Rowland Victor Blundell-Wignall

DOB 29th July 1917
Perth, Western Australia

Father as carpenter building homes for the Group Settlement Scheme in South West of State, hence my early life in that area. Moved to Perth when father joined WAGR (Western Australian Government Railways) – as a carpenter.

Educated at North Perth Primary School. Worked in the milk industry – Pascomi Milk Depot, Stuart Street, West Perth. Universal Trainee – Transport Division, Claremont Showgrounds, 1938/9. Employed by building Contractor, H.A. Wilmott & Company – transported to Darwin 1941.

Corporal Blundell-Wignall R.V. D.X. 736 – Army career as told in attached chapter from *Chancy Times* by Olga Wignall (Mrs Blundell-Wignall).

Post war, re-employed by H.A. Wilmott & Company while studying under rehabilitation scheme. Joined Commonwealth Public Service – Mail Officer, Perth G.P.O. and then Taxation Department till retirement 1975 due to health problems.

Taken from Chapter 32, *Chancy Times* by Olga Wignall

It was during this time that Rowley and I got to know each other better, and when he mentioned that his war-service years were spent in the Northern Territory, I became anxious to hear the story, since it was the bombing of Darwin that had awakened all Australians to the threat of war cascading down on the southern cities.

Rowley had completed nine months' training as a Nasho' (universal trainee). Having flat feet and poor eyesight, he was declared B3 medically. Rowley was, nevertheless, approached to make a career of soldiering because of his aptitude. But being of a non-aggressive temperament, and believing that war didn't solve a nation's problems, he declined and instead went to work for builders H.A. Wilmott and Company. In November 1941, Rowley was transferred, along with a large contingent of men, to Darwin, which was already a military base. The company had won a large Commonwealth contract for construction work, mainly at the RAAF aerodrome. Rowley was to be the driver of Wimott's second truck, transporting personnel around and shifting material from the Bond Stores on the wharf, where it arrived by ship, to the numerous building sites.

Darwin, a frontier town with a casual, easygoing atmosphere, held a lot of appeal for young men. Despite a broad mixture of nationalities, it lacked any racial overtones. And Wilmott looked after his team well.

Even the Wet, which extends from November to April, was something residents acclimatized to. However, some days were incredibly beautiful, with a clear, azure-blue sky. Thursday 19 February was just such a day.

Having driven his truck to the civilian aerodrome where a team of four men was dismantling Sydney Williams huts for transportation elsewhere, Rowley was enjoying a smoko. He and the men were chatting and sipping hot billy tea, eating prepared

sandwiches and relaxing when slowly into their consciousness came a sound which, as it increased to a solid drone, had them looking skyward. Thousands of feet up a mass formation of planes was approaching, wave upon wave coming from the south-east with the sun behind them….the beauty of the symmetry of formation of the silvery objects, gleaming stark against the azure-blue background, had the men transfixed.
'I didn't know the RAAF had so many planes', said one.
'What a spectacle', said another.
Suddenly the sound of explosions – boom, boom, boom – came from the distant town and harbour, and at the same time one of the team noticed the bomb bays opening and yelled, 'They're Japs!'

Almost immediately there came the scream of engines as a number of deployed planes swooped low to the civilian aerodrome. Someone yelled, 'They're coming', and all five men made a dash for a slit-trench. At the same time, other squads were doing likewise. With a shortage of slit-trench space, Rowley found himself the last to seek shelter as men scrambled and struggled to hide. He threw himself flat on top of a heap of squirming humanity just as a dive-bomber screamed in low. Mesmerized, he watched a bomb descend with what he thought was precise accuracy, and said to himself in a prayerful manner, 'This is it'. Rowley buried his head in the back of another chap, certain his young life had come to an end.

However, the anti-personnel bomb, one specifically designed to explode above the ground and scatter shrapnel far and wide in order to exact maximum casualties, and commonly known as a 'daisy cutter' fell short of the trench. Nevertheless, Rowley could hear pieces of shrapnel cutting through the air over the trench, and just hoped.

