



SITREP



Lara RSL Sub Branch

President's Report

Welcome everyone to our first newsletter for the 2024 calendar year!

We finished off 2023 with an excellent Christmas Party with a visit from the shadiest Santa known to mankind, but a lot of laughs were had! I think that everyone would agree that the Christmas Party was loads of fun for all that attended. A great feed, and next year we will make sure that there are deserts served as well!

It was also lucky that our Friday's aligned over the Christmas / New Year period so that we could continue to gather each week which was also well received by all over the festive season.

2024 has kicked off with a bang with a fantastic attendance at the Australia Day Breakfast at the Lara Sporting Club. Thanks so much to all of the volunteers who helped out on the morning to make this day possible. On a personal note, I had the privilege of being awarded the Citizen of the Year award for Lara this year in recognition of my work, not only with the RSL, but for fostering the relationships amongst other community groups. For me, this was a tremendous personal honour and I am extremely grateful to the team at the RSL for submitting the nomination for me. As I said at the RSL Australia Day function, I do what I do for the RSL because I not only have an amazing team around me, but I love the ethos, the esprit de corps, the atmosphere and the mateship that our Sub-Branch provides. Nobody walks into our RSL having a rough day and leaves the same way and I really do love that about the Lara Sub Branch! I can honestly say this. I don't take this as a personal achievement, but a team achievement. I am at the helm of an amazing team of people who genuinely care about each and every member of our Sub Branch. My fellow Executive of Roy, Andy and Russell are truly dedicated to the prosperity of our Sub Branch and the welfare and wellbeing of each and every member and we all collectively love what we do!

Our RSL Australia Day function was also a fantastic day with great music thanks to Jonathan Chandler and a slightly questionable quiz master that also bought about lots of laughs! This was an important

event to highlight that the RSL will always recognise Australia Day and will continue to treat it as our true National Day.

As this is the last newsletter before our AGM on the 9th of March, I want to thank each and every member who has given me their support throughout 2023, which was a massive year for the Lara Sub Branch. I also want to thank your committee, who have endured a lot throughout the year, but have always had the best interests of our members first and foremost in our minds. I hope that we can continue to serve you, our members, into 2024.

Yours sincerely

Marcus McEwen.
President.

Regards,

Marcus McEwen

President

Lara RSL Sub-Branch

0455 190 679



Regional RSL Meeting, held at Lara.

22 Nov 23 Saw the Lara RSL Branch host the RSL establishments of the area. Guest speaker for the meeting was Ella George MP and her trusty assistant Kelly Toyne. Ella spoke about her strong support for veteran's entitlements and her passion to support this cause. Ella also stated that she has links to the military going back two generations.



Ella spoke about the veteran's card which she launched a few months ago with Marcus at the Lara RSL. Ella highlighted the benefits of having the card which could potentially save you hundreds of dollars each year.

Savings include: \$100 discount on rego of one car, free trailer and caravan rego, free boat licence, exemption on a fishing licence and free travel on public transport on ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day.



The general gist of the word coming out of the RSL's in our area is that they are struggling to get volunteers to their respective poppy stands in order to make the sales targets that they have set. The big boys in Belmont have had declining sales for years. Generally speaking, it appeared that most RSL's were half ex-service and half from other backgrounds.



Vail



Arie Dewit



Christmas Tree Donation

I was given the ardoise job of setting up the Christmas Tree in the foyer at the start of Dec. Once I unpacked the box, I realised there were some parts missing. This is when I had a flash back to my infantry days, the saying used to go

“In any season weather or terrain, adapt and overcome”

Well, it was raining outside, the top of the Christmas tree was AWOL (Absent without Leave) and I had nearly finished my first can of healthy apples. It is amazing what you can do with a kitchen knife.



But all jokes aside, this was the donation tree we erected in support of the not so well off in the local area. Thank you to all those individuals who contributed to this small but important cause.

Does this look slightly familiar?



On a Friday night early Dec 2023, I mentioned about how the mural on our back wall came to be. Here is a more detailed version of how this came to fruition.

Our mate Sashi was over at the Lara Sporting Club one Sunday and came across Lauren, after further conversation Lauren explained that she had written a poem in commemoration to service members and Daryl's dad who served in Malaya as a sniper. That's when Sashi said to Lauren that she should come over to the Lara RSL and meet our merry bunch of folks. And she has with her hubby Daryl and their mate Tate AKA Spud.

