

Basil J. Best

My Story – Some Memories of World War 2

I was born at home at 17 Norfolk Street, North Perth on 30 October 1923 so that at the onset of World War II, I was 15+ years old.

I left Perth Boys' School at the end of Year 3 Secondary and sat for the Junior Certificate, which in those days was virtually a ticket to get a job. I think I passed 9 subjects. I applied in writing for 43 jobs in the clerical area and finally received an appointment with the Agricultural Bank (which was later to become a trading bank – the Rural and Industries Bank and which in turn is now named Bankwest). I was a junior clerk working in the Records Department and helping with the huge mail and filing. The Agricultural Bank was government owned and was not a trading bank but a government department which handled all loans to farmers who were setting farms on newly released land and also loans for clearing, Group Settlement for farmers, loans for wire netting, all designed to help the man on the land as many had come from England to start new careers in farming and had no finance, equipment, or knowledge.

On the day I turned 18, I, together with 5 other young chaps with whom I worked went to the Royal Australian Air Force Recruiting Centre in St Georges Terrace. My application was refused on the grounds that my eyesight was not good enough for air crew (pilot, navigator, etc), although of the six of us I had the essential mathematics needed to become a pilot.

On 8 January 1942, I was called up for service with the Army. In 1942 there were really 2 armies in Australia, one termed The Australian Imperial Force who were all volunteers and could serve anywhere in the world. The other section was called The Australian Military Force and consisted of conscripts, as I was, and whose service was limited to service only in Australia or its Territories. As soon as it was practical, I volunteered for service with the former, or the A.I.F. as it was called.

I was enrolled at the Royal Agricultural Showgrounds Claremont, issued with a full kit including rifle and together with about 100 new recruits marched, carrying all this gear to our camp at Swanbourne which housed the 5 Garrison Battalion which prior to us arriving was made up of veteran volunteers from World War I (1914-1918). That camp is now the Special Air Services Regiment Headquarters. After 6 weeks initial training, we set up a tent camp on the council reserve at Allen Park, Swanbourne. The tents we erected ourselves and no one had any idea how to do so, but by the time they were up, I had been made an acting lance corporal with one stripe on my right arm.

During periods of rifle drill and other training exercises, the entire company was given the job of erecting barbed-wire entanglements along the sandhills. I believe this barbed wire was to face the ocean for the entire Perth metropolitan area and was so designed so as to act as a deterrent against Japanese invasions. Some deterrent!! When members of the company wished to go to the local pictures without permission they simply crawled under the wire. After some 4 months or so, we were all transferred to the Northam Camp prior to being drafted for overseas duty.

I was to join the 2/28 Infantry Battalion (AIF) but suffered some virus, which caused me to miss the draft which went to North Africa and which joined the battalion at the disastrous action at Ruin Ridge.

By about October 1942, I was made a Corporal and drafted to 28 Infantry Battalion (AMF) stationed in the Dandaragan area. I was selected to undertake an officers training course, on the completion of which, I would be commissioned a lieutenant. Fate plays a big part in a serviceman's life as to where one serves and one's overseas deployment is out of the individual's control.

Fresh from helping the local farmers safeguard their fast ripening wheat crops from fire and completing the Officer's Course with ease, something happened that changed my life. Applications were called for volunteers to join the commandos. I submitted my name in a flash although I had no knowledge what commandoes did.

I was paraded before the Commanding Officer who suggested that I withdraw my application, as I would forfeit my commission, which was ready to be promulgated. I persisted as my father had died when I was 14 and so I had no one really to discuss my decision with. So, I went on draft with 100 other hopefuls. In my army career, I was plighted by a comment in my pay book, which stated my occupation as 'Bank Officer'. I did the mail and other lowly clerical jobs. But, in the army and having non-commissioned rank, I was detailed those jobs others shied at. For example, with this draft, when overnight leave was granted, who had to prepare and sign the leave passes? Me. And so, with the railway tickets for this draft going to Canungra Queensland. In the early days of the conflict with Japan, for personnel travelling by the trans train, rail tickets were issued. These tickets comprised perforated sections to Kalgoorlie, to Pt Pirie, to Melbourne etc, and I had care of these tickets, and as we reached a town so nominated, I would tear the appropriate section off and give to the Station Master, portions of tickets for that section for the 100 men in the draft.

