

Barbara Wolff

Wartime Memories Through Young Kalgoorlie Eyes

My maiden name was Barbara Flett. I was born in the old Kind Edward Memorial Hospital, Subiaco in August 1930. My parents, Jack and Esther Flett, emigrated to Perth, W.A. from the Orkney Islands, north of Scotland, in the 1920's. Dad came out two years before Mom, travelling with fellow carpenter and Orcadian, Tom Scott.

When I was about six months old, my mother followed my father to the Eastern Goldfields where he'd gone with Tom Scott, to find work during the Great Depression. We lived in a small rented house in Burt Street, opposite the Boulder Race Course.

After some time working as mine carpenters, Dad and Tom Scott went into partnership as Building Contractors between 1932 and 1934. Then Tom left to begin his own business in Boulder, whilst Dad continued as a building contractor in Kalgoorlie, based at 34 Wilson Street.

The family increased with the births of two more sons, Donald (Don) in 1932, and Malcolm (Mac) in 1934. In 1936 we moved into a house my father built for us at 199 McDonald Street. Another daughter, Elizabeth (Liz) was born in Kalgoorlie in 1941. Our family were to live there until all except me moved to Perth in 1954.

I stayed to marry a future mining engineer in-the-making, Dayrell Wolff. Dayrell had actually been 'the boy next door' when I was three and he was one in Burt Street, Boulder, before his family moved away! After his graduation Dayrell and I moved to Rosebery, Tasmania in 1959, then in 1975 we moved to Far North Queensland to a small mine north-west of Cairns at Mt Carbine. Dayrell died in 1997 and I came back to live in Perth last year.

The inspiration for writing down childhood memories of WW II, Kalgoorlie style, came from a series of essays written by local schoolchildren, after they'd read about an English child who was evacuated to America during that War, on display at the Goldfields War Museum in 1999. I was on a nostalgic visit after leaving Kalgoorlie to live interstate 40 years earlier.

I asked the attendant, Caron Milner, if the museum would be interested in an item about childhood in Kalgoorlie during the War. Her eager reaction set me off on a memory gathering mission during the rest of my stay in Western Australia, mainly in Perth.

The following represents anecdotal memories of myself, my family and some of my friends. It is not to be construed as the result of the rigorous historical research. I leave that to the true historian. I have written it with the idea that others who were children or adolescents during the period 1939-1945 may be stimulated into providing more memories of their own to perhaps pass on to younger generations around them.

My sincere thanks to my brother Mac Flett, his wife Gloria, my sister Liz Chapman, and friends Dot Gratwick (nee Dillon), Lois Manners (nee Fargus), Norma Rundle (nee Stahl), and Fay Wellard (nee Stearne) for our lively memory sessions and for providing so much additional material. Thank you especially to Faye's sister June Margetts for taking the trouble to write down memories for Fay to send to me. June's story is attached.

I was nine years old when World War II was declared, attending Kalgoorlie Central State School with my two younger brothers. I vaguely remember listening to the announcement over the wireless with my parents and the aura of solemnity and apprehension afterwards.

I can't remember much about the early days of the war. Presumably, life went on fairly normally for children. I have more vivid memories in cameo form, perhaps, of different aspects of my parent's 'War Effort' and changes at school.

On the social side, there was a sense of awe and excitement at all the visiting uniformed friends and strangers filling our home as my parents entertained troops passing through. A friend's first memories were lots of parties as her father, a singer, and mother, a dancer, provided entertainment for servicemen.

One of these uniformed friends, Bill Beasley, was so big, about 6'8" or more tall, and wide with it, the army had uniforms specially made to fit him. I remember a story going around that when a Tobruk Rat, he was surrounded by the enemy. He grabbed his rifle by one end and swung it around like a whirling dervish and scattered them far and wide. On Anzac Day marches in Perth, Bill was easily spotted, head and shoulders above everybody else. My sister remembers the sensation of Bill swooping her up over his head, almost touching the ceiling! She would have been two-three years old at the time.

My mother joined a Women's Volunteer Group whose title I can't remember. They provided refreshments for troop trains passing through Kalgoorlie and I think raised funds for the War Effort as well. She regularly baked a table full of sponges. I was recruited to help beat up the eggs with a manual eggbeater.

Mom used to sit at night industriously knitting khaki socks and balaclavas for troops. A fast knitter, Orkney style, her average was a pair of socks or a balaclava per night. To help with four-needle knitting she asked a local saddler to make her an Orkney-Shetland knitting belt. It had a thickly padded front section with numerous holes, and end-straps and buckle to fasten at the back of her waist. With one long double-pointed needle in one of the holes and the other tucked under her arm, she knitted at an awesome speed! I later used that belt when knitting for my children. It is still in my possession and is still useable.

Then there was the making up of the relief parcels for friends and relatives living overseas. Our rationing was nothing compared to what they had in the U.K., as I was to discover in 1952.

From somewhere I gained knowledge that Dad was not accepted for the armed forces, something to do with 'essential services'. Instead he eventually was attached to the 8th Battalion VDC (Volunteer Defence Corp), Army No. W 72476, in April 1942 and was promoted to Corporal in May 1943. I have vague memories of him going off to training camps with the VDC. Some of his carpenters enlisted in the armed forces. I can remember him reporting that one of his men had a narrow escape when his ship was sunk.

Another vague memory is of Mom learning that her father had died in Westray, Orkney Isles. Her father had been in the field, watching a mock 'dogfight' between two RAF planes when he had a heart attack and died.