Daryl always wanted some sort of commemoration in his home. He found an image on line of what he was looking for, so when they built their own home Lauren contacted an old school buddy who's an artist by the name of Paul. When Lauren contacted Paul about the mural, he was only too happy to oblige. The mural on their wall was completed in Dec 2022. All three are in the process of becoming members.

Forced Leave



The President doesn't like to operate in the slow lane but a medical procedure has changed that. Marcus will officially be out of action from 05-18 Feb 2024. In his place will be Roy Cook (Senior Vice President) who will take charge of the RSL. Roy does many things behind the scenes and has a solid understanding of our operation. We look forward to Roy's rein in Marcus's absence and "a speedy recovery to you Marcus".

2023 Christmas Lunch



The Christmas lunch has come and gone and it can be said that the elf stole the show. Stellar performance by the Senior Vice President. Having talked to a few members about the Christmas lunch we can now make a few adjustments to make next year's luncheon event even more appealing both at the table and outside.

Lara RSL Member of the Year

Les Kelly OAM



A top effort in the kitchen over the past year, top job washing and drying, top display all year round and while you're at it, put some topping on those sausage rolls lol. Congratulations!!

Christmas in Lara

On Thursday the 21 Dec 23 The Lara Sporting Club held their second annual Christmas in Lara event. With help from the weather gods, with good organisation and a lot of volunteers it was a smashing success. After talking to some of the food vendors it was apparent that they had a successful event also.



There was plenty of activity on the evening with animal farms, jumping castles and roaming entertainment to boot. The Transformers were keeping the peace while the police were entertaining the crowd... or was that the other way around.



At the end of the evening the muscle came in to clean up and take control. That being the Lara RSL. All in all, it was a great evening had by everyone and we look forward to the next Christmas in Lara where we can once again play our part in the community.



At Lara



Sashi's Girls do not look bothered by Roy's intense posture.



Elizabeth, Ian, Anita and Maree are amazed By the lack of talent that we produced.

There was no shortage of laughs.

Costa House

I am very happy to inform you that Marcus and myself have reached out to some of the veterans in Costa House. Some of these Vets are not capable of leaving Costa House so Marcus and I paid one of them a visit about 6-7 weeks ago. We have since received an invitation to visit them as a group.

On the 25th of Jan, Marcus and I went to Costa House for our group visit that proved to be a very positive experience. We had a group chat with the residence and each one had a chance to tell their story or at least what they remember. I feel like we hit a chord with them and expect we will have some form of partnership with these residence in the future.

Karaoke/Quiz Night



Flyers have been sent and we have also been talking about



this for weeks. We have 9 tables for the Quiz part of the evening and two of them are booked. We also have 6 miming and karaoke acts to kick things off. One lady said "it's simply the best" another said "call me". People will most likely get excited on the evening and want to preform but those that have booked their act will be given preference. A night of laughs.



Lara Sporting Club Entertainment Day and Awards (Mornings Events)



“Holy smoke, they’ve called my name”!



Lara Citizen of the Year Award goes to **Marcus McEwen**

Early December we put Marcus up for nomination for citizen of the year. I was under the impression that not too many people knew what was going on. As far I knew only two of us had that information. Not to be, but it is nice to hear that good news can also travel fast.

Congratulations to Marcus (El Presidente) who is the most current holder of the Lara Citizen of the Year.

Annual General Meeting

As most members will know by now the AGM is on Sat 9th March at 2:00pm. For this reason, we will leave the committee members list out of this issue. There will definitely be some changes to the list. See you there.

Lara RSL Australia Day Celebrations



Jonathan in fine form on the day. He even knows a few Diesel songs.



Maree with an Aussie tradition.



We did re-present the Lara Citizen of the Year Award to Marcus as not everyone was present at the Sporting Club for the prior event.

As usual Roy is playing his games.

Carson Russell Roy



Here are three guys pumping up the Karaoke/Quiz night.

If the night fails you can blame the guys on the left and right, if it's a smashing success you blame the bloke in the middle.

The Buttergeigs had a family affair.



Graeme joining in.



