



Little old shoe leads to a humble war hero

Description



The double-fronted shop at 220-222 Timor St Warrnambool (now BIBA Hairdressing) as it was in 1919 when Robert Long, right, ran his bootmaking business. Image courtesy Helen Thomson.

By Carol Altmann

A child's boot found during renovations of one of Warrnambool's oldest commercial buildings has unearthed the remarkable story of a local war hero.

Bluestone Magazine [wrote about the shoe](#) being found under the floorboards of 220-222 Timor St in one of our very first editions, way back in November 2013, when we reported on the restoration of the 160-year-old building by owners **Luke** and **Natalie Taylor**.

At that time, it was known that one half of the two-storey building had been rented during the 1930s by a bootmaker – a Mr Long – but whether the shoe was connected to him, or any more details about this Mr Long, proved elusive.

Enter **Rodney Harris**, who recently stumbled across our story and called *Bluestone* to say that he believed his friend, **Helen Thomson**, a well-known face in Swinton's homewares department for many years, could fill in all the gaps.

And she could.



The child's leather boot that was unearthed during renovations at 222 Timor St Warrnambool in 2013.

Helen, now aged in her eighties, is the daughter of the late **Pearl Long** whose father, **Robert Long**, started the original bootmaker's business at 220 Timor St early in the 1900s.

In one of those priceless moments that history buffs live for, Helen produced a photograph – the only known copy in existence – of her grandfather standing outside the shop in March 1919.

As was common for the time, the extended Long family all lived upstairs from the business and Helen believes the English-style boot may have belonged to one of Robert's six children (another three children had died).

"I know Mum used to talk about these little English boots that her father would buy for them for school, because they were good quality," Helen says.

"But Mum hated wearing them, because of course they were not like what the others kids wore," she adds.

Helen went on to explain how her grandfather's bootmaking business was later taken over by her uncle, **Roy Long**, who everybody knew as "Toy", and this is where the story took an unexpected and remarkable turn.



Roy "Toy" Long as a member of the AIF 2/21 Battalion (Gull Force) who became prisoners of war on the Indonesian island of Ambon for almost four years. Image courtesy Helen Thomson.

When war broke out in 1939, Toy Long left his bootmaking business and joined the AIF as part of the 2/21 Battalion (known as Gull Force) that became prisoners of war on Ambon, Indonesia, following the Japanese invasion of the island in 1942.

Toy, together with other members of his battalion also from Warrnambool, was imprisoned for almost four years in appalling conditions.

During this time, it has now been revealed, Toy risked his life by hiding documents given to him by his commanding officer that would prove crucial in the later trials for war crimes.

Helen has a precious copy of the letter written to Toy by his commanding officer, W.R Scott, after the war.

It reads, in part:

"My Dear Long,

The time has now arrived when we are no longer POWs...in Japanese hands. I may therefore without risk of your being deprived of your life, write and thank you for the way and the risks of death you knowingly and yet willingly took secreting most important documents, holding them in your care for a

long period of time, during which, I may add, there were two searches carried out by Japanese troops...

"You took all the risks, knew it meant death for you if you were discovered, and I now thank you on behalf of us for the gallant manner in which you completed the task. I wish you all the best of luck for the future."

TO CORPORAL R. F. LONG
2/21 BN. A.I.F.

AT SEA
H.M.S. VENDEX
24th September, 1945.

My Dear Long,

The time has now arrived when we are no longer Prisoner's of War at Harman in Japanese hands. I may therefore without risk of your being deprived of your life, write and thank you for the way and the risks of death you knowingly and yet willingly took in secreting most important documents and holding them in your care over a long period of time, during which time I may add, there were two searches carried out by Japanese troops.

Now that the time has come for me to make a full report on the appalling conditions under which we existed as P.O.W.'s for three years and 8 months and to produce complete evidence regarding the guilt of certain Japanese Officers and men who will be brought before the court set up to try War Criminals. The papers which you and several other special selected men have held safely for me, will play a most important part as unfortunately without them little could have been done to make the report now possible or to be sure that the criminals we know can be brought to trial and I hope receive their desserts.

You took all the risks, knew it meant death for you if discovered and I now thank you on behalf of us all for the gallant manner in which you completed the task.

I wish you all the best of luck for the future.

A copy of the letter written to Toy Long by his commanding officer which reveals the great risk he took in hiding documents that would later prove critical in war trials. Reproduced courtesy of Helen Thomson.

After returning from the war, Toy lived with Helen and her parents, and other members of the extended family, in their house in Kruger St.

"My mother was cleaning up one day and found this letter and started to read it, but Toy snatched it out of her hand. He didn't want anybody to know about it," Helen says.

Years later, however, one of Helen's aunts had possession of the letter and typed out a copy for Helen. The original is now in the Canberra National War Memorial.

"He (Toy) never talked about the war, but he had the most horrendous nightmares, yelling out in his sleep," Helen recalls.

Toy resumed his trade as a bootmaker after the war, opening a shop in the former Market Arcade in Lava St (and, later, opposite the Regal Shoppe in Timor St), and despite his horrific experiences – or perhaps because of them – he embraced life to the full.

"He was always such a kind and generous man and always had something for us kids when he came home from work, sweets or glass beads or something like that," Helen says, laughing.

Toy later married and had one stepson. He died in 1990.

A humble shoe retrieved from the rubble has revealed the story of a brave and humble man.

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