



## AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

### AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL WARFARE ORAL HISTORIES

#### Interview Number 8. VX113199 and AK151 Sergeant John Hayes Operation SEMUT I.

#### Interviewed by Dave Sheehan

**Commentator** (00:00): John Hayes flew to Hollandia for Special Operations but when his operation was cancelled he returned to Fraser Island until December 1944. He then completed the midget submarine course<sup>1</sup> at Garden Island in Western Australia, and following parachute training at Leyburn in Queensland he jumped into Borneo to join SEMUT 1 where he served with Colin McPherson from June until the September, when he was evacuated to the Labuan hospital. For his service with SEMUT 1, John Hayes was awarded the Military Medal. He is being interviewed by Dave Sheehan.

**Dave Sheehan.** Tonight it is my pleasure to be talking with John Hayes about his experiences with Z Special Unit in Borneo during the Second World War. John, first off would you like to go through how you joined the Army and the units you worked with prior to getting into Z Special?

**John Hayes** (00:55): Yes David. I joined the Army through the Melbourne University Rifles in May 1940. I continued the course at the Melbourne Teacher's College until the end of the year and went into training with the MUR on January 1941 for three months initial training. We were recalled by the government to ease the situation in the Education Department and country schools where about a hundred of us were recalled to teach for five or six months. Later I re-joined the MUR and was sent to do NCO school at Dalby and early in 1941 the MUR had moved to Bonegilla. We joined them there and then only to find out that the MUR were to be disbanded and all the members are given the opportunity to volunteer for whatever type of service they decided on. And in that way about 20 of us decided on joining the Commandos at Wilson's Promontory.

**Dave Sheehan:** (02:12): And where did you go from there?

**John Hayes:** Well from Melbourne to Wilson's Promontory where we trained in the usual subjects, pretty tough physical education and so on, and after an initial three month's training we were sent to a special cadre which they organized at the Darby River area which was Headquarters in this special camp where we trained in extensive training with explosives weapons and unarmed combat and out of the blue we were sent to Bonegilla to instruct the younger battalions coming up for the AMF for about three months. On our return to Melbourne headquarters we are allocated as instructors to the Southern Command NCO School at Watsonia and through information and a little bit of assistance from a Captain associated with the Commandos still in Wilson's

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<sup>1</sup> It was actually a course in Motorised Submersible Canoes – Sleeping Beauties as the midget submarines did not arrive in Australia until 1944.



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Promontory we were recalled and continued our training with the Commandos until such time that they moved to Canungra ([03:37](#)) and for 16 months I was instructing at the Commando Training School at Canungra when fortunately for me anyhow, three senior officers I think it was, came one morning.

We were called into the Orderly Room, interviewed, told that they were looking for soldiers capable of carrying out rather dangerous operations. Where we interested and three of us were selected. And I think it was May the 5<sup>th</sup> 1944 that I went to Fraser Island carrying out the usual introductory training, Folboats, exercises, weapons, army, physical education certainly, bivouacking and after six weeks training in a group we were recalled to Melbourne and at the Engineer Depot we were briefed for a Special Operation to fly to Hollandia and then in groups of three made up mainly of a Sergeant, a Sergeant Signaller and an OR rank to be taken in by PT boats and landed on various islands surrounding the north western area of New Guinea reporting back Japanese movement particularly with aircraft and strength in those various islands.

([05:12](#)): However, the Americans moved so fast and the Japanese withdrew. The whole scheme was aborted, and we returned to Brisbane per the Douglas<sup>2</sup> planes that we went up in the air and then went back to Fraser Island where we trained on at Lake Camp, which was based on Lake McKenzie, midway in the Island. After three or four months there we went, I and a group of others went to Tabragalba where we met up with New Guinea natives particularly to learn their language there for some unknown operation. After training there for some weeks we returned to Milton in Brisbane and on parade one morning prior to being briefed to go on another escapade into New Guinea, senior officers called out for volunteers for Special Duties. And along with four other members there we volunteered after interviews were accepted and immediately were sent off via Melbourne to do a special course of which we knew nothing about in Western Australia. ([06:41](#)) and we arrived in Perth non-stop by train on Christmas Eve 1944 and this was to do the training with the SBS<sup>3</sup> for four months.

