

Media Release

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Veteran remembers Kokoda ahead of Anzac Day

Highercombe resident Les Arnel says he hopes the younger generations will never experience war in their lifetime.

Mr Arnel, 93, fought as part of the now-infamous 39th infantry militia battalion during the Kokoda Trail campaign, which this year celebrates its 75th anniversary.

He lied about his age, signing up at the age of 17, and joined a group of mostly 18 and 19-year-olds ordered to proceed up the Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea to block any possible overland Japanese advance.

Kokoda is considered Australia's most significant battle of the war in the Pacific in which the Japanese were for the first time defeated on land.

More than 600 Australians died in the campaign, 1600 were wounded and 4000 affected by sickness after four months of fighting in appalling conditions following the Japanese landing in July 1942.

Les was a runner during the campaign and was discharged in September 1942 suffering malaria, typhus, amoebic dysentery and acute appendicitis. He was sent back to Australia on the hospital ship *Manunda*.

He remembers falling behind and seeing the Japanese approaching near the Wairopi Bridge over the Kumusi River.

"I woke up and there was silence all around – I started to investigate and found there was no sign of the boys. I could see them miles away heading back towards Kokoda. I ran like you wouldn't believe. I've never been so scared in my life."

Other memories include: Seeing Australia's own planes brought down because they were mistaken for Japanese aircraft; his two best friends killed on the Track (Keith Warrell, Rex Curren). Clear memories of his captain, Capt Sam Templeton, who mysteriously went missing during a recon mission.

"I was in the 8th battalion originally but I volunteered to be transferred to the 39th," he says. "I was always looking for adventure. I could kick myself even thinking about it now, but there you are. I didn't suffer like many people did – I came out before the

big battles. But I've paid for it ever since, with one thing and another caused by the conditions that I've had. I've had emotional problems developed from war experiences and I find I don't handle things too well.

"The conditions were beyond understanding. Unless you've actually seen them you couldn't imagine what it was really like. We had mountains and valleys to climb and you would go up three steps and fall back two. Mud was the biggest problem, you'd slide back all the time. Our skipper kept helping us, one after the other."

Les returned to Victoria after the war and moved to Port Pirie where he managed a store for 20 years.

He moved to ACH Group Highercombe Residential Living home at Hope Valley seven years ago.

ACH Group has a long history of partnership with Veterans organisations including the War Widows' Guild.

"ACH Group has a deep appreciation for the services and sacrifices of the Veterans and their families. The organisation was established more than 60 years ago when Sir Keith Wilson persuaded the Commonwealth Government to provide housing for older people who could not afford it, many of whom were widows or First World War Veterans," said Ray Creen, ACH Group Chief Executive Officer.

About ACH Group

ACH Group is a not-for-profit aged care organisation that has been offering services to support good lives for older people in South Australia since 1952.

As well as accommodation options across Adelaide, the Fleurieu Peninsula and East Melbourne, the group offers a range of health, wellbeing, respite and support services, help at home and social activities.

Our 1700 specialist staff and hundreds of volunteers share the belief that older people should be valued and respected, connected to their communities and in control of their lives.

For further information or comment, please contact Anna Randell on (08) 8159 3632, 0417 856 361 or ARandell@ach.org.au.