

Vern Roberts.

One of our WW2 Heroes

Vern Roberts will reach 100 *in October next year!* He is possibly the oldest living person who witnessed the signing of the Surrender in Morotai with General Sir Thomas Blamey and the Japanese Generals on September 9th 1945 .

He was born 25th October 1924 in Footscray in Melbourne. At 18 he joined the RAAF in November 1942 and reported to Royal Exhibition Buildings, Melbourne for uniforms.

Vern, V.F. Roberts **RAAF LAC Fitter**, was stationed at East Sale air base only a matter of weeks after it first opened in 1943. He was in a B-24 Liberator Squadron which was attached to 82 Wing of 21, 23 and 24 squadrons.

He spent time in Tocumwal, NSW and Darwin NT.

The signing of the Instrument of Surrender was carried out on Morotai on September 9th, 1945 where he was present along with many other servicemen. The General in Charge with his other Officers, was General Sir Thomas Blamey. Japanese Generals were brought over to Morotai from the islands for that great occasion. Every ANZAC Day, he walked in the Parade to the Shrine of Remembrance along with a very few remaining gentlemen from his Squadron. At 94, it was the last time he participated in the march and now watches the ANZAC service on television. Since 1994 he was heavily involved in the restoration of a B24 Liberator in Werribee, Victoria. This restoration is the largest in the Southern Hemisphere and accredited by the National Trust.

VERN ROBERTS – LIBERATOR STORY

24 SQUADRON B-24 LIBERATOR

(21, 23, 24 SQUADRONS FORMED 82 WING)

82 Wing operated from July 1944 to July 1945 from airstrips south of Darwin – Manbulloo Fenton and Long – carrying out air raids on shipping in the Timor area and Timor Sea.

In July 1945, 82 Wing were moved to Morotai Island which was held by the Japanese up to the early part of 1944, until taken by the American Forces. Morotai was used as a base for the invasion of Borneo. Main places were Balikpapan and Tarakan. 82 Wing Squadrons, 21, 22, and 24, made many bombing raids from Morotai inflicting damage to Army installations and airfields held by Japan. These raids were made before the 7th Division of the

A.I.F. (Australian Infantry Forces) made their attack on Borneo securing Balikpapan and Tarakan after heavy fighting.

The Japanese surrendered after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 15th. The signing of the Instrument of Surrender was carried out on Morotai on September 9th, 1945 which we were all present.

The General In Charge with his other Officers, was Sir Thomas Blamey. Japanese Generals were brought over to Morotai from the islands for that great occasion in our history of Australia. He also read out the terms and conditions of the surrender to the Japanese Generals present.

From then it was our Squadron's job to repatriate prisoners of war – nurses and other Army personnel back to Australia. As an Airframe Fitter, we fitted our B-24's Bomb Bay with luggage racks which was to hold any luggage they had. They carried about 25-26 people in each aircraft, dispersed in the front and rear of the aircraft. They only carried a crew of 5 or 6. Each aircraft was sent to different locations all over Australia. It must have been a rather uncomfortable flight as there was not time to fit out the aircraft, but they all were so pleased to be on their way home after the years of being held as prisoners.

Our aircrew did many hours of flying, having to return time and time again to repatriate these people down to Australia. The job went on for 4 months until December 1945. Many of our Squadron's personnel remained there until December 1945 to service and refuel the B24's while they were doing this great job of getting people back to Australia.. The last of us returned home in late December 1945.

I would like to make mention of the wonderful job our aircrew did during those trying days in our history of Australia.

Also what a great job our B-24 Liberator and crew did in the defense of Australia during those dark days of World War II in the South West Pacific area.

Vern Roberts - June, 2011

As I reflect on my life, there are two things, I believe, that are very important. The first is to be caring towards one's parents and the second is to always have respect for other people. I hope that, through my example, my children (and grandchildren) have learnt this too.

As I write this, I am now 86 years of age, and this is my story (so far).

After serving 3 years of my printing apprenticeship, I was called up for military service. At 18 years of age, I joined the RAAF and in November, 1942 it was full on training. Our rookie's course was at the Shepparton Showgrounds which was over 10 days. The basic training course was done in Adelaide. After the completion of my basic training, I was mustered as a Flight Rigger.

