

## Whit and a cheeky grin: Obituary for Len Whittenbury

*Andrew Faulkner is an author and journalist with The Australian. 12 Oct 2010 @ 05:30am*



“WHIT” by name and wit by nature, Len Whittenbury teased shopkeepers by asking them to change a fake million dollar note, or offering to pay with an ancient penny.

Minted in the year of his birth, 1922, the coin was a lucky charm that Whittenbury carried through his World War II service.

It remained in his wallet until his death last month, aged 88.

He had no need to carry a talisman, for Whittenbury made his own luck through a lifetime of good works.

Awarded an OAM in 2007 for his prolific community service, Whittenbury was a man of his age.

Hardened first by the Depression and then a world war, his was the generation that rebuilt a nation and paved the way for modern prosperity.

And along the way hauled up those who missed out on the good times.

He felt obliged to serve because mates killed in World War II never had that opportunity.

Born and bred in the Maylands area, Whittenbury was 19 when his unit, the 27th Scottish Battalion, was scrambled from Adelaide to Darwin days after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.

“We only had about five rounds of ammunition each,” he said in 2002.

He was concussed and wounded by shrapnel in the first Japanese air-raid, but was soon back in the trenches.

Asking a superior for instructions, he was told if he saw a plane shoot at it.

“What if it’s one of ours?” the youngster inquired.

“We `aint got none left,” was the reply.

All cheeky grin and impish manner, Whittenbury was a trickster who had to be watched closely when playing 8-ball at the St Morris RSL sub-branch.

He was blessed with a delivery so deadpan it rivalled David Letterman at his best.

But his face darkened when anyone asked about his unit’s traumatic time in Bougainville.

“We saw a lot of action there - we lost 20 troops. It was a terrible place ... I was glad to get out of there.”

A cobbler by trade who ran Rundle St’s Grundy’s Shoes after the war, Corporal Whittenbury fell into a job as the battalion’s bootmaker.

“They reckoned I looked after the soles of all the troops,” he used to say through his trademark grin.

After the war, and especially after his retirement in 1979, he devoted his life to his community.

The RSL, Meals on Wheels, Freemasonry, sports clubs, the Scouts, the Retail Traders’ Association - there is no room here to do justice to his contribution.

Out of hours fishing was his passion.

He spent his army severance pay on a small boat and excused his many hours bobbing about on the gulf by reminding people Jesus was a fisherman.

Late in life he suffered from skin cancers, which I assumed were from sustained exposure to the sun in the tropics during the war.

“No, no, no, the rule on the boat was no sunscreen,” he would say.

He loved his football and was one-eyed Norwood, although son Brenton revealed in his eulogy his father first followed Sturt (which would have been handy to know during our many football disagreements, thanks Len).

About 200 people attended his funeral in the New Life Christian Community Church, formerly Maylands Uniting Church, where he met future wife Mary, who died in 2000.

There was a certain continuity in farewelling a proud soldier in a place where the stained glass windows bore the names of local boys who fell in the Great War.

A steady stream of old soldiers placed poppies on the coffin, some wearing 27th Battalion ties matching the flag draped over the coffin.

As the congregation sang the 23rd Psalm we reflected how apt “goodness and mercy all my life” was in Whittenbury’s case.

And as the coffin was carried from the church (to the Norwood football song, of course), more than one digger was in tears, such was their affection for a great man.

Whittenbury is survived by children Judith, Wendy and Brenton and their families, including seven grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.