. As well as the St. Ives Masonic Centre, he also designed the Concord School of Arts Building (1934), for which he won the design competition.

Robinson joined 33rd Fortress Company, Royal Australian Engineers, on 24 January 1933, rising through the ranks to be commissioned on 22 April 1937. In 1939, as a captain he was selected to attend the Anti-Aircraft Wing of the School of Artillery in Britain to study the subject of anti-aircraft searchlights. During the course, WWII was declared and at the conclusion of his course he returned to Australia. With his new found knowledge he was given the task of raising Anti-Aircraft Search Light (AASL) units to cover more than 60 vulnerable sites across Australia designated to have anti-aircraft protection. There were 35 Companies raised in the active CMF with a strength of 10,000 all ranks and 1,500 AWAS at a peak mustering in 1944. The operation of searchlight batteries had passed from the Royal Australian Engineers to the Royal Australian Artillery on 1 May 1943.

Soon after his return from Britain he married Ruth Brackenreg, of Canberra, ACT, on 6 July 1940. Robinson assumed command of 51st AA Company as a major, and having volunteered for active service, was quickly promoted to lieutenant colonel to command AASL HQ AA Defences, NSW Lines of Communication Area in early 1942. In November, Robinson was appointed to command AASL HQ New Guinea L of C area. On relinquishing this command on 2 August 1943, he was appointed Chief Instructor AASL at the School of Artillery, Middle Head. At the end of his term he was appointed Chief Instructor AA School of Artillery. His military service concluded on 17 July 1945 and he was awarded the Efficiency Medal the same year. As a measure of the expansion, capability and technical expertise gained by Robinson's units, they were at Darwin, Port Moresby and North Borneo using Australian radar equipment when the war ended. They had been dubbed "The Loneliest Defenders" by an ABC War Correspondent, a tag for being one of the earliest new army formations raised in WWII.

After the war he started The Radiator Company, which became known as Radco and was registered under that name. Radco made low pressure boilers for use in hospitals and schools

and heat transfer equipment. It was the first manufacturer in the world to introduce packaged totally automatic high temperature oil heating plants to industry. In 1966, Radco was awarded one of 19 Australian Export Awards. Robinson held a number of design patents. His business diversified and is now managed by his two sons.

Robinson retained his association with all NSW and other officers from the many searchlight battery branches and after the war encouraged and supported the formation of their battery associations. Later, he formed the AASL Association as well as beginning a regular newsletter. He took a prominent part in the research of the book 'Expose', written by Noel F. Hill, of the history of the Australian AASL in WWII. He wrote the foreword and attended the unveiling of several AASL memorials, and was always an enthusiastic supporter of his searchlight 'movement'.

In his retirement Robinson was responsible for the purchase and installation of the Wurlitzer Theatre Organ at the Cremorne Orpheum Theatre in Neutral Bay. His interests were theatre, organ music generally, and the Sydney Powerhouse Museum. Apart from his 'Searchlights' interests, he was a dedicated family man to his family and seven grandchildren.

John Robinson died one day before his 96th birthday, 22 April 2006. "Robbie", as he liked to be known to his friends, was always affectionately remembered and respected by all who came to know him. His wife predeceased him and he was survived by a daughter Patricia, and sons Ian and Bruce. He was cremated at the Macquarie Park (Northern Suburbs) Crematorium on 8 May 2006.

Sources: Army Lists; Cannonball, No. 64, p. 25, valediction by D. Roberts, Secretary 73 AASL Battery Association; N. F. Hill, *Expose*; Boolarong Publications, Brisbane, 1993; Mrs P. Hughes, letter 12 July 2007, email 2 Aug 2007.