Towards Peace
A worker’s journey

Writing about oneself requires some egotism, but I have never sought personal power nor had high ambitions in any sphere of life and have always found great strength in just being among workers at job level. Though I have never sought high positions as an individual, I have lived my life with a grand objective always in mind: it has been my hope that the peoples of the world will one day be free from poverty and armed conflict. Perhaps I will not live to see it, but I believe that eventually all in the world will be free from poverty, unchecked disease, oppression and war.

My life to the present has been made up of three ‘wents’: I went to school, I went to the war and I went into the Waterside Workers Federation. All three ‘wents’ were educational in one way or another, with Federation membership and involvement in industrial, political and social events of the post-war years as the most meaningful part of my life.

Unable to get a regular, permanent job during the 1930s, I joined the army in October, 1939. I was fed, clothed and taken in semi–luxury conditions in the old Strathaird to the Middle East early in 1940 where I was supplied with a rifle and the other paraphernalia of military life. The war experience caused me some deep thinking, as patriotism was not one of the reasons I had joined the army.

The depression, war and post–war experiences were responsible for my involvement in the anti–war movement. My wife and I take pride in the fact that none of our three sons has ever had to wear a uniform. Due to the efforts of millions throughout the world, a third world war has been averted despite former prime minister Menzies’ prediction in 1950 of ‘war in three years’ and his commitment of our troops to the Vietnam war during the 1960s.

Being a Federation member always made my activities in the anti–war movement just a little easier. The Federation’s role and reputation were acclaimed, not only throughout Australia, but internationally also. As a delegate to the World Peace Congress in Moscow in 1962, and again as Australia’s representative to the Warsaw Presidential Meeting of World Peace Councillors in 1973, I learned of the international reputation of the Waterside Workers Federation. Today, as much as during the Vietnam years, ordinary workers need to participate in shaping our future. The serious and disturbing move to the right reflected at the ballot box after the 11 November 1975 dismissal of the Whitlam government by sir John Kerr shows the need for all progressive people and organisations to work harder to achieve a better Australia.

Phil O'Brien, April 1976.
Reasons

This autobiography records the period from my father’s birth in 1895 until the present time, the early 1990s. I have written it for several reasons but will mention only two.

Most important is my desire for a world free from war, although while so many small conflicts still bedevil many parts of the world, this always seems an impossible dream. However, since the end of world war II, we have witnessed a tremendous movement for world peace embracing every country of the world with millions of ordinary people playing their parts in various ways. My main objective is to persuade the present and future generations to become involved in the general world peace movement.

There are numerous organisations that have that grand objective as their ultimate goal. The fact that there has been no major world conflict since 1945 is due, I believe, in no small measure to the general world wide peace movement. Many times the superpowers have been very close to actual conflict but each time reason, perhaps encouraged by the knowledge that unbelievable suffering would follow any nuclear conflict, prevailed.

A second reason I have written this story is a personal one. I would like all of my immediate family – my sons and their wives, my grandchildren and great grandchildren – to pass this story down to future generations who I hope will all be living in a world of permanent peace. They can then say that some of their ancestors tried in their lifetime to help them enjoy the most prized possession of all: life itself.


Chapter 1.

My Father and the War to End All Wars.

Will they never fade or pass!

The mud, and the misty figures endlessly coming

In file through the foul morass,

And the grey flood–water lipping the reeds and grass,

And the steel wings drumming.

Vance Palmer
Nineteen fourteen saw Michael James O'Brien working for New South Wales railways around Coffs Harbour, Casino and Lismore. Life, particularly for ordinary people, was difficult. When the Australian government called for volunteers shortly after the outbreak of war in Europe in August 1914, Mick joined the army, the 1st AIF (Australian Imperial Forces) at Lismore. He enlisted on 12 October and was posted to the 15th Battalion stationed at Enoggera, Brisbane. His army number was 473.

My father, Mick O'Brien, had been born in Armidale, a small country town in the New England district of New South Wales, to working class parents on 4 April 1895. Michael’s father, also Michael James, was a bricklayer who, along with his wife, Susan, died in the early 1900s. The children – three girls, Clarence, Muriel, and Mabel, as well as Michael – were sent to live with various relatives. The girls went to Queensland and Michael to Sydney.

War on behalf of England beckoned enticing if hazy opportunities for fit young battlers throughout all states of the Federation of Australia, itself still youthful.

Army enlistment records show that Mick gave his age as 21 years 5 months, although he was only 19. Similarly, when I enlisted in 1939, many young fellows overstated their age by a couple of years – this solved the problem of getting parents’ or guardians’ written consent.

At the time of the first world war my father’s battalion was simply known as the 15th. In both wars, a battalion consisted of around a thousand men. Historians during and after the second world war began to distinguish between the first and second generation battalions (between, say, the 1/15th and 2/15th), recruited from the same areas of Australia and trained in the most appropriate training camp, usually the nearest to where they lived.

During both wars, men such as Mick O'Brien from northern New South Wales trained at Enoggera in Brisbane. Such men were part of the 1st/15th or 2nd/15th respectively.

After training at Enoggera, the 1/15th Battalion moved in November to Broadmeadows camp north of Melbourne. With the 1/16th Battalion, they left Railway pier, Port Melbourne on 22 December aboard the SS Ceramic bound for the Middle East. Two other battalions, the 1/13th and the 1/14th, also departed Melbourne at this time on another vessel. Intense training in the desert after their arrival in Egypt left the men superbly fit.

The soldiers spent their leave in Cairo and Alexandria. Many young AIF men had their first sexual experiences in the brothels in Wazzir and Burka streets in Cairo and Sister Street in Alexandria. For less physical entertainment they visited the Sphinx and the Pyramids.
The 15th Battalion was an infantry battalion. The word infantry means exactly what a novice to war might expect: a band of youths. Originally designed to distinguish infant foot soldiers from mature cavalry men, the infantry came to mean the group of front line soldiers.

On 10 April, 1915, the 1/15th Battalion boarded two ships, the Australind and the Se Eang Bee at Alexandria to travel to the Gallipoli Peninsula calling briefly at Mudros Island enroute. During the journey the men were issued with cloth caps to wear at the landing. The army believed that slouch hats would be too conspicuous to the enemy. The soldiers thought that what they would be wearing on their heads would be the least of their worries. They were right.

The Australian troops alongside English soldiers landed on 25 April. The Australind and the Se Eang Bee went as close to the beach as possible, where the men got into smaller row boats to make the landing on Cape Helles.

Mick took part in several stunts (as actions were called) which commenced at Cape Helles and included Quinn’s Post, Popes Hill and Shrapnel Gully. Conditions throughout these stunts were terrifying with only the occasional rest back on the beach area. Ordinary soldiers, like Mick and me, from both world wars referred to actions as stunts.

During one of the rest periods Mick was a member of a work party that was unloading supplies. The cases were marked as food, but one was accidentally broken open and found to contain rum. Most of the work party, including Mick, got very drunk. His army record of 11 July, 1915 read: “Found guilty of being drunk at Gallipoli whilst on duty and in the presence of the enemy, awarded 96 hours FP.”

‘Field punishment’ was a possible death sentence of four days back at the front line.

A major action by the 1/15th Battalion on 8 August was an attack on Abdul Rahman Bair, known to Allied troops as Hill 971. The stunt was a disaster and the many casualties included Mick who, early in the attack, received gun shot wounds in the leg and hip. He was left to lie in the field. The following day he was rescued. After first aid treatment on the Peninsula he was evacuated to the hospital on Mudros Island.

Although not overjoyed at being wounded, Mick was relieved to have survived the hell of the Gallipoli Peninsula and considered himself fortunate to be out of the battle area. The 1/15th Battalion left the Peninsula in the second week of December that year with the dubious distinction of having, along with the other Queensland battalion, the 1/9th, the most casualties of all AIF units during the campaign. The 1/15th casualties were: 439 killed in action, 111 later dying from wounds; 7 dead from disease; 520 wounded in action and 18 taken prisoner.
Mick’s hip and leg wounds proved troublesome. After Mudros he was sent to Lemnos Island Hospital, then to Malta and from there to the hospital at Heliopolis just outside Alexandria. Finally he was repatriated to Australia aboard the Kanowna in January 1916. He was hospitalised in Brisbane for some months. Mick thought the war was over for him but, being young and in otherwise good physical condition, he improved rapidly. He was declared fit for further service.

In September he left Brisbane for England aboard the Clan MacGillivray. Mick disembarked at Plymouth in November. Rejoining his battalion two months later in France near the town of Mametz, he was soon back in action. Again he was wounded, but this time he remained on duty.

By early April the men knew something big was being planned. The terrible bloodshed of 1916 and early 1917 saw the German army now settled on their infamous Hindenburg Line. It was know as such by the Allies but was called the Siegfried Line by the Germans. It was an 160 kilometre heavily fortified German front in northern France not far from the Belgian border. Bloody mud drenched battles were fought around the Hindenburg Line. The prize for the Germans was control of northern France and possible entry into England. The Allies aimed for the eventual outcome of bursting the Hindenburg Line to allow entry into Germany through Belgium. Despite their huge losses in securing the Hindenburg Line, few Australian troops saw Germany except as POWs. The mood among allied soldiers was one of discontent and disgust at much army bungling. The 1/15th attacked Bullecourt on 10 April, 1917 with tank support for the first time in the history of Australian armies. The tank was first used by the British at the battle of the Somme in September 1916. But the tank commanders were worried about the dangers of ‘friendly’ shell fire. They refused artillery support. With tanks breaking down in fog and snow, the battalion was routed.

Of the 340 men who went into the battle, only 52 returned. Many were killed and wounded while others, including Mick, were taken prisoner. When captured, Mick wisely told the Germans that he had been a farmer in Australia. He was sent to work on a farm near the town of Schniedmühl. He was able to live well, with the attraction of some social life in the nearby village. Periods on the farm were interrupted when he was sent back to the POW camp at Kriegslagerwahn.

At the camp, prisoners were asked to volunteer to fight the young Red Army in the Soviet Union. Mick would not volunteer, but others did. As early as 1917, supposed enemies were collaborating against the Soviet Union, in theory, no—one’s enemy. This culminated in general Ironside’s post—war international army which invaded the Soviet Union in a covert stunt, bankrolled by nations which had been in bloody conflict for 5 years.

At war’s end on 11 November, 1918, Mick was sent to England. He returned to Australia in March, 1919. Mick was discharged in Brisbane after having been in the 1st AIF just four months short of five years. He was convinced that the terrible bloodshed of
1914–18 would never be repeated. Many others of the time shared his conviction that the Great War had been the ‘war to end all wars’.

It is now widely accepted that world war I was nothing more than a trade war between the colonial powers of Germany and England. The tragedy was that so many Australians decided voluntarily to take part in this far away conflict. Their courage was undoubted, but I believe that, even if they had not taken part in Britain’s trade war, post-war Australia would have been much the same – that is, depression–racked almost until the start of world war II in 1939. The fact that approximately 417,000 volunteered to fight overseas during 1914–18 reflected the misplaced patriotism that was fuell by the conservative forces and the media which were dedicated to orchestrating the tune of the English piper.

That Anzac Day is a celebration disturbs me a great deal even though I still march with my battalion, the 2/15th 9th Division. I take part with deep feeling for all those who fell, yet still I know that this day marks what was in reality an invasion of Turkey. I am concerned that while such a day remains on our calendar it will continue to be used by people and organisations with vested interests in war.

I would mention the example of Norman Harvey, the biographer of the 1/9th Battalion, a Queensland battalion of world war I. Harvey states that:

‘The landing at Gallipoli although a small portion of the territory originally aimed at was seized, was a wonderful success, if we consider the results actually achieved’

Later in the book Harvey cites one of these wonderfully successful results. At Gallipoli the 9th Battalion had a 94 percent casualty rate due to death, wounds or sickness.

In even wider historical terms, Gallipoli represented a victory by an Islamic nation, Turkey, over a major western power, Britain. During my own experiences in the Middle East in the second world war, I saw the mishandling of western diplomatic relations with Arabs, the rotten fruit of which today poses the greatest threat to world peace. The recent US/Iraq conflict is an example of this.

The cold statistics of Australia’s involvement in world war I hold little comfort:

| Volunteers 416,809 |
| Served overseas 331,781 |
| Died in action 59,342 |
| Wounded 152,171 |

The 50% casualty rate for Australia was attributed by many soldiers to British strategy in the deployment of colonials. As they went into action on the Western Front in 1917–18, Australian troops would baa–baa like sheep to demonstrate their feelings about the way they were used as cannon fodder.
Chapter 2

Family

As though their flesh were hewn from the warm stone
Of these unchanging hills, and the quiet flow
In their veins were the current of the old, deep river
Silently sliding past the wharf to sea.

Nan McDonald

Permanent work, particularly for unskilled ex-soldiers, was not easy to obtain.
Mick had several jobs around Brisbane on discharge.

After marriage in 1920 to Florence Finnimore he paid a deposit on a house, the total cost of which was £500. Situated in William Street (now Plumer Street) Sherwood, it had no water nor electricity.

I was born in the front bedroom of the family house in Plumer Street, on 9 October, 1920.

The first people to leave an impression on me, apart from my family, were the Beers who had come to live next door. The family were Mr and Mrs. Beer (he was an electrician and amateur radio technician) and their children Roy, Les and Thelma. Roy, the eldest, became my minder in later years at Sherwood School. Les was in the 2/15th Battalion and was wounded at the battle of El Alamein in October, 1942.

Before I was five the Beer boys used to take me to the matinee at Sherwood picture theatre on a Saturday afternoon. They both smoked Cavaliers, 6 for 3d (3 c). Despite my objections they wanted to make sure I had a few draws so that I would not be able to tell on them. Those smoke draws were terrible; I can still remember the coughing and the tears they gave me. As a result I have never smoked in my life. Our families enjoyed many pleasurable outings together and remained close friends even after the Beers had moved to Corinda and Scarborough, other Brisbane suburbs.

I was pleased as punch, when Thelma and her friend Gwen Carter bestowed an honour on me. At that time school children at Sherwood State were allowed to bring a friend to school – usually a child about to enter the school next year – for half a day on Fridays. There I would be, escorted to school each Friday between the arms of Thelma and Gwen. I was four years old at that time.
In the early 1920s Mick opened a wood depot at Sherwood railway station. Wood stoves were prevalent in the district. He also began what he called a ‘Car for Hire’ service. Up to the depression Mick made a comfortable living from these ventures.

My mother’s parents came from the Devon area in England where her older sister was born in 1888. Mum, the next in the Finnimore family, was born in Brisbane in 1891. Her father was a bricklayer. There are several buildings in Brisbane, such as Perry House on the corner of Albert and Elizabeth Streets, which he helped construct. My mother told me that her father always helped carry the Bricklayer’s Union banner every Labour Day until he died in 1912.

Phillip Pickard Finnimore had married Mary Ann Hale in Devon in 1887. With their new born baby, they set out for Australia the next year. The Finnimore ancestors had been agricultural labourers in England, with records of some family burials in paupers’ graves. Both mum and dad had descended from ordinary working class people.

Mum’s work experience was limited as, in the early part of this century, girls just had to stay at home to help their mothers. But both she and her sister Bertha had worked in the most exploitative of industries, the rag trade. Initially they worked for a trial period without wages. Then, if they were considered satisfactory, they were employed for a miserable weekly wage. Each day the sisters walked three kilometres from Paddington to the city and back. Their employer was knighted in later years and died a millionaire. Such are the benefits of the free enterprise system, but not for workers without union organisation – that was the rag trade in the early 1900s.

Towards the end of 1925 my mother won £100 in the Golden Casket, Queensland’s State lottery. This was a great occasion and with the help of this win, dad bought a new Mystere Overland car. It was a beauty – huge wheels, running boards and soft hood.

Over school holidays and the Christmas New Year period of 1925–26, dad, mum, myself and mum’s brother, Hubert, set off on what was then a long tough drive. We headed for dad’s home town of Armidale where we stayed with his aunt and uncle. There was no bitumen on the roads from Brisbane to Armidale, but there were hundreds of gates to be opened and shut. This was my main job. Each night we camped alongside the road. Dad would cut saplings for tent poles. During that short period in Armidale I got lost a couple of times, as all the small brick houses in the town looked the same to me.

From Armidale we journeyed to the coast at Coffs Harbour. Though the trip from Coffs Harbour to Brisbane was a long one, it was exciting. Bridges over the creeks and rivers were few and far between; ferries or flat bottomed punts were used to transport the few cars from one side to the other. It was not unusual to come to a wide river and find on that day, and sometimes for a couple of days, the ferry would not be running because of the strong winds. We would camp on the banks of the river to wait until the ferry began working again. From memory, between Coffs Harbour and Brisbane, there were
some thirty ferries to be used, two of which were between Southport and Brisbane – one to cross the Coomera river and the other to cross the Logan.

When the 1926 school year began, I was keen to go. It was a great day when the Beer children, all three of them, took me to Sherwood State School and I started what was to be ten years as a pupil. It was at this time that Mr Beer gave me a crystal radio set. I considered myself to be one of the elite in society with this valuable acquisition. It had a cat’s whisker to receive signals. I remember only two radio stations – one public, the other commercial. Earphones were needed to receive broadcasts. I spent many nights listening to this wonder of communications.

My brother Mervyn was born in 1926. It was great for me to have a brother, but the six years between us meant we were never close. There were no complications with Mervyn’s birth. The event had contrasted with my birth. At that time medical staff thought that either mum or I would die.

Chapter 3

School Days and the Great Depression

From where the nearest suburb and the city proper meet

My window–sill is level with the faces in the street

Drifting past, drifting past

To the beat of weary feet

While I sorrow for the owners of those faces in the street.

Henry Lawson

During the depression years of the late 1920s and early 1930s, my father’s car for hire business diversified. It was not a decision motivated by finance. Mick helped many families to take what was known as a ‘midnight flit’. With little or no paid work, most families were in debt. A shift from one house to another temporarily evaded the people to whom these unfortunates owed money – butchers, bakers and other small businesses. It was a vicious circle but, despite the desperation, the ones with a sense of humour in those not–so–good old days were always capable of some laughter. Among those who saw the funny side were many who had played their part in the ‘war to end all wars’. The depression period offered no place that could be called fit for heroes to live. The economic and social conditions of the depression meant little to me as I fronted for classes at Sherwood State School.

As I have said, Merv and I both attended Sherwood State School. The school, eleven kilometres from Brisbane, was the first in the district and opened as the West
Oxley State School on 25 March, 1867 with A G Boyd as the first head teacher. In 1878 the name was changed from West Oxley to Sherwood.

Sherwood had one of the first sugar mills in Queensland built on the banks of the river during the 1860s. There was also a floating sugar mill boat called the Walrus which plied the river area crushing cane from the several small cane farms along the bank. The Walrus ceased operations when a load of crushed cane caused its bottom to collapse. Cane farming was gradually abandoned mainly because of a series of severe frosts which crippled the industry for the Sherwood district.

In 1880 cotton was grown by Mr Dunlop at Oxley and a gin was set up by Mr A Boyd near the Dunlop farm at Corinda. During the 1920s, ‘30s and into the late 1940s, many farms dotted the maps of the district from Oxley to Chelmer.

On the sporting side, Queensland’s first golf club was at Chelmer, founded in 1896. The nine hole course meandered along the banks of the Brisbane River. The club inherited a property built in 1893 as a club house. The club house has reverted to its first status as a private home. The first amateur Queensland Championships were played on this course in 1900. This club moved to Yeerongpilly in 1903.

My early years at school were uneventful. My learning ability was average and I was consistently in the lower half of the class. I tried hard but was a slow learner – I regard myself as a plodder, an ordinary student.

During the late 1920s, dad would take me to the baths at the end of Ferry Street of a Sunday morning. In those baths in the river, just a row of wooden piles in the form of a square, I learnt to swim. Although our parents did not allow us to swim in the river or Oxley Creek, we did. Like all kids we disobeyed our parents and we did plenty of swimming in both creek and river. Once my minder, Roy Beer, who could not swim, but regularly dived into deep water in Oxley Creek, almost drowned. He was saved by Rob Anderson, a good athlete, who later boxed regularly at the old Brisbane Stadium.

The doctors suggested that it may have been from swimming in the creeks and river that I ended up in the Wattlebrae Children’s Hospital early in 1931. While I was in hospital a flood hit Brisbane and our Sherwood district in particular. Only the 1974 flood has been worse than that of 1931.

In the Robb family’s old bakehouse in Thomas Street, Sherwood, a number of us young blokes used to train in the boxing arts. Cliff Mair trained with us. Mair was the first of the Sherwood district lads to be killed in action, during the Syrian campaign in 1941.

Apart from the war years, from the early 1930s to the mid 1950s, my father Mick and I went weekly to the old Brisbane Stadium (now Festival Hall) where we were fortunate enough to witness some of the greats of the boxing arena: Ambrose Palmer,
Jack Carroll, Ron Richards, the Americans Johnny Hutchison, Jackie Wilson; and many other top fighters.

As the depression of the ‘30s deepened the unemployed became more numerous and relief workers chipped footpaths and worked on the Sherwood School paddocks. Among the unemployed were unskilled workers and former white collar workers.

Despite the desperate problem of unemployment, much sport was played. It was a cheap recreation. Cricket, tennis and football teams were made up of many of the unemployed. Tennis particularly was popular with the Graceville and District Tennis Association having about 1,000 registered members. Tennis courts were everywhere; in Graceville Avenue alone there were twelve. It was not uncommon for a few of the unemployed to band together to level off some land and help build a court if the landowner wanted one. Competition was keen, with games played during the week and over the weekend. Before I went into the army at Redbank in 1939, cricket and football were my chief entertainment.

In the early ‘30s, encouraged at school by a great friend and teacher, Jimmy Nixon, I developed a keenness for sport. In sport, unlike my studies, I was better than average. During the mid ’30s I achieved the distinction of being made captain of the cricket, football and tennis teams. I was also selected for the Queensland School Boys Australian Rules football team to tour Melbourne in 1934 and Canberra in 1935. As members of the Queensland Schoolboys cricket side, Sherwood schoolmate Finlay Mitchell and I toured Melbourne in 1935. I was the only boy from Sherwood school to tour Melbourne with the Aussie Rules team in 1934, but the following year two other Sherwood lads travelled with the team to Canberra: Geoff Gourlay, who played Rugby Union for Australia after the war, and Peter Lawton.

In 1933 I was awarded a trophy as the pupil of the year. This caused consternation among some of my fellow pupils. As I have said my scholastic ability was average and my main rival for the pupil of the year prize was a brilliant student. He has been a barrister and is now a judge. But my friend, mentor and teacher, Jimmy Nixon, said to me ‘You're right mate, you will be pupil for this year’. Sure enough, I was. My chief contender, besides being an excellent scholar, was a good footballer. After the war, he played Rugby Union for Australia. He was also a top cricketer, but had absolutely no tennis ability. With Jimmy Nixon on my side I won the pupil of the year by a close margin. I fancy that Judge Edmund Broad would still rue that decision which saw Phil O'Brien beat him for pupil of the year.

The depression saw my dad’s wood and car hire businesses decline. People still wanted wood for their stoves and coppers and dad delivered much wood but unfortunately not many were able to pay. Coppers – copper boilers, large tubs made of copper were the precursors of washing machines. Dad, like thousands of other small business people and workers, was in a bad way financially right up to the start of the war in September 1939. Our family never wanted for food and clothing but luxuries were few and far between.
We were more fortunate than the many who lost their homes and possessions and were forced to camp under bridges. I well recall the number of unemployed who were living under the railway bridge on Sherwood Road. Although I did not understand their plight nor the reasons for the unemployment, I felt deeply for those blokes and often gave them part of my school lunch. I never told mum the real reason for wanting extra sandwiches as she was pleased that my appetite had increased. Actually I was eating less but my unemployed comrades were getting a little nourishment.

During the depression, one of my dad’s weekly jobs was to take parcels of food to some of the most destitute of families in the district. The food parcels were packaged by the local RSL and given only to needy returned soldiers. One day I questioned dad why only the returned soldiers were getting food parcels. He testily replied: “Because they went to the war and don't ask silly questions like that.” Although I was only young, I thought he shared my thoughts that non-returned men who had needy families also should have had the right to a decent living and a job. Small things like that set me thinking about the nature of our society. Such young thoughts probably encouraged me to become active in the labour and peace movements after discharge in 1945.

During the later half of 1935 I left school four times to commence work but returned each time after problems at those jobs. Before the last occasion I went to Jimmy Nixon to tell him I was starting another job. He casually remarked: “Well, try and get back for Friday’s game; we play Taringa and they're a hard team to beat.” He was not only a great bloke but had a great sense of humour. He well knew that because I enjoyed my sport so much I was not all that enthusiastic to join the workforce. I had thoughts that I might be able to earn a living from sport but the 1939-45 war put an end to any such dreams.

The first of my four jobs resulted from a school sports connection. The 1935 football season for schools had finished and Bruce Pie, factory owner and future conservative member of State parliament, presented trophies at Sherwood State School. I was to receive a trophy. I had told Jimmy Nixon that I was seeking work so he said that he would talk to Pie.

A vacancy did exist in Pie’s factory in Fortitude Valley and I was told to report there for a 7.30 am start the next Monday. Although I had no industrial or political consciousness, I quickly decided that factory work under those conditions was not for me. After three days I went back to school, much to Jimmy Nixon’s obvious pleasure as Friday was sports day. Although football was over the cricket season had commenced and I was in good batting form.

The second job directly involved sports – I got a ball boy’s job at Milton tennis courts for a well known tennis coach. After chasing and collecting tennis balls from 9 to 5, I inquired on Tuesday for a sub on my expected weekly wage. A sub is the payment of the amount earned to the day on which the sub is asked for by a worker paid weekly. An employer probably would say that it is an advance on a weekly wage, though
this is not correct. With the elimination of cash pay packets subbing is no longer a practice in most jobs.> I was told to wait till Wednesday. Half way through chasing balls on Wednesday I again inquired about the sub on my wages and was amazed to find out this ball–chasing job was only going to pay 5/- (50 cents) a week. Stunned, I left immediately. I returned to school on Thursday, again to a welcome from Jimmy Nixon.

Job number three lasted three weeks. Although I received no payment I enjoyed the experience and never felt concerned about the lack of wages. I considered I was giving the Beer family a little help. Mr. Beer had purchased or leased a few acres out Greenbank way, in the area where the army camp is now located. Les Beer and Jim Tiny Peacock were partners in an endeavour to grow and produce tobacco. I enjoyed the few jobs Les and Jim asked me to perform, especially riding the horse for supplies and mail. The life was hard but Les and Jim were great hard working blokes who should never have been unemployed. This attempt to grow and produce tobacco was doomed to failure. After three weeks I returned to home and school. I really felt Jimmy Nixon had thought I had gone for good, as his welcome back was like that between father and long lost son. I was lucky to get back to school on the Thursday which meant I was available for the cricket match on Friday.

The fourth job was a disaster and was the shortest of them all – only two days. Mr. Beer, who was working as an electrician for Mooney and Co in Edward Street, got me a job behind the counter in the retail shop. I felt bad over the whole affair and copped a tongue lashing from dad and mum but as Mr. Beer said nothing to me I will never know what he felt about the incident.

Monday was uneventful but on Tuesday a resident of our district – a returned soldier and a friend of dad’s who had been unemployed for some time – came into the store. Mr Ferguson had recently had some work and had decided to buy an electric jug which was a luxury in 1935. Ferguson knew me from delivering food parcels to him in earlier and tougher times. After selecting the jug, he found he was short of money. He had only £2/10 ($5) and the price was £3/10 ($7). I assured him that he could pay the difference later, and wrapped the jug for him. However I made the mistake of writing out the receipt for £2/10. The other old faithful employee heard the conversation but said nothing until Mr. Ferguson left the shop with the jug and docket.

Then he swooped on me. He grabbed the duplicate docket and screamed: “You're sacked immediately for stealing – get out!” I was stunned but had no excuse.

When I told mum she said: “Wait till your father hears the story.” Looking back on the incident I feel sure I was not dishonest, but just inexperienced as I should have marked the docket £1 still to pay. The tongue lashing from dad was severe and I felt I had let our family friend down. But going to school next day to see Jimmy Nixon’s face light up made me feel good and ready for cricket on Friday.

In late 1934 I sat for the Scholarship examination. The results were published in January the following year. I had failed to pass, getting only 49%. Scholarship in those
days seemed to be the most important phase of education and my mum and dad were very disappointed with me. Dad said that it was back to school for me. Secretly I was pleased as school meant plenty of sport.

Towards the end of 1935 I went to town one day a week seeking work. I went to dozens of places and factories, only to have my name, age, religion and any work experience or references asked for by my investigators. Dad used to get me certain interviews which intrigued me. It was not until after the war in 1945, while living at home prior to my marriage, that I found out that dad was a member of the Masonic Lodge. Those interviews were part of the advantage, if you like, of being in this type of organisation. After the war, dad asked me if I wanted to join. I flatly refused for many reasons, but my young brother, Mervyn, became a member and was an important activist for the organisation in Toowoomba. He remained so right up to his death in 1980.

I sat for Scholarship again in December 1935 and this marked the end of my school days. Dad informed me that pass or fail I had to be serious about work for 1936.

The pupils at Sherwood School in my time were drawn from three groups in the community. There were the pupils of the elite from Corinda Hill and the river area from Sherwood to Chelmer. Parents from those areas were mostly business owners or professionals. The second group was made up of pupils whose parents had stable jobs in either the public service or private enterprise. Then there were the pupils whose parents were either unemployed or who could only get intermittent work. This group included the children of the many farms that were around the district. Despite the differences among the parents, the pupils at Sherwood always blended in well together, particularly in sport. Academically, the social or business background of the parents made no difference; just as many capable students were to be found among those from the poorer families as from the better off.

Our generation was the one most heavily involved in the second world war: we were the ones who went overseas and died or suffered in prisoner of war camps. A very large number of former pupils from the schools in the district, including the Catholic school, were among those who served overseas but never came home.

My relationship with girls in the early ‘30s was typical of that period. Sometimes a group of us would meet a few of the girls down at the park or along the river bank, but only for a swim or skylarking. At a Saturday afternoon matinee I might sit with a girl but I never got past the holding hands stage. I doubt if any of my mates got any further, though, in those days sex was never discussed. However, I recall several shotgun weddings around the district after our school days so maybe the boys and girls learned quickly after leaving school.

Our lifestyle was easygoing and we did not realise events in Europe shortly would involve all of us. During my school period of 1925–35 fascism had become firmly established in Germany and Italy. The democratic government of Spain was about to be attacked by local and world fascist forces. At home Australian workers were suffering
serious attacks with depletion of their organisational powers in the timber industry, on the wharves and in the mining industry. Conservative governments used their State and Federal forces to impose restrictions on workers in those industries. Success meant all workers in all areas had wages reduced and work conditions worsened. Reactionary politics was a world feature of the ‘30s. European fascism was the extreme form of this reaction, as well as the impetus for the world war of 1939–45.

In Australia, as in the rest of the world, the forces for peace were small. Shortly after the signing of the Armistice in 1918, The League of Nations Union (LNU) was set up and had branches in all states of Australia. Armistice Day – 11 November, 1918. Significantly, Australia does not celebrate the formal end of hostilities with a public holiday. We prefer to honour the debacle of Gallipoli. The LNU was a British inspired peace organisation which received a subsidy from the Billy Hughes led National Party government. Its Victorian branch included four knighted people, two bishops, three Federal members of parliament and several professors. This peace organisation was ultra conservative. Its qualities and support receded as England came to adopt the policy of appeasement towards fascism.

In 1928 a mixed brew of interested peace people and organisations who had been involved with the LNU formed a broader organisation, the World Disarmament Movement (WDM), with Justice Higgins as president. This new peace organisation had the support of Womens International League for Peace and Freedom which still functioned in Australia, the Womens Service Guild and Womens Temperance Union. Many of the political and industrial left participated in the WDM. The trade union movement, scattered and battered by bitter industrial disputes in earlier years, was not involved. The WDM enjoyed spectacular support during 1928–33. One of its activities was a huge meeting in the Melbourne Town Hall in November, 1931, at which Labor prime minister, James Scullin, endorsed a petition of some 120,000 signatures which were added to other nations seeking world peace.

The petition was presented to a World Disarmament Conference held in Geneva in February, 1932. The young Soviet Union had declared support for world disarmament in 1927–28, bringing the support of that country towards world peace.

Despite its moments of success, the WDM faded away. The Movement Against War and Fascism had considerable support among elements of the old WDM. Support also came from the Communist Party and some trade unions which, in the middle 1930s, were slowly recovering from the industrial setbacks of the late 1920s. The industrial action of 1938, when the Port Kembla waterside workers banned the export of pig iron to Japan, was a sign of union recovery. Although the strikers of Port Kembla were forced to capitulate after two months, the pig iron export ceased. Prime minister Robert Menzies from then on acquired the nickname pig iron Bob. Menzies was the man who would have been a leading soldier only for the outbreak of the first world war when he resigned his army commission. Menzies went on to become the orchestrator of Australian involvement in Vietnam, offering advisers, then regular troops, and finally conscripts to the American influenced South Vietnamese government.
After I had finished school I was able to help dad with his wood depot work and to make many trips into town to seek employment. Towards the middle of January 1936 the Scholarship results were published. This time I had gained a pass of just over 50%. It did not make me feel any smarter, but mum and dad were pleased which did make me feel good.

Many small businesses traded around the Sherwood district – butchers, grocers, milk vendors, ice–men, utility men who sold clothes props or collected bottles. Wooden clothes props which can still be seen around Brisbane were the precursors of the Hills Hoists. The grocery men always intrigued me. Mr McNamara or Mr Sheffield would arrive at our place on their push–bikes to be invited into the kitchen. Over a cup of tea, mum would give her order after which the grocers would ride off to the next customer where more orders would be taken over more cups of tea. This ritual would be repeated either that afternoon or the next day when the groceries were delivered. It was a sign of the easygoing way of life of that period. I often wondered just how many cups of tea Mr McNamara and Mr Sheffield consumed during a working week of taking orders and delivering groceries. Milkmen–and there were a lot around–were keen for the householder’s custom. Some resorted to yodelling to attract attention and increase sales. The bakers and butchers seemed to be a class apart. They carried their goods with them and if you wanted bread or meat you went out to the cart in the street. But only the grocers were favoured with cups of tea in the kitchen.

Horse drawn caravans would sometimes arrive in the district to stop in one of the many local paddocks. These were the Gypsies who only stayed a short while. But during their stay, clothes, if left on the line over night, would disappear. Other small household articles would always seem to be missing when the Gypsies moved to another district.

Small travelling shows also would visit. It was not uncommon for, say, a two man or two man and one woman company to set up in a paddock in the district to put on a show for a few nights. Usually these shows had a couple of performing horses, dogs, sometimes a donkey, tight rope or wire walkers and always a clown. The performances were well attended by us kids as the admission fee was very little. Some of us even played in these small shows. The admission charge was waived for us impromptu artistes.

With our family’s involvement in local tennis and the fact that we had a pianola – which read piano type music from paper rolls when you pushed pedals – we often had parties at our home. In those days of severe economic deprivation, tea and cakes and sandwiches were the mainstays of the party. Beer and spirits were consumed only occasionally in small quantities. The favourite pianola rolls played were Bye Bye Blackbird, Hustling Hinkler, Prisoner’s Release, Prisoner’s Song, Prisoner’s Bride along with other Prisoner classics.

My dad was not much of a drinker but occasionally when in the Rocklea or Oxley areas with his wood truck, he might have a beer or two. I well remember the beer drinking bullock at Abercrombie’s Hotel (now the Highway) and the zoo at Kelly’s Hotel.
(now Hansen’s). I also recall travelling with my dad to Cassidy’s Hotel (now the Oxley). In Oxley, sergeant Gorman, ‘Redwings’, the local policeman, was a well known and colourful character. Many are the stories involving sgt Gorman, some true and some legendary. Among the classics was that when Morrison’s bus and a private car collided. Gorman asked: “Who hit first?”

