



Major Bill BENTSON

[1918 – 2012]



Major Bentson was a long-standing “Allied Member”

The membership category of “Allied Member” was established in the Rule changes passed at the General Meeting on 10 May 1943.

“The beginning of 1943 was a time when the military population of Brisbane and environs was growing at a rapid rate due to south eastern Queensland becoming a large assembly, training, transit and supply base for the war to the north.... American officers were present in large numbers also and were being offered honorary membership for the duration of their stay...”

“Some of the American officers desired to be identified more directly with this Club which had taken them in and offered them its hospitality; they wanted some type of membership for which they paid a fee. The committee grappled with the task of devising a means of accommodating the allied officers (there were a few Dutch and other nationalities as well as the Americans) within a constitution which

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stipulated that eligibility for membership rested on possession of a King's commission. They arrived at an eminently suitable solution by a simple addition to the rules, as follows¹:

- *Any Gentleman holding commissioned rank or the equivalent or status of commissioned rank in the Navy, Army or Air Force of any allied country shall be eligible for membership as an 'Allied Member' of the Club for the duration of the war at present existing and for a period of twelve months thereafter. Provided however, that such 'Allied Members' shall have no voice in the management of the Club nor shall they be entitled to any share in the distribution of assets in the event of the winding up of the Club.*

By the end of the Club year, 30 September, there were 48 Allied Members – about 5% of total Club Membership.

In terms of the Rule the category lapsed in August 1946. Club records show that the category was re-introduced in 1954 – with 6 Allied Members being shown in the Annual Report of that year. Allied members of the period had no voice in the management of the Club nor entitlement to distribution on winding-up. Consequently, their annual subscriptions were at a concessional rate.

In 1968, the Club changed the method of defining Allied members. Originally this category of membership applied to any person who held a commission in the armed service of any friendly foreign power. In 1962, this rule was amended so that the privilege of allied membership would not be extended to anyone not already enjoying that privilege (that is closing it to new members). Apparently, this had led to complications. However, there were a number of former American officers living in Queensland who had raised the possibility of their joining the Club. The 1968 rule change allowed them to do so.

By 1995 an Allied Member was defined as being in the category of an "Other" member (that is neither a "Service" nor "Civilian" member) together with Life, Honorary, Associate and Visiting members. They were defined as "a person who is resident in Australia and who has held a commission (equivalent to a commission in the Australian Defence Force) in any Armed Service of any foreign power which service has a standing equivalent to the Australian Defence Force may be invited by the Committee to accept Allied membership of the Club, and upon acceptance will be classified as an Allied member. The Person will be entitled to such privileges of membership and will pay such subscription as the Committee determines"². Allied members also had voting rights.

Club documentation is incomplete, and a substantive record has not been uncovered of the changes to membership categories that resulted in Allied Members being categorised as Service Members. Committee Minutes in July 1997 are the first to show no Allied Members category. Since its peak of 58 in 1944, the number of Allied Members had never exceeded 15 and was usually in single figures.

William Allen Bentson was born 16 December 1918 in Silverton, Marion County, Oregon USA. His parents were Oscar, a bus driver and volunteer fireman, and Clayrene. He had one sibling – a sister Bess, 10 years his senior. Oscar was a second-generation Norwegian migrant, and Clayrene's grandparents had arrived in Oregon in a pioneering wagon train.

The family moved to Salem, Oregon, in 1930 where Bill attended North Salem High School and Willamette University, where he studied for an Arts degree – and developed his life-long passion as an amateur radio operator. He also learnt to type, which held him in good stead in his Army service.

At school he was an Eagle Scout, and when old enough he served as a Private in the National Guard. Immediately after Pearl Harbour and America entering the war against Japan in December 1941, Bill joined the United States Army. His persistence was demonstrated from his initial enlistment in his capacity to foil medical boards disqualifying him from service and promotion. He had been blind in the left eye from birth; however, he developed into a rifle marksman with his good eye.

