

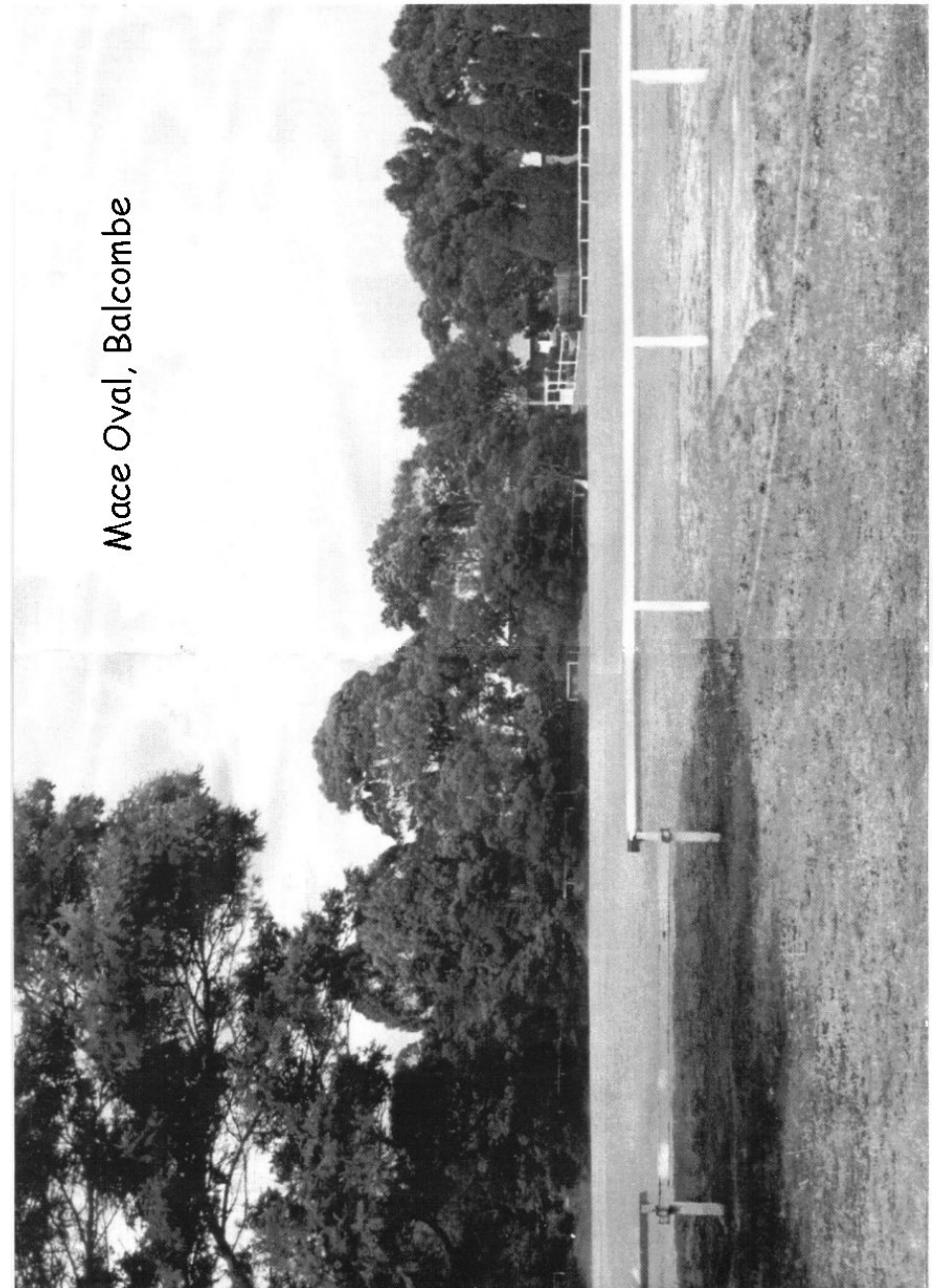
Balcombe Revisited

An Apprentice

Looks Back



Ron Bridgman



BALCOMBE REVISITED

Something compelled me to return to Balcombe exactly forty-eight years to the day of my enlistment in the Regular Army. Similar to other fifteen-year-olds, I had entered Balcombe in 1951 and spent three years of my formative life as an apprentice. The Army Apprentices' School had functioned from mid 1948 until its closure in December 1982. During those years over 3000 apprentices graduated from the school and served in the Army initially as soldier tradesmen. Many stayed on in the service of the Queen and country until retirement age. A total of ten had been killed whilst on active service. Those who returned to civilian life had the necessary skills to be assimilated and successful in chosen careers.