Dad was an extremely heavy smoker, rolling his own cigarettes. The only time I heard mum and him have arguments was over his heavy smoking. The arguments were more often over the buying of tins of tobacco than the actual smoking. Mum handled the money in the house and when he wanted tobacco, dad used to say to mum: “Give Phil a couple of bob (20c) and Phil go and get me some Log Cabin or Champion Fine Cut.” Up to the corner shop I used to dash while dad and mum engaged in heated argument.

These altercations apart, our home was a free and happy place. Although dad’s enterprises in wood carrying and car hire meant hard work and long hours, we could always find time for other pursuits. Some free hours were spent playing sport, while for a time dad was a member of the local volunteer fire brigade. Although important, it was a real keystone cops affair. Dad pulled out after the fire engine, a T model Ford, arrived at a house fire without the hose.

Our district was well provided with churches of all denominations. The neighbourhood was considered a real wowser area. Any attempt to build a hotel in the district provoked much opposition, though the bottle-os claimed it was the best district in Brisbane for bottle collectors. To this day, no hotels are to be found in the area.

There was little in the way of brand loyalty in the choice of religion in our family. On his army enlistment sheet, dad gave his religion as Roman Catholic. Mum was christened in the Church of England. I was christened in the Paddington Methodist Church. I remember dad as a non-believer and I feel he would have agreed with what Albert Facey had to say about God and the bible. Facey, like dad a Gallipoli veteran, claimed that any one who had taken part in bayonet charges could not believe in God.

I made one visit to Sunday School at Sherwood Methodist Church for which I was neatly dressed by mum and given a penny for the collection. I was not really interested or impressed. At the tea table that night, dad asked what had happened at Sunday School. I related a few meaningless things and said that the teacher had asked me my name. When I had told him Phil O’Brien, he had inquired: “Are you sure you're in the right place?” His question had meant nothing to my six year old mind, but dad exploded and said: “You're finished with Sunday School; that teacher must be a bigoted narrow minded bastard.” So ended my religious education.

Chapter 4

Work and Play before War

In our town, people live in rows.
The only irregular thing in a street is the steeple
And where that points God only knows
And not the poor disciplined people!

Anna Wickham

The worst of the depression was over when I began my first full–time job. Towards the end of January 1936, dad found me a job at James Campbell and Sons. I was to be employed as a junior clerk in the main office at their brick and pottery works at Albion. Everybody was friendly and helpful to me during the three years and nine months I spent with them. The office staff were the manager Geoff Campbell, head clerk Jim Plastow (a returned 1st AIF man) Phil Hancox (a courageous church activist who, because of his objections to all wars, spent some of the second world war behind bars) and Miss Cecilia Monkhouse. I was a reluctant worker. I did all of my duties to the best of my abilities but the job was always unsatisfying.

Campbell constantly reminded me that I would be finished as soon as he had to pay me an adult wage. I was upset also when I assisted him in recording times to calculate pay rates for the workers in the brick and pottery section. He consistently did not pay the men their rightful penalty rates for duties such as firing brick kilns and other difficult tasks. This dishonest employer set me thinking and probably helped make me a convinced trade unionist in later years. On my part I sometimes jiggled the time schedules to give the workers extra time and a fair pay for the work done.

Despite my misgivings about insecurity of employment and the non–payment of penalty rates, I found Mr Campbell very friendly to me. Several times he invited me to his house for dinner, but I always managed to have some other engagement. I never disliked him but I just felt, in my own mixed up way, that he was the employer enjoying many things I did not believe he had earned.

Work at Campbell’s brick and pottery establishment was like work in all such places – tough, hard, hot and dangerous. My heart went out to all those workers as they toiled in the harsh Queensland climate for low wages. The basic wage then was £3/10 ($7.00) a week. As a junior I took home 15/– ($1.50) a week.

When I joined the army and gave him my notice, Campbell shook my hand and said he was proud of me. He added that, when the war ended, if work was available, I again could work for Campbells.

It was during the time I was working for Campbells that I became deeply involved with sport – cricket with Western Suburbs during summer, Australian Rules with the Taringa club (which became the Western Districts Australian Rules with its clubhouse and grounds at Chelmer), tennis on a Sunday morning and a local Rugby League team
which played Sunday afternoons. I played fullback in the League team with well known locals such as Bill O'Reilly, George Woolard, Tom Dowling, Bernie and Lloyd McNamara, and Cliff Mair. Our coach was Clarrie McNamara. I also played with the local social cricket team in the summer on Sundays at Lone Pine. This social side had two O'Briens – dad and myself – three McNamaras, two Dowlings and two O'Reillys. Although it was no test side we had tons of fun.

Boxing was also popular among the local boys, some of whom were Rob Anderson, Ted and Tommy Mumford, and Cliff Mair. Dick Gunthorpe, Doug McKellar and Norm Johnson were locals who fought main event fights either at the Brisbane Stadium or at the Bohemia in South Brisbane. I loved the boxing and was a willing sparring partner at either Rob Anderson’s or at Mumford’s farm opposite where the Rocklea Markets now stand. My sporting involvement meant training several nights a week, as well as playing.

My social life was confined to going to Cook’s picture theatre on a Saturday night after football, cricket or tennis. There were times when some of us did not have the money to pay our way. It was not uncommon for Barney Cook, an early Queensland cricket broadcaster, to let a few lads in free on some Saturday nights. It was in the very late 1920s that talkies came to Cook’s Sherwood Theatre which officially bore the regal title Prince of Wales Theatre. The first talking picture I recall seeing at Sherwood was Rio Rita, a thriller of the period.

During my first working year I gave mum my pay packet. In return I was given a small amount of pocket money. Mum paid for my weekly train ticket plus any fees which I required for sports.

Early in 1937, I decided to purchase a push bike. I bought a Tom Wallace Fixed Wheel Special for £3/10s ($7.00). This served dad and me for many years. I rode that bike well into the 1950s.

With money still not plentiful, sport remained my only entertainment until the end of 1938 when a group of us would meet, one night a week at Anzac House in Elizabeth Street. We were members of the Sons of Ex–Servicemen Organisation. One night we became involved in a disturbance at the Club. I do not know who started it or how it began, but there was damage to furniture and club property, including a photograph on the wall of a general. It was alleged that I pulled the photo from the wall and wrapped it around the head of one of the participants in the barney. We had to appear before the club committee which suspended us and fined us £10 for damages. Fortunately, we were allowed to pay in instalments. I made my last payment three months later, just before I went into camp in October at Redbank.

Being denied admission to the Anzac Club we spent our one night a week out at the Marble Bar of the Grand Central Hotel. Our finances were still limited in those pre–war days, but the publican, even at the Grand Central, usually shouted us a round of
drinks. A shout is the traditional form of buying drinks in a pub. A group of (usually) men in turn buy a ‘round’ for the whole group. The shout is a custom that is both sociable and utilitarian – it makes service easier for both the worker pouring the drinks and the drinkers. The individualism of the eighties which is linked to alienating computer technology has made the shout less common in hotels. Reductions in real wages has contributed to the decline of the shout. This year one ‘health authority’ claimed that shouting was a major cause of alcoholism in Australia. This dubious assertion is more likely justification of the demise of a healthy social practice.

Right up till I went to camp, we were able to enjoy our night in town. I did not have a steady girlfriend, but would occasionally sit with a girl I liked in the picture show on a Saturday night. I would meet her inside the pictures to overcome the problem of no money. I had one financial disaster when I decided to take a girl to the pictures in Brisbane one Saturday night. I had only 10/- to spare and the seats cost me 4/6 each, which left me with 1/-. After the show, we were walking to Central Station, when she wanted a cup of coffee. I made the excuse that we had to hurry or we would miss the last train. I was sure she knew I had no money. I saved again until I had a pound but, by that time, she had found herself another boyfriend.

The disaster looming in Europe was to have a larger cast than a teenage boy and girl from Sherwood, Brisbane. That theatre was war, not Cook’s adolescent romance and Hollywood movies. On 3 September 1939 Australia was at war with Germany. The impetus was Hitler’s invasion of Poland. Prime minister Menzies, without consulting parliament, declared that because Great Britain was at war with Germany, Australia therefore was also at war. The Menzies declaration explained: “It is my melancholy duty to inform you officially that in consequence of a persistence by Germany by her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her and that as a result, Australia is also at war.”

Menzies obviously saw countries as feminine. We can draw a comparison with young males denoting feminine gender to their motor cars. But then men like Menzies had whole countries to play with.

I, like many others, was confused about the war and the reasons for our involvement. But I was not happy in my job and I had a gut feeling that this conflict would be a drawn out affair. I foresaw that eventually everyone would somehow become part of the giant war machine needed to defeat Germany and its allies.

September found me between cricket and football seasons. After finishing work at noon on Saturday, 16 September, I called into Victoria Barracks, Kelvin Grove, to enlist. I was told to wait for public announcements. Shortly after, the Federal government announced the proposed raising of a voluntary division of the 2nd AIF.

On Saturday, 14 October, I again applied at Kelvin Grove. I returned on Monday for a medical examination, was passed as fit and told to report at 10.30 am the following Saturday to be sworn in.
On Friday it had been easy to tell Geoff Campbell that I was finishing work to go into the 2nd AIF.

Earlier it had not been so easy to tell mum and dad that I had enlisted. Mum was upset and shed tears. Dad was silent, except to say: “Wars are no picnic but it seems you are determined to join up, so that’s it.”

On Saturday my mates and I went to a party at a friend’s place. Although most of those there wished me luck, some said I was a bloody fool.

Chapter 5.

War Once More

One moment in the window, hooked over bags;

Hurrying unknown faces – boxes with strange labels.

All groping clumsily to mysterious ends,

Out of the gaslight, dragged by private Fates

Kenneth Slessor

It was twenty-five years to the month since my father had enlisted to fight for England. On Sunday 22 October 1939, with hundreds of other recruits, I arrived by train at Redbank. From that day till Thursday, 11 October 1945, I kept a daily diary of my activities and movements.

It was not an easy task. I managed my daily entries during difficult periods when in action in war zones; the sands of the desert, the cold of Greece and Crete, the rain and mud of New Guinea and Borneo. Some entries were recorded in pencil. Later I would go over such entries with a pen.

Theoretically, I was committing treason in the keeping of this diary. Army thinking was that diaries which might fall into enemy hands could provide strategic military information. Reaction from army officers to my diary-keeping ranged from admiration to hostility. For all that, my diary entries have formed the basis of these recollections of my war experiences. Wars are fought from the front lines, where generals and politicians are notoriously thin on the ground. If my keeping of a daily record can bring the real war, the war of the ordinary soldier to people, I will have achieved a worthy purpose. The originals of my diaries are now kept in the Australian National War Memorial in Canberra. There are also copies in the John Oxley Library in Brisbane.

My first tent mates were Bill Irwin, later killed in Tobruk; Harry Holpin, to become a POW, captured in Greece; J Newman, D Fraser, D White, K Gillespsie and
PýO’Connell. We were a mixed crew – a couple of unemployed, a couple like myself who were in insecure jobs, one with matrimonial problems and one who had been jilted by his girlfriend. From my experience most of the original 6th Division came from similarly diverse backgrounds and brought similarly diverse motivations with them. Alongside us were those who were really keen to be soldiers. Many of the last group, who had had militia training and held ranks as officers or NCOs, had been white collar workers before the war.

Our introduction to army life was drill, long route marches around Redbank, early morning physical training, and guard duties. Over the first weekend I was happy to see many visitors – my parents, younger brother Mervyn, my old friends the Beer family, two of my aunts, my future wife’s mother, Mrs Blumel, and some neighbours, Mr and Mrs Murray and family. They must have heard the rumours of crook army tucker because they all brought some foodstuffs for me. For the next week or so, my tent mates shared the cakes and other goodies that my family and friends had brought with them.

On this visit my dad made it plain that I was not to volunteer for the infantry. He reminded me that I was under age and insisted he would not hesitate to pull me out if I did volunteer. I told him it was rumoured they were forming transport companies and would be calling for men who held civilian driving licences. Dad and I came to an agreement. The next week I found myself in a transport company as part of the Army Service Corps (ASC).

There were about fifty of us in this group. We were the first to move south, leaving South Brisbane railway station on 18 December to head for Puckapunyal Camp near Seymour in Victoria. During our training there I gained my army driver’s licence but had little opportunity to drive as few trucks were available. Most of our drill involved infantry skills: Lewis gun, long route marches and the like.

Later, when we Queenslanders were sent home on leave, rumours were rife that we would soon be leaving for the Middle East. I arrived home towards the end of December. An advance party left Puckapunyal for the Middle East in the first week of January, 1940.

Three months later I followed. It was three long years before I was to see home again. We left Port Melbourne on 15 April aboard the SS Strathaird. Other vessels in the convoy were the Ettrick, Neuralia, Nevassa and Dinera. The convoy was made up of the 2/5th, 2/6th, 2/7th and 2/8th Battalions along with all support troops, artillery and ASC. Together this made up the 17th Brigade of the 6th Division. Puckapunyal was emptied of troops. Of the 3000 that went into Redbank in October, those of us in the Petrol Company in the Middle East were the only ones not to go to England.

The seas outside Port Phillip Bay were tremendous. Was I seasick for seven days till we struck calm water at Fremantle in Western Australia! My mates fed me on barley sugar, but this seasickness dogged me. Every time afterwards that I did a sea voyage I was sick, even during the passage between Greece and Crete in the reasonably calm
Mediterranean Sea. We were given leave in Fremantle. When the convoy left Fremantle some soldiers were missing. They had decided to end their army careers early. I wondered if they had been as sick as I over the Great Australian Bight.

Two months later we were in the Suez Canal and disembarked at Kantara. We crossed the Sinai Desert to Palestine by train, a journey lasting more than nine hours. The wheels must have been square, so rough and noisy was the journey. Our transport unit, which became known as Petrol Company, 6th Division, Army Service Corps, settled in at Camp Barbara about 30 kilometres north of Gaza. The 6th Division was settled along the coastal strip of Palestine, the Gaza strip, now occupied by Israel.

Life was reckless at Barbara – we were required to drive on the right hand side of the road, unlike in Australia. The local Arab drivers were rough, very fast and put their faith in Allah.

On 11 June, Italy entered the war as an ally of Germany. That day and night we dug trenches near the beaches. We stood—to all night. At daybreak, befuddled with fatigue, we pictured Italian troops landing on the beaches. It never was a possibility as the nearest Italian troops were a long distance away in the Libyan Desert.

On settling in at Barbara, sport again became important. I played cricket and Australian Rules with our unit teams and took part in boxing. The Queenslanders formed a Rugby League team and challenged the Aussie Rules players to a game. We had a few games but the rule book had to be thrown out the window, or, rather, into the desert. I doubt if we ever made any converts to Rugby League. During this period, I was extremely fit. I remember one Saturday I played a scratch game of Rugby League in the morning, then four quarters of Aussie Rules in the afternoon and boxed in a tournament that night.

During the last week in August our convoy of 126 army trucks left Palestine to cross the Sinai Desert for Egypt. We stopped at an Arab town of Aesluga, some 100 kilometres from our camp at Barbara. We next rested near the Suez Canal at Ismailia before completing the 560 kilometre trip from Palestine to Helwan camp, 30 kilometres out from Cairo towards the Pyramids. The infantry battalions of the 16th and 17th Brigades were already there when we arrived. Some had come by train.

We spent September and two weeks of October training at Helwan. Being so close to Cairo, we used to go in regularly with or without money. Cairo was an appealing city, from where you could visit Cheops pyramid and the Sphinx. The museum was thought provoking especially the Museum of Hygiene which made you think about many of the diseases of the world, particularly those of the Middle East areas.

That road across the Sinai Desert from Palestine to the Suez was an amazing piece of engineering, a bitumen road made from a secret mixture of sand and a bitumen compound. Many kilometres were laid each day by sappers from the engineers, pioneers
from the infantry and Arab workers. Four hours after it was laid, a car could drive over it and after eight hours, it would take a laden truck.

I had an unpleasant experience one evening with some mates while going by train from Helwan to Cairo. Fortunately the train was going slowly and passing a station when I fell out. It had been beer issue night. The fall took skin off me from head to foot, but after a few days of light duties I was 100% fit again.

That experience had less dire consequences than another had for two mates, Theo Barker and Noel Pollard. Having won a lot of money, tossing at two–up, they decided to go AWOL into Cairo to spend the money. Barker and Pollard were caught after a few days and sentenced to 14 days detention. At that time there were no Australian detention facilities. They were sent to an English military centre in Cairo. The English 'screws’ would not allow them to be placed with English soldiers. They were forced to spend all their time among other ‘colonials’, Indians, South Africans and any other non–English detainees.

In October we moved from Helwan a distance of 230 kilometres to I–Kingi–Maryuet, near Alexandria. I drove a Morris six wheeler. By the end of that month, all of the 6th Division was settled in either I–Kingi–Maryuet or the camp next to it, Amurya. Both of these camps were 30 kilometres from Alexandria. Italian aircraft were bombing the port of Alexandria. On some nights, bombs landed not far from our camp area. Spent anti–aircraft gun shells were often heard to thump into the ground. To my knowledge, there were no casualties among the Australians though these night bombing raids on Alexandria were repeated regularly. Egypt and Italy were not at war but this counted for little.

Early in December the British army advanced to capture Mersa–Matruh and Sidi Birina from the Italians. By mid December, we had left I–Kingi–Maryuet, to support the British at Salum, a tiny sea port just before Bardia. The Australian 16th and 17th Brigades were preparing to go into action to capture Bardia. At Salum we experienced our first direct bombing raids and our first casualty. Scotty Booth from Rockhampton, was killed one night during a bombing raid. For over twelve months since Redbank, Scotty had been a tent mate of ours and good company on leave. We were upset by Booth’s death, though casualties had to be expected in a war zone.

Booth had lived a sad life, despite his happy–go–lucky nature. His father had been killed in France in the first world war. His mother had died and he had been sent to Australia under some orphan scheme. He had worked on farms around Rockhampton until he joined up in 1939. From what Scotty told us, some of the farmers he had worked for were little more than child slavers. Scotty made no bones about why he had joined the army. He had found out he had a sister living in Scotland. He hoped that by joining the AIF he would get to see her. It was not to be; such is life and death in time of conflict.

The week before Christmas, most of the infantry of the 16th and 17th Brigade had moved towards Bardia up Halfaya Passage (Hellfire Pass). My mate, Les Pirnie and I
were continually carrying goods up the pass to depots established towards Bardia, after having gone as far back as Mersa–Matruh for supplies. The attack on Bardia commenced on 3 January, 1941. Within three days, the infantry had captured their objective. The Italians were routed. Some 45,000 enemy soldiers had been killed or captured, mostly captured. The stream of Italian prisoners was kilometres long. But we also suffered many casualties; in just two months of action, the 6th Division casualties, from Salum, Bardia, Tobruk, Derna and Benghazi were 239 killed in action, 784 wounded and 21 taken prisoner.

The defeated Italians left an unbelievable amount and variety of equipment. If you wanted a diesel truck to drive or a motor bike to ride, they were there for the taking. But Les and I resisted the temptations as we had a reliable Chevrolet four cylinder which was in good running order. We even occasionally put Italian aeroplane petrol in the tank which almost made our old Chev want to fly.

As we moved towards Tobruk it was common to have Italian soldiers stop you that you might take them prisoners. But we had orders not to accept their surrender. The infantry was rounding them up en masse.

From January 18 to 21, 1941, the infantry fought to win Tobruk. With the city’s fall 25,000 more Italians became prisoners, but at the cost of many killed and wounded Australians. Driving into Tobruk just as the fighting finished, I saw an Australian and Italian soldier lying dead side by side. It set me thinking. They were both young. Their lives had ended great distances from their homes and families. What for? I asked myself. It was some time before I was able to erase the sight of those two bodies from my mind.

A legend from the fall of Tobruk is worth telling. Its truth I cannot vouch for, but it was told and retold many times. The story went that on Tobruk being captured, a couple of Australians, who knew what they were doing, took millions of lire from the bank, stole a staff car and drove non-stop to Cairo. They deposited the money at Barclay’s bank. As I have said, Egypt and Italy were not at war. The legend had it that the two opportunists became very wealthy. After the fall, lire were actually blowing around the desert for a short time. Some used the notes to light fires to boil the billy, until the Army officially started to cash lire at a certain exchange rate into your pay book. By this time my mate and I were able to only find a small amount which we could and did use in Benghazi for drink and entertainment.

We were pushing forward towards our next target, Dernia, a beautiful town, plush and green, unlike the dusty, dirty areas like Mersa–Matruh, Salum, Bardia and Tobruk.

The infantry engaged in a sharp, hard battle to capture Dernia but after this was accomplished, the Italian army collapsed. It was then easy work to drive right through to Benghazi. At the small town of Tocra on the coast not far from Barce, our Petrol Company established its camp and headquarters.
I recall one incident at Tocra which happened shortly after our arrival. My diary entry is dated Thursday, 6 February, 1941. While carrying supplies between Dernia and Barce we had problems with a puncture and a cranky motor. Stalled, we found darkness upon us. A family from a nearby Italian farm house made us welcome, invited us to share their food and wine. After the meal, Les Pirnie and I sang and even tried to dance a little with the two attractive daughters of the farming couple. Around midnight, Les and I curled up on the kitchen floor with our blankets. On leaving next morning, we shook hands with the mum and dad. We got pecks on the cheeks from the daughters.

We drove back to our base at Tocra not speaking a word. Just before Tocra, Les said: “We're both mugs; wars are stupid, aren't they?” I replied: “You've been reading my mind, you bastard.”

We were later able to repay the Italian farmers’ hospitality. When next we were in their area, we stopped to give them a hamper of tea, sugar, and other army goodies. The Italian couple both hugged us and cried, which somewhat embarrassed Les and me. I often wonder how those Italian farmers in and around Libya finished as a result of the war. As the war years went on, they would have been confronted by strangers from Germany, England, Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa and America. I hope that the family survived the perils of the war which was none of the Afro-Italians making anyway.

We had only been at Tocra a month, when we struck camp in March. It was at this time that I ran into my mate, Les Beer, from Sherwood. Les was in the 2/15th battalion. The reunion spurred my ambition to join the 2/15th, my father’s old battalion. For me such an act would be a tribute to the life of my father. At home in Australia, dad, fearful of my death, was hoping I would keep my pledge not to join an infantry battalion. I applied for a transfer to the 2/15th.

It was still as a member of the Petrol Company that I made my way back to our previous camp at I–Kingi–Maryuet, just out of Alexandria. On the last day of March, we boarded a Dutch vessel The Pennland which left the wharf about 4 pm to anchor for the night in Alexandria Harbour.

The destination of the 6th Division was unknown to us. It was an army secret, and indeed was secret to ordinary soldiers. Arab money changers were on the wharf to exchange any amount of money you wanted from Egyptian currency to Greek drachmas.

Chapter 6

**Greece and Crete**

Say Crete, and there is little more to tell

Of muddle tall as treachery, despair
And black defeat resounding like a bell

J S. Manifold

We sailed from Alexandria Harbour on 1 April, April Fools Day, to a fools’ campaign in Greece and Crete. We Australian and New Zealand troops and also British lads were sent in as boys to do men’s jobs. With little or no air support of our own, we faced the might of the German army which had short lines of supply and tremendous air superiority. The ordinary people again were the losers at the hands of inept conservative politicians of the Churchill mould and bungling army organisations.

We arrived in Greece at Port Piraeus, a beautiful harbour even in war time. We were taken to a camp 12 kilometres out of Athens called Gylphadia. Allocated the same trucks we had had in the desert, we spent long hours driving supplies from docks at Port Piraeus to camps and depots. Two days leave followed a week of constant work.

Four of us Queenslanders went into Athens – Leo Hayhoe from Bundaberg, Bill Mackee from Camooweal, Jack Dow from Rockhampton (who was killed in action during the Greece campaign) and myself. Guides and spivs were numerous. <Spiv – a pimp or gaudy hustler of some type> We settled on a Greek guide who claimed he came from Bundaberg. Leo Hayhoe sounded him out. In Leo’s opinion he was indeed from Bundaberg. Anyway, he looked after us all day arranging sight seeing, including a visit to the Olympic Stadium and Acropolis; and drinks and meals. Our guide went away for a couple of hours to organise female company for the night for all of us at a hotel. After tea and more drinks, we went by taxi to the hotel. With a room each and drinks laid on, we all had a night to remember. My companion was a beautiful Greek girl. Whether she was a professional or not I do not know, but she made me feel as though all my birthdays had come on the one night, so tender and expert was she at making love. She left early next morning.

We all had breakfast at the hotel and were back at camp by lunch time. All agreed it was a day and a night to remember and inexpensive at that. Whether our guide came from Bundaberg or not, he treated us well. We agreed that we had more than obtained value for money.

On Sunday 6 April, German troops moved into Greece. That night heavy air raids destroyed wharves and ships in Port Piraeus. We moved north to make our headquarters at the foot of Mt Olympus, Greece’s legendary snow covered mountain. It was wet and cold. Near Olympus I saw, for the first time, a town devastated by war. It was not a pretty sight; many civilians had been in the town; dead men, women and children were still lying all around.

The German air force was operating in large numbers over our area. During daytime the roads were not safe to drive on as German Junkers, Heinkels, Dorniers and Messerschmitts patrolled the roads, flying very low at times. When alerted of an air strike we would hide our trucks among bushes while a few of the blokes fired shots from their
.303s at enemy planes\textsuperscript{1}. Early in the campaign the Stuka dive bombers had destroyed almost all of the RAF planes on the ground at Larassa aerodrome.

All our driving now was done at night. Guided by shaded headlights, the truck was difficult to steer along narrow Greek roads and passes. There was no rest for sleep. By Wednesday it was obvious a big retreat was on. We were in the Braylos and Lamia Pass areas.

On Thursday, under cover of darkness, we moved close to the front at Lamia where the 2/4th (New South Welsh), 2/5th (Victorian) and 2/11th (Western Australian) Battalions were engaged in a rear guard fight. We filled our truck with troops of the 2/4th.

In the truck there was standing room only. Artillery shells whined and machine guns cracked around us. We drove all night. By daylight we had covered about 200 kilometres. With the daylight came the German bombers, which, apart from bombing our area, were also attacking our evacuation vessels lying close to the coast.

Les and I were ordered to destroy our old Chev, faithful companion in the African desert and the frightening Greek campaign. Sentiment aside, destroying a vehicle is not easy. After a night’s driving we spent many daylight hours putting the Chev out of operation.

At 8 pm we moved to the beach and boarded small boats to be taken out to an Ack–Ack Cruiser, an English vessel, the Coventry. On the boat, I was confronted by a 2/4th Battalion officer who, even in the dark, spotted my blue and white ASC shoulder patch. He said I would have to stay behind. The boats were for the 2/4th Battalion only. I replied: “I'm getting out of here. I've driven your blokes all the way from the front and I'm leaving too!” A couple of the infantry blokes said to the officer: “He’s alright.” I got aboard as I had no desire to stay behind to become another O'Brien POW in Germany.

The Australian casualties during the Greek debacle were 320 killed, 494 wounded and 2030 POWs. The casualties included many of our Petrol Company comrades. Some of these men were on a vessel at Port Piraeus which was sunk. Many were killed while survivors from the burning ship described their ordeal as terrible.

The AA Cruiser Coventry took us to Soudhas Bay in Crete Island. We arrived on Saturday the 26th about 6 pm despite attempts by German bombers and fighters to sink the ship. Several sailors were killed during the day. Their bodies were committed to the sea.

\textsuperscript{1} .303s – Large bore, very powerful rifles, the basic army issue of Australian soldiers from the Boer War to the second world war. You may recall the scene in the film, Breaker Morant where Morant is asked by the Court Martial under what rule he shot Boer civilians. Morant (Edward Woodward) snaps to attention to declare: “By rule .303, sir.”
I found the Crete HQ of the Petrol Company which was well inland. Until we left Crete the next month our daily routine was work–parties, drill and marching. We were not bothered by the German bombers, although we saw plenty of them as they daily bombed the port area where we had disembarked.

We were given a talk by general Freyberg of New Zealand, supreme commander of all troops on the island. He advised us that when German paratroops arrived, we were to use our ammunition carefully. When we ran out of ammo were not to be afraid to use the bayonet. These instructions did not impress us one bit as we had only one rifle to six men. I arrived on Crete with my rifle and ammunition, but was ordered, like all others, to put the rifle into a common pool for distribution. I was reluctant as it was the gun I had been issued with on first arriving at Redbank in October, 1939. Besides, one rifle between six men seemed fairly useless.

I was relieved when on Wednesday, 14 May 1941, we marched to Soudhas Bay to board a vessel Lossiebank. German bombers raided the bay. Bombs just missed the Lossiebank, showering water and debris over us crouching on the deck.

Next morning, of all the things to happen, our ship developed engine trouble. While the rest of the convoy and escort ships went ahead, we struggled along, hardly moving at all. Just before 11 am, eleven naval vessels of all sizes joined us: they just seemed to come from nowhere. Then it happened. German aircraft fairly high up dropped their load of bombs on the convoy including the Lossiebank. Having survived the bombing, but still damaged, the Lossiebank limped into the top end of the Suez Canal. We entrained at El Kantara, bound for Palestine once more. For the last day or so we were escorted by two Greek destroyers.

The Greek and Crete experience was put into verse by some unknown soldier poet. It goes:

The Isle Of Doom

Here I sit on the Isle of Crete
Bludging on my blistered feet
Little wonder I've got the blues
With my feet encased in big canoes
Khaki shorts instead of slacks
Living like a tribe of blacks
Except that blacks don't sit and brood
And wail throughout the day for food
'Twas just a month ago not more
We went to Greece to win the war
We marched and groaned beneath our loads
While bombers bombed us off the roads
They chased us here, they chased us there
The bastards chased us everywhere
And while they dropped their load of death
We cursed the bloody RAF
Yet the RAF were there in force
They left a few home of course
We saw the entire force one day
When a Spitfire spat the other way
And then we heard the wireless news
When portly Winston gave his views
The RAF, he said, in Greece
Are fighting hard to give us peace
And we scratched our heads and thought
This smells distinctly like a rort
For if in Greece the Air Force be
Well, where in the name of Hell are we?
And then at last we meet the Hun
At odds of 33 to 1
We thought they weren't very hot
And gave the bastards all we got
The bullets whizzed, the big guns roared
We howled for ships to get aboard
At length they came and on we got
And hurried from that cursed spot.
And then they landed us on Crete
And marched us off our bloody feet
The food was light the water crook

I got fed up and slung my hook\(^2\).
Returned that night full up with wine
And next day copped a fiver fine.
My pay book was behind to hell
And when pay was called I said: “Oh well
They won't pay me I'm sure of that”
And when they did I smelt a rat
And next day when the rations came
I realised their wily game
For sooner than sit or die
We spent our dough on food supply
So now it looks like even betting
A man will soon become a Cretan
And spend his days in darkest gloom
On Adolph Hitler's Isle of Doom.

Six days after I was evacuated from Crete, the German paratroops landed. The battle only lasted a few days. Crete will be remembered as a tragedy for the allies. When the

\(^2\) Slung my hook – went AWOL – from the bush expression to put the swag over the shoulder and 'shoot through'
paratroops landed the allied forces on the island numbered: 170,00 British, 7,700 New Zealanders, and 6,500 Australians. The British lost 612 killed, 224 wounded and 5,315 taken prisoner; 670 New Zealanders were killed and 1,455 wounded, 1692 captured; 272 Australians were killed, 507 were wounded and 3,285 imprisoned. The allied troops were ill prepared for an invasion by paratroopers. They were exhausted from the Greek struggle and badly led by an old and tired general Freyberg who had no backing from Wavell in the Middle East. Freyberg’s thinking was still stuck in the mud and blood of Northern France in the 1914–18 holocaust.

Chapter 7

The Middle East and Northern Turkey

And lonely lonely lonely
are the hearts of men;

the waves the waves the waves
break, forever break,

against the stone in our breasts

Ian Mudie

The Petrol Company limped from Crete back to Julis Camp in Palestine. From May to October 1941 the company carried supplies to various camps, drilled, marched and played sport – cricket, football and boxing. If you had money, there was leave to Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem.

I enjoyed a few days in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth. I went to Galilee and swam in the Dead Sea. It is true, you cannot sink, but after coming out of the water you are like a greasy pig’s trotter. The water made your eyes sore for a long time afterwards. Occasionally, I would get short leave in Tel Aviv. Even with little money, I was away from the camp to lie on the beach and swim – a great way to spend a day.

Shortly after returning from Greece and Crete, my old driving companion, Les Pirnie, developed a chest complaint and was sent home to Australia. I only saw Les twice after the war – once in Mackay where he was the bus driver who drove the watersiders out to the harbour and again during the moratorium marches against the Vietnam war in the 1970s.

Two incidents stand out from my time at Julis. The first was when one of our tent mates decided to transfer to the provosts (military police). For unknown reasons he was unacceptable to them and returned to our unit where he was again placed in our tent. Our reaction was swift and direct: we refused to go on parade with him.
The riot act was read out and threats of courts–martial were made but a nasty situation was resolved by the ex–provost just disappearing, perhaps back to the provosts. The corporal of our tent accepted full responsibility for our action and was demoted to the ranks. But the rest of the tent were given a clean sheet as far as army records were concerned.

The second incident involved Dick Pickup and me while we were on guard duty. We had been posted to the officers’ mess for the midnight to 2 am shift. It was beer issue night. A party was in progress, with many Australian nurses in attendance.

About one o’clock Dick and I thought we saw an Arab slip from the kitchen into the orange grove which ran parallel to the building. We sang out but he kept going with his bundle of loot. Thinking we were doing the right thing, we fired a couple of shots into the air. Drama and bedlam followed. All lights immediately went out, nurses screamed, and some officers rushed out and made towards us.

We told them to stop, which they promptly did. Dick and I came to the on–guard position. The confrontation went no further as several other guards, accompanied by the duty sergeant, arrived. They relieved us of guard duties and we were marched back to the guard house where we spent the night as guests. The sergeant had stumbled over some empty bottles of beer that Dick and I had consumed and placed us on a charge.

Next morning, he read the charges out: discharging a fire arm without his majesty’s permission and drinking on duty. We appeared before the unit commander but the commanding officer was an understanding bloke who listened sympathetically to our defence. He agreed that we had been given lectures about the problem of Arabs stealing army stores, but he cautioned us about the hasty firing of our rifles, particularly as nurses had been in the mess at the time. He gave us the benefit of the doubt about the empty bottles which the sergeant claimed were ours. Dick and I thought this was decent of him though we were sure we had dumped our empties in the officers’ rubbish tin.

The upshot was that all the commanding officer gave us was a mild lecture. As Dick and I had been with the unit for nearly two years and had at no other time been before him, he dismissed us free from any red marks in our pay books.

The same officer called me up for a long talk about my request for a transfer to the 2/15th Battalion. The 2/15th was still in Tobruk at the time, but after Tobruk camped not far from us at Hill 69. On 30 October capt Herschfield called me in to inform me that my transfer had been approved. I moved to Hill 69 the next day.

I was posted to the transport section in HQ Company and fitted in well with the other blokes. I did a little truck driving and, again, plenty of infantry training, marches, manoeuvres and rifle range practice. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbour in December we felt uneasy as now the conflict was getting closer to Australia.
My second Christmas in the Middle East was spent on guard duty. Christmas day was cold and rainy; snow had fallen on the Jerusalem Hills for the first time in over twenty years. There had been a jack-up by the men over threatened non-distribution of bottled beer for Christmas. Action was better than words and all received their correct ration of beer for Christmas, plus something special in the food line.

Early in January, 1942, the battalion left Palestine to travel to Aleppo, 500 kilometres away, near the Turkish–Syrian border. I spent a few days with D Company at a place called The Saddle. The barracks at Aleppo, and the huge canteen with entertainment every night, were a welcome retreat from the snow covered ground outside.

At this time I had problems with two officers. One instance could have been serious but fortunately the transport commanding officer, captain Bill Jubb was a bloke who would listen to you and he liked the truth. Each time, he straightened things out for me. Captain Jubb from Toowoomba was killed early in the El Alamein campaign.

News of the fall of Singapore in February gave us uneasy feelings. Most of us knew at least one bloke from home who was a member of the 8th Division, then stationed in Singapore.