¹ Club History p. 66

² Club Rules and By-laws November 1995.

Bill's US Army service started in the Quarter Master Corps in the 41st "Sunset" Division (so called because it was formed on the West Coast "where the sun set"). The Division came to Australia in May 1942 (in a convoy including RMS *Queen Elizabeth*), arriving in Sydney and then moving by train to Melbourne. Sergeant Bentson was posted to join General Macarthur's Headquarters (Supreme Commander Allied Forces in the South West Pacific Area). In July 1942 Macarthur moved his headquarters to Brisbane. From his office in the AMP Building (now *Macarthur Chambers*) he saw the "Battle of Brisbane" between US and Australian servicemen on 26/27 November. Bill's role was the establishment of transit and training camps along the coast from Brisbane to the North – starting at Camp Cable near Canungra.



Gary Cooper and Bill Bentson at Oro Bay, New Guinea

He deployed with Macarthur's headquarters to New Guinea and Borneo (as a Warrant Officer) and finally in the Philippines. Just before the Japanese surrender he had himself posted back to Brisbane to be with his wife. He was repatriated to the US in late 1945, and Mrs Bentson followed in May 1946.



Warrant Officer Bill and Joan Bentson

In 1942, Bill met Joan Bernice Louise Staines, from New Farm, Brisbane, at a dance at City Hall. Bill recounted that there were a number of pretty girls that he intended to dance with and selected his first partner by saying "Eenie, Meenie, Minee, Mo" and he ended up marrying "Mo"! Joan was 17½ years old when they married on 20 February 1943 – and they were married for 68 years until her death in 2011, the year before Bill died. Their three children - Suzanne, Brad and Debra – were all born in the USA.

On return to Salem, Bill left the Army for a year and worked in a furniture store. However, after one year he was able to re-enlist in the Army without loss of rank or benefits and he completed 23 years' service. For much of his later service he was on the Selective Service Board in Portland

(administering the Army "Draft"). As a benefit of the "GI Bill" he went to university and graduated with a Bachelor of Science (Education). Another benefit he took advantage of was a provision that repatriated his whole family to his wife's homeland – Australia.

The Bentson family returned to Australia in 1964 and purchased a house in Kapunda Street, West Toowong – which remained Bill and Joan's residence until their deaths.

Bill gained employment at the Queensland Spastic Centre as the Finance Officer; and then in 1967 moved to the same role with the Adult Deaf Society. In 1972 Bill and Joan returned to the US where he worked at Scappoose Industries which manufactured computer equipment. They returned to Brisbane in 1976 and Bill operated a business from home selling amateur radio aerials. He retired fully in 1985.

In retirement he became involved in the General Douglas Macarthur Brisbane Memorial Trust. This organisation secured part of the wartime premises of Macarthur's Headquarters in the AMP Building in Brisbane. The Museum was opened in 2004.

Major Benston joined the Club on 1 March 1969 (Proposed by Captain Bonnin, Seconded by Major Rudder) as an Allied Member (one of 11 of that category in the 1969 Annual report). The 1968 Rule change referred to above allowed his admission as an Allied Member. He was one of 6 remaining when that category merged with Service members in 1997. He is shown as a Service member in the 1998 Annual Report; and a Senior member in 2004 (on attaining 35 years of Membership)

Bill is remembered as a very social and cheery club member with a long-standing habit of "sandwiches and snooker" every Thursday.

Bill's son-in-law, Trevor Barrell – an architect who married Suzanne Bentson - joined the Club in 2014. Suzanne and Trevor's son Nathan joined the Club in 1999 and served on the Club Committee from 2013 to 2018.

Major Bentson died on 7 November 2012 in Brisbane having been a member for 43 years.



Sources included:

- Various web pages
- *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton
- Club Meeting Minutes, Annual Reports and sundry documents
- Interview with Ms Suzanne Barrell (Major Benston's daughter) 29 Nov 2018