
Thelma Dawn Whitehurst

My full name is Thelma Dawn Whitehurst (nee Fathers), born 10 December 1930 in Subiaco WA.

I moved to Geraldton, at age 11 months, with my parents, Lloyd and Thelma Fathers. My Dad came from there to work as a fireman at Central Perth (Old) station, met my mother then. He was sent back to the Geraldton Station where I grew up (for my first 6 years, during the Depression years). I started school in 1937. Life was fairly easy going, no hustle and bustle, was still very hard life for my parents. I had one sister born 1936. "Things" weren't easily available. When war broke out, 1939-45, lots of things changed.

We grew up, with rationing pretty well everything – identity cards (which I still have my parents' one today, ration cards for clothes, sugar, tea, butter, petrol, had to be used for the amounts stipulated only, had to last till the next issue was due. Items became very scarce in lots of departments. Nylon stockings, especially. The thing to use as a replacement was a tanning lotion (same colour). In those days stockings had a seam down back of legs, so a pencil line was drawn down leg instead. Some of these nylons became available through the Americans who were in the town, on ships and the Catalina Flying Boats who were based in Geraldton also later on.

My years as a teenager while war was on, can remember quite a lot. Geraldton also had a RAAF training base, 7 miles out of town, plus various army groups stationed all around us. Some were from Victoria and other places. Being a port, many overseas ships berthed there, also submarines. Some were the British Navy and the USA ones too. I corresponded with quite a few of the British sailors as a penpal. Sometimes the ships were allowed to have visitors to meet with their personnel.

In our local church, St John's Presbyterian, each Sunday, especially night service, would be packed out, with over 200 odd Victorian soldiers. The hymn singing was really something to hear. By this time I was in the Church choir with my mother, sometimes did special solo songs to the congregation. After church we would entertain everyone in the hall with cups of tea and eats, generally socialise with the soldiers etc. My autograph book holds many signatures from these people, along with some small books given me. Often wonder if they all survived.

It was customary to take anyone in the "forces" into our homes, give them some home life and meals etc. When any left Geraldton, per train, we would be there to see them go, give them moral support. A sad time really.

My mother being a marvellous singer (and my Dad too), sometimes went to the RAAF base with others and our Church Minister (who was Padre at the base) for dinner nights then entertained the troops there. One chap used to come to our house every weekend on his leave to stay with us.

Our house every Friday night (after late night shopping over) would become a place for musical evenings. We had a piano (Mother accomplished pianist and organist) it got hammered. That was one part of war years that was enjoyable. Across the road from our house there was a group of older army men in the 19th Garrison. (Mother's cousin was one of them.) They lived in that house for quite some time, also used another one, further down the road, as their cookhouse. Mum and Dad always got an early cup of tea, wake up call. Most of these men could play an instrument or two, one violinist, one on saxophone, one on drums, 2 on the piano. The cousin in this group had a twin, who was out at RAAF base also. Many men would use our house also to change out of uniforms into 'whites' to play tennis, courts near us, and go with us.

All along our beach front there were barb wires, all rolled up, up from the water's edge. Had quite a few scary times. One night we had an air raid siren go off and had to go up onto the sandhills, end of our street. Luckily nothing came of it. We had trenches dug at school, we had to jump into, squat down and hold our hands over our ears and head. Our neighbour and landlord built an air raid shelter in his back yard, in which we were told to use with them if necessary.

Food was scarce, I vowed I would never eat margarine ever again, as it tasted awful then. Making do with our rations was very hard, some black marketing went on too.

When Americans came to town they could get anything. We were given butter, chocolates, cigarettes also stockings and food if we happened to entertain them. They put on a couple of big parties too in the Town Hall for some of the locals.

The RAAF base, being mostly a training base, we had planes flying everywhere, sometimes gave us many a scare. Little did I know it then, my future husband (whom I met in 1948) did his rookie training there in 1943. As clothing was a scarce commodity, my first overcoat was an ex-RAAF ladies one Mum was able to get.

