

## AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

### Major Andrew Jack Balsillie (RAEME)

By Brigadier Bill Silverstone (Retd)

Major 'Jack' Balsillie graduated in the first class of the Army Apprentice School and became a mechanic in RAEME. He began a long association with the Royal Regiment from the early 1960s. His value and loyalty to us first became common knowledge when he was a warrant officer commanding the Light Aide Detachment (LAD) with 101st Field Battery in Malaya and was amplified greatly with further service, after he was commissioned, with 4th Field Regiment RAA's LAD and Field Force Artillery when he commanded the Field Workshop RAEME in Sydney.

His marvellous contribution to military history when he discovered the sites and researched the battles fought by the Eighth Division AIF in the Malaya in 1941 – 1942 while a member of 101st Field Battery RAA was a very special intellectual occasion at the time. We also basked in the respect and regard he garnered from his work. [Editor: See additional information from A Field Battery included at the end.]

He was held in such respect by the senior members of our Regiment that Colonel John Howard, the DRA of the time, made him an "Honorary Gunner". An action, which had unanimous support and was well known at the time. Unfortunately, all key players involved at that time are dead. Whilst tongue-in-cheek and informal as it may have been, it gave great pleasure and satisfaction to Jack. He was included in every gunner activity and we all always introduced him to newcomers as our "Honorary Gunner Major Balsillie". I recall that when he was the Mayor of Bendigo, five or so years after he had retired from the Army, he still took pleasure when the term "Honorary Gunner" was mentioned.

Jack had the inherent outstanding personal qualities of unashamed patriotism, loyalty and fairness. Further his remarkably practical application of his natural and true intellectualism, meant that people senior to him in the "power line" appreciated and reacted positively to him and valued his opinions. Sadly, Jack passed away on the 30th October 2018.

Jack's appointment with the Battery in Malaysia saw him regularly traveling around the country. To alleviate the long hours of travel he took copies of the New South Wales Returned Services League journal 'Reveille' to read.

On one such journey to Singapore in February 1961 he was reading an article on the 2/30th Battalion's ambush on Imperial Japanese Troops at Gemenchah Bridge in Johor. He realised that he was actually on the very same road, Gemas-Tampin Road through which hundreds of Japanese troops had cycled 19 years prior.

With his trusty copy of 'Reveille' in hand, and with a picture of the bridge from the article he and his driver pulled over. Whilst inspecting the side of the road at the ambush location he found several Australian relics from the ambush including Australian manufactured .303 rounds, an old Army issued enamel plate and a grenade fuse cap.

These discoveries sparked an interest that was to see him become a modern-day Doctor Charles Bean, and collect from the battlefields of Malaya, Singapore and later South Vietnam some of the most significant objects from these campaigns now held in the National Collection.

### Acknowledgements:

- Additional Information obtained from 'A' Field Battery Association Inc National Newsletter (November 2017 Edition).