

Saving lives was his vocation

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Alan Luby, 1915-2009.

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As a medical orderly serving with a guerilla unit in the mountains of Portuguese Timor and New Guinea during World War II, Alan Luby worked miracles of bush medicine to save the lives of seriously wounded men. At home he served with the NSW Ambulance Service for almost 50 years.

He had joined the service before the war and enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force's ambulance service in July 1940 before joining one of the country's first guerilla units, the 2/2nd Independent Company. Serving as a medic with a guerilla force meant Luby was required to care for wounded soldiers while the enemy was still close by.

He arrived in Timor in late 1941, leaving behind his fiancée, Edith Pengilly, from Parkes. Shortly after the Japanese landed in Timor in 1942 Luby treated a seriously wounded Australian soldier who had survived an execution.

Private Keith Hayes had bayonet wounds in his back and shoulders, and a bullet wound in the back of his neck. Incredibly, his wounds were not life threatening, and, after being patched up by Luby, he was cared for by a Timorese woman who applied traditional mud packs to his wounds. Thanks to their combined efforts, Hayes survived and was later evacuated to Australia. He is still alive.

A week later Luby heard a gun battle raging near his base in the mountains south-west of Dili. A force of about 200 Japanese had ambushed a unit of 14 Australians, leaving two dead and three wounded. A Timorese runner told Luby of the wounded men.

When Luby arrived he saw Private Alan Hollow with his lower jaw blown away by a machine gun burst. Private Eddie Craighill had copped a machine-gun burst through his right shoulder, and another man had flesh wounds in his leg.

Luby did not think Hollow would survive but he did what he could to stop the bleeding and keep him alive. He stayed with the wounded men for the next three days as the Japanese continued to pursue the Australians.

Luby kept Hollow alive by asking the other men to find eggs and buffalo milk. He mixed these and dropped the liquid down the back of Hollow's throat with an eye dropper. Hollow survived, was evacuated to Australia for reconstructive surgery and went on to lead a relatively normal life.

These were the first two emergency cases Luby handled in his first 10 days of seeing action, and he went on to save more lives of the 2/2 Company men until the end of the war.

While in New Guinea, Luby was close by when Private Harry Sproxton had a cardiac arrest from an overdose of anaesthetic. The doctor gave Sproxton up for dead. Luby was undeterred and, believing that he could be resuscitated, pummelled his back. After some minutes Sproxton came back to life, and is still alive, aged 88.

Alan Sidney Luby, who has died just before his 94th birthday, was born in Newtown, the son of John Luby and his wife, Phyllis Kennedy.

After Luby returned from Timor in 1943 he and Edith were married. After the war he rejoined the NSW Ambulance Service, serving in Grafton, Gilgandra and Liverpool before moving into senior management. When he retired in 1980 he was deputy operations superintendent. He remained in contact with the ambulance service and was recently awarded a life membership.

Until his death, Luby remained in close contact with his 2/2nd mates and other veterans of guerilla units. As one of the older men in the unit, he became a father figure. For 20 years he was also president of the NSW Commando Association, which represents all veterans in the state who served in special forces.

In 1982 Luby succeeded in establishing a permanent monument in Martin Place to the World War II men who did not return from dangerous and often poorly planned missions behind enemy lines.

The Commando Memorial Seat, opposite the Reserve Bank head office, displays the insignia of all 11 independent companies and commando squadrons, and those of the Z and M Special Units, whose members were sent into enemy territory and were in many instances captured, tortured and killed.

Alan Luby is survived by his daughter Maria and grandchildren Kieran and Belinda. Edith and two other children predeceased him.

Paul Cleary



Alan Luby