I have the rare privilege of have a World War 2 veteran Mate living in my hometown of Wauchope, NSW. He is Gnr R.R. Dixon MM and he is an Artilleryman. For a number of years I have been meaning to sit down with Ron to get his story and anecdotes first hand whilst the opportunity still existed due to the advancing years for all of us. I have now managed to gather the data and it is presented as the following:

Ron was born on Saturday 9th July, 1921 and on Christmas Day 2017 Ron will have lived 35,233 days. Ron is a under the sign of Cancer with the modern Birthstone of Ruby. Ron is now 96 years of age and in good physical condition with regular games of his favourite game of Golf.

Ron married Marge in 1946 and lived around the St. George district of Sydney before settling in the Wauchope area quite a number of years ago. They are both still together with two sons and one daughter with 18 Great Grandchildren. On Friday 5th January, 2018 they will celebrate their 72nd Wedding Anniversary.

Ron was a Gunner in the 2/5 Field Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery and served with that Regiment from its formation until the end of the War. Ron’s main job was as an Artillery Signaller with the forward observers and was responsible for the laying and maintenance of the communication lines. The 2/5 Regiment was equipped with the venerable 25 Pounder Guns which provided magnificent service for the duration of hostilities. It may be noted that the Regiment also operated a variety of captured enemy artillery pieces to good effect.

For my education Ron lent me his copy of the book “Guns and Gunners” which is the story of the 2/5 Fd Regt RAA and was written by John W. O’Brien (Commanding Officer Brigadier J.W.A. O’Brien DSO March 1941 – April 1942). I thoroughly enjoyed the book and was very impressed by the amount of work done by the Regiment, its successes and setbacks and also for the sheer volume of ammunition expended in very harsh conditions on operations.
It became immediately clear that the 2/5 Fd Regt RAA is the very same unit with which our most famous Gunner, LT Roden Cutler earned his Victoria Cross. The first Artilleryman every to earn that high honour. In the Honours and Awards section of the book LT Cutler’s citation is as:

NX12378 LIEUT. Arthur Roden Cutler

For most conspicuous and sustained gallantry during the Syrian campaign and for outstanding bravery during the bitter fighting at Merdjayoun when this artillery officer became a byword amongst the forward troops with whom he worked. At Merdjayoun on 19 June 1941 our infantry attack was checked after suffering heavy casualties from an enemy counter-attack with tanks. Enemy machine-gun fire swept the ground, but Lieut. Cutler and another artillery officer with a small party pushed on ahead of the infantry to establish an outpost in a house. The telephone line was cut and Cutler went out and mended this line under machine-gun fire; he returned to the house and enemy posts and a battery were successfully engaged. The enemy then attacked this outpost with infantry and tanks, killing the Bren-gunner and mortally wounding the other officer. Lieut. Cutler and another man manned the anti-tank rifle and a Bren-gun and fought back, driving the enemy infantry away. The tanks continued the attack but, under constant fire from the anti-tank rifle and the Bren-gun, they eventually withdrew. Lieut. Cutler then personally supervised the evacuation of the wounded members of his party. Undaunted, he pressed for a further advance. He had been ordered to establish an Observation Post from which he could register the only road by which the enemy transport could enter the town. With a small party of volunteers, he pressed on until finally, with one other man, he succeeded in establishing his Observation Post right in the town, which was occupied by the Foreign Legion. He did this despite enemy machine-gun fire which prevented our infantry from advancing. At this time Lieut. Cutler knew the enemy were massing on his left for a counter-attack and that he was in danger of being cut off. Nevertheless, he carried out his task of registering the battery on the road and engaging enemy posts. The enemy counter-attacked with infantry and tanks and he
was cut off. He was forced to go to ground but, after dark, he succeeded in making his way through enemy lines. His work in registering the only road by which enemy transport could enter the town was of vital importance and a big factor in the enemy’s subsequent retreat. On the night of 23 June, he was in charge of a 25-pounder sent into our forward defended localities to silence an enemy anti-tank gun and post which had held up our attack. This he did and, next morning, the recapture of Merdjayoun was completed. Later, at Damour on 6 July when our forward infantry were pinned to the ground by heavy hostile machine-gun fire, Lieut. Cutler, regardless of all danger went to bring a telephone-line to his Observation Post when he was seriously wounded. Twenty-six hours elapsed before it was possible to rescue this officer, whose wound by this time became septic, necessitating the amputation of his leg. Throughout the campaign, this officer’s courage was unparalleled and his work was a big factor in the recapture of Merdjayoun.

