
Robert John Christison

My name is Robert John Christison. I was born at Kew, Victoria, on 19 November 1927. At 18 months of age my parents brought me home to our farm at Tammin in Western Australia.

My early schooling was correspondence taught by my mother at home. I had my tenth birthday at Wesley College in Perth, and stayed there until I had completed year ten, then came home to help my father on the farm. There was great excitement when we heard on the radio that the war had ended with the dropping of the atomic bomb.

In January 1946 there were calls for young men to join the Army and go to Japan as part of the Occupation Forces. The call of adventure and a chance to take part in the last of the war experiences was too great, so I enlisted at Karrakatta in Perth.

Basic training was done at Walgrove Camp, Rooty Hill, Sydney. I was then posted to Rushworth Internment Camp in Victoria. After Xmas leave at home I returned to Newcastle in NSW before leaving for Japan in January 1947. There was an air of excitement as at last we were going to do what we had joined up for.

On arrival in Japan I was posted to 65 Battalion based at Onomichi, then at Fukuyama. While with the Battalion I had three days in Hiroshima, six weeks in Intelligence School at Matsuyama on the Island of Shikoku and two months duty in Tokyo.

I returned to Australia after thirteen months. Nothing seemed to have changed while I was away, but people treated me with perhaps a bit more respect. The biggest change was in my own maturity.

Coming home I worked with my father on our farm, gradually taking over from him. During the years I was a church vestryman, office bearer for eight years in the gold club, played tennis, did two years motorcycle road racing, was regional president and state vice president of a breed society, was one of two WA representatives on an Industry Council meeting in Sydney twice a year and was the inaugural president of a Meat Council. My son took more and more responsibility and he has been running the farm business for many years. During the time we expanded our holding three times. My wife and I still live in retirement on the farm.

Lasting Memories;

Although fifty-eight years have gone by since we embarked in Japan in January 1947 on HMAS Kanimbla, many memories of my thirteen months in Japan are as fresh today as they were then. Perhaps at that period of our lives we were of a very impressionable age.

The crowding on the ship made sleeping on deck necessary, (there were 1000 troops on board) because it was too hot and stuffy below. The bunks were very

narrow, two side by side and three high. The aisle between rows was just wide enough for two men to squeeze past sideways. Air was circulated but with no air conditioning you can imagine how uncomfortable it was in the Tropics.

Being 'smart' a mate and I slept under a lifeboat to escape the early morning rain in the tropics, completely forgetting that the rain had to run somewhere and waking up with a river running across the deck and under our blankets. To go to bed on deck we spread out a blanket and used our footwear and shirt for a pillow.

One night my wallet, pay book and AB83 were stolen from under my head while asleep and I had to rely on my mates to lend me enough cash until I was issued with another pay book two weeks later. It took two weeks for the trip, with a twenty-four hour stop over in New Guinea. The last two days were extremely rough as we sailed through the tail end of a typhoon before entering the inland Sea of Japan.

Going from ship to train at Kure, travelling approximately 100 miles up the coast to a small town called Itasaki then marching 7 miles to the camp at Onomichi, where we became part of the 65th Battalion. After two weeks doing nothing on the ship, that march was fairly hard, as we had all our gear, rifle, bayonet, water bottle, basic pouches, haversack and pack with bedding on top.

The Battalion Padre did a great job, going up and down the line talking to everyone. Strange sights and smells in a country vastly different to our own were the first thing we noticed. After leaving Australia in mid summer and arriving in mid winter we had our first snow within ten days. Snow fights were common and some character made a 'snow woman' and then posed for photographs. Enough said!

Our first barracks were double story wooden buildings made of pine, fire was always a worry, so 44-gallon drums of water were placed every few feet along the upstairs passage. They would not have done a lot of good in winter as they turned to solid blocks of ice. Trying to sleep at night on a wooden floor, (no beds, no mattress) without wrecking a carefully constructed blanket bed, one did not want to be restless. The bed was made by interlacing blankets half and half with the last blanket around the lot. Most night attire consisted of full uniform minus belts and boots with the greatcoat thrown over the lot.

Our initial training in Japan was six weeks of parade ground drill, all day, every day, whatever the weather. Our Sergeant had been one of those chosen for the Victory March in London and vowed he would make us as good as the English Guards. I don't know if we were that good, but by the time he was finished with us we took pride in our dress and our marching and rifle drill.

All our webbing, belts, gaiters, straps, and rifle sling had to be blanched snow white. Badges, buttons, boot eyelets and brass studs on the rifle had to be polished till they shone and all our bayonets were chromed. We were fully trained for combat as well as being show troops.