East Sale in Gippsland was my first posting. I spent the next 8 months working on Lockheed Hudson aircraft and Airspeed Oxfords. East Sale was a training station where all the aircraft were utilised to train aircrew for operational duties. From there, some of us (including myself), were posted to Tocumwal. This was the RAAF Operational Training Unit where pilots, radio operators and air gunners were converted onto the B-24 Liberator Bomber. After a few months, we were formed into Squadrons in preparation for our big move up North. I was posted to 24 Squadron; the squadron I remained with until the end of the war. Over the next 18 months, there were 7 squadrons of Liberators formed consisting of 287 Liberators. Squadrons 21,23, & 24 made up 82 Wing and, in June and July, 1944, the whole Wing was moved to the Northern Territory. Our aircrew initially operated out of Katherine, carrying out bombing raids well north of Australia; often flying for 15 hours and returning via the Truscott Airfield to refuel. Then, after about 4 or 5 months, 24 Squadron relocated to the Fenton Airfield; which had been the base of the USA 380th Bomber Group before they headed further north. In December, 1944 we travelled to Darwin where we boarded two Liberty Ships. They were the S.S. Louis Arguello and the Cleveland Forbes, 12,000 ton American cargo ships. Each ship carried about 1200 airmen. At the time of boarding, our destination was unknown. It turned out to be Morotai but the route travelled was via Port Moresby and the east coast of New Guinea. Fortunately, we did so without any trouble, despite there being a real risk of an enemy submarine spotting us. We found Morotai full of troops - Army, Air Force and Navy - from both America and Australia. Over the next few months, until the 15th of August, 82 Wing was kept busy carrying out raids - day and night - on Borneo and the surrounding islands.

The 15th August, 1945 was greeted with a great deal of relief for all of us. The Japanese had surrendered after 6 years of war! Our aircraft were then used to transport our nurses, prisoners of war and thousands of troops back down south. Each Liberator carried about 25 passengers with the bomb bays fitted with luggage racks. We were home for Christmas, 1945. And then, it was time to pick up civilian life where we had left off back in 1942. But before that, I will share a little about my youth. My parents migrated to Australia from Guernsey, Channel Islands. Winifred, my sister, was 3 years old at the time. They came on the "Orvieto", a ship of only 12,000 tons, arriving at Port Melbourne in November, 1919.

They settled in Footscray, a suburb of Melbourne, and my father found work at Michaels and Hehlenstein Tanneries in Footscray. I was born in October, 1924 and my schooling commenced at Geelong Road State School. I really enjoyed my years there; we took part in all kinds of sports such as football and swimming. The swimming was at the Footscray Baths (every Friday morning) but the water was not heated; we just had to jump straight into the cold water no matter how poor the weather was.

While I was attending the Geelong Road School, I often had lunch with my cousin, Don, who lived across the road from the school. We played in his backyard and often got up to mischief around the bantam pens and the fish pond; which actually had a few fish in it.

In 1938, I had attained my Merit Certificate and I started working for a firm of printers, EA. Whitehead & Co., in Francis Street, Melbourne. I was a Letterpress Machinist apprentice. But before I could start, I

had to do the usual message boy runs which required me to push a hand truck around the streets of Melbourne; delivering and picking up parcels.

Now, after the war ended, I went back to the printing trade to finish off my apprenticeship; as I still had 2 years to complete.

It was during this time that I started a love for old cars. The first few cars were a 1927 Crossley Tourer; a 1933 Hillman Sedan (with 8 cylinders), which was too expensive to run; and a 1936 Hillman Minx Sedan, which I kept for quite a while.

It did not take very long before I was able to pick up with my social life again; going to the local dances and mixing with my old friends. I married Gwen in January, 1949 at the Holy Trinity Church of England, in Williamstown, Victoria. We had a weatherboard house built on a block of land that we had, we moved into the house in December, 1949 and we are still living there today. Our first child, Brian, was born in 1951 followed by Judith in 1956. But tragically, she lived for only 17 days; she had an abnormal heart condition. In 1957, Glenda was born, another little girl; which helped to fill the big gap left through the loss of Judith.

Gwen and I became involved in the children's activities: gym classes for Glenda; and, Cubs and Scouts for Brian. We also became members of the primary school Parents' Committee and Gwen was also a member of the Mothers' Club. So our spare time was taken up pretty well. Also, every year, for 17 years, we spent two weeks of the Christmas holidays at Barwon Heads.

In 1956 I took on driving taxis for Moderne Taxis and I drove Friday and Saturday nights. During those years I was working at the Commonwealth Bank Note Printing which was a very secure job. Nevertheless, I thought I could do better for myself, so I borrowed quite a few pounds and bought a taxi licence and I started to operate my own business in October, 1957; the same month Glenda was born.

