

## **Interviews with War Dog Operatives**

Series 1, Profile 5 – Korea 1950-53

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**Private/Sapper/RAAF Sergeant Lance Abbott R Aust Inf/RAE/RAAF**

Dateline for this profile is 17 November 2009.

### **Background**

Private (Pte) Lance Abbott was born in Melbourne but spent much of his early childhood in Tasmania. Lance left school and home early and worked on sheep and cattle stations as well as on mining sites. He arrived in Brisbane a very poor man because on the way from Alice Springs to Rockhampton his swag fell off the truck he was travelling on, and that took all his worldly possessions with it. In 1952, there was not much work in Rockhampton, so Lance continued on to Brisbane with just the clothes he had on his back. In Brisbane, Lance saw a poster looking for volunteers to join the Army, applied to join and was accepted. Recruit training was done in the Enoggera Barracks area and then on to the Infantry Centre at Ingleburn for his infantry training.

### **Overseas Service**

Lance's first posting was to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of The Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR) in 1952, which was stationed in Japan. Shortly later, 3 RAR was sent to Korea and occupied the notorious Hill 355. This feature was the ground of tactical importance and was mortared by the Chinese forces numerous times because of the Royal Artillery gun position which was dug into its reverse slope. The Chinese were looking to destroy the Artillery which meant everybody on Hill 355 copped a mortaring with monotonous regularity. While on this feature, Lance's platoon commander called him out to go down the hill to see if he could coax a runaway German Shepherd dog (in those days called Alsatians) back into the Australian lines. It was suspected that the dog belonged to the British Army and had become lost in the front lines. Lance saw the dog and was taken by its well kept appearance. So he talked to it in a friendly way and then commanded the dog to follow him. It jumped up and ran up to Lance who took it back to his company position. However, the dog could not stay in the lines and so he was given to a Royal Army Veterinary Corps unit. Not long after this event, a call went out for each Battalion to contribute one digger for training with the Engineers as a dog handler. Lance was the automatic choice, given his experience with the lost dog.

Lance received much of his dog handling training from Corporal George Gray of the Royal Australian Engineers (RAE). There was a British Army Sergeant who was a very knowledgeable fellow whose experience with dogs was with the London Metropolitan Police. The dog teams were trained as infantry patrol dogs and most of their patrol duties were performed at night. Several of the trenches were unoccupied at night and the Chinese or the North Koreans would quietly infiltrate these trenches so that next morning there would be a battle to reoccupy them by the British units. The dog units would be tasked to give early warning of enemy approach and to ambush them when they

attempted to enter the British trenches. Sometimes this would go on for most of the night. The dog was trained to point out the position of enemy soldiers including enemy ambush positions. When the ceasefire began to take effect, the dog teams were required to continue with night patrols and Lance found himself supporting either Canadian or British Army units on the front line. He ended his tour of duty in 1953 and was posted to the School of Military Engineering near Sydney as a dog handler. He had to Corps transfer from R Aust Inf to RAE at which time his rank changed from Private to Sapper.

### **The School of Military Engineering**

On arrival at the School of Military Engineering (SME) Lance found that they had started a Dog Section which was commanded by a Warrant Officer whose only experience was the breeding of toy sized dogs as pets. Later an officer was appointed, but this person had been self-taught using a British Army dog training pamphlet. The dogs were randomly recruited generally as not-wanted family pets. Lance's dog was a donated fox terrier with a terrible disposition. In those days, SME resembled a big paddock and there were some cows agisted on SME territory. This meant cow pats. Lance's terrier would bolt to the freshest piece of cow shit he could find and roll himself in it until he was totally covered in it. Lance would then have to take this dog to a disused ex-WWII barrack hut which had a bath, and wash the dog in whatever water he could find. This dog was being trained to be a mine detecting dog. The training media was a series of buried tin cans laid under some hessian. The hessian replicated an area of minefield. During the training, Lance's officer arrived with another officer looking for a demonstration on how well a mine dog team could operate. Lance completed the search and declared the job done. But the book trained officer chastised Lance for not checking back along the same line as he had cleared on the way in (it said to do that in the pamphlet). Lance said a few uncomplimentary things to his officer including a reminder that there had been amendments to it which removed the need to undertake the check back. Lance did not need this sort of supervision and decided to take his discharge from the Army in 1954.

A dog trainer who left a huge impact on Lance's life was Corporal (later Sergeant) George Gray. George was a wonderful dog trainer who made a big impact on dog training in Malaya during the Emergency of 1948-60. George was a very competitive athlete who excelled on bike races. He was also Lance's best man at his wedding.

### **Service in the RAAF and Ubon, Thailand**

Lance worked as a bag seller for a while and a salesman. But as a newly married man he decided he needed a trade. In 1956, Lance saw some advertising for the RAAF promoting adult trade training and decided to join the RAAF. He received RAAF recruit training at Forest Hill near Wagga Wagga in NSW, but on graduation he was sought after as a ground defence operative due to his Korean War and dog handling experience.

Lance was posted to ground defence of the United States Air Force base at Ubon in Thailand. The problem there was that the local communist guerrillas would wait in the jungle strip adjacent to the airfield where the aircraft were approaching to land. They

would open fire at the slowly lumbering aircraft and scored many hits on them. Lance was a Sergeant at that time, and his team had the job of tracking down these guerrillas in the jungle and get rid of them. Lance took his dog teams into the jungle and when the guerrillas saw the dogs, they vanished. They did not come back.

Lance saw service as an instructor at the RAAF Base at Edinburgh in South Australia and after twelve years service with the RAAF, he discharged in 1968.

### **Civilian Life**

After discharge, Lance worked as a Real Estate agent in the Sydney area. He would pass a mechanical engineering workshop on his commute to work every day for four years without realising that his best mate, George Gray, was working in that very workshop as a motor mechanic. The two mates met up again some years later in the northern NSW area. Lance needed a medical operation on his leg but it was not a success and he lost much lymph from a severed lymph gland. This caused a dramatic drop in his natural resistance to disease and shortly afterward, Lance developed throat cancer. He has battled that ever since. He lives with his wife Noelene in Coffs Harbour and enjoys the clean air and casual lifestyle of that area.



Pte Lance Abbott, Korea 1952. Image courtesy of Lance Abbott, 1952.



Pte Lance Abbott and Bruce, Korea 1952. Image courtesy of Lance Abbott, 1952.



A typical Bruce “point”. Unknown handler, Korea 1952. Image courtesy of Lance Abbott, 1952.



Bruce on bunker search work. Korea 1952.

Image courtesy of Lance Abbott, 1952.



Typical kennel area of the Korean War

1952. Bruce's kennel. Image courtesy of Lance Abbott, 1952.



Pte Lance Abbott and Lux, Korea 1952. Image courtesy of Lance Abbott, 1952.



*FIND! Trainee dog Tiger points at a hidden mine while his handler, Sapper G. Taylor, prods it with a stick. Tiger is half Airedale, half German Shepherd, and a good soldier.*

This is an image taken from an unknown newspaper source in 1955. It shows some of the mine dog training at the School of Military Engineering (SME), at Casula near Liverpool, NSW. The section also trained guard dogs. In 1953, Lance Abbott returned from Korea during the implementation phase of the mine dog section at SME.

Image courtesy of Sgt Colin "Smiley" Matthews as gifted to George Hulse in 2009.