After initial training I went to Transport. What followed was of great interest, both personally and historically. In 1947 Japan held the first free democratic elections in their entire history, each Battalion had a designated area under their control

and teams of observers were stationed out in the country. These teams were to give advice on how to vote in a democratic election and to see that there was no dirty work by the candidates. Perhaps we should be doing the same thing back here today.

My job was to take out rations to our three teams and bring back their reports six days a week. The teams consisted of a driver, interpreter and person in charge, (not always and Officer). They stayed at hotels. These hotels did not serve alcohol, but were more like a hostel.

I had a jeep and a trailer that was usually fully loaded on the outward trip. The daily run was about 120 miles nearly all over mountainous roads, (mostly one way tracks). As long as I delivered the rations and brought in the reports I could take any route that I liked. Being a flatlander from broad acre farming, the beautiful scenery, the small towns and villages, the people with their dress and way of life, all added up to one of the most interesting periods of my life. For some weeks I had to travel without a spare tyre, a recipe for disaster, as punctures were very common. The day I was given a spare I had a puncture.

Before long the Battalion moved 14 miles up the coast to Fukuyama where new barracks had been built for us. What a revelation. The barracks were two storey and steam heated in the winter. We had proper beds with mattresses and our own wardrobe / locker. The showers were great with buckets of hot water. Each company had its own mess and generally the meals were good, far better than some of the swill we had in Australia.

Before transferring out of transport I had two very interesting assignments. One was to drive a Jeep for the Field Security in Hiroshima for three days. For the life of me I can't remember doing anything special, but I did have time to look at some of the remains of the city. It was awesome to stand on the little concrete bridge near Ground Zero and look around at the devastation caused by one small bomb (inefficient by today's standards).

The second was again with the Field Security. They had been invited to a banquet put on by some big wigs in the local Communist Party and as the driver, I was included. What a meal! Something like fourteen courses and I never picked up a fork or spoon. There was a girl to feed every one of us every mouthful that we ate. Pure decadence. Unfortunately I have never been able to persuade anyone back here that they should do the same.

From Transport, I went to the "I" (Intelligence) Section in BHQ. A six-week "I" school at Matsuyama on the Island of Shikoku followed soon after. Here we learnt how to write reports, read maps properly, interpret aerial photography, classify roads, find our way around in the dark and sometimes get lost. An interesting school that finished with a party that saw most of the school unfit for general duties.

A lot of the work in the "I" section involved keeping tabs on the cell groups of Communists in all the towns. They were very active in those days and I am sure that our presence was instrumental in keeping them from gaining power. A lot of our material was passed on to Brigade HQ at Kure. The classification of roads

was always a welcome break. We were given a driver, jeep and trailer, and an Interpreter. We would load up our gear, rations for three days and head off into the country staying at Japanese Inns at night. We would cover all the roads and tracks in a designated area classifying them on the maps as to whether they would take a line of soldiers, a jeep or trucks of various sizes, up to a tank transporter.

Some of the roads were a bit “hairy” in winter, I remember travelling a road one vehicle wide with a rock wall one side and 300 feet of nothing on the other, when we hit a patch of black ice. Under those circumstances everything has a mind of its own as to where it wants to go. Luckily we stopped before anything disastrous happened. Here again I was lucky to see all of the area under the control of our Battalion.

At one stage the Battalion went to Tokyo for two months guard duty. Each Battalion took a turn doing guard duty at Embassies, Legations and the Imperial Palace. I think guard duty on the Palace was more to keep our people out than anybody in. The changeover parade was very impressive and I must admit to a certain amount of pride when the whole Battalion marched down the Imperial Plaza to the tune of Waltzing Matilda.

Tokyo was an eye opener, even if only for its size. The contrasts were very interesting, something very modern, (for then) and next to it something that had probably not changed in style for a thousand years. The weather in Tokyo was extremely humid and to walk a couple of hundred yards down the street saw ones clothes ringing wet.

No wonder we spent a fair portion of our leave in the beer halls trying to replace lost moisture. A glass of beer about the size of the old pint cost sixpence (today 5 cents). On the last day of guard duty it was decided that the last two guards would be of four hours each, instead of the usual two on and four off. This was to aid the packing up and moving of the Battalion back to Fukuyama. Then followed a monumental “stuff up”. We were forgotten and those of us out there stood and marched up and down our few yards at the guard post for eight hours.

I was always amazed by the attitude of some men, who after going on leave into town a couple of times never went out again. They reckoned they had seen enough and anyway it was not very interesting. No wonder they couldn't get back to Aussie quick enough. I went on leave at least five or six nights a week and never failed to see something new or something of interest.