For the next 29 years, until 1985, the taxi industry was our primary means of support. I really enjoyed all those years of being self-employed and driving every weekday from 7 until 5:30. It was not a worry to me. I had part time drivers working for me which enabled me to spend the weekends with the family. During those 29 years, I had every model Holden beginning with the 1953 model through to the 1980 Kingswood. I sold out in 1985 which was when I retired from the workforce, I was 60 years old. For quite a while, Gwen worked at night at the Woollen Mills in Yarraville. After that, she worked at the Footscray Psychiatric Hospital as a Telephonist/Receptionist for eight years. She also retired in 1985.

In 1971, we took a break from work and went on a wonderful trip to England, travelling on the P & O Liner, Oriana. The ship voyage took 6 weeks and we returned by air after 14 weeks of travel. We toured England, Europe and the Channel Islands where we visited Guernsey, the place my parents were born. Ten years later, in 1981, we did the trip again but this time we flew both ways. Glenda came with us for the 9 weeks, and once again, we visited the Channel Islands, England and Europe.

Since our retirement, life has been very full. We now have five grandchildren to spoil and we have travelled extensively around Australia. In May, 1985 - the year that we both retired - we left for a trip around Australia, in a 1981 Toyota Hi Ace campervan. We travelled the full distance around Australia, travelling 25,000 km, in 14 weeks. We visited every capital city in Australia as well as Alice Springs. On another trip, we went to Norfolk Island; which was special as we went with thirty people from the Probus Club. In 2002, we travelled, by caravan, west through Mount Gambier and across to Adelaide and the Barossa Valley. After that, we toured Canberra which included a tour of the new section of the War Memorial which features many aircraft, submarines and vehicles. During our trips to the Northern Territory, we have visited two World War II airstrips, Katherine and Fenton; the strips I was stationed at during the war. It was very nostalgic to visit the old airstrips after 50 years.

We are looking forward to taking more caravan holidays; but not travelling as far; just travelling around New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Of course, we plan to continue our visits to see Brian, Joyce and their three Children (David, Nicole and Mark) and to see Glenda, Brad and their two children (Tayler & Hayley).

In 1996 I became involved with a very big project; the rebuilding of a World War II B-24 Liberator Bomber. It is probably one of the biggest restoration projects, of an aircraft, going on in the world, where all the work is performed solely by volunteers. It is a big challenge for all of those involved. It is great to think that we have so many dedicated men and women involved in this restoration program. The Wyndham City Council - along with the many volunteers - is hoping that there will be a local museum built to display this grand, old World War II bomber; a bomber which did a magnificent job in helping to defend Australia during World War II.

For over 60 years, we have both been members of the Western Bulldogs Football Club. Through our work with the club, we have made many good friends. The 1990 Bulldog Fight Back will never be forgotten. This is when our club was in great financial difficulty and the club was told, by the VFL, that they could no longer be part of the competition. Within 3 weeks, the club's supporters banded together and raised 1.5 million dollars; and thus won the right for them to pay their debts and remain in the VFL.

Also, I am proud to have been a long serving member of the West Footscray Rotary Club (over 30 years); the Footscray Probus Club (over 20 years); and, the B-24 Liberator Restoration Fund (over 16 years) - an enjoyable achievement but quite an achievement all the same. In fact, I became President of the Probus Club in 1997.

And finally, without doubt, Gwen - whom I married over 62 years ago - has been my greatest source of inspiration and support in everything I have set out to achieve.

Editor's foot-note: John is also currently a Committee member of the B-24 Liberator Memorial Restoration Fund; and has been for the past 10 years.





Ready for dinner at the mess, at
Fenton Darwin 1944



Scotty - one of our mascots at
Fenton 1944



1944 Age 20. Fenton near Darwin



1945 Morotal with Charlie our
resident monkey



1944 Fenton near Darwin Vern
Harvey and myself with a baby
kangaroo



"Wood chopping"
1944 Fenton near Darwin

JAPANESE SURRENDER PARTY
ESCORTED BY BRIG. V. C. SECOMBE



Gordon Roscoe & I in front of
"Old Nick" a B24 Liberator which
later crashed 1944 at Fenton

LT. GEN. HOSHIMA, COMMANDER SECOND JAPANESE
ARMY, SIGNING THE INSTRUMENT OF SURRENDER



Vern Harvey, Wally Goulder,
Dave Grieg and myself holding
our 303 rifles