On the morning of my return visit, I had a solitary, nostalgic, quiet stroll around the old place. There had been considerable changes. Familiar landmarks had disappeared. Trade wings, education facilities, School Headquarters, canteens, messes, ANZAC Hall, gymnasium, the YMCA recreation centre, post office, garrison Chapel, quartermaster stores, armouries, guardhouse and barracks had all gone. Whilst some of the roads could be identified and a number of new streets bore names of staff who had long departed it was obvious the entire area had been transformed into a prime housing estate.

However a memorial brick wall and wrought iron gates which had been built by apprentices, during the 1950s, remained as a sentinel, defying the elements. These gates faced the Nepean Highway and contained two bronze plaques. The first expressed appreciation of the United States Marine Corps, for the friendship and hospitality afforded to the marines, which occupied the site in 1942. The second plaque praised the fighting qualities of the United States Marine Corps. The plaques were quite impressive.

The gates, however, were held open by a piece of old fencing wire. Ex apprentices, pilgrims, like myself, would not be impressed by the fencing wire or the state of the car park.

Our old parade ground had become a sealed car park. It was littered with empty drink cans, papers, branches of trees and rubbish. It would have been unthinkable, in my time, for a parade ground to have even a match or a cigarette butt on it. The entire scene was both depressing and deplorable.

I witnessed two teenagers practising golf on the hallowed turf of Mace Oval. On occasions they missed hitting the ball, but succeeded in sending tufts of grass and soil in all directions. It seemed a contrast from the care of earlier days when groups of apprentices were lined up and required to move slowly forward across the oval picking up little sticks, stones and any rubbish to be found, prior to the planting of grass seed. In the early days Sergeant Ray (Mick) Mace MBE, MM had borrowed a D4 bulldozer and literally demolished a hill in order to construct an oval for the apprentices. He carried out this work in his own time, after normal hours.

The railing around the oval appeared to be in a neglected state. It certainly needed a coat of white paint. Natural vegetation had reclaimed parts of the outside perimeter of the oval and even blocked access to what were once well maintained pathways.

Looking about, I felt it was an insult, for there was nothing to indicate to the current or future generations that an Army Apprentices' School had ever existed. It had been a school that had done so much for me and many of my colleagues. To the uninitiated the significance of Mace Oval would never be known. The United States Marine Corps had its plaques; the Army

Apprentices' School had nothing, not even a small bronze inscription. The valuable contribution the school and staff had made in the lives of so many people was likely to fade into the sea of forgetfulness.



A young soldier, Mick Mace, during WW2. This photograph is part of the collection of the War Memorial in Canberra

The ex apprentices who returned as pilgrims had only their memories to reflect upon. Pilgrims were not infrequent. They came from every state in Australia. They brought their wives, families and friends to see this place. As I strolled about, it was as though voices and scenes of my youth were revived. Emotional experiences relived. Some of my friends had died for this country and who cares?

My reflections took me back to the first time I heard about Balcombe. I was in a secondary school or a Junior High as it was called in those days. A military officer came to speak to the boys about being an Army apprentice. It was not for me and I certainly did not raise my hand to indicate an interest in joining the program.

I did however maintain an interest in cadets. After leaving school I joined a unit which was attached to 11/44 Infantry Battalion, in Lord Street, East Perth. After spending sometime in the work force a conflict of interests arose and I resigned from a job because they refused me time off to attend a camp with the regimental cadets.

It was about this time that an interest in Balcombe rekindled. An effort was made to find out details and an application was submitted to become an Army apprentice. The brochures and promotional material indicated that Balcombe enjoyed an ideal climate, was close to the sea and a great place for young men to grow up. The pamphlets highlighted learning a trade, free medical, six weeks leave each year whilst at the Apprentices' School and of course career pathways.

