Richard John Rice

I have often thought how little there seems to have been recorded about the formation and training of the Voluntary Defence Corp (VDC), which was formed in many areas of Western Australia, and, I presume, in other states, during the Second World War. If records have been kept of VDC activities I have been unaware of them. The two enclosed pages telling of my involvement with the VDC, have been taken from a section of an autobiographical record I have been writing to hand on to my family.

A short background of how I came to be where I was during the war may be of interest. My mother was born in England on Christmas Day 1889 and my father was born in Australia on New Year's Day 1890. My mother served as a VAD (nurse) in France in the 1914/1918 World War, where she served quite close to the front lines, for three and a half years without any leave back to England, although there was some leave in France. Before joining up, my father had been a sleeper cutter at Manjimup in WA. They met in France when my father was hospitalised after a gas attack. They were married at Leister in England in July 1919 and came to Western Australia soon afterwards. For a few months they lived in the town site of Manjimup, and, influenced by James (later Sir James) Mitchell and his faith in developing the land, they decided to take up a holding south of Manjimup through the Soldier Settlement Scheme. Only a small part of this was cleared and the remainder heavily timbered. The challenges were many and the work back breaking, but they kept going. My father died of pneumonia in 1933. His lungs had been weakened by the gas attack in the war, but this was never recognised by the powers that be and there was no pension available to help my mother cope. At the time of his death she had seven children. I was the eldest, aged thirteen, and the youngest was a baby aged nine months. An eighth baby was born six months after my father's death, but it died while Mum was in hospital, as it had several health problems.

When Dad died I had to leave school and help my mother run the farm. I had not started school until I was eight years old as the school was too far for a small child to walk alone through the thick bush. I had a brother 15 months younger, and a sister 28 months younger, so, when I was 8, my brother 7, and my sister 6, we all started school together. This meant that my education was limited, but my mum was a very well read and capable lady and encouraged us to read widely, which was a help. There were still six children younger than I to bring up, which was not an easy task during those depression years.

When war broke out in 1939 I was nineteen and the brother next to me was eighteen. He enlisted in the air force, but I was manpowered in order to run the farm. In 1943 my brother was in Mallala, in South Australia, training pilots, when, during a terrible storm, his plane crashed, killing him and all the crew. There were four planes lost that night and two were never found, but were presumed to have been blown out to sea. At that time, of course, instruments and ground to air communications were very basic.

After the war my two younger brothers and I became partners and the farm was run as Rice Brothers. My mother then left all the management to us. She died aged 86 in 1977. In 1988 the farm was divided between the three brothers when they retired and my area in now farmed by my youngest son and his wife. One brother's area is farmed by his daughter and the third section by my youngest brother's son. Both of these brothers were too young for enlisting in the war.

I hope the enclosed information on the VDC will be of some interest. I have always felt that had war come to Australia on to Australian soil the VDC would have been very helpful as Guerrilla forces and for similar back up duties. I do not feel an Anzac Medallion is necessary. Many of those involved are now dead and those surviving would be difficult to trace. I would just like their work recorded.

My experiences in the VDC during the war years. These pages are an extract from an autobiography I have been making for my family.

After Pearl Harbour and the fall of Singapore, Darwin was really in the fore. Winston Churchill had ordered the Australian troops from the Middle East to be sent to Burma, but fortunately John Curtin, our Prime Minister, stood his ground and the troops remained to protect Australia, the only balls up was their arms still went to Burma, leaving a great shortage in Australia for a while. Had our 9th Division gone there it would have suffered the same fate as our 8th. The 9th went on to very distinguished service in New Guinea.

With the rapid advance of the Japanese through the islands and Australia really vulnerable, John Curtain brought a lot of experienced and distinguished personnel from the Western Desert and put them in charge of training men who had been man powered and forming them into a Voluntary Defence Corp (VDC). Three of these, a captain and two sergeants were stationed in Manjimup, West Manjimup, Dingup, Jardee, Nyamup, Pemberton and Smiths Brook. Together with quite a few other farmers of all ages, I joined the latter group, and because of the shortage of ammunition we were issued with wooden rifles for our drill and for our imaginary attacks, sneaking through bush to wipe out different enemy positions. One such exercise involved our group and one from Jardee who came by bus and met us at the junction of the Lefroy and Nornalup Roads. Captain Robinson, the one in charge, set us to work stepping out 100 yards in our usual paces counting the steps so we knew how many we took for that distance. I didn't find this a problem as on the farm I was used to measuring distances and areas in this way. The two groups then set out in the opposite directions through the bush, using compass bearings and various markers, such as certain trees and stumps, and counting our steps from these to plot a course to a distant meeting point at a junction road in the middle of the route. When we reached the required position there was no sign of the Jardee group. Mind we did have an advantage over the others as, in our group, we had Clem Lefroy and Harry Styles who knew the area well and could probably walked through the bush

and found the meeting place even if we had become lost. Some of us who owned cars, had arranged to wait for the other group to take them back to Jardee, but as time sped by and there was no sign of them and I said I'd have to go home and milk, but would return later. I returned in time to see the poor lost souls arriving, tired and hungry, at just on dark. We had no option but to wait for their return, as we had no idea where they were and where to look for them.