Early in March, the battalion marched 120 kilometres to Latakia. I was fortunate to be a supply driver. Latakia was cold and miserable. We endured six weeks of routine training.

In April we headed for Tripoli, Lebanon. This time I did not drive but walked the 150 kilometres from Latakia. For three months, we drove, manoeuvred and trained around the Tripoli area. While out on manoeuvre I found a tape worm, pulled it from my rectum, and took it to a medic. I was placed in hospital in Tripoli for two weeks, one of dozens of tape worm casualties.

An officer came into the ward to announce that the Germans had regained much of the Western Desert and were heading for Alexandria. All who could walk were to get straight back to their units. Still with the head of the tapeworm inside me, I returned to the battalion where I was allocated a truck and drove for four days non-stop, a distance of 2600 kilometres to Alexandria. All sorts of rumours flew as to just where the Germans under Rommel had advanced.

We camped near a railway line not far from the El Alamein railway station. During the night of Sunday, 26 July, a terrific barrage passed over us. We learned that this was part of the German counter attack that had all but destroyed the 2/28th Battalion from Western Australia. We stood–to all night while rumours were passed around that our battalion was to attempt the impossible: we were to rescue the 2/28th. Fortunately, this time, no ridiculous decision was made on our behalf.
On 1 August our battalion relieved the remnants of the 2/28th and dug-in on Hill 33. Transport officer lt Don Parker (first world war veteran, a gentleman and great friend to everyone who came into contact with him) transferred into the section.

Air activity was intense but our planes appeared to have the upper hand. Artillery fire was intermittent. We saw a big tank battle to our left but were too far away and too much dust was raised by the tanks and artillery for us to know the outcome. Later we learned that an English armoured unit had outmanoeuvred Rommel’s tanks and had forced a German retreat for the first time in that phase of the campaign.

All through August our battalion patrolled out in front. A few times I went out on reconnaissance patrols with instructions not to engage in any action unless absolutely necessary. Once we came close to a German work party busily digging; I was petrified as I watched them, but after estimating numbers, we went back to our lines without incident. The fighting patrols that were sent out had the most experienced blokes who were, in the main, big men.

On one such patrol there was a full blood aboriginal, Paddy Walsh. The Germans trapped the patrol and took everyone prisoner, bar Paddy, who, because of his colour, was scorned as a trophy by the German white supremacists. Paddy came back unharmed. Later, after the war when in Cairns, Paddy met an army mate, ‘Bluey’ Lees. They went into the Cairns RSL where Paddy was refused service. Bluey Lees went to town verbally on the barman, the RSL and racists in general. Bluey, like myself, was a waterside worker after the war.

War can make you feel and understand that there is a humanity above racial and national conflict. I, with several others, was in the back of a truck when a Hurricane fighter crippled an Italian plane. The Italian was slowly coming to earth but it looked like he was going to crash into our truck. With the others I jumped free. The pilot lifted the plane clear of our vehicle. It crashed about 100 metres away. We ran over to help him. He appeared to have broken his legs and was taken back to the casualty clearing station.

But the search for foreign treasures can lead to hostilities. Carl Huddy, Bob White and ‘Peewee’ Sediewe of A Company spied a knocked-out English supply truck. It was a long way out in no man’s land, but one morning when the fog was very thick, the three decided to go out to examine the truck and its contents. The fog bamboozled them as fogs do in the Western Desert. They lift suddenly as when a curtain is raised. That was what this fog chose to do. Our three friends suddenly found themselves among a number of German soldiers, having breakfast. Reaction was instantaneous from both sides. Carl Huddy and Bob White headed for our lines with German bullets ploughing all around them. Bob White copped a bullet in the leg, but ran the full distance back to our lines, unmindful of his injury. Carl Huddy also ran the distance, head and body down like a snake. Peewee flew down a doover (hole in the ground) to find a German soldier for company. Peewee screamed to Carl and Bob: “Get the artillery to fire and get me out.” The artillery did actually fire several salvos towards the German positions, but Peewee became a prisoner of his enemy doover mate. I next ran into him in the 1950s when he
was working at the Hamilton Hotel in Brisbane as a glass picker–upper. I had a few yarns with him. He died shortly after. Peewee was a character, both in the army and in civvy life.

A stunt involving the 2/15th Battalion seemed on the cards. After talk and preparation, early on Tuesday 1 September, the battalion engaged in operation Bulimba—a frontal attack on the German positions. Our rifle companies were predominant in what was some of the bitterest fighting in the desert. There was much hand–to–hand engagement and many decorations were awarded. On a wall in the Australian war memorial at Canberra is a huge painting depicting the Bulimba action. In a few short hours the battalion suffered nearly 200 casualties.

For the Bulimba stunt, I, with my truck, was part of A Company, along with other sections of the battalion. If our rifle companies had broken through the German defences, we were to go on mobile action. But after a time, the rifle companies were ordered to withdraw, due to heavy casualties and stubborn defence by the Germans. In retrospect the withdrawal saved a lot of lives, as the motorised move would have been disastrous. The battalion continued patrols until 23 September, when we were relieved. We moved back a few kilometres for a spell and a bit of leave for the lucky few.

Many were the stories of courage during the Bulimba stunt, but one man’s experience was remarkable. Corporal Keith Craig was so badly wounded that those with him during the fighting, including the first aid man, felt sure he was dead. After the stunt, Keith was reported as killed in action (KIA in army lingo). Back home a memorial service was held for him at his church in Brisbane. But after a few months, reports reached his wife that he was in a hospital in Germany and thus a POW.

Craig survived imprisonment to return to Australia when peace prevailed. His wife was expecting their first child when Keith killed her, his unborn child and himself. Keith’s brother, a Brisbane waterside worker, could not offer me any reason for it at all.

The battalion set up camp about 20 kilometres from the front and a lucky draw for leave saw me and some mates winners of seven days in Alexandria. After the desert the leave was great, baths and clean beds. Then the money ran out. For the last few days, I had to be content with sight seeing and going to picture shows, some in Arabic language only.

Back in camp, intense training was the order of the day—manoeuvres, Bren, rifle and Tommy gun practice. The Tommy guns were not much use in the sand. We all agreed they may have been alright for mobsters on the streets of Chicago and New York, but under desert conditions, they were not reliable.

A tremendous amount of equipment was moved into the desert—tanks, trucks and artillery. The influx of troops, which included a Scottish Highland division, inspired confidence. General Montgomery’s energy and drive in cleaning out driftwood back at headquarters indicated clearly that a big action was not far away. I, with a few others,
was sent over to the Scottish battalion for a few days to help them with their desert training. I hardly understood much of what they said, so broad were their Scottish accents. I think I could have understood the German or Italians better than those Scotties, but they were very friendly and great blokes, mostly young. They suffered very heavy casualties on the first night of the El Alamein battle, as they were on our left flank and encountered crack German infantry. The Scots paid the price in dead and wounded, on behalf of the English war effort.

Preparations for the lead up to the battle at El Alamein on Friday, 23 October, were very thorough, not only on training and equipment rehearsal, but with map discussions and lectures which involved even the privates. I think we all felt that this time our action could have the effect of ending the war.

The previous night I had moved my supply truck to the area where the Bren gun carriers were assembled near Tel–A–Lisa railway station. Under camouflage, we spent all day waiting. At 7 pm we had a hot stew and tea. We moved forward. Before 10 pm, we were in position waiting for the attack to commence. I had a load of mixed gear, including spare ammunition for the Bren gun carriers. Our riflemen were a little further ahead on the imaginary start line, waiting for zero hour.

At 10 pm all hell broke loose. The entire allied artillery opened with simultaneous barrages. There was an artillery piece, large or small, every 35 metres from the coast, for 65 kilometres to the Qattara Depression. If my mathematics are correct, over 1800 artillery pieces went off at the same time. After the El Alamein battle finished, it was reported that some German prisoners claimed the artillery barrages were more intense than anything they had been subjected to at Stalingrad on the eastern front. The German and Italian artillery in return was also intense. As our barrage moved forward, the enemy artillery concentrated just behind our weaponry. The 2/15th suffered many casualties.

Apart from having gear and ammunition for the Bren carriers, I had equipment for D Company who had captured many Italians while taking their objective. After delivering the stores, I received orders to resupply the Bren gun carriers.

Happy Day, from Charters Towers, and I were taking a case of ammunition toward the carriers when there was a terrific burst from a German 88 mm three purpose gun. These guns, when used as antipersonnel weapons, gave no whine to indicate a trajectory, just a bang, loud and clear, above your head with shrapnel immediately splattering everywhere around you. Happy and I decided to dive into holes until the shelling ceased.

I tried to fit into a hole which he had reached first. Happy said: “It’s too small for two.” I dashed a few yards and found another hole. When the shelling had eased off I walked over to Happy’s hole and said: “Come on, mate.” There was no reply. I bent down to have a look. A piece of shrapnel had hit Happy on the back of the head. He was dead.
All that night and the next day, both allied and enemy artillery, mortars and machine guns were constantly in action. While taking supplies to the rifle companies, both Jack Thompson, from Texas, Queensland, and I were knocked to the ground by a shell. It must have been one of ours as it landed behind us. Another exploded about two metres to the front and we lay still for a while. Then as we got up, I took one step forward and fell arse over head into a shell hole. The left cheek of my arse was very sore and I thought I had been wounded. Later, a mate on inspection said I had got a whopping big bruise. A piece of shrapnel, or perhaps a stone, must have hit flat as no skin had been broken. My shirt and trousers were all torn – from the blast, I think.

On Sunday my truck was hit and badly damaged. It was towed back to a workshop and I was allocated another vehicle. After dark I took more supplies up to the rifle companies in the front positions.

Our trucks were being destroyed regularly. On the same day as mine was damaged, trucks driven by Ernie Hurst, Fred Franz and corporal Frank Powers were also destroyed or damaged. While loading stores at a supply dump, another soldier and I were standing talking when a shell – a dud – landed about 10 metres in front of us after noiselessly skirting just above our heads. It must have been from the German 88 mm. We were covered in dirt and dust. We looked back to see the dud shell jumping like a giant kangaroo and probably frightening hell out of more soldiers than just us two.

All week, the battle raged. Tanks passed through our ranks as we moved forward. We drove at night. Most of us had no sleep during the day because of the constant noise. I knew some blokes who never slept at all from the initial attack on Friday, 23 October, till Thursday, 5 November, when the Germans and Italians withdrew after a major defeat. But I was one who had been able to lay down in a hole for a couple of hours sleep at different periods during the battle.

On Saturday 31 October, my truck was again damaged by shell fire. It spluttered and coughed. But I was able to drive it back to the repair depot. I got instant service and was able to take supplies up to the front again that night.

That first Thursday in November was marked by a deathly silence. The enemy had gone. The exhausted battalion settled down for a rest. Bodies and clothes were washed. We left the Western Desert on Tuesday, 1 December to resettle in at Julis Camp in Palestine.

The 2/15th suffered 340 casualties in the 1942 desert campaign which was completed at El Alamein. The commanding officer, colonel Ogle, was badly wounded and was replaced by colonel Mario at the El Alamein stunt. Mario fared worse than Ogle and was killed before the stunt was over.

The toll on senior officers was uncharacteristic of 20th century wars. Captains Samuels, Jubb, Cobb and Bode started their returns to dust in the sand. A junior officer, a lieutenant Ron Patrick joined them.
A Labor party alderman of the Brisbane City Council, private Larry Green did not return to his ward.

Another prominent Queensland casualty was private Vince Beirne, an heir of the Ipswich family of prosperous retailers. Vince Beirne never fitted in with the rest of us in the infantry battalion. We had asked him why he had not used his connections to get out. He had replied “I was offered an officer’s job in a soft outfit, but I wanted to be with you blokes.” He was, but only till the desert claimed his life instead.

One private who had fought bravely at El Alamein was Bill ‘Basher’ Boland. With many others Boland was in a detention centre when the battle began.

As the battalion was below strength the authorities declared that if any inmate of the detention centre volunteered to return to his unit for the battle, his sentence would be considered finished. Of the many in detention, Bill Boland was the only one to volunteer to return to the action in B Company.

Bill, unfortunately, could not read or write. His friend, Jackie Thomas, would read the letters of Boland’s mother to him and write replies to her. To his credit, Bill took lessons while we were at Ravenshoe during 1944–45. Despite his nickname of ‘Basher’, which reflected his boxing ability, Boland was a kindly, generous bloke and a top soldier with rare courage.

Having contracted yellow jaundice, on Thursday 10, I was taken to the Army hospital at Gaza. I returned a month later, January 1943, to the battalion at Julis Camp. From there on Wednesday 20 January we left on our way to the Suez Canal, our first sea leg home. We boarded HMT Acquitainia at Port Taufiq on Tuesday, 26 January.

Australia Day and we were going home. Our convoy included the Queen Mary, Isle of France, New Amsterdam and an armed merchantman Queen of Burmundy. With an escort of one heavy cruiser and several destroyers, we made a safe 35 day journey back to Australia to berth at Sydney’s Wooloomooloo wharf.

I walked into home at Sherwood on Monday, 1 March, 1943. I was greeted with tears from mum and a great hug and handshake from dad. It was just on tea time.<$FTea time, tea – when Phil writes of tea, he is often speaking of the evening meal, which rural and working class people called – and many still do – tea. Middle class people call this meal dinner. Dinner for people such as Phil is the midday meal, known by others as lunch. But it is not only the terminology that is different. Because rural people and the working class used to start work early in the morning, the evening meal, tea, would usually be taken between 5 and 6, when the workers would be hungry from the afternoon’s manual labour. Dinner for the middle classes, who start and finish work later, usually is around 7pm.>

Chapter 8
The Asian War

Here in his groundsheet shroud a man can lie

Muffled in darkness, like a cocoon–swathed grub.

Until the rain–washed dawn

Comes with its weary bone–sore resurrection

John Quinn

Leave was only three weeks. After a march through Brisbane on 29 March, we set off by train to North Queensland to settle in with the 2/15th Battalion at jungle training camp near the little town of Kauri. The camp area is now part of the Tinaroo Dam.

With only a small number of drivers required, the transport platoon was disbanded. I was put into A company 9 Platoon. We settled down to plenty of hard training including a period at Trinity Beach doing invasion practice with Americans on invasion barges. In July we embarked at Cairns wharf. Four days later we arrived at Milne Bay in New Guinea.

It rained all the time. Mud was everywhere. In the rain and the mud, we had continual training for just over three weeks for the invasion and recapture of the Lae area from the Japanese. In September, I boarded an American invasion vessel called an APD to sail for Lae.

Under heavy naval bombardment, we landed 25 kilometres east of Lae. No Japanese were there to meet us. Japanese air planes did hit one of the small American vessels. We marched through the jungle towards Lae. We dug–in to set up defensive positions, again with little opposition from the Japs. We crossed the Burep River through the Malahang Mission. Only a couple of times did Jap planes either bomb or strafe the area. Allied planes were in almost total control of the air space above Lae.

On Saturday, 18 September, we entered Lae after a massive allied air bombardment. The town was but rubble with Japs nowhere to be seen. We again returned to the Burep River area to board landing craft manned by Americans and sailed all night to land under enemy fire on Scarlet Beach, Finschhafen. We went in under a large scale bombardment by allied naval vessels. Unlike at Lae, the Japs fought back from where they were dug–in around the beach landing area. With few casualties, we moved towards the Bumi River and dug–in there.

We came under Jap mortar and small arms fire during the day and some Jap artillery fire during the night. Our B and D Companies forced the Bumi River crossing, meeting stiff resistance. An American artillery unit offered covering crossfire. Their first
salvo landed not on the enemy but among us. Sitting on the side of the doover next to me was a young bloke, Joe Spiller. A piece of shrapnel hit him in the eye. We abused the Yank artillery bloke for his drop shorts. All apologetic, he left.

We continued towards Langemak Bay with only isolated opposition from the enemy, but 7 Platoon of A company was involved in a sharp clash and suffered some casualties. We in 9 Platoon advanced up a steep narrow mountain track. The Japs had the track covered. After some heavy Jap mortar and small arms fire, we were forced to retire to the Bumi River area.

On this action, one of our platoon members, Bluey Hawkins, lost the second part of his right hand finger. It was ironic as Bluey himself had shot off a portion of the same finger to avoid action in the North African desert. He had paid the penalty with time in army jails. This time the Japs did the job for him. As he went back with a blooded finger and hand, he swore: “I didn't do it this time.”

I had a lot of time for Bluey. He was frightened like the rest of us, only more so. We held no grudge against him for his action in the Middle East. In later years, Bluey drove a truck unloading from the wharves. He was killed one day back loading steel from the BHP wharf. A load of steel ended Bluey’s life which he fearfully had protected during the war.

We made our way towards the mountain area of Sattelberg. It was two days of tough uphill slogging with constant rain making it that much more uncomfortable.

Digging–in one night, we heard more digging just in front of us. Voices of the enemy jangled through the dark. After checking with battalion HQ to make sure none of our companies was in front of us, we opened up with Brens, rifles, Owens, small 2 inch mortars, and hand grenades. The noise the Japs made getting out made us estimate that they were there in numbers. During that night’s clashes the enemy replied with mortars, but three out of their first five were duds, which was fine in our book.

On moving forward next morning, we found three dead Japs, much gear and a fair amount of rice and tins of canned meat. We used the rice which was of good quality. In some tins were human fingers. The Japanese religion demands the return of part of their dead to Japan. These fingers were apparently intended for Japan but never made the journey.

Saturday 9 October, was my 23rd birthday. There were no celebrations, just plenty of rain by which to remember the day. I was on patrol, doing my short period as a forward scout when I came across a well beaten track leading down to a watercourse. I heard Jap voices up on the ridge above the river. I called up our platoon commander, Austin Murphy, and we set in place what we thought was a well concealed hand grenade with trip wires. We later returned to the track but found no sign of the grenade. I had the sinking feeling that the Japs must have been watching Murph and I set the booby trap. Why they had not fired on us we could not work out. My status as a survivor remained.
We went on patrols almost daily. Being a forward scout was the most nerve-racking of any of the duties I ever did in a war zone. We were only out in front for ten minute stretches, but walking in front waiting for a Jap to shoot you is not good for the nerves.

After one of my stints as a forward scout, the soldier relieving me remarked: “What are you sweating for Phil, it’s bloody cold.”

I replied: “Just keep on walking. Your temperature will rise too, mate.” Sure enough, after he had done his ten minutes, he was also a lather of sweat. Such is the nature of fear even when it is cold and wet.

Every day it rained to provide cold and miserable conditions. We celebrated when, on 3 November, we were relieved by the 2/23rd. We moved to the Si–Si River without opposition but at dusk contact was made with the enemy. We dug–in for the night 600 metres above sea level amid heavy rain. When it was not raining, we had no rest as our weapon pits were brim full of water and the Japs were moving all around us.

I was on guard duty on morning stand–to. I was moving around asking the boys to prepare for dawn and to stand–to. Just on daybreak, a Jap sneaked close enough to throw a hand grenade among our weapon pits. A hand grenade at that hour of the morning sounded like an atomic bomb. I dived into a weapons pit which was full of water. A mate, Arthur Streeter from Bullyard just out of Bundaberg, dived in on top of me. It was a tremendous effort on my part to get from under Arthur as he weighed 16 stone. The thought flashed through my mind that it would be a hell of a way to lose your life, drowned in your own trench. But I got my head above water. Arthur thought it was a great joke.

We had two native Papuans from the Papuan Infantry Battalion in the advance section of our platoon. Just before noon, the Japs opened up. Unluckily, both PIB soldiers were wounded.

We dispersed either side of the track. Lt Murphy detailed me and my section of six men. Due to casualties and disease I was the only old timer left in the section and by default the leader. Murphy had said: “You're the corporal, Phil, and that’s that.” Our instructions were to move well off the main track and travel through the jungle to find out how wide were the Japs’ defences.

We moved cautiously forward, but it happened. The Japs opened up at point blank range with rifles, Woodpecker machine guns and hand grenades. We hit the ground and returned fire. Lying next to me was a young reinforcement, seeing his first action. Gordon Tex Davidson screamed that he had been shot through the head. I told him to keep quiet. He took off his hat and, sure enough, a bullet had gone through his hat. Neat as a barber with clippers, a Jap had shorn a furrow along the top of Tex’s head. I calmed him down, told him he was alright and to just keep quiet.
But more bad or good luck or probably a mix of both was in store for Gordon. The next thing I heard was the familiar click of metal. I knew what that sound would bring. Jap infantry men had a small metal disc on their waist belts. To set their grenade fuse going, they banged the top of their grenade on this piece of metal. That click was clear to me. Between my feet and Gordon’s, a grenade landed. Tex’s American type gaiter was blasted off the lower part of his leg. Again, he was not severely injured, just torn skin and burn marks. Davidson asked if it would be alright for him to shoot through. I replied: “If you want to take the risk and have a go, it’s alright by me.” He wriggled back a few metres. During a lull of Jap firing, he upped and offed through the jungle at record pace to seek medical attention.

After the war Davidson introduced me to his wife by saying: “Love, meet the bloke who saved my life in New Guinea.” It was not correct of course. But the way she answered in an offhand fashion I was not sure whether she was pleased or upset with me for having ‘saved’ Tex’s life.

After Tex had bolted, I drew the pin out of one of our grenades. From a lying position, I threw it towards the Jap’s position. It did not go high enough over the bamboo trees but rebounded about a metre in front of me. I was petrified, but grabbed it, screwed the base plate and removed the fuse. It was a one in a million piece of good fortune. Should it have exploded, it would have killed my five comrades and me.

That afternoon, A Company attacked the Jap position. With cover from our Vickers machine-gun, the platoon routed the enemy with few casualties. We moved forward to dig-in for the night near the village of Nangaura. It was more rain and more Japs throwing grenades during the night with some casualties on our side. C Company was in trouble and 9 Platoon of A Company went forward to assist. All 2/15th returned back to the village position.

The Japs obviously were withdrawing or, as their propaganda from Japan said, ‘advancing towards Tokyo’. Despite the withdrawal they hindered our advance with heavy machine gun fire from both flanks.

We moved from the Nangaura village downhill to the Song River. After a couple of days spell, as usual amid plenty of rain, we commenced the long march along the coastal strip, crossed the Sanoa River and travelled the Masseweng to Fort Point where we were joined by Matilda tanks. On the coast, the weather improved, but some days, after staying dry all day, we would wade over a stream, mostly waist or chest high before digging-in for the night. That meant another wet and miserable night. On Christmas Day, 1943, we were delighted to see an invasion convoy of over 80 vessels of our American allies.

We moved forward each day and on 4 January, 1944, near Kelonoa Point, the 2/17th Battalion took over from us. We were in the hills for a few days and saw many
Japs in full retreat scurrying along the flats below us. Our Vickers and Bren gunners helped them to go just that little bit faster.

Our job was completed. We continued on past the Buri River towards Sio, then back to Kelonoa. Here a militia battalion took over to continue the advance to meet American forces near Saidor. We moved by barge from Kalonoa Beach to a camp at Lakona in the Masseweng River area. The barge trip was enjoyable and incident free, much better than our 130 kilometre rain–drenched walk from Finschhafen. We boarded a Dutch vessel, the Klipfontain of 17000 tons at Finschhafen and sailed into Brisbane on Friday 10 March 1944.

I was home in Sherwood for tea that night. By now, I had had a gutful of the army and war, but still extremely fit and healthy, I could see no way out. As the allies were heading for victory, at least I hoped I would not see any more action after my six weeks of leave.

During this leave my future wife, Joyce Blumel, and I started to go out regularly.

Joyce’s father Harold worked at the Oxley bacon factory. His family background was Germanic. Joyce’s mother Mabel Price had English ancestors.

The Prices lived in Price Street Oxley which was named in honour of Mabel’s brother, Dick, who was killed in France in the 1914–18 war.

Some of Joyce’s fondest memories of her childhood were regular Sunday afternoon rides around Oxley and Corinda. Her grandparents, the Prices, were proud owners of a horse and sulky.

The Blumels and the O’Briens shared pre–war holidays at the seaside towns of Caloundra and Labrador. I recall one time in my boyhood that Joyce was a passenger in my lovely canvas canoe. We were in the waters off Labrador. I asked Joyce to jump out to a sandbar. The bar was not where it should have been. Joyce could not swim at that time. Despite a few trips to the bottom, she was able to scramble to the sandbar.

Joyce must have forgiven me this mishap by 1944. Our budding romance made me all the more eager to opt out of the army. Drinking in the pubs, during two hour sessions which were the order of the time, a lot of my mates told me they were taking that step, staying AWOL and not bothering to get an official discharge; or getting a farmer friend to claim them. Farming was an occupation which could make its practitioners exempt from war service.

These AWOLs and rural adoptees were usually released. My mates suggested I follow their example. I did actually give it some consideration. But I probably did the sensible thing by going back to the battalion, now reassembled at camp just out of Ravenshoe on the upper Atherton Tableland.
Fewer than 150 were on strength. This small number was due in some measure to those who had discharged themselves. Illness from New Guinea such as, malaria, scrub typhus, pneumonia, and skin diseases further depleted the ranks. Many of the diseases contracted in New Guinea were fatal. To have survived enemy attacks, disease and friendly fire, all of which featured in the New Guinea campaign was no mean feat on my part.

My brother Mervyn wrote to me, while we were training near Ravenshoe on the Atherton Tableland in 1945, to ask for assistance to join the 2/15th Battalion.

In 1939, when I joined the army, Mervyn was thirteen years of age. When I returned home in 1945, he was also discharged from the army, and we never had many things in common. Merv also went to Sherwood School, easily passed his Scholarship and went on to the exclusive Brisbane Boys Grammar School where he sat for and passed the Junior examination. He obtained a job with Queensland Machinery Company and volunteered for the AIF on turning 18. He spent most of his training period around Bathurst in NSW.

Mervyn was keen to join an army unit, but I refused to be any part of bringing anyone, particularly my own brother, into an infantry battalion. There had been at least five sets of brothers in the battalion where one of the brothers had been killed, either in the Middle East or New Guinea. When bullets and shells start to fly the odds of a casualty for a family is twice as great if there are two members in the battle area.

On discharge, Merv returned to Queensland Machinery Company and was later appointed manager of the company’s branch in Toowoomba. He married a Sherwood girl, Pat White, but they had no children. He was president of his bowls club and also attained high office in the Masonic Lodge in Toowoomba.

At one time a number of waterside workers travelled to Toowoomba to campaign for a new wharf contract. We needed publicity and Merv arranged an interview with the editor of the Chronicle, the local newspaper. The editor gave us an excellent hearing with front page coverage in the following day’s edition. This was unprecedented in a conservative city like Toowoomba.

Merv did not enjoy a long life and died after two minor heart attacks in 1980 on our father’s birthdate, 4 April. He was aged 53.

For almost 12 months, we remained in camp at Ravenshoe. Despite monotonous routine, I never got bored, as sport once again came into full swing. Shortly after settling down, I seriously hurt my right knee, playing Rugby League, and spent some time in Rocky Creek Army Hospital.

Three of us, Ernie Hurst, Smacker McCleary, who played football for Toowoomba and I had control of a two–up game. As with most gambling games, the main winners were those who ran the enterprise. I sent considerable money home to my
mother, but the three of us finished in army hospital together, all having gone down with malaria. Thus we lost control of the valuable two–up game.\(^3\)

The battalion was brought up to strength with almost 600 men, ncos and officers from the 62nd Battalion which had served for a long time in Merauke in Dutch New Guinea. Christmas 1944 was a big disappointment for most of us, as only the few who lived in the northern part of Queensland were given leave. The rest of us were sour on the army command.

On Sunday 29 April 1945, we embarked on an American vessel, the SS Charles Lummis to sail from Cairns to land at Moratai Island. We were to invade Northern Borneo. The barrage we went in under reminded us of El Alamein. Bombers were everywhere. For the first time, rockets from the naval force exploded.

We invaded the island of Muara just off the northern mainland of Borneo. The island was very small, mostly mud with some patches of rainforest. In a few hours, we had patrolled the island completely. So much for army intelligence – no Japs had been on the island for three years.

We crossed by barge to the mainland town of Broketown and made towards Brunei, the capital of that country of the same name. Our patrols made no contact, but there was plenty of evidence that the Japs were around, including information from local headhunters, the Dyaks. Our 8 Platoon of A Company contacted Jap positions. Two young privates were killed and two wounded. Nine Platoon went out to assist but darkness hid the enemy.

We moved to a village of Pandan on the Limbang River. From there we passed, through the village of Limbang to dig–in on a ridge about three kilometres out from the village. From this position, we patrolled extensively, kilometres up rivers in American barges. The rivers were all large and deep and thickly wooded either side. We made journeys along the Limbang River, the Panduan River and the Labu River.

One afternoon, we could see about 20 Japs running along a flat plain. We helped them along with rifl–e, Bren and Owen gun fire. We went down to the plain area to find three dead and some badly wounded. It was obvious that the Japs were in a bad way with no organisation whatsoever. Our efforts were most certainly part of an unnecessary action. The deaths of good men, though few, made us question the strategies of the army establishment, particularly those of the top echelon.

\(^3\) Two–up – has been called Australia’s national gambling game. One of its attractions for soldiers was the simplicity of its playing tools. Two coins, traditionally pennies, are tossed into the air from a wooden or metal rod (the kip) by the spinner. The object of the game is for the thrower to throw three pairs of heads in a row. (A head and a tail is a standoff, known as ‘oned–em’. For the benefit of a good fast game, Phil and his mates used 3 pennies, thus eliminating ‘oned–ems’. People in the crowd back two tails against the thrower. The reason the ‘house’ or organisers win can be seen from Phil’s account of the game. “When the head bettors were doing well we would call for management fees ‘Alright you headies; you're going well; how about tossing some our way?’ Similarly we would make requests of tail bettors on a winning streak. We were never as formal as those houses which take 10% from winning and losing bets.”
A couple of days before I was to leave for home, I really did not want to go out on patrol. But my comrade, lt Austin Murphy said: “We have not contacted or seen Japs for some time, so it’s only a routine patrol, Phil, out along one track for a mile or so and back along another to our base here.” I led the patrol out and did my stint as forward scout, then handed over to an other bloke. I moved back towards the end of the patrol. We had only just moved forward a short distance when we heard a shot. I hit the ground so hard that I believe that the marks on the earth will still be there. It turned out to be a false alarm. Our forward scout had accidentally fired a shot. So close to going home. I was really shaken. When we returned to report to lt Murphy, I said: “I bloody near died on that patrol from fright, Murph; you just lost a good friend in myself.”

After the war, many times I would call into the Gresham Hotel on the corner of Adelaide and Creek Streets, to have a beer with Austin Murphy. Plenty of times we talked about that last patrol. Murphy always asked the same question: “You're not still crooked at me about that patrol, are you, Phil?” I always replied with the same answer: “No way Murph old mate.”

During our 12 months in the Ravenshoe area our company commander, captain Bill Angus, told me that I had been recommended to be made a confirmed corporal. Details had to be sent to Victoria Barracks in Brisbane for approval. Later in the year, Bill Angus called me to company Headquarters to say that army red tape had prevailed. My confirmation was refused.

I thought that had been the end of it, but just before leaving the battalion early in August, 1945, I was called to HQ and told that I had been a confirmed corporal for over 12 months. The red tape had been snapped somewhere along the line. It was a minor windfall, pay–wise.

I left the 2/15th Battalion pleased I had survived the tough periods and also convinced that you need to serve in an infantry battalion to understand the perils and real hardships of war. I was determined to try to do something to prevent the next generation from experiencing a war situation. After my father’s and my experiences of war, I knew that any sons that I should have would be educated to reject war as a means of settling world disputes.

When the conservative government of Menzies and company involved our troops in the Vietnam conflict, my three boys all held the same view as I did – complete opposition to going to Vietnam. Fortunately, only one of my lads’ birthdates came out in the lottery of death, all Canberra’s proceeds going to support the American invasion of Vietnam. My youngest son Dennis was called up by the army for military service. However he was granted an exemption after Joyce and I submitted an affidavit stating that Dennis had been a sleep walker as a child. My involvement in the anti–Vietnam war movement and active participation in the Draft Resisters Union probably had some bearing on the authorities’ decision regarding Dennis, his sleep walking and whether to accept a most reluctant soldier.
Chapter 9

Sketches of War

Is it, I said, a waste of love

Imperishably old in pain,

Moving as an affrighted dove

Under the sunlight or the rain

John Shaw Neilson

Peace is in war, though rare; war is in peace, though not so rare. All elements of the human condition are common to war and peace: life, death, humour, tragedy, courage and fear, sharing and greed.

The following stories are of three types: some I experienced first hand. I can vouch for their authenticity. Some were told to me by participants and I regard them as more or less true. The veracity of the others, which came to me third or fourth hand, is left to the reader to decide. As peace breeds and spreads urban and rural legends, war disseminates warriors’ legends.

The Joe Blakes

You will recall my funk at the accidental shot on my last patrol in Borneo. Another incident just before I left for home showed that I was moving towards a nervous crack of some kind. One morning on stand–to at daylight, Alex Bagley from Mackay and I were sitting on the side of our doover. As daylight broke, an unexpected burst from a Japanese machine gun sent bullets ploughing up the ground between us. Naturally we dived into our funk hole until the firing ceased. I got the shakes. My hands and body shook uncontrollably. Only with extreme effort was I able to control my body with the exception of my hands which continued to tremble. Alex was unaffected and said to me: “Jesus, what’s wrong mate?” I was in complete control mentally and said: “This bloody war can't finish soon enough for me Alex.”

The Digger

During my six years of service I had seen some men who unfortunately could not cope mentally. Their reactions, always unpleasant to witness, varied with individuals. I well remember one comrade in the Western Desert whose nerves cracked. He was unable to sleep. All he did every night was dig holes in the desert. Each morning at daylight he was usually lying asleep beside an unfinished hole, dead to the world. His area always looked like a mini mining camp with small holes and mullock heaps of sand. To be with
and see a fellow soldier slowly cracking up is not a pleasant experience. I believe that state can happen to anyone during war, but it is more likely to come about in a front line unit.

22 June, 1941 – Nazi Germany attacks the Soviet Union.

Nazi Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 caused much discussion within our unit. I was still a driver in the Petrol Company of the 6th Division ASC and, as with most units, the officers in the main were anti–Soviet. They expressed negative opinions about the Red Army and predicted its early collapse at the hands of the Germans. But within the ranks of the Petrol Company were a small number of privates who were either current or former members of the Communist Party. There were also soldiers who had read widely and were very knowledgeable regarding world events; they had a progressive or Marxist viewpoint. These men always courageously refuted the arguments of most officers. When I transferred to the 2/15th battalion similar political opinions were espoused but one officer was different; captain Don Parker was well read and understood world events from a progressive point of view. A veteran of world war I who was respected by all in the battalion, Don was also a great battler for any private who happened to get into trouble.

Among the left wing soldiers was Les Sullivan who stood as a Communist Party candidate in the 1943 State elections for the North Queensland seat of Herbert. The army denied him leave to campaign but despite this he polled extremely well. Danny Seaton who often clashed with the Roman Catholic padre, fr Byrne, was another communist. Byrne abused his clerical office by predicting that Seaton would be killed in action, if Danny maintained his atheism. I have always wondered if Byrne found any solace in an incident at Kumawah, Finschhafen. Danny Seaton was killed in action. These and other party members from the ranks were always prepared to debate and talk with any officers who adopted an anti–Soviet attitude.

