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Life Story

When he was 12, my father was sent by his mother to the training ship, "Warspite" in a U.K. port to become a merchant seaman.

He had completed training in some very interesting accomplishments such as compass and having the lead rule at Road-at-Sea, use of palm and needle general seamanship, etc.

I wonder what he found most useful when searching for back boundary surveyor's pegs on the government's 1,000 acre grant of virgin bush way out in the Western Australian wheat-belt.

He had made several short voyages as a merchant seaman.

When his mother received his baggage from a Sailor's Home with a note from the manager saying Dad was a fine young man and he hoped he would return safely from the Front.

Dad told us a house was bombed in France and a part fell on his shoulder. He was sent back to hospital in Blighty.

Once recovered, he wasted no time in marrying his nurse and acquiring two daughters ready for his next big adventure.

As he couldn't find enough work in war-worn Britain to support his family, he decided to sail to the land of promise down-under on the "Ballarat".

1923

He decided to sail to the Land of Promise – down-under on the "Ballarat" to become a "group settler" at Northcliffe, one of our less successful colonising schemes.

Years later in the fullness of time, one of his friends, a "Bank Johnny", Jack Gabbedy, published two volumes about this scheme (available at the State Library). He asked Dad to write what he could of his memories – Dad wrote 34 pages with pleasure.

Dad gave the scheme a fair trial then left Northcliffe to try and find more consistent work in the city.

His diligent efforts to remain employed led to my sister and I – Aussie brother – too young, attending at least 7 different primary schools as we moved around chasing work.

At last my Dad received the long awaited news he had been granted 1,000 acres of virgin bush 50 miles east of the nearest town, Narembene, 222 miles inland, east of Perth.

Without waiting for my mother to come out of hospital, Dad hired a driver and truck and packed all our belongings plus 1 dog, 3 children and proceeded due east to conquer the eastern wheat-belt.

We slept one night on the side of the road and made an early start to find the Number 1 Rabbit Proof Fence.

We drove beside it till we came to what we learned to call the "Silver Gate". There was a government catchment tank and also a mail collection point until a school was organised in the middle of the settlement (new).

We drove due east through the Silver Gate for 4 miles passing a few cleared paddocks. Growing weary, "How far now, Dad?" Nearing sundown we pulled up and there was a paddock on our right. On our left bushes and trees. "Is this it, Dad?"

He smartly had a fire blazing and a meal started when out of the evening dusk a figure guided by a hurricane lamp appeared to offer to bed we 3 children on the floor in front of their fireplace – good neighbours.

From then on we had a wonderful time. Unlimited bush to explore and willing aid to Dad to help build a bush home.

We were socially isolated, this making us noticeably shy, so that when we spotted a vehicle approaching up our front drive, we showed a rare turn of speed heading for the house or nearest tree.

Despite which when time came to seek work in the nearest town, our bush training stood us in good stead.

With great self-reliance, independence and resourcefulness, we soon found work. Rejoicing in the magic of being young and in the company of others of our young generation until one Sunday evening found us gathered around the wireless to hear the momentous news, which caused a great and enduring change in our lives.

Britain was at war. We were at war. Our lives henceforth irrevocably changed to be nevermore as carefree.

We never doubted that we would support England fully and promptly with perhaps a few capers during shore leave on the way to U.K.

On the way to sort out the Germans, the word would go around. The Kiwis are here, I wonder what they will be up to this time.

I never did learn whether the Mini Minor which our Kiwis decided to place on the G.P.O. above the steps was returned to more everyday roadway or not!

In no time, in family groups, we had made our way to the city to see what could be done. As in the depression days, we simply shared a house with another family so settling in was comparatively rapid and simple. Without wasting time, my fiancé caught a tram to town to the recruiting office to volunteer his help.

He came home to announce with pride that he belonged to 2/4th Field Squadron of Engineers to help build roads and bridges badly needed in New Guinea.

Have you heard of the Kokoda Trail? Well he did that, he had a natural gift of getting the best out of his men.

Over a period of time, with the rest of his squadron, it did take time as they would work hard all one day and when they went back next morning, all they had achieved as a road around a mountain would have slipped to the bottom of the valley. It rained a lot you see!

Our next concern after we had seen our menfolk out of our way was how will we win the war to enable us to return as quickly as possible to our personal concerns.

I was free without responsibility of any kind, also quite enterprising as I eventually proved.

I assure you anyone who has grown up way out in the bush on a virgin block destined to be a wheat farm, especially during a depression needs or soon learns to develop very useful characteristics.

