

Gathering the Malaya Collection:  
Jack Balsillie walking in the footsteps of C.E.W. Bean

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## **Abstract**

In 1961 Warrant Officer Class 2 Andrew John Balsillie, known as Jack to his army colleagues, began surveying the Second World War battlefields of Malaya. The relics he uncovered have provided the basis for the Australian War Memorial's collection of the 8th Division's actions in Malaya and enriched their story. My 2010 Summer Scholarship has focused on the gathering of these relics by Jack Balsillie and his subsequent work in Vietnam. This paper will be presented in three sections, to reflect the three periods of collecting undertaken by Balsillie, from whom the Memorial has benefitted.



Major Jack Balsillie, c. 1971 (photo courtesy of Jack Balsillie)

## Malaya 1961

Jack Balsillie was 16 years old when he joined the army in July 1945. Under the Army Apprentices Scheme, Balsillie completed his training as a fitter and turner, and became a member of the Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (RAEME). In May 1960 Balsillie was deployed to Malaya for the Malayan Emergency, and was attached to the 101st Field Battery, Royal Australian Artillery, stationed in Malacca.

Balsillie's role in Malaya took him to several parts of the country, repairing guns and equipment for his unit, the British 26th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery (to which 101st Battery was attached). In February 1961 Balsillie was due to take a supply of equipment down to Singapore. Knowing he would be absent for several days, he took a few copies of the latest edition of *Reveille*, the New South Wales Returned and Services League journal, to occupy him and "the fellas" on their drive south.<sup>1</sup> Reading the feature article on the 2/30th Battalion's 1942 ambush at Gemencheh Bridge, Balsillie realised he was travelling down the same Gemas–Tampin road on which the Imperial Japanese Army had cycled into the ambush 19 years before.

The Japanese invasion of Malaya had commenced on 8 December 1941, and their advance down the peninsula had been rapid. The ambush was the first major action by the



Gemencheh Bridge, as it appeared in the *Reveille* article, 1961 (AWM 117484)

Australians against the Japanese, and Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Galleghan's 2/30th Battalion had been in preparation for several weeks. Their role was to be the first point of contact with the enemy, acting as a shock absorber and inflicting as many casualties as possible before falling back to

the main position.<sup>2</sup> The battalion was successful: the ambush inflicted 1,000 enemy

losses for just eight Australians killed and 72 wounded.

Balsillie recognised the Gemencheh Bridge from the photograph in *Reveille* and asked his driver to pull over. On the side of the road Balsillie discovered three expended

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, J Balsillie with author, 10 February, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Wigmore, Lionel, *The Japanese thrust*, Official History (Australia in the War of 1939–1945), Series One: Army, Volume IV, 1957, p. 210.

cartridge cases, each engraved "Maribyrnong 1939", marking them as Australian made, incidentally in Balsillie's home town. A little further off the road he discovered a grenade fuse cap and an old army-issue enamel plate. He had uncovered his first relics.

And so it was here, at the site of the Gemencheh Bridge ambush, that Balsillie's interest was sparked and would continue, to the benefit of the Australian War Memorial, for the next decade. Discovering these roadside relics prompted Balsillie to wonder what else might lie undiscovered, so he returned to the site the following Sunday with "five keen searchers", armed with garden hoes and rakes.<sup>3</sup> Balsillie described this visit in a letter to *Reveille*; and while he would never again find relics so easily as he had on that first day, on his second visit he located further remnants of the action, including a .303 round, four brass eyelets from an army groundsheet, and a small fragment of aluminium alloy. Balsillie identified the fragment, originally manufactured in Woolwich, UK, in 1936, as being from a type of ammunition sent to the Far East during the early stages of the war.

Keen to discover more, Balsillie began reading books on the Malayan campaign, including Frank Owen's *Fall of Singapore* and General Gordon Bennett's *Why Singapore fell*. At the start of May 1961 he wrote his first letter to the Australian War Memorial, seeking information on the specific areas where Australian troops had fought the Japanese in January 1942. He needed further details in order to survey the areas of Mersing and Bakri and to retrace the jungle trek taken by the Australians who had been trapped at Parit Sulong. The Memorial's director, Jim McGrath, already knew of Balsillie, having seen his letter to the editor in the May edition of *Reveille*. Oblivious of Balsillie's letter en route to him, he had written to Balsillie on 12 May, asking if he would be willing to donate his collection of relics to enable the Memorial to feature the 2/30th Battalion and the ambush.<sup>4</sup> McGrath had himself been trained as a recorder of history, sent by Memorial director John Treloar to London after the end of the Second World War to copy the British records, as had been done in the previous war. His long apprenticeship under Treloar cemented in his mind the objective of the Memorial: to tell the stories of the soldiers it commemorates through the presentation of relics.

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<sup>3</sup> Letter to the editor, *Reveille*, vol 34, no. 10, May 1961.

<sup>4</sup> Letter, 12 May 1961, J. McGrath to J. Balsillie, AWM315 749/005/007.



Until this point, the men of the Australian 8th Division were largely remembered as prisoners of war. Dominating their story were tales of Changi, the atrocities of the Burma–Thailand railway, and the Sandakan death marches. In 1961 the Memorial's 8th Division relics concentrated on the prisoner-of-war period, and these relics failed to tell the story of the men's actions before the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942. This lack was stressed by the director in his first letter to Balsillie:

Unfortunately, although we have on display numerous relics featuring the 8th Australian Division after the Singapore surrender, the most important items, those associated with the actions fought by the Division, are almost non-existent.<sup>5</sup>

The first man of the 8th Division, the 2/22nd Infantry Battalion, had arrived in Malaya in February 1941 and were joined by the 2/27th Battalion in August. The men were put into position in southern Malaya, Johore province. When they finally saw action, a month after the Japanese invasion, one Japanese commander described them as fighting with "a bravery we had not previously seen".<sup>6</sup> These men fought overwhelming odds as the Japanese advanced with tanks, bicycles, and troops from the northern parts of Malaya to the peninsula's southern tip in just 55 days. The men of the 8th Division were as courageous as men of other divisions, but their fate was sealed by the decisive Japanese thrust and the resulting British capitulation.