Further to the Lieut. Cutler story in Syria, a section of the book states:

...Meanwhile Cutler with the infantry had reached the start-line. He then became involved in the infantry fight, and captured eight Frenchmen from three machine-gun posts. The enemy in the first nest were persuaded to surrender by the sight of this six-feet-four-inches of elongated “Aussie” jumping right into their midst. Those in the second nest were talked into it by Cutler’s limited French. A grenade dropped into the third, plus the assistance of a Bren-gunner from the (2/16th) battalion, caused its occupants to make an instant decision on the subject. Cutler set his prisoners on their way to the rear and rejoined (Maj.) Caro.

The book goes on to state on the issue of being unable to locate the wounded Lieut. Cutler:

...What happened was that the prisoners, whom Cutler had captured during the attack, had found him all alone. Recognizing him as the man who had spared them, they carried him, under fire, to the El Atiqa bend. Macmeikan soon located him and got him on the way to Yerate, Capt. Johnson meeting him en route. It was twenty-seven hours since Cutler had been hit, and for all that time he had lacked medical attention. No sooner was Cutler carried within the building at Yerate than it once again became the target for a heavy concentration. A shell bursting close outside the open door sent a shower of splinters inside. Several men standing around Cutler were hit. The blast flung Johnson sprawling across Cutler’s wounded leg. Several shells then exploded close to the truck waiting to carry Cutler away. Patching up the men who had just been wounded, Johnson decided that the only chance for Cutler was to get him to where better attention was possible. The bombardment showed no signs of abating.
SOME 2/15th FIELD REGIMENT OFFICERS WAITING TO EMBARK, SYDNEY, 19 OCTOBER 1940

After digressing I now return to my Mate Ron Dixon MM.

Ron and the 2/5 Fd Regt RAA sailed on the Queen Mary to Bombay and then on to Egypt with the objective of striking west towards Tobruk however they were re-tasked to push up into Syria to deal with the Vichy French.

Ron mentioned that on one occasion they were having quite a bit of trouble with a particular French gun. It turned out that the French had placed a Naval Gun into a cliff face cave with what appeared to be a rubber matting cover and from that position they would bring it out to shell our lines. Once they had determined where it was it was only a matter of laying the 25-pounders on to the spot and waiting. They didn’t have to wait long and from then on in the French gun was no longer a problem.

Another incident that Ron recalled was that in the dead of an extremely black night whilst he was laying line over rough terrain, and not sure of his exact location, he came across a soldier who lit a cigarette. Not knowing whether or not he was an enemy, Ron was surprised to recognize the face of the infantry soldier as an old Mate of his from Carlton in Sydney, Tommy Jones, with whom he had spent many hours playing Penny Poker. Talk about a small world.

Also in the Honours and Awards section of the book Gnr Ron Dixon citation is as:

NX18304 Gnr Ronald Robert Dixon

As a signaler, he was continually on duty at the Observation Post during the period from 9 to 22 June 1941 and displayed the utmost coolness under machine-gun and shell-fire. At Qleaa, in Syria, on 22
June, when wounded by a shell fragment from a round that had exploded on a flat roof which was being used as an Observation Post, he continued to transmit fire orders and subsequently repaired the line under heavy shell-fire, carrying out his normal duties until evacuated to hospital on 23 June 1941.

The book mentions Ron in part:

...Midnight brought continued harassing fire around the O.P. Brown, with Lieut. Stevenson and Gnr Ron Dixon, stayed on the roof to watch for S.O.S. signals. Dixon refused his turn to go below, saying, “I couldn’t sleep with all the racket, at any rate.” Plus and minus rounds, some very close to the O.P., fell throughout the night. At dawn the inevitable happened – a direct hit, right on the roof-top. Each man held his breath until the smoke cleared away, to make sure that he was all there and in the flesh. Stevenson, keeping watch over the zone, was wounded in the back. Dixon, at the phone, was hit in the arm. Brown, resting on his valise, with the hood drawn over his head, had his covering riddled and large pieces were torn out of the webbing he was wearing. Miraculously he was unhurt.

Thoroughly peeved by such treatment, Brown grabbed the telephone, his intention being to slam back a couple of hundred rounds or so. But, alas, the phone was “dead”. With a sigh of resignation, Dixon made his way downstairs and went along the road through the shelling to find the break. It was not far from the O.P. As he worked, he was at times completely obscured by smoke and dust from very close bursts. Returned to the O.P., he was about to resume his duty at the phone without further ado, but Brown thought that, for a nineteen-year-old lad, Dixon had done enough for the night. He sent him into the house below where his driver, batman, and another signaler had not been exactly enjoying the night. Naturally enough, the shell that had burst on the roof-top had caused some consternation downstairs as well as above.

As for Dixon, he stayed at the O.P. for the rest of the day. Then his arm began to swell badly, and Brown packed him off to hospital. He had done a grand job and thoroughly deserved the Military Medal that came to him in official recognition.

