

# Albury & District Historical Society

December 2017

No 585

PO Box 822 ALBURY 2640

[www.alburyhistory.org.au](http://www.alburyhistory.org.au)

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## Next Meeting

Wed 13 December,  
7.30pm Commercial Club  
Members Show & Tell



Joan Fairbridge (Nee Duff) Aged 20 1941

**ALBURY  
LIBRARYMUSEUM  
PATTERN MAKING:  
STITCHING TOGETHER  
ALBURY'S TEXTILE  
MANUFACTURING  
INDUSTRY  
20 JAN– 15 JULY**

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## REPORT ON NOVEMBER MEETING (08.11.2017)

It isn't often that we get the opportunity to meet someone who has been involved with working in a team that has changed world history. Those who attended the November meeting had that privilege to meet and hear the personal stories of Joan Fairbridge who worked in signals intelligence during the Second World War. Joan who is 97 years young, recounted how she was selected to be a "traffic analyst" in a position that required the utmost secrecy. Even though she couldn't touch type or take shorthand, she was noted to have "language skills" after receiving good marks in French and German at school. This was months before Pearl Harbour but Joan's new boss Commander Jack Newman, Director of Signals and Communications was already concerned about the increasing traffic signals being intercepted from the Japanese Navy. Members of the WRANS came into the DSC in 1942 and Joan was adamant in saying that they had code books and were code breakers. This new department which was built from scratch were very successful in cracking Japanese army and air force codes playing a vital role in giving an early warning to the Allies fighting in the Pacific.

Greg Ryan presented the story of a "Letter to a Lonely Soldier" which appeared in the Border Mail. London in World War One, 1917 video was shown.

The winner of the raffle for four laminated historic pictures of Albury was Sue Simpfendorfer. Peter Quick is researching JT Fallon and is particularly interested in where the wine was bottled and details of how the business was run. Joe reminded members that the Xmas Dinner is not being held this year however there will be a supper of tea and scones provided by the Society after the December meeting. Joe reported the passing of John Craig, a well known and highly respected member of the Society for many years.



## JOAN FAIRBRIDGE

It is hard to know where to start and even after all these years how much I am free to say and whose names I can mention. At the outbreak of war I was working as a dental nurse, assisting our family dentist Ron Campbell, whose house and surgery were within walking distance of my home in Brighton. Ron Campbell enlisted early in the war and was second in command of the ill-fated 2/40th Battalion, who fought briefly and bravely before being captured in East Timor. He survived three terrible years as a POW in Changi and other prisons.

I began work part time as a budding journalist, my guide and mentor in those

Joan received the Government Code and Cypher School Bletchley Park medal in recognition of her work as a traffic analyst during World War II.

Photo: Mark Jesser

days as I struggled with journalese and was introduced to Melbourne's "Social Set" was Beth Thwaites the social editor of the "Truth". It was 1941 and I was 20. My brothers and many of my friends had gone to war and because my part time job was not a reserved occupation I was directed to apply for work in some kind of war service.

My eldest brother David who retired from Army service as Lt.Colonel, was with the 7th Division in the Middle East, fighting against the Germans and the French Foreign Legion in the Syrian Campaign. David and one of his close friends Johnny Cosgrove, father of General Peter Cosgrove had decided when they applied to join the Royal Australian Artillery at Fort Queenscliff before the war that if they were unsuccessful they would join the Foreign Legion! My second eldest brother Peter was in the Royal Australian Engineers, Coast Defences Darwin and was there when Darwin was repeatedly bombed. He had the unique experience of looking into the eyes of a Japanese pilot and he said all his life that the enemy decided not to kill him. My younger brother Gerald who was a GP in Melbourne was serving "somewhere in Australia". My two youngest brothers were too young to enlist but Gordon, now a retired chemical engineer joined the RAAF cadets, the Air Training Corps, and John a retired Army Colonel got his own war later when he trained at Duntroon and served in Korea and Malaya and Vietnam.

I was interviewed in the tin shed next to the Town Hall and having naturally expressed a wish to serve in the army, was given a sealed envelope marked SECRET and sent directly to Navy Office, Victoria Barracks.

My first meeting with the very personable and, to me, awesome Commander Jack Newman was brief to say the least. He asked: "Any special qualifications?" I replied "Not really". "Except intelligence?" "I hope so Sir", I said. "How soon can you start?" was his reply.

He then patiently instructed me in the first of many tedious, monotonous and boring tasks in the field of Signals Intelligence. When recently I described some of this work to a Navy Department security officer who phoned me from Canberra I was told that my job description was "intelligence analyst".

At the time it was a mystery to me how I came to be selected and in fact it still is, although I now realise from reading some accounts that those were desperate times and there was an alarming shortage of trained people. It should be said that I had no idea at the time of the importance of the work that was being done by the quite brilliant people with whom it was my privilege to serve. I did not even know that they were brilliant or that our unit was engaged in "Special Intelligence". There was not a cloak or a dagger in sight.