Without relics, it was very difficult for the Memorial to tell the story of the 8th Division's actions against the Japanese, as McGrath explained in his second letter to Balsillie:

As you can appreciate and are probably aware records on the brief period of fighting in Malaya before being overrun by the Japanese are very limited and to a large extent compiled some time after the events. The battalion's war diaries were largely destroyed before capitulation and had to be written up during captivity.<sup>7</sup>

The Memorial had attempted to gather relics from Malaya from the period before the fall of Singapore. John Treloar, in his wartime position as officer in charge of the Military History Section, wrote to his acting director, Tas Heyes, at the Memorial in August 1941, suggesting a unit be established in Malaya, based on the one he had established in the Middle East

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<sup>5</sup> Letter, 12 May 1961, J. McGrath, AWM315 749/005/007.

<sup>6</sup> Tsuji, Colonel Masanobu, *Singapore, the Japanese version*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1960, p. 193.

<sup>7</sup> Letter, J. McGrath to J. Balsillie, 18 May 1961, AWM315 749/005/007.

earlier in the war. This proposal appears as an agenda item for the Board's meeting in November that year. The Board decided that the collection of relics and records in the Pacific was vital, and urged Treloar be sent to Singapore from Cairo to establish a unit. C.E.W. Bean, still working on the official histories of the previous war, stressed the urgency, so as not to lose any essential records.<sup>8</sup> The Finance Committee approved the unit on 13 January 1942, by which point it was too late. A telegram to Bean on 9 February stated that the matter was being deferred by the Minister for the Interior "until we see how the military situation at Singapore develops".<sup>9</sup>

Events at Singapore ensured no unit was formed, Treloar was instructed to await further direction, and the relics of the 8th Division were destined to spend 19 years in the jungles of Malaya waiting for Balsillie. The fall of Singapore, Churchill's impregnable fortress, was the British military's greatest surrender and even if a military history unit had been established in Singapore at this point, there is little chance anything they collected would have been able to leave the island. It is more than likely that the relics, and the field historians, would have suffered the same fate as the 15,000 Australians stationed there.

McGrath sent Balsillie a copy of the relevant volume of the official history, Lionel Wigmore's *The Japanese thrust*, and for the remainder of his tour every moment of Balsillie's free time was consumed with the gathering of relics. During the last five months of his Malayan deployment, Balsillie scoured the battlefields of the Second World War, unearthing relics across southern Malaya to help tell the 8th Division's story. The 26th Field Regiment gave Balsillie its full support and allowed him the use of mine detectors, enabling him to uncover items otherwise inaccessible. Balsillie found the British much more supportive than the Australians: "they seemed to appreciate that sort of thing [collecting relics] a bit more."<sup>10</sup>

The Japanese had cleaned up the battle sites of Malaya immediately following the surrender. They used prisoners of war to bury the remnants of battlefield equipment in surrounding slit trenches, originally dug out by Commonwealth troops in preparation for the invasion. With the mine detectors, Balsillie was able to discover stockpiles of relics. Many were damaged and in a state of decay, but Balsillie managed to send five crates of material

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<sup>8</sup> Note, C. Bean to AWM, 26 January 1942, AWM93 50/1/6.

<sup>9</sup> Telegram, AWM to C. Bean, 9 February 1942, AWM93 50/1/6.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, J. Balsillie with author, 10 February 10.

to the Memorial. He custom-built one crate in his workshop to fit a vehicle chassis from Parit Sulong, which Balsillie had discovered at a local house that was being used as part of a bridge over a sewerage drain.

Recalling his first period of collecting for the Memorial, Balsillie feels the most important relic he found was part of a Japanese tank, now on display in the Memorial's Second World War gallery. The British military sent no tanks to Malaya and tanks were an unexpected element of the Japanese invasion, soon to prove instrumental to their rapid advance down the Peninsula. Concrete road blocks and even house bricks were scattered along the main routes south in an attempt to halt the Japanese advance and they were still in the spread across the countryside in 1961. Balsillie found a piece of a tank near Bakri, fused with remnants presumably from one of the tanks destroyed by the Australian 2/4th Anti-Tank Regiment on the Bakri–Yong Peng Road on 18 January 1942. Ken Harrison of the regiment remembers his first experience with the Japanese, at Gemas:

Compared with these battle-tested veterans (the Japanese), we were babies. Apart from firing six shots out to sea from a few old French 75s, none of us had ever handled an artillery gun since we enlisted. We were going into action with a two-pounder gun we had never actually fired, except in theory.<sup>11</sup>

Balsillie, a friend of Harrison's, returned from Malaya with a relic of his past, which he acknowledged in his book: "My own highly-prized gift from John is the rusted case of a 2-pounder shell that we had fired at Gemas some 18 years before."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Harrison, Kenneth, *The brave Japanese*, Rigby Limited, Adelaide, 1966, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Harrison, p. 278.