I will remember until the day I die, how we left from Karrakatta Station by train to travel to Queensland. The travel was in a normal local passenger train, and the little compartments accompanied about 8 persons, and I do believe that there were not any toilets in some. When we left Claremont, there was not one person to see us off except when we passed the red light area of Roe Street when some girls came out to wave us goodbye. On leaving Perth Station a few disinterested bystanders just stood and watched us go, no cheers n' no farewells, no best wishes, no nothing. I remarked to a chap sitting opposite whether we would see Perth again, and several in that compartment didn't return. Remember, we were all about 18 years old and several guys had tears in their eyes. Today the contrast is so marked. A ship or an army detachment leaving for the Persian Gulf has a band playing and relatives and friends of the servicemen and women waving goodbye.

So, off to jungle training I went and received some facts of life. The officer in charge of jungle training told us that it was hazardous and that he was permitted a mortality rate of 5 percent. As I am a bit of a pessimist, I felt I would be one of that 5 percent. I would like to say that the idea of the glamour of War is very much over rated. I would consider that my time spent overseas in particular, one was terrified for say 5 percent of the time, 5 percent of the time being very excited, and about 90 percent bored.

Army life is a cultural shock for many young men of my age. Prior to joining, I played many sports and had to shower in the company of many the same age. We all came from the same background, possibly went to church on Sundays and maybe had jobs in banks or similar but the shock of 30 or so in a hut sleeping side by side on a palliasse of straw, using communal toilets and showers, and many of us came from such a variety of occupations. In my hut, we had miners from Kalgoorlie, shearers, farm workers, wharf labourers, truck drivers, shoe salesmen, clerks, window dressers, so our social values were different and a real cultural shock.

Following our training, I was sent to New Guinea and following my return was detailed to a hospital in Toowoomba, Queensland. Why? That thing in my pay book. They wanted a paymaster and there I stayed until Peace in the Pacific was declared. And, how the town of Toowoomba turned it on. Almost all businesses shut for two days to celebrate and celebrate they did with a communal BBQ of 3 bullocks, about 12 sheep and several goats. The hotels ran dry and on that occasion, I had my first drink of an alcoholic liquor.

With the impending end of war, I was further detailed to go to a Prisoner of War Control Centre in Kununoppin, WA. I had applied to go to the Occupation Force that went to Japan but I was refused, as I was the sole person living at home with my aging mother. The POW's in this centre were all Italians and worked on nearby farms, as so many of the farmers' helpers, both male and female, were in the services. I met some very interesting Italians, one with whom I had a game of tennis with, had actually played Davis Cup tennis. I won't bore you with the obvious result. Another one returned after repatriation to the farmers and in due course married the farmer's widow and in later life became a Road Board councillor.

On demobilisation, everyone was offered courses under the Commonwealth Reconstruction Scheme which was devised to give young service personnel whose studies had been interrupted the chance to improve their employment opportunities. I opted to do car maintenance as I opined that this would be handy as a car owner. It was not available and I was offered a course in Farm Machinery, which I declined. After the war, I returned to the bank, which soon became a trading bank and was offered a promotion as Accountant/Teller at a country branch but as I was engaged to be married, I declined and went to work with the Native Affairs Department.

I always had a hankering for teaching, as my father had been one. I started doing my Leaving Certificate (now T.E.E.) and was informed that assistance would be available through the CRTS. All fees, books were paid for to enable me to do my Leaving subjects at evening classes in two years and complete an Arts Degree and Diploma of Education as a part time student at the University of Western Australia. I also became a teacher and finally retired due to health problems as a Principal (now Director) of a Technical and Further Education College.

In addition to my full time employment with the Education Department for 13+ years, I was actively engaged as an instructor with the Citizen's Air Force (RAAF), retiring as a Flight Lieutenant. I was a Founder and Director of the now defunct Teachers' Credit Society and the Founder of an organisation for Retired Technical Officers and actively concerned with the professional organisation of my craft and in due course recognised with a Community Award.

In my retirement, I worked for 12 years in building and maintaining a community hall for the elderly. I have been active in Probus and the RSL and I am currently engaged in the project "Wheelchairs for Kids" which has seen over 4000 locally made chairs sent to needy nations overseas to help alleviate the trauma experienced by those young people who need a wheel chair for their mobility. I've had a good life and I am terribly proud of being an Aussie.