John W Hamersley

A BOY'S WAR IN W.A.

"History is not what you thought. ***It is what you can remember***. All other history defeats itself."[1]

John W Hamersley (born 8th Sept., 1933) Memories Of The Years 1941-45

WOODSIDE AND WHEEZING.

I can date the year I developed pneumonia, 1941, by a terrible disaster that befell Australia. Then, before the development of antibiotics, pneumonia was a potentially fatal condition necessitating vigilant nursing, so I was incarcerated in Woodside Hospital, once a rather grand double-storey private residence in East Fremantle. I remember the terrifyingly strict discipline, broth given mid-morning (which I enjoyed), some horrible medicine I was forced to take, and the Dutch sailor.

He was ambulatory, in hospital having a hand injury treated. Again, before antibiotics, a simple infection, even of a small part like a finger, if not properly cared for, could easily lead to septicaemia and death. He was a large man, I think, who spoke broken English and must have felt sorry for the puny little boy he befriended. He came to my bedside often, once when I was improving and had been taken out to a verandah couch to enjoy the spring sunshine. This time he spoke very mysteriously and conspiratorially.

"I have something special to show you. It is secret. You must promise not to tell anyone – all right?"

I presume I nodded assent, because he left, furtively returning a few minutes later carrying an object wrapped in a piece of cloth. Looking around all the time to be sure we were not observed, he carefully unrolled the material to reveal a most exciting secret to a small boy. It was a wicked-looking pistol, and quite obviously not a toy. He had been on a ship that had plucked survivors of the 'Kormoran' from the sea after the mutually disastrous engagement with the 'Sydney', and he had confiscated the weapon from a German seaman.

THE WAR YEARS.

The fear of being bombed and the nameless horrors of invasion engendered in the mind of a small boy an enduring distrust and suspicion of the Japanese people. This was not allayed until a reading of *The War Diaries of Weary Dunlop*. This helped me come to a conclusion that the Japanese had among them at least the same proportion of individuals with the capacity to be loving and compassionate as our own society. However, in the culture prevailing until the end of the war, it was difficult and sometimes even dangerous for Japanese citizens to exhibit these traits, while the inclinations of individuals with a beastly disposition were empowered and encouraged. Let's hope that the changes occurring after the Japanese capitulation ensure that such horrors as the Sandakan Death March will never be repeated.

I remember two events of the war deeply affecting my family, the distress of which transferred to me, although I had little real understanding of their significance. First was the

[1] Sellar, W.C. & Yeatman R.J. 1066 AND ALL THAT
1949: Methuen & Co., London.
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sinking of the British super battle-cruiser, HMS *Hood*. The other, even more cataclysmic, was the fall of Singapore. This was beyond comprehension. The loss of the *'Sydney'* had not been such a shock at first, possibly because details were hushed up. Also, we felt better than we would have about it because my brother Bill's friend Clive Stone, after serving aboard in the Mediterranean battles, was on shore leave in Perth at the time.

EVACUATIONS.

I suffered two evacuations during the war. Neither were very pleasant. One was not strictly associated with the conflict. I think it was after I had surreptitiously picked from the garden and eaten unripe and uncooled watermelon. I was given an enema, an unpleasant and undignified treatment for my bellyache. No doubt it was an effective deterrent to further unauthorised consumption of watermelon. The other evacuation also turned out to be rather unpleasant. An army officer came to see Dad shortly after the bombing of Darwin, Wyndham and Broome. There was high expectation that Fremantle would be attacked next. The port would have been the main target, but our poultry farm, only a few miles inland at Melville, then a sparsely populated semi-rural district, was surrounded by defence installations. An anti-aircraft battery and a searchlight unit were under daytime camouflage in the bush just beyond our boundary, and the extensive Melville army camp lay only a mile to the south. The area being a likely secondary target, Dad was strongly advised to get the women and children away. So I was evacuated with my mother, brother Val and sister Margaret to Uncle Sam's farm at Balkuling, about 25 Km. south-east of York. I was well into my twenties before venturing further from Melville than this. Uncle Sam, my mother's brother, lived alone, his wife, my father's sister, having died a few years earlier. His son Lyle was with the A.I.F. (9th Divn.) in the Middle East, and his daughter Sheila was in the army also, stationed in Perth. There was a very close relationship between our family and these cousins. Genetically, they were more like brother and sister to us. Uncle Sam was a lovely old chap and the farm was interesting, but school was the problem. I had to ride my pushbike to school, and it was not a particularly good machine. There were two routes; five miles along a corrugated gravel road, or half the distance on farm tracks through Morgan's place, with difficult 'cocky' gates to be opened and closed. I was warned about Morgan's ferocious bull.

