

The Gundagai Independent

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\$1.10 (includes GST)

Returned to sender

In a wonderful gesture of goodwill and kindness, a letter written in war torn Vietnam has found its way back to its original writer some 47 years later.

Gundagai man Richard Erkelens wrote the three page letter to his parents on November 4, 1966 while serving as a soldier in the Vietnam War. Conscripted in 1965, Richard spent 12 months in Vietnam with the 5th Battalion, known as the Tiger Battalion. Recently, on May 17, Richard received a phone call from Gary Townsend, an old Army buddy, who saw an advertisement placed on the Tiger Battalion's online newsletter, by a gentleman called Ron Fouche who was looking for Richard to return a letter he had found.

"Gary gave me Ron's email address to make contact but after three attempts to send an email to him, it kept bouncing back so I gave up," said Richard. "Then about two hours later I received a phone call from Veteran's Affairs saying Ron was trying to contact me through them and they gave me his phone number. I rang him in Perth immediately."

Richard's Dutch parents lived in Perth until their deaths and it seems that the letter was sold along with the bureau it became stuck in, in an estate sale of the Erkelen's furniture.

"We purchased the writing desk from a young English couple who were moving," said Ron. "This was about ten years ago."

"I stripped it down to re-oil the wood and found the letter stuck up behind the roll up door. When we found it and looked at the date, I was

over the moon. At the time, I said to my wife that we must find these people."

Ron, himself once a soldier in the South African army, then put the letter in the bureau draw and forgot about it until he recently went to put new handles on the drawers.

"When I emptied out the drawers, I came across the letter again and made it my mission to find Richard."

After the phone call with Richard on the Friday, Ron sent the 47-year-old letter to Gundagai by courier and it arrived, safe and sound, last Monday, May 20. And Richard was thrilled to receive it.

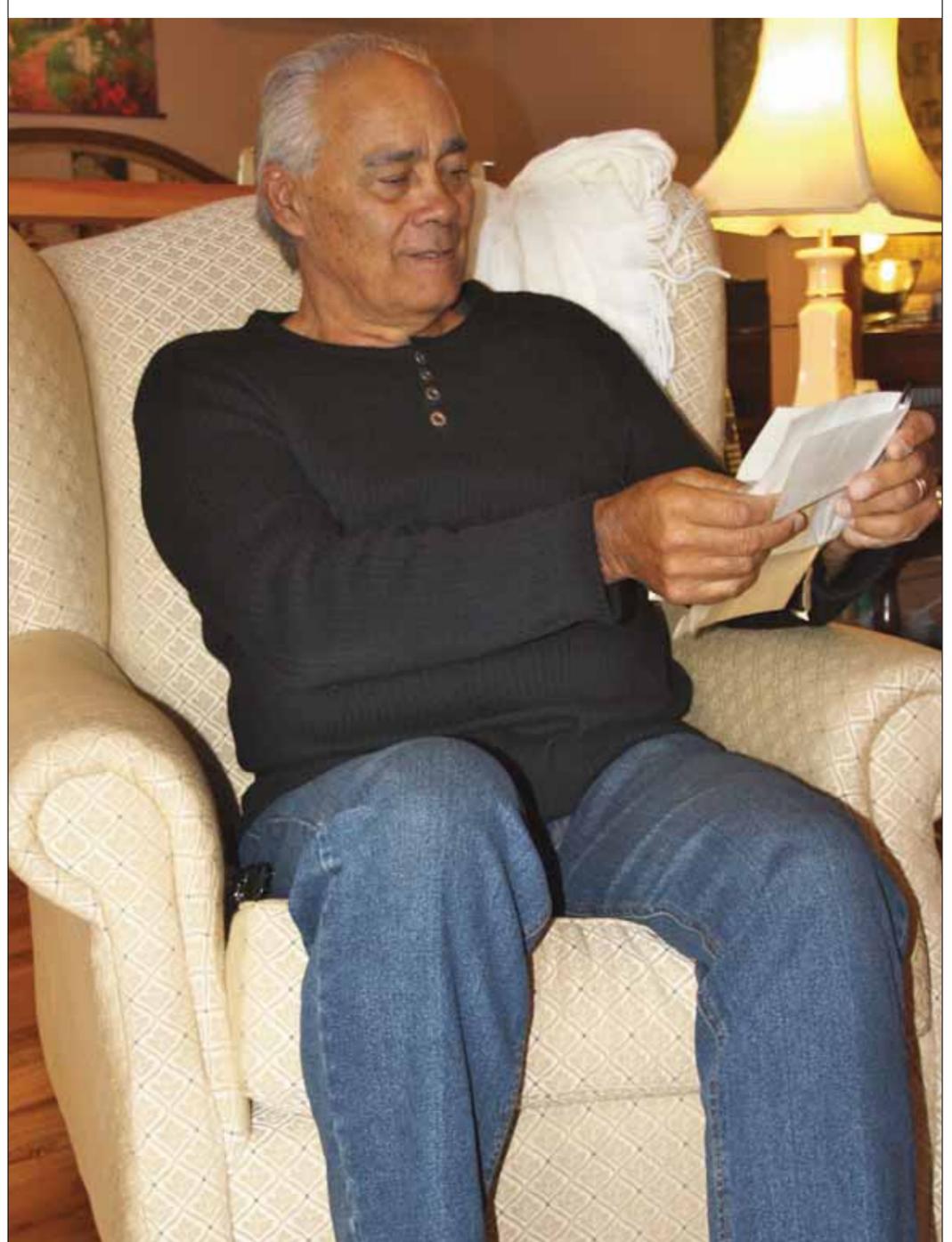
Both of Richard's parents were prisoners of war for three and a half years under the Japanese and he said, being an only child, they were terrified for him to go to Vietnam.

"They never wanted me to go," he said. "They begged me not to. Dad was so proud after I came back home."

He said his father was never one to keep mementos and that after his death, Richard retained very little to remember him by, so the return of the letter is even more special as it now gives him something of his father's to pass on to his own son, Jayson.

In April of next year Richard plans to return to Perth for a Tiger Battalion reunion and while there he will meet up with Ron to thank him in person for his kindness.

"Ron said he had made it his mission to find me," Richard said, "so I think we can now safely say mission accomplished."



A letter Richard Erkelens wrote to his parents from the Vietnam War over four decades ago, recently found its way back to him after it was discovered by a stranger who made it his mission to see it returned.