Stanley James Richards

I attended country primary schools at Minding (near Wagin) and Tarwonga (near Williams). I won a Country Scholarship to high school and attended Bunbury Senior High School where I passed the Junior Certificate exams and the Leaving Certificate exams. I was elected as School Captain in my final year and won many sports awards while at the school. (School Athletics and Tennis Champion and a State Schoolboys Boxing Championship).

Having applied to join the Education Department, I was appointed as a monitor at Narrogin Agriculture College on leaving school in 1943. When the College closed down owing to wartime requirements, I was posted to Gosnells Primary School for the remainder of the year.

I applied to join R.A.A.F., initially as a Physical Education Trainer, but after tests and interviews, I was advised to join as a Wireless Operator/Mechanic, which I did. My training was done at Point Cook in Victoria. At the end of the course I (and eleven other men) were selected to enter a course in Ultra High Frequency Direction Finding, a course which was designed to help pilots locate their position when returning from missions.

At the completion of our training, we were sent to Townsville to await posting. While waiting here, our work consisted of occasional wireless operation, making concrete floors for huts on the station, cutting firewood for the stoves and (rarely thank Heavens) doing latrine duty.

We finally boarded a ship – a sailing ship, which had been converted to power by means of a propeller, which projected sideways from the stern. This resulted in a slightly twisted forward motion, which bought on bouts of sea-sickness to all who had not previously been aboard her. The only time that all aboard forgot about their sickness was when a submarine alert was sounded and a couple of depth charges were exploded. A very effective cure. We arrived at New Guinea on 25th November 1943. I left the Pacific at the end of the war – Sept 1945.

Once in New Guinea our group was split into two. My group was sent on to Goodenough Island and the other group to Kirawina Island. This was so that our vector lines from the aircraft could be mapped to an exact location. We had to set up our station in an area of Kunai grass, which was mown down from a height of about two metres to about ten centimetres so that no grass or forest trees would reflect incoming signals.

We found that we were attached to 109 Fighter Squadron, at a camp about two kms away. When any of our group was off duty for a day or two we could go to the main camp for meals and sleep. Our party of six was accommodated in a large tent raised to the height of 44 gallon petrol drums and each of us made beds from timber, cut from a nearby forest and strips of rubber cut from aircraft tubes – very comfortable.

An interesting sidelight – I cut six stumps of various lengths from the forest to support steps up to our raised floors. These were buried about a foot deep in the ground and after a week, I discovered that all six of them had started to grow leaves

and limbs. So much for the fertility of tropical New Guinea. Our camp was about half a kilometre from a small river in which we swam almost daily. The size of this stream varied daily with the 2 o'clock downpour of rain, which came almost daily.

Our work in the Direction Finding station progressed smoothly. We gave bearings to Beau fighter pilots as they returned from bombing or fighting missions. Some of the pilots who knew that our operation depended on "line of sight" bearings would be rather mischievous, much to our chagrin. They would call for a bearing then dive below the ridge of the Owen Stanley ranges. Then they would climb and call again. This threw us into a panic, until they burst into laughter and told us that they were not lost after all. We were never very impressed with this. We saw very little of actual combat, but occasionally had to take refuge in out slit trench when a lone Japanese plane would fly in on the tail end of a returning bombing squadron to avoid our radar. We had a Queen's rifleman who was determined to shoot down one of these with his .303 rifle and the help of Tracer bullets. We could watch the curve of the Tracer as it curved behind the plane even though our mate Sawl sighted about 200 metres ahead. We weren't keen on his identifying our trench with these but applauded his efforts.

Off duty time was spent in a variety of ways. We swam at the local beach; we made so-called "foreigners' in the form of bracelets from Australia coins and Jungle Juice from green coconuts both of which we sold to nearby American units. One night our Jungle Juice caused a minor scare to me. I was on duty at midnight when I heard ear-splitting screams coming through the Kunai grass. I looked out at the clear moonlight to see Mad Pat running towards our station carrying the huge container in which our latest batch had been gurgling for some weeks. Behind him ran Thomo, Shep, Sawl, and Jack trying to catch him. Pat burst through the door, slamming the container on the floor. "You've gotta try it Ricko. You've gotta try it," he yelled drunkenly. "It's bloody wonderful stuff. Just try it before these bastards drink it all." By that time, the others had arrived, captured Mad Pat and the container, and were on their way back to the tent. "Don't touch the stuff", advised Jack. "Not while you're on watch". By next morning, the container was bone dry and everyone in the tent lay there moaning until I got them down to the river for a swim, so I never did taste this "bloody wonderful stuff". However, I came down with Dengue fever the next day and spent a few days on hospital drinking a blue medicine called "Blue Heaven" which quietened the pain in the joints for about two hours.