Rum Deal

Rum issues were not regular in the desert. But one night, by various means, the men in a forward position where no man’s land was only about 600 metres or so wide were able to get a considerable amount – far more than their share. Despite the Germans being only some hundreds of metres away, the rum started to take effect. Community singing and yarning broke out. One bloke who had had more rum than was good for him declared he was sick and tired of doing nothing about attacking the Germans; he was going out to fight. So he put his gear on, loaded his rifle, put one round up the spout and, full of fight, went off. No one tried to prevent him as he had not been known for any outstanding courage in action previously. When daylight came we saw the fighting man lying huddled in the middle of no man’s land. As he stirred to life the Germans opened up with small arms fire. He was forced to lie in no man’s land all day with a bad rum hangover; each time he tried to move the Germans responded with more bullets. At nightfall, dejected and disgusted with himself, he made it back to friendly dugouts. Our hero declared himself off the rum for good.
Doover Dan

He was one of those rare officers who was so objectionable that he had few friends, if any, even among his own ranks. In the desert he rightly earned the title of Doover Dan a nickname which described his usual haunt. His courage could be summed up easily – he had none! With numerous LOBs (left out of battle) to his credit he safely saw the war to its conclusion. After discharge he became an executive with a firm in Brisbane city. One day a large number of striking workers were marching up the street when Doover Dan came out from behind huge glass doors to hurl abuse at the strikers. Bad luck for Doover, one of the marchers was in the same unit in the desert. He called to Dan: “Get back down in your doover, Dan, you dingo bastard.” Dan was stunned and his face went about six different colours. It’s not certain if he even bothered to open the glass doors to retreat into the building from which he had emerged.

The Removalists

Poverty and its associated evils do make people very cunning. The Arabs were no exception; they were able to outsmart many allied troops in the Middle East. I can vouch for the following two stories.

Most troops slept in huge tents called EPIP (English Pattern Indian Production) accommodating sixteen men, eight each side of the centre poles. One morning sixteen soldiers woke to find themselves gazing at blue sky! Their tent had been removed during the night! The Arab’s method was to take two camels down the centre isle of the tent and with a centre pole lashed to each camel, they would release all guy ropes and away the camels would go. The tent went with them leaving the sleeping soldiers undisturbed.

On another occasion an officer out on manoeuvres had retired to his sleeping bag one evening but woke the following morning feeling very cold. During the night, Arabs had actually removed him from his sleeping bag! It was little wonder that the forces lost a great deal of gear. Not all of it was stolen by our own men.

The Burnt Lavatory

In the Australian area in Palestine army camps were scattered and covered a huge area, but where this incident occurred two units bordered on each other. This led to a problem with the latrines. The difficulty was that several tents of rank and file soldiers were only a short distance from a lavatory complex which was in use by officers from the adjacent unit. Human nature being what it is, instead of trudging some considerable distance to their own facilities, the privates used the officers’ toilets.

Although this cut across army protocol repeated warnings were ignored by the men. The army, in its wisdom, decided that the diggers would have to mount a 24 hour guard on the premises to keep their own mates out. Naturally, this caused considerable resentment. The impasse was overcome one night when the officers’ lavatories
mysteriously burst into flames and were completely destroyed. In one stroke the hated guard duties were discontinued! It was not only the guard duties on a lavatory that upset the troops, but the fact that some officers expected to be saluted on entering and leaving the dunny. One digger was charged with destroying army property but lack of evidence and witnesses saw the suspect discharged from the inquires. The crime remained on the unsolved list for the AIF in Palestine.

The Lazarus Overcoat

It was a small scale attack one night on an Italian position in the Western Desert during the El Alamein campaign of 1942. On taking the position two mates, after digging-in, found a dead Italian soldier near their area. Out of respect they placed the body in a shallow trench and covered it with a little sand. As the night wore on it became bitterly cold. One of the diggers remembered that the buried Italian was wearing a thick army great coat, so they decided to dig him up and remove it. While removing the coat, they saw the enemy soldier breathing. They called for the battalion first aid who arrived with a stretcher. By the time he was placed on the stretcher the prisoner had begun talking. Who knows, he may even have immigrated into Australia after the war. He certainly would not have known that he owed his life to two Aussies who got very cold.

All’s Well that Rhymes Well.

He was the lean, wiry, stockman type of bloke, noted for his rhyming slang. He would ramble on for several sentences along the lines of: “I went for a pickle and pork down the frog and toad to get my tomato sauce which was in the Cain and Able.” Translation gave us: “I went for a walk down the road to get my horse which was in the stable.”

He was an open friendly bloke who hid no personal secrets about his pre-army life. We all knew he had become engaged to a girl just before leaving Australia. On returning home, he could not get back to his girlfriend quickly enough. He was stunned when she told him the engagement was off. But his now ex-girl had a very attractive sister who made it obvious she was willing to take her sister’s place. He was a little surprised how easily he was able to get into bed with his new girlfriend. Leave ended, he returned to his unit in North Queensland. Alas, two months later, he received a letter from his girl saying that she was pregnant. He obtained compassionate leave and got married, with the sister who had jilted him as bridesmaid.

He returned to the unit happy in the knowledge that he had done the right thing. Shortly after in New Guinea he was told by letter that he was the father of a fine bouncing baby boy. Counting up the months, he became convinced that the baby had been conceived while he had been in the Middle East. He realised he had been the victim of a cunning set-up by the two sisters. On returning to Australia he had no trouble getting a divorce. He was philosophical about the situation, however, and summed up the experience in his usual lingo: “Oh well, the billy lid at least got a decent picture frame.”
AWOL and the Parson

They were in the same class at a suburban State school, one from an ordinary working family and the other from a nearby orphanage. They were great school mates and met again in army camp at Redbank in 1939. After a couple of weeks of army life the ex–orphanage bloke declared: “This army is not for me, I'm shooting through.” Which he did quite easily.

The other bloke went on to serve in the Middle East. On returning in 1943 he met his mate in Queen Street, Brisbane. The orphan was in full clerical dress, Roman collar and so on, which he said had been his uniform for the war years. They had a cup of coffee together as the ‘parson’ was a teetotaller. After the coffee and a yarn, they shook hands and parted. A few months later while marching in New Guinea, the soldier spied the ex–orphan, ex–soldier, ex–parson outside a Salvation Army Red Shield hut. He gave the soldier the thumbs–up sign.

After the war the soldier became a waterside worker and who should he be working beside but our ex–orphan, ex–soldier, ex–parson, ex–salvo character. He died shortly after. At his cremation, directed by a fellow worker, he was sent off under a name nothing like the one he had used at school, nor in the army, nor as a parson, nor as a Salvo, nor on the wharf.

Ground Rules

The engineers had cleared a lane for the infantry to go back from the front line to collect stores and ammunition to resupply their forward positions. On this particular night, two mates were carrying a case of ammunition back to the front when the Germans opened up with machine gun fire. Everyone went straight to the ground but for this one bloke who ran about ten yards before going to ground. After the German fire had ceased, all got up ready to move forward except our friend. He had run into a mine field and refused to move. He demanded that his mates bring an engineer to lead him out of his predicament. This was done. He had learned his lesson the hard way – when in danger never run before going to ground, always go to ground immediately.

Army Jails

Some servicemen experienced both military jails (detention centres) and their civilian equivalents. The great majority of men confined to the army’s cells were there for non–criminal offences such as being AWOL, disobeying orders and other misdemeanours. The general opinion was that, of the two, army jails were worse.

Jerusalem and Cairo (Middle East) Holsworthy (NSW) Churchill (near Ipswich, Queensland) and Lake Eacham (also in Queensland, on the Atherton Tableland) were among the most notorious of army jails. Tales of brutality and intimidation in these places would make your hair stand on end. But black humour emerges from even the most demeaning situations.
One story worth telling relates to the Lake Eacham centre where inmates spent most of the day marching with full pack in bull ring style. Any man wishing to use the toilet, situated in the middle of the bull ring, first had to ask permission from the screw. Permission granted, the hapless prisoner then moved at the double to the toilet box. With trousers below the knees he had to keep both feet moving up and down marking time while relieving himself. A time limit was imposed. Time spent over the limit had to be made up at the end of the day with more marching around the bull ring.

Although army jails were places to be avoided at all costs, they could sometimes be difficult to dodge; a personal dislike towards a private from an officer could easily result in the digger spending a few days or even months in one of these dreaded centres. After the war, Royal Commissions and public inquiries revealed some disturbing incidents in these places but this information was nothing that those with personal experience did not already know.

Norm and Nature

He was a Salvation Army man through and through and a principled Christian; he neither drank nor smoked. He was well liked and respected by his fellow soldiers. When he joined the 2nd AIF in 1939, Norm was married with four children.

Like all humans, he suffered from one weakness. Norm’s was women. This foible was cheap to indulge in the towns of the Middle East as sex was inexpensive and easy to obtain. Later, in Athens, his indiscretions resulted in his contracting venereal disease. He received treatment in the military hospital and was still laid up when the Germans charged through Greece in 1941. The hospital was quickly evacuated. Norm was given a bottle of sulphanilamide tablets to continue his treatment while on the run. He survived his disease, Greece, Crete, and the rest of the war. He was discharged in 1945.

On his return to civilian life he resumed his involvement with the Salvation Army. This included playing in the band on a Friday and Saturday night in Brisbane near the pie stall at the corner of Queen and Edward Streets. On one such night an old army mate, much the worse for drink, happened along and waved to Norm who was loudly blowing his trumpet. Between hymns Norm called out to the bleary eyed digger: “Join us and be saved, friend.” His cobber responded to this invitation to salvation with: “Have you got any tablets left from Greece, Norm, old china plate?” Norm hurriedly gave a blast on his trumpet and waved a finger of silence at his old comrade. He then walked over, shook hands, and suggested that the boozy one move on as members of the band were becoming curious about the tablets in Greece. Norm assured his Christian friends that he had had a minor illness while overseas with the AIF and the tablets he'd been given had helped him wonderfully.

Two Different Men Behind the Moustache
He was posted to the platoon after they had withdrawn from the front line fire for a much needed spell. As suspected, he was an upstart toothbrush moustached born-to-be-officer type. He immediately made life hard for all of the men – drill, marches, unnecessary guard duties and, to cap it all off, he never shared his bottle of issue whisky with any of his diggers. After a few days he decided he would show his troops how to breach barbed wire entanglements. Throwing himself on to the barbed wire, he invited all the platoon to use his body as a means to get across. After half the platoon had used him as a springboard he became a casualty. The medics and a stretcher were called for. He was removed from the platoon and never seen again in the battalion.

A replacement officer arrived. He also sported a toothbrush moustache. But it was a different man behind the moustache this time. He shared his whisky issue, never took risks and never asked anyone to do anything that he was not prepared to do himself.

Towards the end of the battle of El Alamein he, with what was left of his platoon (about ten men), was directed by the battalion commanding officer to move behind Thompson’s Post and capture it. Thompson’s Post was heavily fortified (88mm German three purpose guns, mortar, heavy machine guns and anti-tank with other heavy artillery) and was of quite large an area. The Germans had repelled attacks of battalion strength by English, Australian and New Zealand forces over many months. It was ridiculous for an officer and ten men to attempt to take this position.

However, the small party moved around the outside of the post during darkness and fired a few bursts of Bren and rifle fire towards the German position. The enemy responded with Spandau and light machine guns. The officer directed his men to retire to battalion HQ and reported that the area was still very active. Next morning, Thompson’s Post was occupied by Australian troops without a shot being fired. The Germans withdrew under cover of darkness shortly after they had replied to the one officer and ten man attacking force.

My 21st Birthday

I celebrated my 21st birthday on Thursday, 9 October, 1941. I am not particularly proud of the finale to that night of celebration. About eight of us from the Petrol Company travelled down from Palestine in army staff cars to a British army depot, on the Suez Canal, named Tel–al–Kabir. This camp had one of the large well-stocked canteens known as NAAFI (Navy Army Airforce Institute).

As we did not have enough money to journey into Cairo, we went to the canteen where we were delighted to find Australian beer – Fourex and Bulimba, both brewed in Queensland. With our pooled finances supplemented by generous English soldiers and airmen, my 21st turned into a great night of sing songs and performances of all kind.

But all good things come to an end. At a very late hour (or very early in the morning) we literally fell out of the canteen and headed for our tents. On the way one mate and I were somehow separated from the others and found ourselves in the English
officers’ lines near their mess. Our raucous singing brought several officers (who were in much the same condition as us) from the mess. They took exception both to our rowdy behaviour and our presence in their lines. After exchanges of insults and an invitation to fight from my mate, the officers promptly laid both of us on the ground with well placed lefts and rights.

The camp guard was called and we were bundled off to the guardroom. Next morning, sick and sore with skin off and black eyes, we were paraded before the camp commander for a tongue lashing. He informed us that because we were only visitors to the camp (and colonial troops at that), he couldn't sentence us to detention. But he would order us back to our unit in Palestine immediately with a note prohibiting us from ever again entering the camp at Tel–el–Kabir. It’s one birthday I have never forgotten! Those English officers certainly knew how to punch – hard and often!

An Army Poet

Most army poets remained anonymous. The following is one effort from a 6th Division bard.

A Soldier’s Prayer
Our father which art in Aussie
Menzies is thy name
Thy will be done in Melbourne as in Sydney
Give us this day our deferred pay
And forgive us our AWL as we forgive all
Except the 6th Division Provost Corps
Lead us not into the Army reserves
But deliver us Bonds Negotiable
Bearing interest for ever and ever
AMEN.

Boils and the Sex Therapist

After being in the Middle East for over two months, I went on sick parade for the continuous boils that I had. The unit doctor asked me if I had had any leave since my arrival. I replied negatively, so he said he would recommend a few days leave in Tel Aviv. He added: “Get the dirty water off your chest; it may help your boils.” I don't know which medical book told him that sex was a cure for boils. However despite taking my pleasant medicine as instructed, on my return I continued to have boils.

Two Brothel Incidents – Cairo and Alexandria

The war time brothel area of Cairo was called the Birka or Wazzir. Its fame was established when 1st AIF troops, while in Egypt awaiting orders to leave for Gallipoli, almost destroyed a number of bawdy–houses during a rampage on Good Friday, 2 April
1915. Soldiers from the 2nd AIF 25 years later also patronised these establishments. I can verify my part in a mini riot in this same area during my time in Egypt.

The Australian 6th Division had camped at Helwan about 15 kilometres out of Cairo in early September, 1940, after we had travelled 560 kilometres from Palestine. Helwan was connected to Cairo by rail and leave – official or unofficial – was available almost every night. Even without money we much preferred a trip to Cairo and a walk around the city to staying in the camp. But for those with funds a visit to the Birka area was commonplace. This influx of large numbers of Australian troops caused a price increase in prostitutes’ rates which in turn resulted in ill-feeling from the English soldiers already stationed in the area.

One night I was with a group of Australians and New Zealanders in the foyer of a brothel chatting to some of the girls when in rushed three English red caps (provosts). At the same time a digger emerged from one of the rooms followed by his lady who was screaming at him in Arabic. It seemed she had been able to call the Red Caps to the area.

Quick as a flash the Aussie landed a perfect right hander to the jaw of one of the Red Caps. Down he went. We were all on our feet by now. I thought I saw another provost’s hand move towards the revolver on his hip. For the one and only time in my life I king–hit a man from behind. Simultaneously a New Zealander disposed of the remaining provost in the same fashion. While I was not particularly proud of my action, at the time I saw it as a necessity.

We all rushed from the brothel to mix with the crowds in the street. We quickly made our way back to camp. Worried about possible repercussions from this affair, we were relieved when we heard no more of the unsavoury incident.

The other outstanding brothel scene I recall happened when we were camped at I–Kingi–Maryuet, a short distance from Alexandria. Sister Street, badly damaged in a bombing raid in 1942, was the brothel district in Alexandria.

Again leave, official or otherwise, was ‘open go’. Again, a number of us were in the foyer of a several storied building. One of our mates had chosen his girl and retired to a room. He had only been there five minutes when there was an explosion. A hole appeared in the floor of the foyer. A drunken Aussie, apparently dissatisfied with his lady’s performance, had fired a revolver shot from the bedroom below. Amid the confusion our mate rushed from the room still pulling up his trousers.

We left the building in a hurry. We were only a short distance up the street when provosts and local police arrived in several vehicles. As we headed for camp our mate said that when the shot exploded his lady had slipped from under him. “Jesus,” he lamented, “I was on the short strokes when she disappeared.” We heard later that the offending shot firer had been arrested. All in all, it was not a good example of how Australian servicemen should conduct themselves in a foreign country. But war makes men behave in ways that would not be tolerated in civilian life.
Cairo and Alexandria were fascinating places with poverty and wealth existing side by side. The populations of both cities were quite cosmopolitan – if you stood on the street corner for twenty minutes you would see most nationalities of the world pass by.

We Australians always got on well with the local population (even though they did their best to extract as much money from us as they could). In Palestine our friendly relations with the Arabs were frowned on by the British. One English provost said: “You bloody Aussies have undone 20 years of our work in six months by being friendly towards the Arabs.” Quite rightly, the Arabs hated the English for what they had been doing to them since Palestine had become a British Protectorate at the end of the First world war.

A Brief History of the 2/15th Battalion

15 May 1940 – raised at Redbank. It colonel Marlin was commanding officer.

28 December 1940 – battalion left Sydney on the Queen Mary.

April–October 1941 – part of the defence of Tobruk.

January–July 1942 – Syria and Turkish border.

July–December 1942 – Western Desert including El Alamein with the 8th Army.

February 1943 – returned from Middle East to Australia.

February–August 1943 – jungle training at Kauri, Atherton Tableland.

September 1943–February 1944 – landing at Lae and Finschhafen and Huon Peninsula to Sio, New Guinea.

February 1944 – returned to Australia and reformed at Ravenshoe on the Atherton Tableland.

February 1944–May 1944 – training at Ravenshoe.

May 1945–August 1945 – Morotai, Maura Island and North Borneo, Brunei and Limbang.

21 January 1946 – 2/15 Battalion disbanded at Chermside, Brisbane.

The 2/15th Battalion, part of the 20th Brigade of the 9th Australian Division of the 2nd AIF served for five years and six months with over four years of active service in forward areas. Ninety one decorations were awarded to the battalion.
Casualties were as follows:

Benghazi to Tobruk – 184
Siege of Tobruk – 164
El Alamein – 158
Operation Bulimba – 173
Lae and Finschhafen – 180
Borneo – 4

This total of 863 does not include the many hundreds who had various illnesses such as hepatitis and desert sores in the Middle East, and scrub typhus, skin diseases and malaria in New Guinea and Borneo.

The 2/15th Battalion was originally part of the 7th Australian Division 2nd AIF but eventually became part of the 20th Brigade of the 9th Australian Division.

The First Overseas Deployment of the 6th Division.

In raising the 6th Division at the start of world war II army authorities aimed to recruit 20,000 men. They were to be split into three brigades, two from the populous states of New South Wales and Victoria; and the third from the other states. Each brigade would be further broken up into battalions of around a thousand men. The table below shows the first overseas deployment of the 6th Division which was the realisation of the plans of army command.

The 15th Battalion remembers

“Angels” had been a password at Gallipoli. After WW I, returned soldiers of the 15th battalion set up the Angels Remembrance Club.

The Angels Club was still in existence when some of us veterans of the 2/15th met at Anzac house in Elizabeth Street to set up the 2/15th Remembrance Club. Don Parker was elected president and Ted Hamilton became secretary. With my paternal connection to the 1/15th I was made our delegate to the Angels Club.

From 1951 to 1986 I was a financial rather than active member of the 2/15th Club.
Many secretaries of the club have co–ordinated the efforts to organise veterans’ welfare, hospital and family visits, and reunions. After Hamilton, secretaries were: J L Horton (1947), Don Parker (1948), Joe Sparkes (1949), Alex Rae (1950–57), and George Soden (for over 25 years from 1958 till his death in 1985).

Since that time secretary John Morris and president Bob Cowie had made the organisation as vital as at any time of its existence. I was fortunate to become actively involved during this period. Our annual re–union is held during Exhibition week.

Unfortunately my earliest role as delegate to the Angels Club is redundant. There are no known members of the Angels still living. With the youngest members of the 2/15th Battalion Club over 65, we shortly must face the prospect of joining the Angels.

Chapter 10

Bringing Home the Memories

Turn home, the sun goes down; swimmer turn home.

Last leaf of gold vanishes from the sea–curve

Take the big roller’s shoulder, speed and swerve;

Come to the long beach home like a gull diving

Judith Wright

The Atom Bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on Monday 6 August 1945. The next day, I was called to battalion HQ. I was told that, under the Labor government’s five year service plan, I was to leave the next day for home and discharge.

We were to fly directly to Australia. But on Thursday the second atom bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. The grapevine had it that Japan was willing to surrender unconditionally. Our plane trip was cancelled as all available aircraft were required to fly to Singapore and Malaya to rescue the men of the 8th Division AIF who had suffered for three years as prisoners of the Japs. We were quite content given the reasons for the aborted flight home.

We boarded an American Liberty ship, the John Steele, from Labuan (Borneo) the following Monday. There were about 200 of us five–year men going home. On Wednesday we received news that Japan had surrendered. World war II was over.

We had a couple of days on Moratai Island in the Philippines. We boarded a Dutch vessel, the Swartenhondt on Tuesday 21 August to leave for Australia. We arrived at Sydney on Tuesday, 4 September. I walked into our home at Sherwood on Thursday to tears of joy from mum and dad.
After two medicals, my discharge in my pocket, and all pay due – seven hundred and five pounds and three shillings ($1,410.30) – I walked slowly from Redbank camp to the railway station. My discharge read: attested for service 21–10–39, discharged 11–10–45 with accumulated leave of 102 days, made up as follows: Service 2183 days (1406 overseas, 777 days in Australia). After six years of service my discharge was something of an anticlimax. With my discharge money I opened my first bank savings account.

Rather than go straight to the station I walked into the Redbank pub and bought a beer. I sat down on my own in a quiet corner to think of the future. At 25 years of age, I had spent a valuable six years of my life in uniform, mostly overseas. That I had survived made me feel great. But a lump in the throat came with the memories of all those who had died or had suffered in POW camps.

I really do think I was not cut out to be a soldier. I have never hated any person, not even the Japanese as I blamed their religious upbringing, blind patriotism and hari-kari attitude for their brutal treatment of other people. Patriotism was not one of my reasons for joining in 1939. I believed then, and still do, that patriotism and religious fervour are the last refuges of scoundrels. Also I would not compromise with arbitrary authority on matters of principle. How I survived for six years without a red mark in my pay book was one of the wonders of my army life. Principles had led to clashes with ncos and officers.

Looking back, I knew that it had only been by good luck I got through the first two years without being caught AWL. From then when I did appear for some misdemeanour before the company or battalion or unit commander, they were considerate enough to give me extra guard or fatigue duties rather than a bad mark in my pay book. After a couple of years and a campaign or two, you were considered to be part of the old soldier class and this helped.

I thought there had to be a way to create an organisation that could prevent any more world wars, so that my dad’s and my experiences were not the lot of the next generation. My thoughts turned to the many dramas I had been through during the previous six years. I dwelt on four incidents in particular.

The first of the four experiences happened in March 1942. We were stationed at Lattique, a small seaboards town 160 kilometres north of Tripoli in Lebanon. Part of our duties was to go down to a small village with offers of food as an inducement to allow us to spray the mud huts. The children loved to have their hair and body sprayed, as they were vermin covered. On this occasion a woman, very dirty and agitated, came from her mud hut waving her arms about. She came close to me and spat towards my face. I was stunned and took a step back to put a bullet in my rifle breech. The interpreter stepped between us and quietened the woman. He explained to me that her son had been killed while fighting for the Vichy French (Nazi collaborators) when engaged by Australian soldiers some months before, during the Syrian campaign. I was shocked at both her
reaction and mine. I told the interpreter that I felt sorry for her but I did not kill her son. Such is war in a foreign country.

The second incident occurred during the El Alamein battle which commenced on 23 October, 1942. On 2 October, while driving a truckload of ammunition up to the rifle company, the engine and the front of my truck were blown to pieces. There was intense shelling going on at the time but whether the truck was shelled or I had run over a mine, I was not sure. All I know was the driver’s side door was jammed and I could not open it. I climbed out the left hand side door and dived into a hole until the shelling died down a little. Unable to continue transporting I was sent as part of a detail to one of the rifle companies to escort several Italian prisoners back to battalion HQ. The prisoners were huddled together. When we told them to get on their feet one started to move towards me. I thought he was going to attack me so I put my rifle on guard. With that he fell on his knees and cried: “Mama, Mama.” I thought he was calling for his Mother but ‘Mama’ is mercy in Italian. I said to him: “Get up you silly bastard and get moving.”

My third strong memory was of 13 October, 1943. After landing against Jap opposition on the beach at Finschhafen we moved inland over rugged mountains to attack Jap positions dug–in at Kumawah, a village towards Satelberg. We attacked at 9am. There were nine men in our section of the platoon. The Japs were stubborn. Most died in their holes with their weapons. Our company also sustained heavy casualties. After almost three quarters of an hour of close combat, of our section, only Bill Huddy (later a Cairns waterside worker) and myself were left on our feet.

I had been wounded by a Jap hand grenade. I had grenade splinters down my left hand side from head to toe. I was very dizzy. Only one machine gun nest remained to be silenced. Bill said: “how are you, I am going to rush the post.” I replied: “Not the best” so he said to give him covering fire with the Bren, which I did. He charged and silenced the Jap post.

I managed to get up and move forward, but fell, Bren gun and all, into a trench with a Jap in it. I put the gun barrel on the Jap’s back and fired till the magazine was empty. Terrified, I jumped out of the hole. I moved forward to where Huddy was digging–in to prepare for a possible counter attack.

After a while I decided to go back for treatment for my wounds. I was drawn to the hole, where I had emptied my magazine in the Jap’s back. Rolling him over, I saw that he had been shot through the forehead. Strange as it may seem, I felt relieved that it had not been me who had ended his life.

The fourth flashback was towards the end of July 1945. We were in Borneo patrolling in American barges 80 kilometres up the Limbang River. On this particular patrol, we saw the work of local Dyaks – many heads of Jap soldiers and also Jap women and children. The Dyaks handed us – I was in charge as corporal of the patrol – three Jap soldiers. They were in a bad way with dysentery when we took them on the barge. They were heaving over the side most of the time. Merv Dangerfield, a member of the patrol,
had a brother who was a POW in Japan. I said to him: “Those Japs are yours if you want to square up for your brother.” Merv was upset. He said: “Jesus Christ, no way, Phil.” Then I felt like being sick also to think I would suggest such a cold blooded murder. War does strange things to people.

Chapter 11

From War to Wharf

You gaze at the flag which hangs from the mast
To honour the men who were staunch to the last
And fancy you hear a quiet voice say
`Australia my country, will you repay?'

Gwen Richards

With my $1,410.30, I intended to have a good spell and enjoy civilian life. Financially my lot improved. On enlisting in 1939, I had allocated my mum 3 shillings a day from my 5/- per day. She now gave me £300 ($600) back. I was lucky to have had such a considerate mother.

After a couple of months of the easy life, I took a job as a truck driver with Campbells, the company I had been working with when I had enlisted. It was hard work loading and unloading cement. By July 1946 Joyce and I had decided to get married in the Sherwood Church of England.

After a few months driving a truck I developed a stomach condition and was given a job at Campbell’s city warehouse. Since our marriage we had lived with Joyce’s family. Our eldest son Jim was born at Sherwood Hospital on 23 June 1947.

We purchased ground at 205 Verney Rd East, Graceville. We moved into a 10 square cavity brick home in November. We had used up almost all of our money including my gratuity army pay. Our commitments left us with very little spare cash at the end of the week.

Joyce would collect several bottles. At the end of each week, we would place certain amounts of money in each of these bottles. Our weekly income of around £5 ($10) would be allocated for rent, electricity, gas and clothes. We also had an industrial fund bottle, in case money was needed during a strike. By the time we had finished our bottle budgets, no money was left for social outings. My mum and dad obligingly treated us to some Sunday arvo picnics, when they drove us to nearby Brookfield.
I began playing tennis again. I also attended Dick Gunthorpe’s boxing gym at his Oxley home, and took part in amateur contests. I had done some considerable boxing in the army but I was fortunate that I knew my own ability as a boxer. It was a great sport so long as you did not get knocked around. During this period a young local boxer, Mick Lewis, died after a bout at the old Brisbane Stadium. This tragedy upset us all; we had held Mick in high esteem both as a boxer and as a man.

I joined the Sherwood Branch of the Returned Soldiers League (RSL). I attended an occasional meeting but as the early 1950s developed so too did the Cold War. I firmly believed that the RSL had no right to become anti–communist and to refuse membership to or expel suspected communists. Many communists served in all branches of the forces. They played their parts in the defeat of fascism. I discontinued my membership of the RSL. As I became more involved in the trade union and peace movements I had even less desire to be part of an organisation that openly supported extreme right wing positions.

While working at Campbell’s warehouse, I became the representative for the Storemen and Packers Union. I was troubled by the apathy of members there. Most of them even worked without pay at Campbell’s display at the annual Royal National Association exhibition. I tried to organise opposition to this practice but only was able to muster two supporters.

One lunch hour, while strolling around town down near the Waterside Workers Union rooms, I went in to inquire if the books were open for new members. This was just after the end of the Queensland railways strike of 1948, in which the watersiders had played a major role. During this strike, Communist Party MLA, Fred Paterson had been savagely batoned from behind by a well known policeman, sgt Mahoney. The reaction to this was a huge rally and march in Brisbane streets. I left work at Campbells to take part in this activity. This first industrial action of mine made me feel that I had joined an army again – this time, no uniforms or drill, but a worldwide organisation of workers who, irrespective of country, had common objectives of a decent standard of living, a fair wage and, most importantly, the grand objective of a world free from wars.

I was told by the assistant secretary of the watersiders’ federation, Alby Graham, that no new watersiders were being taken on but that the coal workers section was recruiting 17 new members. He said it was hard and dirty work but if I wanted wharf work I should submit an application signed by two union members. I did this and was accepted. I was admitted to the Waterside Workers Federation in the last week of June 1948 as a coal worker. As no coal work was immediately available we went on the general wharf roster.

As we entered the 1950s, I became more involved in the union movement. I was elected job delegate. I enjoyed this responsibility, even though wharf workers were very hard task masters. Their comments and criticisms were straight to the point and generally were honest opinions of how workers felt. I have often pointed out that the wharf is similar to the army – both organisations can accommodate all types of people. During the
1950s, 60% of the membership of the Federation were men who had served in the 1939–45 war.

By 1951, our family had increased to three boys. Alan, the second, was born in 1949 and Dennis in 1951.

The wharf was an industrially active place at this time. Many improvements in wages and conditions had been achieved but Australian workers still faced attacks from conservatives. A major assault on labour was the Communist Party Dissolution Bill. As part of our union’s campaign to defeat this obnoxious bill, I helped by handing out leaflets, placing posters and stickers on public places. This was my first effort in political activism. Postering was hazardous as it was subject to police attention. The struggle over this act was bitter. I admired the Labor Party leader, dr Evatt, for his courageous stand as it was obvious that the ordinary people of Australia were deeply divided on the question. On Saturday 21 September 1951, the proposal was narrowly defeated at referendum by 2,370,009 to 2,317,927 – just 53,028 votes the difference between, I believed, democracy and fascism.

If that piece of legislation had been accepted by the Australian people then, quite apart from the actual membership of the Communist Party of Australia, thousands of ordinary Australians with opinions and beliefs similar to mine would have become victims. I believed that concentration camps or the like were in the minds of the reactionary Menzies government and its supporters. It should be remembered that many Austro–Italian communists were interred by the Menzies government when war was declared. The avowed enemies Mussolini and Menzies agreed that Italy and Australia both should have concentration camps for anti–fascists.

Apart from defeat by referendum of the Communist Party Dissolution Bill, the High Court of Australia also declared the bill invalid.

Despite these setbacks, the conservative government had been working on another strategy. Vladimir Petrov, third secretary of the Soviet embassy in Canberra, was being cultivated. In April 1953, Petrov defected and was granted asylum in Australia. The subsequent Royal Commission did not produce one spy but slandered many decent people, including my friend and editor of Maritime Worker, Rupert Lockwood. Sydney federation official, Nev Isaacsen also was wrongly tainted. The Petrov Royal Commission Christmas Party showed what farces the conservatives perpetuated as they tried to mislead the Australian people.

1954 saw the Federation in a struggle with the Federal government over recruiting legalisation. Later, a three week strike over wages and conditions gave us moderate gains. In both of these strikes, I took an active part in a number of union committees our union formed to seek support, both in the city and country.

At the 1958 Brisbane branch elections, I was elected to the branch executive as a rank and file member. I was re-elected each year up to and including 1974. I did not
nominate for union elections in 1975 as I had intended to take voluntary redundancy in 1976. For some years, I held the position of vice–president and also acted in the roles of secretary, assistant secretary, vigilant officer and president. For many years, George Kellaway (ex-Brisbane and Fortitude Valley footballer of the 1930s and 40s) and myself were branch delegates to the Queensland Trades and Labor Council and also to several Queensland Union Congresses.

The 1960s saw a great display of union action when almost all of the Australian workforce ceased work. The year was 1969. Clarrie O’shea of the Victorian Tramways Union was jailed for non–payment of fines. He was released when his fine was paid by persons unknown.

Fines and penalties were realities our union had to live with. In a lengthy campaign to win long service leave for all waterside workers, fines and penalties on the union and on its members as individuals ran to two million pounds. Despite the fines we were able to win universal long service leave. Many of the fines were imposed by the Australian Stevedoring Industry Authority, which was the government authority for the Australian waterfront.

This heavy handed organisation was eventually phased out as weekly hire, mechanisation and containerisation changed the whole Australian stevedoring industry with substantial reductions in employment. When I joined the Federation in 1948, its membership was approximately 25,000. In the late 1980s, the total membership was 6,000 watersiders with 2,000 others, such as clerks and tradespeople.

Union activity is an involved and unpredictable commitment. During one of our campaigns, as a union official, I was invited to address a Young Liberal branch. I do not think I won any converts to the labour movement, but they listened attentively and asked many questions. The youths invited me to stay for supper after the meeting. I found at such meetings and at meetings among workers my six years of army experience helped me greatly. I believe that the militant unions such as our Waterside Workers Federation are the shock troops or infantry of workers the world over who struggle for better conditions, quality of life and, most important of all, world peace.

As part of the Cold War and anti–communist movement of the 50s the industrial groups penetrated our union. Industrial groups or groupers were right wing anti–communists, most of whom were lay members of considerable influence in the Catholic church. As well as infiltrating trade unions, the groupers set up an official political party, the Democratic Labor Party and an extra parliamentary political group, the National Civic Council. There is ample literature on the public and clandestine activities of the industrial groups. They were strong in the port of Brisbane, but by patience, debate and legitimate campaigning we were eventually able to remove all industrial group influence from the branch executive.

We were fortunate that, unlike some other ports, Brisbane did not see the bitterness and violence that took years to recede and finally disappear.
In branch elections, I was part of the unity tickets of communists, ALP members and non-party candidates. During one election in the 1960s, Jim Killen, Liberal member for Moreton, waved a unity election card in Federal parliament. Killen proclaimed that seven communists had been elected to the Brisbane branch executive. Alby Graham and Mick Healy, the two communist members who had been elected on the unity ticket, complained that the other five of us had not been paying our party dues. Of the five, three were Labor Party members (Bill Stimson, Peter Pritchard and ex-alderman, Paddy Beckett). George Kellaway and I were not members of any political party.

One wonders, had the Communist Party Dissolution Bill become law, would politicians like Killen have been able to remove from office or jail elected union representatives on false and misleading information? Killen’s information may have come from ASIO (Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation) or the chamber of commerce or the industrial groups led by B A Santamaria.

During my seventeen years as an executive member I spent many periods as relieving official. In total I gave about four years service in this capacity. I always found the job stimulating but mentally demanding. After a month as a full–time official I would recuperate by relaxing in our tent, usually at Currumbin on the Gold Coast. My main hobby at the time was surf ski riding. The mental taxation made me feel that I would not be able to cope as a full–time official. For that reason more than any other I never sought such a position in the union.

Our union always tried to work with the Queensland Trades and Labor Council. Throughout my thirty years as a waterside worker, the Trades and Labor Council had only two secretaries, Alec MacDonald from 1949–1969, and Fred Whitby from 1969 onwards. Alec MacDonald was dedicated and possibly the best secretary ever of the Council. His management achieved unity and settled disputes satisfactorily for the workers. Even Jack Egerton a union power broker who later accepted a knighthood in contentious circumstances, was very loyal towards Alec. I came to know Alec just that much better when he and I were delegates to the World Peace Congress in Moscow in 1962. Fred Whitby who became the secretary on the death of Alec in 1969, was also a dedicated and capable union leader. When I worked with Fred, I found him obliging and loyal to the cause of trade unionism. But I feel sure that Fred would be the first to agree that Alec MacDonald was a legend in his own life time.

