

HAWKESBURY DISTRICT NSA REFLECTION SPEECH HARRY PRESTON

Robyn Preston MP
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It was the 15th March 1944 when John Harold Preston, an 18 year old metal finisher from Bonnyrigg in Sydney's western suburbs, enlisted as a Leading Aircraftman with the Royal Australian Air Force, Service Number 162070.

He had high expectations to train as a pilot, but after rigorous testing it was identified that he was colour blind, so that personal development opportunity was quickly squashed.

He always answered to Harry – and the blokes called him handsome Harry – a nickname that stayed with him all his life, for Harry was a striking man with a dashing smile and laughing hazel coloured eyes.

Basic training was in Wagga Wagga at that time, then, eventually he boarded a ship from Sydney to Borneo and found himself in the Borneo Campaign - a four and a half month operation from May to August 1945, that was the last major allied battle in the South West Pacific Area during World War II.

Forces from Australia, United States, the UK and Netherlands fought against Japan.

The plans for the Allied attacks were collectively known as **Operation Oboe** and the aim was to destroy Imperial Japanese forces in, and to re-occupy, the Dutch East Indies, Kingdom of Sarawak, Brunei, Labuan, British North Borneo and the southern Philippines.

Borneo in particular, was considered at the time a strategic location for its natural resources, especially oil. There were six stages to Operation Oboe – stage 2 was **The Battle of Balikpapan**.

The amphibious landings took place on 1st July 1945 a few miles north of Balikpapan, on the island of Borneo. The landing, had been preceded by heavy bombing and shelling by Australian and U.S. air and naval forces –

and that's where Harry Preston came in.

You see, it was Harry's job as a Leading Aircraftman with the 6th Air Construction Squadron, to drive a D9 bulldozer up and down the make-shift landing strips for the allied fighter planes to land, refuel and then head back into the sky to fight the enemy.

Each time Harry would try to smooth out the runway with his bulldozer, the Japanese would fly over and bomb the strip many, many times over.

As Harry saw the enemy approaching who would take cover under the bulldozer – he figured, he had a far better chance of survival by sheltering under the tracks on heavy equipment, than making a run for it, into open space.

The bombing gave Harry Tinnitus but he never, ever made a fuss about it.

The Japanese were eventually outnumbered and outgunned in the battle, but like the other confrontations of the Pacific War, many of them fought to the death.

Major operations had ceased by 21st July. Australian casualties were significantly lighter than they had suffered in previous campaigns. The battle began only a few weeks before the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which effectively, ended the war. Japan surrendered while the Australians were combing the jungle for stragglers.

Following the surrender, the Brigades were committed to occupation duties until around February 1946, and on 12th March 1946, Harry Preston was discharged.

His Certificate of Service and Discharge notes that his character on discharge was 'very good'.

He headed back to Bonnyrigg – with no fan fair, no red carpet. Harry just got on with the business of living and locked away the vividness of the battlelines in his memory.

He was just happy to be in his homeland. He met a beautiful girl named June who reluctantly went on a date with Harry.

I recall Harry telling me he was smitten with June from the first instant he saw her.

They were married for 67 years, had two children, five grandchildren and three great grandchildren.

Each year on ANZAC Day, Harry's son Peter, proudly wears his Father's medals and in time, my son James will honour his grandfather by wearing Harry's medals on special commemorative occasions.

Harry made life-long friends in Borneo.

Bill Hoad was one of those mates and he lived in Perth - and June and Harry would make the pilgrimage every few years for the next 40 years, to meet up, reminisce and share new experiences in life's journey.

Every ANZAC Day, Harry attended the dawn service with around 10 close family members. They would go to the local RSL for a few rums, loads of conversation, a few games of two-up and the several games of cards.

I recall a quiet conversation I had with Harry one ANZAC Day when he was 82 years old. We were at Castle Hill RSL and I'll never forget the deep sadness in his eyes when I asked him why he never talked about the war.

His mouth trembled as his mind flashed back to the horror of those days on the shores of Balikpapan and the savagery of the attack by Japanese soldiers.

His eyes glazed over and he said to me...

"Nobody should ever hear of the atrocities I saw in battle. It has lived with me every single day of my life.".... and then, his voice quietly faded...there was nothing else to say.

Harry was a man who loved gardening.

I think it took his mind to a better place. The splash of red salvias, the colourful petunias and fragrant frangipanis, all adorned his garden.

They stood for tranquility, beauty and peace and gave him a sense of calm reality.

I recall how he would constantly play music and he would sing along to Bing Crosby, Burl Ives, Dean Martin and even Abba.

He told me the music helped fight the demons in his mind that brought back the horror of war that was deeply etched in his memory forever.

I am reminded of the solemnness of Memorial Services like today's and of the deep appreciation I have for our veterans who showed Courage, Mateship, Sacrifice and Endurance.

Australia has lost 102,760 personnel in the wars. In World War I, 156,000 were wounded and 60,000 of those died within 10 years of returning to Australia.

Today is a day to honour our serving members and I am particularly proud to share my father-in-law, Harry Preston's story with you.

Harry found a way to smile again in life, through his deep affection and love for his family and friends.

Today, I say thank you Harry Preston, for your contribution to this country's freedom.

I am proud to have known you, Pa.

Rest in peace.

Lest we forget.