The promotional material said nothing about washing clothes, ironing, cleaning footwear, cleaning webbing, polishing brass, scrubbing out huts, emptying rubbish bins, dusting, cleaning windows, and making bed rolls. Neither did the literature mention involvement in kitchen fatigues, sweeping floors, washing floors, cleaning down tables, washing dishes, rostered duties, guard duties, stoking fires, obeying commands and much, much more; that of course would come later.

In January 1951, following a series of tests and medical examinations I was one of 28 boys who were invited into the Colonel's office at Swan Barracks. We quietly stood around the office and listened to the Commandant as he spoke about the school. He warned us, 'some of you might have to live in unlined huts and it will be very cold in winter...' Following his talk personal interviews took place. Of the original 28 who listened to the Colonel's talk only 14 were accepted. Within a year, two were discharged and never completed their apprenticeship. However, the majority of the group formed life long friendships that remain to this day.

Following our acceptance into the Army an Armoured Corps lieutenant was assigned to ensure we were "sworn in" and placed on a plane to Victoria. He had told me that I was to wear a decent pair of shoes not the sandals that I usually wore. The truth was that I did not own a decent pair of shoes and I was afraid to tell him. Being the product of a broken home, money was in short supply. I had worked for a year after leaving school but had spent my wages on dental care, the purchase of a new bicycle and paying board. There was really nothing left. When I joined the Army I had a total of £2.1.2 in the bank.

On the evening of our departure my group assembled in Barrack Street in Perth. Before boarding the bus to travel to the airport, the lieutenant saw me wearing sandals. He was obviously not happy and voiced his disapproval. It was possibly the only lawful military order that I ever disobeyed.

The eldest in our group, seventeen year old Alan Moore, was placed in charge. He was two years older than most of us and had visited Melbourne on a previous occasion so the appointment was received without comment. Alan was in charge.

A few of my new found colleagues had relatives or friends to bid them farewell. A number like myself had nobody. It really did not matter to me personally, as I had become accustomed to looking after myself. Before long we were off to the airport and to an adventure which would change all our lives.

The four engine propeller driven commercial aircraft took off from Perth Airport, at the appointed time, circled the city then set a land course for South Australia. My Mother later told me she had come out of the house and waved to the aeroplane in the night sky.

The next morning we had our first experience of turbulence prior to landing at Parafield, in South Australia. A second experience was also shared as the aircraft came in to land at Essendon Airport, just north of Melbourne.

We were met at the Essendon air terminal by a soldier wearing a beret and blue uniform, with a red stripe down each leg. He herded us on to an old bus that had hard wooden seats. Once we were seated the long trip began. It was quite eventful as I had not seen traffic lights in operation before. There were brightly coloured taxis, red and even yellow cars, fast moving trams and electric trains. As we swept along the highway there was so much to take in, there was so much that was strange, even bill boards advertising icecream with unfamiliar names. It felt like a new world.

Perhaps an hour or so later, the soldier in the blue uniform advised us we were nearing our destination. My eyes strained to get a view of the camp and with mixed feelings I thought, "This is your home for the next three years."

Lunch was served on arrival. We were heckled a little by the long time residents, but accepted it as part of an initiation. Once lunch was dealt with we were quickly divided into various trade groupings, allocated to barrack rooms or huts. I found myself with other Westralians assigned to E6 - and discovered two apprentice NCOs, a sergeant and a corporal, were in charge of the dormitory and us.

During the afternoon the assimilation process began in earnest. We were escorted to the "Q" store, issued with clothing, equipment, 'housewife' and bedding. It took a while to sort out our

bed spaces and arrange clothing in an appropriate order in our lockers.

The transformation began as we changed from civilian clothing into working dress or the uniform of the day. At 6:00 p.m. (1800 hrs) we were required to be on mess parade, to march down to the dining rooms, next to the kitchen, for the evening meal. Our first parade was a little unconventional, more like a mob of sheep being goaded along by a sheep dog barking, ".... left, right, left, ...halt.!"

Gradually we improved, as Regular Army instructors took us under their wings to mould us in military protocol. The assimilation and indoctrination process took approximately six weeks. During those six weeks we learned how to drill, march, run, use fire arms, identify ranks, form friendships, establish modesty norms, live together and work together as a team.