Sir Les, Maureen and Margret (back to shed)



This couple are not members of the RSL yet but have been to the Bowls event that we had, have purchased our merchandise and don't look too disappointed going by this photo that Jackie took.

Peace to you as well brother!

The day after our Australia Day Celebrations I received an e-mail from a new member, I will transcribe it word for word.

Cheers Russ,

What a bloody ripper morning and afternoon it was. From first light it was action on, but it didn't stop, the positive mood flowed through to the afternoon. Whilst I knew that the day was always going to be full of mirth and carry on, having my Mum come along as a guest made it a lovely family day also.

She could say nothing but good things about how everyone was very friendly, funny and engaging-and nobody was taking themselves too seriously. She loved that there was a guitarist, people dancing, and I could go on...

Long and short, if this is what a guest feels like when they walk through our doors, they'll keep coming back,

Thanks again mate.

Lara RSL Members Stories

In the last edition of the newsletter, we focused on one of our members and found out a little about them, their family, the town of Lara and Saigon. Fittingly we now move from Saigon to a famous track that leads to the city. Our enemy at the time used this track to infiltrate the City of Saigon where the Australian's had their Headquarters. This next member helped stop this insurgency.



Trooper John Thomas Ockwell

Royal Australian Armoured Corp

1967-1968 Tour of Duty with 3rd Cavalry Regiment

South Vietnam 26/11/1967 to 14/08/1968

(Conversation with John Ockwell)

John was Born in Lilydale around the Yarra Valley area. He shared the home with four sisters and 2 brothers. Born on the 29 May 1946 to Harold, his father and Kate Emily Ellen Powell, his mother. (Just as a side note) Kate Powell is a descendent of Lord Robert Baden Powell founder of the scouts and along with his sister, founder of the girl guide/girl scout's movement, worldwide.

At the age of 16 years old John had bush fires rip through the Woori Yallock area. When the family had evacuated John and one of his sisters went back to try and back burn around the home but everything was out of control. They both ran into the river nearby to save their own lives. Tragically John's Uncle Les and Auntie Linda were heading from their home of danger to the safety of the Woori Yallock township. They never made it to town, and even worse they had two of their grandchildren with them.

John's Dad Harold was a champion at every sport he put his hands to. He was into every sport going in the town. Boxing, Cricket and Football. His accolades were that good that the Town named the local Park after him.

John's first job at 18 years of age was assistant paymaster for the Metropolitan Board of Works. This job required John to travel all over the Melbourne area distributing pay packets to the water catchment workers. They travelled with four crew, two were armed security and the other two were the pay representatives. They were even required to enter Pentridge Prison where they had staff working. When they entered Pentridge the crooks would heckle, jeer and whistle at them, John found this fairly unnerving.

John went for his license at the local police station, the cop knew he lived on a farm and told him to drive around the block, when they got back to the station John said we haven't parked or done a U-turn the copper told him that he hasn't got time to mess around all day, so John took the hint.

John has spent some time researching two of his uncles who both fought in the Great War in Europe. Charlie and Alfred were both fighting in the same Unit on the Western Front around France. The Battle of Passchendaele (Third Battle of Ypres) Belgium, which ran from 31 July to 10 November 1917, Sadly, Charlie was killed in action on the 04 October and less than a week later Alfred was also killed in action, that date being 09 November 1917. John has made a number of trips over to Europe to pay his respects.

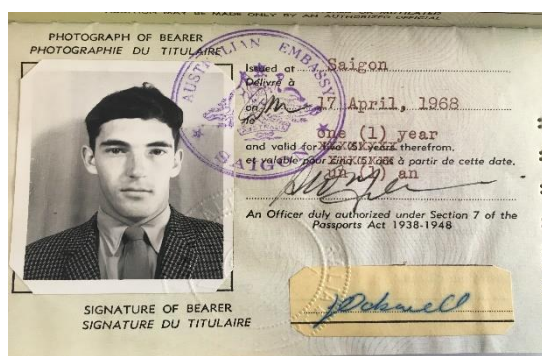
John was called up for national service in September 1966 and was happy to oblige. So off to Puckapunyal he went. John's cousin was also conducting his basic training at the same time so they would challenge each other on the running track for a bit of fun. Footy season hadn't long finished so John found that the basic training was not so rigorous. After John finished his 10 weeks of training he stayed on at Pucka because the School of Armour was also on the Puckapunyal Base. This is where John completed his Armoured Personal Carrier (APC) course



John and his cousin Laurie at their Recruit Training Passing Out Parade

Now, John was transferred to Wacol in Queensland where he would stay for the next 3-4 months. Attached to 2nd Cavalry Regiment, John was now waiting to be assigned to a unit permanently. Whilst waiting, he helped out umpiring on a number of Exercises in Shell Water Bay. The Units participating in these Exercises were honing their skills before deployment to South Vietnam. At the end of John's stint in Wacol he was assigned to the 3rd Cavalry Regiment (3 Cav) back at Puckapunyal.

