Thomas Christie Meadows

Prior to the second World War, I was living with my parents at a place called Damboring, on the southern boundary of the Dalwallinu Shire.

About November 1929, we were experiencing the beginning of the Great Economic Depression that was to plague our nation for the next decade and as a result, our farm was in a state bordering on bankruptcy when our Federal Government declared war on Germany in September 1939.

In the compulsory registration of young males, I was registered as a farm hand singly employed, exempted from military service, but obliged by the Manpower Authorities to remain in my existing position and location.

The war in Europe caused enormous difficulties in shortages of supplies and equipment for all Australians and especially for farmers. Obtaining most farm machines, tractors especially were very severely restricted and virtually unobtainable, likewise motor vehicles of all types. What made the situation critical was that Australia was still trying desperately to recover from the severe economic depression of the 1930s which had brought many farmers to the verge of bankruptcy so that they had been unable to replace worn out equipment during the depression period due to lack of finance. As a consequence, when war came most of the farmers were in a desperate need of new equipment, especially tractors and rubber tyres, which were now, because of Government restrictions virtually unobtainable.

All petroleum fuels, rubber tyres, fertilizers etc, were now strictly rationed. These restrictions caused enormous difficulties and hardship for farmers, at a time when this country and Britain needed all the food our farmers could produce. As a result, many food items and clothing were drastically rationed.

Meat, sugar, tea, butter, were all rationed, also cotton and woollen goods. Because able-bodied men and many women too, were required for the armed services, man and women power for industry was strictly controlled. Another wartime measure that caused a lot of distress was the confiscation powers of the armed services to claim any personal goods or property they thought fit to take for war purposes. Motor vehicles and horses were commandeered in this way with little in the way of compensation. Our family lost the best of our horse team in this way.

Because of fuel restrictions we were obliged to equip our old tractor with a charcoal gas producer, this restricted its power output considerably and meant operating in a low gear, which slowed down field operations drastically. It also meant we had to now spend days gathering and burning tons of wood for charcoal each week, so increasing the burden of working our farm while at the same time reducing our farm productivity.

Despite my farm commitments, I joined the Ballidu unit of the newly established Volunteer Defence Corps. Headquarters of our unit was based at Moora, called number Thirteen Battalion Special Duty Western, commanded by Major Humphries.

“A” Company was established at Moora, “B” Company was based at Pithara and “C” Company at Dalwallinu. My platoon was part of B Company. As I was experienced

in the Morse code, I was appointed signal leader in my platoon. At first, our battalion was a common part of the V.D.C. so our equipment was a simple armband bearing letters, V.D.C. we had no other equipment. When our battalion was upgraded to Special Duty Western, we received full army uniforms, SMLE rifles, etc. We practiced every weekend and when Japan entered the war, we were detailed to provide guard duties on the two liquid fuel depots in Ballidu every night. This was onerous work for farmers working their farms all day, and entailed a lot of extra travelling especially as our fuel rations were very light. Our farm was eight miles from Ballidu and I was obliged to convert my vehicle to operate on power kerosene. Another complication following Japan's entry into the war was the establishment of the Volunteer Air Observers Corps. I became a member and did duties with this organization at least one night a week, often more.

A few weeks before Japan came into the war the German raider Kormoran sunk the Australian warship Sydney off the West Australian coast near Carnarvon, although we were not aware of this at the time. My unit of the VDC were called out at short notice to assemble for transport to an unknown destination and we found ourselves at an out camp near Mogumber on the Moore River from where we had to patrol up the coast searching for foreign sailors who were believed to have come ashore at an unknown place on our coastline. It was not known if they were armed or how many there were, but we were ordered to take them alive for questioning. We were not told of the Sydney event or who the foreign sailors were, every thing was very hush hush. We searched day and night for several days to no avail, before we were called in and brought home. It was a long time later that we heard sketchy reports of the Sydney-Kormoran affair and that the foreign sailors had been apprehended at a sheep station north of Carnarvon.

There were many reports circulating that Japanese submarines were also involved in the above affair and that some of these submarines had been seen in the Jurien Bay area. This was before Japan had officially entered the war.

Japan's entry into the war compounded the difficulties of our farmers with more Government restrictions and personal hardship on our farms and more onerous duties for us such as time off our farms performing guard duties and longer hours of military training in preparation for possible enemy landings, air raids etc. We were ordered to prepare to take into our homes people evacuated from the metropolitan areas in case of enemy invasion or bombing. This involved much renovation of old buildings on our farms to make them fit for human occupation at short notice. This caused a lot of distress both for rural people and the possible evacuees. Rural schools had to prepare for influxes of pupils as a result of such possible evacuations.

As a result of all this uncertainty and confusion and the long hours we had to work and the very low prices we were paid for our produce and the heavy bank overdrafts we were carrying, we enjoyed very little sleep and this added to our problems and caused many physical breakdowns and ill tempers among rural people generally. Consequently, bankruptcies, even suicides were occurring. Personally, my biggest worry now were the manpower regulations that restricted me to my unpaid job on my parent's farm, as I had met my future wife. I applied for permission to enlist in the RAAF, as my younger brother had done in the early stages of the war but got a severe reprimand from the Manpower Authority pointing out that Australia was fighting a total war and I was obliged to do my duty and remain in my job! We had to

wait more than three years for the war situation to ease so that we could marry in June 1944, I was then aged 30. Likewise, my two sisters who were trained nurses were similarly ordered about by the same authorities. Meanwhile my eldest sister was engaged in weapons manufacture for the Defence Department.

Following my marriage, my father retired from the farm and secured a job as personal service officer for a farmers' organization in the city while I took over the running of the family farm on behalf of the family. After five years as manager, I was able to negotiate with my parents to buy the farm and continued to run it in my own name.

In 1951, because salt was invading the lower sections of our farm at an alarming rate, and also my neighbour's farm, where his home was now in the centre of a salt pan, while our home was safe, we negotiated to sell to him and we shifted down to Williams where I bought a new undeveloped farm right on Williams river and fully developed that. An advantage of this was much better educational opportunities for our three children. As a result, all three graduated with tertiary degrees.

At age 60, crippled with arthritis, I retired from farming in 1974 and began writing my memoirs titled: "Brandeston", a copy of which is in the Battye Library. This book was written, bound, and published by myself. Following this, I compiled the life history of my mother's family titled: "Our Christie Clan", a copy of this also rests in this same library. My wife for 56 years, died in May 2000 leaving me with three adult children, a daughter and two married sons and five grand children. Following the death of my beloved wife, I wrote her biography: "To know her was to love her". A copy of this book also rests in the Battye Library.

I now live in retirement. At the time of writing this report, I have entered my 92nd year.