We returned to Mount Martha near Melbourne, and we were reorganized with other troops and with a Major whose name I have forgotten. We were allocated to go somewhere up into Malaysia to blow up railways and railway bridges. We did our training at Watson's Bay in Sydney and from there other changes were brought about and a group of us were then sent to Leyburn to do the parachute jump and from there back to Brisbane and by plane I think to Morotai. After training there for some weeks we were informed that the next morning we would go onboard the Liberator, early hours of the morning. I can remember well Smokey Dawson was with me.

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<sup>2</sup>Douglas C-47 Skytrain or Dakota is a military transport aircraft developed from the civilian Douglas DC-3 airliner. It was used extensively by the Allies during World War II and remained in front-line service with various military operators for many years.

<sup>3</sup> AIB Special Boat School at Garden Island, WA



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[\(08:05\)](#): Col Thornton<sup>4</sup> and Johnny Onslow<sup>5</sup> and we took off in the dead of night on a jungle morning and saw daybreak somewhere on the way to Borneo, and that was the start of the SEMUT operation.

About mid-morning, 10 o'clock we flew over the DZ, and it was a fine morning, cloudless sky. We went out with Col Thornton number one, Smokey two. I was three and Johnny Onslow four. And looking up I had several twists in the lines and having kicked myself out of there, I looked down and so one marvellous green patch. What a landing site and too late I had realized I was heading straight for the padi field along with Johnny Onslow but the natives there were all around us in a matter of seconds and dragged us out of the mud onto the recently made bamboo air strip at Belawit [\(09:10\)](#) and we were welcomed by the Sig man. I think it was Bob Long, and Major Harrison.

**Dave Sheehan:** How much did you know of the operation before you were in?

**John Hayes:** Nothing. Not a thing address unknown when we were in Morotai. Major Harrison then called Johnny Onslow and myself to come up to his kampung where we were entertained with a cup of coffee I think. I am not sure what we ate, not very much and he informed us that as soon as we were ready we were to set out with guides to contact Rick Edmeades at Long Semado which was a two-day march from where we left.

So Johnny with our guides walked off staying overnight, I think at a camp called Ba Kelahan and on the following evening we arrived at Semado and I met Rick and other members of Z Special. But I did not stay there long enough to get to know them as next morning he said to me I want you to go to Long Miau which was getting over towards the Padas area. So with a couple of carriers and native guides I went off alone, camping I think one night at a little village, the name of which I have forgotten and late the next evening we came to Long Miau where Col McPherson had previously been before going further up towards the coast and round the Sipitang area.

[\(10:58\)](#) There was a Signals Officer there whose name I have forgotten now. I do not know whether he was actually in Z Special but probably operating from Army Headquarters, but as soon as I arrived, he left and after a matter of days Col had come back and it was quite a pleasant relief to be with Col. I had not seen him before Bob Griffiths arrived and it was then that we were strafed one Sunday morning by the Kitty Hawks, mistaking Miau from a further place north where we were informed the Japanese were in the area. However apart from the natives taking to the jungle and a few lost pigs, no damage was done and it was then possibly the middle of July, one afternoon, two wild looking natives arrived. We had not seen the Tagals before.