If your mother says, "We will need a dead chook for tea", you whistle up your dog, choose the victim from a free-ranging flock and chase her full pelt till lack of wind-power forces you to direct Rover to catch and put a foot on the hen's neck until I managed to catch up thence a short step to the chopping block and axe. Head severed, swift removal of feathers, further use of a sharp knife on the reverse end, removal of unwanted bits and the fowl was ready to be delivered to the back door.

I must admit that lack of experience in some areas led to some comical realities in my valiant war work.

One of my first attempts to help with the war effort was to join the staff of an establishment run by a well-known Perth lady.

Her war work was to care for small children whose parent's basis of interests was elsewhere. Dad was away fighting, mother in hospital.

I came along at mealtime with high chairs occupied by equally hungry twins. I must admit I was completely flabberstumped when two wide-open infant mouths demanded synchronised operation with a single spoon. Believe me, it can't be done no matter what the roaring chorus. The sergeant came home on leave, which spared me any further worry about the twin's nourishment. We were allowed to stop whatever we were doing to join our husbands for the duration of leave.

We had a home to be together, we were very lucky as with all the timber cutters and house-builders away, accommodation was restricted.

A small weatherboard house became available next door to my mother's friend. She had the opportunity of renting and wisely did so in my name. No-one could evict a serviceman's wife. I lent my name, paid the rent and my mother created a home for family and friends on leave.

The Black Market was rife. Skulduggery and all manner of possibly illegal acts of bribery and corruption prevailed. If you had enough money, you could surely get a place to live. It was blatantly bad, the entire real estate business world was shaken up and reorganised to be reasonably legal after the war.

Munitions appeared to present a suitable war effort. Location, a tram-ride away and 3 shifts to fill my days and nights.

The first nightshift was slightly disastrous. I omitted to bring food with me as they said there was a canteen however they failed to mention that a solid pack of fellow workers were between me and the food laden counter.

I politely stood back as my mother had taught me and was still waiting my turn when the whistle went for the end of my break. I gave this situation some consideration, all of two seconds, when the next midnight break found me confronted with a solid phalanx of hungry workers. I turned side on with my elbow out and every time someone breathed out, I surged forward. Being reasonably large and weighty, I soon found myself in sight of sustenance which was absolutely necessary to the objective of winning the war.

Vital Telegram

He warned, "Home. Leave soon. Marry me." Well that was all very well, but how can you go about arranging a wedding in wartime. Where to begin?

I was fortunate that I had bumped into my younger brother.

He was filling in time on any old job in the city waiting to be old enough for the navy. We had quite a laugh.

“Have you heard?” he asked, “The old chap has joined the Air Force.” Dad was all of 44 years! The last we had heard he was still battling to develop a farm 50 miles out in the bush, east of Narembeen, but he had won one war. I suppose he thought he could do it again.

Air Force Truck Driving

I expect he'd had enough marching as a “Tommy in France”, besides, someone had to keep fuel up to planes when the enemy planes in sight needed to take off fast (in the early days).

Small details of the wedding were soon sorted out.

Time, coupons, money and wartime restrictions simplified preparations. I knew where the Anglican Dean lived so he soon had his part arranged. A chapel instead of a Cathedral (St. Georges). Also, soon he had the “sheila from the bush” feeling comfortable – a very nice bloke.

For the cake, I went into dear “Old Boans” for one of their big rectangular slab light fruitcakes. These were sent all over the state. It looked very elegant after the lady next door was finished with it.

All we needed now was my Dad and try to retrieve him from the Air Force long enough to give me away. We found a recruiting office in St. Georges Terrace. Breasting the counter, I explained to the gentleman waiting for me, “I want my Dad. My Sergeant's coming home on leave to marry me on 11.5.1942 and I need Dad to give me away.” They turned away to hide their grins then kindly advised me how to write a telegram which would facilitate Dad's chances of a leave pass for his daughter's wedding. Also he was to scour the city for bottles of any size, shape or colour.

My dad was a man very aware of his important role in the coming ceremony. It was impossible to acquire any quantity of beer so he did the next best thing and very nicely the table looked too – quite colourful.

I didn't try any as I was too busy catching up with family and friends around the table. Besides I was worrying about our leaving a trail of confetti into the tram, which we had to catch to go to a hotel on the river foreshore for one night. The next day we caught a bus to Safety Bay. A clever friend had found accommodation for a few days – freedom from the responsibility of running the war or part thereof.

