



**Montmorency  
Eltham RSL**



**Empathy Tradition Integrity Mateship Transparency Compassion Respect**

# **2024 Annual Report**

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### 2024 Committee

Position	Name
President	Glen Ferrarotto
Vice President	Ash Graham
Secretary	Andrew Hall
Treasurer	Mark Hookey
Committee	Mick Ricks
	Matt Loughman
	Rebecca Hall
	Jim Gronbach
General Manager	Michael McCombe



The badge is a symbol of readiness at all times to render service to the country and to former comrades. No wealth or influence can purchase the RSL badge which may be worn only by those who are members of the RSL.

- The **SHIELD** shape is symbolic of the protection which the RSL gives to its members, their dependents, and widows/widowers and orphans of those who paid the supreme sacrifice.
- **RED** represents the blood ties of war that exist between comrades.
- **WHITE** stands for the purity of the motives in joining the League – to render service without thought of personal gain or ambition.
- **BLUE** indicates a willingness to render that service to a comrade anywhere under the blue sky – wherever he or she may be.
- The **WATTLE** is symbolic of Australia. The leek, rose, thistle and shamrock represent the link with Wales, England, Scotland and Ireland respectively.

Depicted in the centre of the badge, and encircled by the name of the organisation, are a sailor, soldier, airman and servicewoman marching together with their arms linked in friendship. This is to show that within the circle of the League, all Services and all ranks march together in unity and comradeship.

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## PRESIDENTS REPORT

It feels like a lifetime ago that I first stepped into this RSL, a bit lost perhaps, yet subconsciously searching for something I didn't know I needed.

I remember the moment at a bar table when Bill McKenna, greeted me with a warm "G'day mate, how ya doing?" For those who had the pleasure of knowing Bill, you'll understand the engaging and entertaining conversation that followed. I didn't buy a drink that day, nor did Bill, but it was in that moment that I began to realise the potential this place held for me. Before long, I found myself on the Committee, where I met Duncan, Minnie, Pete Randle, Mick Mash, Mick Lannigan, Hans, and many others. It was here that I began to grasp the profound connection this RSL had with the community, even amidst the financial and cultural challenges we faced. The circumstances were far from ideal, but nothing I encountered, whether on paper or in personal relationships, seemed unmanageable.



At that time, the State Branch was under the leadership of General David McLachlan, with Mike Annette guiding us through a transitional period for veterans from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Timor, while our Vietnam Veterans, though younger, were still navigating their own battles.

It was on a Remembrance Day that I first met Bob Elworthy AM, and while again, I don't recall the specifics of that day, what has stayed with me is the incredible spirit of our Vietnam Veterans and their families. Their camaraderie, compassion, and unwavering support for one another and now for us, has inspired a nation, teaching us younger veterans about true courage and mateship. I've said this before and I will continue to say it, we will honour their

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service and we will remember their sacrifices, and we will continue to express our love and respect for them.

Bill McKenna often said with pride that his kids grew up at the RSL, and I cherish the fact that my children, Amelie and Gus, have had the same experience. Over the years, they have formed friendships here, learning that kindness and safety can come from strangers, an invaluable lesson in today's world where many children grow up wary and untrusting.

Our past Presidents, including Bill and Duncan, have all left their mark on this RSL, driving success through both our business and culture, adapting to the resources and circumstances of their times. Each of them shared the desire to make a difference, to build upon the legacy left by others, and to ensure a bright future for this organisation.

In my professional journey, I learned early, the importance of surrounding myself with people who are better than me, and I endeavored to apply this principle here. I was fortunate to bring in Michael, a consummate professional in hospitality. His understanding of balancing business with the community has led to remarkable growth, with our revenue nearly tripling since his arrival. Under his leadership, our staff retention rate has soared, and with a structured leadership team, including Maddy and James, our venue operates efficiently and continues to thrive day in day out.

