

Things Past

Newsletter 50

April 2012

Mount Evelyn History Group Inc

PO Box 101 Mt Evelyn VIC 3796

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Dates for your diary

History Group meeting: Thursday 26 April, 7.30pm Mt Evelyn RSL, Hardy House, 49 Birmingham Road, Mt Evelyn.

The authors of *Aborigines of the Yarra Valley and Northern Dandenongs* will speak at the Lilydale Library, 2pm Saturday 21 April.

Unveiling of Roll of Honour plaque, Sunday 22 April, 2.00pm Mt Evelyn War Memorial Garden.

ANZAC Day Dawn Service Wednesday 25 April, 6.00am RSL Memorial (in front of RSL Hall).

Historic delights of Penang

The globe-trotting Herlihys explore the history of Penang, Malaysia.

We visited a Nonya house in Penang that recently opened for tourists as a privately owned museum, and spent many hours there.

The Baba Nonya have lived along the Straits of Malacca for generations. Descendants of late 15th and 16th century Chinese traders, they have adopted some of the Indonesian and Malay customs, creating a distinctive cultural identity. 'Nyonya' is the word for the women and 'Baba' for the men.

Our daughter-in-law Lesley's mother was adopted into a Nonya family as a small child, so her family has a Nonya tradition of dress and food (currently very fashionable in Penang!)

One high point at the Nonya house was having civet coffee prepared before our eyes (from grinding through to cooking on a gas Bunsen burner to serving), and five of us shared the



Timeworn graves at the Old Cemetery, Georgetown.

tasting (\$A23 a cup! Ordinary black coffee is about A30^c in Malaysia). Civet coffee is made from coffee berries that have been eaten and passed through the digestive system of civets (small cat-like mammals), causing the flavours to be subtly altered. You need at least three sips of the black coffee to get the effect!

Penang has historic Georgetown, a World Heritage City site. The Old Cemetery is beautiful, both the graves themselves and the way time has mellowed the area. There was a friendly caretaker and enough information to find the graves of people in the town's early European history.

We also visited a recently opened war museum at Batu Maung, Penang. While it was well conceived, I found it depressing, so cannot recommend it except to the enthusiast.

To be continued next month. Text and photos Paula Herlihy.



The Herlihys at the Nonya House, Penang.

Captain MacVean of Quietways

A distinguished service record, a lost cigarette case, a conscientious finder, a beautiful house name and an Admiral of the Fleet all figure in the story of Captain MacVean, as told here by Mike McMullen.

The story started in the 1980s when my late father-in-law found a silver cigarette case on the beach at Bellambi, NSW. It was inscribed 'Lieut. MacVean, 1st Bⁿ A.I.F.' He spent a long time trying to find either the owner or the family, without success. After his death, I decided to find out what I could and to return (if possible) the case to MacVean's family.

After a great deal of research, I found that Maffra William Bushby MacVean was Australian born (Toorak, 1887), but migrated to England with his family. At about 16 or 17, he returned alone to Australia and began a career as a stock and station agent in Coonamble, NSW.

He enlisted as a rifleman (Private) in the 1st AIF in August 1914, at the outbreak of WWI. He was wounded at Gallipoli and, after convalescing in Egypt, returned there and was among the last to leave the peninsula. MacVean was promoted to Lieutenant and was posted to the Western Front. He was again wounded and convalesced in England (I believe at his father's house). Awarded the Military Cross for actions at Fleurbaix and Pozières, he was repatriated to Australia with the rank of Captain.

It was there that my research met a dead end for a long while. I could find no evidence to tell me where he went or whether he had married, or had any children. I subsequently found (via British records) that he had an aunt in Sydney, where he stayed for a while. This aunt had



'Quietways' probably dates from the 1920s-30s. The land, now subdivided, was once part of David Mitchell's Cave Hill Estate. Photo Kevin Phillips.

some correspondence with the Defence Department about his war service. The correspondence gave MacVean's address as 'Quietways, Lilydale'.

I was assisted by Lieutenant Colonel Glyn Llanwarne, a serving Australian Army officer, who buys up military medals and traces the families of the original owners to return them. He found that MacVean was the uncle of the late Admiral Gordon John Branstone Crabb.

Admiral Crabb is survived by a daughter living in Sydney who is, as far as we can ascertain, the only living relative of Captain MacVean. I passed the cigarette case on to her and she was extremely pleased to get it. Although she remembered her great-uncle, she had not seen him for years and had nothing of his.

I was pleased to be able to link the case to MacVean's family. After I got to know him through my research, I must say it would have been a privilege to have met him.

From Mike McMullen & Lost Medals blogs

'Quietways' is the brick and timber gabled house on the hillside above the Swansea/Hereford Road intersection. MacVean had no children of his own. His stepdaughter, Dorothy Nesta Lind, was married in Lilydale Presbyterian church on 29 January 1944.

<http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/NameSearch/Interface/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=1966231>

<http://www.lostmedalsaustralia.com/>

http://lostmedalsaustralia.blogspot.com.au/2009_09_01_archive.html

<http://mafframacvean.blogspot.com.au/>

http://www.navy.gov.au/Gordon_John_Branstone_Crabb

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/11808345>

Descendants of John Blyth

Family historian Paul Blair would like to contact descendants of John Blyth (1824-1908). Blyth owned 'Blythswood', now 'Westhill', from 1887 till his death in 1908 (see *Things Past* 28). His widow sold the property in 1911. John Blyth, who was born in Africa, married twice and had sixteen children, eight from each marriage.