Commander Newman was the Director of Signals and Communications (DSC) and I was never told and it was never mentioned or even implicated that I was working in "Sigint" (Signals Intelligence) I spent my first day ruling lines on sheets of paper.

If I remember rightly DSC was situated in an office at the end of a corridor on the third floor of N block at Victoria Barracks. I was the only civilian who was employed in the work I was doing and for some time I worked with the only other two people in the office, the Commander himself and an elderly officer Lt. Cdr. Edgerton. He is not mentioned in any reports I have so far read. There were uniformed officers coming and going during that time, but no "other ranks" and no civilians. As far as I knew there was nothing out of the ordinary in what I was doing. On one wall of our office was a map, studded with tiny coloured pins denoting the last known positions of ships of the Japanese Navy. The chart was concealed behind a locked steel roller blind when not in use. Sometime in June 1942, the first two members of the WRANS, Joan Cowie and Jo Miller joined us. They were telegraphers and had been trained to read Japanese Morse Code (kana). I had no such expertise and always felt that I was at a bit of a disadvantage to say the least, but was never made to feel less able or less qualified. We worked in silence, talked only when necessary and in whispers.

## JOAN FAIRBRIDGE

The Commander emerged from time to time from behind piles of books and papers and a fog of pipe smoke and collected our finished work. Some of this work as I recall had to do with the identification of the call signs of ships and shore stations of the Japanese Navy and I remember this more clearly because most annoyingly they kept changing. In spite of the fact that all of this is now de-classified I still feel a reluctance to write about it. Then one day the US Navy arrived in Melbourne and our usually deathly quiet office was invaded by a group of loud talking US Navy officers. I remember that it was winter weather and they were wearing white summer uniforms and their faces were pale. They brought with them a kind of urgency verging on panic which we had not previously felt, in spite of the fact that at that point in time Japan seemed to be winning the war. Within a week we had become part of Commander "Rudie" Fabian's shouting, door-slamming world. The US Navy group had been rescued, under heavy bombardment, and had come by submarine from Corregidor near Manila. From the first they seemed to take charge, demanding office space, telephones, material for winter uniforms etc. and getting everything they wanted much more easily than had been thought possible in those days of shortages. Our operation, now under two separate Commanders, Newman and Fabian, moved from Victoria Barracks to a block of flats called Monterey in South Yarra between St Kilda Rd and Queens Rd. I continued to work there as the only civilian and gradually more members of the WRANS, a tele printer and T/P operators joined us. I was present when an IBM arrived. It took up an entire room, a kitchen if I remember rightly. I have read reports which say that the US Navy worked on the second floor and our section on the ground floor. It is not important I suppose, but as I remember it, for some months at least both were housed on the ground floor and that is where the IBM and the tele printer, which brought the intercepted Japanese messages to the central location, were situated.

One account of "Monterey" in a book called "Ships Belles" leads me to think there is some confusion between the two Montereyes, the block of flats in South Yarra and the Defence building in Albert Park to which the operation named FRUMEL (Fleet Radio Unit Melbourne) was moved - after my time. In anything I have read there is no mention of the South Yarra Monterey being a W/T station but on one occasion I arrived early for work and witnessed what was to me an unusual incident. A US wireless operator who, I was told had been listening all night, was waiting for an operator on a Japanese submarine to start sending. It was explained to me that in order to send a message, the submarine needed to surface and then dry out its aerial, making a recognisable sound to a trained listener. Knowing that it had thus given away its identity the sub would wait, sometimes for hours before sending and risking giving away its position. This was the only time that I saw activity of this kind, but then unlike the WRANS I did not work eight hour watches. After the installation of the IBM I fully expected to be moved on. Some of the WRANS personnel left us about that time. The room where we worked began to fill with all the stuff that had been in the kitchen, and that included the Commander's steel double locked filing cabinet, where all of the messages sent by the Japanese Navy were neatly filed away under their appropriate call signs and in chronological order. The Americans, being more efficient and better equipped, had shredded their copies which led to an incident in which Commander Newman was able to offer assistance to Commander Fabian's team by allowing them the use of his filed information. The Japanese, for reasons best known to themselves, changed their call signs to those that they had used in the early days of the war. The filed tele printed messages were of obvious interest to Commander Fabian's team who filled the small room grabbing fistfuls of the messages and spreading them on the floor. I can remember Commander Newman smoking his pipe and grinning. It was well known that there was no love lost between the two Commanders and that the Americans did not like to think they needed any help from us. Nevertheless they worked very much as an integrated team or so it seemed to me.

