
John Ivan Bergin

Being the fourth child of a family of ten, just emerging from the great depression, I had to leave school at 14, not even completing the first year of high school. Starting work in a green grocer shop for 7 shillings and 6 pence per week plus lunch and dinner, starting at 8am and finishing after we had cleaned up after dinner, being well after 7pm, shop still open and serving customers in that time. On market days Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I had to start very early with the boss arriving at the West Perth Markets around 6am, later having breakfast at a guest house nearby.

Leaving that job, next was on a poultry farm in Belmont. Staying there 5 nights of the week, being woken up at 5am by a collie dog licking my face. A cup of tea and slice of toast it was out to mix the feed all the pens, which were in two rows of pens with a long sandy lane between, using a horse drawn sled to carry the food on. Washing their drinking dishes and refilling with fresh water we would go in for breakfast. Collect the eggs, clean, grade the eggs for size, pack into crates, which the lady owner would take into the market twice a week. My time off was late Saturday afternoon and Sunday, starting Monday at 5am. Most Sundays I would go back to save riding a push bike from Inglewood to Belmont in the early hours of the morning.

I was offered a job in Marvel Loch south of Southern Cross at 25 shillings per week including my keep. The owner was an Italian man whose wife had left him and had to rely on hired help. A married couple were leaving to start their own business so I had to learn real fast. He had a 5 ton truck and two large square iron tanks which he used to cart drinking water out to prospectors as well as two delivery rounds in the outlying areas that I would often accompany him, allowing me to drive on bush tracks. One very hot day the Police sent a message to the shop that some people were desperately short of water, as the boss was very ill and the only two men I thought could help were ill with the same thing the boss had. I managed with the help of a very old man to slide the tanks across from their stand onto the truck, then drove around to the Police Station where the overhead water pipe was and went in to get the key for the padlock. I asked the sergeant-in-charge if there was anyone available to drive the truck, who said, "who drove it around here?" I started to tell him, he told me that he already knew as he had sent the message to us and would I be able to manage and to be very careful (those days not too many people had the opportunity to learn).

After 9 months of working long hours and doing the fortnightly accounts, I needed a break, as the owner had another married couple to take over I decided to go back to Perth. My eldest sister was being given a 21st birthday party so I thought I would surprise them by turning up. My mother had asked a builder if he would have a vacancy, as it happened he was just starting a large building contract and needed a lot of men. That was in 1937, I would be apprenticed as a carpenter which also included office boy, billy boy (no thermoses in those days), time keeper and responsible for the other boys, all for 19 shillings and 11 pence per week of 5½ days. The building was the first brick building at the Infectious Diseases Hospital at Shenton Park, (now Royal Perth Annexe). The only road that came under the subway went to the Dogs Refuge Home and Lemnos Hospital. After this we built a lot of houses. Another job was building a house and transmitter building at Dardenup near a tall radio mast for 6tz. One night while waiting in the car outside the Rose Hotel in Bunbury we heard the news that war had been declared. My employer decided to finish off his contracts and join the Army Construction Unit. As I had just transferred from the Senior Cadets to the 25th Light Horse (a mechanised unit) we were only doing short training camps 4 weeks at Rockingham, then 3 months at Melville, another 3 months at Canning Dam, I only had to be there for the last 4 weeks. I lived in a boarding house on the 4th

floor the same as another chap from the same regiment, who was supposed to be in camp, but had gone A.W.O.L. with the service police looking for him. I happened to have come home when they came and started questioning me but were very suspicious of me and insisted on searching my room. Of course my uniform was hanging in the wardrobe. They insisted I had to go to their headquarters just down the road in Beaufort Street while they made enquiries. I was reluctantly apologised to and allowed to go. I didn't tell them the other fellow's room was one they had passed at the top of the stairs. As it happened he was in his room and heard all this and while they had me at headquarters he hurried back to camp so that he wouldn't be in so much strife.

During this time I had started work for another building firm and worked on the Northam Army Camp, then the Midland Military Base, also Welshpool munition works, then down to an old farm on the riverfront with a foreman and a labourer so was the first carpenter on the Leeuwin Naval Base. We worked 10 hours a day, 6 days per week. I was supposed to attend night school, have private tuition for maths with one night per week at the G.P.O. in Forrest Place where they had set up trestle tables for dozens of us to learn Morse code.

When I finally got the call-up I was worn out. We were posted to No. 5 Initial Training School at Victor Harbour in South Australia. We went by troop train, 8 to a 4 berth compartment, most of us caught a very bad dose of the flu, on arrival at the base quite a lot reported sick and were hospitalised, but I battled through. Later, those who missed on their marks were given a repeat course. While waiting our results we were placed in the pool meaning we were given jobs to do. I had the opportunity to speak to the C.O. who suggested I apply for a discharge then later apply again. This I did but was informed that you couldn't enlist again. I immediately applied for the Navy but was refused by the manpower officer, carpenters were urgently needed.

I started work in a joiners shop making panels that when assembled were huts to be used as field kitchens for the Army. Then building Torpedo Inspection buildings at Byford. Quite a lot of work on the R.A.A.F. Base at Merredin, an ammunition depot at Ardath. Moving a lot of old farms and houses around Dunreath Country Club for the air base (now Perth Airport) I was then sent to a shipbuilding yard next to the old causeway that was run by Millars and Bunnings building 4 ships to be used by the Z force of which 2 were commissioned, the other 2 later sold to be used for cray-fishing as the war was over and no longer needed.

During my time at the shipyards, certain elements of the union were stirring everybody to strike for casual shipwrights pay. I was unpopular because I refused to join them and told them what I thought as my best friend had been shot down over Europe two days before D. Day.

Housing was very hard to get, building material, especially cement, plumbing items such as baths, basins and sinks. Rationing continued for some time after, sugar, tea, meat, clothing, petrol was the hardest only 4 gallons a month. It was necessary to write your license number on the back of each ticket. Identity cards had to be used often also.

During the war everything had to be blacked out, car headlights glass were replaced by tin with an 1 inch by ½ slot and a little hood over the top. Hardest of all was not to be in the services, you were treated like a second-class citizen.