
Ronald Francis Powell

An Amusing Reflection

Ronald Francis Powell was born in Highgate on June 18, 1929. I was educated at local schools in Highgate and my first real insight into our involvement in World War II was as a schoolboy in seeing American servicemen, early in 1942, in the city and exchanging coins with them.

I lived in Mary Street, Highgate and Mr Hicks, a chemist who lived ten houses away, became our Air Raid Warden and invited me to become an Air Raid Warden Messenger. He was responsible for inspecting the security of the black out and we attended training exercises for mock air raids at the local Air Raid Headquarters in Beaufort Street near Lincoln Street. The house dedicated for the job was surrounded by jarrah panels filled with sand.

I was equipped with a gas mask and tin hat and I thought it was Christmas: I was part of the war effort. My job was to deliver messages to adjacent centres on my bicycle, riding in the dark as part of simulated communication break-downs.

Throughout 1942-43 regular air raid drills with total blackouts were practised in the event of an impending Japanese invasion. The Beaufort St Headquarters was a hive of smoke-filled, noisy rooms and frantic activity on those nights. As a fourteen year old I found it quite exciting; I relished the responsibility I had been assigned.

One night at a time when a Japanese landing was feared I was summoned to deliver a dispatch to the East Perth Air Raid Headquarters. I had been there previously in a total blackout.

"Powell," said a portly, elderly man who emerged from a tobacco smoke-clouded room, "take this envelope to EPARH. Wait for a reply; you may have to return something."

His serious demeanour alarmed me. Was an invasion imminent? I wanted to know. The door closed behind him and I mounted my bicycle with concern. If an enemy landing is taking place I must ride home and warn my parents.

At my destination I was ushered into a foyer where an official opened this impressive brown envelope and told me curtly, "Wait here."

He left the opened letter on a table. Anxious to be informed of the danger I looked at the note. It read as follows: SEND A BOTTLE OF GIN BACK WITH THE LAD, HARRY. WE ARE COMPLETELY DRY HERE.

Shortly after, he returned with a shoebox wrapped in brown paper. "Take this back to Highgate. It is a delicate instrument so for God's sake don't drop it or there will be hell to pay."

At Highgate I passed the box to the man who had sent me. Behind him I saw about six men, smoking and playing cards. He smiled generously and barked "Well done," as he slammed the door. It was in hindsight that I saw the humour in the situation.

By 1944 the fear of an invasion abated; the frequency of air raid drills diminished.

I plotted the invasion of Europe on a map in my wardrobe from June 6, 1944, as I was anxious for the war to continue so as to enlist in the Air Force. The War's ending, I heard on the radio and I felt a sense of disappointment even though two of my cousins had been killed in the RAAF.

Perth's Forrest Place was used as an entertainment venue for War Rallies, patriotic gatherings to encourage people to invest in War Bonds. Visiting American service bands played the swing music of the day, Tommy Dorsey, Glen Miller, Benny Goodman. It transported a part of Hollywood into our city. Most young people were thrilled by the entertainment provided in those years.