

Hero of the Innocent; Ralph Honner Jacinta Honner

On the 17th of August 1904, in Fremantle, Western Australia, Australia, Ralph Hyacinth 'Jump' Honner was born. He would soon become Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Honner, one of the most inspiring heroes of World War 2.

When I was searching the family name 'Honner' on the internet I found Ralph, and also found out that all Honner's are supposed to be related, I was proud to be related to somebody so loved for what he did in the war. I talked with my parents about it, but none of them know how we are related, because we can't find out about the first Honner to come out from England.

He was born on Saint Hyacinth's feast day, so his mother, who was an Irish Catholic, named him after the 13th century Dominican priest whom the day was named after. But Ralph didn't like the name, so he dropped it as soon as he could.

His father was a policeman that worked in rural Western Australia.

While he was growing up his family lived in a town called Three Springs, which is about 300 km north of Perth.

When Ralph reached high school age, he went down to Perth, where he boarded. Whilst he was here he overcame loneliness by reading heaps of books, he also developed a love of poetry like; *El Cid*, *Paradise Lost*, *Homer's Iliad*, *the Song of Roland*. He had this fascination all through his life. He always wrote in an epic manner, and continued this although his life.

After he graduated to University standards, he went to the University of Western Australia, where he studied arts, English, and Modern History; he then became a school teacher. During his teaching careers he taught at Kalgoorlie, and then at Hale School in Perth, but after two years in this profession he left and began to study law.

When he was 20, he enlisted as a private in the 11/16th Battalion. But he only spent a bit over a year serving as a private before he was upgraded to a corporal. He had also brushed up his skills in the languages French, German, Italian and Spanish.

I think he learnt these languages because they would be some of the main countries that they would be fighting, and it would make it easier for him to understand what they were talking about, and maybe even find out a few of their plans.

Honner spent 2 years as a corporal before he was upgraded to a Sergeant.

In June of 1934 he married Marjory Bennett, and two years later, in 1936 he joined the militia. By World War 2 he had two sons called Brian and Richard.

On the 13th of October 1939, Ralph enlisted in the second AIF (Australian Imperial Force), he was also given command of the C Company of the 2/11th Battalion. On the 13th of December that year he was appointed Captain.

Honner sailed for Palestine in the Middle East in April 1940, (he arrived in May that year) when he was 35, which was a shock to many because he had a promising career in law, a wife, and a young family, but like many others he felt it in his duty to go and fight.. They fought at Bardia, Tobruk, and Derna. They were then sent to Greece, where they were fighting the German's. Here Honner commanded the men through a series of fighting withdrawals; the Battalion was evacuated to Retimo, Crete.

After the fighting here had a heavy toll on all of the battalion, Ralph escaped to Alexandria. Here he got promoted to Major, and was awarded the Military Cross for his work in Greece. This is what was put on his recommendation;

*'Citation: WX15 Capt. Ralph Honner. Recommended for M.C. This officer is the best company commander I have known in this or the last war. Throughout the campaign he has led his men on all occasions with courage, cheerfulness, calmness and skill.'*¹

¹ <http://www.awm.gov.au/people/218.asp>

I feel proud at what they put on his recommendation, because they are in my opinion some of the greatest characteristics in the world to have.

Apparently Ralph didn't get much time at home, and Ralph often told this story;

(Ralph used to tell the story that his young sons, then aged 5 and 3, apparently had no idea who he was when he came home. They reported to the nuns at their school that they'd seen some strange man cuddling their mum in her bedroom. The nuns figured things out and delighted in telling Ralph.)

With all the positives he has about him, there have to be some negatives too, one of them is the fact that he never got much time at home.

He returned to Australia on the 14th of April 1942, here he briefly saw his wife, Marjory, before he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, given command of the 39th Battalion, then sent to Papua New Guinea to fight the Japanese on the Kokoda Trail, where they were told to keep the Japanese at Isurava, then he lead the Battalion on to contribute to the win at Gona. For his role there he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

I feel very proud that he won two awards in his time during the war; he must have been a great man, and a great leader.

On the 23rd of January 1943 Ralph lead his men from the northern beaches near Gona, the legs of the Battalion carried by little else than pride. Honner summed up their spirit by saying:

"Higher authority refused us vehicles for the less fit, ruling that no one could ride unless he fell out on the march. In the 39th's book marches didn't straggle, so we all marched, all the way, to Dobodura – for some a long torture on the verge of unconsciousness.

When an amazed bystander inquired: 'What mob's this?' we kept our eyes straight ahead – all except my second-in-command at the end of the line who barked: 'This is not a mob!' and added, relenting 'This is the 39th'.²

² http://www.charlielynn.com/docs/RalphHonnerDSOMCObituary_000.doc

I think that this is an amazing quote, and really brings out what it was like during the war, and what it was like to be in command of a Battalion of people, whose life's were all in your hands.

The 39th disbanded in July 1943.

After the 39th disbanded Ralph was given command of the 2/14th Battalion. He led them in the Ramu-Markham Valley campaign but received a serious gunshot to the hip. This ended his combat career.

This is a sad thing to hear, and I'm sure most of the men would have thought so to, because he was a great leader and I think that he should have had a bit more time to fight. But it is also a good thing because he got to go back to his family.

After this Ralph spend until late 1944 in hospitals having operation after operation, and having a variety of staff appointments.

Then Ralph was made the *General Staff Officer Grade 1* for the *Directorate of Military Training* at Land Headquarters in Melbourne, but took his discharge in 1945.

Honner served as chairman number 3 of the *War Pension Entitlement Appeal Tribunal* from 1945-1950. He was also chairman number 2 for the same body between 1950-1968. Ralph's family moved from Perth to Sydney with these appointments.

Honner retired in 1968 and became ambassador for Ireland.

Honner died in Sydney on the 15th May 1994. He was 89 years old.

I believe he was a good citizen because he fought alongside his men, rather than just commanding them. Also because he was kind to his men, he didn't think himself superior to them.

Bibliography

http://www.charlielynn.com/docs/RalphHonnerDSOMCObituary_000.doc

<http://www.awm.gov.au/people/218.asp>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Honner

This project has helped me to gain more of an understanding on Ralph Honner, and how he played his part in the AIF. Also on why he wanted to go to war, and what he did during the war. It was great to find out so much more about a family member who was so famous for how he contributed to the war.

Also the Defence 2020 day in Hobart was a great opportunity to meet people who are a part of the current ADF, and hear what they do.