I take immense pride in our staff. AJ produces culinary delights that surpass those of every venue in our area. Our kitchen, restaurant, and bar teams have forged meaningful connections with our patrons, demonstrating that their roles here extend beyond mere employment.

Of course, we still have some details to address—like Joe's true role as either an HR specialist or a barman—but under Wayne's leadership upstairs, I am confident we will navigate these minor challenges.

My first encounter with Hally was at an Eltham Seniors footy match during an Anzac Day weekend. Tasked with conducting a commemorative service, I noticed him standing proudly on the oval, exuding a commanding presence. Initially intimidated, I chose to observe rather than walk out there and join him, but by the end of the game, Hally and I had forged a friendship. His leadership has led to unparalleled changes in our governance, systems, and community engagement, enhancing our culture and connection with local sporting clubs among so many more physical changes to this venue. I've never met a guy so passionately connected to his community and so willing to continue Serving, despite decades of wearing a uniform.

Succession planning is a critical aspect of leadership. As I stepped into the role of President, I committed to making a difference over a five-year period, a timeline that was disrupted by a year of lockdowns. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, our team has emerged stronger, and I am proud of our collective achievements particularly during that time where we continued supporting our community.

When Ash Graham joined our team, Hally and I recognised his potential immediately. Over the past year, Ash has demonstrated exceptional professionalism and skills in



communication and negotiation. His extensive background in policy development and project management, coupled with his 27 years of service as a Senior Army Officer, aligns perfectly with our strategic goals and I fully support his nomination for the vacant Presidency role.

To our committee which continues to evolve, thank you for trusting in me, for listening to me and guiding me with your own knowledge and expertise. What a team we have now and what an amazing and exciting future we have ahead of us.



As I reflect on my journey here as President, I must acknowledge my wife, Rowena. Being a partner of a veteran is not easy, and she has supported me through it all, the broken legs, the black eyes, the busted shoulders. The late nights, and the sacrifices that come with a life dedicated to service. While I remain involved as a committee member, my priority will shift to my family and business in the coming years, and they deserve it.

So yeah, I found what I didn't know I was looking for, the Montmorency Eltham RSL. A place full of wonderful people whom I've forged life-long friendships with, a place I can be proud of, and somewhere I know I will always be safe. This is what an RSL should be, and I bloody-well love it.

Thank you.

**Glen Ferrarotto**  
**President**

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## Vice Presidents Report

I am pleased to present this year's Vice President's Report. This year has been a period of strong growth, consolidation, and success for both our Sub-Branch and Club, reinforcing our commitment to serving our members and the broader community.

At the heart of our Sub-Branch's mission is the provision of welfare support and the preservation of our commemorative traditions. Our welfare team has been active in providing critical support to our Veterans and their families, ensuring they have access to the services and assistance they need. We have also maintained our commitment to commemorations, with well-attended Anzac Day and Remembrance Day services, as well as other significant events that honour the service and sacrifice of our Veterans.

The unveiling of the Conway Cross this past Remembrance Day not only received national media attention, but more importantly will serve to be an ongoing tangible link to the memory of Private Harry Conway – just one of thousands of young Australians who paid the ultimate sacrifice in the Great War. These activities remain a cornerstone of our identity and purpose. To enable our Sub-Branch to continue to thrive, our Club is performing exceptionally well across all aspects of its operations. The ongoing success of our bistro, members' bar, gaming facilities, and an increasing number of functions have collectively provided a solid financial foundation and enabled us to expand our welfare and community support programs. Importantly, we have balanced our commercial operations with our core mission of supporting our Veterans and their families, ensuring that every success within the Club translates into meaningful outcomes for our members.



One of the most encouraging aspects of this year has been the steady growth in our membership. The increase in service, affiliate, and social members reflects the ongoing relevance of our Sub-Branch and the welcoming environment we have cultivated. New members have brought fresh energy and ideas, contributing to a stronger and more vibrant community.