Left: One of ten tanks destroyed by the 8th Division at Bakri, January 1942 (AWM 040370)  
Middle: Australian anti-tank crew in action at Bakri on the Muar-Parit Sulong road, January 1942 (AWM 011302)  
Right: tank fused with battlefield equipment from 1942, uncovered by Balsillie near Bakri, 1961 (Photo courtesy of Jack Balsillie)

Balsillie's correspondence with the Memorial increased towards the end of 1961, as his tour in Malaya concluded in November and he readied his relics for shipment to the Memorial. Balsillie was instructed to clean each relic of the detritus of the Malayan jungle, to guarantee its clearance at Australian Customs. The crates arrived at the Memorial in May 1962, and Balsillie journeyed from Melbourne to assist in sorting and classifying the battlefield relics. This visit was the first time Balsillie met the Memorial's keeper of relics, Jack Rutherford, marking the beginning of a decade-long correspondence between the two men.

There was a great deal of interest in the Malayan relics, and the Memorial organised a press conference to coincide with their arrival. Balsillie was introduced to the journalists by Gavin Long, editor of the Second World War official histories, and Balsillie fondly recalls how Long likened him to Bean – stating that no man since Bean on his expedition to Gallipoli and the Western Front in 1919 had contributed such an important collection of relics as those Balsillie had found in Malaya.<sup>13</sup> A notable member of the audience was Lionel Wigmore, author of the official history volume that Balsillie had used in tracking down each of the battle sites.

A relic of great importance to the Memorial is the Singapore surrender table, which Balsillie acquired for the Memorial during this deployment to Malaya. Balsillie learned that the British signed the surrender in the old Ford Factory, on the Bukit-Timah road, in Singapore. On a trip to Singapore in mid-1961, Balsillie visited the factory, identifying

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<sup>13</sup> Interview, J Balsillie with author, 10 February 2010.



himself as a collector of war relics. A wartime employee of the factory was found to show Balsillie the site of the surrender. Balsillie had brought with him Japanese propaganda photographs, and was able to identify the six-legged table in the company's boardroom as the one on which General Percival had signed the surrender. The original linoleum floor was a highlight of the visit, as it still bore the markings made by the Japanese when planning the seating arrangements for the surrender. Balsillie made enquiries as to whether Ford would sell, or preferably donate, the table to the Australian War Memorial, as an important part of the story of the 8th Division and Australia's role in the battle for Singapore. The representatives at Ford were reluctant; Balsillie recalls them being "pretty negative about it" but he knew a good relic when he found one, so he left his details, care of the Memorial, in the hope the Ford people would change their mind.<sup>14</sup>



Left: Allied surrender signed by Lieutenant General Percival on the table at the Ford factory, February 1942 (AWM 127903)

Middle: The surrender table in 1961 (photo courtesy of Jack Balsillie)

Right: The Ford Factory in 1961 (photo courtesy of Jack Balsillie)

On 30 April 1964, Balsillie received communication from Ford Malaya informing him that they had agreed to donate the historic piece of furniture, and the linoleum flooring, to the Memorial. Contacted by a representative from Ford's public relations unit, Balsillie referred the coordination of the donation on to Rutherford at the Memorial. Ford Malaya shipped the table to the Ford headquarters in Sydney, from where it was transported to the Memorial, arriving in October 1964.

For the past 46 years the table has been a key feature of the story of the Australian role in the Pacific, and a feature of the Memorial's Second World War gallery. In 1971, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board requested the return of the table to be part of their

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<sup>14</sup> Interview, J. Balsillie with author, 10 February 2010.

planned historical museum on Sentosa Island. Having legally acquired the table, the Memorial instead provided a replica made for the Pioneers of Singapore and Surrender Chambers museum (now the Images of Singapore museum), which opened in 1983.

While the table is one of the most treasured pieces in the Memorial's collection, to Balsillie it marks a dark period of Australian military history. The army had ingrained in Balsillie the dictum, "success comes in cans and failure in cannots". In Balsillie's mind the table represented a colossal failure, a defeat which marked the period of captivity for the men of the 8th Division. Balsillie had collected relics from Malaya in order to tell the story of their bravery and not of their defeat. He believes that one relic would have best told the story he wanted to tell: the steps of the Municipal Building in Singapore, where the surrender of the Japanese army took place in 1945. He admits he had set himself an impossible task, to remove the steps of what is now Singapore's City Hall; but as a soldier, Balsillie wanted to tell the story of a victory.

### **Rose Force, 1967**

During Balsillie's time in Malaya he had become aware of a small commando force assembled from the six Australian battalions in Malaya. Their mission was to wreak havoc behind enemy lines. Wigmore's 700-page volume of the official history refers to the force in three brief paragraphs, but it was enough to spark Balsillie's interest. He wrote to the Memorial's director on 10 September 1961 from Malaya, requesting further details of the unit, as "unfortunately this reference (in the Official History) does not give me sufficient details for me to locate the site."<sup>15</sup> McGrath responded to Balsillie, enclosing a map of the ambush site from Angus Rose's *Who dies fighting*.

Even today little has been written about the unit, which became known as Rose Force, following the line begun by Tulip Force, already established in September 1941 (the name "Rose" was taken from the flower, not the coincidental surname of the officer who raised the force).<sup>16</sup> The unit came together at Kuala Lumpur on 23 December 1941, under the command of Captain David T. Lloyd of the 2/30th Battalion. Having not yet seen action, many men of the 8th Division were keen to join a commando unit. Conditions of entry stipulated that only unmarried volunteers would be accepted and all men had to be

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<sup>15</sup> Letter, J. Balsillie to J. McGrath, 10 September 1961, AWM315 749/005/007.