Passport Photo



Fortnightly Pay Book

PAYMENTS SECTION						
SOLDIER'S SIGNATURE		John				
CASH PAYMENTS, KIT DEBITS, FINES, FORFEITURES, MISCELLANEOUS DEBITS/CREDITS						
DATE OF ENTRY	PAY CODE	PARTICULARS	Amount \$	Progressive Total \$	OFFICER'S SIGNATURE	
TOTALS BROUGHT FORWARD						
1 28/9	32		6 00	6 00		
2 13/10	32		22 00	28 00		
3 27/10	32		22 00	50 00		
4 10/11	32	4-36	25 64	75 64		
5 24/11	32		22 00	97 64		
6 6/12	32		22 00	119 64		
ADDITIONS TO BE CHECKED AND C/F			119 64			

Pre deployment training at Canungra was the last chance to hone the Units skills before Operations. The conditions at Cunungra training Base are not dissimilar to the terrain in Vietnam. Now John was on foot playing infantry tactics.

John was in charge of his section playing enemy against the 1st Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR). The 1 RAR boys had just returned from Vietnam and were basically sharpening their skills. John's section walked straight into the 1 RAR platoon and the pretend battle was on. John sent his section back for re enforcements while he fired the odd shot to keep their heads down. Little did John know that one of them snuck up behind him and tapped him on the should, he asked John if he wanted to play dead or be captured, John said "be captured".

They took him back to their base camp and fed him better than what he was getting fed from his own side. John had a good night's sleep and was still in bed when John's own troops put in the final assault on 1 RAR early in the morning.

After Cunungra, John along with the rest of the 3 Cav boys were sent to Holsworthy Barracks in Sydney to await deployment. Returning soldiers from Vietnam would be replaced by fresh newbies and those soldiers who would be on a 2nd or 3rd tour of Vietnam. Sometimes they would be replacing wounded or dead soldiers, from what I have been able to work out each soldier in South Vietnam knew who their replacement would be. Like a one for one deal.



Headset off



Headset on



Courtesy of Qantas the next contingent of soldiers were sent to South East Asia. This would be a mixture of soldiers with varying talents e.g. cooks, infantrymen, artillerymen, Medics and even padre's, the list goes on. On John's flight he had 13 others from 3 Cav and they landed at Tan Son Airport in South Vietnam.

The intelligence prior to leaving was that if you see anyone wearing black riding a pushbike, they were Viet Gong (the Enemy). When they landed, John quickly realised that most of the locals were wearing exactly that (poor intel).

The next day John flew by C-123 (Caribou) to Nui Dat which was where the Australian Task Force was located. This was the main base for the Australian Army and also where 3 Cav was stationed.

Now that John was at home base, he was assigned his APC (Armoured Personnel Carrier) and crew commander. Vehicle call sign 3 1 Alfa for radio communication purposes meaning, troop 3, section 1 and Alfa being the lead vehicle most of the time. Each APC can carry 11 persons in the back and has a permanent crew of two, being the Crew Commander and Driver. On top of the APC, you had either two 30 calibre machine guns or one 50 calibre machine gun. Most soldiers preferred the 50 Cal as it had more hitting power and was also more reliable. The main function of the APC's is still to this day, to transport troops to and from Operations in the field. Also, to support the infantry in battle with heavy machine gun support and protect the same soldiers from enemy fire.



50 Cal Gun above and below



Twin 30 Cal guns



The biggest dangers were firstly landmines that could be detonated by downward pressure or remotely controlled for ambush purposes, this was bad news for the driver who sits down low in the vehicle. Secondly was the use of Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPG) that could penetrate the side of the APC.