The feedback from our members has been overwhelmingly positive, a testament to the efforts of our dedicated team, staff, and volunteers. Members have consistently praised the welcoming atmosphere, the friendliness of our amazing staff, the

quality of our facilities, and the range of activities and events we provide. This feedback reaffirms our direction and inspires us to continue improving and delivering services that meet the needs of our growing membership base.

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This year, we commenced the development of our Strategic Plan to ensure that we are well-positioned for the future. This plan will provide a clear vision and framework for the continued growth and sustainability of our Sub-Branch. It will outline our priorities across three themes of Support, Commemorate, and Grow, ensuring that we remain proactive and forward-thinking in our approach.

The past year has been one of progress, growth, and meaningful engagement with our members and the wider community. I extend my sincere gratitude to our dedicated Committee, staff, volunteers, and members who are at the heart of our success. We remain committed to strengthening our Sub-Branch, supporting our Veterans, proudly being a focal point in our Community, and upholding the traditions and values that define the Montmorency-Eltham RSL.

**Ash Graham**  
**Vice President**

## **Treasurers Report**

The Auditors McPhail & Partners have completed the audit of the accounts and completed financial reports for the three entities of the Montmorency Eltham RSL Sub-Branch. The audit reports are distributed throughout the room and will be posted on our website.

Financially, the Club has once again performed extremely well this year with the Sub-Branch Trading Account returning an operating surplus of \$95,570. Of substantial note this year, our income rose above \$5 million (2024 - \$5,225,271, 2023 - \$4,7m, Pre Covid/2019 - \$3,3m) for the first time which is an outstanding result when many other hospitality venues are reportedly not doing so well. We have continued our investment into modernising the club through significant funds being expended on the upstairs decking area during 2024.



### **MERSL Sub-Branch Inc Trading Account**

A surplus of \$95,570 was returned compared to \$130,244 for 2023.

Total Member Funds (equity) retained earnings as of 31 December 2024 was \$1,694,222, up from \$1,598.656 in 2023.



### MERSL Sub-Branch Inc Patriotic Fund

A net loss of \$102,282 for the year compared to a loss of \$23,362 for 2023.

Total Member Funds (equity) as of 31 December 24 was \$3,644,770, down from \$3,747,052 in 2023

### MERSL Sub-Branch Inc General Appeals Fund

The amount of \$63,446 was raised Anzac Day and Remembrance Day Appeals. The Club retains 50% of this which is spent wholly on Veterans Welfare.

As of 31 December 2024, there was total equity of \$12,185, up from \$10,820 in 2022.

In closing, results like this would not be possible without the efforts of our wonderful staff at all levels. The work done by our management teams to reduce costs and expenses has been exceptional and our successful year is very much attributable to their efforts. Once again, I would like to acknowledge Libby Annet for her book-keeping, financial accounting and advice expertise throughout the year.

**Mark Hookey**  
Treasurer


## Welfare and Advocacy Report

Veteran and veteran family support is one of the main roles of an RSL. Community support enables the Sub-Branch to be a community focused and a supportive organisation.



We continue to be proactive in reaching out to all Service Members either by visiting, by phone, mail or email. We believe reaching in also helps people reaching out.

The following is an overview on how the RSL has worked for veterans, families and the community:

 Volunteer work for the benefit of Veterans and the Community in 2024 the total was 3091.42 hours which equates to \$149,717.48.

 Welfare and Charitable expenses incurred by MERSL Trading Account totaled \$415,918 and include:

- Support Kev Myers in his role as a DVA Advocate, a vitally important position proven by his many hours of work to Veterans from not just MERSL but around the state.