There has always been more to unionism than just the leadership and the WWF believed in encouraging rank and file workers to foster unionism at the workplace. This is one aspect that has always made the Federation a militant part of Australian unionism. While delegates had always been prominent in wharf organisation, it was not until the late 1950s that a Job Delegates Association was formed from rank and file members in Brisbane. This development also occurred in all major ports and many smaller ports throughout the Commonwealth. In time, JDA conferences were held in various ports. In 1964, Barry Earle and I represented the Brisbane JDA at a conference in Sydney. The structure of the JDA over the years changed as work methods altered with
containerisation and mechanisation. The old JDA organisation became, and remains to
this day, the Port and Base Committee. Its mission is still the same, to involve the rank
and file workers in job decision making and to feed information and ideas to the branch
executive.

The Federation was involved in the discussion over weekly hire in 1967. During
1967 – 68 weekly hire, which meant a weekly wage for waterside workers, was
introduced throughout Australia. Before this, any member could transfer to any port in
Australia. The system saw a large number of workers ‘following the sun,’ working apples
in Tasmanian ports early in the year, moving north to Queensland meat ports such as
Gladstone and Rockhampton, for the autumn, and during the winter on to the sugar ports
of Mackay, Townsville, Bowen, Cairns, Innisfail, Lucinda Point and Port Douglas.

The transfer system was a great thing for unionism as new ideas were conveyed
around the Australian ports from the east coast to Western Australia and back again. This
helped to solidify ideas and unionism generally. There were problems, as locals in some
ports resented the transferees, but, overall, it was a great system. Nonetheless, waterside
workers are like other workers; they desire decent wages and working conditions. For the
economic advantages of weekly hire we sacrificed many of the benefits of the transfer
system.

I took advantage of the transfer system three times. The first was in 1953 when,
due to the Federal government’s import restrictions, work was down in Brisbane. It was
not uncommon to have, either no work or one or two days a week during this period.
Also as a result of industrial disputes, our attendance money had been taken from us as a
penalty imposed by the Australian Stevedoring Industry Commission. In May 1953, I
decided to transfer to Mackay for the sugar season.

The sugar work had just commenced when a serious dispute erupted at the Port of
Bowen. The dispute widened to include railway, meat workers and others. The Federal
government’s sledge hammer actions in introducing troops on the wharves at Bowen
backfired in the face of increased union resistance. The government backed down. The
troops were withdrawn. Work resumed around Bowen. The 1953 sugar season was a
bumper one.

In September, Joyce and our three boys arrived in Mackay by train. We set up
house at Slade Point, about eight kilometres from the Mackay harbour. I had rented a
small broken down place, right on the beach front for 12/6d ($1.25) per week. There were
no beds, and only a broken wood stove. During a small flood that year, the kitchen and
two other rooms had about six inches of water in them. But we were together as a family.
For the next eight months, we were perfectly happy with plenty of work and good pay.
Our two older sons went to Slade Point State School, alongside other waterside workers’
children and locals. Many other families had come from as far south as Melbourne and
Tasmania. We had a good social life. By December 1953, we were able to buy a new 4
cylinder Hillman Minx, our first car, thanks to the good sugar season, and an interest free
loan from Joyce’s parents. We stayed at Slade Point till May, 1954, and then drove home
to our house at Graceville, which we had shut up for the previous eight months. As our rent payable to the War Service Home Division was minimal, we had never rented out our home. Our weekly repayment was a mere 12/6d ($1.25).

In 1955, we decided to visit Melbourne by car. I sent my work transfer to the Port of Melbourne. We stayed with my old school friend, Ron Parker, who lived well out of Melbourne. I decided it would be too far to travel to work. After two weeks holiday, I had my work transfer sent on to Port Kembla.

While travelling from Melbourne to Port Kembla, we broke a back axle near Holbrook, about 80 kilometres north of Albury. As Holbrook was a small town, we had to wait days for the axle to arrive. We pitched our tent. The kids reckoned Holbrook was the best part of their holiday, as they, like children everywhere, quickly made friends. The garage owner, after fixing our Hillman, said: “If you had a Holden, I could have had you on the road in a matter of hours.” I was convinced and have only purchased Holden cars since.

But the Hillman got us to Port Kembla without further trouble. We pitched our tent at Windang, a camping ground on Lake Illawarra a few kilometres south of Port Kembla and Woollongong. I commenced work and we stayed there for a few weeks. We left Port Kembla in time to get home to Graceville for the start of school for 1956.

My third and last transfer was a working holiday over the Christmas and New Year period. In December 1956, we drove to Katoomba. We did all the walks, caves, and sight seeing in the area. We drove back to Coffs Harbour where my transfer awaited me. I worked there till towards the end of January, 1957, when once again we returned home in time for the boys to be back in class for the new school year.

My father Mick died peacefully in his sleep in September 1957 after two minor heart attacks. He and I were very close, perhaps bonded most closely by our war experiences and our common desire to see war prevented by mass action from ordinary people. No organised peace or anti-war movement existed before my father’s war service, except for the limited anti-conscription campaigns of 1916–17. As a young man I spoke about an anti-war organisation. My father suggested that the Returned Servicemen’s League (RSL) was able to fill that role.

However, from the early 1950s the RSL became a leader of the pro-war, anti-communist movement in this country. In the main it still supports reactionary activities, be they local, national or international. During the Vietnam war, I always found allies when I went for a few beers at our local Services Club. It is possible to be a member of the Services Club yet not be a member of the RSL. This is the status I have had, having been a member of the Twin Towns Services Club at Tweed Heads New South Wales for twenty five years. My membership commemorates my father’s war service along with that of his and my wartime comrades.
On being elected to the Branch Union Executive of Brisbane in 1958, my transfer days ended. I was not bound against transfer by any union rules, but felt that to transfer just for a short Christmas–New Year holiday period would not be doing the right thing. If I had transferred out of Brisbane, my position on the executive would be declared vacant and may have needed another election for the position. This would have been costly for the union and I surely would have lost much support from members of the branch.

Probably the most profound change for waterfront labour resulted from the change-over during 1967–68 from casual employment to weekly hire (permanency). The new system came about in the Port of Brisbane in August, 1968. As executive members, we had the difficult responsibility of convincing our members that the time for drastic change had arrived. We had many meetings before the crucial two day stop work meeting held at the City Hall. I happened to be acting president at the time and I chaired each of the lively stop work meetings. On the second day of the historic meeting, the rank and file finally accepted our recommendations to move to permanency. More than twenty years later, the switch to permanency is regarded by all members as having been the correct step. Permanency of weekly wage and a pension scheme were followed in later years by a satisfactory voluntary redundancy scheme. I took voluntary redundancy in March, 1976.

Our union’s belief in the ACTU as the voice of the organised workers of Australia caused much heartburn for many years. The ACTU was extremely conservative. We reluctantly accepted ACTU directions to return to work several times, in the interests of union unity. We all felt greatly honoured when Jim Healy (our general secretary 1935–1961) was elected to the executive of the ACTU. It gave this body a bit of militancy. It also gave the progressive unions a voice at top trade union level.

On the retirement of Albert Monk, president of the ACTU in 1969–70, a keen contest developed for the presidency between Harold Souter and Bob Hawke. Souter was secretary of the ACTU. Hawke had been an industrial advocate for some years. Souter was openly right wing politically and industrially. Hawke seemed to be on the left of unionism and politics. Hawke became president with the support of the left of the movement. I remember a meeting of concerned unionists at Brisbane’s old Trades Hall where he urged us, meaning the left, to support him for the presidency. Though the quality of Hawke’s later performance is open to debate he did at least put new vigour into the union movement.

Workers made minimal gains in some disputes, but Hawke’s Mr Fix–It image worried many of those who supported him. More and more trade unionists watched with disquiet the performances of Mr Fix–It as he progressed from Labor candidate to Labor member and prime minister.

It is impossible to divorce politics from unionism. Our union has always put its finances and human resources behind the election of Labor candidates. Over a long period of Australian history, the waterfront has supplied many politicians to local, State and Federal parliamentary positions. Some of them later became viciously anti–labour.
Our branch always supported the policies put forward by Labor at elections, but also as part of this campaigning, we put forward many of our own progressive objectives which were far in advance of the official Labor Policy. We would travel to nearby rural towns, hold meetings in halls, address various organisations, leaflet and place posters.

Our efforts to return Labor governments were a hard slog with little electoral reward, except in Brisbane where there was a Labor City Council with Clem Jones as lord mayor, first elected in 1961. Jones served as mayor till 1975. He was best remembered for presiding over the building of a sewerage system in Brisbane. It was a long period of 23 years before a Labor Federal government was returned. The people of the 1940s, who elected a Labor government during the war years, apparently lost their sense of wanting a government of social reform of the John Curtin or Ben Chifley type. The post–war rat race to make money and the Cold War were obstacles to the election of Labor governments.

I believe the war–time Labor government of Curtin produced the best and most progressive prime minister we ever have had. Prior to Curtin’s early death, I and many others believed that the post–war period would be marked by Labor control of the Federal parliament, and socialist programs would be the order of the day.

Our union’s role in international activities goes back well into the 19th century when Australian watersiders sent finance to their fellow workers in England. The Federation played a part in the anti–conscription campaigns during the first world war. A close workmate of mine in the coal section, Alan Lane, took an active part in that campaign. Alan was a son of a founder of the labour movement, Ernie Lane, the author of Dawn to Dusk–Reminiscences of a Rebel4. As a boy Alan had spent some time with his parents in Paraguay at the attempted establishment of a socialist society. Alan, himself a non–drinker, believed that alcohol was one of the main causes of the failure of the Paraguay socialist experiment.

The Port Kembla action in blackbanning pig iron exports to Japan in the late thirties is well known. Equally well known is the epithet pig iron Bob which former prime minister Menzies carried for the next 30 years. After the second World War the ban on Dutch vessels assisted the formation of the Republic of Indonesia. The Federation opposed Australia’s part in both the Korean and the Vietnam War.

The anti–war movement no doubt was instrumental in the election of a Labor government in 1972. We all played our part in this victory. The Whitlam government moved decisively to abolish conscription, to undertake complete and final withdrawal from Vietnam, to recognise the People’s Republic of China and to improve the status of women in Australian society. The government injected money into departments such as health, education and Aboriginal affairs.

This mildly reformist government offended overseas and Australian conservatives. The efforts to bring down the Whitlam government were rewarded in 1975

4. Lane’s book will be reprinted shortly by SHAPE
when the governor general, sir John Kerr, ordered the sacking of the Labor government. Our union immediately took industrial action. Many other unions did the same, but after several stoppages and rallies, both Whitlam and ACTU president Hawke called for the workers to cool off. Any positive results from real workers’ and people’s power were curtailed.

At that time I believed that the Labor government should have rejected dismissal by Kerr and have been prepared to battle on even if the Australian army was put on a green alert by Kerr. As governor–general, Kerr was also supreme commander of the Armed Forces and therefore had the power to do this. Anything could have developed. But the ballot box had been rorted by reaction and conservatism. As it was Whitlam chose not to be at the centre of a momentous change in Australian history.

Chapter 12

Social and Political Activity on the Waterfront

The dance, the smoke–oh, and the children’s picnic

Down the river–flats beneath the willows–

They all come homewards and Joe sets them all,

Between the morning and the mid–day schooner.

Rosemary Dobson

I witnessed the lifespan of one progressive initiative of the WWF in 1954. Arising from our three weeks dispute of 1954, a Women’s Committee was formed by the Brisbane branch. The activities of the women’s committee included action during industrial disputes. In quieter periods, catering for union functions, attending to members who were in hospitals and preparing May Day floats were some of the contributions of the committee. Our Sydney triennial conference had a special section for women’s committees from many ports around Australia. Joyce, my wife, became an active member of the Women’s Committee for many years. Joyce was on the executive for a few years.

The Women’s Committee was one of the most effective of the many committees that were formed within the Brisbane branch of the Federation. After the second world war over twenty auxiliaries functioned at various times. They included the Job Delegates Association, First Aid Auxiliary, Women’s Committee, Dancing Academy, Peace Committee, Billiards and Snooker Club, Branch Brass Band, Club Committee, Football, Cricket, Tennis, Indoor Bowls, Outdoor Bowls, Fishing, Youth, Port Committee, All Ports Sport Committee, Social Club Committee, World Festival Committee, Picnic Committee, Golf Club, Table Tennis, Dart Club. Auxiliaries were supported and encouraged by the Federation as fundamental to the overriding objective of socialism. Socialism is all about participation by ordinary people in all aspects of life–sporting,
social and political. The list of watersiders who were or became outstanding in their field of sport is too long to write in detail.

The Federation’s outstanding sporting event in the 1950s and 1960s was the All Ports Sports Carnival held in Sydney and Adelaide. Brisbane held the last carnival in 1960. These carnivals were attended by waterside workers from as far away as Fremantle, Western Australia. An ageing and reduced workforce were the main reasons these sports carnivals were discontinued. The range of sports contested included fishing, boxing, cricket, golf, tennis, table tennis, bowls, and football.

Auxiliaries of our union and the establishment of our Workers Club in Brisbane played important roles in our contact with thousands of people from the general public who were subject to anti–waterside worker misinformation. Through this contact non–Federation people were able to realise that watersiders were just ordinary people with a desire for a good standard of living and a decent living wage with, above all, a commitment to a world of peace.

I was still an executive member when the great flood of 1974 devastated Brisbane, Ipswich and other areas. Our executive appointed me as flood relief organiser. For several weeks I was engaged in this activity amid the plight of Brisbane people including our own members, which was heart breaking. We assisted in as many ways as we could. Responding to a call from Brisbane, watersiders throughout Australia, contributed just on $40,000 to Brisbane members distressed by the flood.

I did not stand for re–election in the 1974 branch elections. Our sons had moved away from home. With only Joyce and me to be provided for, I was seriously thinking of finishing work. I accepted voluntary redundancy in 1976. I was accepted as a Life Member of the Waterside Workers Federation and joined the Brisbane branch of the Retired Members Organisation.

The Brisbane branch of the WWF owned a broken down building at the lower end of Adelaide Street. It was adjacent to town wharves, and stevedored by James Patrick and Co. which handled mainly Australian vessels. During the latter part of the war years, a £1 ($2.00) levy was imposed on all members to pay for a proposed union building and club premises on the site. From the early 1950s, a weekly levy was agreed upon by members of 2/6 (25c) per week.

Work had commenced on the building by the early 1950s. After many delays, changes to plans and disagreements with builders, (though no industrial problems were encountered), the building and club opened for members early in September, 1957. But it was not until the first Saturday in December that the building and club were officially opened by the then leader of the Labor opposition in Canberra, Dr H V Evatt.

It was an occasion attended by political and union leaders and by many rank and file members. Such a meeting in the history of Queensland Workers Clubs unfortunately has been an anomaly. The Collinsville Workers Club (North Queensland), the Southport
Workers Club, and the Brisbane Waterside Workers Federation Club, are the only three workers clubs long established in Queensland. In the last twenty years workers clubs have been established at Ipswich, Cairns and the Brisbane suburb of Hemmant.

The wharfies’ club quickly became the hub of many activities, mainly social in character to give the chance for auxiliaries of the union to raise finance for their own particular areas.

Socials were held at the club on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons. The consuming of alcohol on Sunday arvos in Brisbane was regarded by the State government as a heinous offence. The club was patronised by many hundreds of people, in the main friends of waterside workers. Considering the great number of people consuming alcohol at the socials, problems were few. Disturbances were always handled by the members of the various committees.

I, as secretary of the Waterfront Peace Committee, conducted a weekly peace social for just on two years, every Wednesday night from 1960. We always had guest speakers who represented all walks of life: political, trade union, academic, church, rank and file workers. Before our Wednesday peace socials, I visited each vessel in port to invite the seamen to attend. We had seamen from almost every country in the world. Despite some language difficulties, we never ever had problems. These socials endured despite times when provocative elements from some right wing organisations attempted to disrupt what were enjoyable times for the great majority of ordinary people.

Chapter 13

Sketches from the Waterfront

Historians spend their lives and lavish ink
Explaining how great commonwealths collapse
From great defects of policy – perhaps
The cause is sometimes simpler than they think

A D Hope

Bill Graham, evergreen compere at Waterside Workers Club for many years and also entertainer supremo, always made contributions of working class style. Perhaps his best known song has, like many workers’ songs, an unknown composer. It is:

The Banks Are Made Of Marble
The banks are made of marble with a guard on every door
And the vaults are stuffed with silver that the people have sweated for
Now I have travelled o'er this country from shore to mighty shore
And I have often sat and wondered at the things I have heard and saw
I've seen the weary miner scrubbing coal dust from his back
And I've seen the miners’ children crying because there is no coal to heat the shack
And yet the banks are made of marble with a guard on every door!
And the vaults are stuffed with silver that the miners have sweated for
Yes I've seen the weary wharfie standing idly by the bin
And I've heard the shipowners screaming we have got no ships a coming in
Yet the banks are made of marble with a guard on every door
And the vaults are stuffed with silver that the wharfies have sweated for.

Now I have also seen the ex–servicemen shortly after the war,
Battling and struggling for better wages and conditions,
Something he thought he had been fighting for
Yet the banks are made of marble with a guard on every door
And the vaults are stuffed with silver that the ex–servicemen had been fighting for
I've also seen the weary farmer ploughing on his sodden loam
And I've actually seen the auction hammer knocking down his very home
And yet the banks are made of marble with a guard on every door
And the vaults are stuffed with silver that those farmers all sweated for
Now I've travelled o'er this country o'er this mighty land
And I vowed that one day together we will all make a stand
And we will own those banks of marble with the guards on every door
And we'll share those vaults of silver that all of the people have sweated for.

The Banks Are Made Of Marble is an international labour song, but the Brisbane wharf contributed some local oral art.
The Brisbane Waterside Workers weekly Branch News during the early 1970s printed several poems by an elusive poet, pen named ‘Arry ‘Orry. The poems dealt with current events on the waterfront. Twenty years on, it is safe to declare that the ‘Arry ‘Orry poems were a combined effort by the late Billy Stimson, Alby Graham and Nan Lane, with Bill Stimson being the main contributor. Although the poems dealt with waterfront conditions here are some of the original works of ‘Arry ‘Orry with no apologies to Banjo Patterson nor Henry Lawson.

'Arry ‘Orry On Permanency

Permanency – permanency when will it come,
Everybody’s saying in Two Thousand and One.
With conference on conference, oh what a fuss,
Bugger the Bike Rider and his bloody bus.
I'm getting tired of delay after delay
I'm telling the Cheese and Kisses it'll come dear, some day.<SFCheese and Kisses is rhyming slang for Missus (wife).> 
But I'm beginning to think it'll be time for retiring
Before they settle this damned inter–hiring.
My wife’s name is Olly and longs for the day
When I can take home a regular pay.
She nags me daily: “Oh why do they tarry, 
I've had my gutful, its true and I 'ave ‘Arry.”
I've read and listened to speeches and such,
With our delegates asking so much.
Absorbing the section of the Storemen and Packers,
If it don't soon start, we'll all finish up crackers
When we go to the job, the talks on idle time
If you talk races it’s damn near a crime,
I'll tell you fair dinkum, the damn things a farce and a curse
And the bosses’ stallings is a bloody sight worse.
Their meeting this week I believe it’s on Thursday
If they don't reach a verdict it'll send Olly grey.
So on Friday it’s down to the Club for a beer
And I'm hoping to hear, the bloody thing’s here.
And we'll stick together, though our numbers are depleted
Containerised ships won't see us defeated.
And lucky old ‘Arry will still give us his views
In many more issues of The Brisbane Branch News.
'Arry ‘Orry on Bull Shit
The Francis Drake arrived bringing troubles galore,
With a stink on the ship and more stink on the shore.
The boys were curling the mo for an hour or two.<$FCurling the mo – being idle, in this case because of a stop work.>
It was the state of the hatches that caused the blue.

The Bull went mad; he stamped and he roared:
“Listen to me you bastards on board
I'll even this up, I'll get my own back
I'll find a reason – someone will get the sack.”
He called for Donkey Doodle who answered, ‘Hee Haw'
As he jumped over railing and galloped ashore
Where he joined Cross and the Bull, the threes in a bunch
But then the whistle blew and we all went to lunch.
One o’clock sounded
The Bull again stamped and roared:
“Look Donkey,” he said: “there’s not one man on board”
The Donkey then brayed: “they won't seem to move
Because the gangway post is not in its groove.”
The positions now tense, The Bull, he’s ready for battle
‘Look Donkey, that man there, he’s eating an apple
And there’s one or two blokes that’s having a munch
Of corn beef sandwiches they bought for their lunch.’
The Donkey just snorts as he hee haws once more
He brays out loud: “now I'll even the score –
You pair of smarties Keith Hay and Les Day
Just right about turn you're both on your way.”
“I told you I'd even” said the Bull with a roar
As the two wharfies came from the ship to the shore.
“Calm down,” said the delegate, “before you take a fit
I've heard of silly sackings but this is plain bullshit.”
So in future, boys, be careful just what you are doing
Especially if your actions are related to chewing
If the Bull and the Donk appear on the deck
Just plaster your chewy on the back of your neck.
If your chewing tobacco and your mouth is quite full
And from outa the shadows appears the Bull
Don't matter if the day is too bloody hot
Just give a great gulp and swallow the lot.

Len’s Latest Caper
The latest caper by Nut Grass Len is over the hatches
With his little black book and biro pen
Checking out the numbers of all the working men
Who have to answer to nature’s call every now and then.
When one goes for a pooh you know what he has to do
It’s up to Len, and say to him: “Len I'm off to the loo”
Len then asks what’s it for – a brace and bit or a riddle–me–ree
On your way fast, and then come back and report to me.
A holder comes up, Len has a look
Then out comes the little black book
What if it’s a false alarm
Said the holder – nice and calm
No false alarms with Patrick and Co.
You've got to be sure when you want to go.
The holder said – 'Len don't be a fool
We're not just kids it’s years since we've left school.'
Never the less this pantomime went on all day
And men went to the toilets all without even loss of pay,
But at four thirty pm Len got lit
And now it was his turn to go for a hammer and hit
Off to the loo hurried poor Len
With his black book and trusty pen.
No paper to be had, Christ wasn't things crook
“Len use some of the leaves from your little BLACK BOOK.”

A Real Smart Alec
(by ‘Arry Orry)
A certain smarty whilst drinking a beer
Made a remark so one and all could hear
A wharfie turned to him sporting a big grin
And said, I heard what you said, so now I'm butting in.
As a white collar worker how can you judge
That waterside workers do nothing but bludge
How would you be working on fishmeal down below
If you did you'd soon bloody know.
You'd come up for air a nice looking bird
Covered all over in four lettered word
How would you be, coughing and sneezing
Lumping cartons of beef that’s bloody well freezing.
Now maybe you think it’s just a nice big treat
Lifting up big cases or humping big bags of wheat
At night, how could you tell, when big boats are mooring
With your bloody big gob wide open from snoring.
Fish Meal Fishyfied
Fish meal, fish meal, Pooh! how I pong!
I hope this job don't last long
The filthy stuff’s down my neck and back
Extra rates be buggered, not a lousy zac.
The delegate is met with grumbles and growls
No issue of soap, let alone towels
I stink to high heaven and so do the others
We'd be better off working for Hunter Brothers.<$FHunter Bros were well known sewerage contractors in Brisbane.>
Knock off at five and off in filthy togs
Met at our gates by cats and howling dogs
The cats are meowing, the dogs they sniff and snuff
Curse those bastards who make the bloody stuff.
Into the bus and we're met with a stare
Conductors bellow as we hand them our fare
A snotty nose kid yells, what a smell
As he rings the bell and goes like hell
Off we get at the Valley where we are met by Dave and McDougall
Who make no secrets that we're all on the bugle
Barmaids sniff and declare: ‘What’s that pen and ink?’
As we downs our beer and grin and wink.
Dave and Dougal leave us like shags on a rock
Pretending they're late as each looks at the clock
Left out in the cold you'd know how we feel
As homeward we go, alone downhearted we steal
That’s the end of this poem, Yours truly, ‘Arry ‘Orry’
If I’ve offended I can't say I'm sorry
You and I fellow workers must demand a new deal
When asked to work on Stinking Bloody Rotting Fish Meal.
A Story to give you a Big Lift
Nobby Clarke’s in charge below
He said the cargo discharge is far too slow
Hook four more on, don't worry about weight
We've only till five o'clock to finish off the freight
Hook on those cables, the gears the right rig
Bill Peet called out the sling is too bloody big
Nobby barks back, I say it’s OK.
But still those winches groan with its load on the way.
Don't be a fool shouted Tommy O'Toole
You're breaking every bloody safety rule
Safety, shouted out Nobby is only a bloody farce
Keep up your protesting and you'll get the arse
The gear it groaned, the cables go skyward
But for all Nobby cared it could have been plywood
The ships mate really paid out, as he nearly dies from fright
The hatchman screams out using a rude word: “You're a Big Gobshite”
The derrick creaked, Gordon Crosby swore
This bloody sling will never reach the shore
But Nobby’s the boss and stood fast, and shouted just send it out.
But Nobby’s now in trouble, that’s without a doubt.
The final result was soon to lob
The navigation boys came and inspected the job
And just as one and all predicted
Nobby ended up by being convicted
Nobby fronted the local court
He was fined with added costs of court
Hard to believe but its true what follows
Just one hundred and thirty odd dollars
So when Nobby’s below in control of the job
Be alert when Nobby’s the nob
Directing discharge of the freight
Defend yourselves by particularly checking the weight.

November Affair
One Tuesday in November the temp was One–O–Five,
With the poor bloody deckmen almost cooked alive.
Holders blueing and moaning as they worked down below,
"Tell the bastards at Eagle Street to come and have a go!"
One stageman working in the sun, his face all flushed and red,
Said: “Who’s this bloke called Crowther, the mug they all call Ed.”
“He’s no mug”, chirped up his mate: “You're the bloody fool!
Ed’s Place is air-conditioned, He’s sitting in the cool”
Down at Bretts – it was on the Toun Maru,
Tempers were frayed and there was blue after blue.
Murphy was screaming: “A man will drop dead,
I wish I was downing a cool beer instead.”

Judges and jurors were all in the act,
All were disrobing, as a matter of fact
But poor old Ed, in a bad state of gloom
Looked out the window of his lovely cool room.
When the boys left the ships, Ed paid out a treat.
To knock off like that had just got him beat.
So Ed phoned the Union: “You've gone too damn far”
As he noticed the tarman pouring the tar
But the boys had gone through to their local hotel,
Sweating like blazes, as if just out of hell
The day was a corker; by Christ it was hot!
And they downed their Bulimba or Castlemaine pot.
Supers and foremen all went their way,
Looking so happy we'd called it a day.
But Ed was downhearted and that is no guess,
Did you see that statement he made to the press
He went for the blast and boy was he hot!
A little was true, the rest bloody rot.
But Eddie, old boy, it was a zing zummer,
And it seems we'll be having a very hot summer
Eddie, forget November and the temp One–O–Five,
If you want to stay happy, well and alive.
When you join your mates and breast to the bar
Have one for the poor bastard who was pouring the tar
Greetings From ‘Arry ‘Orry
Merry Xmas to Nut Grass Len
With his little black book and Biro pen
To Donkey Doodle with his 'Hee Haw'
As he jumps from ship to shore
To Nobby Clarke – ‘Happy Yuletide Feeling'
And to the big lift expert who is always heeling.
To Billy K. who loves to hear
Crane bells ringing in his ear

To ‘Phenyl’ Webb who went down south
And to Jack Reece the ‘Big Loud Mouth'.
To Jessie James and Sack–em–Sam!
And Belafonte the big ‘I am,'
To Pee Wee and all who have left the murk
And all foremen who do our work –
To Charlie and Cliffie, those bosom pals
And to Heeler J. Bates who works at Dal’s<FDal’s<193> Dalgety’s Shipping.>
To Roy the Bull at Newstead who made Donkey Doodle bray
And sacked the apple and sandwich men and sent them on their way
To Gunga Din and Harry Chung Doo
Not to forget Dumbishy the stupid old moo
B P ’s Lennie with his whingeing spew
And Soapy Ryan who suspends quite a few
To Photo Finish Jimmy and Johnny Mac
The pair of bludgers not worth a zac.
To the London Docker, Chester, Boyd and Lott
And to any of the other bastards who I might have forgot
So the year of 1967 is drawing to a close
with all these bludgers rightly on the nose
Take this warning ere it’s too late
That permanency will be with us in the New Year, 1968.
You'll all see as a permanent hand
In my opinion the best in the land.
So when you see me perched upon a lorry
I'll bet you'll say ‘Whacko there goes old ‘Arry ‘Orry’
Chapter 14

Wharf Yarns

An oath, a whisper and a laugh

Will make our better epitaph.

We'll share a noggin in the park

And whistle songs against the dark

Dorothy Hewett

The Life of Bottles

His nickname came from his physical build. He was shaped like a bottle – tall, narrow shoulders and thin legs. His father had been a drover. Bottles was with him from teenage days on droving trips out in far western Queensland. Droving, using horses and dogs only, was a hard way of life. Bottles was roughly clothed with footwear of one elastic side riding boot and one sandshoe. He said his dad always gave him a kick in the ribs to rouse him before dawn each morning exclaiming: “Get out from under that blanket and stop playing with your stick.”

The outbreak of war in September, 1939, gave Bottles the chance to get away from the droving scene. He was the first to enlist from the small far western country town. As he and his family were well respected and liked, the townspeople clubbed in to give him a wallet of notes when he departed from the local railway station. There were tears and waves and calls of “Poor Bottles has gone to the war.” Bottles was shocked when he was rejected as medically unfit for the army. His pride hurt.

He decided not to return to his home town. He obtained work on the waterfront all during the war. During that time, he married and fathered two children.

He was well liked by his workmates as a good story teller, a boisterous drunk, very free with his money when he had it, which was not very often. His main weakness was his disinclination to shout in his turn when on drinking bouts with his mates.

As the years went by, he suffered a couple of mild heart turns, but this did not deter his drinking habits. During one drinking session, his mates made a stand and demanded that he buy some beer. He grumbled about shouting out of turn, but his mates insisted that it was his turn to shout. He put his hand deep into his pocket and put four shillings on the bar. He then slumped off the bar stool onto the floor, dead.

Naturally, his drinking mates were shattered. After the funeral when things had settled down, his mates took up a collection for his widow. When they gave the money,
she thanked them immensely and said that, as she wanted him to go straight to heaven, would they find out if he owed any money to his workmates.

The mates, with tongues in cheek, assured Bottles’ widow that he was financially solvent with all his mates. Anyway, I guess that’s what mates are all about.

The Singing Dog

Morrie Taylor was an old wharfie and life long battler. As his life style improved, he travelled from port to port in a battered utility which many times served as his bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom. He always found it difficult to get accommodation in towns, large or small, as his constant companion was a large friendly dog of mixed parentage called Bunchy. Apart from being a good old wharfie, Morrie could sing a song and put on an enjoyable act in conjunction with Bunchy.

Morrie played the mouth organ. Bunchy always joined in. Bunchy’s blending with Morrie’s mouth organ was surreal. As Morrie moved from high notes to low notes, so did Bunchy. The dog always drew plenty of applause from worker audiences, either in hotels or at the Waterside Workers Club.

While working in Brisbane at one time, Morrie was badly advised to apply to go on a talent quest on television. One judge was Gabby Horan, president of the Housewives Association and a well known anti–union, anti–labour, anti–worker individual.

Morrie and Bunchy duly got their chance to perform on local television. Even their most ardent fans admitted that their performance left a lot to be desired. Of course, Gabby Horan on awarding points added insult to injury. She said: “Out of 100 points I award your act, Mr Taylor, 40 points – 38 points to Bunchy, and two to yourself.” There is a big difference from enjoyment on television and in live performances at hotels and workers’ clubs. It is doubtful if Gabby Horan had a friend on the waterfront after her treatment of Morrie and Bunchy.

That Two–Up Game.

The Mitchelton area was an ideal spot for a two–up game in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The ring was on high ground between a deep creek on one side and a Chinese market garden on the other. A strong high tree gave the cockatoo (look out) a bird’s eye view of the surrounding area. This game continued over many weekends despite visits by a car load of plain clothes police who regularly arrived late in the afternoon.

They would have spent much time at the Keperra Golf Club imbibing the local brew. By the time they walked near the Chinese gardens, the cockatoo would have sounded the warnings. The two up players dispersed into the gardens. When the police got to the gaming area, they only saw several blokes with hoes or rakes among the vegetable rows. Their police training must have made them suspicious of blokes with
nice clean shirts and trousers and good shoes who would be chipping weeds on a Sunday in a Chinese garden. The police remarks were always insulting and provocative to the gentlemen horticulturalists.

Police persistence eventually won the day. After heavy rain, the flooded creek bordering the two up game became wide and deep. The game was in full swing with waterside worker, Cec Thomsett as ring keeper and son Alan as assistant. Alan had advanced from look out boy up the tree to assistant manager of the game.

Fairly big money was being bet and the spinner had just tossed the pennies high in the air. Out of the creek jumped several young policemen, not in uniform, but wearing swim suits, snorkels and flippers. They, in conjunction with the land based police reinforcements, overran the game, money and many players, particularly the elderly ones who could not run fast enough across the vegetable gardens. The wash-up was that several were charged and fined. The game never resumed. The vegetable gardens, in tribute to progress in the district, eventually became a huge shopping centre.

Shoelace and the Chooks

Shoelace was a likeable bloke and good story teller – his physique much like his nickname. He was an inveterate biter of small amounts of money which were never paid back. But his mates overlooked this weakness as, when he had money, which was seldom, he was generous to everyone.

In the same work gang was a chap nicknamed the White Leghorn. Each year before Christmas, the White Leghorn bought and fattened up many fowls of that type. His profits helped his family over the Christmas period. This year in particular, the White Leghorn had purchased a large number of fowls. Shoelace suggested to him that he could put a pellet in each of the fowls to ensure extra growth which in turn would mean a more profitable price. So the White Leghorn allowed his friend to insert a pellet in each of his fowls.

After a short time the fowls began to die, one or two at a time. Nearly all had departed this world just before Christmas. Naturally, the White Leghorn was very upset and spoke harshly to Shoelace. Shoelace suggested it was not his fault; perhaps the fowls had died from some mysterious disease. Anyway, the White Leghorn and Shoelace remained friends.

Next Christmas, Shoelace was not invited to do anything to the fowls. The White Leghorn reported a good profit from his sale of chooks, not carrying any extra weight from his not so helpful, pellet injecting friend, Shoelace.

Children Plus

A local watersider was attracted to and liked this widow friend who lived at the local hostel. He felt sorry for her when she said she had four children with her all day and
four more up at the cemetery. She invited him to her place for tea. Imagine his surprise when tea time arrived and eight children were there. His lady friend had neglected to say that the four up at the cemetery were up there playing games. Numerical confusion sorted out, they married, had two more children and lived happily ever after.

Returned to the Union

He had died in his sleep in his room at Spring Hill. He had been a watersider and seaman for many years. Originally he came from Scotland. As a seaman he had travelled the world in tramp vessels. No one knew of any relatives but the union and the police delayed his funeral for a week after placing radio and newspaper announcements just in case he may have had a relative or loved one. No response was forthcoming so the union arranged for his cremation. The ashes were delivered to the union office. It was agreed that they be scattered on the Brisbane river. This was done from a cargo ship with a few words from a union official. A silent tribute from friends in his gang followed.

Weeks later, the casket was retrieved by the water police who were dragging the river near the Story Bridge. As the name and address were still intact they duly returned the remains to the union office. Our old friend’s ashes were finally taken back to the crematorium which disposed of them in a manner fitting for a fine old but lonely member of the working class.

Beer in the Family

It was Thursday night, pay night with no work because of heavy rain. The hotel was right opposite the wharf area. One gang in particular had some seasoned drinkers including the job delegate. A situation such as this could brew trouble.

