
Harry Francis Drake

Date of Birth: 04/01/1923

Place of Birth: Corrie, King Island, 7256.

Employed on dad's farm milking cows, job done by hand milking, me and my brothers learnt proficiently at 6 years of age. Before and after school, unless badly sick with flu and whooping cough, or bronchitis severe.

Late 20's and all through the 30's, two sisters born mid 30's saved from whooping cough by immunisation given when babies. There were numerous small schools about King Island 7256, the one at Pearshape had 12 to 14 attending, a female teacher, and some had to walk up to 5 miles.

Pearshape to Currie was 15 miles where there were shops, bank and Post Office and a shipping port for Melbourne and Launceston trading ships. Aeroplanes started 1932.

I was interested in various situations about the world – HITLER – STALIN – MUSSOLINI. In the 1930's to the general public at large Japan was not a danger until later.

I started off at Brighton, Tasmania, training camp January 1942 – Army – trained as a wireless operator using Morse code and use of several types of firearms and ciphers and codes. During the war I was attached to Infantry Battalions.

I enlisted as many my age were doing the same. Many who did several months before me wound up as P.O.W's, poorly trained and woefully not ready, sent away too soon, learnt later. Getting away from dad's cow's and other farm work played a big part and to see the world. Tried for the Air Force and the Navy and said I was not bright enough.

I did training at Brighton Tasmania Military Camp and Ingleburn N.S.W. I did three weeks at Randwick Race Course, lived there and each day travelled to a place to be instructed in radio handling by A.W.A. retired technicians. In 1944 I went to Communication Army School in Kelvin Grove, Brisbane before going overseas 1944 – 1945 among many men sent to SELCHEIM North Queensland for toughening up for 3 or 4 months, might have been less. We were employed at athletics, assault courses, long marches through trackless scrubs and stony hills and dry water courses, to return a few days later.

When the local Shire Council of the area wanted gravel trucks filled at the quarry they used us with pick and shovel. I found the place mostly good fun. Tucker time at the end of the day everybody was starving. One night at meal, the camp boss (a major) came in and asked are there any complaints, one bloke stood up dangling a piece of meat and said "there are maggots on the meat" and the Major shouted in a loud voice "Are they big ones?" he replied "No sir" The major said "They wont hurt you". I didn't look closely and carried on feeding like most others too.

From July 1942 to December 1943 I was stationed at Queensland Gulf country and then off and on coastline east of Darwin at the mouth of the Adelaide River. 1944 I was at Bonegilla, Atherton Tablelands, above Cairns, Queensland.

In May 1945 I went from Cairns, Queensland in a large fleet of L.S.T's bound for Morotai Island, it took 3 weeks. 4th Division plus attached. I served at Balikpapan, Borneo until the end of the war and was outside of Australia for 730 days.

The Army was a good way of life, no trouble, everything forward, stacks of excitement in the N.T. and Borneo, 3 times close to being wiped out.

The first close up of war actions was about 4 miles south of Darwin at a place named Winnellie. There was a Navy radio communications centre there, it seemed to be targeted, the only damage I saw was to the water pipe line to Darwin and raging grass and scrub fires. Me and a few others standing about were saved from hurt by a large stand of gum trees, the other side of landed bombs that made an awful noise, my left ear hearing was knocked out, and is still out.

About the same time at Koomali Air Force strip a dozen of us travelling from Katherine to Darwin stayed the night in the trees at Koomali strip and after settling down we asked our C.O. can we go for a walk to the strip. He said yes and to be back by dark. We got a bit lost and returned after dark. During returning we heard the un-mistakeable sound of Japanese aircraft and some explosions. Our C.O. said good thing you blokes are late getting back, bombs landed nearly to our transport and partly knocked out our C.O. who was lucky to escape.

Other times when at Coast Watch, Posts reported incoming Japanese aircraft to the Air Force by our radio as well as Army stations.

We supplemented diet, buffalo meat, fish and magpie, geese and several times allowed to get a small beast – steer meat off on the spot on Koolpinya Station. What was not used that night was wrapped and treated with salt that made meat last a little longer, otherwise next morning gone bad. We made our own bread and took turns at cooking.

In May 1945 after passing the Australian Great Barrier Reef, we sailed into a mini cyclone (described as) ships scattered and did not see them again until 3 weeks later at Morotai Island. While passing through the cyclone the L.S.T I was on showed signs of breaking up, cracking across the upper weather deck. American Navy men regarded it as a very serious affair with seas washing over us, equipment floating away, some blokes reckoned we had had it, it made many sea sick; me a little too.

The Yanks got their repair equipment on deck, large slabs of sheet metal and electric welders on the job; they did well and from then on after we travelled well.

I had only one close go on Borneo, while removing old wires from telephone poles. I am up this pole on top, safety belt attached to the pole, my helpers at the bottom ready to throw up tools attached to a rope. We knew about a collection of aerial bombs and marine mines in the shrubs nearby. One of the marine mines went off. Someone on the ground picked up a fragment, said look, dropped it straight of – it was hot. Then the pole started to fall; on the way down I thought I

hope I'm not underneath it when we hit the ground. Hit the ground side by side, my left leg suffered a bit, but able to carry on.

I had a tough time in places with dengue fever, tropical ulcers, one on my chest the Doctor opened it up with a pocket knife to let the pus out, after that it healed up quick. The next one was from wrist to shoulder; all over up and under, Doctor said it was a pipe like ulcer grown vertical to one inch – painful. The medical orderly put on a mixture of Vaseline and Penicillin, then bandaged it all the way, gave me a sleeping pill – next day, better, gone. Penicillin in the early days was a very effective wonder drug, it was for many things.

My Army career did not cause life changes to me, during my Army career I learnt how to loose, live and behave. From time to time in civvy life I carried on that way for short periods – booze, laziness, smoking too much (gave up July 1964) approaching women in the wrong way. I married in 1961 and remained that way for 22 years.

I found out the war had ended when we got a call on phone from the beach to our post west of Balikpapan in the jungle forests.

It became more relaxed, no more fears. At that time 3 of our men were sent out to find a route for a phone line to an army unit that was behind Japanese lines. They went out un-armed, one of the 3 got shot in the chest and the other two saw this Jap put his rifle to his head – he did not fire, the Japs then walked away. The other two men got the wounded man back to transport and to hospital – the Australian Hospital MANOORA anchored off shore – never heard if recovery made.

After the war ended, I don't remember much; workload eased off, many of us were sent back to Port – beach area. Redundancy. Place was set up – tents, rigged place to wash and eat, fixed up orderly room too, to handle administration.

The sick precedes who want to stay on, those who want to go home soon, I did not want to go home straight away – ease of gradually.

I was in Borneo when the war ended and then went to Japan with the B.C.O.F. for almost 18 months. Returned from overseas, Japan to Australia May – June 1947.

On return to King Island 7256, there was no change, very little money about, number of cars perhaps fewer. Dad's car still locked up, 1929 Laker. I got home well off; soon after enlisting I put most of my Army pay aside into the Commonwealth Bank. I went through five and a half years on 10 pence a day. When I got home dad was going back into milking. There were now milking machines in dairy and other mechanics. I was able to help him pay for them.

A few days after getting home I started looking for a job and landed a job with the Soldiers Settlement Board operating tractors almost a year. Then got a property of 330 acres to dairy farm on. Used Re-establishment Loan \$1000.00 X \$500.00 Rural Credits to buy stock cattle. I had no phone and had to push bike 5 miles to P.O for 10 years.