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## **Keith Tasman Eddington**

### **Telegraphist, R.A.N.**

I was born in Perth, Western Australia, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1925, descended from a "First Fleeter" as a 6<sup>th</sup> generation Australian. I had three older brothers and two sisters. I was educated at East Victoria Park (Primary) and Perth Boy's School (High), leaving school aged 15 years with a Junior Certificate and commencing employment as a clerk with the WA Government Tramways Dept, in Perth.

As a young boy I was a sea scout as I always had a fascination for the sea, so, as my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday approached, to join the RAN seemed to be a natural transition to continue my love and interest for anything maritime. Less than a months after my birthday I found myself travelling on a troop train for HMS CERBERUS, the RAN training depot not far from Frankston, Victoria. I now realise in retrospect how my parents must have grieved at my departure as here was their youngest son leaving home, their three older sons already in the RAAF in England and Darwin.

It did not take me long to be stricken by an acute case of homesickness which I would never dare reveal to my travelling mates! The troop train journey was epic to say the least as it took eleven days to reach our destination! For instance, we spent a week camped at the Adelaide showgrounds enroute. The naval personnel on board the train were given springless cattle trucks to travel in as it seemed that on each overland train journey one of the three services – er – won the raffle to travel in such a way, there no doubt being some kind of rotation method in force.

It was an excruciatingly rattling, bumpy, dusty journey; we didn't sleep well as can be imagined. Periodically the train stopped to allow its exhausted passengers to have a meal where we queued up amidst flies and red dust on the Nullarbor Plain. Woe and betide anyone foolish enough to use a train toilet when it was stationary! One young soldier did so on one occasion and he was furiously berated by the train's C.O. and then mercilessly jeered and mocked by hundreds of onlooking servicemen as he humiliatingly scooped up his own waste from the railway track.

HMAS CERBERUS was finally reached and within a very short time we were allotted our barracks, issued with our uniforms, bedding and toiletries. Our bedding consisted of a large, thick blanket and a hammock. We were immediately instructed how to unpack a hammock, to string it up, to climb into and out of it, and to lash it up and stow it away for inspection each morning. It was required to be lashed up with seven lashes, the same as for our bell-bottomed trousers, incidentally, which had seven creases.

Marching drill, rifle drill seemed to go on endlessly, for about three weeks, and also during that time we were instructed how to salute, when to salute, who to salute, how to recognise the various ranks, how to wear our uniform, (the tricky lanyard gave us trouble), how to scull and row, how to tie basic knots – a vastly new world for all of us, although it helped me previously being a sea scout. As a matter of the fact I was ragged about it on one occasion! I am sure I was not alone in suffering from frequent bouts of homesickness especially when I wearily climbed into my snug hammock at "lights out" at 2200 Hours each night.

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I had joined up to be a Telegraphist (a “sparks”) so I knew I had six gruelling months of training ahead of me. I found out to be a coder it was only a six to seven weeks’ training stint and many is the time I had wished that that had been my choice. However, prior as a sea scout, I already had basic knowledge of Morse code by flag and lamp, as well as semaphore. Besides this I was able to receive Morse code by key at about 8 wpm, a skill I had picked up whilst attending free instruction from Post Office staff at the main foyer of the Perth GPO during my lunch times as a clerk as 16 and 17 year old. As a RAN sparker I was eventually required to “pass out” reading 30wpm. My endless stints at the GPO had certainly been of inestimable value to me – and I had learnt not to be the “smart Alec” about this in any way!

By the way, shortly after being issued with our uniforms we were compelled to jump into a deep swimming pool fully clothed, no doubt anticipating the future possibility that our ship may be sinking during enemy action when we would be abandoning ship in a hurry with the great possibility of being clad at the time. Some of the recruits had first to learn to swim, however.

We were granted leave once a month, for a weekend from about 1600 Friday to about 2100 Sunday and it was exciting to be clambering on the train for the 45 minute journey to Melbourne. Oh how at times I longed to be a Melbournite so I could go home to my mum, dad and sisters! At these times Perth seemed to be SOOOOOO far away. You could almost be on another continent in fact. The sandgropers seemed to get more than their fair share of rubbishing from those of the other States and we were constantly having to defend WA and its people. All reasonably good-natured!

But to return to the all important leave ...Melbourne was an exhilarating and exciting place to be for a young serviceman, for there were free tickets to stage productions (generally as part of a group), visits to private homes for dinner, dances attended by especially selected and charming young ladies. I would stay at the TOC H Hostel, the YMCA, or some such accommodation especially available for servicemen.

At this time there were a million US servicemen in Australia and it seemed that all of them appeared to be in Melbourne! Eleanor Roosevelt and General Macarthur visited the city at this time and the notorious “brown-out murders” began to occur. One of the highlights in Melbourne was an unexpected visit from my mum and dad who had been lucky enough to be able to wangle train tickets from the West, no easy accomplishment for civilians during WWII days.