**John Hayes**[\(12:10\)](#): And they turned out to be two Tagal natives coming to inform us that the Japanese were moving into a little village called Buntang north of Eburu which

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<sup>4</sup> NX index 15874 and AK 0379 Lieutenant Colin Thornton

<sup>5</sup> VX 56026 and AK 81 Sergeant John 'Jacky' Onslow,



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was about a two-day march from Miau. So Rick Edmeades and other troops assembled at Long Miau and Long Pasia where it was decided that Mack and I would go straight to Eburu and see what the situation was but unfortunately Major Harrison sent a message that he had to see Col at a smaller kampung at which name I have forgotten between Pasia and Semado. So Rick said to me, Stroke you better go and with 6 native boys, away I went and arrived at Eburu. I think that it was the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, about four o'clock in the afternoon surrounded by a magnificent welcome I think from hundreds of natives who rallied to the cause from the various kampungs around being controlled by a famous Pengulu named Labor.

**John Hayes(13:19):**We discussed the situation and Larbor was every help but in a desperate hurry to get to Buntang so that he could supervise the actual situation, with the result that I could, as well as I could, organize the natives who were there into a group that we could get organized with equipment and what firearms we had possibly I think six or seven rifles. And I was carrying the American carbine and telling Labor just before he left that we would continue the trip to make contact with him as soon as we could, which entailed a night march and with the native support and their knowledge of jungle tactics it was done without mishap. And in the early morning we reced the situation. There was approximately 200 Japanese in Buntang with quite a number of car patrols, a couple of machine guns. So, we thought they were too strong a force to attack there and then. We withdrew, organized an ambush and as they moved out later, this was in the dawn light around about nine, 10 o'clock. We did what we possibly could I think and caused merry hell with the unfortunate Japanese and took off back into the jungle.

**Dave Sheehan:** What weapons were the natives using?

**John Hayes:** The natives themselves had parangs and blowpipes and were completely marvellous as far as I was concerned. I insisted that they did not go haywire and get out of the line which they did. And eventually after another ambush further down the way we returned to Eburu and I think Mac was there by that time and it was quite a relief to know that somebody else was there to help and the trackers.

**John Hayes(15:37):**The following day we got reorganized and Mac also had Jita Singh a famous Sikh soldier who had fallen foul of the members in India and took refuge in Borneo prior to the war and was taken a Japanese prisoner. And the Japanese insisted that they cut off his hair which was the greatest insult that one could offer any Sikh. Jita hated the Japanese more than any other man I have known anywhere up there. He was a brilliant soldier and it was decided then to meet Sanlito with a group of soldiers and what weapons and blowpipes they had to Bole which was further down along the track from Buntang going towards the Sapong Estate which he did. Mac and I with other soldiers decided to go back towards the Buntang area, just to see what other troops were following on. And during the three days there were a series of ambushes and so on and overall. Although the Japanese did pass through



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(16:57): I think we accounted for about 150. 35 deaths and three prisoners. Two of whom were women and one was a little fellow that came from, not actually Japan I don't think, from one of the other islands they told me later. Well in the meantime Rick Edmeades and other members of Z came up to Eburu and George Griffiths, Roly Marsh now, who had been further north around the Malamin area was informed I think by Major Harrison to report to Eburu. It was on one of my trails that I left Eburu prior to George coming I went to the ulu Temani area down to the Tamani-Eburu track junction where we found the Japanese had slept the night before presumably leaving most of their arms and ammunition behind which we hid in the jungle and left to be distributed to the natives when they returned I only I returned to Eburu simply because there was not a scrap to eat and we were on the trail already for three days and it was when I was coming back to Eburu that I met George about 10 o'clock one, oh no it must have been midday with his troops coming back to Eburu. So, we had a re-assembly there again. In the meantime Rick Edmeades had arrived with others and it was decided that Roly Marsh would go to a place called Mengalong which was on the west more or less west northwest of Borneo and I with about 30 natives would go back to Tamani and at that time not to progress any further towards Sapong and a place called Kemabong which was about I suppose a half a day's march from the actual Japanese in Sapong.

