



# THE COLONEL

A STORY OF U.E. OHL AND FAMILY



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Cover

Images top to bottom, left to right: Colonel U.E. Ohl, Dutch colonial army, Dutch East Indies, 1949. U.E. Ohl and his wife Gorgine in their rented home near the old post office when they first arrived at Mission Beach. U.E. Ohl. The Ohl children, Irene (Rene) and Walter (Wally.)

\_\_\_\_\_ In relation to the recording of stories behind local street names, this is a submission to the Mission Beach Historical Society regarding the name “Ohl Road” at the end of Boyett Road up past the old school site at North Mission Beach. It is my understanding that this road was named after a former resident Mr U.E. Ohl and his wife who lived on the road now bearing their name from 1956 to 1969. Hereunder are some background notes regarding the Ohls, who this writer was privileged to know for several years from 1965. My informant for much of this information has been Irene [Rene] Harten nee Ohl, the only daughter of Mr and Mrs Ohl, now aged 97 and living in an aged care facility at Hamlyn Terrace NSW. Rene’s only sibling, her brother Walter, died in Palm Beach Qld. in August 2019. Most photos here have been provided by Walter’s family members.



With an exceptionally long name, Jan Hendrik Menne Ulrich Lucien Emeil Ohl was born in 1900 of mixed Dutch / East Indies parentage in Surabaya in Java in what was then known as the colonial Dutch or Netherlands East Indies. [In later life, he was known to his male friends as ‘Jan’, and identified himself officially as “U.E. Ohl”, the name which is painted on his large old trunk which is retained by his family today]. Spending his childhood in “The Indies” and wanting to join the local military, he successfully applied for officer army training in Holland in 1921. Two years later he graduated and returned as a young officer to Batavia [modern Jakarta].

In December 1923, he married Gorgine van der Horst there – above - she also had mixed Dutch / East Indies heritage, being born in Surabaya in 1899. Their first child, Irene, was born in Demak near Surabaya on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1925. Their son Walther Dietrich was born in Jambi in south Sumatra on 3<sup>rd</sup>



December 1926 – both opposite. Military personnel serving with the Dutch colonial army in the Indies at that time received nine months of paid leave back in Holland after every six years of service, an exercise which involved travelling for four weeks each way by ship via Colombo and the Suez Canal. It was during one of these breaks that war broke out in Europe in 1939 in Europe, and Mr Ohl, by then a captain, had a choice of staying in Holland or returning to the Indies. He chose to return.

The Pacific War then commenced with the bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1941. Not long after, whilst fighting the Japanese for control of the oilfields on Sumatra in early 1942, the Dutch were forced to surrender, and from March 1942 to September 1945 the then Major Ohl – opposite right - was a prisoner of war at Bandung in Java. His wife and daughter and son were forced to survive as best they could in



occupied Batavia. It was a very difficult time for all - Rene, then an attractive young lady of nearly 20, recalls being slapped by a Japanese soldier for not bowing but was otherwise unmolested. Her mother had to sell her heirloom jewellery, and Rene's brother Wally was interred in a youth detention camp.



In later life, their father rarely spoke of his wartime experiences and unfortunately wrote no memoirs.

After the war, although initially in an emaciated state but reunited with his family with the assistance of the Red Cross, Major Ohl continued to serve in the Dutch colonial army, now fighting separatists agitating for independence. Soldiers of local birth generally sympathised with the rebels, which no doubt posed a challenge for Dutch officers trying to maintain discipline. Rene recalls much civil disturbance – after the Japanese war, there was no shortage of guns and ammunition in the hands of civilians. Armed rebellion and political manoeuvring eventually led to the transfer of authority from the Dutch to the new Republic of Indonesia in late 1949, the year Major Ohl had attained the rank of Colonel [shoulder insignia] - opposite.

Resigning from the military and being forced to leave their lifelong home, the Ohl family decided to emigrate to Australia rather than return to Holland. The Ohls senior followed their son Wally to Sydney in 1952. On the ship to Australia however, they met Dick and Greta Verhey who were heading to a small place named Mission Beach in Far Nth. Qld. to work on a banana plantation [they eventually set up a poultry farm at Bingil Bay]. Dick Verhey had also served in the colonial Dutch army in the East Indies. Subsequently, the Verheys were impressed with their new surroundings, no doubt reminiscent of the East Indies, and persuaded the Ohls to visit and assess this tropical outpost, so different to the relatively civilized conditions they were accustomed to in the former East Indies where running tap water and electricity were the norm in the colonial centres of population.