<sup>16</sup> Rose Force Malaya and A Force December 1941 – January 1942, Australian Military Forces, Army headquarters, formation and unit diaries, 1939–1945, AWM 52, <[http://www.awm.gov.au/cms\\_images/AWM52/1/AWM52-1-5-67-001.pdf](http://www.awm.gov.au/cms_images/AWM52/1/AWM52-1-5-67-001.pdf)>, p. 1 .

prepared to be left behind enemy lines should they become wounded and a burden to the party. The unit consisted of two platoons, one with volunteers from the 2/19th, 2/20th and 2/30th Battalions, led by Lieutenant R.E. Sanderson, the other led by Lieutenant M. Perring, with men of the 2/18th, 2/26th and 2/29th Battalions. Balsillie's interest in Roseforce's story, despite the force's size and status as a temporary unit, was founded in the knowledge that they were the *first* Australians to encounter the Imperial Japanese Army: to Balsillie, this was a story that needed to be told. While Balsillie was unable to locate Rose Force relics on his first visit to Malaya, he spent the next six years planning a trip to find the relics necessary to tell their story.

The Japanese invasion of Malaya had been swift and the British and Commonwealth troops were unprepared for the jungle fighting necessary to engage the enemy. By mid-December 1941, as the Japanese moved steadily down through northern Malaya, British command became receptive to new ideas, giving Major Angus Rose of the Argyll Sutherland Highlanders the opportunity to propose his plan for a commando unit. Rose, under the command of General Ian Stewart, had spent his initial months in Malaya training in the jungle and had become well versed in guerrilla tactics. It was not until 1944 that the first detailed manual on tropical warfare was printed and distributed throughout the 2nd Australian Imperial Force (AIF) – but lessons learned from earlier attempts, including in 1941 and early 1942 in Malaya, contributed to this understanding.

Lieutenant Colonel Ian Stewart of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders had intensively trained his 2nd Battalion in the jungles of Malaya, a seemingly crack-pot approach in mid-1941. Following the Japanese invasion, his battalion's experience meant it was one of the best fighting units in Malaya. Rose, with this pedigree, was taken notice of. Rose envisioned a commando force posted behind Japanese lines:

My plan, in brief, was to land a battalion behind Jap lines and to harry their communications on the only two routes that crossed the Perak River. I reckoned the Japs would be across the Perak River before Christmas but that their forward troops would be entirely dependent on these two routes about the time that the operation could materialise. This I put about the New Year ... I hoped that not only would we be able to cut off the Jap forward troops from essential battle supplies but also that we would force them to detach a large force to clear their line of communication.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Rose, Angus, *Who dies fighting*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1944, pp. 46–47.

Rose's plan was approved, in a more limited capacity than he intended, and it was soon realised that only the AIF would have men to spare. Rose was sent to speak to General Gordon Bennett, General Officer Commanding the Australians in Malaya: "I discussed the project with him and he agreed to produce fifty men and three officers but no more."<sup>18</sup> In addition to these two platoons for the force, Rose obtained six Europeans from the local volunteers, a large supply of Bata hockey boots, special rations, map cases with cut and glued maps of the target area, and a medical detachment. Rose allocated 13 Tommy guns, two Bren guns, 12 rifles, eight Gurkha kukris, and four .38 pistols to each platoon. Additionally each man received two No. 69 Bakelite offensive grenades and sufficient ammunition. On its first mission, from Port Swettenham (today's Pelabuhan Kelang), 37 kilometres south-east of Kuala Lumpur, Rose Force was transported by boat 300 kilometres north to the mouth of the Trong River, far behind enemy lines. Rose's instructions were to take the force as far this point, with his role becoming observational once on land, attached to the No. 2 Platoon as a liaison officer:

Gordon Bennett had already stipulated that I was subject to the normal procedure under which British officers were not empowered to give orders to or command Australian troops; so, apart from holding direct responsibility for putting them ashore and re-embarking them, my duties only extended to planning.<sup>19</sup>

Rose's platoon was commanded by Lieutenant Sanderson, a newly commissioned officer, and while Rose thought the unit lacked the "precision and *esprit de corps* of a homogenous body" that had lived and trained together,<sup>20</sup> he was impressed by the volunteers' fitness for the role: "their glistening brown torsos were hard and well developed – good material."<sup>21</sup> In Bennett's account of Rose Force, written while the men of the 8th Division were still in captivity, he recalled the suitability of his men to be part of such a force:

Australians are particularly adaptable to this type of work. They possess initiative, resource and individuality, and quickly shake themselves into a team – the team spirit being essential for guerrilla work.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Rose, p. 50.

<sup>19</sup> Rose, p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> Rose, p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> Rose, p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> Bennett, Lieut.-Gen. H. Gordon, *Why Singapore fell*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1944, p. 81.

From the Trong River, the force made its way inland, though the No.1 platoon, commanded by Lieutenant Perring of the 2/28th and to which Lloyd was attached, had engine trouble and were unable to get to the proposed landing place. Sanderson took his platoon and the instructions for No.1 Platoon, successfully ambushing a Japanese column on December 28, making them the first men of the AIF in action against the Japanese.