At 10.30 pm. rain stopped. Work commenced. First sign of something wrong was when the delegate tried to catch up to a running wharf supervisor regarding some job problem. The supervisor ran into his office, closed and bolted the door behind him, and grabbed the telephone.

The next scene was the arrival of several police and paddy wagons. Six of the gang and the delegate were thrown in the paddy wagon and taken to the city watchhouse. Bailed out they appeared next day before the local stevedoring committee chairman and received various terms of suspension. Further punishment was discipline on the job, with particular reference to the job delegate.

Despite the seriousness the night had been one to remember. Two incidents especially were often later recounted with much relish.

On arrival at the watchhouse one of the offenders was booked into a cell, near one that housed his brother, picked up hours earlier for drunkenness. The early arrestee loudly claimed from his cell for his release as he had done his four hours. The watchhouse
keeper got the christian names mixed up and told the drunken one he had not been in long enough. He was forced to stay another four hours.

When we finally got bail for all of our work mates, we found one member’s wife had been informed of his being in the watchhouse. She was there to meet him on his bailing out. When he saw his wife he implored the watchhouse keeper to return him to his cell. It was no go and he left with his wife proclaiming her displeasure at his predicament.

Russian ‘Ritin'

Union official filling in a watersider’s compo claim asked the member his name. He was told ‘Anton Stanislavski'. The official asked: “How do you spell that mate?” Reply was: “Buggered if I know, I was 18 before I could even pronounce it.” Official union records saved the day.

The Goatman, Custard Jack and Compo Technicalities

Almost every day these two intrepid characters would go to one of Brisbane’s many wine bars after work. The Goatman was well known to many of the ladies of the wine bar set. On one occasion he introduced a certain lady to his work mate. Custard Jack, after several wines, accompanied the lady for an interlude of lustful delight.

But alas, a few days later, Jack was absent from work undergoing treatment for venereal disease.

After a few days, he returned to work. He expressed the opinion that, as he had contracted the VD at his first stop on the way home from work, he should be entitled to compo. Workers Compensation rules state that payment can only be paid for an injury at or before the first stop on a workers way home. After some friendly advice from fellow workers he wisely decided not to pursue the claim.

Lions Everywhere

Many years ago at the small port of Coffs Harbour, where the main railway line passed very close to the wharf area, the circus train stopped. Several of the circus lions managed to escape from the train carriages. They were wandering around the wharf area.

A local watersider living in a small house near the wharf opened his back door to see a large lion enjoying a poultry breakfast in his backyard. He quickly closed the door not too sure whether his hectic night out the previous evening was haunting him.

Another worker, limping from a leg injury, was halfway out along the wharf. Looking back, he was amazed to see a lion following him. The limping worker took off at double pace to the end of the wharf, dived in and swam to the breakwater.
No casualties were recorded. Later it was found that the lions had been loose for some hours before their escape was discovered. All the lions were caught and were performing that night in Coffs Harbour.

Crook Back Pegged

It was during the heyday of export of mineral sand from Brisbane. Right from the start of the shift of carrying bags of sand, Ted the Toiler complained of pinches in his lower back area. After a while a fellow worker said: “Ted, give us a look at your back.” He pulled Ted’s shirt out and discovered two wash pegs still attached to his underpants. Wash pegs removed, Ted’s back improved immediately.

Social Calls

Floor Off Freddie had been retired a month and lived in a small place down by Moreton Bay. One Saturday morning his work mate Lord Foulmouth paid him a visit. When his Lordship, a well known master of obscenity, popped in on him, Freddie was entertaining his girl friend.

Lord Foulmouth was much impressed by the sparkling whiteness of Fred’s cat, which the owner explained was achieved by giving the cat a few turns with Omo in the washing machine.

Freddie and the Lord drank beer, Maggie drank rum, straight from the bottle. After some conversation, Maggie, with some attempted social flourish, declared that she, as a lady, objected to Lord Foulmouth’s continual vile language. Freddie was taken aback but supported his wharfie mate by saying: “Be quiet, Maggie. Some lady you are, drinking your rum straight from the bottle.”

Compromise is always possible among friends. Lord Foulmouth moderated his language. Maggie thereafter drank her rum from a glass provided by Fred.

Two in, One out

Socials at the Brisbane Waterside Workers Club have provided enjoyment since the club opened in September 1957 for members and friends. At one period a fellow wharfie was having problems, highlighted at a particular social attended by both his wife and his de facto of several years.

In accordance with Licensing laws the doors were closed at 10 pm. At 10.30 a knock on the door was answered by a club committee member. He was confronted by a well dressed woman who asked if she could see her husband. The committee man explained that he could not let her into the social because of the rules but he would oblige by taking a message if she wished. He was astonished when she named as her husband the member who already had two wives inside. The committee man quietly closed the door, amazed at the trouble some men seem to get themselves into over women.
The Eyes Have It

In a north Queensland sugar port, some years back, humping 70 kg bags of sugar all day was the lot of wharfies. One member who had a glass eye accepted a bag of sugar to hump from the man at the sugar stack. But, as happens at times, the bag fell heavily on our one-eyeded friend. The jolt dislodged the glass eye which fell down a deep crevice between stacked sugar bags.

The job was immediately halted while all holders shifted tons of bags but, unfortunately, no one could find the glass eye. It was declared lost. The men suggested that our friend go to town and get himself a new one.

Our friend departed. Many hours later he arrived back on the job obviously having indulged in some liquid refreshments. He explained it had been difficult for him to get a glass eye in so small a town. He had had to settle for one which was a different colour to his good eye. He resumed carrying sugar with high spirits, one green eye and one blue eye. He declared that he had had a good time getting his eye replaced. But he was careful not to get any more jolts on the head in case he lost his new eye.

Votes for some only

Many years ago at a small port, the members, the majority of whom were transferees, were engaged in strike action over a certain principle. Federal officials considered the dispute unwinnable and advised the president of the local branch to convince the members to return to work. He tried this several times unsuccessfully. The position was becoming deadlocked when the president ruled from the chair. Only those members whose wives were not working were eligible to vote on a return to work.

The return to work vote was won easily. The chairman had known quite well that most transferees’ wives were working at that time, and they could struggle by financially to uphold the principle.

The Federal office was astounded at the local president’s undemocratic ruling. Ironically years later the principle was fought over nationally. It was won by the Federation as a whole. All blue collar and most white collar unionists have faced showdowns between short-term financial interest and long-term industrial interest.

Change of Viewpoint

A wharfie member of the Communist Party in the late 1940s decided to give his young nephew a farewell party. The lad was in the army and being sent to Malaya to fight ‘the communists’. As the party wore on, the young bloke got nastier. Late in the night, he declared that seeing he was going overseas to ‘fight comms’ he should clean up some while he was here. He proceeded to give our wharfie Communist Party friend the old straight left, right cross. The wharfie received a decent old hiding.
Time rolled on. After a few years, the young bloke arrived back at the wharfie’s home to apologise for his behaviour at the party. He remarked that, after three years in Malaya, the only communist terrorist he had seen was old Charlie, the taxi driver. Old Charlie had been a good bloke. The soldiers could always borrow money from him when they were broke.

Anti-communism has always been, as one member remarked, the last refuge of scoundrels.

Chinese Haircuts

A few years back, several ships on the Far Eastern run called into Brisbane. The crew and many passengers were Chinese. One night shift, a wharfie who always carried hair clippers and scissors in his port, had plenty of customers from among the Chinese on this particular ship. As no work was being performed because of rain, he was cutting Chinese hair. In return they were supplying him with liquid refreshment. As time went on, his hair cutting became more and more erratic until at last, while using his scissors to trim, he misjudged and snipped about <$E1/2>$ inch off a man’s ear. What a bellow there was, blood and hair and a Chinese seaman going crook with our wharfie barber trying to find the piece of clipped ear from amongst the hair lying on the deck. Things eventually calmed down, but no more Chinese wanted hair cuts.

Funeral Oration

An old waterside worker, who had no living relations, died. His workmates laid him to rest at a local cemetery. After the brief service the clergyman asked if anyone would like to say a few words. A good friend of the departed climbed the mount at the grave side. He began his oration: “Ladies and Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to be here today.”

This produced mirth among the mourners. But a woman present commented: “Its alright for you lot to laugh, he still owes me two weeks rent.” The wharfies duly saw off their mate and paid the landlady the rent due.

No Scab on this Finger

When Jim Healy became secretary of the WWF in 1937, the wharf was still recovering from the bitterness of the 1928 clash between unionists and non-unionists. During the years after ‘28, the violence of the dispute was often relived. In one such clash, a non-unionist bit a union man’s finger. A few days later the finger turned septic. It was amputated. The union bloke proudly declared: “I am pleased I lost that finger. I would hate to have a finger that had been bitten by a scab.”

Another Finger Tied Down
Wharfies were loyal to a doctor in Fortitude Valley. Doc was engrossed in bandaging a waterside worker’s finger. What a shambles! The wharfie got up to leave with an unexpected constraint. The doctor had neatly strung his tie to the injured finger.

More Tie Trouble

The Christmas break up party down the wharfies club was firing. The president of one union auxiliary was dressed to the nines, bow tie and all. Beer and prawns was the most prized combination of drink and food. The president loved prawns and didn't mind a beer.

Late in the night his wife exclaimed “Good God Bob! Where is your bow tie?” Sure enough, Bob had devoured his bow tie, even without pepper and salt.

Relatively Fast Thinking

A wharfie had failed to report to work. He was called before the chairman of the stevedoring industry committee. An official of the union was there to look after the worker’s interests.

The Chairman was irate. “On at least ten occasions you have failed to report to work, each time claiming a death in the family. Each occasion co–incided with a big race meeting. Surely you must have run out of relatives by now.” The errant waterside realised that humour is a great weapon. He replied: “To be truthful I only have my mother in law left. I'm saving her up for the Stradbroke Handicap meeting.”

The chairman smiled and said to the union official “Put him back on the work roster tomorrow.”
Chapter 15

Monikers on the Wharves

With luck within a hundred years
Australia will have abolished crime
And surnames, dirty books and queers,
Dry wine, old buildings, art and rhyme

`Except for commercials on T V,'
And all across the great outback,
Made safe for kiddies, there will be
A barbecue for every shack;

Geoffrey Dutton

There’s Smith the galoot who invented our boot
And Horry the Horse with Pig’s Head of course
There were birds to the fore with a Penguin on shore
A Wild Curlew, a Mallee Hen or two and a Brolga so poor
Hampson the Wild Duck and Pigeon with a bag full of grass
Carried a portmanteau as big as Brennan’s fat arse.
We had Whisker Blake, Waxy and a transferee called Mo
Wynnum George, Melbourne Jack, Thursday Island Ted and Townsville Joe
Richard the Runt and Mickey Blunt, the Rusty Rifle who would not fire
And Bonny with a gut inflated like a motor car tyre.
We had Paddys galore, I’ll quote you a few
Waistcoat Paddy and Tell–em–a–Lie–Paddy it’s true
Paddy the Gig and Paddy the Pig and Catfish Paddy too
There was Freddy the Frog and Bob the Log
And the Rabbit from Wooloomooloo.
There’s the Walrus, the Wombat, the Turtle and Christ knows who

We had Pin Heads, Slip Rail Adams and the Candle Light Kid
Match Box Jimmy, Stamps and Malnutrition, not worth a quid
The Fireman, the Lock Forward and the rest of the crew
Lost Weekends, Bowyang Bills and a Hooker Pugh.
An Undertaker who made his own coffin
And doctor Death who was knocking and knocking
Polar Bear, Yogi Bear and the Koala so rare
Hear it, the Ferret, the Bull Tosser and Johnny the Lair
We had a Happy Jack, Cranky Joe, Phil the Dill
Pretty Micky, the Mirror, Dolly Sisters and Burglar Bill.
Marmite Mick, Peanuts, Ham Bone Cross
Saveloy Logan and the Pomelo Kid and Prawns who was a dead loss
Don't forget the Bailiff, the Dancing Doll and Holloway Tock
Smarties like Floor–off–Freddies, Nick away Nevs, on the Toe Joe, and Glass Back Jock.
The Laughing Hyena, Giggling Ghandi, Toddlers and Shivery Jim
Barramundi Joe, the Barracuda, Tim the Bream
Big Tiny, Snell and little Tich
Aeroplane Jimmy, the Dive Bomber who had a seven itch
There was the Mongrel, Blah Blah Brennan and Blackguard Jack
Grubby Foremen like Castor Oil Ollie, Axehead, Simon Le Frere and a Scotch bastard called Mac
It’s Shake–Hands–Tommy, Lord Foulmouth, Herman the German who always blew through
Alex the Russian and the Leaky Canoe and Arse Paper George the Jew
Strong Man Gus, Yogi Wright
Who shoved his bifocals up his nose right out of sight.

Gooseneck Harry, Broken Arse Wally and a hangman called Tinks
A Whispering Baritone, Two Drummers and Handy Andy who blinks when he drinks.
Hot Water Harry, Salt Bush Bill, Mr. Fourex and Teddy the Mule
And a happy tenor called Tommy O'Toole
Props and Footlights always on the stage
With Banjo Paterson and Bugle Horn Page,<SF>On the stage – the stage is the wooden place on the wharf for landing cargo. Being on the stage is counter–pointed to being in the bows of the ship.>  
Overcoat Harrys, Hill Billies galore,
I've mentioned a lot but there’s a bloody lot more.

The waterside took great pleasure in perpetuating the Australian tradition of nicknames.
Nicknames could be cruel. They could be clever. They could be both.
I have sorted through hundreds of nicknames of transferees I worked with on the wharves to put some together in a few rough and ready categories.

Geographical Nicknames

Barramundi Joe (from barra country)

Bouila Joe

Geelong Jimmy

Herman the German
The London Docker

Mad Irish

Melbourne Jack

Number One Son (Chinese and named after a Charlie Chan saying)

Pommie George

TI (Thursday Island) Ted

Townsville Ted and Townsville Joe

Nicknames for Shirkers

Laziness earned its owner an appropriate tag.

Blackguard Jack was rough, tough and worthless. He distinguished himself by being fired by his foreman, his own son.

Blisters showed up after all the hard work was done.

Carousel was always running around in circles.

Fred Astaire would not do a tap.

Fugitive Jimmy always went missing.

Glass Back Jock was never known to bend over.

George Negus only lasted 60 minutes.

Landslide Lenny was always slipping away

The London Fog would not lift.

Ned Kelly was always where the hold-up was.

Perry Mason handled one case a week.

Pregnant was always late.

Rusty Rifle could not fire.

Sammy the Eel would wriggle out of hard work.
Sorbent was always in the toilet.

Spirit of Progress and Sunlander were always late, like their namesake trains.

Stamps was always stuck in a corner.

Starfish was always on the shore.

Steam Roller crawled around “flat out.”

Wally the Whale was always coming up for a blow.

Uranium you needed a geiger counter to find.

What They Said

Many of us have a phrase that we repeat often. Some of the cleverest nicknames were given in honour of a wharfie’s favourite saying.

Bing Crosby: “Are you going my way?”

Blue Heeler: “I'd like to round up here.”

Curl the Mo Joe: “This is a real curl–the–mo job”

The doctor (a bookmaker): “You'll get better with me”

General Motors: “How you holden'?”

Gunner Walsh: “I'm gunna do it shortly.”

Handcuffs Henry: “My hands are tied.”

Lawnmower Len: “I run things around my house.”

Little Anzac (a WW I vet): “This is worse than Gallipoli”

Mirror: “I'll look into it.”

Old Sock: “Well, I'll be darned.”

Tell a Lie Paddy: “I tell a lie.”

Venereal Vince: “Let’s bring this to a head.”
The Vomit: “I'll bring it up later.”

A Fair Go

The wharf was a place where you could get a fair go. Some nicknames were flattering to the wearer.

Æsop Johnny was a Greek who loved telling tales.

Atlas Bennett carried the motley crew of gang 12 on his shoulders.

Fingers Foggarty was always on hand.

Ghurkha Worker was never a shirker.

Hydraulic Jack would lift almost anything.

The Tremolo Kid worked very quickly.

Yoga Wright had mental discipline and full control of his body.

The Grog and Attendant Escapades

The wharf had its share of heavy drinkers. Some of these faced the alcoholics’ occupational hazards of arrest and accidents.

Autumn Leaves was always falling down

Ball Point Pen was always half–full of ink.

Bartlett Pears was always in the can.

Beirut and Hanoi both were bombed every night.

Leaky Canoe was always being bailed out.

Martin Place was always full by lunchtime.

One Man Sub was always half under.

Playing With Words.

Some monikers were built around a play on words.

Ding was Graham Bell
Man of Iron was Jim Steel

Psycho was Ted Hitchcock.

Steam Boat Sid was SS Searle.

The Hot Cookie was Silvester Burns.

The Two Gooses were Crane and Drake

The Valley Frog was Billy Croaker.

Annoying Habits

Annoying habits would see someone marked with a tag.

Alligator Al would bite anyone he could.

The Black Bream was always biting weed (tobacco).

Blackhead Bob would pop up on anybody.

Carbon Johnny was always copying others.

Caretaker Charlie would not mind his own business.

Ding–A–Ling was always on the phone to you.

Earphones meanwhile was always on your lug (ear).

Elastic Ernie was always stretching things.

The Honest Woodman – you could hear his ring barking all day.

The Late Night Chemist would never shut up.

The Surgeon had his knife into everyone.

Tangalooma was always wailing. (This one also fits the play with words category. Tangalooma on Moreton Island was a former whaling station.)

Underpants was always on the bum.

The Wild Duck and The Mallee Hen were bookmakers who never settled (paid their debts).
Physical or Personal Characteristics.

Physical or personal traits were quickly seized upon.

Aeroplane Jimmy had his head glued to his shoulders “spotting aeroplanes.”

Bifocals Bill was always on the nose. (smelly)

Blinky was Ron McLean

Bubbling Bill would froth at the mouth.

Dive Bomber Bob and Rat–A–Tat–Tat made noises taking them back to the war.

The Gent, Frank Eather and Hollywood George and Pretty Mickey were snappy dressers.

Hang Man Tinks was so bandy it was said that he ironed his trousers over a beer barrel.

The Hurricane Lamp was not too bright.

The Lizard used to dart his tongue in and out of his mouth.

Matchbox Jimmy, Marmite Mick and Overcoat Harry had habits which spoke for themselves.

The Moon Man and The Satellite were always in outer space.

Penguin Pete waddled on his turned–out feet.

Pig’s Head had a big head and floppy ears.

Prawns had eyes popping out of his head.

The Skeleton had trouble finding anybody to work with him.

The Spinning Top hummed all day.

The Tailor, The Undertaker and The Green Grocer were always measuring or weighing someone up.

Thallium Ted was considered a slow–working dope.

Twinkle Toes loved a step about the wharves.
One–Offs

Nicknames could come from one–off events.

Cowboy Flynn rode a bull aboard one ship.

Esso Jack gave petrol from his own car to the bosses to keep their powered tow ropes going.

Friar Tuck got lost in Sherwood forest (in Brisbane).

Hambone got caught pilfering that very thing.

Kanga Kennedy gave up the grog when he heard there were no longer any hops in it.

Shake Hands Tommy put his hand out in the street one day and found himself shaking hands with the mechanical arm of a turning bus.

Bosses, Supervisors and Scabs.

As you might expect these people did not get complimentary nicknames.

Axehead was always flying off the handle.

Bagpipes was full of hot air and wind.

Castor Oil Ollie gave everyone the shits.

Cyclops and Tomato Arse each had an extra eye – guess where – to spy on wharfies.

The Dead Heaters did not have a head between them.

Dirty Dick scabbed on the militants.

Nut Grass Len was always sneaking up behind you.

Singlets was never off your back.

The Wet Match was a redhead who refused to strike.

As you can see nicknames varied from the complimentary to the downright nasty. If you were a boss, supervisor or scab you would be destined to draw the short straw in the nick–name stakes. Otherwise it was a matter of luck – which one you got and whether it stuck. Consider the unfortunate Ritchie brothers. Their wharf numbers were one and
eleven. Inevitably they became known as one and eleven pence (1/11d), or not worth two bob together.

Many of those wharfies mentioned above were well know transferees who took their nicknames from port to port, prior to weekly hire in 1968. They moved around the Australian coast from Thursday Island to Tasmania, Broome and Wyndham in North West Australia and up to Darwin. They gave great strength to the Waterside Workers Federation taking new ideas and views to the various ports. Though not welcome on some wharves, where local social politics worked against the transferees, they eventually made friends as all workers should.

Chapter 16

Communists and the Great Jim Healy

Well, round and ripe with years you went
As if you rode that great tide out to sea
And we salute you even as we lament
And drink your health wherever you may be

Douglas Stewart

I have always questioned life, the world, its events and history. I believed in creating a better life for all peoples. Inevitably, I became involved with people of the political left. Among the finest people I have met and worked with over the years have been members of the Communist Party of Australia.

While the list would be too lengthy if all were mentioned I believe that among those who contributed most to the ordinary people of this world were Jim Healy, general secretary of the Waterside Workers Federation; Alec McDonald, secretary of the Queensland Trades and Labor Council 1949–69; Alby Graham, Brisbane WWF official; Ted and Eva Bacon – Ted was secretary of the Queensland branch of the Communist Party and Eva was president of the Union of Australian Women; Jim Henderson, first communist elected to Wongaratta council, west of Bowen; Fred Paterson, member of Queensland’s House of Assembly and the only communist ever to be elected to any parliament in Australia; Gerry Dawson, secretary of the Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU) and Australian Council of Trade Union executive member during the 1950s.

Les Sullivan, from the 2/15 Battalion, campaigned in the seat of Herbert as a Communist Party member in the 1944 State elections. He polled 49% of the vote in

---

5 Two bob, the same as two shillings ‘2/-’ figured in many working class metaphors. As well as ‘not worth two bob’ there were ‘as ratty/crook as a two bob watch; ‘two bob capitalist’ and more.
Cairns and 44% in Cardwell and almost won the seat. Les is easily recognisable as Slim Sullivan in Eric Lambert’s novel Twenty Thousand Thieves. Captain Don Parker, a communist, also served with us in the 2/15th and in the Great War before that. Mick Healy, secretary of the Queensland Trades and Labor Council from 1940 till 1949 was an executive member of the Brisbane branch of the WWF. Gerry Hennessey, an official of the old Amalgamated Engineers Union was still active in his ‘80s. Jack Sherrington, BWIU was also a Queensland Peace Committee Executive member. Joe Harris, BWIU official was an author of working class and union history. Ted Roach, secretary of Port Kembla branch of the WWF during the ‘pig iron to Japan’ dispute later became assistant general secretary of the WWF under Jim Healy.

From my involvement in the trade union movement and particularly the Waterside Workers Federation, I met many fine leaders. One, Jim Healy the general secretary of the Waterside Workers Federation from 1937 till his death on 13 July 1961, stood head and shoulders above all.

He and a dedicated band of Communist Party, Labor Party and non–party militants completely turned the Australian waterfront upside down. When Healy became general secretary in 1937, the union was a battered and disorganised body of workers. Australia had yet to emerge from the great depression. The 1928 Beeby award, which allowed non–union labour in several ports throughout the Commonwealth, was disadvantageous to both wharfies in general and the Federation in particular. Healy did not walk into a cosy union secretaryship in 1937. The Federation was bankrupt; working conditions were appalling; rorts and rackets were numerous; shipowners reigned supreme with no control by workers over hours of work, pay or conditions. At the time of Jim’s death in 1961 the waterside workers’ conditions, pay, pensions and international standing were superior to most other unions in this country and possibly the world.

Jim Healy was born in Manchester in England in 1898. As a lad, he sold newspapers. He never really had a job before I915 when, at 17 years of age, he became a soldier in the 8th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. After three months’ rifle and bayonet training, he was sent to the mud and blood of France to fight battles around Armentieres and Vimy Ridge. A German shell flattened Jim and many of his comrades, but Jim survived. After a spell recovering from frostbite and a deep splinter wound in his leg, he was back in the trenches.

In 1917, Jim again was wounded badly in the leg and also lost part of a finger. The field doctor was close to cutting off his badly wounded leg, but decided to give it a chance. After five months in hospital Healy was returned to England where he was discharged as ‘unfit for further active service'.

In 1925 Jim, wife Betty and young family came to Australia on a nominated migrant passage. They settled at Mackay, North Queensland where he worked at a sugar mill and then on the Mackay wharves. He became a member of the local ALP and president of the Mackay branch of the Waterside Workers Federation.
In 1934, the Mackay wharfies and other local workers dipped into their nearly empty pockets to send Jim to Moscow for the 1934 May Day celebrations. While there, he visited Leningrad, Kharkov, Odessa and Stalino. He was impressed with what he observed: free medical services and workers’ rest houses as well as plenty of work for everyone. Full employment made Soviet socialism attractive, as unemployment in the free enterprise world was at its peak.

In 1949, Jim attended a World Peace Congress in Paris and was honoured as a World Peace Councillor. To my knowledge he was Australia’s first World Peace Councillor. Jim’s honour set a precedent for many Australians who were to become World Peace Councillors, including ex–senator Bill Morrow, dr Jim Cairns, Sam Goldbloom, Tas Bull, senator George Georges, Tom Uren, and other Labor members and trade union officials along with academics and less public figures, like myself. In 1970, I was nominated and was accepted as a World Peace Councillor. The World Peace Council has for many years been part of the Non–government Organisations within the United Nations.

Jim Healy’s ability as a union leader and organiser was recognised within the Australian trade union movement when he became a member of the ACTU executive. He was leader of the Communist Party senate team which just missed election by a small number of votes in the 1958 Federal election.

His death in 1961 was a tremendous loss to the Waterside Workers’ Federation and to all progressive Australians. His funeral in Sydney was remarkable as the largest private funeral ever seen in Australia’s history. People came from all parts of Australia and overseas to pay homage to a great man, who respected all his worker comrades, particularly his beloved wharfies.

He, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, had spent a couple of periods in jails as a matter of trade union principle.

During the war years, the Curtin Labor government appointed Healy and Ted Roach to a government Stevedoring Board to help organise the wharf labour force more efficiently. For the first time workers were invited to help unravel the mess created from complete control of the waterfront by employers and overseas shipowners.

The success of the Stevedoring Board with union participation might be compared with the Employment Contracts Act, now in operation in New Zealand. The New Zealand Act which has supporters among Australian business people and conservative politicians has replaced union bargaining with individual contracts. It is the greatest threat to the livelihood and to the unity of Australian workers since world war II.

The gallant SEQEB strikers of 1985 foresaw the coming of these voluntary employment agreements, but unfortunately the labour movement refused to close ranks behind their momentous struggle. It will be a sad day if the Australia, to whose ordinary working people Jim Healy gave so much, is turned into nation of scabs.
By 1985 Joyce and I were retired from our union activities, but we were prepared to defend the principles Jim Healy fostered. In April of 1985 we stopped for petrol, during our trans–Australian holiday at Victoria River in Western Australia. The petrol seller loudly proclaimed his disgust at the meat workers’ picket of the local non–union contract labour meatworks. Joyce and I gave the man a few verbal blasts before we joined the picket line.

Just after his death, a ship owner’s representative openly admitted in a Sydney newspaper that they had offered Jim an enormous sum of money to give it all away, but he had refused the offer.

Apart from his union activities, he was well advanced in his study in law. As an orator, he had no equal and could handle hostile audiences without ever getting rattled. Had they been recorded, Jim’s debates with some misguided 2nd AIF soldiers in the Sydney Domain just after the commencement of the 1939–45 war would now be regarded as classics of sane and sensible argument. He was respected by all sides of the political and industrial arena and dearly loved by his family and all who knew him. I was fortunate to be among those who was privileged to know Jim and his family personally. I would say that Jim Healy was the greatest man I have ever met.

His greatness came from the fact that he was and remained just an ordinary bloke with rare ability and a total dedication to the cause of workers and the people of the world in general. Jim Healy will always be remembered by those ordinary people.

Politically I have always believed in social reforms. To the Labor Party’s credit many reforms have been achieved but most of these reforms had their origin in the trade union movement. The Communist Party believed in drastic reform with socialism replacing capitalism within the Australian social structure. That reality seems light years away with the left divided on many important issues.

On becoming involved in union and anti–war activities I was under pressure many times from both Labor Party and Communist Party people to join their organisations. Many times I gave this question serious thought but with my deep involvement elsewhere, I felt I would not be able to devote much time to party work. So I remained a non–party person but my views and actions were always well known to my co–workers in the union and peace movements. During elections and other activities I actively supported unions, peace groups, and the Labor and the Communist Parties. I attended meetings organised by these groups to canvass political, industrial or peace issues. As an ordinary worker dedicated to a fair go and peace, I addressed some of these meetings.

Chapter 17

Peace Movements.

We walk in silence past
All Saints'. The dead do rise,
do live, do walk and wear
that flesh. Your exile’s done
So, so, resume our last
rejoicing kiss. Your eyes
flecked with my image stare
in wonder through my own.

Gwen Harwood

A world without war is one of my abiding hopes but the prospect of this always seems illusionary: over 50 million people of my generation were killed during the conflict of 1939–45.

The tragedy of the second world war overshadowed the horrors of 1914–18. Bombers and fighter planes were the main instruments of death in the second conflict. The majority of the victims were civilians. The day of the gentleman soldier with access to a million or so pawns was over. The flight over Hiroshima was but the last of many that killed the gentleman soldier while it exploded the number of pawns. World war II legitimised the strategy of regarding ordinary citizens as wartime enemy targets.

Since that time some 25 million human beings around the world have lost their lives as a result of armed conflict. To be apathetic and inactive in the face of these horrendous statistics, I believe, is to condone wars in general.

During my involvement in trade unions I perceived that, among workers, the life and death questions of war and peace were always discussed. This prompted my activity in the peace movement. I was convinced of a need for a local, national and international movement for peace.

I consider that I have been involved in five armies in my life: first, the pre–1939 army of unemployed although, fortunately, I was only a part–time conscript and never suffered any real hardship. But I did witness a considerable amount of distress in our middle class area of Brisbane.

The second army was the only one in which I wore a uniform, with the regimental number QX 4247, from 1939 to 1945.

The third army, without uniforms, was the trade union movement.
Closely following this was my entry into the fourth army, the anti-war and peace movement, again no uniform but, during marches and demonstrations, plenty of banners. Membership of this army was, I believe, the most difficult and involved of all, as for many years opposition to Australia’s part in the Vietnam war created bitterness and controversy. But the end result, Australian withdrawal from Vietnam, was worth all the effort and struggle. During this period, I held no animosity to those soldiers who volunteered or were conscripted to go to Vietnam, but I loathed the politicians and other community leaders who peddled the lies and deceits which so divided and confused the Australian people. I firmly believe we should never forget those who took us into that disgraceful conflict.

I still belong to the fifth army, that of the retired and pensioners. This group has a considerable band of dedicated people who are active in pensioner organisations battling to improve the lot of all their members.

During the early 1950s, national peace conferences were held in Australia. The Brisbane branch of the Waterside Workers Federation sent a delegate to these important meetings. George Kellaway was one such delegate. I was endorsed by the union to collect finance to send him to the conference.

Early in this period, 1950, a meeting was called at the Brisbane Town Hall to coincide with the peace conference in Melbourne. One of the main speakers was the dean of Canterbury, Dr Hewlett Johnson. I attended this meeting as I particularly wanted to see the dean. While we were in the Middle East in 1941, Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union. Dr Johnson was one of the few people to express the view that this was the beginning of the end for the Nazi regime. Other leading commentators – politicians, army staff and diplomats, including England’s ambassador in Moscow, Sir Stafford Cripps – predicted the Soviet Union would last only three months, six at the most. But, as the dean had visited the Soviet Union several times before 1941, he knew that the Russian people would fight to the end and never allow themselves to be defeated.

In the early 1950s prime minister Menzies predicted war in three years. He was proved correct when the government sent troops to the war in Korea, a war which our union and I myself opposed. Several of our 2/15th Battalion members, who for various reasons decided to go to war again, were killed or wounded in action. Among them were Bill Woods of our A Company, a DCM winner in New Guinea and Jack Sheppard another DCM winner from the desert campaigns. A school mate of mine, Hiram Lenaey, was also killed. One of the wounded was a well known 2/15th Battalion member, Butch McEnery, who had married a Japanese girl. After thirty years in the army he was discharged, but was killed on his way to work near the Hamilton wharf during the 1970s.

I feel that the anger at so many Australians being killed in Korea should be directed at the conservative political parties, namely the Liberal and Country or National parties. How any thinking person can vote for these parties who surely have the blood of those killed in Korea and Vietnam on their hands is beyond my understanding.
During the 1950s, the anti–war movement sent delegates to the annual Hiroshima Memorial Conference held in August in Japan. Many of these delegates were unionists. I became involved when the Brisbane branch of the Federation sent Bill Stimson to one conference. In later years I represented our branch on the Queensland Peace Committee. I am still a delegate to the QPC as the representative of the Waterside Pensioners Association.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s we held an annual Hiroshima Day march, usually from Roma Street to Centenary Park. These marches were poorly attended. While many unions gave their official support they failed to organise attendance by their members. The maritime unions – watersiders, seamen, painters and dockers – were the main participants but, even on our union executive, it was not easy to get agreement for our union banner to become part of the march. On one occasion, organised hooligans resorted to violence at Centenary Park while our meeting was in progress. But our maritime union and building union stalwarts were able to contain these semi professional thugs who, apart from being opposed to the anti–war activities, were not even prepared to allow freedom of speech in a public forum.

As a prelude to one Hiroshima Day march, a public meeting was held in Brisbane in a church hall where the guest speaker was Lady Jessie Street (wife of the chief justice and lieutenant governor of NSW, sir Kenneth Street). She had been a long time activist and supporter of the world peace movement and had attended the United Nations in 1945 as an official representative of the Australian government.

Despite her privileged position in society, Jessie Street was always at ease with unionists and ordinary people. I can relate one story to illustrate this. I had been asked to entertain Jessie for a few hours one afternoon. After a short drive around the parks of Brisbane, I took her to the WWF club rooms where she asked to go into the bar to meet some watersiders. I was a bit reluctant as it was about 4ÿpm on pay day but she was adamant. So in we went and I introduced her to many of our members. She was greeted with hugs and even a kiss on the cheek from one wharfie. She insisted we stay for an hour or so. It was agreed by all that Lady Jessie Street was ‘a great old stick’. We left the club to cries of ’see you later, love’. She declared: “that’s one of the most enjoyable hours I have spent for a long time.” Such was the simplicity of this great woman who, after a long illness, passed away in 1970, at the age of 81.

As we moved into 1959, the peace movement geared itself for a National Peace Conference to be held in Melbourne in November. This conference, solidly supported by the trade unions of Australia, was organised by the Association for International Cooperation and Disarmament (AICD). A number of international activists were invited to attend. Among these were English author J B Priestley, his wife, archaeologist Jacqueta Hawke and Nobel prize winner Professor Linus Pauling. Bill Stimson, Brisbane branch official, and I, rank and file member, were elected by our union to attend. This conference did much to alert people to the dangers of another world war and to raise an awareness of the need for ordinary people to become active in the peace movement. I was
mainly involved in the trade union section which was attended by several hundred union delegates from Australia and New Zealand. This made me feel that the peace movement was broadly based. In later years my attendance at World Peace Conferences made me aware of the widespread desire for peace among the world’s masses.

The 1959 conference suffered interference from the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), but this did not deter any of those delegates who were genuine about their activities for peace.

For five weeks before the Melbourne conference, I worked fulltime with the Queensland AICD. I visited work sites around Brisbane, spoke to union members and sought AICD delegates from the unions. It was not all plain sailing. Many workers raised challenging questions. At that time, many considered Indonesia and China as threats. I spoke at many job meetings around Brisbane with the ex–Labor senator Bill Morrow whose life story is well told by Audrey Johnson in Fly a Rebel Flag. Bill Morrow’s long life from 1888 to 1980 is an epic of involvement in the anti–war movement with over 70 years of activity for peace.