I can remember one time when a Tank Corp battalion was stationed out of Geraldton, a tank came down one of the main streets near our house. We heard an unholy din (noise), rushed out to find a tank had missed turning the corner properly and ended up on the footpath, narrowly missing the building on the corner. Quite a hullabaloo it caused.

I had many relatives, on both parent's sides, in Navy, Army, Airforce etc. Two of Dad's brothers, Army men (one of whom served WWI on Gallipoli also) was caught in Singapore, 15.2.1942, P.O.W. 3 ½ years in Japan, Manchuria). We didn't know he was still alive until 1945, a huge relief when told. (My grandma sent him and 3 other sons to WWI so she must have been a very brave person.)

When war ended, we heard the news, on our radio – immediately my sister and I hopped on our bikes, with a kerosene tin and a stick, rode way up Marine Terrace, banging the tin and shouting out, "War is over". People came out of their houses asking "What's up, why all the noise". "War's over, war's over" we cried, everybody went mad, so relieved and happy.

Took a long time to settle down though and get back to some normality, also be able to buy things again, gradually became available to do so. We were **very** lucky, being a port on the coastline, nothing serious happened to us or our town. Though we learnt after, some enemy submarines had been near at hand. I often had nightmares of Japanese coming up onto the beaches, end of our street, to our house for us.

At 13 ½ years it was during 1944 in June I had to leave High School and get an office job to help out at home to cope, make ends meet. I only earned \$2.00 a week (one pound then) and gave my Mum 10/- (ten shillings = \$1.00 now) for my board and keep. I never finished my 3 years High Schooling, ended up working Accountancy, in 3 businesses before marriage in 1950.

I can remember being child and into teenage years besides all the anxiety of the war to all of us – there were times when we kids were helped to have fun and keep our spirits up best way possible. The older men of the Garrison (over the road house) would often get out in the street and play tennis with us, one of them would give my sister and I 'piggy back' rides on his back as he crawled round our side lawn. We had dances going, and the local picture theatre (cinema) a couple nights a week. My Mum also was a very good dancer as well, and she and Ted (RAAF chap who weekendend our place) won many waltzing competitions. Later taught dances at the Yacht Club also. My Dad had caught

polio in 1933 whilst at the Fire Station. He was partially lame in left leg so wasn't able to do some things physically such as dancing. He lived to 88 years.

I often wonder how many "Forces" people went through Geraldton and off to fight for our country, how many came home. I only hope we helped in our own little way, to them all before they went.

Another way we helped, we all had to save our tins, pots and pans etc, anything we could to help the war effort, a community effort of course. Everyone did their bit for Red Cross parcels, knitting scarves, socks, balaclavas etc which I did also. We packed and sent food parcels when we could and "things" most needed in other parcels.

I think as kids growing up then we were possibly shielded from a lot that went on. I was old enough by the end years of the war to understand more, what it was all about, am lucky to be here to tell the tale.

Geraldton had sandhills up behind most of the town and became good lookout places to see out over the ocean. Of course we had blackout regulations, same as everyone else, safety precautions etc. Friday, late night shopping night, lots of the "Forces" on leave pass would meet up with us (in our main street, Marine Terrace) and others and go home to our houses with us, for some relaxation and companionship.

The RAAF base was also Pilot's training base. One of my cousins, (Mum's side) did his training there, became a Pilot. The day he got his "Wings" at age 19 years was told he was to become an Instructor and the youngest one to do so. He was very disappointed. Later went on to fly, only to end his life in an air show at Pearce Base, after the war ended, leaving his wife and three sons. Many planes were wrecked out and around Geraldton in the countryside.

As Geraldton and surrounding country areas, loss of manpower on farms etc, some businesses – Land Army Girls took over men's jobs and other women stepped in wherever needed as we did through our church. Everybody pitched in while the men were away.

I can remember too at times, some of the RAAF and Army "boys" mainly would get up teams to play each other off at football or cricket, as well a couple of special concerts were put together. Even the ship's crews got in on things as well. Many memories.

Ex-Geraldton-ite Mrs T D Whitehurst.