

**DID YOU KNOW** | The 39th Australian Infantry Battalion 1941-1943 existed as a unit for only 20 months of World War II.

WWII hero is reunited with a treasured souvenir after a series of almost unbelievable coincidences



Ken Phelan with the flag he signed while serving in New Guinea during World War II.

Pictures: MARK STEWART N08WG302

# Writing's on the flag

**War history** | Adrian Bernechich

LAST month when Ken Phelan saw his carefully scrawled name – on a tattered Japanese flag that he and fellow Australian soldiers captured in New Guinea during World War II – the 87-year-old veteran was surprised, to say the least.

The Mulgrave resident, who served in New Guinea from 1941-46, was reunited with the flag after a series of almost unbelievable coincidences triggered by the Oakleigh-based Military Historical Society of Australia.

It all came about when Camberwell war buff David Howell, 30, who runs tours up the Kokoda Track, was asked to talk about the famous 39th Battalion – of which Mr Phelan was a member – at the MHSA's future August 27 meeting.

In preparation, he contacted the 39th Battalion Association, which referred him to Mr Phelan as a real-life example of a war hero.

In a delightful twist of fate, Mr Howell later saw the flag for sale on eBay with Mr Phelan's name and officer number. Four days later, he surprised the veteran with the treasured souvenir at their first meeting in Wheelers Hill.



The flag has 24 signatures.

"The whole thing was just sheer luck," Mr Howell said. "It's one thing to have the flag, but to be able to relate it to a living person makes it so much more worthwhile."

Mr Phelan said he could not remember signing the flag, or any of the names on it, but described the surprise as the "greatest in the world".

Mr Howell bought the flag, which has names of 24 ex-servicemen from Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, from Jeanette Brown, the daughter of another soldier on the flag, Ken Brown.

Ms Brown, 56, said she had inherited the flag after her father died 15 years ago.

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Chiropractor

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**Time?** 8am to 6pm



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