During the world congress for peace in Moscow in 1962 I had an enjoyable day with Bill Morrow, author Frank Hardy, and Victorian Amalgamated Engineers Union (AEU) delegate, Steve Horrigan. It was Sunday and we visited a church in the morning, the horse races in the afternoon and the Bolshoi theatre in the evening. Hardy and I drank that vile Russian beer, in between Frank’s mad betting spasms counterpointed by Bill and Steve’s quiet attitudes. I only saw half the Swan Lake performance as sleep overtook me before one of the intervals. Despite this mishap the day remains favourably etched in my memory.

At the Melbourne conference the trade union section agreed that union peace committees should be established as part of union organisations. Several unions throughout Australia including the Brisbane branch of the WWF set up such committees. Bill Stimson was elected president of our peace committee. I was elected as secretary.

Chapter 18

World Peace Conferences

But trellis and blind remain

to propose that screened and slit

and safe, we occupy

plastered pigeon–holes, white–

ceilinged, white–silled, unremitting.
Judith Rodriguez

The World Peace Council had called for a world congress for peace and disarmament to be held in Moscow from Monday 9 July to 14 July 1962. The then secretary of the Queensland Trades and Labor Council Alec MacDonald and myself were elected from the Queensland trade union movement. Alec and I joined 24 other Australians and two New Zealanders at the conference. The Australian delegation was a mixed bag of unionists, intellectuals and business people.

New South Wales was represented by dr and Mrs Collcott, Mr and Mrs Buckley, Bill Morrow, Bill Gollin, Frank Hardy, Mrs Latter and Mrs Holt. South Australia sent Mrs Glen and dr Syd Lovibond. From Victoria were Sam and Sandra Goldbloom, reverend Bruce Silverwood, Mrs Broadbent, Mrs Adler, Steve Horrigan, Mr J Meltzer, E Bierderberg, Mrs A Shinglaw, Mrs D Gibson and Ken Turnbull. The two New Zealand delegates were Murray Rhodes, who was the first New Zealand trade unionist to attend a peace conference in the USSR; and Mrs Flora Gould.

Most of the Australian delegates flew from Sydney with stops at Darwin and Djakarta, Indonesia. At Djakarta some of the delegation joined the Soviet plane. The rest of us flew to Rangoon, in Burma. From there, we flew to Delhi in India and were settled in a luxury hotel, the Ashoka.

My room and bed companion was the reverend Bruce Silverwood. I had no objections to sharing a giant king sized bed with Bruce. After six years in the army, many times under a blanket in the African desert or a groundsheet in New Guinea or Borneo, I had spent many a miserable night snuggled up with a fellow soldier. To share a bed with over a metre between Bruce and myself did not concern me in the least. This episode always raised questions from some of my fellow workers when I recounted the story. Some people’s minds never seem to get above their navels.

We spent a couple of days looking around in Delhi. India always sickened me with its extremes of wealth and poverty, even from my first visit on our way to the Middle East in 1940. Nor could I get used to neighbouring Ceylon during the war years, with its workers loading coal by baskets on their heads; and the streets cluttered with rickshaws. I never rode in one of those things. Although I was only 19 I considered it wrong for one human to be pulling another in a vehicle. If a country ever needed an economic change of its system India surely was it. Socialism could only benefit the vast majority of down trodden people, but divisive religious sectarianism has provided barriers to a socialistic alternative.

For many years, India was regarded as one of the loudest voices of the so–called non–aligned nations at the UN. This year (1992) India and the United States of America announced closer military and economic ties. This power shift is a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union which has been the main military supplier to India, the largest arms importer in the world. I very much doubt that the new international relationship will increase the economic welfare of the ordinary Indian people.
We left the luxury of the Ashoka hotel to board the Soviet plane for Moscow. We had an early breakfast before we left. Then we were given a second breakfast on the Soviet plane. Four hours later on landing at Tashkent, capital city of the Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan, we were offered breakfast number three. Our time had been put back some three hours which made travel in that direction very confusing with regard to meals and meal times.

After a few hours of more travel we landed at an airport 30 kilometres from Moscow. Quickly, without inspection by customs, we sped to the Ukrainian Hotel in the heart of Moscow. Bruce Silverwood again was my roommate, but this time we had two single beds. At the hotel, we were each given an attache case and were credentialled for the peace conference.

We Australians all met each other and had a brief talk where Bill Morrow and Bill Gollin were elected to represent us on the peace committee’s Presidential Congress Committee.

Steve Horrigan and I went for a stroll around Moscow. Moscow nights are not nights as we in Australia know them. It never gets very dark.

Steve and I got lost. I had had the foresight to have acted on advice I had received before leaving Australia. I had asked one of our interpreters to write down the name and address of the Ukrainian Hotel in Russian. We hailed a taxi, showed the driver the hotel address and were driven back to the hotel.

The World Peace Congress began on Monday 9 July 1962. The main sessions were held at the Palace of Congresses in the Kremlin grounds. The trade union section of the congress was in the Hall of Columns, another magnificent building. Alec MacDonald was the Australian trade unionist on the steering committee representing some 400 trade union delegates from around the world. For many of these, to get to Moscow for a peace congress was a story of overcoming many obstacles. Quite a few came from countries where unions were banned or underground. Our minor hassles in getting to a Moscow peace conference seemed trivial, when you heard of other delegates risking their lives to attend.

The trade union section broke into smaller subcommittees. On Wednesday at 6pm, I made my contribution and was heartily applauded. I felt proud to have spoken at a world peace conference. Having been a humble private come corporal for six years in the 2nd AIF and an ordinary rank and file wharfie, I felt I had expressed the view that we ordinary people of this world did not want war. We shared the belief that wars being made by people could be prevented by people.

I attended every day and night session of the congress. I was most impressed by a night concert on Thursday at the Palace of Congresses. Some 2500 Soviet children gave a never to be forgotten concert with world peace as the theme. In 1986, the International
Year of Peace, the New South Wales schools had hundreds of school children perform a concert for peace. At both these concerts the point was made—children as well as adults require peace for life itself.

On the Tuesday the world congress was addressed by premier Nikita Khrushchev who gave a long winded, but important discourse. An American delegate expressed that a lifelong desire would be realised if a World Peace Congress were held in America with the president of the USA attending and speaking.

Day and night attendance at the congress and seeing some of Moscow in between sessions was a once in a lifetime experience for me. I recall, with pleasure, rides in the Moscow Metro underground, and visits to museums and churches. With my friend Steve Horrigan, a practising Catholic and reverend Collcott, I visited two churches one Sunday. Steve expressed the opinion that they were ‘fair dinkum’ church procedures except that the collection box was at the door where you entered. As well, all in the church stood for the entire service. From my observation and to my surprise, the church crowd was a congregation of old and young people.

That same day we were taken to see Vladimir Lenin lying in the Mausoleum. The Soviet people were lined up for a great distance, but our guide said, that as foreigners, we could go straight to the head of the queue. On principle I declined to do that sort of thing. The guide was upset at my refusal to queue—jump. I tried to explain how that sort of thing was not done in our country. The guide remained unconvinced. Equally, I remained determined. I did not wish to see Lenin by going to the top of the queue.

On Saturday 14 July, the world conference ended where it had begun, at the Palace of Congresses. A draft statement was read and agreed to by nearly all of the 2800 delegates. Two delegates from the United States voted against the draft and seven delegates abstained.

At all main and plenary sessions of congress, I saw and heard that any delegate could say whatever they wished. Some American delegates’ contributions were extremely anti–Soviet, and, in some cases, very provocative.

The conference now concluded, delegates dispersed far and wide. Some went home immediately while others ventured to all parts of the Soviet Union. The next Monday, I was visited at my hotel room by the president of the Soviet Sea and Rivers Union, G Saenko and an interpreter. Earlier, I had expressed a desire to visit the waterfront at Leningrad. It had been arranged for me to leave Moscow on the train, The Red Arrow, for Leningrad.

That same day, the USSR–Australia Society arranged a social get together. At this gathering I met ex Brisbane watersider, Tom Pickunoff, who had taken part in the abortive 1905 revolution in Russia. After the failed revolution, he had stowed away to end up in Australia in 1910, where he had worked mostly on the waterfront. In 1959, at 75 years of age, he decided to return to the USSR, where he was accepted as a citizen. He
looked extremely fit and was an excellent interpreter. He told me that having spent nearly 50 years in Australia, his return to the Soviet Union had been drastic for him. But he said he was contented, had a small flat in Moscow and also a Russian wife. He invited me to visit him at the flat. Unfortunately I did not get the time. Tom lived well into his eighties and died in Moscow.

At midnight I boarded the Red Arrow. In the six berth sleeper was a mixed company of young and old people. No one spoke English. As my day had been full, I got into my bunk and slept through most of the eight hour trip to Leningrad.

At Leningrad station we were greeted by a band and many young children with flowers and world peace welcome signs. We were taken to the Russea Hotel. Leningrad’s history in 1917 and 1941–45 is one of greatness and unbelievable tenacity. In 1962 the city was beautiful, having been built on over a hundred islands on 48 rivulets merging with the Neva river.

My five days in Leningrad were ones of continual activity with visits to the wharves and cargo vessels; the Winter Palace and Smolny Institute where Lenin studied. I had lunch with a Leningrad docker, his wife and family in their very small apartment near the docks. I appeared on Leningrad television and was interviewed by the local and trade union press. I visited Saint Isaac’s cathedral, the third largest in the world. It had been badly damaged by German bombing. At the cost of 40 million roubles, it was completely restored. When Saint Isaac’s was in operation as a church up to 14 thousand people, standing, could be at the service. The marble mosaic columns, nearly 20 metres were something to be seen.

On Thursday at the Seamen’s Palace, I was a guest speaker at a public meeting and concert. From the stage, the Soviet general, Solouev, and I spoke to commemorate Poland’s liberation by the Soviet army in 1944.

On Friday I was taken by car seventy kilometres along the north side of the Gulf of Finland to a rest and pioneer camp for children from seven to fourteen years of age. Many different sports were played in this children’s camp including gymnastics, basketball and swimming. The camps dotting the 70 kilometres were all children’s pioneer camps. They held from 400 to 1000 children.

Back in Leningrad I was taken to the Seamen’s Club where I met seamen from several countries. I was asked what I thought of Soviet beer. Being honest, I said that it was bloody terrible. The manger of the club did not take offence, but said that he would give me a bottle of good beer to drink. It was Czechoslovakian beer, really cold and similar to our Queensland Fourex.

At midnight on Saturday my interpreter, Lena waved goodbye as I boarded the Red Arrow heading for Moscow. Lena had been a great guide and friend during my stay in Leningrad. She told me that as a child during the 1941 Leningrad siege, she had lived...
for almost three years on a slice of Russian black bread per day. Her healthy body and sharp mind spoke volumes for Russian black bread.

During the week of the World Peace Congress Alec MacDonald had been invited by some of the Chinese delegation to visit the Peoples Republic Of China. Alec said that I could come with him to China if I so desired. I dearly wanted to, but it would have meant being away from Australia much longer. As I was not being paid any wages or expenses during the trip, my personal finances would not stand it. I found that invitations to other countries were common.

One day, during one of the few times I was walking around on my own I boarded a special peace bus with many delegates from Cuba. During the tour around Leningrad, there was much singing. Despite being an off key singer, I sang Waltzing Matilda and The Banks Are Made of Marble, a workers’ song. The Cubans were thrilled and invited me to return to Cuba with them to see their country. Like the China visit, I was unable to accept their kind offer.

On Sunday 22 July, I left Moscow airport with Steve Horrigan, Murray Rhodes of New Zealand, Mrs Gibson from Melbourne and Mrs Glenn from South Australia. It was our first misadventure. On arrival at Delhi we found our plane bookings had not been made right through to Australia. We looked like being stranded for some time. Steve, Murray and I undertook feverish actions including a visit to the USSR embassy in Delhi. This saw us all with tickets home. Murray Rhodes and I had a couple of days in Singapore, where we were taken around the wharves by local trade union officials and representatives of the Peoples Action Party, which was the government of the day. By Saturday 27 July I was home at Graceville.

It was back to work. At union meetings and anywhere I could get a large or small audience, I proclaimed the message of the World Peace Congress. Signatures for a peace petition had been collected over several months. A cavalcade was organised to present the petition in Canberra. A busload of people was to go from Queensland via the coast road and five cars of unionists were to travel the New England Highway. My wife Joyce our three boys and I were in our Holden station wagon, adorned with many peace signs. There was another car from the WWF with Peter Dare and Barry Earle; and cars from the building workers’ union, the Seamen’s Union and the meatworkers’ union. We were stopped by police at our assembly point at New Farm Park.

They were mostly from the special branch, along with traffic branch inspectors who declared that we could not have peace signs on our cars or buses. The signs contravened the traffic act in that they could be offensive to some citizens. After much argument we were forced to cover our peace signs until we moved out into the suburbs.

Our first stop outside Brisbane was at the satellite city of Ipswich. Our arrival contrasted with our departure under police censure. At Ipswich we were welcomed by supporters who were mainly from the trade union and peace movements.
In the city of Toowoomba, our next stop west of Ipswich, we were officially received at Trades Hall and interviewed by journalists from the Toowoomba Chronicle. From Toowoomba we passed through Warwick and on to Stanthorpe.

At Stanthorpe we met a local girl, Elena Raccanella outside an hotel. Elena handed us £20 ($40) for the peace movement, but the peace offering was made under the watchful eyes of six local policemen. She told us that they were anything but friendly towards her before we arrived. Some of our delegation had a sensible talk to the local protective squad. We expressed objection to their harassment of the girl.

We spent the first night at the Telegraph Hotel at Tenterfield, safe from the cold and wet, outside. By phone, we contacted the peace bus down the coast to exchange tales of eventful journeys of both groups.

The first stop the next day was the University of New England at Armidale, where we contacted Peter Christasen and dr Gabriel. A drive around the University grounds with our prominent peace slogans produced the usual mixed reaction from cheers and thumbs–up to shouts for us to get back to Russia.

Thirty kilometres out of Tamworth, we enjoyed a cup of billy tea and a chat with a group of peace supporters at a roadside picnic area. That night we stopped at the Thoroughbred Hotel at Scone.

The owner agreed that I could address an impromptu meeting in the hotel private bar where I reported my recent attendance at the Moscow World Peace Congress. During the meeting Don McCleary a sheep station owner and peace supporter arrived. He had come in from his property, thirty kilometres away, to wish us well and donate finance for peace. He apologised for being late but explained that it was lambing time and he was very busy. As everywhere we had found a genuine supporter for the peace movement although, as Don explained, in the ultra conservative Scone area peace supporters were few and far between. Still, we enjoyed his company for a few hours before we retired for the night and he returned to his property and lambing problems.

At Hexham just north of Newcastle, we were met by a police escort which guided us to the Newcastle Trades Hall. Since we had entered New South Wales, the action and attitude of the police in each town had been one of cooperation and courtesy. We were received at the trades hall by secretary Tom Dowling and the reverend Charles, a coalfields’ church leader and active peace supporter. Our peace bus had also arrived at Newcastle and reported on their experiences down the coast from Brisbane. These were similar to our inland adventures with contacts made at various coastal areas.

After overnight billets in Sydney suburban homes we went to Canberra with a stopover for a reception at the Goulburn Workers Club. Over 1000 delegates from every State in Australia met a kilometre from parliament on Wednesday 15 August 1962. We marched to the front of parliament house where we were welcomed by Labor member Gough Whitlam. He accepted several bundles of signed petitions for world disarmament
and the Pacific to be declared a Nuclear Free Zone. We broke up into small groups and visited many embassies of various countries. Joyce and I were part of the deputation to the Soviet Embassy. Receptions at the embassies ranged from friendly to hostile.

Believing our peace cavalcade and activities on the way to and at Canberra had contributed to world peace, we returned to Brisbane. Unfortunately the pig iron Bob Menzies’ government had already committed advisers to Vietnam. 1962, although a year of much activity for world peace, was only the beginning of the long ten years struggle against our involvement in the unwinnable, immoral Vietnam War.

During October 1964 an Australia wide anti–war congress was held in Sydney. Again, I was elected to represent the rank and file of our union, along with several delegates from our union auxiliaries. We all travelled in the one bus to join overseas delegates including the Mayor of Hiroshima, New Zealand’s dean Chandler, a Japanese Professor, Joseph Hromadra; and again Professor and Mrs Linus Pauling. The week long congress drew more people to the anti–war movement.

On Wednesday 17 February 1971, I again attended a national anti–war conference in Sydney. Brian Plunket and A Zanko were other rank and file delegates from the Brisbane WWF. Several Labor Federal members were also present at the Sydney conference. Jim Cairns, Bill Hayden, George Georges, Gordon Bryant, Jim Keefe, Tom Uren and others had joined the peace movement from the anti–Vietnam moratoriums of the 1970s.

In 1970, I was nominated as and made a World Peace Councillor. There were no financial rewards or medals or certificates for this honour but I felt proud to have joined a group which included many distinguished and far sighted people from around the world. The great Jim Healy was a World Peace Councillor from Australia, as were Jim Cairns, George Georges and Melbourne businessman Sam Goldbloom. While the Council has had many stormy periods since the 1940s it is now recognised as a voice for world peace and has gained respect with its accreditation within the United Nations.

I was advised by the Queensland Peace Committee that it had been agreed among Australian World Peace Councillors that I was to attend a council presidential meeting at Warsaw, Poland, from 5–9 May, 1973.

I left Brisbane on Saturday 28 April, after a hassle with the Soviet embassy which for a few days had lost my passport.

That sorted out, I arrived at the Moscow airport and was met by Soviet peace committee member, Yuri Vassalvev who gave me my plane ticket from Moscow to Warsaw. I arrived at Warsaw on Friday 4 May to the usual welcome of flowers and peace badges, mainly presented by Polish girls.
I went to Warsaw’s parliament house to meet Romash Chandra, long time president of the World Peace Council. We talked about a proposed visit to Australia by several peace councillors, including Chandra, later that year.

The world presidential meeting began the next day. It was held in four separate commissions and I attended the section discussing the Indo–China region. I made two verbal contributions. Each evening we were entertained with theatre or receptions at the Indian Ambassador’s residence.

I visited several places in Warsaw including the Warsaw grotto. Around Warsaw are more than 220 places clearly marked, where during the 1941–44 occupation German soldiers indiscriminately shot civilians. Similarly to the Greeks, the Polish people never gave up the battle against German occupation. To my knowledge, Poland and Greece were the only two countries overrun by Nazi Germany that totally refused to cooperate with the invaders. German reaction against the people of Poland and Greece was deadly and brutal.

During one stroll, I was amazed to see a huge crowd around a particular building which turned out to be a church. The church was large and full of people. Outside in the street were thousands more listening to the church service through a public address system. The Polish people are certainly serious about their religion.

During the meeting of the presidential committee I made contact with a Polish trade union official. One afternoon he took me to trade union headquarters in Warsaw. I was welcomed by Matt Berezecki, then president of the Polish Seamen and Dockers Union. I expressed a desire to visit ports of Poland.

The next Wednesday, Matt came to the Grand Hotel where I was staying. We drove out to the Warsaw aerodrome to go by light plane to the port of Gdansk, formerly Danzig. As high winds prevented light plane trips, we changed plans. We headed to the Warsaw railway station for the three hundred and fifty kilometre trip to Gdansk. For three days I was a guest of the Poland Seamen and Dockers Union, settling in a recreation village at the seaside resort of Sopot. I visited clubs, wharves, workers flats, and had lunch on board a Polish vessel. The hospitality was exquisite.

The ship’s captain on the vessel was not happy about Australian waterside workers with their strict attitudes to safety and gear requirements. After much discussion with this skipper I was convinced that he did not dislike Australian dockers. He just did not understand our requirements regarding safety and work conditions in Australian ports. Aside from the questions of safety the Australian union movement could learn something from its Polish counterpart. With approximately 11 million union workers Poland has only 23 union organisations. The Seamen and Dockers Union covers all sea areas, including fishing.

For recreation, Matt took me with his wife, son and daughter to the Maritime Club where I was entertained with dinner and dancing. Although a novice at dancing, I found
that after a few vodkas, I was able to cope with the Polish dances quite well. I was informed that I was the first Australian waterside worker to make an official visit to Poland. The only other Australian waterfront representative to later visit Poland was the late E V Elliot, long standing secretary of the Australian Seamen’s Union. I believe that my visit did play some part in cementing peaceful relationships with the Polish people, particularly the waterfront workers.

As I flew out of Warsaw bound for Moscow, I regretted I had had only such a short stay in Poland. My guide and friend, Matt Berezecki invited my wife and me back to Poland for a holiday, but Joyce and I never have got around to accepting his generous offer. Matt, apart from being my friend and guide for the short period I was with him, was also a personal friend of our union’s general secretary, Charlie Fitzgibbon, whom he had met at World International Labor Organisation meetings.

At Moscow airport, the soldier at the exit looked at my passport and visa and said nyet (‘no go’ in Australian). I was refused entry into Moscow, but I was able to use a telephone to ring Alice Bobresheva who had visited Australia in the 1960s as part of a Soviet peace delegation. Alice spoke perfect English and was high up in the Soviet government. I told Alice that I had overstay my visa in Poland. She soon sorted things out. A car arrived at the airport for me. I was allowed past the ‘nyet’ soldier and taken to the Russia in room 785 on the 12th floor.

After three days of sightseeing in Moscow, I flew out, nursing a big bottle of Vodka given to me by a Soviet miners’ official to take to the Queensland president, ‘Digger’ Murphy. I faithfully delivered the full bottle to Digger.

I arrived back home in Brisbane on 16 May having been away since 28 April. I believe that I had again contributed something towards world peace. It may say something that, on both occasions when I returned from the Soviet Union in 1962 and 1973 the Australian customs were extremely polite. On neither occasion was I required to open my port.

George Kellaway told me what had happened to him when he returned from the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War in 1954. Customs officers seized all George’s personal papers and photos. He had to wait a long time for their return.

I like to think that the changes in attitude from 1954 to the times of my trips in 1962 and 1973 reflected part of the successful work of thousands of Australians who participated in the peace movement.

Chapter 19

Australian World Peace Councillors

In hollows behind outhouses
or back of a wall of pepper trees, tanks
are sleeping, stirring.
They expand, become nervous and rough,
and grinning with iron dimples
begin to move out to the edge of town
to wait for the lorry to places unknown.

**Rhyll McMaster**

Since its formation in the late 1940s, the World Peace Council has accepted many
Australians as Peace Councillors. You will notice prominent members of the ALP among
World Peace Councillors. But you won't notice many names of Labor politicians of the
50s.

When groupers were powerful in the ALP, the World Peace Council along with
most peace organisations were proscribed by the Labor Party. Bill Morrow, who went on
to serve Tasmania as an ALP senator, had his preselection vetoed, when he refused to cut
his ties with the peace movement.

Australians who have been honoured as World Peace Councillors include:

Geoff Anderson (ex world war II fighter pilot) from NSW

A Brennan, Seamens Union, New South Wales

Tas Bull (Federal officer of the Waterside Workers Federation) from NSW

Dr Jim Cairns, former MHR, and Treasurer of Australia from Victoria

Bill Cameron (ex world war II pilot) from NSW

Laurie Carmichael (Australian Metalworkers Union official) from Victoria

Norma Chalmers (secretary, Queensland Peace Committee)

Rev Alf Dickie, from Victoria

E V Elliott, Seamens Union of Australia from Queensland

Senator George Georges, from Queensland
Sam Goldbloom (businessman), from Victoria

Senator Arthur Gietzelt, from NSW

Mrs M Hartley, from Victoria

Jim Healy, (WWF)

Mrs E Hutcheson, from South Australia

Senator Jim Keefe from Queensland

R Nielsen from South Australia

J P (Phil) O'Brien (Waterside Worker) from Queensland

W H O'Brien, from Victoria

E Phillips, Miners’ Federation, Sydney

Jack Sherrington (BWIU official) from Queensland

Tom Supple, WWF from New South Wales

Tom Uren MHR, minister in the Labor government 1972–75.

As Australian Peace Councillors died or resigned from the council for various reasons, others replaced them. Despite the council’s Soviet orientation, a sincere commitment to world peace overrode any ideological orientation. When I left the workforce in 1976, I took no further active role in peace movements, apart from attendance at peace gatherings and my representation of waterside pensioners on the Queensland Peace Committee. My humble contributions to the international peace movement had been amply rewarded with meetings with like minded peace activists in Australia, the Soviet Union and Poland.

Chapter 20

Vietnam Moratoriums in a Divided Nation

Writes Vietnam like a huge four–letter word in blood and faeces on the walls of government; reminds me when the intricate machine stalls
there’s a poet still living at this address

Bruce Beaver

The anti–Vietnam War movement in the United States greatly increased during 1969 with massive marches and university activity. Towards the end of that year, the Queensland Peace Committee, still intact from the 1959 Melbourne conference, called a meeting which was held in the small flat of Mrs Judy Hampson at Toowong, a suburb of Brisbane.

At this small meeting a steering sub committee of the moratorium committee was set up. The chairperson was Rod White a research officer from the Miscellaneous Workers Union. Joint secretaries were Carlene Crowe a university student, Joe Harris of the Building Workers Industrial Union and Bertrand Russell of the Peace Foundation. The treasurer was Hugh Hamilton, an official of the BWIU.

General Members were: Mrs Judy Hampson, a housewife; Mal Price, a university student; Phil O’Brien of the WWF; Jack Sherrington of the BWIU.

A massive action was to be held on 8, 9 and 10 May, 1970 in all capital cities and several smaller cities which had anti–war committees. As we came closer to May, weekly meetings were held at our Waterside Workers Club. These large meetings were fiery, as methods and tactics were discussed with strong participation by university students.

All points of view were aired. At this period, Brian Laver, Mitch Thompson, Jim Prentice, Dick Shearman and Jim Beetson were the leaders of the students from the University of Queensland. The university had established its own anti–Vietnam war organisation. The Queensland Trades and Labor Council also had endorsed the May moratorium and had called on unions and members to take active roles. There was a contrast between the enthusiasm of the students and the caution of many trade unions. The young people full of enthusiasm and diametrically opposed to Australia’s involvement in the war in Vietnam considered that at the moratorium march, street sit–ins and mass actions against the US consul rooms in Queen Street were warranted.

The period of great activity by students for civil liberties and opposition to the Vietnam war had been during 1966 and 1967. Many arrests of students resulted in their refusal to pay fines. Brain Laver and Mitch Thompson were in Boggo Road jail. Supporters were picketing outside the jail. Headquarters for picketers and friends was the home, opposite the jail, of a waterside worker, the late Jim Gill and family.

Joyce and I arrived one Saturday morning to take part in the picket. We parked our Holden station sedan about 30 feet from the bus stop outside Jim’s home. State special branch and uniformed police were there all day in large numbers.

About three in the afternoon one of the police cars suddenly came out of the jail and stopped in front of our car. Out the uniformed police got with their booking pad at
the ready. Several of us went to my car. Constables Hutton and Beswich said I was parked illegally as you could be no less than 40 feet after the bus stop and 60 feet away from the approach to the bus stop. I attempted to explain the traffic act which in fact cited the distances of 40 feet before and 20 feet after a bus stop. The police were both very arrogant and said that they were not prepared to talk with me but would fight me in court. They handed me the traffic ticket. In the meantime, Jim Gill had got a tape measure and measured 32 feet from the bus stop to my parked car. I asked Constable Hutton to mark on the traffic ticket the distance, which he did. I had the traffic rule book in my hand at the page of parking near bus stops. I tried to reason with the two constables who were more arrogant and insulting than army provosts were during the war. I told them I would appeal against any fine imposed and would not be paying it.

Time moved on and I received an order to pay for my alleged offence. I wrote to the traffic branch explaining my objection. Lo and behold, after some considerable time, I received a letter from the traffic branch signed by Inspector Hughes. It said that a technicality had been observed in the traffic ticket and no further action would be taken to enforce payment of the fine.

On the day I was given the ticket, a student, Jim Beetson had parked his motor bike in front of our car. Beetson also was given a traffic ticket. I feel sure young Jim would have refused to pay the fine. Perhaps a further technicality was discovered by the police department.

The Queensland Trades and Labor Council had early in 1970 endorsed the May Vietnam moratorium activity but as was common within the trade union movement, endorsement was easier to achieve than active strategy for achieving political goals.

This was not the first time that there had been a rift between the TLC and the student movement. In the late sixties the then president of the Trades and Labour Council, Jack Egerton decided to ban students from participating in the 1967 May Day March. The WWF welcomed the students to march with us. Jack Egerton was reported to have slandered the Brisbane waterside workers for taking the students into their ranks and so letting them take part in the workers’ May Day March. In reply the executive of the WWF demanded that Egerton as president of the Qld Trades and Labour Council appear before the Union Executive. This he did. Alby Graham made Egerton squirm with discomfort as Egerton meekly tried to defend his actions. Egerton’s defence was that he had been misquoted in the Rockhampton ABC broadcast.

Our branch of the Waterside Workers Federation in Brisbane endorsed the May actions in 1970 and pledged full participation by stopping work on 8 May to allow the maximum number of members to join the march and rally.

Our participation in the struggle traced back to 1962, when the Menzies government sent advisers to Vietnam. Our union went to the USA consulate in Queen Street to raise our objections to the steady build up of US troops, advisers and CIA
operatives. The last group had moved into Saigon even before the 1954 Geneva agreement which had ended French domination of Vietnam.

The 1954 agreement chaired by Great Britain and the USSR had ended the war between the French colonials and the liberation forces, led by Ho Chi Minh, by dividing the country. This had allowed thousands of Vietnamese to move north if they had supported the Ho Chi Minh forces, while those who supported French interests moved south.

The USA refused to ratify the 1954 Geneva Agreement. Years later it was revealed that John Foster Dulles of the US offered the French ‘a couple of A Bombs to finish the Bien Dien Phu battle’. The refusal by the French to accept such a drastic measure was revealed in a book published in 1965 by an ex–president of France, Bidault.

Our unions protest visits to the US consul in Queen Street, Brisbane were many. Sometimes only officials went. At other times several hundred members protested after stop work meetings. Our discussions with Consul officials did nothing to change their views that the USA government was correct in being in Vietnam, but it enabled many of our members to become aware of the truth about Vietnam before 1964 when conscription became a fact of life for the younger generation in Australia.

The Federal government and others forces supporting our participation in the war in Vietnam sank to the lowest levels with insults and innuendos about the May 8, 9 and 10 moratoriums of 1970. The late Bill Snedden, then Minister for Labor and National Service described the organisers of the proposed moratoriums ‘as political bikies pack raping democracy’.

The Waterside Workers club in Brisbane was the main assembly point of the protesters. Several thousands of students, teachers and others had marched from the Queensland University to join many thousands more. It was Brisbane’s largest anti-war rally and march. We estimated that close to 10,000 took part in Brisbane’s 8 May 1970 moratorium. Throughout Australia, it was a mighty demonstration of opposition by ordinary people against the Vietnam war. It was estimated that 120,000 marched and rallied in all capital cities and other smaller towns. Melbourne claimed over 70,000 protesters at a massive sit–in at Bourke street. A sit–in like Melbourne was the action that our university friends had hoped for in Brisbane. A Queen Street sit–in did not become a reality till the 21 April 1972 march and rally.

The second moratorium of September, 1970 saw much violence and many arrests throughout Australia. The May moratorium had shaken the conservative forces of Australia and they had retaliated with lies such as the moratoriums as a communist plot, as a threat to law and order, damaging the morale of Australian troops in Vietnam and ultimately as a threat to Australia’s internal security.

I believe that the many thousands of Australians who showed their opposition to the Vietnam War on 8 May foreshadowed the 1972 election victory by Labor. On
election the prime minister of the first Labor government since 1949 quickly withdrew the few remaining Australian troops in Vietnam, abolished conscription and very importantly recognised the People’s Republic of China.

The anti–Vietnam war activity from 1962 to 1972 included more than demonstrations. There was a conference in Sydney in 1964 with delegates from all over Australia. There were teach–ins and debates on Vietnam throughout Brisbane and Australia. Response from the universities was tremendous. Thousands of young people taking an anti–war stand played a major part in Brisbane’s huge turnout in 1970. While many university participants had way out and revolutionary ideas which did not match the general mood of the movement, their enthusiasm was unbounded.

I remember one period when the students decided to launch a paper named Impact. Their expectations knew no limits. At one meeting about this paper, some said: “We will force The Courier Mail and The Telegraph (Queensland’s mass dailies) out of the news arena in a short time.” Impact folded. Like other organisations around that period, the student newspaper served its purpose for a limited time.

The Ex–Service Human Rights Association played a role with the ABC personality, Alan Ashbolt, prominent in the New South Wales organisation. Here in Queensland a branch was formed with senator Jim Keefe as president and myself as secretary. Although only small in numbers, we were able to draw into the anti–Vietnam war movement many people from different walks of life. The association allowed many ex–servicemen to belong to an ex–service organisation that expressed opposition to wars everywhere. We were a voice of sanity raised in opposition to the hysteria of the RSL hierarchy. In Queensland the strong arm of reactionary hysteria was supplied by the special branch of the State police force.

Chapter 21

Queensland’s Political Police –The Special Branch

Pledge me: I had a hangman for a father

And for my mother the immortal State;

My playground was the yard beside the lime–pit,

My play–songs the after–cries of hate.

Vincent Buckley

It came as a shock when, after walking to our union office from a stop work meeting at Brisbane’s Festival Hall, I felt sure two big blokes were following George Kellaway and myself. I told George of my suspicion and we stopped to look in a shop window. Sure enough, they did the same.
These men were Queensland police officers, members of the special branch.

They were De Lange and now disgraced former National Party minister Don Lane. Lane was imprisoned for misuse of public funds after the Fitzgerald inquiry into corruption. From this period of the late 1950s until I retired in 1976, special branch presence at union and Peace Committee meetings and at anti-war and civil rights marches, demonstrations and meetings was constant. Unwelcome but familiar gate crashers were De Langes, Lane, Walker, little and large Hogan (unrelated), Savage, and Gleeson. Their continual presence severely annoyed me at first, but as the years went on, they became like arthritis. You accept it and learn to live with the nuisance.

I made it a rule never to get into conversation with these special branch watchdogs. On one occasion just before Armistice Day in 1966 I had made a written application to hold an Armistice Day and anti-war demonstration outside the Brisbane City Hall. I made the application to the correct police department – the traffic branch – but lo and behold who should arrive at my workplace at New Farm wharf one night but four special branch members to convey a message on behalf of the traffic branch police. I refused to talk to any of them. Their presence just about stopped the job as my work mates wanted to leave the wharf and go home to let the special branch know how they felt about the attempt to interview me or message-carry to me. The special branch officers eventually gave up as I would not stop work nor listen to their message. All I said was that my dealings were with the traffic branch. They finally retreated from the wharf.

Next morning, a police car pulled up outside our place at Graceville. I allowed Inspector Geary of the traffic branch into our home. He was courteous and said: “I believe you were upset about last night’s episode.” He then conveyed to me the decision of the traffic branch regarding our planned Armistice Day activity outside the Town Hall. We were allowed to go ahead with our activity on 11 November 1966, which linked Armistice Day to our opposition to the Vietnam War.

About 50 of us ex-service men and women held placards and rendered silence for the fallen of all wars. The usual large number of special branch were there. None of us was arrested, despite the tension which resulted from extreme provocation by the special branch.

My correspondence with the Cubans interested the political police. My connection with Cuba commenced when I was in Moscow in 1962, at a World Peace Conference. I already have related how I happened to get onto a bus with all Cuban delegates. They had made me extremely welcome and had invited me to visit their country after which we had exchanged addresses. I have received their national paper Granma, and other information, regularly since that chance encounter.

During the 1962 US – Soviet/Cuban crises regarding Soviet rocket bases in Cuba, our union office received a cable in Spanish. One of our officials said: “I have a friend over at the ‘Gabba area who has a used car business – he can read and speak
Gabba/Woolloongabba – an inner city Brisbane suburb.> I'll ring him now and tell him I'm coming over to get this cable translated for our information.”

He made the phone call, but an industrial problem meant it was an hour or so before he got to his Spanish reading friend at the ‘Gabba.

When he did arrive, his friend was terribly agitated, as special branch had interrogated him at his car yard. They wanted to know what connection he had with Cuba. Despite denials by the police, this incident made it clear to us that the union office phone must have been tapped.