- Donations of meals to needy Veterans, War Widows and Members of the RSL.
- Providing support to our Isolated persons program.
- Maintenance of Memorials including gardening and restoration at Eltham Cenotaph and our Remembrance Garden.
- Subsidised or free room hire for community groups.
- Welfare Bus expenses.
- Vouchers for local groups to support their raffles.
- Physical and financial support in the way of garden maintenance for older Veterans and War Widows.
- Subsidised meals for older Veterans and Seniors to prevent social isolation.
- A bi-monthly Service Members and Partners dinner.
- A monthly Coffee Club for veterans.
- Sponsorship of five local cricket clubs, five local football clubs and two local bowls clubs who deliver valuable work in running sporting organisations to promote health, competitiveness, and a sense of community. These Clubs have many existing members of the RSL and we have seen that the promotion of our brand and facility a return on the investment with future membership and participation within RSL. This also provided Committee Members a chance to attend and discuss the RSL and its role in our local community and provide commemoration activities to certain games to ensure the community continues to remember.
- Support of the Montmorency RSL Bowls Club.
- Support to the RSL Golf Club and Angling Club. Two vital Clubs that do valuable work volunteering for us.
- Continued contact with older Veterans and War Widows.
- Conduct of social activities like Bingo and Morning Melodies to assist in social interaction and participation.



Members have participated in RSL Victoria's training in suicide awareness and prevention with the aim of identifying and assisting those in need.

There are so many people that sacrifice time and effort raising welfare funds. All the valued volunteers at appeal time, all sporting clubs that run raffles that support us, all staff who help sell welfare items and raffle tickets. Each and every person is a crucial part of the welfare program we have.

**Andrew Hall**  
Welfare Officer

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## Commemorations Report

As always, a busy year. Our Anzac Day Service has grown in attendance and involvement. With more community groups setting up displays in Petrie Park Oval than previous years. These are important as it is an opportunity for other community groups to take advantage of the attendance by the local population to grow awareness and raise funds for their organisations.



Our involvement with sporting groups and schools has grown this year with a great help from the advocacy of our RSL's secretary. We now support multiple small services in the area that are attended by local youth. Which helps to keep our clubs name front of thought and the history of the proud service of our nation and our local veterans alive. Our competitions were a great success, with the Primary School art competition seeing a threefold increase in school involvement, and our poetry competition having over 50 entries from across the 5 secondary schools within our district.

We attempted last year to create a service specifically to honour our indigenous war dead. However, due to planning and collaboration issues we had to unfortunately abandon this plan. For now, we will shelve this goal for another year in the near future.

For 2025 we plan to continue to deliver the excellence we have displayed in previous years. Rob Kilcullen, Alan Field, and Ken Paynter from Eltham Rotary have passed the torch for organisation of the Dawn Service back to the RSL after more than 10 years of stewardship, which has built an amazing service. We thank them and Rotary for all their efforts and look forward to Rotary's continued support albeit in a different capacity.



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Planning for Anzac Day 2025 continues in earnest and is on track.

**Timothy Riley**  
**Commemorations Officer.**

## Appeals Report

The Montmorency Eltham RSL was again a standout in the League with its work conducted with the ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day appeals.

With the passion and leadership from Hector Hart and Cait Chubb we again had a successful appeals year. There is so much behind the scenes work that goes into planning, preparation and conduct of the appeals program and the desire shown by all that support is truly inspirational.

We ask each year, and I will again now, that when the call to arms to volunteer for our appeals comes, please reach out and find some time to help. As major fundraisers these are critical and all hands make light work as they say, everyone that can please do.

We have also sourced many items of remembrance that are for sale at the RSL all year round. All funds go directly towards our welfare programs.

We will also be looking at many more ways to raise funds through out the year to ensure we can fund all our welfare programs.

**Andrew Hall**  
**Appeals Officer**



## History and Heritage

The Memorabilia Group changed its name a few months ago, at the suggestion of the main Committee. It was thought that 'History and Heritage' better reflects the range of work undertaken by the group and the respect we hold for the wartime contributions made by many local members and residents.



In addition to memorabilia items, the group is involved with cataloguing and storing the book collection, researching the back-stories of displayed items to provide a local connection (where possible), and researching the enlistment history of many of our locals who served in various wars over more than one hundred years.

