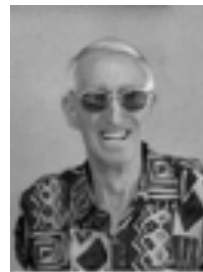


A SOLDIER'S STORY



Service No.: SX9929
Name: William Hurtle SCHMITT
Nickname: Schmitty



Medals and Decorations

Order of Australia

1939 - 45 Star

Africa Star

Pacific Star

Defence Medal

War Medal 1939 - 45

Service Medal 1939 - 45

Rank: Private

Service: Army

Enlisted: 24 Jul 1940

Discharged: 22 Nov 1945

William (Bill) was born at Cowell on 30 Apr 1918 to Francis Frederick Lincoln (Linc) Schmitt and Sybil Schmitt (nee Goodes). His father was a ganger on the railways. He was the eldest of 5 boys in the family. He went to school at Ungarra, leaving at the completion of Grade 7 in 1931.

He undertook whatever work he could get, working mainly on local farms as a 14 year old lad, until he managed to get a job with Sheehans at Tumby Bay and then with Elders. He remained in this employ until he enlisted.

In Jul 1940 both he and his brother, Murray, went across to Adelaide on the "*Minnipa*" and enlisted in the Army at Wayville (SA). Bill undertook his recruit training at Wayville before being allocated to 2/3rd Machine Gun (MG) Battalion. He then undertook further training at Warradale (SA) and Woodside (SA), before entraining for Sydney.

On 10 Apr 1941 he embarked on the "*Isle de France*" bound for the Middle East. In May 1941 he arrived at Hill 95 in Palestine before being sent into Syria. He remained in Syria until Jan 1942.

In late Jan 1942 he embarked on the "*Orchidy*" bound for Summatra: before boarding, the battalion had been stripped of all its weapons and the troops had only marching order (basically the clothes that they were wearing). All of their equipment, weapons, echelon bags and such were loaded onto another ship, never to be seen again. On arrival at Summatra on 10 Feb 1942 he went ashore at Heoostafen; he and a few of the troops were given weapons from the ships store and the remainder were advised to "cut themselves a stout stick and wait for someone to drop and to grab their rifle". It was found that the

Japanese were already entrenched here so it was back onto the ship and off to Batavia (Djakarta) for a night landing to secure the airport. The next morning his unit location was bombed so it was off to Boetenzorg – it was here that they had their first contact with Japanese ground troops. The troops of 2/3rd MG and 2/2nd Pioneer Battalions (about 1000) began a strategic withdrawal, but the Dutch capitulated and blew the radio transmitter, so the Australian's had no communications with their senior Headquarters.

On 9 Mar 1942, Bill was captured. He was taken to Leles, then to Garoet and finally to Bandoeng, where the Prisoners of War (PoW) were held and concentrated. In Jan 1943 about 1000 PoW were taken by train to Makasura, then by boat to Singapore arriving on 10 Jan 1943. During the trip Bill had contracted amoebic dysentery, so was taken to hospital where he almost died, whilst the remainder of the PoW were taken to Thailand.

After recovering from the disease he was taken to the infamous Changi prison. This prison was built to house 600 inmates, but 6000 PoW were held there. He was put to work building the Changi airstrip. Again he almost died, but this time as a result of allied air raids on the airstrip.

On 30 Aug 1945 he was released. It was decided that those that had served in the Middle East would be sent home first, but again difficulties arose. He boarded an aircraft on 20 Sep 1945 bound for Aust, but the aircraft had engine trouble, so a day later he landed in Balikpapan (Borneo). Bill and his mates had only the clothes they stood in varying from lap-laps to home made shorts, so when they landed in Balikpapan they received the first hot shower they had had in 4 years (with soap!) and were issued with a new set of US uniforms. From here the aircraft flew to Morotai and then to Marauke, but on this leg was caught in a fierce electrical storm and had to put down in Beak (PNG). It was then an uneventful trip, refueling at Marauke and Townsville before arriving at Brisbane. Bill then traveled by troop train to Melbourne where he again met with his brother Murray.

He then traveled to Adelaide and was given a weeks leave whilst repatriation checks were completed before being given a further months leave to return to Cummins to see his mum and dad: he took his discharge on 22 Nov 1945.

On 22 Apr 1946 Bill married Joan Heinze at Port Lincoln. They had 3 children, a boy and 2 girls.

Bill continued his repat and got a job with Welford builders before again gaining employ with Elders. He was certainly mobile in this job, working at Adelaide, Tumby Bay, Cummins, Kapunda, Cleve and Keith, before finally returning to Adelaide. In Dec 1978 he retired and settled into his house at Mitchell Park in Adelaide. But in retirement he could not stop – in 1995 he was awarded an AM because of the untiring work that he had undertaken for veterans and POW welfare. Even at the age of 93 he was still heavily involved and was a member of the Veterans Advisory Council that reported directly to

the minister.

In his younger days he was a keen sportsman, playing cricket and football for Tumby and after the war tennis.

He was a member of the RSL and Secretary of the Tumby Bay Sub Branch. He attended the opening ceremony of the RSL building in Tumby.

Unfortunately since this story was written Bill died in May 2015. He is buried in Adelaide.

Post Script.

Bill tells a story of how the RSL at Tumby was funded in its early days. In fact how many clubs were funded on the Peninsula at that time.

Crops were sown on various farms and the farmer would get half for providing the land whilst the club would get the remaining half for sowing and reaping the crop. It happened that the “townies” contribution to this scheme was the sewing of the bags in which the wheat was transported. Each person was expected to sew 100 bags in a day.

One day in the middle of summer it was Bills turn to sew the bags. He and his mate, Bob Fitzgerald, duly arrived at the Tumby Bay hotel to be transported to a farm, out near Lipson. The publican of the time noted them outside and surmised that they were off to bag sew, so gave them a flagon of beer to slake their thirst during the day.

Bill states that by morning “smoko” the beer was gone, it was as hot and dusty as hell and he had sewn 8 bags. In the paddock next to him he could see a professional bag sewer working away, so Bill went over and asked him how much he charged per 100 bags; he replied 15/- (\$1.50). Bill said OK, gave him 15/- and said there are 92 to sew over there. He walked back, told his mate what he had done, hitched a ride back to town and went to the pub.

His mate had said that it was too expensive to pay to have the job done and continued on in the field. About an hour after Bill arrived at the pub his mate walked in and ordered a beer. Bill asked how he had finished so quickly, and his mate answered that he had paid 15/- to the same bag sewer to finish his remaining 90 bags.

No doubt they spent the rest of the day recuperating (in the hotel) from this ordeal!