As things grew quieter, the men scrambled out of the trench and came up for air, thinking the danger was over. With much relief and excited chatter, there were examining the damage when there was a yell, 'They're coming again'. Without hesitation the men ran, again jumping into the trench just as a Zero zoomed in from the north. Almost scraping the tops of shrubbery, it screamed down on them with all guns firing – rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat. Fortunately for the men, the trench ran in an east-west direction, and it was this factor that was their saviour.

When they considered it safe, the men emerged to survey the damage. They found a scene of devastation – hangers and other buildings lay in burning ruin; vehicles, planes and equipment were demolished.

Then an advancing drone snapped the men to attention. 'Bloody hell, here they come again', someone yelled, and another wave of bombers blotted out the sun as they flew overhead. And the boom, boom, boom, this time coming from the direction of the RAAF aerodrome, had the men thankful they were not over there.

Rowley, intent on returning to the RAAF aerodrome, ran to his vehicle hoping to find it unscathed. Although it had survived a bomb, the strafing Zero had hit the battery situated on the tray to the side of the cab and the electrolytic acid was leaking out of it. The motor started, however, and men crowded him to give them a lift into Darwin proper. But Rowley was determined to return to the Wilmott gang's headquarters at the RAAF aerodrome, and when he got there even more chaos confronted him. The second raid, by 54 land-based bombers of the Japanese Airforce, had concentrated on the RAAF aerodrome and it had been completely demolished.

Wilmott ordered his two trucks and his team to close on forty men to leave Darwin and head south, then to re-assemble in Katherine, from where the entire workforce would head for Queensland. However, at Adelaide River there was total confusion, so Wilmott, believing his damaged trucks would not make the distance, ordered his men to catch the train the Katherine. That plan was not to be. Military police held up the young men and marched them to a temporary (canvas) recruiting office. Many were then returned to Darwin in uniform.

In Darwin, administrative offices, along with many other buildings, had been knocked out and lay in ruins – hundreds of people had been killed and many others injured. (Although an official report stated 247 persons died in that first raid, locals maintained that the number was nearer 500.) The frontier town was in chaos and, with nobody in control, confusion reigned until martial law was proclaimed and the military took over.

(This situation was later examined by a Royal Commission. However, as a consequence of marital law, order was reinstated and Darwin was eventually rebuilt as a frontier town against further attacks.)

In shock, many of those who had survived started an exodus of the town. They travelled down the north-south road (later to become the Stuart Highway) by any means available – including bicycles. Some caught trains, many set out on foot, prepared to walk.

(Some time later, Rowley returned to Darwin and was able to put everything into perspective. 'There was utter devastation of the causal town I had known,' he said. 'The loss of personalities in the bombing added to the sobering effect. From the position of the civilian aerodrome, where my gang was on that fateful day, no imagination could conjure up the reality of what that first raid on the town and harbour had done. Despite the countless raids of the following months and remaining years of the war, none compared with that first battering and consequent dislocation.')

It was mid-afternoon on that fateful day when Rowley clambered into an empty cattle truck – all others were overflowing with men. Just as the train indicated its intention to pull out of Adelaide River Station on its way south, an officious looking military policeman brandishing a handgun ordered Rowley out of the cattle truck before marching him over to the recruiting depot. Hence, R.V. Blundell-Wignall became a soldier, No. D229, in the Australian Military Forces.

Rowley was placed under the command of General Blake as a driver of his office van. Blake had Rowley typing letters, even his personal ones, trusting his private to be circumspect. On one occasion, when a plane dived to bomb General Blake's camp, men ran in all directions seeking cover, mostly in trenches, but Blake remained at his desk, quite unaware of the attack. Fortunately, the bomb exploded where it could do no damage.

Shortly after this, General Blake, already an old man and a peacetime officer, was recalled south and Private Blundell-Wignall, D229, was transferred to the headquarters of Colonel George S. Nunn at Katherine.

Colonel Nunn had been Duntroon trained and was an excellent administrator in

control of the 7th Military District (Northern Territory). A huge man, George Nunn was greatly respected for his fairness. He became known to the troops as 'Wee George'.