(19:08): And I think then for about six weeks we patrolled the area and contacted a few Japanese patrols coming a little bit close to Kemabong I know but when they found out that there was somebody there to meet them with rifle, ammunition and so on they returned and never caused us any very much trouble again until after the making of peace on 15<sup>th</sup> of August. The 21<sup>st</sup> of August a native came in very concerned with news that a group of Japanese were coming down the track. So we left Tamani went on towards Kemabong but they did not come as far as Kemabong but did meet apparently some wondering natives who might have been coming to see me at Temani or Roly at Mengalong and shot two of them and the other three I have never seen again but that was the last contact we had with the Japanese until the 9<sup>th</sup> of September when I was recalled to Eburu.

**Dave Sheehan** (20:28): With the training did you initially, once you got a number of volunteers did you train them before you took them out on operations or was it an ongoing thing as you went from place to place?

**John Hayes** (20:40): It was an ongoing thing because sometimes you had some training, some of the Murut people did not like to come very far into the Tagal areas and so you had to depend mainly on the Tagals that you met on the tracks and when you were patrolling around the area. And the Tagals as far as I was concerned for all the time that I was with them from say the 19<sup>th</sup> of July until the 9<sup>th</sup> of September were completely honest, supportive in every manner of form although they were reported to have been rather treacherous little villains earlier.

**Dave Sheehan** (21:17): Was there an attempt made to keep different groups of one tribal grouping or you did not have the luxury of doing that?





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**John Hayes (21:29):** I did not have that problem I suppose because once I got past Eburu well they were all Tagals. I think on the borderline there could have been before we went in there I suppose animosities between the Tagals and the Muruts but I never saw an incidence of it.

**Dave Sheehan (21:50):** What about language? How did you communicate with them? Through Malay or through interpreters?

**John Hayes (21:56):** Well that was a big problem in a way. We were trained in the Malay language at Fraser not very intensively and when we got up there it was just learning a word at a time. I think the first word I ever learned was berapa Jauh which meant how far and the reply was jauh tuan which meant a very long way. The further they would say banyak jauh. So you picked up the language like that and you picked up words like makan and the names of other edible fruits, bamboo shoots and so and you just learned enough to get through to them. The biggest problem is to when we got into the Tagal area there were different dialects and it was quite a problem but just to quote a little instance as to regard to communication on that patrol I took with 16 natives.

**John Hayes (23:04):** I had 8 natives in front and 8 natives behind on this particular occasion. We were well armed While I going from Eburu to ulu Temani. And on a very warm languid jungle afternoon, about two or three o'clock. Everything was going along smoothly and then in a second the two native scouts and the other six natives in front of me vanished and I looked behind and there was no one left either there. So it is time for me to go to the jungle, which I did which is a piece of bamboo fortunately. I scrambled through the bamboo and got cover and then I could not find anybody for quite some. Well eventually I found one of my boys Adanan who had the Bren gun and I said, apa susah Adanan? Nipun?

**John Hayes (23:58):** He said tidak Nipun. I said apa? What? That sort of thing. This goes on in the middle of the jungle and he said tuan, cow. I said we are not frightened of cow. So we got the boys together, still in the jungle and cutting our way through and bypassing this unknown mystery to me and as we went past I think it was Adnan said, look back. There on the side of the track in a dust bowl was two of the biggest Zebu bulls I have seen in my life. We got through it that way. Those things you know. One word would led to another. It was alright.

**Dave Sheehan (24:47):** What about food? Did you pick up food from each village as you went through?

**John Hayes (24:53):** Food, once we got past Eburu was the biggest problem of all time. The Japanese had been in Sapong for quite some time and had patrolled the areas not as far as ulu Tamani, but halfway from Sapong towards ulu Temani but prior to our going there and had stripped everything, even cutting down coconut palms. And there was nothing. And the natives had gone bush. There were no natives apart from about ten of the most primitive people I had ever seen in a tiny little sulap at ulu



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Temani. And I think Mac had the biggest headache at Eburu trying to organize a native party carrying the right food to us and George at Mengalong

(25:48): We were desperately in need of food all the time. We did the best we could to live off the land and use all the grenades we could take from the Japanese that we had killed to blow up fish but they were not sufficient all the time to keep us properly fit as a result of course we got amoebic dysentery and malnutrition.