The accounts of this ambush differ in the three versions which detail it. Bennett, writing from Australia without access to the war diaries, or any details of the action, has Lloyd, the commanding officer, as the central protagonist. Rose also wrote his book before the end of the war, having been one of the few evacuated from Singapore with the intention of sharing the lessons of the Malayan campaign with other divisions. Rose lectured on the topic of Japanese tactics and jungle warfare immediately following his evacuation, writing his account of Rose Force from memory and personal interpretation in 1944. Rose was considered an eccentric officer of the men by his unit, many describing him to Balsillie as antagonistic. After attempting to contact Rose himself while researching the ambush, Balsillie learned from the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders that Rose had spent the last years of his life in a psychiatric facility.<sup>23</sup> In his account, Rose casts himself as the hero:

As the leading car flashed into sight I saw a blue pennant flying on the radiator cap. I thought instinctively – “Brigadier! – We must have him,” and, in the split second which I had for making a decision, I put up my rifle, swung through on to the driver and pressed the trigger. “Correct!” The driver crumpled up ... I was quite pleased with my marksmanship and got a kick out of my shot akin to pulling down a high pheasant at a covert shoot.<sup>24</sup>

The account in the Rose Force unit diary is by far the most detailed of the three, and while it was probably not typed up until after the war, it offers a more realistic view of the successful ambush:

0830 hrs. Convoy came round corner headed by a staff car carrying pennant followed by three lorries and one utility. Fire was immediately opened up upon them. The car ran off the road after being hit by a 69 grenade, and Lieut. Sanderson fired one full drum magazine of 50 shots into the occupants, who numbered six.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Interview, J. Balsillie with author, 10 February 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Rose, p. 71.

<sup>25</sup> Rose Force unit diaries, pp. 5–6.

While the diary suggests the platoon killed a Major General of the Japanese army, no Japanese source confirms the death of a high ranking officer at this location at this point in the war. Therefore no certainty can be placed on the importance of the ambush, other than inflicting a shock to the Japanese and giving an indication of what could have been achieved had a battalion been put into action behind enemy lines. Field Marshall Wavell, commander-in-chief in the Far East, estimated that guerrilla forces organised within the Peninsula would have been instrumental in defeating the Japanese.<sup>26</sup> To the men of the 8th Division waiting for action in Johore, southern Malaya, the ambush was seen not only as a representation of what could have been done to immobilise the Japanese army, but served as a morale booster which remained the unit's greatest achievement. Rose Force was disbanded after just one month: fighting was getting too close to Singapore and Bennett needed every trained man in his battalions. The men returned to their units on 27 January 1942, crossing over to the island for the final battle of Singapore and their time as prisoners of the Japanese.

After digging holes across Malaya to retrieve the relics of the 8th Division, Balsillie's focus shifted to Rose Force and locating the site of their ambush. During his Malayan deployment, Balsillie knew little of the details of Rose Force, but through ardent research and some help from the Memorial with maps and a copy of the unit diary, he was able to get a better understanding of the ambush upon his return to Malaya. Correspondence in the Memorial suggests Balsillie met with Rose Force's commanding officer, the retired Major David Lloyd, during which time the two discussed Rose Force, Balsillie leaving Lloyd with a map of the ambush site from Rose's book in the hope of verifying the exact location. He also visited Lieutenant Sanderson at his home in Parkes, NSW, on his return from Malaya, after Lloyd's suggestion that Sanderson would be best able to pinpoint the site.<sup>27</sup>

Balsillie's fervour for the retrieval of the Rose Force relics for the Memorial is exemplified by the intensity of his correspondence on the topic of Rose Force. On 7 June 1962, he wrote to the director asking if the Memorial could sponsor his return to Malaya to find relics of the ambush. The director replied to Balsillie the following week, stating that

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<sup>26</sup> Wavell, Field Marshall Earl, in the Foreword to Chapman, F. Spencer, *The jungle is neutral*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1954, pp. v–vi.

<sup>27</sup> Letter, Maj D. T. Lloyd to J. Balsillie, 1 June 1962, AWM315 749/005/007.



the Memorial had sufficient relics to tell the story of the 8th Division and would be unable to press for his return. At the end of June, Rutherford received a letter from Balsillie, disappointed that the Memorial was unable to support his return, but still enthusiastic about finding the Rose Force relics himself.

Balsillie's correspondence with the Memorial declined between 1962 and 1964 but he was still researching Rose Force and seeking alternative sources of funding. In August 1964, he requested a letter from Rutherford, outlining why the Rose Force relics would be of great importance to the Memorial. The letter of reference was one of many Balsillie used in his application for an army grant. Rutherford obliged Balsillie and heard from him again in March 1967, with the news that while unsuccessful with the grant, he was "off at long last" on a self-funded Rose Force mission.<sup>28</sup>

In 1966, Balsillie had applied to use all his available leave and took a total of five weeks leave in 1967 for his return visit to Malaya. Balsillie embarked on a RAAF flight to Malaya on 20 March, staying at army bases still active in Malaya throughout his visit and making several contacts who would later prove useful when he was in Vietnam. Along with accommodation and equipment, the army provided Balsillie with a driver and an assistant, and put him in contact with a local Malay who had lived in a kampong near the ambush site in 1941. For a small fee, the local was able to lead Balsillie to the site of the Rose Force ambush, on the Trong–Temerloh road. Balsillie was sceptical at first, but having received the assistance of local guides in his relic searches of 1961, he was willing to follow his escort – who led him 550 metres off his researched position. The discovery of a Thompson sub-machine gun magazine confirmed this as the ambush site.

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<sup>28</sup> Letter, J. Balsillie to J. Rutherford, 3 March 1967, AWM315 749/005/007.



Balsillie (far left, wearing head phones) and his crew of helpers searching in the jungles of Malaya in 1961, with a recovered collection of bullets from 1942 (photo courtesy of Jack Balsillie).