Fraternization was not encouraged, but there were not too many blokes that didn't have a Japanese girlfriend. It would have been impossible to prevent a lot of virile young men from chasing girls. It was quite extraordinary how much conversation could be carried on with each person only knowing a dozen words of the others language.

So, after being settled and contented with the routine of army life, notice was given that we would be on our way home in 48 hours. Two weeks on the old Westralia (we started with a Typhoon in the Inland Sea and finished with a cyclone off Queensland), we were back in Aussie. Within ten days we were on

the streets of Perth with a discharge certificate in our hands and a rather lost feeling. The first girl I met that day was from my hometown; seven years later she became my wife.

These are only a few of the memories but they are very precious to me, and I reckon that there are a lot of “lads” out there in their seventies who feel the same way.

A bit of Reminiscing (Best done with cold beer in hand)

Last year in “Lasting Memories” I made mention of the Battalion going to Tokyo for a stint of guard duty. While there we were stationed out at Ebisu, or Ebisu Barracks as we called them. They were fairly large, all grey concrete and mostly two stories. At the rear of the camp were some enormous concrete tanks full of water. They were rumoured to have been used to test midget submarines, they were certainly large enough. We used them for swimming, but unfortunately most of us ended up with mild ear infections, so that came to an end. In the hot, humid Tokyo summer those swims were delightfully refreshing.

One thing that always stayed in my mind was breakfast. Nearly every morning in the mess would be a large container (10 Gal?) with a big block of ice and filled with tomato juice. That to me was luxury. We also had a free daily ration of six schooners of beer, they would give us six little tickets like the ones we used to get at the pictures and all you had to do was pass one over the bar for a cold beer. My mate and I were friendly with two renegades who worked in the Orderly Room and Pay Office. Somehow they ended up with a whole roll of tickets each. You would think that six free drinks would be enough, but I guess we were young and completely hollow in those days.

When on leave in Tokyo we often finished the day at the Union Jack Club for dinner. It was always delightful. A game of billiards or snooker then a beautiful dinner with white tablecloths and shining silver. It was good to get back to civilization for a while. Going back to camp we would catch the electric train at central. The carriages would be jam packed full, (no seating) and being summer the atmosphere would be fairly thick to say the least. The trip to camp usually took about twenty minutes.

In the January issue of BCON there was an article on the Kawana Hotel as a leave resort. We had six days at a hotel on Lake Biwa out of Kyoto. Sleep in, in the morning, maids to make the beds and wash and iron your clothes, a great dining room and a very relaxing bar and lounge. Leave into Kyoto full of interest, it was the original capital of Japan. We even managed a few sets of tennis. A great place to recharge the batteries.

When we went out on road reconnaissance we would go for three days and two nights. The nights we spent at Inns. We were given a living room and a couple of bedrooms for our own use. We always prepared our own evening meals. Some of them were wondrous concoctions, as we never knew what rations we had been given until we unpacked.

As long as they were piping hot on the cold nights they went down without any trouble. We would sit around a short-legged table with our legs in a square hole in the floor and a cloth covering the table. In the hole in the floor would be and Hibachi (a pot with hot charcoal in it). Even if it was snowing outside it was pretty comfortable inside.

Some of the scenery on these trips was magnificent. To come around a bend and there below would be a small village, all the roofs covered in snow and all the trees loaded with snow, everything quiet and serene, picture post card stuff. Very different to where I am now, with the temperature sometimes over 40c and hot wind and dust.

Once in the snow and ice we had a puncture in the jeep, jacking it up was no problem, but even with gloves our hands were too cold to hold the wheel nuts to take them off. We had to rub our hands together to spin them off. Most of us smoked in those days and to roll your own was courting disaster. With frozen hands you could destroy a whole packet of papers and lose half the tobacco.

When the weather was a bit warmer (still needed a great coat) we went to an outdoor picture theatre in a small inland town. It was an American film in English, the interpretation in Japanese ran across the bottom of the screen. Evidently with two different cultures and the interpreting, things get a bit mixed. We were laughing when they were solemn and they were laughing when we could see nothing to laugh at.

The site of the new barrack the Battalion moved into at Fukuyama was originally a seaplane base. It had this great concrete runway with spillways running down into the sea. The runway was used as the main parade ground. It was quite an impressive sight to see a whole Battalion Advance in Review Order. The RSM had a voice that could be quite clearly heard the full length!

When attending a school on the island of Shikoku some warships paid a visit. One was HMAS Shropshire and some of us were invited to spend the day on board. I always thought it amazing that, as a soldier, I could spend the day with a sailor on a ship, in Japan, and that this sailor and I were friends and had grown up together. He lives in Sydney now, but we usually meet once a year and remember those times.