On one occasion, Shep and I had two days off so decided to walk around the shore of Goodenough, taking a good supply of food and tinned milk with us. About half way around, we came upon a camp of natives. There was a party of 12 year old girls playing soccer on a small level patch, bare breasted as they always were. Tom, one of the men, invited us into the camp. He had been on an Australian ship so spoke English well. We opened up our lunch bags and offered some "kai-kai" to those who were seated around us. They offered us crushed coconut in return and cups of tea without milk. Shep pulled out a tin of milk and offered "susu" to the others. All the girls wrinkled their noses up in disgust, but Tom explained that the only milk on the island was "woman's milk" and Shep should put it back in his bag. Just then two figures in American uniform could be seen coming along the beach. Tom immediately told all the girls to disappear into the jungle and stay there. He explained that they had bad fellows come into the camp before. "Only after the girls", he explained. "Bad guys", he said. When the two Americans came up to us, they

asked where the girls were. “No girls in this camp”, said Tom. “All gone to another camp”. Shep and I finished our lunch and continued our trip around Goodenough.

Our other off-duty activity was sport, combining with the main camp to make up a team. We organised a softball team and challenged the 7th top team of the nearby U.S. Paratroop Brigade. We always liked to play American teams because they invited us back to their mess for a meal afterwards, where we fed on roast chicken, followed by fruit salad and ice cream instead of our doubtful stew with bread and “axle grease”. Having defeated the 7th team, we were asked to play the 5th team next time. We duly won again, probably because we had five State or 1st Division cricket players and two State baseball players in our unit. Ultimately, we graduated to playing their top team, but could never beat them, but we enjoyed some marvellous meals. We had a pretty efficient Aussie Rules team, which trained regularly; again, in this sports-mad unit there were four V.F.L. players, and several League players, all keen on keeping fit and keeping ball skills up to date. On one occasion, we challenged an American unit to a game, one quarter of rugby and one quarter of football. The game was much fun and confusion and no one could work out who won because of the different scoring systems, so an American decided that the match would be decided by a distance contest. Their star was to throw the rugby ball and our star was to kick the ‘aussie rules’ ball. Their guy threw the long thin ball a measured 70 yards. Our man, Albie Rodda, a half back from North Melbourne, kicked a mighty drop kick 73 yards. I heard he was later given a beer with his roast chicken at the mess.

One day we got word that, as the war was moving north we were to be moved to Aitape on the north east coast of New Guinea. I was to be left on duty at Goodenough while the rest of our group was to go on ahead to set up the new station. I served 62 hours at my station, grabbing a cup of coffee and a snack where I could. Then someone rang to say I was to go to the main camp for a plane ride to Aitape. I slept all the way in the plane. I felt great seeing the rest of the boys who had set up camp and even made a bed for me in the tent, so I crashed and slept through until the following morning. On that first afternoon about 5.30 the boys said, “Come with us and we’ll show you the two-up ring”. About 200 metres from the camp we came upon a massive circle of men – about four deep and 100 metres in diameter, almost all were American servicemen, who had been introduced to this Australian game some weeks before. As I always enjoyed a bet on the pennies, I stepped forward and called out, “Ten shillings on the heads!” No one paid the slightest attention to me so I called it again. Shep grabbed my arm and said, “Hey Stan, these are Yanks, try calling a hundred dollars a head. These guys don’t fiddle with little bets.” I put my wallet back in my pocket and we all headed for the mess tent. One interesting sidelight: A few weeks earlier a team of C.I.B. men turned up at Aitape to find out why 7,000 pounds of two-shilling pieces had disappeared from circulation. It turned out that the few Australians there had been busy making engraved bracelets and medallions from the coins to sell to the wealthy Americans. Apparently, no one was charged with this offence, but dire warnings were issued and the making of ‘foreigners’ was curtailed for some time.

At Aitape, I was introduced to an ingenious heating device called a “Woofer”. This consisted of a one-gallon tin filled with aircraft fuel, which hung about four feet from the ground, suspended on a tree. From the bottom of the tin protruded a thin copper pipe. The pipe ran straight down almost to the ground then was bent back into a coil

of two-inch diameter and four inches in length, then the end of the pipe bent back into the coil. When the tap is turned on at the tin and a match applied to the bottom end of the pipe, a flame squirts up through the coil until the coil gets hot then there is a “choof” of blue flame. There follows a “choof, choof” of blue flame which will boil a kettle full of water in about five minutes. These were scattered all over the camp. Occasionally we would see a 44 gallon drum of fuel being rolled into camp from the nearby dump. How no one ever got blown up with these devices I’ll never know. The other aspect of Aitape worth noting was the incredible surf. Although the waves were never more than about a metre in height they could be caught from a quarter of a kilometre out and would carry even a beginner all the way to the beach. Whenever a seaplane crashed, the floats would almost immediately disappear to become superb surfboards. As our camp was virtually on the edge of the beach most of our off duty time was spent surfing. About three waves was enough surfing for the afternoon because the long swim out to the surf break was fairly exhausting.

I was granted 30 days leave from Aitape. Three of us managed to cadge a ride from the camp to the air field and found a plane going as far as Finchaven. We sat on the strip for about 3 hours until a D.C. 3 landed and we asked the pilot if he was going south. “Yep. Townsville.” “Can you give us a lift?” “Yep. If you help us load up.”