To Balsillie, the most important relic he collected on this second visit to Malaya was the Thompson magazine, a key piece of evidence which validated his years of research. Thompson sub-machine guns were not standard issue in December 1941, so units that had withdrawn from this northern part of Malaya would not have been carrying them. As noted in the 2/30th Battalion's history, Thompsons were new to the action: "Tommy guns and Bren guns, particularly the former, were weapons new to the troops in Malaya. None of the men had fired a Tommy gun."<sup>29</sup> Every second man in Rose Force carried a Thompson. In addition to the magazine, Balsillie found further Rose Force relics, including an incendiary grenade and a Japanese wheel wrench. He revisited several other battle sites from the 8th Division, boxing up two crates for the Memorial. Unfortunately, given the quarter of a century the relics had spent undiscovered in the Malayan jungle, they were badly corroded and many have been de-accessioned from the Memorial's collection since.

Balsillie returned to Australia with the most important of the Rose Force relics in a small box, the Thompson magazine among them. He delivered these to the Memorial in person, in June 1967, once again timing his visit to catalogue the items with Rutherford. Having successfully discovered the relics of the first Australians in action against the Japanese, Balsillie broadened his passion to other divisions of the 2nd AIF. The month

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<sup>29</sup> Penfold, A. W. Bayliss, W. C. & Crispin, K. E., *Galleghan's Greyhounds: the story of the 2/30th Australian Infantry Battalion, 22nd November, 1940 – 10th October, 1945*, Halstead Press, Sydney, 1949, p. 73.

following his visit to the Memorial, Balsillie wrote a letter to Rutherford requesting another reference, this time in support of his application for a Churchill Scholarship. Balsillie's application was to fund a 21-week relics recovery trip, aiming to fill the gaps in the Memorial's collection. As Balsillie puts it, he was "after all the major actions of all the major units" that fought in the Pacific during the Second World War.<sup>30</sup> His proposed tour included a survey of the Burma Railway, the Sandakan prisoner-of-war march in Borneo, the fortress guns at Proid Point in Rabaul; various sites of action in Papua, including Milne Bay, Buna, Sanananda and the Owen Stanleys; and visits to Timor and Malaya. The final two weeks of the itinerary were to be spent preparing and cataloguing the relics at the Memorial. Other referees for his application included Sir Wilfred Kent Hughes, Sir Arthur Lee, Brigadier Galleghan and Colonel Brockwell. Despite the impressive line-up of support, Balsillie was not awarded the scholarship, and informed Rutherford later that year that "we were unsuccessful".<sup>31</sup> Balsillie clearly saw himself as a collector for the Memorial and it is unfortunate for both Balsillie and the Memorial that this trip never eventuated.

### **Vietnam 1969–70**

Not since Treloar's work during Second World War had there been an official Military History Unit working to gather relics for the Memorial. Jim McGrath, as the Memorial's Director, was acutely aware of the shortage of relics from the Korean War, and had written to the Department of Defence on 25 November 1965 with the aim of preventing a repeat in Vietnam. In his letter he stated that while there had been no official declaration of war, hostilities were of a sufficient nature to warrant their being recorded; he requested a team be assembled, "similar to that provided during the 1939–45 war".<sup>32</sup> McGrath did not receive a response to his letter until 31 May 1966, a few weeks prior to his retirement. His successor, W.R. (Bill) Lancaster took an even more assertive stance on the collection of relics from Vietnam, writing to each of the service arms consistently throughout the war.

The Defence Department assured the Memorial they were collecting sufficient relics and deemed the establishment of a Military History Unit superfluous.<sup>33</sup> For the Memorial,

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<sup>30</sup> Interview, J. Balsillie with author, 10 February 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Interview, J. Balsillie with author, 10 February 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Letter, J. McGrath to Sen. S. Paltridge (Minister for Defence), 25 November 1965, AWM315 748/001/024.

<sup>33</sup> Letter, Sen. J. Paltridge (Minister for Defence) to J. McGrath, 31 May 1966, AWM315 748/001/024.

though, the lack of its presence on the ground to educate and collect, meant that the few relics being sent from Vietnam were not suitable for exhibition. The tradition of collecting, relic by relic, the story of Australians at war had been passed down from Bean to Treloar, and both McGrath and Lancaster were trying to pursue this legacy. McGrath, writing to Captain I.C. Teague of the Australian Army Team stationed in Vietnam in 1965, described it thus:

It would be of some assistance if I indicated just what constitutes a good relic from our point of view and to do this I must emphasise that the War Memorial is not technically a military museum, but a memorial in which, relic by relic, record by record, we endeavour to tell the story of those it commemorates. A story – often some seemingly unimportant and insignificant item of uniform or other equipment belonging to a friend or foe, but associated with an incident, a battle, an ambush, or some other outstanding event.<sup>34</sup>

The Korean War had passed with no collecting policy in place, meaning that little had been donated to the Memorial. This lack of relics made it difficult to engage the public with the stories of the Australian contribution to that war. McGrath, and his successors, were keen not to repeat this mistake – yet by 1965, after three years of an Australian military presence in Vietnam, McGrath was worried.

When Bill Lancaster became the Memorial's Director in 1966, he inherited a severely underfunded and understaffed institution.<sup>35</sup> The small staff team was focused on the relics from previous wars and was unable to stretch its attention to contemporary conflicts. By 1966, the only relics that had been donated to the Memorial from Vietnam were a small collection of captured Viet Cong weapons. While the Memorial could use one or two in an exhibition, the weapons did not directly relate to the Australian soldiers stationed in Vietnam and told little of their story. Lancaster was keen to rectify this, and wrote widely seeking support. In a series of letters in 1968, Lancaster petitioned serving Memorial Board members and trustees in the hope of gaining their backing to send a member of the Memorial's staff to Vietnam. Lancaster believed a higher volume of more suitable relics could be sent to the Memorial if the Memorial had a representative in the field. To the Chief

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<sup>34</sup> Letter, J. McGrath to Capt I.C. Teague, 15 July 1965, AWM315 748/003/078.

