
Experiences of WW11
By Arthur Herbert OLSEN

I was born in Meekatharra on 26 August 1919. My education began in Meekatharra but whilst still in infant's class we moved to North Fremantle where I attended both the Infants School and Primary School on Stirling Highway. Our family then moved to Kalgoorlie when I was about eight where I attended school until the age of 14. Times were tough for large families; I was one of ten children, so my father arranged for me to travel alone to Perth to take up an Apprenticeship as a Jockey with a Mr. T. Tighe whose racing stables were situated in Belmont on the corner of Belmont Avenue and Cleaver Terrace.

Apprentices earned very little money as we usually had to ride our bosses' horses for nothing. My wages for the first year was five shillings a week. Over the next three years I earned seven shillings and sixpence a week and the final year, ten shillings. After a while I was not getting many rides from Mr. Tighe so I eventually transferred my indenture to Mr. G. Atkinson in South Fremantle where I served out the remainder of my five year apprenticeship. Mr. Atkinson was a gentleman of the highest order and was very good to me.

I rode several winners over the years, including one for Sir Ernest Lee Steere senior at Goodwood Racetrack. The horse was trained by a W. Marks and my boss asked him "How much are you giving the kid for winning?" When the trainer said 'a fiver' my boss answered "Give him a tenner or nothing." Mr. Atkinson was a good boss whom I had a lot of admiration for. Just before he died he called me to the hospital and gave me £40 for winning a race on 'Cresting'. This was the last winner I rode before retiring in 1938 after my Apprenticeship ended, due to increasing weight.

I then moved to Norseman to live with my sister for some time, but was unable to find work there so I moved to Grants Patch, between Broad Arrow and Ora Banda. I stayed here with my elder sister and her husband, but I had no money at all so I used to follow the mine every day trying to get a job. Finally after about two months I was given a job working underground. The first position I was given was bogging a winge on the five hundred foot level in a stope. Having been a Jockey and not knowing how to use a shovel, this became very difficult work for me at nineteen years of age, but needing the money I was very humble and battled it out.

In September 1939 war broke out and about half a dozen of the workers, including yours truly, decided to enlist in the A.I.F. I joined up in Kalgoorlie on 19 March 1940 and was sent to Northam Army Camp on 24 April. I was very proud to think I was going to serve my country. We were entrained and taken to Fremantle on 10 May.

Once in Fremantle we embarked on the Mauretania as a reinforcement to the 2/11 Battalion who were in the Middle East. The ship sailed on 12 May 1940 in a convoy which included the Queen Mary and the Empress of Britain along with several other ships and a Navy Escort. I was very excited to be heading off overseas and thought of it as a great adventure.

We sailed up over the Equator and then the convoy was turned around and proceeded to head for England, due to the British Army being driven out of Europe by the German Army. Our convoy docked at Capetown for a day then sailed on to Freetown, Sierra Leone, where the ships anchored off shore. Following this we sailed on to Scotland reaching Gourock on 16 June 1940 where we were entrained to Salisbury, England. We then travelled by coach to the Army Camp on the Salisbury Plains at Tidworth where we remained for the summer.

When we arrived in England the Australian Forces were deployed into different branches of the Army. A Division of Infantry was formed which consisted of 71st 72nd and 73rd Battalions. Later it became the 31st 32nd and 33rd Battalions. I was in the Field Ambulance attached to the 2/32nd Battalion.

Our next destination was Colchester in Essex where we spent the winter months, during which time the Battle of Britain took place. On 3 January 1941 we left Colchester and travelled by train back to Gourock where we embarked on a troopship. We sailed down the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean, calling in to Durban South Africa, then up the Suez Canal finally disembarking at Alexandria in Egypt on 10 March 1941. From there we crossed into Tobruk where we were to find out life wasn't going to be exactly cosy.

In Tobruk we became part of the 9th Division with the 28th and 16th Battalions. Each Platoon had to do two or three weeks in the Salient, which was a section of 'no man's land' where the enemy had driven us back from fortifications that skirted Tobruk from sea to sea. Time up there wasn't exactly pleasurable. We were in dugouts with interconnecting trenches about a foot or so deep (hence becoming known as the 'rats of Tobruk').

The Germans pummelled us with trench mortar bombs and also had fixed machine guns firing on us. One time I was in a dugout with another soldier when a trench mortar bomb landed on top and we were knocked out for a while.