We accepted each other, firstly on a personal basis, "warts and all." Secondly, we could identify with others with whom we had enlisted in our own state. Thirdly, there were trade groups, or "companies" as they were called. Fourthly, we could be identified by the group numerical sequence of entering the school; for example, in 1951, the sixth intake arrived. We were a large group and the last of the six monthly intakes. The school could now boast of a student population in excess of three hundred. Finally, when assembling all the intakes one to six we constituted the Army Apprentices' School.

In summer, our days usually began at 0600 hrs. Reveille was the signal for the day's duties to begin. All apprentices were expected to bounce out of bed immediately reveille was played. Technically if both feet were on the floor, then a person was considered to be out of bed. In winter, we were treated to the luxury of a sleep-in, reveille was at 0630 hrs. If a person was slow getting out of bed, there was usually some response. One apprentice who gained a reputation for being slack in the morning, appeared occasionally to sleep through reveille. In winter he simply slept in his underpants with a single blanket covering his body. He had no wish to disturb his bedroll and therefore only used one of his five blankets to keep warm. Early one morning the duty officer entered our barrack room accompanied by the bugler who was ordered to play reveille beside the sleeping apprentice. The young man did not move a muscle. Reveille was loud enough to rouse the entire school, yet the apprentice appeared to sleep on undisturbed. The officer then called the apprentice by name and threatened to throw a bucket of water over him unless he was out of bed by the count of ten. He then proceeded to the count down, from ten to one. Just before the count of one the apprentice touched the floor with both his feet. Although this lad was really quite intelligent, the Army discharged him during his second year, believing he would not make an efficient soldier.

In the early days of the Apprentices' School, "lights out" was traditionally at 2130 hrs (9.30 p.m.), it seemed to be a carry over from the war years. Even so, it was not until 1953 that the time was extended to 2230 hrs. Each day was so well planned by the authorities, that there was little free time available to get into mischief. By the time it was "lights out" we were ready for bed.

Sport was a major activity in the life of most apprentices. Wednesday afternoons and Saturdays were highlights of the week. At the weekends teams of apprentices were engaged in competitive sport as far away as Melbourne. They played in a variety of football competitions. There were other teams involved in baseball, basketball and numerous other competitions. Wherever the apprentices went they appeared to excel.

In those days the Army apprentices were physically, very fit young people. Every week the

program involved sport and physical training. It was therefore only natural for Army Headquarters, in Melbourne, to invite the school to put on a PT display at the Royal Melbourne Showgrounds during an Army Tattoo week. Under the watchful eyes of our PT instructor, Lt Martin, the school travelled up several nights during the week to perform before large audiences. We obviously looked good, running about in white singlets, shorts and clean runners. Personally I had a fear that someone might fall when we were required to stand on a partner's shoulders. It seems we had performed creditably and some praise eventually filtered down the line to the performers. During our first summer we had been issued with green and gold bathers. Green and gold were the School's colours and enabled us to be readily identified on the beach. At various times we were given permission to go swimming locally. This involved a fifteen-minute walk along a sandy track through the paperbark tea trees and banksia

to the beach. En-route we passed through a holiday caravan park. It was an idyllic environment. Once across the sealed Beach Road, we were standing on one of Port Phillip Bay's beaches. For me it was a new, perhaps an unpleasant experience, having coarse, rough sand running through my toes as it contrasted to the soft white sea sand along the shores of Western Australia. Nevertheless I became accustomed to the Victorian beaches.

One night early in 1951 we were woken by the voice of our Commanding Officer, Colonel Oldfield, speaking to the school through the public address system connected to our barrack rooms. He advised that bush fires were threatening local properties at Red Hill and consequently senior classes were to be mobilised to fight the fires. As juniors the sixth intake, was not required. For my part, I felt a sense of rejection, the "Sixth" was not yet considered up to the standard of the rest of the school. In my youthfulness, it seemed as though we were missing out on an adventure and I envied the senior classes.

Some years later, when fighting a frenzy bush fire in a N.S.W. national park with the Army, the realisation of the inherent dangers became apparent. Life and property could be destroyed instantly. Fire could sweep through treetops at an alarming speed. Heat, radiation and panic can bring agonising death to wild life and could do so to human beings. Colonel Oldfield's words returned to me and I felt that he was wise in not allowing the junior class to be involved in fighting the fires at Red Hill back in 1951.

