

Ed Bennett's Story

Ed Bennett was never one to refuse a challenge or shirk responsibility. In October 1944 Ed found himself behind a 50 calibre anti-aircraft gun on board a ship approaching the Philippines and under relentless attack from Kamikaze (suicide) aircraft. 'The ship ahead of us and the ship following us were both hit and set on fire, but most Jap planes crashed into the sea.'

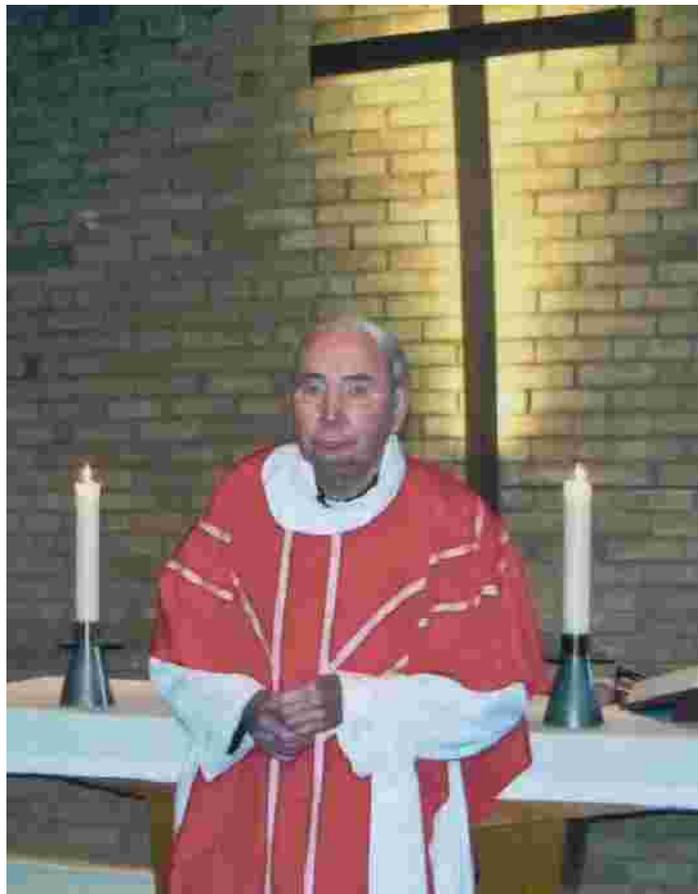
In a life that spanned most of the twentieth century and continues into the twenty-first, Ed has devoted his life quite literally to God, Queen and Country, serving as a dedicated army chaplain and later as an Anglican priest. Edwin James Bennett was born in Bromley, Kent, on 22 February 1923.

His father, having recently retired from the British Army, took his family to Australia as part of the new group settlement opening up virgin country in southwest Australia. Ed attended Perth Boys School and in 1938 he read in a newspaper that a new army unit, the 9th Anti-Tank Regiment, was to be formed. 'I put my age up by a year from seventeen to eighteen and volunteered for the new unit, which was a CMF (Territorial) unit.'

Ed's resolve and enthusiasm were quickly recognized. He rose through the ranks with remarkable speed. Within months he was promoted from Lance- Bombardier to Bombardier and finally Sergeant, all by the age of eighteen. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbour in 1941, thrusting America into the Second World War, Ed's unit moved north along the coast. For two years his unit scoured the Western Australian coastline in anticipation of the Japanese landing or air attack that never came.

Eventually, Ed's unit was disbanded and sent to New South Wales to train as infantry reinforcements. Here, Ed was faced with an early choice that reveals the depth of his character. 'Being a confirmed Sergeant I would be used to check on thieves who were robbing the ships carrying supplies from Brisbane to New Guinea.

Instead, I decided to hand in my three stripes and join my boys as an infantier.' Sailing from Australia on a convoy bound for the Philippines, Ed takes up the story: 'We landed at Leyte Island but not before we had been attacked twice by two flights of Kamikaze pilots. I had a ringside seat because I



told the American transport ship I had been an anti-aircraft gunner (not an anti-tank gunner)! The ship was armed with two 50 calibre anti-aircraft guns. Ed was kept busy feeding linked belts of ammunition to the gunner. All around them the battle raged as anti-aircraft fire lit the sky and Kamikaze planes exploded into ships or plunged into the sea.