Meals only came up of an evening after dark; the mess truck coming to about a quarter of a mile from where we were. Each soldier had a turn at going down to get the tucker, which always consisted of tinned meat and vegetables and boiled rice and milk. If it happened to be a moonlit night, which it was when my turn came, the machine gun bullets whizzed all around making quite a precarious trip. On one particular such night the Sergeant of our platoon was standing up dishing

out the food when the enemy opened up with gunfire and the poor fellow was unlucky enough to lose a testicle.

When we first sailed into Tobruk it was noticeable that the harbour was strewn with sunken ships and boats. It didn't take us long to find out why. We had disembarked off the old Chakla, a tramp steamer, and walked up the hill from the harbour when forty German Stuka dive bombers came over. Deadly accurate, they dropped a bomb straight down the funnel of the Chakla; down she went.

The last boat to come into Tobruk in daylight was a gunboat with an Australian crew; the Stuka's got it too. From then on navy destroyers came in of a night, bringing supplies and taking out the wounded.

One of the discomforts of Tobruk was the water situation. It was distilled seawater but still had a brackish taste which wasn't very nice to drink in the heat of the desert.

After seven to eight month's in Tobruk we left one night on a destroyer sailing back to Egypt to camp at Kilo 89. From there I transferred to the 2/1 Australian General Hospital which was stationed at Gaza, Palestine.

During my time with the Hospital I had the good fortune to see a lot of the Holy Land including the Dead Sea, Capernaum, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Galilee and Nazareth and I visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Whilst serving at the hospital on one occasion I was detailed to take four patients to Jerusalem. It rained heavily on the way up and we came to a section of road that was under water. The driver directed me to walk on the edge of the road so as to enable him to negotiate this hazard which was a distance of about 80 to 100 yards. After we returned to the Hospital base I was interned with pneumonia.

Another unenviable duty I had to perform as an orderly was to attend to a patient who had contracted a contagious disease. This would normally have been the task of the nursing sisters, but they were loath to do it. Eventually the poor soul succumbed.

On leaving Palestine with 2/1 Australian General Hospital we sailed down the Suez Canal across the Arabian Sea to Bombay, India. Our unit was transferred on to a West Australian ship the Duntroon, but we were later put on to an American ship. The ship was short on food, but was unable to obtain any from India or from Colombo, Ceylon when we reached there. It was then on to Mombasa, Kenya, but not much food was forthcoming, so we sailed down the coast of Africa to Durban where plenty of food was available. We were then able to eat food other than beans which was all we had been given previously.

The Officers of our Unit showed some foresight by obtaining large quantities of tea at Durban and distributed it among the Units compliment. Needless to say when we arrived home to Australia we were very welcomed, as tea was rationed during the war.

On our return to Australia the 2/1 Australian General Hospital Unit, was stationed at Guildford Grammar School, where a big red cross was painted on the roof of the Chapel. Subsequently we established a Field Hospital at Merredin, as it evidently appeared imminent that the Japanese might invade Western Australia.

When the Japanese invasion appeared unlikely, we packed up and went to Port Moresby and established a Field Hospital. Following this the Hospital Unit was sent to Bougainville in the Solomon Islands, which is where we were when we heard the American's had dropped the Atom Bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. This then brought about the end of the war and we were returned home for demobilisation.

Back in Western Australia, I was very happy knowing the war was over and there would be peace at last, no more fighting. It was great seeing my family again; who still seemed the same, just a few years older.

Following discharge at Karrakatta in August 1945 the returning servicemen were given the opportunity of participating in the Soldiers Rehabilitation Scheme. As I had an interest in woodwork I applied for carpentry, but was told too many had applied for this area and it was suggested that I should become an Industrial Painter. I went to school for six months under excellent instructors at an establishment in Bayswater.

Upon completing the training, participants were rated as being 40 percent proficient. We were then sent to employers who were being subsidised 60 percent of our wages by the government. Being grown men we learned the trade well and became an asset to the firms we went to, where we had to remain for three years.

When my time was up I teamed up with another painter and we decided to become private contractors, eventually becoming well established. Subsequently we parted ways and each became contractors in our own right.

Over the years I trained nine apprentices including three of my sons'. Two of my grandsons' also completed apprenticeships through the business.

Eventually an accident at work forced me to retire after thirty four years in the trade. Due to complaints I received during my War Service I was granted a Disability Pension through the Veteran's Affairs Department.

On my return from the war I had purchased some land in Belmont where I eventually built a house after I married (Gertrude) Anne Pyle in October 1946. My wife and I eventually went on to have sixteen children and forty two grandchildren. At the time of writing this article we also have six great grandchildren.