

Margaret O'Connell

In April 1941, my Mother (Gladys Randell), my brother (Keith Randell) and myself (Margaret Randell) sailed to Darwin on the "Koolama" to join my Father (Norman Randell) who was working for the Public Works Department.

At school there, I found that I was a year ahead in the class in English – but a year behind in Maths. Our teacher, Miss Halberstatter, liked me because I did well in English and it was her pet subject. Those she didn't like or who got things wrong, she called to the front of the class and grabbed them by the ear and banged their heads against the blackboard several times. How times have changed!! In my class was a girl named Nadia Kassinfoff and we were friends. We tried to beat one another in our tests, there only being a point between us each time. We took turns to have the higher point. Also in our class were Michael Kailis (who needs no introduction) and Brian Snell (whose father was a builder). I often wonder where Nadia and Brian are now. We also had a lot of different races in our class and we all got on very well.

One night, when my brother and I were at the open-air pictures with friends, the Air Raid siren went and we all had to go home, I was pretty scared!!

Apparently a plane had been sighted, but nothing happened.

On or about the 21st December, we were told that all civilians were to be evacuated and were given a very short time to be ready. We could only take what we could fit in a suitcase – leaving everything else behind. My Father, who was a carpenter, had to stay, as he was manpowered (he was a soldier in France during the 1st World War). He helped carry out the dead from the Post Office after the bombing of Darwin.

Those who had family or friends in the Eastern States went on the "Zeelandia" and those of us who had family or friends in the West went on the "Koolinda" which was expecting 12 passengers, and found themselves with over 200 women and children. There were people sleeping everywhere, even in the dining room, so meals were taken in relays.

There were no men onboard, except for the crew, a Doctor (whose name I forget) and Major Seaton and his wife, who were Salvation Army people. On Christmas Eve the Major and his wife went ashore at Carnarvon, to see what they could buy for the children for Christmas (I don't remember what it was). As far as I remember we arrived in Fremantle on Boxing Day and went to stay with my Aunt (Mrs Nell Lynch) in West Leederville. When we went to Darwin, my Mother had let our house, as we were expecting to stay longer in Darwin. Later we had the house back and my father returned, as he was a very sick man. He travelled by truck from Darwin to Alice Springs and by cattle truck (train) to Perth. He had an operation and the Doctor found his appendix had rotted and he had to have other surgery after the first one. His heart couldn't take it and so he died away from home, in hospital in Geraldton where he had gone to work, aged just 52. He was a lovely man!!.