As my course began to wind up there was the unsettling yet exciting thought that any day we would be notified of our draft. What type of ship would it be? Where would the ship at present be stationed? Our Skipper? Our future shipmates? One by one and day by day my classmates were notified until eventually my turn arrived! Not a ship at all but a land base at Milne Bay, New Guinea. I travelled by train (not in a cattle truck this time) via, Brisbane to Townsville, boarded a corvette to my destination.

I immediately loved the tropics even with the associated humidity. The torrential downpours, the gluggy mud didn’t bother me, the swaying palm trees were exotic

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to me, the brilliantly coloured butterflies, the bunches of bananas stolen from nearby abandoned plantations, the comradeship, the complete lack of homesickness! Paramount to all of this was my ability to send and receive Morse code quickly and accurately, which gave me a great feeling that I was doing a good and worthwhile job! There was the obligatory atabrin tablet to take daily whilst watched by the Duty Officer to ensure we did the right thing in this respect. However, we were all aware that one of our messmates was stealthily disposing of his tablet rather than swallowing it, right under the eyes of the attendant officer! This young Queenslander, alas, sadly died of spinal malaria, a tragic, unnecessary loss of a young life. This was a great shock to all of us from which we learnt a bitter lesson.

During my Milne Bay days I vividly recall one magical moonlit night when a group of us went to an open air concert (under swaying palm trees!) given to the US GI's but to which Aussies were also welcome. All four entertainers were from Hollywood: the great John Wayne, glamorous blonde actress Carole Landis, character actress Una Merkel and the harmonica wizard, Larry Adler – who was equally adept as a jazz pianist – a blissful, never to be forgotten experience being the hopeless movie-showbiz buff that I am.

As a pianist of very modest ability I occasionally played the piano at the YMCA Hut and Salvation Army Hut, both situated in the jungle, where servicemen were invited to relax. After a year I returned home for leave (by this time I had been drafted to another land base at Madang, NG, where formerly plantation owners and their families used to holiday.) My Perth leave was wonderful but uneventful excepting for one somewhat unnerving incident. I was aboard a US Liberty ship crammed with hundreds of GI's and Aussie servicemen heading for Australia. We were still out to sea but fast approaching Brisbane River when a violent jolt and shock waves shuddered through the ship. My first thought was that we had been torpedoed, and then shortly afterwards a PA announcement rang out, that we were to all make for the top deck wearing our lifejackets, my panic was beginning to build up. We were eventually informed that we had collided with an allied ship in the blackout, that very little damage had been done and that we were soon to proceed up the river to the port of Brisbane. Phew!

I hadn't been long back in Madang when I received a telegram from my mother to say that my dad had suddenly passed away and that she had requested me to come home on Compassionate Leave. She was apparently entitled to do this because she had four sons in the services and I was the most accessible to home. A naval chaplain had interviewed her at her home to ensure that everything was above board. But how was I to find suitable transport during wartime? I was to hitch hike home that's what! Armed with a travelling authority from my sympathetic C.O at Madang I began my mammoth hitch hiking spree, by waiting endless hour upon endless hour, days even, at airports at Madang, Lae, Port Moresby, Townsville, Brisbane and so on to Sydney where I had the thrill of splashing onto sunlit Rose Bay on a US seaplane. Indeed, all my hops had been aboard US service planes. However, the remainder of the journey was by a series of very slow trains. In all it took me eleven days to reach home by which

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that time my fathers' funeral had long since passed. I know that my return home was of great comfort to my mother.

When I reported to HMAS LEEUWIN at the end of my leave I was told, after a medical examination, that I had unexpectantly developed two tropical ulcers, on my inside ankles. My return to the tropics was definitely a no-no. Instead, I was drafted to a semi-secret radio station located under the Royal Perth Tennis club, West Perth and mainly manned by US personnel. I was able to live at home in between watches.

From there I was eventually drafted to yet another little known radio station, located at the top of a wheat silo at North Fremantle which overlooked Fremantle Harbour and the dozens of allied submarines stationed there, the Indian Ocean and my beloved Rottnest Island 18 Kilometres distance away. Once again I was able to live at home – 24 hours at the station (on six-hour watches) and 24 hours home.

On 14 August 1945, we heard by radio at the wheat silo that astonishing news that the Japanese Government had surrendered and that the war had ended! Shortly afterwards, on my way home I wandered through the streets of Perth which were choc-a-bloc with throngs of crazy, wild, jubilant, celebratory people – joyfully celebrating the end of WWII on what was soon to be known as VJ Day.