**Dave Sheehan (26:08):** What about medical supplies for casualties and?

**John Hayes (26:14):** Nearly as bad as food. I had one little native on this occasion when the Japanese had come down after the, on one occasion before the end of the hostilities and they got into a bit of a close quarter combat and the Japanese lifted his sword and cut his little finger off. Anyhow we got back after taking a few heads. I bandaged him up with the only field dressing that I had. And he would not go back even to Eburu. I said you have to Labuan to the hospital. No tuan, but eventually I insisted that he had to go to Eburu. And I think it was there after many days, he took a time long time to go. George? Was it George Griffiths? think Bob Griffith had arrived at Eburu and had medical supplies and fixed his missing finger and wound and he survived. But medical supplies were very poor. We had sulphanilamide tablets and that was the full total of my supplies.

**Dave Sheehan (27:29):** So you were not getting much from Harrison back in?

**John Hayes (27:33):** No. Not nearly enough.

**Dave Sheehan (27:36):** How many Z Special Operatives who were working in the area at the time?

**John Hayes (27:41):** SEMUT 1 overall we had 42 members that dropped in. Thirty by a Liberator and the other 12 by the little Auster craft when they had built the airstrip. Probably some by boat I do not know from Labuan. But of the 42 then I suppose most of them were active Operatives apart, well we had to have a headquarters staff at Belawit with Bob Long and Smokey Dawson and signallers with Mac and others at Eburu. And of the others well they ranged from Belawit towards the coast to Lawas, back to Malaman, up to Mengalong and Tamani in that area.

**Dave Sheehan (28:39):** Looking back on it, in hindsight was there any particular subjects that you wish you had been trained in for that type of operation that where you had to learn by a hard experience or?

**John Hayes (28:50):** Well I think the situation was such that we had to learn by heard experience because you moved from one kampung to another and you collected two or three of the natives that were willing to become soldiers. And for the time that I was at Miao we did have an opportunity for three or four weeks to train the natives there that were willing to come on with us in the use of the 303 rifle that was about all,



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perhaps a Bren gun. But it would not matter how well you were trained probably to that in dealing with that situation then you could do much more.

**Dave Sheehan (29:33):** Had you received any training in Guerrilla Warfare before you went there?

**John Hayes (29:37):** Well I would say yes definitely from the time we down in the Prom. Guerrilla Warfare training yes, and in Canungra for sure. As well as the general training for the commando regiment on operations.

**Dave Sheehan (29:59):** Would you recommend any particular training methods for somebody in the situation where you were, where you had, native soldiers and you had to get across weapons lessons or teaching tactics? How much, how deep did you go into the training, or did you try and keep it as simple as possible?

**John Hayes (30:23):** Well it was as simple as possible to get them familiar with weapons such as the Bren gun and the carbine. We did have eight or nine Austen guns at Tamani and the natives were fairly clever little blokes. It did not take them long. I do not say that they were dead eyed dick shots for the time being, but they improved. But I suppose, well we were in a situation would seem to be the only thing we could do. We did not know where the Nips were. We did not know what we were going to do until such time that they came out on into Buntang. And of course, with untrained troops we did the best we could. And then once they knew that we had the upper-hand and I will say this that the natives were expert in jungle tactics. And without them and their support of course we would not exist in over a week. In our situation there it was a matter of accepting the situation and doing the best you could with what you had.

**Dave Sheehan (31:42):** Once you got into the contacts with the Japanese were the Europeans or the Z Special guys always the leaders in the contacts or did you have natives that were of a sufficient standard that you could put them in charge of different aspects of actual?

