

## **Clem Sargent, army surveyor and military historian**

Recalling his part in 90 years of Royal Australian Survey Corps history

Lord of all he surveyed? No, at 82, with a mischievous glint in his eye, Clem Sargent told me "I did what I was told".

In March 1946, aged 22, Mr Sargent enlisted as a Private in the Interim Army in the hope he would be sent to Japan with the Occupation Forces. Instead, after on the job training to become a Sapper, he was posted to what later became the Royal Australian Survey Corps, or RASvyC, which celebrated its 90<sup>th</sup> birthday on 1 July 2005.

Young Clem was sent to Jindabyne and commenced working on investigations for the Snowy Scheme. "I'd never ridden, couldn't ride then and still can't" admitted Clem. But for the next three years, with the help of high country horsemen and their horses, Clem and other Army surveyors walked and rode throughout the Snowy Mountains, recording data as they went.

Clem has delightful memories of working with Major Clews. This feisty 5'6" Yorkshireman later became well known and loved when at 63 he left the army and was employed by the Snowy Scheme as a civilian surveyor. The hut he built to retire in near Geehi was saved from the 2003 fires which ravaged that area. But in the summer of 1948 the Major, still in RASvyC, planned a survey in the Mt Kosciusko area. Major Clews and two other officers were to walk from Mt Kosciuszko down the precipitous western side of the range via Hannells Spur, recording heights as they went. Clem and a mate were to take horses from the Chalet at Charlottes Pass and meet the others at Geehi. As it turned out, more easily said than done! They awoke in Spencers Gap Hut on the summer morning of the expedition to find six inches of snow on the ground, a common enough occurrence even now.

At that time Major Clews didn't know much about the high country, and even less about 'walking' down a steep snow-clad range nor how dangerous it would have been taking horses through untracked snow, all he knew was he had a job to do. This was one occasion when Clem and the others showed their initiative, and didn't do what they were told! Laughing at the memory, Clem recalls that they had to almost physically restrain the Major.

Clem's next posting was to survey trajectories for the Woomera Rocket Range in 1950. He enjoyed working outdoors and the challenge of new places and new environments. Just as well! Because Sargeant Sargent was about to become an officer and continue his career as a Lieutenant. Lt Sargent's first posting was to the Army Cartographic Unit at Fortuna in Bendigo. "I hadn't had the chance to meet or court any girls much before that" he recalls. But Clem had met his first wife, Betty, in Bendigo when he was there for a course in 1949 and they married in September 1951.

The newly married couple then moved to Puckapunyal, where Lt Sargent was posted as the Assistant Adjutant of 15 National Service Training Battalion, behind a desk! When I asked Clem what he thought of being stuck behind a desk he said "I did what I was told" but admitted he "wasn't overly struck on it".

Clem's first Canberra posting was to the Directorate of Survey (head office for Survey Corps) in 1961. He, Betty and their growing family lived in a Red Hill house allocated to them by the government and the children went to Red Hill Primary School. A two year posting to Singapore attached to the British Survey Directorate followed, and then from 1967 Clem spent several years surveying the remote Kimberley. In 1970 he was seconded to take the first Australian Defence Aid Mapping unit to work with Indonesian army surveyors in West Borneo, Kalimantan and Barat. At much the same time other members of Survey Corps were serving in Vietnam and their experience, combined with that acquired by Clem and others in Indonesia and New Guinea, made an invaluable contribution to future surveying and map-making operations in Australia.

Towards the end of his career, Major Sargent was promoted to Lt Colonel. From his beginnings as a lowly Sapper in 1946, Clem was now Chief Instructor at the School of Military Survey at Bonegilla, near Albury. Ironically, the same Bonegilla was an immigrant hostel in the forties and fifties that housed many of the refugees from a war-torn Europe. It was these same European refugees who, with the young Clem, would work together to build the mighty Snowy Mountains Scheme.

Sapper Sargent had come full circle, now passing on to young surveyors and mapmakers all the things he had learned in a long and full life with Survey Corps. The technology may have changed from chain and theodolite to increasingly modern instruments and computerised mapping, but the challenges and dangers of operating in the field were ever present.

After retirement in 1975, Clem continued to contribute to RASvyC in his honorary role as Corps Commandant, becoming the figurehead of the Corps between 1983 and 1989. As an army historian he wrote "The Colonial Garrison 1817-1824" the story of the 48<sup>th</sup> Foot who had fought at Waterloo in 1812 before being sent to Australia. For this and other services to the community, Clem was awarded the OAM.

In 1996, the Corps was disbanded and its members either absorbed back into the Royal Australian Engineer Corps which had spawned it in 1915, or became public servants working for the Defence Imagery and Geospatial Organisation based at Fortuna in Bendigo. Mysteriously the Corps badge has recently reappeared on the gates at Duntroon and army surveyors like Clem maintain that after 90 years the Royal Australian Survey Corps "may be dead, but is definitely not buried!"

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