Phone tapping rightly has always been illegal in Australia. Despite this, phone tapping has been practiced by ASIO, Federal police, State police and private detectives for business and social espionage. A progressive judge of the Supreme Court, Lionel Murphy was a victim of phone tapping. It still goes on. It is about time for some people to go to jail for long periods for phone tapping.

During the last few months of 1970, several young people who opposed conscription for Vietnam were in King George Square, opposite the Brisbane City Hall, on City Council property. They were displaying banners and giving out leaflets to passers by. When I arrived at the square the special branch men were giving the youngsters a torrid time by tearing up their leaflets and ripping banners. I objected to the special branch’s actions and pointed out to them that we were on Council property and thus not breaking any State laws. They eased off somewhat and I began to hand out leaflets myself. The special branch men then asked my name and address as if they did not already know me! I gave them the information that they already had.

On 5 September 1970, I received an order to appear in court as I had broken ‘Chapter 54 of Brisbane Acts'. I immediately handed the order to the secretary of the Brisbane branch of our union. I made it clear I would not be attending any court or paying any fines with regard to the offence. After a time I received a ‘Copy of Minute of Conviction’ on complaint of one S McDonald for breaching ‘Chapter 54 of Brisbane Acts'. I was fined $5.00 with further costs of $2.50 expenses and $35.70 court costs. The total was $43.20, plus the threat that failure to pay would mean seven days in prison. I again made it clear to our union that I would not be paying any fines.

I stood firm on the principle that I and anyone else had the right to give out leaflets around the City Hall area. Several letters passed between our branch and the Labor City Council. There were discussions with the then Labor lord mayor, Clem Jones. At the 1971 Queensland Trade Union Congress, it was announced that eight Labor aldermen had paid my fine, thus saving me from seven days jail.

Our union had told the Labor council that, for every day that I was in jail, no work would be done on the Brisbane waterfront. I was critical of Clem Jones who, despite approaches by our union and also from Fred Whitby (secretary of the Queensland Trades and Labour Council), allowed my case to go to court.
It was plain victimisation by the special branch, one member of which said to me at an anti–Vietnam demonstration: “O'Brien, you bastard, we will get you yet.” I was lucky to escape arrest on one other occasion.

It was during the state visit of Air–Vice Marshal Ky of the South Vietnam government. Hundreds who opposed his visit gathered at the official reception at Lennons Hotel in George Street. The security and uniformed police moved in to arrest some of those demonstrating against Ky. Two police officers, one on each side of me, took hold of my arms. I did not move, but kept cool and said: “What’s wrong fellows?” This stunned them and they released their hold. Had I stiffened or moved I surely would have been arrested for assault or resisting arrest.

A friend of mine, Heck Chalmers, ex POW in Singapore and department head of a leading Brisbane insurance company, was arrested. He was later fined for assaulting special branch detective, Don Lane (later disgraced National Party MLA who earned the nickname Shady Lane). When I had last seen Heck, Don Lane had a head lock on him.<SFA standard police practice at demonstrations was to charge a person they had assaulted with ‘assault police’.> Anyone who knew Heck knew him to be a quiet and gentle person. Bad luck continued for the family: during the anti–Ky demonstration Heck’s wife, Norma, (secretary of the Queensland Peace Committee) had her ankle broken amid the melee of police and demonstrators.

As a delegate from our union to the Queensland Trades and Labor Council, I attended the meetings of delegates from all affiliated unions every Wednesday fortnight. These meetings were held in Trades Hall in the city. I normally travelled there by train. One night, however, after having been required to work later than normal, I decided to drive to the meeting. Parking at the entrance to the building, I noticed another car occupied by five men whom I recognised as special branch officers. Their car was parked opposite the hall. Returning to my car after the meeting, I noticed the special branch men were still there. I felt uneasy. But as my car was locked just as I had left it, I dismissed thoughts that anything might be wrong.

Some days later I received a letter from a Mr Ian Grant of Bardon who told me he had found my car log book in a wallet with my driver’s licence. He had found my wallet in a little garden area near where my car had been parked during the meeting. I have no proof of any involvement by any one but it is passing strange for someone to unlock my car, remove the wallet, and then lock my car again with five members of the special branch nearby. There are those people in our community who would say that the special branch members were only doing their job. But so were the German brown shirts only ‘doing their job’. As fascism developed in Germany the ‘job’ eventually became administering the concentration camps and the gas chambers.

The Nuremburg War Crimes Trials clearly established that agents of the state cannot resort to the defence that they were only ‘doing their job’ or ‘obeying orders’ to justify brutally treating citizens.
Chapter 22

**No Nukes.**

mangoes are not extra mild
mangoes are greedy delicious tongue teasers
mangoes are violently soft
mangoes are fibrous intestinal love bites
mangoes like beginning once again

**Richard Tipping**

When the French first began to test nuclear bombs in the Pacific in the 1960s, we wasted no time in organising protests.

The carrying of placards was deemed illegal. My wife Joyce and two other women from the peace committee used their ingenuity to overcome this legal obstacle. They wore aprons over their dresses. The aprons declared the message: “Ban the French tests.”

With a guard from the Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU), the three women wore the message through the streets of Brisbane. The guard was to prevent harassment from reactionaries among the citizenry rather than among the police. After all, Joyce and her two comrades were not carrying illegal placards.

France’s decision to test nuclear bombs on Pacific Islands like Mururoa, was a shocking act by most standards. It raised opposition among the Australian people, and the Queensland peace movement decided to collect signatures from people who wished to protest against French testing.

We had set up a small peace group in the Graceville district, with myself as secretary and Col Ashby as president. Ashby was a union activist employed in the railways at Ipswich.

Each Saturday morning, Joyce and I went out to local shopping centres. We easily obtained several hundred signatures from ordinary citizens opposed to the Pacific tests. As I was working on a night shift, I visited all of the local church leaders during the day. The reverend Arkell of the Church of England who was a padre in the 2/15 battalion and had been taken POW in the Western Desert in 1941, willingly signed the protest petition. I also got signatures from the Methodist, Presbyterian and Seventh Day Adventist
ministers. The last one to be collected was from the Roman Catholic priest at Corinda, father Kelly.

My mates at the local Services Club, who were Catholics had said: “Yes, father Kelly should be alright.” I went to father Kelly’s and was invited in. I had got half way through explaining to him what I was there for when he exploded: “Get out of here. I want nothing to do with signatures of any kind.” He made towards the door and opened it for me to go. I tried to reason with him, but he became agitated and would not listen to my arguments. His only answer was the repeated: “Get out, get out.” I kept my cool but was disappointed at not having obtained his signature against French tests in the Pacific. Of all the dozens of petitions for which I had collected signatures over many years, the ban on French nuclear tests was the easiest one for which to gain support.

A while later, I was in discussion with Bart Lourigan who was Queensland secretary of the ALP for many years, lived in our area and was a practising Catholic. I related my experience to Bart. He was puzzled at father Kelly’s response. Bart suggested that the next time I wanted such a signature from the priest, I should contact him and he would accompany me to the church house. He was sure that he could obtain that signature in protest against French tests in the Pacific.

It should be remembered that the Democratic Labour Party and the National Civic Council were active at this time. One of the more insidious tenets of their reactionary philosophy was the irrational advice to never sign anything.

After I had collected several hundred signatures, I took them to the local Federal member, Jim Killen. I handed them to Killen’s secretary. Later in the year, he presented them to Federal parliament. I believe they were the first of many anti-nuclear petitions presented. Manfred Cross, Labor member for Brisbane, told me it surprised Labor members that the conservative Killen was the first to present such a petition in Federal parliament. And to boot, Killen had received it from one of the five non dues paying ‘Communist Party Members’ on the WWF unity ticket.

Apart from our annual Hiroshima Day march during August each year, we organised a long anti-nuclear march in 1966. The march from Ipswich to Brisbane during the Easter period echoed activity in England, the long marches that had been organised by the peace movement during the Ban the Bomb era.

About twenty of us assembled at Ipswich to commence our anti-war march to Brisbane. It was a Saturday morning. To help us on our journey Bill Hayden, the local Federal member for Oxley, gave a short address. Hayden who is now the governor general was a police officer prior to his entering parliament. We marchers were outnumbered by uniformed and plain clothes special branch police. We set off and completed our two day Easter march to Brisbane, accompanied all the way by a couple of car loads of the special branch. I believe the march had some value, as at various times, we actually had several hundred marching with us. We heard the usual reactions from
motorists and other people along the way – mixed comments from ‘Good on you’ to ‘Commo traitors, get back to Russia’

Chapter 23

Traitors

my words are gone.

here it comes, he’s gonna ask

about my men

have you tried white men?

why?

how do they compare?

compare with whom

with black men or do you only black

Aileen Corpus

During December 1969, waterside workers refused to load the Jeparit with supplies for Vietnam. We drew criticism from many quarters, but our WWF policy was complete opposition to Australian participation in the war in Vietnam.

On a radio talk back program on Brisbane’s 4BH, Greg O'Dwyer used the term ‘traitors’ when criticising our members’ black ban of the boat. Several of our members heard the words used by O'Dwyer and were incensed. Union officials rang 4BH to ask that a deputation of watersiders who were ex–servicemen meet O'Dwyer and station management.

The station refused to meet a deputation. The radio management was told that a stop work meeting was to be convened at the Brisbane Town Hall. Seeing they had refused to meet a deputation, many very angry waterside workers would likely go to the 4BH studios, not far from the Town Hall. The 4BH management reversed its decision and agreed to meet a deputation of wharfies. Greg O'Dwyer would also attend the meeting.

I was given the responsibility of organising the deputation to 4BH. Early in February, we were ready to meet at 4BH at a given time after our stop work meeting. The deputation included Graham Bell, Military Medal winner in France in 1917, who had served at Gallipoli at 16 years of age, and also served in the 2nd AIF 1939–45. Others were Don Murphy, 2/26th Battalion, 8th Division, POW in Singapore, Burma and
Thailand; George Hanson, POW taken in Crete 1941 and wounded by allied bombing in POW camp in Germany in 1944; Mick Moss POW from Greece 1941; Jack Lidell 17 years of age in Tobruk and later at El Alamein; and myself six years 2nd AIF, three years in the Middle East, twice wounded during service in New Guinea, and served in Borneo. I was elected the leader of the deputation but I refused to be spokesman as I insisted that all should have their say.

I need not have made that insistence. The exchanges between all members of our deputation and Greg O'Dwyer were heated. George Lovejoy, 4BH general manager also attended. O'Dwyer's attempts to rattle our members were not successful. Although a couple of our blokes would have dearly loved to grab O'Dwyer and clip his ear, with considerable restraint, we debated calmly. Soon both Lovejoy and O'Dwyer were on the defensive. While O'Dwyer would not apologise, he claimed he did not mean ‘traitors’ in the way in which our members had taken it.

After many heated exchanges we left 4BH. We considered that our deputation had served a useful purpose. For a long while after that, Greg O'Dwyer did not use any strong words or sentences when discussing our union either industrially or politically.

When radio or television commentators use loaded words such as ‘traitors', they need to be challenged by those whose records in the service of this country, both in war and in the industrial area prove rare and real patriotism. Over a long period of Australian history, the policies of the Waterside Workers Federation, in the long run, have proved to be correct. They have become common industrial or political policy whereas at a particular point in time, those policies may not be appreciated by the likes of the O'Dwyers whose anti-union views cloud their judgement.

Chapter 24

International and National Peace Activists

How the bricks float up
to the catcher’s hands!

like bubbles lifting
through the water
from the bottom of an aquarium

Andrew Lansdown

I have already mentioned some of the overseas visitors that I met in the course of peace activism. One was respected British author J B Priestley.
In 1959 Priestley came to a public meeting at the Brisbane Town Hall. With him was his wife Jacquetta Hawkes. Priestley was hard to get on with. He liked a drink or two. After we had settled him and Hawkes in the old Canberra Hotel, he wanted a drink. We gave him the sad news that he was in a temperance hotel. He would have to go to a nearby hotel for a drink. He exclaimed: “What idiot put me in this place?”

While he was in Brisbane, it was difficult not to have arguments with Priestley. Hawkes was the opposite in temperament to her husband. Jacquetta was easy to talk with and to entertain.

Professor Linus Pauling was also easy to get on with. At one time the dual Nobel Prize winner came to a stop work meeting at Festival Hall. Pauling’s addresses always attracted an attentive audience.

During the early 1960s, a delegation from the People’s Republic of China visited Brisbane. The delegation included a church dignitary, dean Chou Fu San from Peking. An organised aggressive opposition to the visit at Brisbane airport saw some violence in which we had to defend and protect our Chinese friends. The violent opposition reputedly was organised by the National Civic Council. This vocal hateful minority several times attempted to disrupt anti-war meetings in public places including a Hiroshima Day gathering at Centenary Park, Brisbane’s public forum meeting place.

Another visitor to Brisbane early in the 1960s was ex–New Zealander Rewi Alley who, in the middle 1920s, left his ship while in China and worked and lived among the Chinese people. He helped them form cooperatives which were precursors to the Chinese system of socialism of 1949 when the People’s Republic of China was declared. Rewi Alley was a quiet dedicated man. I believe he only just passed away in China, early in 1988.

American entertainer and peace activist, Paul Robeson and his wife visited Brisbane in 1960. It was memorable for me to meet such a great man. After his public appearance in concert at Festival Hall, Joyce and I were privileged to meet him and his wife at a private function at the late Ivy Scott’s home in New Farm. On being introduced, Paul gave me a hearty slap on the back and said: “I am also a fellow wharfie.” Not only was he an honorary member of the West Coast Longshoreman’s Union in the USA but also an honorary member of the Sydney branch of the WWF of Australia. He was proud of this recognition by worker organisations.

During the 1960s overseas peace delegations were numerous. We entertained an Indonesian delegation which included lt general Heinsurat. In the 1965 military overthrow of democratic government in Indonesia, Heinsurat took part in establishing a military junta that is still functioning. The victims of the military dictatorship include Indonesians in the peace movement. At one time, Heinsurat purported to be such a peace activist.
During November 1967, retired American brigadier general Hugh Hester visited Brisbane. He was opposed to US involvement in Vietnam. I took Hester down to the Mercantile Wharf to speak to our members in their lunch hour. Hester and I were refused admission to the wharf area by the gatekeeper who, as usual in cases of this type, said he was only carrying out orders. He would or could not say whose orders they were. He could not stop me as a watersider from going on the wharf. I apologised to Hugh Hester and asked him to wait at the gate for me.

I went to the lunch rooms to quickly address a meeting from which came the resolution that if the general was not allowed in, all workers would leave the job to hold a meeting outside the wharf gates. I told our branch secretary Phil Healy of our resolution. Healy contacted the employers’ representatives. Soon after he informed me that Hester could go to the wharf area to address our members on his reasons for opposing US involvement in Vietnam. Brigadier Hester addressed an attentive meeting at Mercantile Wharf. I imagined someone at the shipowners’ office in Eagle Street, who had tried in vain to stop the meeting, would not have been very pleased with himself.

The ironic part was that Hester, who had served as a gunnery officer in the 1914–18 war, was stationed with the US forces in Brisbane in 1942. As he was with the supply unit he had open access to all wharves in Brisbane from 1942 to 1945. But he had understood the temporary setback of 1967 and appreciated the way our members had resolved the problem.

While Hester was in Brisbane, the executive of the Queensland Peace Committee held a get together one night at the peace committee rooms in the Valley. Noted journalist Francis James (who died this year, 1992) was also in Brisbane. During our social, James went away to return with the dean of Brisbane, Cecil Muschamp, whom James had known in the Air Force during 1939–45. The discussion was animated as the dean was a supporter of Australian and US involvement in Vietnam but Hester’s and James’ arguments against the Vietnam war made the clergyman uncomfortable. As Francis James said, dean Cecil was alright as long as the grog was on. By midnight Cecil was friendly to all and talked in shorthand while his robes and crosses hung askew in an undignified fashion. Still Muschamp left shaking hands with us all and declaring he had had a great night.

Stories of the eccentric liberal and peace campaigner, Francis James have been passed around the rarefied circles of politics, the church and journalism. I recall one conversation I had with James. In his plummy, pseudo English accent, James told me how much he enjoyed his visits to the Sydney wharves and his chats with Sydney wharfies.

“But, of course,” he added, “I always leave the Rolls Royce a couple of kilometres down the road and catch a tram to the wharves.”

Other anti–Vietnam Americans who visited Brisbane during the late 1960s were Whittaker and Schiller. They were wealthy US businessmen, and members of Rotary
International. They reached audiences in Brisbane with their anti–Vietnam message, that our peace movement and trade union movement could never hope to address. But I also took these two men down to Newstead wharf. They addressed an attentive meeting of wharfies and were just as much at home, as they undoubtedly were when addressing their fellow Rotarians and other business leaders of Brisbane.

As well as meeting overseas peace activists, we attended public and private gatherings with many Australian leaders in politics, business, and trade unions. One was Arthur Calwell who was, for many years, opposition leader of the Labor Party. I was amazed at his open hatred of Gough Whitlam, the man who succeeded him as leader. Calwell recounted to me a scurrilous yarn about Whitlam. He claimed that the young Whitlam had tossed a coin to decide whether to join the Labor Party or the Liberal Party.

Calwell played a great role in his opposition to Australian involvement in Vietnam. Jim Cairns, eventually deputy prime minister; Gordon Bryant, Federal member of parliament; Sam Goldbloom, Melbourne businessman; Francis James, editor of the Anglican church paper and later detained for a long period in China were other prominent people who came to Brisbane to voice opposition to the war in Vietnam.

During the long period of the Vietnam war, visits to Brisbane were made by several very pro–Vietnam war personalities. Two whom we demonstrated and acted against were the president of the United States, Lyndon B Johnson, when he was in Brisbane in late October 1966 and one of the many leaders who rose, to be later disposed of, in South Vietnam, air vice marshal Ky, who visited in 1971. The anti–Vietnam war movement in Brisbane at that period was not as powerful as that of our southern friends. We decided when Johnson arrived in Brisbane not to confront his motorcade with our meagre force. But on the night Johnson was in Brisbane a fairly large anti–Vietnam/Johnson rally was held outside the Brisbane Town Hall in King George Square. There were no arrests despite the heavy presence of the police force.

Unfortunately, at the demonstrations against air vice marshal Ky the police forces moved in and there were many arrests. The usual charges of failure to move, resisting arrest, and assaulting police were manufactured.

Chapter 25

Marching out of Retirement for Civil Liberties.

Down our street, downhill into an adjoining suburb, people are not so neuter – not it people.

They march in processions which shout
No! – and I mustn't look down there,
or my neighbour may peep at me
and I shall seem challenging
democracy. He won't speak to
me again, and I won't belong

John Blight

I had been retired only one year when the right to march issue developed in 1977. Huge rallies had demonstrated against Australia producing and exporting uranium. Responding to pressure from the multinational mining lobby, Queensland premier Joh Bjelke–Petersen declared: “The day of the political street march is over; there is no need to apply for a permit, you won't get one.”

Bjelke–Petersen gave the sole decision on permits to the later disgraced and imprisoned Queensland police commissioner, Terry Lewis (still sir Terrence, it seems despite his anticipated lengthy detainment in her majesty’s Brisbane prison). Many illegal marches were attempted during 1977 and 1978. When I was in Brisbane for these attempted marches, I took part, but was not among the hundreds that were arrested during 1977 and most of 1978.

A massive rally and march was organised for Thursday 7 December 1978. The trade union movement called for maximum participation. As with earlier peace campaigns we had a mini rally at our Waterside Workers Club. The building was surrounded by police. Sensibly we did not march from the Club. In mass formation of twos and threes we strolled along the footpath to the assembly place at King George Square. At the rally a massive march was voted for.

At the corner of Albert and Queen streets I and a fellow retired member, Jim Gill, were arrested at 3pm for illegal marching and refusing to obey a lawful direction by a police officer. Along with 295 others arrested we were dispatched by police paddy wagons to the South Brisbane pre–trial detention centre. With 65 other civil rights campaigners we were placed in a 6m by 3m cell. The conditions were bad but excellent was the company of many unionists, Federal members Tom Uren and George Georges, union official Pat Clancy and even John Ducker, right wing NSW union official, along with others from all walks of life, including a grazier. We wharfies all had previously decided not to accept bail or pay fines but rather would go to jail so strong was our opposition to the anti–street march laws of the Queensland government.

In a cell opposite ours, I found and spoke to a second cousin of mine, Phil Finnimore. We had never met before as my mother’s family, the Finnimores, were not close to ours. Most of them, I had heard, were politically conservative. From this chance
meeting I was able to meet other members of the Finnimore clan in more celebratory circumstances. Phil organised a reunion of 80 or so descendants of the Finnimores. I was the oldest of the original Finnimores, while our great grandson Jaga James, born 12 August 1988 was the youngest descendant.

Most waterfront unionists had decided that they would go to jail by refusing to pay fines imposed for attempting to march in Brisbane streets. By early March 1979 two seamen Sonny Matt Myles and Les Mousie Hamilton were arrested and placed in Boggo Road jail. The Seamen's Union took industrial action. Sonny and Les were released after a few days, their fines having been paid by persons unknown.

On Tuesday 13 March 1979, the police came to my home with a warrant for my arrest for failure to pay the fines. The two policemen who came to my place implored me to pay which would mean no arrest. I refused and was conveyed by police car to the Brisbane city watchhouse, as Boggo Road jail does not accept anyone after 5 pm. The next day just after lunch, I and several others were taken from the watchhouse to Boggo Road.

On arrival I was processed, finger printed, photographed, and given a haircut. The screws demanded that I roll back the foreskin of my penis. They also made a torchlight inspection of my rectum and asked dozens of questions. The screw who asked me all the questions at least had a sense of humour. When asked if I had any other convictions, I replied: “Yes, $60.00 for giving out leaflets against the war in Vietnam.” He replied: “Jesus, you're a bad type, we may have to place you straight in the dungeon.” The dungeon was solitary confinement also known as the notorious black hole and since has been abolished. Boggo Road prison itself was closed this year (1992).

During that afternoon fellow waterside workers Jim Gill, Brian Shanahan and Fred Harvey were also imprisoned. The Brisbane branch members of the WWF declared that, while a member was in jail, work on the waterfront would be curtailed. By Friday 16 March all four of us were released when our fines had been paid by an anonymous ‘benefactor’. A few weeks after our release, many thousands of dollars were paid by the unknown benefactors so that no more wharfies, seamen nor painters and dockers were sent to jail. Shipowners obviously preferred to pay our fines rather than lose profits when their vessels were held up each time a waterfront worker went to jail. Even Bjelke–Petersen’s friends in the shipping industry had had a gutful of his oppressive anti–march laws with the threat to valuable wharf labour.

My few days in Boggo Road in F wing provided a unique experience for me. The silent comradeship and respect the other prisoners extended to us was something you had to experience to appreciate. One day I exchanged words with a screw when he called out six names to go for dental inspection and he said: “O'Brien, you look the smartest of this team of shit, you can take them to the dentist.” I strongly objected to us being called a ‘team of shit’. After some verbal exchanges, the screw called us ‘gentlemen’. Away we went to the dentist.
I was in jail on principle, so I was prepared to endure what went on, but was happy that the industrial action by my fellow waterside workers meant that I had only served four days, instead of fourteen that I had been sentenced to. Since the days of the street march campaign permits for street marches in Brisbane have been fairly easy to obtain.

Chapter 26

Post Fitzgerald: The O'Briens Declare Their Assets

Monopoly

I asked my tax accountant

which was worse

to give a something away

before you had done with it

or must you keep a something taken all in.

oh don't be a dopey

she said;

for May must have heard and inked a twisted note

go straighten tail of dollars

make cents.

Bernie Dowling

It was a tremendous victory for the ordinary working people of Queensland, when, on Saturday 2 December 1989, the reactionary, corrupt government of the National Party was resoundingly defeated after 32 years in office. As a result of many factors, including the findings of the Fitzgerald inquiry into police and political corruption, thousands of Queenslanders switched political loyalty to ensure a Labor victory at the polls.

Much remains to be achieved in Queensland. I hope that this Labor government does the job that it has been elected to carry out. The forces for conservatism and reaction
are entrenched in our free enterprise system and they will be formidable hurdles for any
government to overcome. Whatever happens, the disbanding of the special branch of the
police force gave me much personal satisfaction. This action was a recommendation of
the Fitzgerald inquiry.

The Tony Fitzgerald inquiry into corruption in Queensland sat for two years from
12 July 1987. The final report was handed down to the then Queensland premier Mike
Ahern on 3 July 1989.

The report sowed the seeds of the election of a Labor government. It also ended
the premierships of three men, Joh Bjelke–Petersen, Mike Ahern and Russell Cooper.
The inquiry did not taint the latter two with allegations of corruption. Ahern was the
victim of desperation within the Nationals which saw him replaced by Cooper who in
turn lost the premiership to Wayne Goss in a massive swing to Labor.

The police commissioner at the start of the inquiry, Terry Lewis, is in jail serving
a long sentence for corruption. The special branch was disbanded by Labor as
recommended by Fitzgerald.

Public money has been less wisely spent than on the 20 million dollar lawyers’
picnic that was the Fitzgerald inquiry.

The reading of the Fitzgerald report is a must for every thinking person interested
in or involved in political or trade union activity. The corruption outlined is almost
unbelievable.

But corruption is an integral part of the free enterprise system, where the ‘free’
market is managed for the benefit of a small minority with inherited privileges. Most of
this minority escapes public scrutiny, though two johnny–come–lately capitalists, Alan
Bond and Christopher Skase are wearing much of the blame for the greatest depression in
Australia since that of the thirties.

Fitzgerald designed a plan for register of pecuniary interests to make public
figures accountable, at least for trade other than that conducted through the media of
brown paper bags.

Having read this far into my book, you will understand I have always regarded
myself as an ordinary worker, not a public figure. My involvement in union and peace
campaigns has stemmed from my perceived obligations as an ordinary worker who has
had the opportunity to promote the interests of ordinary people for justice, equality and
peace.

I declare the financial interests and benefits received during the life of a working
class family to show that a fortunate life need not be achieved at the expense of others.
In June 1990, I did a financial review of the income and expenditure of Joyce’s and my families since 1920. At the time we assessed our lifestyle as being free from financial hardship.

With no debts and $5000 in the bank, we owned our home, car and caravan. We had a tax free income of $337.25 a week, made up of service pensions and a war disability pension.

When I took voluntary redundancy in 1976, my weekly wage was $158. My redundancy package was around $20,000.

When mum’s estate was finalised in 1974 my brother Mervyn and I each inherited $8000.

Permanency and weekly hire in 1968 meant a secure wage for watersiders for the first time in our history. Our permanent wage was $50 per week, based on an eight hour day, five day week. From the time of weekly hire and all through the 70s, a constant print media fabrication revolved around the supposed fortunes being accumulated by waterside workers through immense take home pays.

You do not have to think hard to appreciate why such lies went hand in hand with the kind of rubbish exposed in ‘Arry ‘Orry’s poem A Real Smart Alec. The media attempted with some success to set other workers, ignorant of wharf conditions, against us. I have absolutely no doubt that it was because the Waterside Workers Federation was one of the most progressive worker’s organisations in Australia.

I commenced work on the Brisbane wharves as a coal worker in June 1948. Our casual hourly rate was 4/7d (47c), based on a standard working week of 30 hours.

My truck driving job with Cambells in 1945 brought in £5 ($10) a week. You will recall Joyce’s and my bottle budgets of our pay.

The 1930s saw Joyce’s father working at the Oxley Bacon Factory. During the depression all workers at the factory were employed on the basis of one week on, followed by one week off, with no pay. The wage for the week on, £4 ($8) spread thinly over the fortnight.

When mum and dad bought their home, in 1919, for £500 ($1000), dad was on a weekly wage of £2/10/– ($5).

Comparisons between the divisions of dad’s small business are revealing. Dad used to charge £1/10/– ($3) for a ton of wood. Today’s cost of a ton has escalated to $50 (£25). Car hire charges from Sherwood to the city of Brisbane was 12/6d ($1.25). Taxi charges in 1990 had only risen to $6 (£3). You can see that dad’s ownership of relatively new and scarce automotive technology had the potential of providing a good income. The depression intervened to curtail that potential. Still, those who were able to take
advantage of a free midnight flit from landlords and bailiffs were glad that a small amount of capital was in the hands of my father who was sympathetic to their plight.

Through time, benefits to ordinary people often cannot be measured in monetary terms, though there have always been accountants or economists narrow sighted enough to contort all benefits into figures in a ledger. Looking back, Joyce and I can vouch for many non-physical assets we have accrued through our travels throughout Australia.

One major reward of our retirement was an around Australia trip from October 1984 to June 1985. Having been an inveterate personal information gatherer since penning my war diaries, I can provide statistics of that trip.

We travelled 22,773 kilometres, all by road and towed a caravan for over 15,000 of those kilometres. The cheapest fuel we bought cost 45.9c a litre at Byron Bay. The dearest was bought from a roadhouse between The Threeways and Camoweal in north west Queensland. The price was 69c a litre.

During our 8 months tour, we spent $3,700. It confirmed to us that working people can have a first rate life style without aspiring to the impossible dreams of over consumption that capitalism encourages.

Developing comradeship with new acquaintances provided many highlights to our trip. I already have mentioned the great spirit of the meatworkers’ picket which we joined in Western Australia.

We were so taken with the West that we settled for two months at Emu Point 10 kilometres from Albany. Joyce and I made friends through our regular participation in tennis and golf. When we left Albany, our friends from the tennis club gave us a small gift and a card.

Of course I made contact with local watersiders. Once a week I would go into Albany to greet and play snooker with local wharfies at the Sterling Workers Club.

We casually ventured from Albany to Perth and again met local wharfies. I also contacted some army mates who arranged a small reunion of a few 6th division soldiers and their wives. Joyce and I were honoured by such hospitality.

Central Fremantle, Palm Sunday 1985, provided a spectacle utterly foreign to that conservative city. Joyce and I were two of 25,000 peace marchers rallied behind anti-nuclear and anti-war banners. The regular presence of hugh US Navy warships off the coast must have effected re-thinking by West Australians about war and peace.

Our 1985 trip emulated our holidays of 1971 when I took long service leave. We spent six months covering Australia.
With petrol at 11c a litre and beer at 15c for 200 ml, our basic fuel costs were economical. The trip followed the coast north from Brisbane to Cairns and headed west to Darwin. Travelling through the centre to Adelaide we went across to the West, before we returned to travel up the south–east coast, with a flight to Tasmania included.

We travelled over 26,000 kilometres by road, air and sea. As in all our travels, meetings with new and old friends provided memorable interludes.

After leaving Normanton in North West Queensland we had to travel 320 kilometres west to a private sheep station, Monstraven, to refuel. The station owner, Jack Cooper turned out to have been an ex–shearer and was a staunch member of the Labor party. He invited us to stay the night, an entire night spent in discussion on local, national and international politics. We left the next day but kept in contact with Jack Cooper until his death in the late 1970s.

In Alice Springs we ran into an old friend, father Alf Clint, a man who represented what Christianity should have been about. Clint spent his adult life in struggle for Aboriginal rights, trade unionism and peace. When he was in his early 20s, Clint used to attend bible classes on Sunday mornings and Marxism classes on Sunday afternoons. He was introduced to beer at the afternoon classes. Father Clint claimed that regular medicine of beer with a rum chaser helped to explain his longevity.

With dozens of shorter trips up and down the east coast as well as our two marathons, Joyce and I have enjoyed the freedom of mobility.

Such freedom unfortunately is at risk for our young, the victims of World Depression II.

I hope that young ordinary Australians reject the policies and threats of those who promote ruthless competition and social apartheid, economic booms and busts, inequalities and war. Although our efforts have been unacknowledged or distorted in most social histories, ordinary people, during the past 90 years, have fostered a culture centred on equality, an adequate standard of living for all, productive harmonious work environments and peace.

Chapter 27

Peace and the Next Generation

There they sat

this curious fruit

that cut has the texture

of wet chalk
and cooked

turns not like water to wine

but fruit into blood

**Kate Llewellyn**

When our eldest son, Jim, had his marriage bust–up late in 1983, he and our grandson, Brett, came to live with Joyce and me. Brett, our eldest grandson, went to Indooroopilly State High School. I gave him some World Peace Council literature to give to his history teacher.

Rima Remedios, through Brett, invited me to speak to the students of Indooroopilly High School on my life before the 1939–45 conflict, my war experiences and my post–war involvement in the trade union and anti–war movements. I contacted Ms Remedios to explain my social and political position. She said it was alright by her for me to address the students. I asked her if it was alright by the school principal. She replied that she had invited me as an individual to speak to the students. She went on to tell me that the principal had informed her that the National Party government had instructed all schools that no representative of a peace organisation was allowed to address students. I could only speak as a private individual.

The full extent of this policy became clear in 1986. In that year the corrupt National Party government rejected the idea of participating in an International Year of Peace, IYP. It declared 1986, as the Year of the Family. Protection of the family had long been the banner under which the Nationals introduced reactionary social and political policies.

I addressed the students on Thursday 15 March 1984. I started with a couple of corny army jokes. I spoke for 45 minutes on my pre–war, war and post–war activities. The students listened attentively. I asked for questions. They were plentiful and thoughtful. The students showed their appreciation with applause.

A few days later Brett brought home to me a thank you card signed by all the students. This affirmation of commitment to peace of young Australians pleased me greatly.

It could not have happened in a more fitting year than 1984. Those young people had replied to George Orwell’s prediction that by 1984, fascism would have become the dominant social and political system throughout the world.

**Postscript.**
My written story was intended to be passed down in book form for my family and close friends. I am pleased that it has reached a wider readership. My story ends in the early 1990s at a time of much social change in the communist nations of Eastern Europe. Despite recent events I believe that socialism is far from finished, as most of our mass media and Western spokespeople declare.

What is obvious is that the brutal variety of Stalinist socialism is almost at an end. Socialism will need to improve its act in more ways than one. Equally, capitalism, the free enterprise system has let many of its admirers down, with mass unemployment and disgraced entrepreneurs throughout the world. I hope that the best of both systems may merge to improve the lot of all ordinary people of this world.

The major danger I see that could arise from the present upheavals is for conservatives and reactionaries, including church reactionaries, to support elements that wish to establish systems of fascism, under whatever name they may come to call it.

I have always been an optimist. I have trust in those millions of ordinary people the world over who sincerely believe in and will strive for universal peace, food and shelter.

For someone who doubted if he would reach 20, over 70 years in this world have been a pleasant surprise. On my death I want my survivors to hold no religious service, but to cast my ashes into the sea.

If I have earned the love of my family and the respect of my peers, I am content. This book which is, after all, one of my legacies, is dedicated to all those in and out of uniform who have fought and will fight fascism, the ultimate enemy of peace.

i drew a line
through yesterday
on one side, now,
and on the other, childhood
the line was not
quite straight
wavering partly because
one’s hand trembles
at such closing–off
of innocence
partly because i doubted
that one could demarcate so easily
good from bad, past from present,
i from me

Michael Dransfield
SHAPE

The Social History of Australia Publishing Enterprise was established in Brisbane in 1991 with the central aim of publishing:

“ works of literary merit which for economic or political reasons might not otherwise be published.”

SHAPE is a short–run, non–profit publisher. It is part funded by donations and non–interest bearing bonds (currently in units of $50) of people who support the principal aim of the enterprise.

Donors and bond holders support individual SHAPE publications. Towards Peace: A Worker’s Journey is the first publication of SHAPE.

This work and SHAPE’s next publication, a reprint of Ernie Lane’s Dawn To Dusk: Reminiscences of a Rebel are historical works.

However SHAPE also will consider publication of contemporary social analysis, fiction, poetry and drama.

If you:
–Wish to find out more about SHAPE
–Wish to buy more copies of this book (@ $16.95 plus $3.00 postage to anywhere in Australia, total cheque or money order for $19.95)
–Wish to donate towards or take bonds in the publication of Dawn To Dusk: Reminiscences of a Rebel
–Have suggestions for future publications
–Would like to comment on this book
Would like to offer assistance, physical or mental or both towards further publications, write to:

SHAPE

P O Box 5093

West End 4101

Brisbane