

100 Years of the Returned & Services League in Albury

An address by Howard Jones to the Albury RSL Sub-Branch Centenary dinner, May 7, 2019.

In June 1916, a wounded Lighthorseman named Danny Nunan was invalided home from Gallipoli. He stayed a few days with friends in Albury, and told *The Border Morning Mail* his life had been saved on Gallipoli by one George Newton, formerly a police constable in Albury. Nunan was hit in the buttocks by shrapnel. He would have bled to death had not Newton arrived, ripped off Nunan's shirt and made it into bandages to staunch the bleeding. Newton placed the 14-stone man on his back. He carried him 100 yards through a pitch-black tunnel to a surgeon's dugout, and Danny Nunan was saved.

Newton had served in the Boer War some 15 years earlier. He survived Gallipoli but in Egypt was struck down by typhus and was sent home in 1916. In December 1916, he was one of a tiny group of wounded, sick and shell-shocked Gallipoli veterans who formed an Albury branch of the Returned Soldiers Association of NSW.

That same month, a trainload of 156 wounded soldiers passed through Albury. The Red Cross gave them tea and coffee and smokes before they switched trains. Local girls handed out flowers they pinned on their uniforms.

Coincidentally, the association's first state secretary was an Albury man, James Sheehan, also wounded on Gallipoli.

Although this first branch petered out, the present RSL sub-branch was formed in December 1918, just after the war ended.

In 1919, hundreds of soldiers returned home, and took part in peace celebrations in July. Will Colley was the leading light of the RSL but there were many others. Many of Albury's soldiers like Colley were horsemen, either in the Light Horse or artillery units such as the Albury Battery. There were three sailor brothers from Lavington. One was Cec Meredith, who served on Royal Navy ships in the Mediterranean, Red Sea and Indian Ocean in 1918 when only 15 years old.

Meredith came home unscathed, worked on the Hume Dam construction, became a builder and lived to be 93!

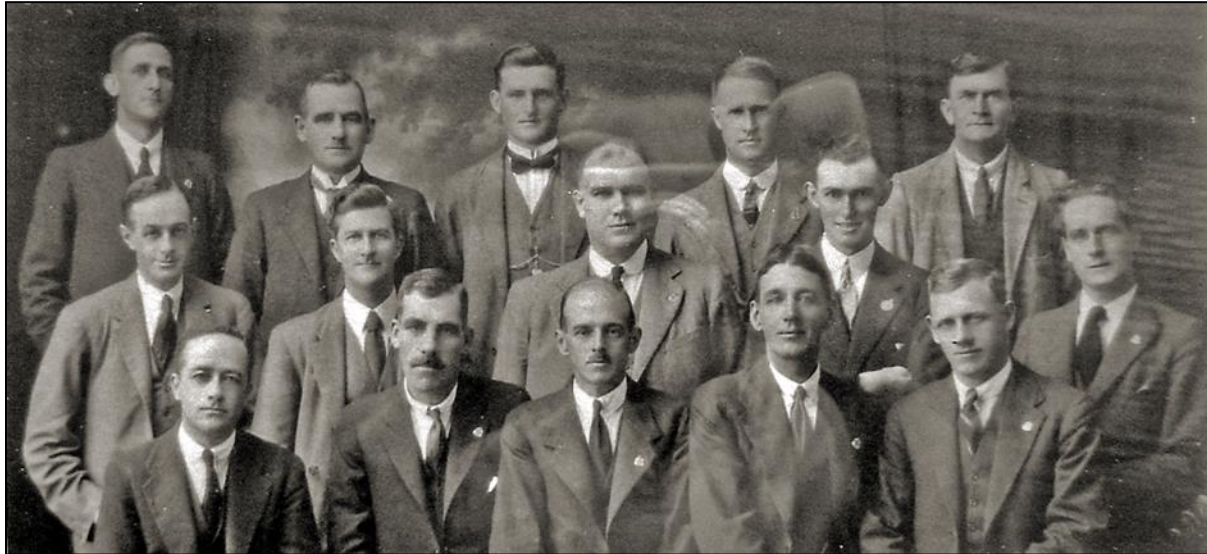
From 1919 to 1932, the RSL's priorities were:

- Securing jobs for returned men, and for teenage children of returned men.
- Helping destitute men and their families.
- Helping the returned men get medical help. Dr Eric Woods MC (Gallipoli and France) treated returned men free of charge.
- Organising Anzac Day services, and from 1927 the Anzac marches to the Monument.

Remember, most were still young men in the prime of life – 1920s or early 30s. So there were Diggers' clubs for football and cricket. Several RSL pioneer men were elected aldermen – among them Clive Burt, Will Colley and Tom Oldfield, who had injured his shoulder on Gallipoli and lost a leg in France. One RSL president, Bruce Dowling MC, was a civil engineer on the Hume Dam project.

The early RSL was an all-male organisation. In Albury, there was a women's auxiliary – it organised the annual RSL Ball for diggers and their wives or lady friends, but the annual smoko was strictly men only.