In conclusion of his eight days, the Sergeant departed once more in his clumpy boots and scratchy khaki to check the Nullarbor from his favourite cattle truck on the way to the East Coast – and the war zone. We didn't ask.

Even now, I find it hard to voice details. His address was always the same of course no matter where he was sent so worrying was a waste of time.

The important thing was to keep the letters going and coming. Dad wanted a camera and film – plenty of it.

Rumour had it that Kodak in Hay Street were selling. As quickly as possible, I dressed. Hat, gloves, high heels and by tram into town to claim my single film. Once back out in the street, I realise the possibilities of the situation where two lads selling boronia from a large basket could be persuaded to change places with me to increase Dad's film supply. It worked. I didn't sell any boronia but the boys were successful and happy to have earned 2/- each, which was worth a bit in those days.

It made a good parcel – one camera and three films but I was surprised to learn from my irate parents that I should have insured it because the ship was bombed in Moresby Harbour. He was lucky to receive it!

Some wonderful photos ensued. His great grandchildren were very proud of the old chap and the granny who turned out to be a street trader albeit unsuccessfully.

It was a lonely time because I hadn't a circle of friends growing up from 10 years to 18 on an isolated farm.

I spent the majority of my free time once in the city in the old art gallery. I had favourites and used to go and visit them.

Wartime, the way it was to be young and newly married without a husband or a real home. How conditions affected us. The manner we dealt with all the difficulties.

The effect of circumstances; coloured and shaped our lives. Shortages and loneliness.

Dealing with the breaking rhythm of our lives. Having to go on living with our parents and being under their direction despite working and being married living in limbo. Not knowing when all of it was going to end.

Being in Perth meant sometimes hearing rumours, we knew better than to repeat. We hoped it wasn't true when rumour said Bluey Truscott, one of our Air Force heroes had been shot down.

We were aware something was going on "up there" north of Perth but we had our job to do and we would just get on with it. The blackout was general but I walked wherever I chose without fear through a city crowded with servicemen and women.

From Victoria Park onto the Causeway leaning on a rail in the evening, star gazing and wondering whether he could see the same as me. On into the city, I reached our famous landmark, London Court in Hay Street. To mark the entrance, we had an ornamental clock with moving figures. I stood on the pavement opposite waiting patiently to see them move to tell the time. Gradually I realised I was seeing a truly extraordinary sight – something entirely different. Strange figures and uniforms were in the quiet calm of evening, strolling along our main city streets.

Free and Safe

I was aware our immediate neighbours had been over-run by the enemy. My impulse was to call “Welcome” to refugees but I was too quickly overcome by the proud reality. I said, “This is my country’s history”.

The Tale of the Vanishing Dog

I was sitting in a city café with a coffee in front of me when I was startled by a sudden burst of noise and activity. A small group of khaki-clad figures erupted into and around the café tables calling loudly, “Here boy, good dog, here boy” incessantly. Searching vigorously around about and under tables. In the meantime, making humorous comments to one another until someone called, “There he goes!” and off they ran, back out into the street. It took one the odd minute to realise there hadn’t been a dog, just some homesick diggers with a great sense of humour.

My Land Army Service was at Donnybrook, an interesting episode

I had suffered a succession of chest infections in the munitions factory so it was concluded that a period out on the land would benefit me, my country and set me up for dealing with the Army, due on leave soon on a one-on-one basis.

I found myself at an uncivilised hour being called from my bunk in the Donnybrook Showground to prepare for my next challenge.

Smartly on order into boots and overalls then loaded into a truck already half full of men – foreigners, who, judging by the gleam of teeth shining out of the dim recess of the truck, thought it was a great joke to have a compliment of young ladies to drop off in a paddock where flax was spread to dry.

Our task was to push a long pole underneath the outspread flax to flip it over to dry the other side. Not a highly technical procedure. I found the day passed reasonably pleasantly, especially when young fellow girl workers with romantic problems chose to work alongside an old married woman (8 days) full of advice and wisdom culled from diligent study of the “True Romances” magazines.

It was 22 months before I saw him again. Relaxing on Sunday in the Showground, seriously studying the Sunday Times. It dawned on me that the report of a crashed plane was referring to my part of the wheat-belt at least some distance east of my Dad's property. Dad was in Port Moresby remember. One airman survived to make his way due west past our place to fortunately find Clinny McGaw's house and help.