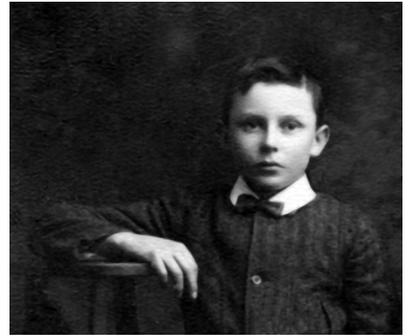
It was a day like any other day when Commander Newman told me that he would have to let me go. Because of the nature of our work in the event of a Japanese invasion, civilians would be shot if captured, he explained. He hoped that those in uniform would be made prisoners of war and that the enemy would observe the Geneva Convention. He had already explored the possibility of my enlistment in the Service without going through the proper channels, but because he now had his full complement he could not guarantee that I would remain with his section. "I could ask for you" he said but the war might be over before I got you back". He then thanked me for my very valuable work and, looking quite worried and drawn and sad and old I thought, left the room. It was the first time I had ever even contemplated the prospect of our side losing the war. I continued to serve in Navy Office until after the end of the war, again as the only civilian in RDF (Radio Directional Finding) and IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) until replaced by a WRANS officer and then in CAFOs (Confidential Admiralty Fleet Orders) and finally DNRM (The Directorate of Naval Reserves and Mobilisation). The war was well and truly over before I was allowed to leave. After the war finished I wasn't allowed to tell anyone I'd worked in espionage, but I didn't want to talk about it anyway. People don't understand we all wanted it behind us. Everywhere around us was darkness and families losing sons.

## LETTER TO A LONELY SOLDIER

An edited version of the story written by Anthony Bunn published in the *Border Mail* on 11 November 2017. Thanks to Anthony and the *Border Mail* for permission to reprint.

How do you bring home to a Border schoolboy the damage caused by bombs exploding in London during World War I? Naturally as a self-described old Albury boy you would look to compare the havoc to what would happen in your hometown in such a situation. That's exactly what plumber-turned-sailor William Joseph (Joe) Kemp did

when he responded to a letter penned by Bowna schoolboy Claude Mullavey (above) in October 1917. "A raid in London would make you cry to see the poor women and children all rushing for the Underground Railway, it is cruel, the people get in a panic," Mr Kemp wrote. "I will try to explain the damage a bomb or bombs will do. I dare say you know Albury. Well, if one or two bombs were dropped in front of the Town Hall, they would wreck the street, from Olive St to Kiewa St." That vivid vignette is contained in a letter which is a remarkable story in itself. It was a response to a 'letter to a lonely soldier' penned by Claude and published in *The Albury Banner* in June 1917 as part of a writing competition. Claude detailed his life at Bowna, fishing in the Murray River, rabbit shooting and how his teacher enlisted but was declared unfit after a week in camp. "I will now conclude, hoping that by the time it reaches you this terrible war will be brought to an end, and that you will once more be able to return to the land of your birth," Claude wrote.



Mr Kemp, a petty officer in the Navy, spotted the *Banner* article after receiving the newspaper from friends. "On reading it I noticed that well worded letter of yours, which I feel sure was well worthy of the small prize," he wrote. "I wish to highly congratulate you on your letter, which I really enjoyed." Mr Kemp then related his war experience, which involved nearly two years with the Grand Fleet to that point. "We often lose a man or two over the side, but that is nothing, no stopping to pick them up, it is to riskie (sic)." While on the North Sea in May 1917, Mr Kemp's vessel came under fire from German airships. "All eyes were fixed on the Zeps, & (we) were admiring it. All of a sudden she started to bomb us, just missing the magazine I had just left, pieces of bomb blew in board. She used to let about 5 bombs go at a time. We were useless, just trusting to our Skippers (sic) Seamanship, the way he maneuvered (sic) the ship was wonderful."

Mr Kemp later told of working as a plumber in Albury and wistfully reflects on fishing from the Hawksview bridge across the Murray. "How only wish I was there now, with my old friends, but never mind it will all come right some day. Life is hardly worth living sometimes, but when we get back in the land of Australia we will forget everything."

Mr Kemp offers good wishes and stresses his loyalty in signing off. "I am afraid I am making this letter too long, you might think am writing a book. I will close now, hoping this letter will find you and your parents enjoying the best of health. Believe Me, I Remain an Old Albury Boy, Joe Kemp."