Apart from a weekly C.O's parade and periodic Wednesday evening educational programs, held in ANZAC Hall, the entire school rarely assembled as one body. The funeral of Australia's only Field Marshal was an exception. The whole school was involved and we marched, six abreast through the city of Melbourne, somewhere behind the cortege. The next day we were delighted to find a photograph in the Melbourne papers showing the front of our column marching smartly in the procession.

In the winter of 1951 we woke one morning to snow, a most unusual occurrence. Many apprentices had never seen snow before and it was a novelty. It seems there were reports of snow falling in the metropolitan area and Melbournians, claimed it to be unusual.

There were many things which interstate apprentices found unusual about Melbourne. When granted local leave the Mornington Peninsula was the first area to be investigated. Later, when authorised to visit Melbourne, we laughed at the size of the Yarra River, mocking Victorians for their impertinence for calling it a river. It could not compare with the Swan, Parramatta or the Hawkesbury.

However, Melbourne had traffic lights, electric trains, unusual trams, Phar Lap, the M.C.G., wide streets, the Melbourne Cup, Ned Kelly's armour and millions of people.

Our first year at Balcombe was packed full of activities, compulsory church parades, ceremonial guard duty, volunteering - we soon learnt not to volunteer.

However, some staff members did and as a result an Apprentices' School Band was formed and an excellent concert produced. It was a kindly, elderly Captain Arthur Lazenby that brought the boys together and before long they produced acceptable sounds and marched in time to their own music.

Owing to the pressure of work, the First Intake's graduation was deferred for six months. It was an historic graduation, something to be remembered for all time. First and Second Intake graduated together, on a balmy Saturday afternoon, in December, on Mace Oval, in 1951. One



Balcombe entrance in 1999, with Mace Oval in the background

of the most unforgettable moments in a life-time took place as the senior classes marched through the ranks of the junior intakes, whilst the band played, Auld Lang Syne.

All this was so long ago and suddenly I was back to reality, viewing Mace Oval, the empty car park and the Memorial Gates. I could have continued reminiscing for the rest of the day, but there were demands to be dealt with and duties to perform. I felt that something ought to be done to bring the situation to the attention of the authorities. In due course I got around to it and eventually in March, 1999 I wrote a letter to the Minister of Defence, pointing out personal concerns. I actually received a number of responses, but nothing practical emerged except an application form for funding if I wanted to fix the gates.

Brian Jones, President / Secretary / Co-ordinator / of the sixth intake reunions, some how heard about the letter and recommended to our group that we should hold our fiftieth anniversary on the Mornington Peninsula. He further suggested that we work toward an Army Apprentices' memorial.

In the months which followed contact was made with the Mornington Peninsula Shire, through their officers. Mr. Joe Cauchi, Director of Community Services, presented a case for a plaque to the Mayor and the Shire Council. He and his officers continued to work closely with representatives of the Sixth Intake ex - apprentices.

On the 17 February 2001 an unveiling ceremony at Balcombe took place. A number of dignitaries were present including, the Mayor, Shire officers, Mr. Reith, Minister for Defence, who was also the local MHR. There were senior representatives from the Army, and a military band. Two ex-apprentices, Colonel Jack Wilson and Lt Colonel K.T. Thomas, a first intake apprentice, both gave excellent addresses.

A crowd of three hundred or so gathered on the oval, to listened attentively from the marquee and the surrounding area. The guests included retired staff member, Captain Arthur Lazenby who was in his 99th year, Lt Col. Jack Wilkins MBE, a mere 85 years of age but a loved Senior Instructor of later years and the original RSM Laurie Sergeant. There were of course apologies from two of our ex-apprentice Brigadier Generals, one of whom was on active service in Timor. Owing to his wife's illness, 79 year old, Ray (Mick) Mace sent his apologies.

The unveiling ceremony actually involved two plaques. The Apprentices' plaque was mounted on a large stone near the entrance to the oval. During the Lady Mayor's address the audience was officially advised, that the gates, Mace Oval and the plaques were now heritage listed and would remain indefinitely.

A casual return to Balcombe accomplished far more than one might have imagined.

Ron Bridgman
12 August, 2002



Councillor Judith Couacaud Grayler - Mayor unveiling one of the plaques - 17 February 2001