At this point, we saw three jeeps loaded with armed men, followed by a truck and two motorcyclists also armed with machine guns. The truck turned out to be loaded with Lend Lease gold in small wooden boxes. We duly carried dozens of these on to the plane, got on board, and sat on them for the take off. All the way to Townsville, I hoped that the plane would crash and I was the only survivor, but it never happened. Another dream of lifetime wealth gone. I managed to get as far as Melbourne without reporting to a transport officer and enjoyed a fortnight with relatives. Hoping to get back to Perth without reporting, thus extending my leave by a few more days, I jumped a train going west. Unfortunately, I was struck with an attack of Malaria between Melbourne and Ballarat and had to report to a medical officer. I spent the next week in Ballarat Hospital.

When I returned from leave, our work at Aitape continued. One afternoon about 4 o’clock, a jeep containing two officers speeded into camp and, broad siding to stop yelled out, “The war is over. The Japs have surrendered.” We then learnt about the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There was an immediate issue of beer and everyone gathered in the mess hut to talk excitedly about what they were going to do when they got home. The drinking went until teatime. Games of poker and two-up started, several men sang songs. My contribution to the entertainment was to sit on a roof beam and turn a back somersault to the ground. Someone yelled out, “Hey! Come out here and see this.” Some guys had undone the bungs of some drums of aircraft fuel and rolled them into the nearby surf. A ‘Very pistol’ set the whole ocean alight and flaming waves rolled into the beach. It was the most spectacular celebratory event of the night.

Next day we all had to continue with our watch duties as we waited for a notification that we were to head home. Finally, with plane and train rides, I found myself back at Katanning with my family. Dad had returned from up north and my brother Arthur was due home from P.O.W. camp in Germany, after his Lancaster had been shot down during a bombing mission, so mum was ecstatic that our family had survived the war.

I guess two aspects of the war had an impact on me. One was that all through my stay in the Pacific the U.S. forces issued a free carton of cigarettes each week to all their men and to all Australians, so I became an addicted smoker. The other, much more beneficial, was that war service entitled me to apply to go to University to continue my education. Not only was the full degree course free, but we were paid a living allowance and were given free vouchers to buy all the textbooks we needed. I would never have had enough finance to do this without this scheme. So, my heartfelt thanks go to the Government for my future life.

I completed my Bachelor of Arts, my Diploma of Education to go with my Teacher Training course and went on to a Bachelor of Education and M.A. preliminary course.

I was selected along with four other graduates to set up youth clubs in five centres. My area was along the Great Southern - Beverley, York, Pingelly, Wagin, and Narrogin. This had to be done in such a way that the club would be operating independently within six months and we could retire from the scene. This worked fine for me. I kept in touch with each club by travelling on my Enfield motorbike and some clubs continued for many years. From this task, I was appointed to a one-teacher school at Piesseville, a village near Wagin. There were 9 classes with one or two students in each class, so preparation of lessons and marking of work saw me working well into every night.

When the usual teacher of that school returned from Long Service Leave, I was asked to report to Merredin Junior High School on the following Monday. Not knowing what Merredin was like, I drove along the Great Eastern Highway for about 240 klms until I came to a village of pub, shop, garage and three or four houses. I asked the garage man if this was Merredin. After he recovered from his laughter, he said, “No son, this is Hines Hill. Another 20 K’s up the road. Good luck.” Merredin turned out to be a town of several thousand people.

After five enjoyable years at Merredin, where I graduated from teaching grade four to teaching the high school grades in all subjects, I was appointed as Senior Master of English at Swanbourne High School, then after 4 years to Narrogin Senior High School and finally to John Curtin Senior High School, the largest school in the State. There were so many classes at this school that I had to hold my English staff meetings for a staff of 74 teachers in the gymnasium. As a result of my work here, I was appointed to lecture at Nedlands Teachers’ College, a newly formed college to prepare secondary teachers for their work throughout the State. This was a paradise to work in as most of our students were university students studying for their Diploma of Education and we must not give more than one assignment per term. This meant that our marking load dropped from some 500 pages of marking per week to an occasional marking of the one assignment.

Over the fifteen years of my work at the college my work load gradually multiplied as I was made Head of the Department for English, then also of Communication Studies and Modern Languages Departments. I was the only member of staff who had more than one department. By 1984, the workload was untenable, to the point where I was preparing lectures for 70 or 80 students while on the run from my office to the lecture room. I decided to cash in on my 140 days of acquired sick leave and

6 months Long Service Leave and retire early before I found an early grave.

My wife and I retired to our house in Mandurah (I had it built four years before I retired) where I had easy access to the beach for fishing, to the local tennis courts for hard-fought games and to the Mandurah Bowling Club where I took up lawn bowls. After winning the novice championship at bowls, together with several other trophies, I became an addict of the game. I took up coaching, became the chief coach of the club, and enjoyed many years of bowling together with my wife. I took up creative writing again, published a novel on Aboriginal life before colonisation, won the south-west prize for poetry in a competition, and a similar prize for song writing. Other than that, my hobbies of leatherwork, cabinetwork, woodcarving, fishing, and bowls have kept me very busy in my retirement. Two months ago, I enjoyed, with my children and grandchildren and their friends, my 80th birthday. This is my story of the war and its outcomes.