John's troop was part of every Operation whilst he was in Country. The two major battles that John was part of were The Tet Offensive and The Battle of Coral/Balmoral which was protecting Saigon along the Ho Chi Ming Trail. The Tet Offensive took place in 1968 and the objective was for the Viet Cong to capture every major city in Vietnam, this was partially

successful but after many confrontations with the Viet Cong they were eventually pushed back.



3 Section Sergeant explaining to Alpha and Bravo Crew Commanders, what is happening next.

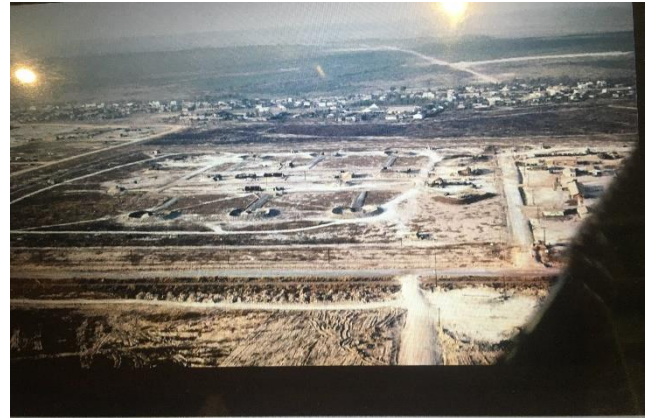


Troop HQ vehicles set up in a Fire Support Base.

The Second battle was a 6-week long event, this was where the Viet Cong used the Ho Chi Ming Trail to infiltrate Saigon. To stop them the Australian Forces set up two Fire Support Bases (large contingent of Australian Forces) one was called Balmoral and the other was called Coral.



South Vietnam Army APC driving past our APC's



American Army Base Artillery Emplacement

The 1st Offensive took place at the Balmoral FSB. The first night they set up camp was the night they were hit by Regular North Vietnamese Soldiers (RNVS). The RNVS were hell bent on wiping out the Australian base, and in doing so overran the Artillery Guns killing a number of soldiers. The Gunners did manage to remove their firing pins so the RNVS couldn't use them against the remainder of the camp. Eventually the Aussies repelled the attack by sheer force and the RNVS were pushed back out of the base.

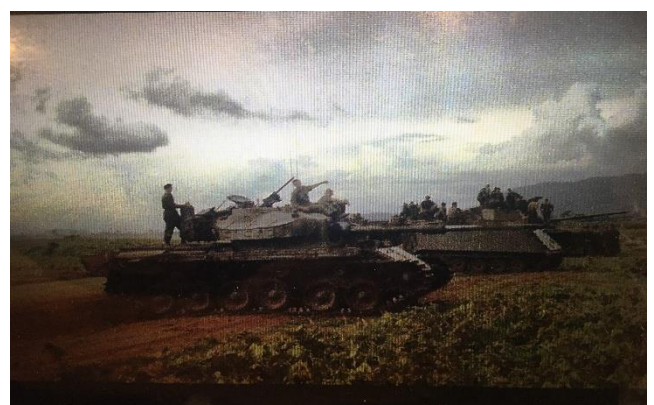
The 2nd Offensive that John was involved in took place on the Coral FSB. The RNVS sent Rocket Propelled Grenades and mortar shells on their position over many nights. On the night of the attack the RNVS laid a pipe like bomb (Bangalore Torpedo) over the concertina wire to blow it out the way. This was their entry into the FSB, from here they partly overran the base, things were frantic. After this initial assault the Coral FSB gained the upper hand and repelled the attack. The 3 Cav boys and the rest of the FSB pursued the RNVS for days, eventually the area was cleared of any enemy activity.

One of the main reasons that the Coral and Balmoral Bases were successful was the use of the Centurian tanks. Among the Centurian Tanks arsenal was the use of canister shots. These shots filled the air with 100's of pieces of small lead, a bit like what a claymore can do. This was used at both FSB's during their offensives to great effect. Also, John was part of a number of minor skirmishes in different areas of operation throughout his tour. Eventually John's tour of Vietnam had come to an end, he returned home to Australia on the 14 Aug 1968.