No ex-Army nurses were in the RSL between the wars, and not until after WW2.



RSSILA Albury Branch Committee 1924

Back Row: W F Stillman, J Garnsey, C Bohan, D L Young, A Shann

Middle Row: G Stedman, S Bradford, W Montgomery, R Collings, J C Cuthbert

Front Row: Dr J Wilkinson, W McCulloch, B S Dowling (President), B Phillips, C H Burt

In 1932, a group of RSL members founded Albury Legacy, which in 2019 has supported local widows and children for 77 years. From 1932, the RSL no longer had to look after the war widows and their children, but had to help unemployed diggers passing through in the Depression.

In the 1930s, the RSL made sure every soldier's grave in Albury was marked by a gravestone. About 100 Albury men died in the war. Another 100 were to die in Albury before the next war began.

World War II, of course, brought a vast change. Albury was virtually a garrison town with hundreds of men and women in camps in Albury and Wodonga. Local wounded soldiers began returning from the Middle East, and later from the Pacific theatre.

The RSL women's auxiliary, mainly wives of veterans, ran a soldiers' canteen in Dean Street that catered for something like 3000 men a month.

Several RSL veterans joined the local volunteer unit (Dad's army) and some were Air Raid Precautions wardens. There were huge Anzac parades in wartime, except in 1942 when the Curtin Government, fearing an imminent invasion, banned them.

After the war, the RSL sub-branch rose to around 1000, although it was strictly for those who had served overseas.

The two big achievements in 1946 were creating the SS&A Club and the Mungabareena housing settlement for diggers' families. Captain Borella VC was in charge of the latter.

Clive Marshall, who had been captured by the Japanese in Rabaul in 1952, was elected the RSL president in 1947, aged 33. This was a turning point. Most of the committee were now 1939-45 veterans, but there was plenty of turmoil in branch meetings. The SS&A Club soon became independent and the RSL sub-branch concentrated on welfare and pension issues, also securing war service homes in North Albury.

Hospital visits were important. Amazingly, in 1955, the sub-branch spent £100 on smokes for diggers at the Albury Hospital, though Ned Monte once told me they spent a lot on chocolates, too.

A solicitor, Ken Walls MC was an exceptional president for six terms from 1956 – a lieutenant who had escaped from the Japanese invasion of New Britain.

In policy matters, Albury sub-branch stood out against any sport on Anzac Day.... until a sub-branch referendum in 1958 agreed to allow afternoon sports.

Albury was pro-monarchy, pro the Australian flag, pro-National Service and supported Australia's entry to the Vietnam War.

Mac Green was president for 11 consecutive terms from 1968, including when Anzac House was acquired. He had been a radio operator on Lancasters bombing German cities. Unable to have their own children, Mac and his wife Nancy adopted a German child. Mac got a film extra job in London – playing a Roman soldier in a film about Cleopatra. Another extra with him was Roger Moore, then 17. Mac was no James Bond, but in 1992 came back for a 12th term in his 80th year.

Old soldiers seemed reluctant to fade away. Ernie Fugger MM, who had survived the Battle of Lone Pine and was gassed on the Western Front, was still on the committee in 1968, aged 76. Harry Strong was elected secretary at 84, 60 years after being wounded in France.

It's true Mac and some other members were cool on welcoming Vietnam veterans, an issue that led to the Murray Border veterans being formed in 1980. A turn point came when Michael Seary, a Vietnam veteran, became president in 1986. The Vietnam veterans have now been the largest group for years.



World War II veterans Len Lemke, Dinny Dennis and Roy Poy march Anzac Day 1990.

A seaman in the Korean War, Graeme Townsend was president nine terms from 1993. He was president during the very busy 'Australia Remembers' year in 1995, supported especially by John Neale. Graeme was followed by John Stanborough for five years, with Des Bailey secretary for even longer, and later welfare officer.

Another big step forward was the creation of the Hume Veterans Information Centre. It was started in 1998 by John Stanborough, Kevyn Williams, John Bauerle and Mark Brown.

Eligibility changes at different times brought in new faces and a greater involvement of ladies, ensuring the survival of this sub-branch when many others have disappeared. In Ned Monte's words, it always had "a damn good band of workers".

How long can it continue? Well, the last Albury RSL member from WW1, Alan Stow, died in 1994. There were then about 250 World War II men and women marching on Anzac Day.

In 2019, there were only four WW2 veterans, aged 92 to 98, in the parade, though (RSL officer) Barry Howard believes there are about 20 on the books, all in their 90s.

We still have many veterans who served in Korea, Malaysia, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, East Timor, the Solomon Island and elsewhere.

Clearly the need for an RSL will continue. As Dr Brendan Nelson wrote in a Foreword to my Albury sub-branch history*: "Only a veteran can possibly understand what other veterans need, what they have experienced and how best to help."

**March of the Veterans*, published in 2014.