I was occasionally a few minutes late to school and invariably castigated by the one male teacher in front of the total school population of about 20 children. As well as having an unsympathetic teacher, the pupils resented the intrusion into their tribe of an interloper from the city, and made my school days a misery. Only one boy, with the surname Draper, whose first name I have forgotten, was friendly. Unfortunately, he did not live near Uncle Sam's farm. The bull influenced me to take the longer route more often, but when worried about being late, I would risk his wrath rather than that of the teacher. One morning, as I pushed along a track in the middle of a paddock, I was horrified to see a mob of cattle coming towards me, and I was sure the bull was leading them. Between them and myself was a fenced haystack. I raced furiously to it and threw myself over the wire, leaving the bike to its fate. The beasts wandered past, cropping the grass, never coming closer than several hundred metres, seemingly quite uninterested in the haystack or me. More consternation resulted when they appeared to congregate around the gate I must pass through, but they gradually moved further away. When I thought it safe, I re-mounted my bike and pedalled desperately for the gate. I was fifteen minutes late, but this time I was sure I had a valid excuse. The teacher must have read this in my eyes, for when I entered the classroom he merely snarled:

"I don't want to hear it. Sit down."

I was invited to stay with my cousins at 'Roxby' near York again for the May school holidays. When I returned to Uncle Sam's, I was very unhappy at the prospect of returning to school. I was home-sick for 'Roxby' and secretly cried myself to sleep for a few nights.

Of course, there were pleasant times on the farm, on weekends, when there was no school. I enjoyed riding with Uncle Sam on machinery pulled by his horse team. He talked, or in most cases, shouted and swore at them constantly. They were ill-assorted, not regular sized animals as my father said a good and efficient team should be. Uncle Sam probably couldn't afford better. There was Bombjack, a huge fellow, as large as any horse I have ever seen. He was a good, solid worker. Tommy was small for a draught horse, little more than a cart-horse, but an enthusiastic nag whose heart was bigger than his body. Uncle Sam always had praise for these two but only curses for John Willy. John Willy was a rather handsome fellow, a chestnut but little less than an outlaw, who required regular doses of the whip to prevent him from disrupting the whole team. The other draught horses have sunk into anonymity.

Old Amy was the cart horse. She developed a terminal illness while we were there. Uncle Sam shot her, and to my horror had Bombjack drag the corpse into the pig pen, where after a few desultory attempts to chop the body open with an axe, it was left to be eaten by the pigs. As I have said, Uncle Sam was a dear old fellow. I'm sure he was essentially kind to animals and not without sentiment, but the tribulations of the depression years had bred a certain pragmatism. Nothing could be wasted, though the feeding of raw meat to pigs was probably frowned on then, and shortly after became illegal. All pig slops had to be well cooked to lessen the likelihood of contagious swine fever.

Some men, usually dark of visage because of the nature of the enterprise they were engaged in, camped rough at the back of the farm, making 'coke'. However, they did not attract the attention of the police. Coke was a misnomer for the charcoal produced to burn in gas producers. Petrol was in short supply and had to be conserved for the war effort, so rationing had been introduced. Car owners were issued periodically with a limited number of coupons that had to be handed to a garage proprietor in order to get a supply. Augmenting fuel by mixing kerosene with petrol was a strategy not good for motors and illegal under emergency regulations. However, vehicles could be fuelled by gas producers. These contraptions, about the size of a stove, were bolted onto the side or rear of cars or mounted on trailers. Coke was burnt in vertical metal cylinders like small furnaces and the resulting gas collected in a chamber ready to be fed to the engine intake manifold. Coke was produced by packing deep pits with dry wood. When it was well alight, the pit was covered with corrugated iron and earth and left to smoulder until the process of conversion was completed. Given time to cool, at least a week, the pit was uncovered and the charcoal shovelled into sacks for sale, a very grimy task.

Christmas was the riding horse, but he was more than a mere hack. A beautiful animal in appearance and nature, I think he was pretty close to a thoroughbred. Digger, a brindle and white kangaroo dog, had a vendetta against foxes. One-day when we were at the sharing shed, I spotted a fox in the paddock, at least a half-mile distant.

"Get Digger after him," I requested Uncle Sam.