William Joseph Kemp

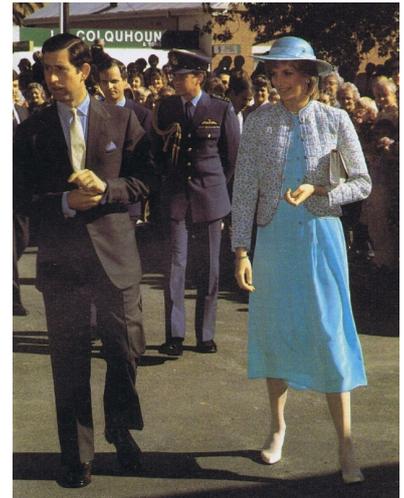
The five-page letter has since become part of its own adventure with the sender's and recipient's families only learning the full story in October, 100 years later. It was at a Mullengandra school gathering that Greg and Cheryl Ryan (nee Mullavey) learned of the existence of Mr Kemp's letter from Claude's daughter Joan Bourke who had travelled from her Geelong home. Claude's grand-daughter Colleen Jennings had found Mr Kemp's letter in a wardrobe drawer while cleaning out her pop's personal effects following his death in 1998. Mr Kemp's youngest child John Kemp lives in South Albury, where he fiercely guards a diary his father wrote of his war days. Joe Kemp began his own plumbing business in 1923 and at one stage employed 13, while Claude Mullavey became a shearer. Both never spoke of the war with Mr Kemp dying in the late 1960s without suspecting his letter would stir readers 100 years on.

You needn't be worried that history is being lost – I can tell you that all over NSW, local history is being researched, recorded and published in copious quantities. Doug and I have been to the Royal Australian Historical Society's Annual Conference, held at Cowra this year. What a great time we had. Cowra was ablaze with flowers, the weather was good, the speakers and their technology very professional and everything ran like clockwork – no overtime speakers at all! Cowra Historical Society and Cowra Family History Group gave half the presentations on the local area, but other speakers informed us about Aboriginal Black Trackers attached to police Stations all over NSW; a group are researching the tombstones in the Sydney Quarantine Station, a lady is looking for bodies removed from a monastery cemetery that has been deconsecrated and we had instructions about using Trove, especially the Government Gazettes. Next year's conference is at Port Macquarie – a lovely place for a little holiday I understand.

**ANSWER TO THE OCTOBER QUESTION OF THE MONTH**

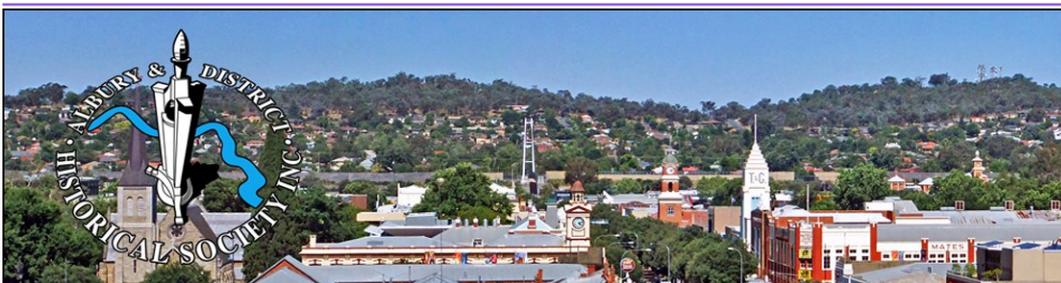
British Royalty has been seen in Albury.  
Who was it and when and where did they stay ?

- 1927 Duke and Duchess of York, later to become King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, changed trains at Albury.
- 1957 Princess Alexandra stayed at Bungowanah Park.
- 1974 Prince Charles – visit to Wodonga.
- 1983 Charles, Diana and Prince William – stayed for several weeks at the Woomargama Homestead.
- 1986 Prince Phillip visited Bandiana.
- 1988 Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip Bi-Centennial visit to Australia.



**Extra Reading for those interested in Joan Fairbridge's Story:**

*The Secret Code-Breakers of Central Bureau* by David Duffy tells the story of the country's significant code-breaking and signals-intelligence achievements during the Second World War. It reveals how Australians built a large and sophisticated intelligence network from scratch, how Australian code-breakers cracked Japanese army and air force codes, and how the code-breakers played a vital role in the battles of Midway, Milne Bay, the Coral Sea, Hollandia, and Leyte.



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## QUESTION OF THE MONTH

What do the terms Sigg and Sugg mean ?

Both have a connection to Dean Street.

## DECEMBER MEETING

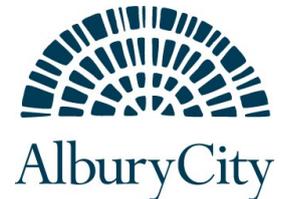


Our pre-Christmas meeting will be a little light-hearted. We will have a "Show & Tell" where members "Show" objects of historical significance and "Tell" the story of each object. There will be a quiz and all will be followed by a supper provided by the Society.



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**Meetings:** Second Wednesday of the  
month at 7.30 pm usually at the  
Commercial Club Albury.

The Committee meets on the  
third Wednesday of the month  
at 3 pm at the Albury  
LibraryMuseum.

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