I forgot to tell you of the occasion when I found myself with a band of willing war workers walking on the veranda in Heathcote Mental Health with Matron who was happily finding jobs for us. "I need someone for the kitchen", she announced. I barely heard as I had a lifetime's aversion to kitchens so had dropped to the back of the pack. Next came "Sewing room". As that sounded within my capacity I responded, "Yes please". Sitting at a sewing machine, I would settle for repairing rent sheets. Overlooking the Swan River with a group of inmates enjoying each other's company.

Letters and telegrams were an important part of our days. Helping to keep family and friends in touch; to reassure each other that all would be well.

Just at this time, a letter from Dad in Moresby was wonderful to read. It contained news we were all waiting for. He hoped the officer would not censor it too strictly.

He says, "I see you have made a very good guess as to where we are. I can't say anything about it except that it has been comparatively quiet, bar one rather hectic spell when our boys gave them a taste of what is coming to them. I wish I could tell you about it but at least we made a complete job of it. They stuck their yellow noses into a hornet's nest and did we sting them! You should see the chaps. They were all a bit fed up with the mud and monotony. Now they are on their toes with grins a yard wide. Marvellous what a taste of victory can do. I hope the censor will pass this as I think you all should know that the Japs have no longer got it all their own way. The "business" here is a good indication of what is to come. I can hear them from here cleaning up the remnants and does it sound good." End of Dad's effort, sent to me in Perth from New Guinea via the Army.

Shortly after, back in the city, I was walking along Leighton Beach one bright morning and stopped to make a full inspection and stare hard at a group of figures in sailor's garb – white with huge baggy shorts.

It could only be – indeed it was! The British Navy. Hurrah! It won't be long now!

A very moving occasion for many lonely folk was a service given by Counsellor Caddy on Sunday evenings on the Perth Esplanade. Readily available to many footloose and lost souls far from home and loved ones. As long as I live, I will remember standing with kindred spirits caring and sharing being together until time came for the final song; reassuring in it's familiarity.

“Now is the Hour” fading as we drifted away to rest and prepare for another war weary day in Perth.

Getting ready to go to Brisbane, Amberley Hospital.

War news was so encouraging that when a telegram came to tell me of the sergeant's accident and presence in Brisbane Hospital, I decided immediately on trying to reach him. He had just had a period of leave so I was unemployed and free to go if I could find a way physically and monetarily. The first idea seemed simple. Sail to Sydney perhaps – not until all Japanese submarines had finally departed.

A train ride; as far as possible? Any spare seats were reserved for officer's ladies. Despair – what is to be done?

“Why don't you fly?” suggested a gentleman from a more progressive country.

I went home and thought about it. Why not? I was amazed to find out that yes, I could. All I had to do was preset myself to be weighed on a huge machine similar to those on railway stations, pay for my ticket and wait to be told when. Only as far as Melbourne but that would do for a start. Sit down and work out finance. Quite simple truly. The less you possess, the easier it is. Contact all Commonwealth banks enroute by mail with specimen signature to enable me to withdraw my soldier's wife allotment if I needed to. This master stroke was combined with a small calico bag pinned to a suitable undergarment.

All details were seen to and at last I received notice that I was to be picked up at the end of my street early by an airways bus. The grand adventure had begun but it was not until I was actually seated in the plane and felt it speeding down the runway, rushing to leave the earth and join the clouds, could I believe it. I thoroughly enjoyed this part.

Also meeting with friendly fellow travellers who kindly advised me what to do when we arrived. How to find a “posh hotel” but the next day, I smartly changed to the Salvation Army as being more my monetary level. Self reliant – no-one to help – no credit card! I still had a long way to go. I was lucky to be informed of a 4 a.m. short flight to Canberra with Ansett the next day in time to catch a train to Sydney.

The station in Sydney was a huge area full of humanity rushing this way and that. I was so tired plus more than a little confused and at 10 p.m. wondering what on earth I was doing there and which exit to choose and where I could go to put my head down. I would like to tell you this as it is more proof our lads took their sense of humour with them. In crowded Sydney station we realised we would have to step back and make room for a troop of soldiers to

pass and as they did so, a young fellow caught my eye and offered "Carry your bags lady?"

I gave him my best grin to take away with him and silently wished him a safe return and blessed him for recharging my spirits and sense of humour because I couldn't help chuckling at what the folks at home would say if they could see me at midnight sitting on the front seat of a tram hoping I could see where I was rushing to in the blackout. I was much wiser to tell the driver and trust him to put me off when we came to a first class hotel recommended by my fellow plane companions.

I think I might have been in a state of blissful confusion because when advised to catch at least two trams to find the Y.W.C.A. Refuge as more suitable for me, they were unable to find a room for a mere soldier's wayward wife.

