

## ‘A sacred Day’: Veterans gather together again

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It was 77 years ago yesterday that Bill Craig sailed with the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion for New Guinea. He was 19 years old – younger than most aboard the *Duntroon* that morning – and his head was swimming.

“You’d have seen all those horror pictures of the Kokoda Trail and that business” he said from his room at Vasey RSL Care in Brighton East. Then you see Australia drifting away—drifting, drifting ‘til it disappears – and you think ‘shit’.

The Battalion found its war a year later on the island of Bougainville in the Solomon Sea. Mr Craig, now 96, moved hill to hill through this “wild country” loading mortars to be fired at Japanese positions. Twenty-five of his battalion were killed and time has claimed most of the others.

It means he will be one of just two 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion WWII veterans attending its annual function among the descendants of other men at the Middle Park Bowling Club on Anzac Day afternoon.

The morning will be spent in the courtyard at Vasey Brighton East, whose near 130 residents – almost all of them veterans or war widows – put on their own service each year with staff and families. This year will be particularly special for residents after Melbourne’s COVID-19 lockdown shielded them from everyone but masked-and-gloved staff.

“I saw nobody for a long, long time” said Mr Craig. “But that’s something you learn in the army. When it got dark in the jungle and you’re in your dugout, or whatever it is, you can’t just go walking down Swanston Street.”

His battalion captured 25 enemy positions in little more than two months in 1945 and, per the Australian War Memorial’s history, “dominated the Japanese”. Mr Craig, pointing to the list of killed comrades printed on the latest 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion magazine, preferred more modest language. “we didn’t do a lot, but it was a lot for these poor fellas” he said.

Geoff Williams, who served with both the army and the navy between 1954 and 1963, lives a couple of doors down. “For the last few years marching has felt a bit too much” he said. “But we will dress up here ... you’d pay a million dollars to get in here if you weren’t a serviceman or had help from DVA (Department of Veteran’s Affairs)”.

Peg Uttling, 98 years old and a great grandmother of 18, lives on the opposite side of the hall. She was among the first 26-strong intake for the Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force when it launched in early 1941 to fill roles at home while men went north or served overseas.



Above: Veterans Bill Craig (left) and Lyall Butling (right) at the Reunion lunch

Ms Uttling typed and patched messages – most of it in code – to bases around Australia. “I loved it all,” she said. “I was just wanted to do anything that was necessary.” She was also featured on the RAAF “wanted urgently” poster calling on other women to join. They felt they were contributing, she said, but the gruelling hours led many of the members to breakdowns.

“I think it just got too much,” she said. “A lot of the did [breakdown], particularly the wireless telegraphers. One night ... and I was the sergeant in charge of the shift then, I just stood there and couldn’t do anything. I just stood there and cried.”

Ms Uttling has rarely marched in the Anzac Day parades. The WAAAF unit never organised itself postwar like the returning men. “They did start having girls marching but, I don’t know, there weren’t very many of them,” she said. “I could never find anyone to march with. “[But} I’ve never missed watching or listening to the Anzac Day marches. They just look so proud. They just fill me with – I don’t know what the feeling is – maybe belonging. It’s a sacred day.”

Note: different photos used in the article in The Age