The allure of the tropics prevailed, and Mr and Mrs Ohl moved to [North] Mission Beach, bought a small utility and initially lived in rented accommodation along the esplanade near the old post office – opposite - managing financially on their modest military pension as well as working on a banana farm belonging to a Spanish immigrant named Jodana. Not long afterwards, in about 1956 they purchased a modest dilapidated weatherboard house on a small acreage block along a track off the end of Boyett Road which ran up the steep

hill past the original Mission Beach school. The property had no creek but there was a well at the lower end. Today the property is described as 28 Ohl Road. The Ohls made the house into a comfortable home best described as a bungalow, and over time established a dense productive tropical garden and a small citrus orchard which always seemed to have Agile wallabies in residence.

A feature of the house was a large jacaranda tree in front near the road. The eaves of the house were lined with bougainvillea thorns to discourage possums - and snakes – from getting into the ceiling!



I the writer first met Mr Ohl – *opposite* – and his wife in 1965 when I commenced part-time work with their son-in-law Robbie Harten and daughter Rene who, with their three daughters Maureen, Ginette, and Charmaine, had bought the banana farm, accessed along an avenue of large old mango trees, at the end of the road which was to bear the name Ohl Road. With Clump Mountain looming above them, the two properties were only about 500 metres apart. There were no neighbours except for Norm and Joyce Mackney who lived on the corner of Ohl Road and Boyett Road. Vince and Maureen Huttley – tragically both subsequently killed in a car crash - had the adjoining banana farm to the east, and Don Campbell grew bananas to the north.

Rob and Rene had married in Holland in 1950 and relocated to Sydney in August 1954 after Rob completed compulsory military service. Not long afterwards, in August 1954, the couple with their daughter Maureen joined Rene’s parents at Mission Beach, with Rob supporting his family by working on banana farms owned respectively by Jodana and Crisp. Subsequently in 1957, together with Rene’s brother Walter and his new wife Jean, the two young couples jointly purchased the banana farm at the end of Ohl’s Road as mentioned above. For a short time then, the entire Ohl family were all living and working on Ohl Road before Wal and Jean returned to Sydney in 1960.

Mr Ohl had an erect military bearing and spoke in a slow but deliberate manner, navigating the intricacies of the English language relatively late in life. I clearly recall one evening in about 1967, Mr Ohl delivered a prepared address to a group of local residents gathered at builder George and Hope West’s house on the esplanade. The occasion was local concern regarding a proposal to drill for oil on



the Great Barrier Reef. Mr Ohl spoke eloquently and with passion about the perils of such a proposal, and was given much applause when he finished, everybody recognizing that this gentleman with an imposing presence was again fighting, this time to preserve the natural environment of his adopted home. Coincidentally, just the day before, a large fish kill had washed up on Mission Beach, a consequence of illegal in-shore commercial trawling.

Above – Mr and Mrs Ohl with son-in-law Robbie Harten – granddaughter Maureen Harten in front and her sister, Ginette, in the stroller – on Mission Beach c. 1956.

Mrs Ohl was a demure and kindly lady who spoke with a deep strong Dutch accent. She and her husband occasionally helped pack bananas for the Hartens, working industriously until lunchtime when Rob drove them home in his aqua-coloured Kombi van. The whole family travelled in this vehicle to Tully every Wednesday for shopping and appointments.

On occasions, the Ohls had picked and packed lemons from their orchard in small wooden crates, the timber of which was supplied by sawmiller Peter Wheatley from South Mission. This fruit, sometimes



up to about 20 crates, was taken to Tully in the kombi to be railed to agents Askern Brothers in Townsville for sale.

Opposite – the entire Ohl & Harten families [unknown older man standing at rear] Mission Beach c. 1958 On occasions I stopped to chat with the Ohls when walking home from work. I was only a teenager and regret now not taking more interest in their background and past experiences. I recall their

kindness and generosity – they rarely allowed me to pass without taking some fruit with me – they had soursops, custard apples, rollinias, star fruit etc. in abundance - or something sweet from Mrs Ohl's kitchen. Just before I left the Beach in 1968, Mr Ohl offered to sell me a beautiful old engraved silver double-barrelled shotgun he affectionately cared for many years. I knew little about firearms but recognized it as a very special piece. Sadly, I declined to buy it. It was subsequently bought by Ken Campbell, a nearby banana grower.



Being aware of potential health issues, the Ohls – opposite, at home on Ohl Road c. 1960 - decided to relocate to Sydney and left Mission Beach in January 1969. They sold their property to their neighbours the Huttleys who subsequently utilized the house for farm worker accommodation. Over the intervening years, the place seemed to fall into disrepair, in contrast to the large and productive garden and well-maintained dwelling it once was when occupied by the Ohls. Rob and Rene Harten subsequently sold their farm at the end of Ohl Road in late 1971 and also moved to Sydney.

Mr U. E. Ohl died of lung disease in Sydney aged 72 in 1972, and his wife of nearly 50 years, Gorgine, also died in Sydney of cancer in May 1974 aged 75. It is to be hoped that the road at Mission Beach which bears their name will be a testimony to these fine people from abroad who lived, laboured, and loved there during the 1950s and 60s ...

Ray Langford Nov 2022

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