Rationing coupons were required when buying petrol, meat, butter, sugar, tea, and clothing, which must have tested the ingenuity of mothers. I remember ration books about the size of an old-style bank pass book, with sheets of postage-stamp size coupons.

Our car was put up on blocks for the duration. Mom took to riding her pushbike everywhere. Memories are of cars being driven with black covers over the headlights with very small holes for light to peep through at night, white painted squares front and back, and white lines along the sides.

A friend referred to ingenious ways mothers overcame clothing shortages. Mosquito netting Bridal gowns used no coupons. Neither did coats out of curtain material, dresses from white linen tea-towel material that came in rolls or clothing from used parachute silk, much in demand. A friend of their family working in a drafting office supplied them with discarded plans made from heavily stiffened lawn or some-such material. Soaked to get rid of starching and wash off the printing, they were transformed into beautiful handkerchiefs with hand crocheted edges. Another friend's mother looked forward to her reaching 10-11 years of age and five feet tall because her clothing allowance would then increase.

There were nightly blackouts. All windows wore blackout curtains – wardens patrolled to check that there were no lights to be seen from the outside of buildings, especially during night-time Air Raid Drills when the eerie sirens would sound. It was believed that if there were no lights showing, then predatory night bombers would pass over our town not knowing it was there!

Air raid shelters of all shapes and sizes became features of most back yards. They varied from sophisticated to simple and were wonderful places for children to play. A friend remembered theirs had humped corrugated iron over it and it was a marvellous obstacle to ride bikes over and over and over!

Listening to Winston Churchill's stirring messages on the radio became a regular event in our family. War news was all around us, over the airwaves, in *the Kalgoorlie Miner* and at the picture theatres on Friday nights – 'kids' night' – fuelling young imaginations.

Much of the school playground was covered in zigzag slit trenches. There were air-raid drills. Children who could ride their bikes home within a certain time were allowed to go there when the siren wailed, I think from the vicinity of the Post Office Clock tower. The others had to dive into the slit trenches, mud and all at times, until the *All Clear* was sounded. One friend had time enough to ride her bike from Boulder Technical School to her home in South Kalgoorlie across the 'flats' between Boulder and Kalgoorlie.

Some remember children wearing ID tags around their necks, as well as either a cork or peg on a cord. There are memories of being instructed at school to get under desks or beds or tables if caught outside, the drill was to lie as flat as we could in the gutter, and bite on our cork or peg to minimize injury from flying shrapnel and avoid biting through our tongues when bombs exploded near us!

A friend remembers speeding home one day during air-raid drill, racing through the house, shouting that there was going to be an air raid and to head for the shelter – only to be met with laughter from the adults.

I remember nightmares about enemy planes over Kalgoorlie, dive-bombing the house, and dogfights between planes overhead.

There was a Munitions Factory where the Hippodrome is or was in lower Hannan Street, with many local women working there.

Youngsters went to special matinees at the Majestic Theatre. Entry was paid with a scrap of aluminium for the War Effort. Many aluminium saucepans, casseroles, kettles etc. were sacrificed.

For a while, girls from Kalgoorlie Central State School went to Boulder State School on Wednesday afternoons where, instead of cooking class, they were taught rudimentary first aid and wound bandages for the War Effort.

One friend remembers going to Church and getting balls of wool to knit socks and scarves for soldiers and sending them food parcels, fruit cakes etc. She remembers mail from family service men and women always being censored, so there was no way of knowing what they were doing, where they were or how long they would be there. If they tried to tell the family, large sections would be cut out of the letter.

Another memory is of children being evacuated from Perth to Kalgoorlie for a few weeks. Perhaps it was after the Japanese bombing in northern parts of Australia.

Some children had fathers away at the war – no one remembered anyone in their class losing someone to the war.

Towards the end of the War we met an English family who'd come to Australia after being bombed out of their home two or three times. The stories they had to tell about air raids they had lived through were the stuff nightmares were made of.

When the Atom bombs were dropped, there was awe at what had been unleashed. To adolescents it seemed the future had a big questions mark over it.

When the end of the war was finally declared a friend remembers crowds of people dancing, doing the Hokey Pokey round the King Pole at the main Hannan-Maritana Street intersection. Another memory is of the pictures being interrupted to announce the end of the War and everyone standing and cheering.

Afterwards there were vivid reports of what occupational forces found – the horrors of German and Japanese concentration camps. The stories of survivors. A friend of my parents, Frank Gascoyne, had been a Prisoner of War on the infamous Burma Railway. Frank was holidaying with us at Esperance. He developed an infection on the back of his hand. My mother applied a lint poultice so hot it raised blisters. Frank didn't feel a thing; he'd had to endure so much worse in captivity a few years earlier.

An Air Force Barracks had been built on the Boulder Race Course during the war. Afterwards my father got the contract to dismantle part of it, transport the material to Esperance and build the Fresh Air League Home on the beachfront, at the, then eastern outskirts of the town between the New Jetty and the Newtown Jetty. It is still there today as a YHA Backpackers hostel.

The real impact of WW II in Europe was brought home to me on a visit to the U.K. with my parents in 1952. There was still rationing of some items. We took a coach tour from Edinburgh down the West Coast to Land's End, returning through the centre of England. In towns like Exeter, we were told the most heavily bombed area in the U.K., we drove past streets of houses that were just shells, with gaps in between where houses had been. On the way to the U.K., a Ship's Engineer told me of walking home from school after an Air Raid and finding a whole block of houses flattened. So many terrible stories everywhere we went.

Despite all the War related activity in Kalgoorlie, I realized that we, as young children, didn't really know what war was about! We seemed to be such innocents compared to children of the same age who'd been through the real thing. For them the War was no game!