On 20 October 1944 American forces under General MacArthur invaded the island of Leyte and established his Headquarters, thus fulfilling his famous pledge: 'I shall return'. The allied invasion formed the cornerstone of a strategy designed to isolate Japan from its occupied territories in South East Asia. From a strategic point of view the battle was absolutely critical. It would deplete the enemy forces of oil supplies vital to their war effort. And the Japanese knew it.

The Japanese counter-attacked in blistering fashion. The ensuing Battle of Leyte Gulf is generally regarded as the largest naval battle of the Second World War. Two Australian cruisers, HMAS Australia and HMAS Shropshire took part in the engagement. Unfortunately, the first ever suicide attack by a Japanese aircraft was recorded against HMAS Australia.

'The Kamikazes had a go at HMAS Australia, Ed recalled. 'While she was being attacked the captain of HMAS Shropshire laid on heavy anti-aircraft fire'. Ed got an eye-witness view of the battle: 'I saw it all happen', he recalled, 'I saw Japanese planes crash into the sea near our island'. The allies won the day, however, and the Japanese suffered such heavy losses that its future capacity to act as an effective naval force would seriously be compromised.

Ed's unit was responsible for undertaking jungle patrols on the Western Visayans, a group of islands located south of Luzon, the largest island of the Philippines. Ed's service in the Philippines was cut short when he was recalled to Australia by his Bishop to commence training for the ministry. Ed had to make his own way back to Australia, travelling alone on a protracted journey by way of Palau, Papua New Guinea and Brisbane. 'I had to hitch a ride home by various places until I reached Perth. On the last leg I sat next to a Japanese Prisoner-Of-War — he was scared to hell of me and my Aussie slouch hat.'

After discharge Ed entered St Barnabas College in Adelaide to begin his theological training. After four years in the Parochial Ministry he was commissioned as a chaplain in the Australian army in 1952. He then spent seven years at training battalions in Victoria and Western Australia, before being placed on the Australian Army Reserve.

The second phase of Ed's service as army chaplain resumed with his recall to active service in 1962. He was needed as a chaplain in the rapidly escalating Vietnam War. It was to prove Australia's longest and most unpopular war, spanning fully ten years. The politics of the conflict and the controversial policy of conscription that fuelled it drove a wedge through Australian society.

'I served a full tour of Vietnam for twelve months with the first of the new national servicemen from the 5th and 6th battalions of the Royal Australian Regiment', Ed explained. He arrived at the Australian base at Nui Dat in Phuoc Touy Province the same day that the first Australian soldier was killed in action near the base. Ed's role as Chaplain was important to Australian servicemen in Vietnam.

Soldiers in the field, many of them conscripts, were struggling coming to terms with the nature of the conflict and their part in it.

Ed conducted services and ministered to soldiers, visited the sick and wounded, and offered advice to soldiers wracked with personal problems far from home. Not content to remain within the relative safety of base camp, Ed frequently was choppered out to men in the field. Armed with a small communion kit and stole, he offered pastoral care to soldiers in need.

'I'd go up to a group of men and ask if anyone would like to join me in a service', Ed explained. 'Often I'd find a group of about six men and I'd just conduct the service wherever I could, sometimes from the back of a truck or even on an ammunition box'.

After Vietnam, Ed returned to Australia and filled various postings before joining ANZUK (the successor to the British Far East Command), a three nation force formed to defend the Asian Pacific region between 1971 and 1974. Ed was posted to Singapore for two years, and whilst there became one of the first five chaplains to be granted a permanent commission (chaplains) in the Australian Regular Army.

On his return to Australia Ed joined the Legacy Club of Townsville, looking after the interests of seven war widows placed under his care. He took early retirement in 1973, having been offered a Crown Living by Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth.

Arriving in London in 1974 to take up his new appointment, Ed transferred to London Legacy and continued his work as a legatee, looking after thirteen Australian war widows living in the UK. Ed also served for two years as President of London Legacy.

'I remained an active legatee until with age and ill health I was made an honorary member in 2010.' Ed's thirty-seven years of service to Legacy is indicative of an exemplary life, frequently spiced with danger, but always lived to the full.

Above all, Ed Bennett's has been a life devoted to his faith, self-sacrifice and to the needs of others.