<sup>35</sup> When Noel Flanagan was appointed Director in 1975 he pointed out to the Board that the Memorial was understaffed, running on a team of 80, in comparison with the Imperial War Museum's 206 – with a collection twice the size of its London counterpart's. McKernan, Michael, *Here is their spirit, a history of the Australian War Memorial 1917–1990*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1991, p. 186.

of the Air Staff, Air Marshall Sir Alister Murdoch, Lancaster was both sympathetic and compelling:

While I appreciate that our forces in the field have many more pressing tasks than the collection of relics for the War Memorial, it is important that the miserable collection of relics of the Korean War is at least equalled for Vietnam and this does not seem likely to be achieved unless something positive is done.<sup>36</sup>

It was in this climate that Rutherford received a letter from Balsillie, informing him that he was soon to be deployed to Vietnam and keen to collect relics for the Memorial.

Rutherford's response to Balsillie indicates the high regard in which the Memorial held Balsillie's work in the field, endorsing him as a Memorial collector:

The main thing is to be able to recognise a worthwhile relic when you see one and that's something I know you have a flair for – so, should you come across any, Jack, we'll look forward to receiving them.<sup>37</sup>

Balsillie recognised himself as a representative for the Memorial in Vietnam and when he deployed in May 1969, his reputation as a collector for the Memorial preceded him. On his second visit to Malaya, Balsillie had been assisted in Singapore by Brigadier C.M.I. (Sandy) Pearson, who in 1969 was now the Commander of the 1st Australian Task Force, Vietnam. Familiar with Balsillie's work for the War Memorial, Pearson ensured that Balsillie was able to play his role of educating soldiers on the needs of the Memorial:

Sandy made arrangements for me to go around the different units and to speak to them about what to collect, how to arrange it and identify it – that the story was important. For instance – Long Tan, Sandy made arrangements that I was to accompany that deployment to put the cross in. The cross was made by the engineering people of the 6th Battalion and on the morning of the memorial it was taken out by carrier and placed into position.<sup>38</sup>

This cross-raising ceremony, just three months after Balsillie's arrival and three years to the day after the battle of Long Tan, was the first return to the site. Long Tan was to become the most remembered battle in which Australians took part during the Vietnam War – and

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<sup>36</sup> Letter, B. Lancaster to Air Marshal A. Murdoch, 20 May 1968, AWM315 748/001/024.

<sup>37</sup> Letter, J. Rutherford to J. Balsillie, 29 October 1967, AWM315 749/005/007.

<sup>38</sup> Interview, J. Balsillie with author, 10 February 2010.

Balsillie knew, even at the start of his tour, the importance of gathering relics to tell the story of the battle and the men of D Company, 6th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment, who fought there. Few had returned to the site since the battle as it was still considered hostile territory; during the ceremony, Balsillie went over the battlefield, filling three sandbags with relics to send back to Rutherford. Among them Balsillie recovered a North Vietnamese Tokarev (TT-33) pistol and holder, damaged by a bullet, which is now on display in the Vietnam gallery.

With a quartermaster's appointment, for the first six months of his deployment Balsillie ran the Headquarters 1st Australian Task Force's Light Aid Detachment, which provided much of the task force's mechanical repair support. This gave Balsillie the opportunity to meet a great many army personnel. He made sure he spoke to as many of the new arrivals as possible on his trips to the bases, making himself known to all high ranking officers, as he recalled in a letter back to Rutherford: "I told them [a newly arrived unit] what the requirement is but although the units make all sorts of promises I don't know if much has been sent back."<sup>39</sup>

Balsillie's influence was wide, and many high-ranking officers ensured they spread the word about collecting relics from important scenes of battle. Colonel Alan Stretton was Chief of Staff, Headquarters Australian Force, based in Saigon, and also proved a great contact for Balsillie in Vietnam. He recalls his years of supporting his friend Stretton when he was a ruckman for St Kilda: "Those were the days we used to be pretty closely involved with football, so I knew Stretton from way back," and Stretton was keen to assist Balsillie in spreading his message.<sup>40</sup>

Balsillie had an ear for a good story. He vividly recalls collecting what he believes to be his most important relic from Vietnam. On the morning that Warrant Officer Class 2 Ray Simpson's Victoria Cross was announced, Simpson was in the garage (like many of the advisers, Simpson was a regular visitor to Balsillie's workshop):

Without a doubt Ray Simpson was the most professional soldier that I've ever met. He knew that I was collecting for the War Memorial – so I asked "what have you got that you would have been wearing at the time of that action for me to send down to the War Memorial?" He said everything [had] changed, he said he even had a

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<sup>39</sup> Letter, J. Balsillie to J. Rutherford, 13 March 1970, AWM315 749/005/007.

<sup>40</sup> Interview, J. Balsillie with author, 10 February 2010.



different rifle than what he had ... He said "the watch is the only thing I believe I have now which I had then." It was a standard military plastic watch which we used to call Mickey Mouse watches. So I said right you give me that and I'll give you mine, so I gave him my watch which he wore and I sent that one back down to Jack [Rutherford] with a little story that it belonged to Simpson the day that he was in action and won the Victoria Cross.<sup>41</sup>



Left: Ray Simpson's "Mickey Mouse watch" (AWM: RELAWM40187)  
Middle and right: Raymond Woolan's uniform (AWM: RELAWM40186.001;  
RELAWM40186.002)

When 2nd Lieutenant Raymond Woolan received the Military Cross, Balsillie, who knew Woolan's commanding officer, made sure he got not only an item of what Woolan was wearing that day, but the whole kit, from his identification discs down to underpants. In the tradition of Charles Bean, who had collected the full uniform of a soldier (Private George Janes Giles) of the 29th Battalion during the First World War, Balsillie had acquired for the Memorial a Vietnam War equivalent. The importance of having a uniform from an Australian soldier in Vietnam, particularly one awarded a Military Cross, should not be understated. The Memorial was more interested in the relics of the Australians serving in Vietnam than in a cache of Vietcong weapons, and Woolan's uniform now plays an important part in the Memorial's Vietnam gallery.