In those days the road to Jardee was gravel and very corrugated. I used to drive with one pair of wheels on the corrugation and the other on the side of the road about a foot away from the posts, as this made a smoother and more comfortable ride. I could hardly get a word out of these chaps and I concluded they were exhausted from their bush walk, but some time later in Jardee I found out that I had scared the life out of them. They reckoned I was missing the road posts by inches and would hit the next one for sure.

We later amalgamated with Jardee and were issued 310 rifles, single shot. All the 303 rifles in Australia had been sent to Britain because the British army had lost their rifles and equipment at Dunkirk. We received ration tickets for the petrol we used attending VDC practices and later, we also received an issue of two bottles of beer in acknowledgement of our voluntary work each Sunday. This was really appreciated, as during the war, beer was often hard to get. Later still we were issued with 303 rifles together with ammunition for practice on the farm and to enable us to adjust the sights on the rifles for accuracy. We spent a lot of our training at the Manjimup rifle range. I had used my 22 for many years and was a good a shot with the 303. Clem Lefroy and I were usually battling each other to win in competitions and sometimes I would win the trophy – a bottle of beer.

Snap shooting at 200 yards was my strong point. We had a target, which popped up and down as we fired and we had to fire a shot each time it popped up before it disappeared. We had five shots to fire and it always amazed me that, when the score came up I would have five black dots in the bulls eye and a score of 25 out of 25, which was called a possible. From my end I always felt as if the target had disappeared before I had fired the last of the shots. The rifles issued to us had to be looked after in the manner that was drilled into us.

An Owen machine gun had also been issued to me. These fired 9mm bullets and were excellent weapons for jungle warfare, as they only had nine moving parts, which had to be kept well oiled. I was allowed this at home, together with bullets, so that I could practice using it, for they needed to be fired in short bursts. If fired too long they were most difficult to keep on the target. We also practised on the range with a Bren gun, a good and accurate machine which fired 303 bullets from a 30 shot magazine, which could be changed in seconds, and a water cooled machine gun, a World War I model which also used 303 bullets.

As well as these guns we used mortars, loaded with dummy mortars; also, using our 303 rifles, and a specially adapted 303 cartridge, together with a rod

which was inserted down the barrel and had an attachment for a hand grenade, we could launch a dummy grenade for a distance of a couple of hundred yards. We did throw live grenades. Sergeant Thompson, our Middle East veteran, had a trench dug on the old golf course, and in this, one at a time, we were coached on how to launch the grenade. The safety pin was pulled out with a single straight arm like a bowler, the grenade had to be hurled towards a bunch of trees. “Keep calm!” he commanded, “and in the event of the grenade falling back into the trench, you must throw yourself on to your tummy with your boots, heels together, pointing towards the grenade, and it is a privilege to throw myself on top of the grenade to save your life.” He survived his training sessions with us, so he must have taught us well.

By this time we had all been issued with uniforms and a military number. I cannot remember what mine was.

To add to our training we were taught how to throw dummy grenades while crawling on our bellies. When close enough to the target, by drawing one knee up beneath us and then doing a great lurch with that knee, and at the same time doing that overarm throw, it was amazing how far we could lob the missile. Another test was that, while we were advancing, half sticks of gelignite would be thrown amongst us to get us used to advancing under fire. A half stick of gelignite going off close to us could not harm us, but we were warned not to pick one up under any circumstances. Sticks of gelignite were also secured in a tight circle around a tree, then when the fuse was lit, Captain Robinson yelled, “Hold your mouths open!” I was standing on a log behind a tree and I am sure the concussion of the blast made the log jump a foot. Unrestricted gelignite goes off with an unbelievably loud explosion, and this one brought the tree down. The reason for this exercise was so that we would know how to use trees to block roads if we were invaded.

There were exercises conducted at Windy Harbour, but, because of the condition of the track these could only be taken in summer and, even then, the sandy track could cause bogging. Due to having cows to milk, I was not able to join in any of these.

After the Americans came to Australia and the famous Battle of the Coral Sea was won, the Japanese invading force that had been heading for Australia was pushed back from the islands in the Pacific; and we of the VDC (Voluntary Defence Corps) were disbanded. We handed in our weapons and, with no ceremony, or recognition on the part we had played in preparing for a likely Japanese invasion we went quietly back to our jobs.

When the American soldiers poured into Australia in their thousands we were asked to improve our food production. The price of potatoes was set at twelve pounds ten ($25.00) a ton, which was an immediate improvement on the eight pound ($16.00) we had been getting. I immediately planted as much as I could cope with. For the first time we planted potatoes using a mould board plough. Jack Omodei and his son Robbie (who later became the father of our present member of parliament, Paul Omodei) came to help. I had Roland pulling my plough and Robbie had Bessie, who was not keen on

co-operating so he pulled her reins to make one length of rope and made her gallop around him in a circle until she raised a good sweat, then put her back in the plough and had no more trouble. Sister Betty was one of the planters and walked along with a planting bag over her shoulder and strapped to her waist, while two hands were busy dropping the seed. Later Betty and I helped the Omodei's plant their crop. In those days most farmers helped each other. Jack Omodei enjoyed a glass of wine and regularly had a 5-gallon keg of claret sent from the keg for refilling. I could never call on him without having a glass thrust into my hand. Although he was older than I we always enjoyed each other's company. His wife was also a delightful person and very interesting to talk to.