"Don't think he will spot him from this distance," Uncle Sam replied, but he held Digger's head, pointing his nose in the direction of Reynard, saying:

"Fox! Fox! Get him! Get him!"

Digger took no notice at first, but suddenly he shot from Uncle Sam's grip and raced down the paddock. The fox was near a fence, and when he became aware of his danger, started zig-zagging in and out under the wire. It worked for a few hundred yards, the fox scrambling

from one side of the fence to the other while the dog easily followed, leaping over the wire each time until eventually he landed right on top of his quarry. That was the end of the poor fox. Digger came back puffing but looking very pleased with himself. Since then I have always taken with a grain of salt declarations that dogs have poor eyesight.

Our stay in Balkuling came to an abrupt end. Arriving home from school one afternoon, I found Mum looking very serious. Dad had been badly hurt in a road accident. He was riding his 'Indian' motorcycle and sidecar along Canning Highway towards Fremantle when a car coming towards him had suddenly turned across the roadway and smashed into the right side of the 'Indian'. The leg that had been crushed many years before in a level crossing collision with a train had suffered another compound fracture, and at this point we could not sure about other injuries. My brother Arthur had been in the sidecar but was thrown out with only a few scratches. He was driving up in the Willys-Knight tourer next day to take us back to Melville. I went home worried about Dad but pleased to be leaving Balkuling school, still uncertain whether Morgan's bull was as aggressive as Uncle Sam had warned, or whether he was having a bit of a leg pull and feeding me some bull.

The war situation had improved so it was deemed safe to remain in Melville after returning from evacuation to the country, so I went back to Applecross School. If the weather was wet I travelled the three or four miles to the school by bus. At other times I rode my push-bike, passing the 'Wireless Station' and 'The German Jetty', the latter having become derelict. The former was a steel tower perched on a hill at Applecross that had been built by the German firm Krupp Steel just prior to World War I, used for sending out radio signals (in Morse). The jetty had been specially constructed to unload the steel girders from the lighters that had brought them up river from the port at Fremantle. Although the traffic was slow and light on the so-called Canning Highway, which was really only a two-lane road, there was little fear of being gored to the death by a bull on it. However, there were adverse winds to contend with. It seemed totally unjust and annoying that nature had conspired to cause me to push into easterly breezes on summer mornings, and in the afternoon, heading home, pedal even harder against stronger sea breezes.

The fear of Japanese bombing had lessened, but drills were still carried out at the school in case it happened. Occasionally, mock air-raid tests were held and the whole community was expected to respond. When the sirens sounded, we were ushered from the classrooms into slit trenches dug in the sand near the playground. I always felt I was different to the other children. They laughed and chattered, seeming to consider the experience a lark and welcome break from lessons. I would sit in the bottom of the trench aware that it was still dark in Britain, bombing was continuing there, and that children like myself were crouching in bomb shelters at this very moment while death rained down from the skies.

ARMY SERVICE.

Our family were fortunate not to suffer loss of life in the war. Stirling, oldest of my four brothers, volunteered for the army in 1940, but because of his severe asthma was not classified A1 and could not be posted overseas. He served as a pharmacist, first in Lucknow hospital, Claremont, a once private hospital taken over by the army. He then inaugurated the pharmacy in the newly constructed Hollywood General (Services) Hospital. When he became a captain he was posted to a large army hospital at Heidelberg, Victoria. I very much looked forward to his letters and for some reason was fascinated by the hospital magazines he sent. These were produced on a crude duplicating machine known as a 'Gestetner' , and as befitted their purpose, were full of cheer and humour. I treasured and kept them for years.

Second brother Val was unable to serve because of his epilepsy, but Bill (Vernon) was drafted into the army. However, he was 'manpowered' out after a few months. This was a

scheme that allowed employers to hold onto staff if it could be demonstrated that their civilian work was vital to the war effort. Bill was occupied with removing archives and records from the Lands & Titles Office in the Treasury Building, Perth, and overseeing their transportation to Toodjay to be stored safe from bombs and resultant fire. However, he was obliged to remain on reserve, training with the artillery and spending his weekends during the time of crisis manning the big coastal guns at Leighton or Coogee. Arthur tried desperately to join up. He applied in turn for all the services, even the Merchant Navy, being rejected by all because of a heart condition, a consequence of rheumatic fever in early teenage. He never omitted to wear 'V for Volunteer' badges issued so that men not in uniform would be free of any taint of cowardice.

