
Virginia Davidson (nee Martin)

Before the war I lived in the small Western Australian wheat and sheep town of Moora with my mother and father and my three brothers and four sisters. We lived in a two-bedroom weatherboard house. Dad enclosed the veranda and that's where the boys slept. My sisters and I shared a room inside. We collected rainwater from a tank for washing, cooking and drinking. We relied on firewood for cooking and heating and used hurricane lamps for light, as there was no scheme water or electricity on our property at the time.

Dad was the local carrier, he transported wheat and wool from the farms in the district to the railways where it was loaded onto trains bound for Perth. Dad's name was Septimus, so named because he was the 7th son of the 7th son. I am his 7th child, this child, legend has it would produce wonders. Well the year was 1939 and my claim to fame at the time came on my last day of school when I won first prize for reciting "The Man from Snowy River" and "The Bush Christening" by Banjo Paterson. I was 14 years old. Reciting poetry at home on long winter nights was a favourite form of family entertainment in those days.

They were simple peaceful times when the roles of men and women were more clearly defined. Generally speaking the men were the breadwinners, the head of the house and the custodians of everything important. Women nurtured their children, saw to domestic duties and obeyed their husbands.

On the 3rd September 1939 Robert Gordon Menzies announced to all Australians that we were now at war. This announcement was about to turn our lives upside-down and change our way of life forever.

By 1941 thousands of Western Australians were overseas with the armed forces, amongst those were my three brothers, Lionel, Rennie and Hurtle. Lionel was in the Airforce and had been deployed overseas. Rennie was in the Army and had been reported missing in the Middle East. After several agonising weeks he managed to find his own way back to his battalion, he was badly injured suffering burns as a result of explosions dropped from a plane, he never fully recovered. Hurtle had also enlisted in the Army and was captured in Java by the Japanese and he spent the next four years working on the Burma Railway as a P.O.W.

I began to see the full impact of the war on the faces of my anxious parents. I clearly remember the day when our long serving town doctor, Dr George Miles, sat at the table with my parents to console them in their despair. Dr Miles delivered my brothers, sisters and me plus many other young people in Moora at the time. He was a pillar of strength for the many parents, wives, family and friends left at home unable to sleep through constant concern as they waited and waited on news from their loved ones.

By the time I was 16 years old two thirds of the male work force had left the farms, many women were having to help out on the land doing jobs once dominated by men. I will never forget the determination and courage shown by my 19 year old sister Hilda when, Dad, over run with work, was unable to collect some sheep ready for transport from a local farm. Hilda stood up from the breakfast table and with great conviction turned to me and said "Hop in the truck, we can do this, we will collect the sheep ourselves." I felt so empowered, I was inspired, I knew right there and then I wanted to do whatever I could to serve my country while our men folk were away so bravely defending it.

In 1942 I responded to the call of the Australian Women's Land Army, I was still only 16 years old and I had never been away from home. Dr George Miles gave me my physical before I joined. 16 year olds were very naïve back then and I could remember how concerned the doctor was about this, he repeated several times that not all men could be trusted, not even if they want to marry you, he said. It all sounded a bit confusing at the time but I was given a clean bill of health and with a worried look on his face Dr Miles wished me good luck.

In the Land Army we were all given numbers and I was number 47 one of the earliest to join up. Sally Carlton was the state superintendent for the Australian Women's Land Army (AWLA). Sally was an exceptional leader who never lost her strong sense of purpose or her belief in our abilities to face the challenges before us; she was highly inspirational and made us feel invincible despite a lot of growing prejudice towards women doing what had always been male roles. There was at the time widely held opinions about a woman's place in society and that place was in the home. As a result of all this opposition there was very little recognition and very few if any of the entitlements or support offered to the A.W.L.A that was bestowed on women in the other services. Sally however was above getting overly involved in all of this politics, to her it was of secondary importance to the fact that Australia was in desperate need to produce more food in war-time to feed the civilian population here in Australia and to supply whatever we could to England.

In time to come, out of sheer necessity there was a change of heart and the land girls were in great demand. We had a very important job to do and Sally very effectively set about organizing her Army of girls to carry it out.

I was initially sent to the Noricks Vine Yard to pick grapes and later sent to Glen-Var Pastoral Co. in Wongan Hills where I worked for Mr and Mrs Shields. I was involved in milking cows and making butter. I helped out with the sheep during tailing, castrating and crutching, whatever was required I was being trained to do it. I worked at Glen Var for two years before being sent to Fairbridge Farm in Pinjarra for further training.

I continued to work in the A.W.L.A. until the war ended. I was pruning grape vines in the Upper Swan on August 16th 1945 when I heard people shouting, "It's official the war is over."

We were given time off to travel to Perth in buses for the Victory Parade.

About one hundred thousand people crowded into the middle of Perth. All down St Georges Terrace paper drifted from office buildings like confetti. Navy, Army and Airforce personnel were swapping hats and revelling in the streets. With flags flying high, over 7000 service men and women in uniform marched in a huge parade to the Perth Esplanade.
A truly unforgettable experience!

Life after the war was one of great adjustment. The war affected everyone in one way or another. Those who stayed at home while their loved ones were away fighting for our freedom suffered from the anxiety and waiting and worrying. My father for instance never really recovered, he endured ill health complicated by Parkinson's disease for many years before he died.

Many of those who were deployed overseas returned bearing life long injuries both physical and emotional which continues to impact on the lives of many to this very day. My husband John and I were married in 1946. John served overseas with the 2/16 infantry B.N. where he suffered injuries and endured conditions, which contributed to him becoming a double amputee later in life.

John and I raised three daughters during the baby boomer years of the 50's and 60's. The effects of the war on myself and I believe of the many women who supported the war effort be it at home, on the land, in factories, industry or the services, was one of a new found confidence and belief in our own abilities as women to make a difference, to make a significant contribution to society, contributions and change brought about more through influence than power, we were quiet achievers. Although in saying this, I must confess that somewhere along the line we were responsible for raising a generation of women who would go on to sing "I am woman hear me roar".

Overall though, looking back I believe that the most significant effect that the war had on all who endured the suffering and the sorrow, who witnessed the triumph and the tragedy, was one of an overwhelming sense of what was really important in life, a stripping away of all that is trivial and superficial and replacing it with an appreciation of the qualities of love and compassion, humility and courage. The nation embraced all of the qualities of character and spirit, "the ANZAC spirit" that ultimately won us our freedom and restored peace to our country.

