Guest speaker was our own member Michael Flynn – “Administering Medicine in the Armed Forces During Conflict.”

Introduced by Ray Hyslop, Michael was born in the West Country of Victoria and graduated in medicine. He joined the Australian Navy and served on many ships including some time spent during the Gulf War. Michael retired from the navy with the rank of Commodore, which is the highest rank that can be obtained as a medico. He is a fourth generation navy man. He was involved in the Sydney Olympics and more recently led a medical team to Banda Aceh following the tsunami, which destroyed the area in January 2007. Michael is a pilot and also has been a marathon runner including completing the original Greek course.

Michael commenced his presentation by announcing that he would not be speaking to the subject referred to above but would be giving us an insight into his experience on Manus Island and some of the history surrounding it and Papua New Guinea in general. Michael was on the island from 1979 to 1981 and his son was born there during this period. Michael's role was to provide public health services in the area. He found communication difficult and was accompanied on his rounds by the local witch doctor. This ensured that Michael’s involvement with the nationals was valuable and led to health improvements, particularly those with eye problems. Family care was also included.

To improve his communication skills Michael learnt “Tok Pisin” which is an official language of PNG and the one most widely spoken. This experience involved visits to various places and as a result provided Michael with a good example of the educational level achieved by the locals. Cultural training was equally important as the locals viewed Australians as “ugly” and patronising. Essentially the locals categorised foreigners under the “3Ms” – missionary, medico or madman. During his time on the island Michael played the role of “banker” to people he worked with by lending them money until the next “payday”. His treatment of people on the island involved persons of all religious persuasions. His experienced was enhanced through having his children with him as they became involved in the local activities and learnt much from the local people. Michael showed various slides of the work and a slide of his daughter climbing a palm tree.

Michael now turned to some historical knowledge of Manus Island and PNG gained from his time there as a navy medical officer. The area is very volatile both physically and politically. It has high mountain ranges, rugged terrain and volcanic activity. Politically there is conflict regarding mineral ownership and access and whilst the religious issues are not as bad as Indonesia there are tribal issues. There is a challenge to manage this mineral wealth, particularly the copper and gold deposits of Bougainville. PNG’s neighbour is West Irian, which is part of Indonesia. The English essentially settled PNG when the Dutch settled West Irian. There is still an ethnic connection between PNG and West Irian. PNG became independent from Australia in 1975 and is still a democracy.

Michael completed his presentation by discussing Manus Island from the perspective of its position during the World War 2. The Japanese had invaded it in 1942 and following this they later established a base on the island. As a result the Australian observation post that had been there previously was disbanded and the troops fled to the jungles. In 1944 General MacArthur launched an attack from the east side of the harbour and with air support defeated the Japanese. An Allied naval base was then set up at Seeadler Harbour that later supported the British Pacific Fleet. There are 3 main war memorials on the island. The island was also the location for the conduct of Japanese war crime hearings in 1950-51. Michael again showed various slides of the topography, location shots and those related to World War 2.

Questions from members related to - Health issues – were they real or not? (Generally yes - particularly malaria and malnutrition); the work of Margaret Mead; the 1960’s establishment of West Irian and whether it will stay Indonesian (probably will stay as is but the Free Movement is still active).

Ross Swan gave the vote of thanks to Michael and acknowledged his life as a medical officer in PNG. Ross reflected that his presentation had triggered the memories of the people in the audience, particularly the “Shropshire” and its importance for the war effort in regaining Manus Island, and thanked Michael for providing the stimulus to jogging those memories.