



Old Digger returns to T.I.

Ray Watts was 21 when he first set foot on Thursday Island. It was February 1946. The Second World War had ended. The Island was being demilitarised and Islanders were returning to their homes. He was still enlisted in the Royal Australian Engineers, working in the Torres Strait Area Workshop as an auto and general electrician.

Last week, ten days before his 80th birthday and 58 years since he left the Island, Ray realised a long-time wish and returned to T.I. to revisit the location of “the best year of my life”. He travelled with his son, Greg, from the South Coast of NSW. The trip was a bit different from 1946 when it took a few days and a long, bumpy flight in a DC-2 aeroplane from Brisbane to Townsville, where the airfield was flooded in by a cyclone. Then there was another flight to an airforce base near Bamaga and a barge trip across the strait.

Greg said the journey back was worth it just to see the smile on Ray’s face as he stepped off the ferry and set foot on Engineers Wharf.

“ I reckon he was so excited that if he didn’t have gammy knees he would have bent down and kissed the ground like the Pope,” Greg said. “It was an emotional time for him.”

Ray and Greg spent a couple of days wandering around the island down memory lane, looking at old haunts and chatting with the locals. One of the highlights of the trip was catching up with some local TAFE tour leader students at the Quetta Cathedral. Ray retold his memories of attending Sunday evening church services there.

“The Western Islanders were seated down one side and the Eastern Islanders down the other”, he said. “When it came time for singing the hymns each side of the church would try and outdo the other in volume and quality of the singing. It was glorious to listen to.”

The Island Tour with Christine from Peddells was also an experience. Looking through the Greenhill Fort Museum Ray found some memorabilia from his old Army unit and was able to relive some of his times on T.I. He spoke of a relaxed time on T.I. in those days after the pressures of the war effort. He worked for 6 days a week, mainly maintaining, packing up and shipping off war equipment, with a rest day on Sundays, writing letters back home.

Rations were short and he told of supplementing his Army diet by using homemade spears and spotlights to catch garfish off the wharf at night. At other times when they had run out of meat, hunting parties were despatched to Friday Island to shoot deer for venison.

Another story was of his unit fabricating a small barge from army surplus and sailing it around the island at night, catching fish. One night the anchor rope snared a big croc and the crocs’ death roll wound down the anchor rope and started submerging the barge before they could cut the rope.

Like today, immigration was also an issue, and he told of the night an Indonesian boat sailed into the harbour under a Dutch flag, and how the police had to round up the crew with exchange of gunfire.

Ray has promised to forward some mementos of his time on T.I. to the Historical Society for display in the museum. He said he'd like to thank the people of Thursday Island, particularly the girls at Peddells and the staff of the Federal Hotel for their hospitality during his stay and for helping him to realise a lifelong wish.