Bob Cornish, an army public relations officer working in South Vietnam, heard of Balsillie's passion for collecting and wrote an article on Balsillie for the *Sunday Truth*. Jokingly, Balsillie told the officer his aim was to get the Brigadier's bush hat for the Memorial, as it had become such a well known symbol: "Brigadier C.M.I. Pearson's battered faded green bush hat is the stuff of history ... he is seldom seen without it, in the field or in

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<sup>41</sup> Interview, J. Balsillie with author, 10 February 2010.

the base camp."<sup>42</sup> After reading the article himself, at the end of his tour Pearson gave Balsillie his hat, which is now in the Memorial's collection.



Left: Sandy Pearson's bush hat, (AWM RELAWM40156)

Middle: Panji spikes used by the Vietcong (AWM RELAWM40819)

Right: Chicom Type 54 pistol discovered at the site of the Battle of Long Tan (AWM RELAWM27493.001)

During Balsillie's time in Vietnam, he was recast in the role established by Treloar during the First World War. Promoted to the rank of captain during his tour, Balsillie's work took up most of his time, but he had established a reputation as a collector of relics for the Memorial. Through clever networking and an obvious charm, he was able to influence a great deal of the Memorial's collection during this period. Balsillie obtained the knife Major Peter Badcoe had carried with him during the action that won him a Victoria Cross; he passed on Stretton's Vietnamese Army Distinguished Service Order (2nd class) to the Memorial. He collected a set of Vietcong *panji* spikes, a spiked concrete booby trap well-liked by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, which tormented Australian troops stationed there and is now on display in the gallery. By Vietnam, Balsillie had hit his stride as a collector for the Memorial – his understanding of what made a good relic meant that from the range of items at his disposal, he chose the ones which could tell a good story. The evolution of Balsillie's notion of collecting, from his raw energy in surveying the battlefields of Malaya, to the advantageous position he found himself in as a collector during the Vietnam conflict, can be noted in minutes from a meeting on the status of several potential war relics. Balsillie outlined the role of the Memorial, and echoes of Rutherford and McGrath, and through them Bean and Treloar, can be heard: "The object of the War

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<sup>42</sup> "Battered bush hat may make history", *Sunday Truth*, August 3, 1969.

Memorial museum section is to tell, relic by relic, the story of the exploits of the men the Memorial commemorates.”<sup>43</sup>

Not all the relics Balsillie influenced were given directly to him for the Memorial. The Memorial received a large number of relics after their return to Australia, and a letter from Major John J. Donohoe in 1971 indicates Balsillie’s influence: “Some time ago during a casual discussion it was suggested to me that I should pass the War Memorial [a pennant].”<sup>44</sup> Donohoe had served in Vietnam as a civil affairs officer attached to 1st Australian Task Force. He donated his vehicle pennant to the Memorial, and from reading the story which accompanied it, Balsillie’s influence is plain to see. Donohoe had been stationed at HQ, Australian Force (Army component) for the month of April 1970. Balsillie was there from November 1969 until May 1970. Donohoe’s red and yellow pennant read “WHAM” (Winning Hearts and Minds) and he would fly this from his vehicle so that villagers would recognise him as the Civil Affairs liaison – part of the pacification plan in Vietnam.<sup>45</sup> After a few months of use, the pennant was retired when it was revealed that Donohoe had a \$500 price on his head. A 12-year-old boy reported that he had been given a grenade to throw at the car with the red and yellow pennant. Only the relic itself would allow the telling of such a story and it is now part of the Memorial’s collection.

For his services to the Australian War Memorial, Balsillie was made a civil Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1970, awarded on few occasions to serving military personnel. Balsillie was stationed in South Vietnam during the investiture ceremony of 1970, and had to wait until his return in May that year to receive his award. He recalls the effort Stretton made to get him home for the ceremony, but shrugs it off: “I bet getting an MBE from the Governor is just as good as the Queen.”<sup>46</sup>

With a total of 126 relics donated to the Memorial, Balsillie’s passion for collecting found a different focus after Vietnam. When he retired from the army in July 1985, after 40 years of service, he was the last of the continuously serving soldiers to have enlisted during the Second World War. Balsillie went on to become the mayor of Bendigo for a period and in his retirement he remains actively engaged with the RSL funeral service, with his passion for collecting concentrated, at present, on Boer War ceramic plates.

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<sup>43</sup> Letter, J. Balsillie to J. Rutherford, 13 March 1970, AWM315 749/005/007.

<sup>44</sup> Letter, Maj. Donohoe to AWM, [?] February 1971, AWM315 748/001/024.

<sup>45</sup> The “Winning Hearts and Minds” effort was central to the work of the Civil Affairs unit in Vietnam.

<sup>46</sup> Interview, J. Balsillie with author, 10 February 2010.

While Jack Balsillie's contribution to the Memorial's collection ended in 1970, his legacy is seen by every visitor who walks through the Second World War and Vietnam galleries.



Balsillie being awarded his MBE at the Melbourne Town Hall, 1970 (photo courtesy of Jack Balsillie).