Sydney wartime would need all the accommodation possible for all the V.I.P's floating around in 1945 and with the willing help of various strangers, I eventually arrived in trembling doubt to be taken in and given a bed for what remained of the night and tomorrow is another day.

Easter in Sydney

Luck was with me. I was welcome at the Y.W.C.A. for the next 24 hours, which was a great help to the spirits. It also gave me time to discover a train just re-established on its run from Sydney to Brisbane non-stop the next day. I rushed to fill in a form and book my seat. At last the end was in sight.

Telegrams were sent to my home state to let them know all was well then to Amberley Hospital out of Brisbane to warn the sergeant to keep him up to date.

Despite small hiccups such as a recklessly ill-advised rush to take a taxi out to Amberley Hospital to find he had been discharged. Nothing left to do but sit quietly, hungry and wait for a bus at the hospital gates to return me to the railway station to see whether he, by some chance, had sorted "freshly" running trains. All I had was his Army address, which of course is designed to confuse. Eventually a bus appeared and ground it's leisurely way back to the railway station but the wrong side. "You need to cross over and up a ramp to find the interstate platform", the driver assured me.

Grasping my bags with the help of a deep breath, I made a final violent effort to join my spouse. Not a minute to spare as I reached the ramp, a figure in khaki took a last look around and began to walk away. Not while I still had enough wind to shout, "Hi Soldier". I dropped my bags and proceeded in correct traditional army fashion. In short order – very smartly.

So here we are – hardly able to believe after a short train journey to his campsite able to look forward to a brief peaceful period before the final drive to end the war – Petrie – 17 miles out of Brisbane.

Inevitable the time came. The end of our peaceful preparation for the final effort. Our partners were to end the war and Mary S.A. and I went to Sydney to take up our family caring. Mary to see members of her family and I had to find out what had happened to my young brother and his ship in the war zone to land him in Balmoral Naval Hospital. He became a T.P.I. but with great courage married and raised a fine Aussie family.

In Leichhardt we found somewhere to live with a wonderful mother whose two sons were in the 9th Division – heroes no less. So we have much in common; we all belonged to war heroes.

We found jobs to help pass the time but soon rumours began to fly around so I booked a berth on the “Mauritania” lying beside the bridge to sail home. I feared he would arrive home before I did.

Returning home to Leichhardt one evening, Mary and our hero’s mother had ears turned to the wireless. I went to a film, I couldn’t sit still.

“The enemy are talking peace.”
“They told me”. 15 August 1945.

Peace

Sure enough the next morning Mary woke me with her excited cry “It’s peace, come and see.” Craning out of a window to see the street was quiet but hanging out in voiceless shouts of joy, a host of flags fluttering in the peace of the morning.

The post brought me a letter from Burns Philip Limited. “Please come and retrieve your passage money. Voyage of the ‘Mauritania’ to Fremantle has been cancelled.”

They need ‘her’ to bring the lads home.

I dashed into town to secure a railway ticket home, to be sure I was there to meet him.

Martin Place

Everyone within a hundred miles of Sydney came to celebrate in Martin Place. It was impossible to move. No wonder the little ones complained, “It’s all bottoms and legs...”

We had emotional farewells as we all separated to hurry on our journey home to prepare for our loved one's return.

Fortunately, I was early to my train seat as people kept coming to the carriage door exclaiming dolefully, "Oh no, we're double booked."

I was very sorry for them but was glued to my seat. As we got underway and settled down, I found myself nursing a small Tasmanian. The mother had five of them to be hurried home for Dad's welcome.

As soon as they were able, it was a case of jumping onto anything which would float – an elderly landing barge to the mainland.

Thereafter I had a telegram to mark his progress from every post office possible until he boarded "Aquatania" having dispatched his final instructions as to which port and when.

I was free to prepare for the long awaited day.

Scouting for a House

Scouting for especially favourite food, a new dress, then away down to the harbour where is she, 'The Aquatania'? The wharf appeared deserted. With some confusion, we gathered to wait at the end of a large shed wondering what we should be doing. It's hard to remember now what it was that we felt – like trying to image what it would be like to be free of all restraints and fear.

After some time, someone walked from around the end of a shed and another figure followed. Soon figures were being claimed as they appeared from between the shed and a rusty grey ship.

It was hard to believe and grow accustomed quickly to a different rhythm of life.

We were warned we would have to allow our men time to adjust – we had to. But don't ever believe, it wasn't a pleasure!

25 May 2005