November 10, 2024 | Sunday Herald Sun

NEWS 33

## Temporary cross a poignant find after eight decades in dusty garage

# Digger's marker of respect

Ian Royall

A temporary wooden cross made for the grave of a teenage Melbourne soldier who died in northern France during World War I has been discovered in a Beaumaris garage.

The cross was created for Private Harry Conway, of the 21st Infantry Battalion, who died on April 28, 1918.

Such was the carnage on the battlefield, proper headstones could not be found for the cemetery in Rouen.

Instead, a timber cross, with a simple plate bearing his service number and name – 7213 Pt H Conway – was installed, later replaced and then sent back to his mum Rosamond, who lived in Christmas Hills, a rural community 35km north-east of Melbourne.

Mrs Conway died in 1940 and the whereabouts of her son's cross was unknown for eight decades.

It was forgotten until Beaumaris resident Graeme Funnell found it during renovations at the house previously owned by his father, tucked away in a cupboard in the garage.

The only possible known connection was that the execu-



The Vietnam Veterans Association's Bob Elworthy and Montmorency Eltham RSL's Ash Graham with the cross made for the grave of Private Harry Conway (inset). Main picture: David Caird

tor of Mrs Conway's will was Edith Stawell, who lived near Mr Funnell's home.

The "Conway Cross" will go on display at the Montmorency Eltham RSL along with Private Conway's small memorial plaque given to his mother.

The cross was restored by members at the Montmorency Eltham RSL and will be for-

mally unveiled on Monday, Remembrance Day.

None of Private Conway's relatives has ever been located.

Harry Conway was a bright, well-mannered young man when he enlisted to fight for King and country in 1916, weeks after his 18th birthday.

He was already handy with a gun thanks to weekends spent

at his local rifle club near his Christmas Hills home.

His rifle skills earned the young private a role as a sniper when he arrived at the battle frontline in Normandy, northern France.

He joined his battalion in September 1917 and the following month was wounded when an exploding shell partly bur-



ied him. He recovered but the following year he sustained serious injuries from which he did not recover.

The cross made for Private Conway, one of few returned to Australia, took on special significance for Mrs Conway because a collection of her son's personal effects being shipped home was lost when the SS Barunga was torpedoed by a German submarine off the coast of England in July 1918.

The handmade cross became her sole reminder of her only son's wartime service.

Mrs Conway then became a central figure in organising

commemorations in her community. She helped arrange the construction of a soldiers' memorial near the Christmas Hills Mechanics Institute Hall in 1921. That memorial is still a focus of Anzac and Remembrance Day events today.

The rifle club at Christmas Hills also went on to honour one of its youngest former members. After the war, the club announced it would offer an annual Harry Conway Memorial Prize.

The plaques were often referred to as a "Dead Man's Penny", and some even regarded them as symbols of bad luck.

Sub-branch vice-president Ash Williams said finding and saving the cross was significant.

"It had been a privilege to remember Private Conway and tell his story so he is not forgotten," he said.

The Victorian branch of the Vietnam Veterans Association has brought the restoration and display to reality.

Private Conway is one of 3082 Commonwealth burials in Rouen, and one of the 53,000 Australians who died in France in the war. His headstone says: "God be with you my son till we meet again. Mother."

When sufficient details are collected for each item, it is recorded on the *Victorian Collections* website (search 'victorian collections montmorency eltham') which MERSL has access to. In addition, we have our own History & Heritage website ([sites.google.com/view/mersl](https://sites.google.com/view/mersl)) which can be access from the main MERSL website. This contains not only articles about our memorabilia and related events but it also has sections which record quite a bit about the early history of the Sub Branch (and club), its premises and its people.

Over the last year, the group has been involved in two projects of some significance.