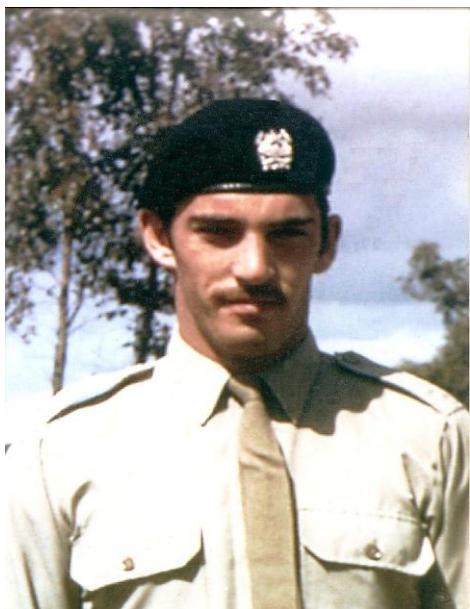
The Battle of Coral/Balmoral was by far Australia's largest, longest, bloodiest battle involving more soldiers of both forces, and suffering more casualties than any other battle of the Vietnam War.



Great place for a look out



Centurian Tank



On Discharge

When John returned home, he got the same treatment as all the other returned Vietnam Veteran's, rejection and names like baby killer. He went bush for a few weeks to clear his head. John then started working for Esso conducting clerical work for the oil riggers working off shore. After this he went through different jobs during the 70's until he realised that he had Post Traumatic Syndrome. At this point John was married to Jenny with two young children.

Now moving into the 80's John joined Mobil Oil and worked his way up to Area Manager of the Gippsland & South NSW Coastal Areas. He held this position until 1986. Now John branched out and bought his own service station in Bairnsdale, he changed the brand name from BP to Mobil and ran this for 11 years.

John then worked for the local Traralgon Agency as the Area Manager of the service stations; this is when John **hit the wall**. Officially Diagnosed with **PTSD**, John spent the next 6 weeks in the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital. John said it was a great help to go through the rehabilitation program and to get his life back on track. John was awarded Total Permanent Impairment (TPI) in 1997.

The effects of war certainly haven't slowed John down as a whole. He has been very active on numerous committees, also heading up some of these organisations as well.

1998 – 2000 Vice President of the Gippsland/Latrobe Valley Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia RSL. (VVA)

2000 – 2001 President of the Gippsland/Latrobe Valley VVA of Australia.

2002 - 2005 State Treasurer of the VVA of Australia.

2005 President of 3rd Calvary Regiment VVA

2005 Committee member of the Upper Yarra RSL.

2007 President of the Upper Yarra RSL

2010-2013 President of the Outer Eastern VVA of Australia.

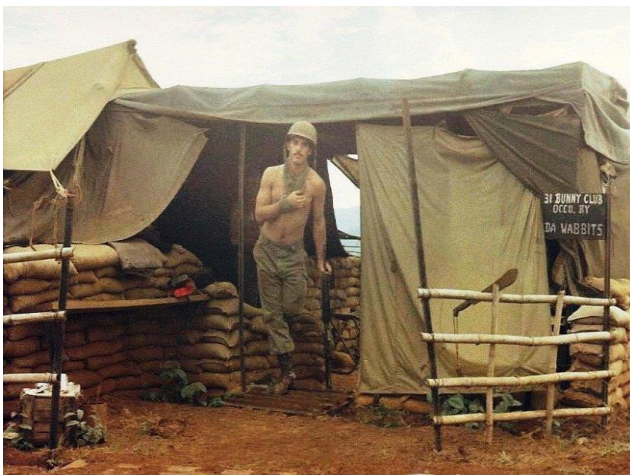
2015 Committee member of the Lara RSL

2020-2021 Senior Vice President of the Lara RSL

John's youngest daughter moved to Lara around the year 2010. And as many grandparents do, John and Jenny moved to Lara to be near their family in 2015. John and Jenny eventually divorced in 2021 but still share and enjoy their family time together.



John Ockwell has been an ongoing member of the RSL since 1969. And as you can see, he has done this with flying colors.



John mucking around? Never!



Suspected VC in village (interrogation)

John Ockwell, thank you for your service. It will not be forgotten in our life time.

Our ongoing Local Sponsors are



Don't forget that we do use these sponsors on a regular basis with our raffles and daily travels. Feel free to mention that your part of the Lara RSL. We are looking to release the 2nd issue of our newsletter early in May. Stay Safe!