In my naval gear, I was kissed, patted on the back, cuddled, hailed by happy strangers – and I loved every moment of it! I can clearly recall accidentally meeting up with a group of teenagers I knew who were wheeling around lavishly decorated bikes, which they had ridden in from East Victoria Park. I can remember where I met up with them, too – at Sharps the Tobacconist corners of Hay and Barrack Streets. Within days I attended a Victory Dance organised by my mates at the wheat silo.

Shortly afterwards I was drafted to a naval motor launch, based in Fremantle Harbour, with a crew of 15. ML812. We were invited to take part in a victory march at Bunbury, the SW Port, with a follow-up Victory Dinner at the town's Town Hall and hosted by the Town Councillors. A lot of fun! On our return to Fremantle I received another draft, this time to the large naval radio station outside Darwin.

Only being 20 years old, I was way down on the list to be demobbed – hence this new draft. I flew to Darwin, calling in at Broome, Geraldton and Carnarvon on the way – and quietly celebrating my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, not telling a soul. I felt a bit lonely actually although when I reached Darwin there were a few dozen telegrams and a few gifts to greet me – all from my dear family and friends in Perth. This cheered me up considerably.

Darwin was still looking very much the worse for wear from its numerous bombings – a shattered Bank of NSW, another wrecked shell where about a dozen people were killed (the Post Office) and many shipwrecks in the harbour. However, I enjoyed my stay (back in the tropics!), involved with Morse code which I loved and playing the piano for 'sing-a-longs' and impromptu concerts at the Station's Canteen.

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Also, I was unexpectedly invited to play the organ for naval Sunday services at a town church. At first, I trudged a few miles there and back but when the C.O. sighted me on the road one day I was invited into his car from then on! Six months later, March 1946, I returned to HMAS LEEUWIN for my de-mobilization.

I loathed the government clerical position that had been kept open for me and when my mother passed away early 1946 I rejoined the navy for a further two years, (they were calling out for servicemen to re-join at this stage.) Besides, I was extremely restless from my navy days and had great difficulty in settling down. I was immediately sent back to HMAS CERBERUS for a brief re-training programme and then drafted to HMAS KANIMBLA, based in Sydney.

What an exciting 15 months lay ahead of me! The KANIMBLA's job was to transport 1200 troops up to Japan, the troops being part of the Occupation Forces of course. The programme was: two weeks in Sydney, and one week in Japan, calling in at New Guinea both ways to stock up on fruit and other stores. When in Japan I was able to travel by train on several occasions to Hiroshima and was staggered by its almost total annihilation. I managed to visit Tokyo too – cherry blossom time – a sight of sheer beauty.

From KANIMBLA I was drafted to the cruiser, AUSTRALIA, and a memorable voyage aboard her was a cruise around the Great Barrier Reef area. The reason behind this cruise was that the ship had been partly re-furbished to accommodate the British Royal Family who were to live on board for at least a week, and our cruise was to map out a suitable route for their anticipated visit.

The Royal Family at that time consisted of: King George VI, Queen Elizabeth, the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret. Their visit never eventuated, sadly, because of the King's illness, which led to his death a couple of years later. By chance, I was working in an Australian Bank in London at the time of his passing and was able to attend his funeral (with thousand of others!)

March 1949 I was demobbed for the second time, worked in a government position for a while, and then a bank – in Perth on both occasions. However, my restlessness seemed to be incurable and I travelled overseas. From England I eventually migrated to Canada and scored a job with the Australian Consulate in New York. I remained there in that job and was able to shift to the United Nations for a further year.

Two years in that fantastic city was a wonderful experience but I had a longing to return to my home roots and SETTLE DOWN! As a mature age student I enrolled at Graylands Teachers' College. One of my sisters so obviously loved her role as a teacher that I strongly thought that that was the job for me. I was right! At the time of my training I met a girl, a wonderful girl, who I knew was right for me from the time of our meeting. Early in my teaching career we married and now have two children and three grandchildren. We have had a marvellous life together, and here we are forty years on!

There is no doubt about it that my time spent in the services grossly unsettled me and set me back in my career several years – but I really do not regret any of it.

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To me it was a wonderful adventure and I was lucky not to have faced any real danger during the war years.

To finish, there are several highlights from my navy days: looking at a Japanese Prisoner of War who had wandered into our camp at Milne Bay after the Japanese army had pushed on. Also, I recall taking a walk to an abandoned airstrip (from which the Japanese army had been pushed back only a few months previously) to discover several shattered planes lying in the fringe of the jungle.

Whilst onboard the AUSTRALIA I had to make an official request to grow a beard; six months later I changed my mind but had to make it official in front of the C.O. His somewhat caustic remark was that he had not realized I had even commenced growing one! As I gave him my obligatory salute in my confusion and nervousness I mistakenly gave him a boys scout salute, which he was quick to rebuke me about! The humiliation I experienced at the time was excruciating to say the least!

I have enjoyed thinking back over my service years in particular, and this effort I know will interest my children. And hopefully others!

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