COUSIN PETER.

Our cousins were not so fortunate. Leslie, James and Peter lost their lives. It must have been after we returned from Uncle Sam's that Peter came to say goodbye during the still critical days of 1942. Next morning he was to board a train for the east coast. Apart from this he gave no information. Probably he did not know much more, but we were aware that in just a few weeks he would be in action with the Australian army.

He had farewelled his own family in the country, and reported in the city for mobilisation. He came by bus from somewhere, turning up unexpectedly in the late afternoon at our poultry farm, a fairly isolated property on the outskirts. We were very pleased to see him and I think rather proud than he had chosen to come to us from among his city relatives. I was nine years old and had spent most of my school vacations on my uncle's farm, 'Roxby', with Peter and his family. These were truly enjoyable experiences that encouraged an enduring love of the country. He was a crack shot. Rabbits running flat out were safe enough, but those who choose to hop along slowly and uncertainly were in grave danger. He could almost invariably hit them with his 'pea' rifle, even when firing from the cab of a slowly moving vehicle. Admittedly bunnies were in plague proportions and there were plenty to aim at, but I was vastly impressed by his skill.

He stayed for the evening meal of course. I cannot recall what happened later, but I presume being of tender years and tired, with school to attend in the morning, I was sent early to bed, probably not without some protest. But I do clearly remember being woken, seemingly at first by a voice from far away. Gradually my mind focussed, and I heard Peter speaking softly.

"It's Peter here, John. Sorry to wake you up, but I have to say goodbye."

Drowsily, I untangled an arm from under the bed-clothes and held it out. He squeezed my hand.

"Goodbye, old chap," he said, and was gone. I fell asleep again immediately.

During tea the next evening my father suddenly said:

"Wasn't it good of Peter last night – not many men would have taken that trouble."

I must have looked blank.

"Didn't you know?" he asked.

"Know what?" I replied. "Peter came and said goodbye. Is that what you mean?"

"He did," said my father. "But we had walked with him almost the whole way to the bus stop when he realised he had not said goodbye to you. He absolutely insisted on coming all the way back, despite it being an extra mile. He nearly missed the last bus. I thought it was very good of him."

I didn't say very much, just inwardly digested the information.

Peter didn't survive the New Guinea campaign.

It's a long time ago and I still wonder. Was it a premonition that urged him to make such a point of saying farewell? Or simple kindness, or a combination of these and other motives? Whenever it was, a nine year old boy was made to feel very special. He has never forgotten that for him Peter did come back.

MY FIRST COKE.

The annual Royal Show was cancelled because the grounds at Claremont had been taken over by the army. A letter was published in the paper commenting that the children were not only suffering from all other effects of the war but would now miss out on the prime and indeed for most citizens the only carnival held in Perth. The American fleet decided to do something about it. They hired Gloucester Park, the trotting ground, and invited every child to attend a free fair, which gives some idea of the size of the town. It was very well organised. On entry each child was given a card of tickets which entitled him or her to so many rides on merry-go-rounds and such like, one bag of sweets, one ice cream and a bottle of a mysterious drink not then on sale in Western Australia labelled 'Coca Cola'. It came in the traditionally shaped five fluid ounce bottle, and I thought it was delicious.

It may have been the following year that a similar event was locally organised, but this time things were not free. Arthur took me, and later, when we reached home, he counted his money and exclaimed to my mother that he had spent nearly ten shillings (one dollar) on my entertainment. My mother was outraged at such profligacy, one of the few times I ever saw her really angry.

APPREHENSION THEN JUBILATION.

One of my mother's few pleasures was to spend several weeks in a rented cottage in 'The Hills', that is, the Darling Scarp. I remember only two: the second was in early August 1945, when the first atom bomb was exploded. It was more than a huge and barely comprehensible event. There was a realisation that something new and horrible had been unleashed into the world, that would touch even isolated Western Australia. We knew that life would never be the same.

We were still there, Darlington I think it was, when I awoke to strange sounds echoing up from Midland and along the valleys in the cold, still, morning air. I clambered out of bed and ran into the kitchen where Mum was listening to the wireless while she prepared breakfast.

"What are those noises?" I asked.

"Railway engines saying cock-a-doodle-doo."

I listened more carefully. Yes, there was an orchestra of unmistakable cock-a-doodle-doos coming from the whistles of the steam locomotives.

"Why?"

"Because Japan has surrendered. The war is over."