

Military Medal winner

CHARTERS Towers' Ernie Huxley has a Military Medal to prove his courage and dedication to duty under fire on Bougainville in WWII, but is at odds with the wording of his citation.

Australian military records have him killing four Japanese soldiers and "capturing" a Juki heavy machinegun at Tsimba Ridge on January 20, 1945.

"I didn't capture it. I destroyed it," Ernie said matter-of-factly as he sat on the verandah of his comfortable home in the Towers, where he has lived for 80 of his 90 years.

As he prepared to honour his mates at another ANZAC Day, his memories of that day, and his six years in the Army, were clear.

With D Company (31/51 Australian Infantry Battalion) held up by heavy fire, the then Lance Sergeant Ernie Huxley led a patrol charged with gathering information about enemy positions on a section of Tsimba Ridge known as the Pimple.

But when the patrol came under heavy fire from an enemy gun pit, LSGT Huxley and another soldier outflanked it and killed the four occupying Japanese soldiers. "We suddenly found ourselves amongst the enemy," said Ernie, adding that there was no question of capturing the gun.

With so much lead in the air, there was only ever one alternative - destroy it and get out.

Japanese troops tried encircling his section, but when a couple jumped up, they met

the same fate as the others. "I gave each of 'em a squirt," said Ernie, who was armed with an Owen machinegun, which he described as a good jungle weapon.

The citation said that as well as fighting his section to safety without loss, LSGT Huxley's bold patrol gathered information that enable a successful attack to be mounted on the enemy's positions.

"When his platoon commander was evacuated, this NCO became the commander and, in the subsequent operation, led the platoon in an

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outstanding manner.

"The determination and courage of SGT Huxley throughout in overcoming difficulties, and the manner in which he controlled and led his troops by

his own personal example in the face of enemy fire, won the respect and admiration of all," it reads.

Ernie takes delight in saying he was conceived in Hughenden, born in Townsville and returned to Hughenden, where he lived until the age of four, when his family moved to the Towers.

Despite four years in Hughenden and six in the Army, he is a son of Charters Towers. A grandfather, Andy Huxley, was one of four brothers who set off from Sydney to drive a herd of horses to the

Charters Towers goldfields in 1874, two years after the discovery of gold.

"One of the brothers got as far as Brisbane, where he found a girl to his liking and left the party. The three others completed the journey, with two returning to Sydney, leaving my grandfather here, where he married a Danish woman.

"They had seven children, my father - Bill - being the second youngest."

The grandfather went into hotels, but proved to be a compulsive gambler.

"That was to be his down-

fall. He lost the Annabranche Hotel and five racehorses."

While that finished him financially, pneumonia ended him physically.

"He had a cancer of the lip and had taken ship to Sydney for treatment, but died enroute.

"My dad was nine when his father died."

"Dad was a carpenter who did bush work, but Mum, Mary Agnes (nee King), who was also born in Charters Towers, wouldn't go bush.

"He was wagon-building for Queensland Railways in Hughenden when I was born. Four years later we moved to the Towers."

Educated at the local primary school and Mount Carmel College, Ernie - along with brothers Andy, two years older, and Frank, nine years

younger - was a child of the Depression.

With his dad reduced to working two and a half days a week in Townsville as he struggled to support his family, young Ernie was forced to take what work he could get - first in a grocery store and then in a bakery, and both against his will.

But in those tough economic times, any job was a good job.

However, his grocery career came to an ignominious end - sacked the day he turned 17 to make way for a more lowly paid replacement.

An apprenticeship as a baker-pastry cook followed, but disenchantment with the anti-social hours started him talking to Andy about getting more excitement in their lives.

Ernie recalled Andy saying: "Don't worry, there will be a war on soon and we will go."

But Andy, 20 at the time, never did get to join up. He was electrocuted using an electric drill.

"This knocked Mum for six... she was in a hell of a state, so talk of joining up was pushed aside.

"However, Dad said if I was so keen, I should join the militia, which I did."

But Ernie was itching for more than the militia offered.

His boss got wind of the young fella's plans to enlist in the AIF and contacted the Apprenticeship Board, which said Ernie, as an apprentice, would not be released until his time was up.

But there was no holding Ernie once his apprenticeship was completed. He en-

is at odds with his citation

listed in Charters Towers in February 1940 with the 31st battalion, later merged to form the 31st/51st Infantry Battalion.