Paul's connection is that his grandmother's sister, Elizabeth Mary Ryan, married the fifth son, Alexander Macfarlane Blyth, in 1892. One family mystery is why Elizabeth married in Condobolin, NSW, having grown up in Melton, Victoria. If you have information on the Blyth descendants, please contact Paul, email: pblair@pcug.org.au

'Home in patched up ship'

Marian Adair sent us the following clipping from the Cairns Post, 24 March 1942.

How a party of R.A.A.F. men patched up a ship wrecked by bombing and navigated it at four knots from Java to Australia was told today by Flight-Lieut. G.A. Mocatta, a former Brisbane solicitor, who has arrived in Australia.

The vessel was a Thai prize ship, lying in Batavia. It had suffered several direct hits from bombs and had 63 bomb or shrapnel holes in the port side and 30 in the starboard side.

There were no lifeboats and no wireless. The holds (sic) were blocked where possible with blocks of wood and cement. A sergeant-pilot secured two radio receiving sets and patched up a transmitter from them.

To overcome the lack of lifeboats, empty petrol drums were lashed to long pieces of bamboo. A permanent list to starboard had to be effected to keep the ship afloat.

The ship was manned by makeshift personnel. The skipper was a Dane, first officer a Swede, third officer was Flight-Lieut. Mocatta, who has had naval experience. The first and second engineers were a Scot and a Cornishman from Malaya, who had not been to sea for years. The third engineer was a Chinese and the crew were also Chinese.

When arrangements were ready the ship put to sea with a convoy. But as the damaged engines could manage only four knots, it had to drop out of the convoy inside half an hour.

Limping along the coast of Java, the ship passed through the Sunda Straits in broad daylight. She was sighted by Japanese aircraft but not attacked.

After a journey of 16 days, the ship reached Australia. She had made less than 100 miles a day. All on board were R.A.A.F. personnel, except 10 civilians.

Flight-Lieutenant Mocatta then related his earlier experiences in Palembang, Sumatra, during the Japanese invasion.

In one day we sank a 10,000-ton transport, and set another ship of the same size on fire, sank a 5000 ton vessel, two ships of 3000 tons, and 32 barges on the river. We bombed the invading force until we ran out of bombs. Then our boys went over their ships at mast level and sprayed the decks with machine gun fire



Above, Doug Gordon of Mt Evelyn in RAAF uniform. Doug, who was 18 when he enlisted, was one of those who sailed the 'patched-up ship' from Java to Australia in 1942.

At the end of the day the Palembang river was littered with dead Japanese and the attack was smashed. But next morning there were twice as many of them on the way in So we had to leave Palembang.

We marched through the blazing oil fields – a terrifying sight – and down to Oosthaven. There was no doubt about the Netherlands scorched earth, they made an amazingly thorough job of the oilfields...

We were lucky to get out in the patched-up ship and our first glimpse of Australia was the sweetest sight we have ever seen.

One of the R.A.A.F. personnel on the ship was Doug Gordon, Marian Adair's brother. 'Doug would never speak about it all', said Marian. 'He just hoped war would never happen again.'

See also *Things Past* 45 & 46 and the Mt Evelyn RSL Newsletter, Autumn 2012.

Rydalmere?

History Group members enjoyed Bronwyn Higgs' talk on 'The Happy Hermits' on 24 March. The photos and diary readings brought back memories of the way things were done in the old days. Bronwyn's cousin Fred Higgs was one of the Hermits, but the family's connection to Mt Evelyn did not end with the dispersal of the group. Another cousin, William Carling Higgs, his wife Ruby and sons Max and Norm rented a house in Mt Evelyn in the 1920s and 30s.



Above, the holiday house. On the far left is Ruby Higgs, with her husband William just peeping out from behind the corner post. Max and Norm Higgs are sitting at ground level. The other children are cousins and ring-ins.



The lower photo shows the family grouped round a house sign, 'Rydalmere', which may have belonged to the same house. Does anyone remember either the house or the name?

William Higgs' father was also called William but went by the familiar name of 'Erne'. He loved Mt Evelyn. As an older man, he could often be seen fossicking in the hills around the district. Max and Norm have fond memories of staying at the holiday home at Mt Evelyn as boys but do not recall its location.

Photos & text courtesy Bronwyn Higgs

Tragedy at Stringybark Creek

Tim Heenan has pointed out that this month marks 100 years since the worst-ever accident on the Lilydale to Warburton railway line.

In the early morning of 18 April 1912, an up train from Warburton struck a maintenance trolley on the Forest Road bridge, killing four workmen: Walter Peberdy, Robert Hallam, Henry James and David Baxter. A number of others were injured. In a particularly sad twist to the story, Peberdy's wife was then 'on the water', coming from England to join him (*Hobart Mercury* 19/4/1912, <http://newspapers.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/10217308>). The report calls the location 'the bridge over the Stringy Bark Creek, between Wandin and Evelyn stations'.

It seems that the creek name, if not the spelling, was fixed by 1912. This raises a question: when was the Stringybark not the Stringybark? The creek derives from three sources. The Little Stringybark rises between Forge Road and Bailey Road, at the foot of Billygoat Hill. Another tributary, which flows from a spring on the Edwards' property, is now officially 'McKillop Creek'. The longest branch, the Stringybark proper, rises near Queens Road, Silvan. Strangely, some early maps differ on the names. For instance, we have a survey map, correct to 1922 (printed 1935), that shows what should be the Little Stringybark as the Stringybark. The main branch is not named.

From Kev's rain gauge

Rainfall for March 2012 for Mt Evelyn, McKillop, Melbourne and the Melbourne average.*

Mt Ev	McK	Melb	Melb Av
61.2mm	88.5mm	57.4mm	50.3mm

* McKillop readings courtesy Jean Edwards; Melbourne figures from Bureau of Meteorology website.

Kevin Phillips

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