Statistics from “Guns and Gunners” for the Syrian campaign have:

2/4 Field Regiment firing 40,142 rounds at 1,673 rounds per gun,
2/5 Field Regiment firing 48,720 rounds at 3,075 rounds per gun with 93 rounds per gun per day, and
2/6 Field Regiment firing 52,699 rounds at 2,195 rounds per gun.

Moving from the Syrian campaign the Regiment was on the out-skirts of Suez on 8 Feb 42 and on 15 Feb 42 were in Bombay, arriving in Fremantle, WA 14 days later. After a couple of days in Fremantle they the sailed to Adelaide to disembark. The Regiment and its equipment then moved by train to Tenterfield, NSW and on to Kilcoy in QLD to prepare for the defence of Southern Queensland.
The Battle of the Coral Sea removed the threat of immediate invasion of Australia by the Japanese so the Regiment was tasked with engaging the Japanese in Papua New Guinea (PNG) which saw them sailing from Brisbane on TSS Katoomba for parts unknown. They arrived at Gili Gili at the head of Milne Bay on 21 Aug 42.
Fighting was fierce and up close in the jungle terrain however after numerous ordeals and engagements they fought the enemy to a standstill along the coastal area from Milne Bay to Buna. Bombardier Ron Dixon MM entered the little village of Sio with the first patrols to find that the enemy had already gone and by 20 Jan 43 fighting had virtually finished in PNG.

One incident of note in the PNG campaign was ‘Carson’s Gun’. The Japanese had dug their guns in and constructed well camouflaged and fortified positions. Each of these strong points had to be dealt with. In a place called the “Pill Box Area” there were several enemy gun emplacements so they deployed Carson’s Gun and crew well forward to engage the enemy. The BC ‘shot-in’ the gun using an armour piercing round as it was too dangerous to use High Explosive (HE) rounds due to the close proximity of our infantry troops. The BC managed to put a round straight through the 12” x 12” firing slot of the enemy bunker with the tracer flame being visible glowing inside. This rounds carried away the breech of the 75mm gun within. Carson’s Gun didn’t have it all their own way with a triple barreled 25mm gun giving them quite a duel. Carson’s Gun prevailed and finally smashed the remaining pill boxes by blasting away the earth and logs and thereby flattened them. The infantry were very impressed by the accuracy and result of this action.
After PNG the Regiment was then sent to Balikpapan on 1 Jul 44 to deal with the enemy there. During that campaign they came across two troublesome Japanese 155-mm coastal guns that were emplaced on the forward slope of a hill 500 yards due north of the tip of the western airstrip at Manggar. The strongly reinforced structures that housed the guns were fitted with heavy steel doors that could be used to cover the gun ports. It was decided to use a forward gun to deal with this problem, in emulation of “Carson’s Gun” at Buna. A 25 pounder “Palmer’s Gun” was deployed to a position near the southern end of the bridge across Manggar Besar River where it could engage the enemy guns over
open sights at a range of 2,000 yards. As like Sergeant Carson, Sergeant Palmer picked his own crew and once again there was no shortage of volunteers. Amongst the signalers for this mission was ‘the ever-ready Bdr R.R. Dixon and Gnrs W.M. Coffey and G.D. (George) Noland.’

Under cover of darkness the gun was man-handled the last few hundred yards through loose sand to the river bank. As soon as the targets could be distinguished in the dawn light, “F3” opened fire. The 155-mms never fired again.

17 July 45 was the last day of actual fighting.

In the book the “Review of Balikpapan” states:

The “Show”, to all intents and purposes, was over. The members of the Regiment now had time to review the part they had played in achieving victory at Balikpapan. The work of the Gunners had gained high praise. Lieut. Col. Rhoden, whose 2/14 Battalion had been supported throughout its fighting by the guns of the Regiment, wrote some months later, “I shan’t forget too readily the wonderful show put on by the Regiment at Balik.” His Battalion’s history states: “Not since the Middle East had our Artillery such opportunity to show its worth and every infantryman had nothing but praise for the way the Gunners made the most of it.”

What more could any Gunner ask than the commendation of the men best qualified to judge, the men who had the really tough going, and who won through so splendidly?
PS: The 2/5 Field Regiment RAA was affectionately known as “Harry Peck’s Mob”

The story is that some un-named Gunner engaged in an alleged nefarious activity was caught by some Military person or persons of authority and, when asked to identify himself, and in the confusion of the moment, he erroneously gave his name as Gnr Harry Peck of the 2/5 Fd Regiment.

The “Peck” was derived from the sandwich spread called Peck’s Paste. When the authorities arrived at the Regiment to have a one sided discussion with Gnr Peck, he was unable to be found. Some things never change with Gunners and the legend endured.
Wauchope RSL Sub-Branch
Christmas Luncheon Sat 9 Dec 17

Three local Proud Old Gunners

Syd Farrow
Enlisted RAA 1956

Kim McGrath
Enlisted RAA 1970

Ron Dixon MM
Enlisted RAA 1940