Ironically, the Army, seeing his baker background, tried to "press gang" him into a bakers' unit cook. However, the CO rescued Ernie - who had risen to the rank of corporal in the Militia.

With the threat of a Japanese landing on the Australian mainland, the 31st, with Ernie, was sent overland to Jacky Jacky, at the top of Cape York.

In February 1943, the government decided to release men who had worked in essential industries from the Army to meet the needs of the war economy.

That severely depleted the ranks of the 31st and 51st Battalions, which were heavily made up of rural workers drawn from Townsville and Cairns regions respectively.

To overcome this, the two battalions were merged in the April to become the 31/51st Infantry Battalion, which underwent amphibious training near Cairns, and by June was heading for Merauke in Dutch New Guinea.

While serving in Dutch New Guinea he was pulled out and flown back to Australia for an NCO training school.

He remembered his first plane ride well. "We hit an airpocket and the plane dropped. I thought it was all over until I saw a couple of Air Force guys sitting on the floor playing cards... not flinching, blinking or anything."

While he was away his section "got stuck into about 300 Japs".

"The boys did a good job on them," said Ernie who was teased about knowing when to be away.

Withdrawn from Dutch New Guinea in August 1944, the men went on leave before assembling near Brisbane in readiness for deployment to Bougainville.

Of that time, Ernie remembered the day-long march to Sandgate for a "holiday beside the sea".

"They marched us to the ocean for a swim... and then all the way back again."

By the time the 31st/51st Battalion got to Bougainville in late 1944, Ernie was a lance sergeant... and the Japanese well entrenched.

While Ernie did not think much of the withdrawing Americans as infantrymen, their logistics were amazing. "Augusta Bay was full of their ships as far as the eye could see one day ... and by the next morning, they were all were gone, not a thing to be seen."

In the fighting, he suffered shrapnel wounds to his right hand.

"We would stay in action for four, five or six weeks before coming out to clean-up, have a bit of a rest, and then get back into it again."

He also remembered the "canned heat" used to warm tinned canned food, and the tablets used to purify water. "There was no smell or smoke with the canned heat, so less chance of positions being given away to the enemy.

"Water treated with those

tablets may have been safe to drink, but the taste was awful. I hated that water, instead got as much fresh rain water as I could from big lily leaves."

Ernie, who by then had his sergeant stripes, was under some pressure to sign papers to be made up to an officer when the war ended.

"The end of the war suited me," he said, because he favoured staying a sergeant with the boys in his platoon rather than going somewhere else as an officer.

He remained bitter about all his mates, and other soldiers, who were "left where they fell, far from home and their loved ones". Although conceding it would not have been easy, he thought the effort should have been made to bury them in home town cemeteries, where families could visit the graves.

After being part of the occupation force that garrisoned Nauru and then Rabaul in New Britain, he was finally demobbed in April 1946.

He had thought of applying to attend the London Victory Parade to be held on June 8 of the same year, but decided the smarter thing to do would be to get a job as soon as possible.

So he returned to the bakery trade in the Towers, but with nerves still frayed from battle he sought medical advice.

"Old Doc (George) Ellis told me to get out.

"He said 'You are going to work when everyone else is going to bed. Get out and get some fresh air in open spaces. Go to the railway'. "And I did, becoming a

bridge carpenter for five years.

My health certainly improved," said Ernie, who would later work as a psychiatric nurse at Mossman Hall in the Towers for nearly 30 years before retiring in 1983.

There was a time though when he considered re-enlisting for the Korean War, which started in 1950.

But by then he had met and married Miriam, an Ayr lass nursing in the Towers, and the first of three children was on the way.

"Doing that would have made me a bit of a heel," Ernie said, shaking his head.

The couple had three children. Bill is a scientist in Brisbane and Estelle teaches music at Sandgate High School. Robert was 18 when he was killed in a car crash.

Mrs Huxley, who died in 2003, left a lasting reminder of her family - a nameplate made up of their initials, EMBERS, pinned to the front of her house.

Until last year, Ernie was a long-serving Legatee of Townsville Legacy and an avid poultry breeder. He has retired from both.

"Age put an end to one... and a fox, or something else, to the other," Ernie said, grinning. These days he is content to sit on his front porch in his quiet street and watch the world go by.

And the best part of the world is?

"Charters Towers... no question," he said in blunt assessment. Six years of war showed him that.

Northerner by WARWICK WOCKNER



MEMORIES ... LSGT Ernie Huxley with a photo taken of him on Bougainville during WWII