**John Hayes (32:06):** Well in my experience going back to Buntang I was in charge for that first hit and the natives then were reacted quite well but when I had gone back to Eburu the other Natives decided to carry on themselves on the way to Boal and of course, organized quite a fair number of heads to be brought in to prove their bravery. When Mac arrived and we know we got together with Uta Singh. Uta was a soldier of renown really. I think he was brilliant in what he was able to do with organizing and carrying out the ambush at Boal.

**Dave Sheehan (32:54):** How did you go about paying the natives?

**John Hayes (32:57):** I did not have any money at all. Others did. Things moved so quickly that when I went to Buntang without money we did not worry about money and





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the natives did not worry but they were being paid back at Eburu and back at Long Miau for their carrying operations or whatever soldiering they were doing.

**Dave Sheehan (33:20):** What tasks did you then carry out after hostilities? For Z Special? Were you involved in trying to recoup all the weapons or?

**John Hayes (33:30):** I was not. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of September we were recalled from Tamani and I went back to Eburu. And when I arrived at Eburu riddled with dysentery and malaria and malnutrition, dermatitis. Name it, I had it. Fortunately, Major McCallum<sup>6</sup> has come up from SEMUT II, I think, and back to SEMUT 1. He jumped in with SEMUT 1. He was at Eburu and it was dark when I arrived and Mac had kept a little drop of whiskey in one of the supply drops I had for me, which I had and enjoyed and in the morning after a jungle meal, rice I think it must have been Major McCallum said I want to take your blood pressure, stroke and whatever. He had just run down that little rise and walk back and was not more than 20 yards and he took my pulse and heart again. He said listen mate if you do not keep walking we will have to carry you out. So I had nothing to do with the reorganization of the show after the war but walked out to Sipatang and then to the 2/14 AGH<sup>7</sup> on the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> of September I think I arrived in hospital there.

**Dave Sheehan (35:04):** Had there been any contingency plan for the team getting out of Borneo? If, if things had not gone as planned when they SEMUT 1 first went in?

**John Hayes (35:15):** Well I never heard of one. No. I suppose well things went as we wanted them. There was not a sort of withdrawing or going or having to go anywhere else. Later on, apparently I suppose as it is written up in the SEMUT book there was the little problem. Major Harrison and the other members that were back in the Belawit area contacted this group of Japanese who would not surrender but I was not involved in that at all. I do not know how they went about it.

**Dave Sheehan (36:00):** What about communications between yourself and Harrison? Was that always by a runner or did you get radios?

**John Hayes (36:07):** Yes in my case Doug Bower was one of the signaller's, radio operators. He did come to Temani on one occasion, stayed overnight and was recalled to Eburu anyhow and somewhere else. All my communications were with Mac at Eburu by note and native carriers.

**Dave Sheehan (36:30):** On a final note what type of qualities do you think people should be looking for in soldiers to operate in that environment and carry out those sort of tasks? If you were selecting people to go back and do a similar task again?

**John Hayes (36:49):** I think common sense is a very important characteristic. The ability to cooperate and to train natives. I think the secret to our success of SEMUT 1

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<sup>6</sup> VX63314 and AKV28 Major Ian McCallum, Medical officer Ops SEMUT 1 and II

<sup>7</sup> 2/14<sup>th</sup> Australian General Hospital



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was the fact that the natives gave us their whole-hearted support from the day I landed and to my left. And I think that applied to every other Operative who to my knowledge yes. If we did not have the native support we would not have existed for one week. And yet in a matter of well three or four months the 42 Operatives of SEMUT along with the native support accounted for a thousand Japanese and we in SEMUT 1 did not lose one of our own operators and only 18 native groups altogether for the whole of the area.

**Dave Sheehan (37:53):** Thanks very much for talking to us tonight John. I am sure that a lot of the problems you had would probably still be problems today for anyone attempting to do the same sort of job.

**John Hayes (38:08):** I think they might have been unless they reorganized the supply of food and medical and perhaps instead of operating as a one-man army, two would be twice as good.

**Dave Sheehan (38:25):** Thank you very much.

**John Hayes (38:27):** Pleasure.

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