Early in 2024, the Nillumbik Shire Council purchased a glass cabinet for us to display some of our items in the Eltham Library. It is in the entrance area beneath the Roll of Honour listing the names of local residents who served in WW1 and WW2. Last September we collected several items related to WW1 and handed them to the Council as the first of our planned ongoing displays. By agreement with the Council, the items are to be changed each six months, usually just before Remembrance Day and before ANZAC Day. the latest display (installed in mid-March) focuses on the end of WW2, this year (2025) being the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary for the end of the war in Europe (VE Day) and the war against Japan (VJ Day). We have provided the Council with newspapers and clippings from each of those days which reported the events surrounding each of those significant days.

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The other important activity over the last twelve months has been the preservation and installation of the Conway Cross. Thanks to significant funding from the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia (and the work of its State president, Bob Elworthy – a MERSL member) the display now holds pride of place in the alcove adjacent to the elevator. The background stories about the cross, Pte Harry Conway and the commemoration event to unveil the display are all described in some detail on our H&H website.

**GROUP MEMBERS:**

**Peter Randle, Noel Campbell, Stu Kibell, Paul McColl, Gail Moncrieff, Leigh Ryan, Leonie Schulz, Bruce Taylor.**

## Membership Report

This year, we experienced growth in membership across all three membership categories. At the time of writing and of those that are financial, we proudly boast 232 Service members who have provided a minimum of six months military service to our nation. In addition, we have 566 Affiliate members with a connection to service, and 1871 Social members who are supporters of our purpose, who share our values of service, and take pride in our nation's military. This reflects our overall strong performance and the value proposition our Sub-Branch offers.



It is the growth in Service membership that is of most importance to our Sub-Branch, as it allows us to reach and provide welfare and wellbeing services directly to Veterans and their families. However, it is crucial to recognise that the average of our Service members falls into the 70-79 age

bracket. We must seek to lower this average age by attracting some of the 1900 younger veterans that reside in the Banyule and Nillumbik local government areas and are not RSL members. We will only do this by being visible in the community and offering a value proposition that is attractive to younger veterans. Our Strategic Plan will focus upon this, because building a strong and active Service membership over the long term is critical to our ongoing viability.

If you do know a current or ex-service member and they are not a member of an RSL, our Sub-Branch strongly encourages you to discuss the benefits of being an RSL member with them. Your first-hand experience and encouragement to someone else is the best

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advertising we can buy. We would double our membership if every current Service member recruited just one friend or colleague to join. Our Sub-Branch challenges you to achieve this target.

**Ash Graham**  
**Membership Officer**

## **General Managers Report**

It's been a year to remember, 2024 has seen so many positive results to our club. I like to use "Our Club" in talking about the Montmorency Eltham RSL, because that's what I feel it is to all of us, whether it be our loyal members or staff, as every one of us contributes to the success we have seen this year.

We have seen huge growth in all aspects of the business with food and beverage leading the way, even through large cost increases to these departments we have maintained a cost-effective offer which can still be enjoyed by all.

I feel privileged to work alongside each and every one of my team, from the fantastic work James and Maddy do in front and behind the scenes, to the staff that work effortlessly front of house, we have seen Ajay and his Kitchen crew produce high quality meals to numbers our club has never seen before.



Not that I have to mention our committee, but they have once again been a big part of what we are able to deliver here at our club, their support and approach to giving me opportunities to better improve the club has been without question.

I look forward to 2025 and more importantly having a beer with you all on our newly refurbished deck while watching the footy on our new screen.

Cheers

**Michael McCombe**  
**General Manager**





ME Montmorency Eltham RSL

*Lest we forget*

**APRIL 25<sup>TH</sup>**

# ANZAC DAY

Stay after the service for food and the opportunity to meet our local veterans and emergency service personnel

**DAWN SERVICE**  
Eltham Cenotaph 6am  
Eltham Memorial Main Road Eltham

**ANZAC DAY MARCH**  
Were Street, Montmorency 10am

**ANZAC DAY FAMILY SERVICE**  
Montmorency Eltham RSL 10:30am