The aerodrome on the shores of the Katherine River was flanked with huge boulders on the opposite side and was, on one occasion, a target. It was thought by the military that the boulders possibly looked like camouflaged planes and vehicles from thousands of feet up in the air.

Rowley, as a Duty Officer, gained a stripe, but was on the road most of the time, mainly as Colonel Nunn's driver, but also driving for Majors Hendry and Jacobs. Major Hendry was like a bantam rooster, and always had a lady tucked away somewhere. He became known as 'Chook' Hendry. Major Jacobs was an obstetrician and bemoaned being in control of men. He was affectionately known as 'Pregnant' Jacobs for, despite his six feet plus in height, he had an enormous gut, which gave him the appearance of being pregnant. At no time did the three senior men indicate they knew of their nicknames, for they graciously took whatever came up – not always pleasant in the raw, untamed environment – and tended to treat their staff as equals.

Army life, with its clear guidelines and expectations, suited Lance Corporal Blundell-Wignall, especially as the Katherine Army Camp functioned well – orderly, yet without rigidity. Mutual respect was high on the agenda, hence the general atmosphere. Rigidity did exist, however, in the area of camp hygiene, particularly around the ablution blocks. Deep trench latrines, with thunderboxes in rows and pissaphones scattered about, catered effectively for the men. At the end of the Wet, a team of engineers rolled the cane grass with 44-gallon drums. This made matting that kept the eternal dust down. And rammed ant bed was used in the mess and cookhouse.

When on the road with either or both of his officers, they always invited their driver, Lance Corporal Blundell-Wignall, to doss down in their tent. He was also included in many of their outings to the surrounding pastoral stations and elsewhere. There was no pulling of the forelock. A highlight was a trip out to Elsie Station, the pastoral property of 'We of the Never Never ' fame, with 'Pregnant' Jacobs when Giles was the manager.

Accidents were common on the narrow, rough roads, especially as men tended to drive recklessly over the vast distances. Speeding, however, was a no-no in the Army. Rowley – 'Blun' to his mates, Wignall to the officers – kept to the rules when driving but was to come up against many ticklish situations with other road users. And with enemy planes continually bombing and strafing up and down the north-south road, there were constant hazards. The officers, too, must have felt their hair raise on occasions but never commented and allowed their driver to use his initiative accordingly.

When a medical team arrived at the Camp, Rowley decided to try for the AIF and this time was re-classified A2 – his flat feet and poor eyesight no longer being seen as a deterrent. His new identification was DX 736, which meant he could now be posted overseas.

During this time, Rowley was sent for a couple of months to Darwin for workshop

experience in vehicle maintenance and repair. Billeted at the Larrakeyah Barracks, he noticed that the enemy planes constantly harassed the area in the early hours of the morning. As a result, sleepy men had to rush outside and make a dash to the trenches. But, although the planes approached menacingly, they would veer off at the last moment before their bombs were released. These mostly fell harmlessly onto the foreshore of the bay. Darwin personnel came to the conclusion that the barracks were being spared for future occupation.
Eventually the Katherine Camp was closed down and men were transferred to other units, Rowley to the 10th Malaria Control Unit, with its headquarters at Adelaide River. Here he was given another stripe, making him a Corporal and in control of several men.

His new task involved transporting 44 gallons of distillate impregnated with DDT which, when decantered into knapsacks, could be carried on the men's backs. Then, using hand pumps, Rowley's team sprayed waterways, swamps and the like in an attempt to control the anopheles mosquito – the malaria-carrying culprit. Areas around campsites and headquarters, wherever there was a sign of wetness, were also sprayed. The men also had to catch the offending mosquitoes. They used a phial with ether-soaked cotton wool in the base which, when placed over the suspended mosquito, simply anaesthetised the offending creatures. They then fell to the base of the phial where upon the lid was replaced. At headquarters, a laboratory was set up where much work was done on malaria control, to the advantage of post-war medicine.

