

Mateship sustains veterans

Lucy Jarvis

NORTH Beach RSL veterans have varied experiences of conflict and service, yet share a sense of mateship.

Geoffrey Pope, 95, enlisted with the Royal Australian Army when he was 18, inspired by his father who served at Gallipoli in World War I and his brother who flew Lancaster bombers over Germany with the Royal Australian Air Force.

"I couldn't go overseas until I was 19," the Craigie resident said.

"In that time, I had acne all over me — they listed me as unfit for tropical service."

Mr Pope served with the 2nd/13th battalion in Borneo and 66 Battalion British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan before being discharged in 1947.

He said he used to march on Anzac Day and now spent the day — and most days — thinking about his old mates

and a few of the officers he served with.

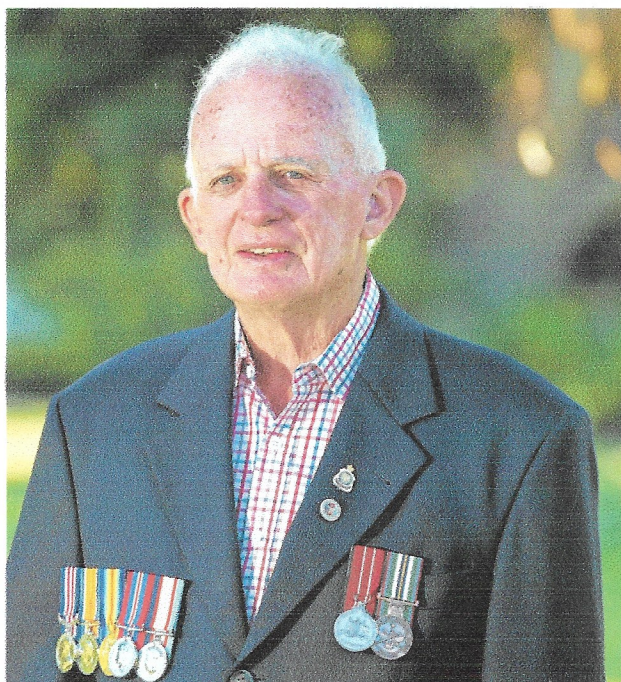
Wayne Koch, 73, said he could remember Anzac Day services as solemn events since he was in primary school in the late 1950s and early '60s, and going to town to watch the parade.

Mr Koch said commemorations became more important after he was called up for national service with the army in 1968 and posted to Vietnam for 12 months.

His grandfather was a WWI soldier who trained at Blackboy Hill before going on the second convoy to Egypt then took part in the Gallipoli landing.

After surviving various battles and rising through the ranks from private to second lieutenant, he was captured and became a prisoner of war.

"I had no verbal history of this; I only found out when I researched his medals," Mr Koch said.



Clockwise from left: Brian Jennings, Peta Connelly and Geoffrey Pope. Pictures: David Baylis

Peta Connelly, 44, became an army reservist when she was 17 then joined the Royal Australian Army at 21. Mrs Connelly served in peace-keeping roles for eight years full-time before being discharged in 2005 then did another eight years with the reserves.

The Trigg resident joined North Beach RSL about

eight years ago and said being part of the organisation had been her "saving grace" as she adjusted to civilian life.

"RSL offers a way back into the community — people to talk to who are like-minded," she said.

"They can give you advice and introduce you to people that might help; people who

can help you get back to work."

She said the branch helped her get health issues recognised and looked out for her, calling to check in if she missed meetings and motivating her to go to gym.

Brian Jennings, 76, served with the 3rd Battalion RAR based in South Australia with about 50 West

Australians.

The retiree has been with North Beach RSL about six years, having done his national service from 1966-68.

"I can't say I enjoyed it — it was something that everyone had to do," he said.

"We were discharged as they went to Vietnam, so we missed out thankfully."

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Comrades come together

Kids take an interest

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CAMARADERIE and understanding underpin the support veterans find at North Beach RSL.

As they prepare to host Anzac Day commemorations at Charles Riley Memorial Park, members shared how the organisation binds them together.

The North Beach RSL service will start 5.30am on April 25 and pay tribute to the Royal Australian Air Force's 100th anniversary.

In the past the service has been one of the biggest in the metropolitan area, outside Kings Park, and organisers expected several thousand people to attend this Sunday.

Assistant secretary Wayne Koch, 73, said the sub-branch was one of the biggest in Perth, with about 340 members and a great sense of camaraderie.

Mr Koch said he had been part of the RSL for 50 years and valued how it brought together veterans of all ages from various military backgrounds and conflicts.

"You get a different rub of shoulders," the Vietnam War veteran said.

Mr Koch said they were active in organising events and working together, and included social activities such as kayaking and coffee meetings which supported



Peta Connelly, Geoffrey Pope and Wayne Koch at the North Beach Memorial. Picture: David Baylis

veterans' wellbeing.

"It's a good escape for a lot of people who would normally be socially isolated," he said.

Geoffrey Pope, 95, has been attending RSL sub-branch meetings and services since moving to Perth in the mid-1980s.

The WWII stretcher bearer said he enjoyed the fellow-

ship shared between veterans.

His son Andrew said the sub-branch also provided support for veterans, distributing hampers at Christmas and helping them find support services through the Department of Veterans' Affairs and other organisations.

Website editor Brian Jen-

nings, 76, said about 140 people attended a recent sub-branch meeting, which showed how welcoming the club was. Mr Jennings started researching and writing profiles about veterans this year to publish on the sub-branch's website.

"I'm trying to get all the World War II stories together before they disappear into

the sunset," he said.

"My grandfather was in World War I and he never spoke about it.

"He got a military medal (but) he told his sons he won it in a raffle.

"It's really good to see that they have got a place like the RSL where they can go and be comfortable and just be themselves."

RSL stalwart Jack Le Cras, who joined the Royal Australian Navy aged 17 in 1944, says Anzac Day is a time for reflection and respect.

The WWII veteran witnessed the peace-signing with Japan the day after his 18th birthday, and later served in the Naval Reserves for 25 years.

"I've only missed one Anzac Day parade since 1952," the Wanneroo RSL president said.

"This year we are heavily involved in visiting schools.

"We've had so many requests we've had to knock back some because we don't have enough people.

"Some of them are very enjoyable when you look at what the children are doing and how they are presenting their own service.

"They are very appreciative of our people attending; they look at medals and want to know what they are."



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