Men serving in the Northern Territory, like men on service anywhere, were hungry for female company and most, right up to officer ranks, sought it out. 'Chook' Hendry tried to get Rowley a girlfriend but he wasn't prepared for that. Much later, at Adelaide River, a provost again wanted to help Rowley out. Rowley said he had met a girl when on leave that he was attracted to, so the provost replied, 'Well, why don't you marry her?'.

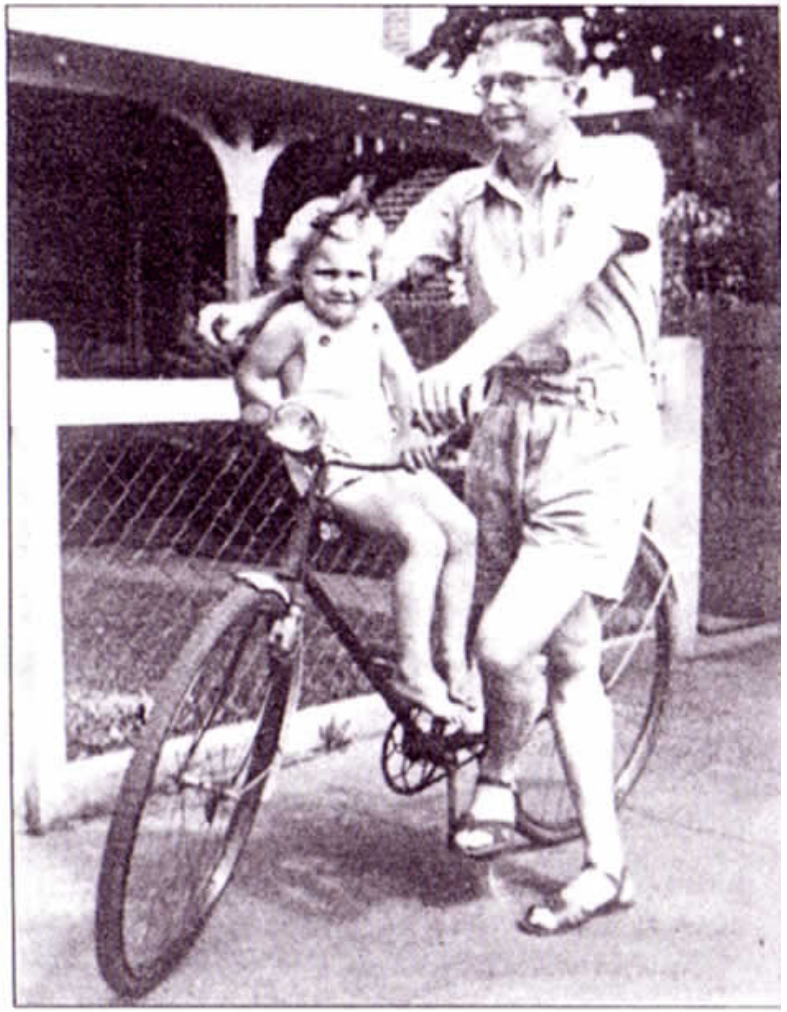
I knew nothing of this as I tried to keep myself afloat in the uncertainties of my marriage. But once free, other forces started to work. And when Rowley was subsequently demobbed on 4 July 1946 – Independence Day – he found himself free to consider life as a civilian. With the end of my marriage in sight, the atmosphere between us became more open and friendly.

Rowley returned to the building industry, which was in full flight after six years of inactivity. Then, passing an entrance exam, he entered the GPO as a postal officer. Sometime later, through post-war rehabilitation studies, he sat for the entrance exam to the Third Division of the Commonwealth Public Service and became an officer in the Taxation Department.

Whatever that certain something is that wafts between couples, it seemed we were destined for each other and on 15 March 1948 (the Ides of March 1948) we were married, with Rowley signing adoption papers for Glenys.

We believed that the post-war euphoria and the new order that was about to enfold would include us.

Rowley and Olga at Government Gardens, Perth, on their wedding day.



Rowley and daughter Glenys in North Perth.