

"Sonny you have lost your Pannikin" by Tom Luke

From my memory of growing up in the 1940's in Kangaroo Flat now a suburb of Bendigo, but at the time part of the Shire of Marong.

The year was 1940 the day was Monday April 1st (April Fool's Day) and as a student in Grade 2 at the Kangaroo Flat State School Number 981 I was walking my way to School. My Schoolbag was on my back and attached to it was an Enamel Pannikin (Enamel Cup). My mum did not like the idea of us drinking out of a tap and hence the never to be used pannikin. Who wants to be different?

A convoy of private vehicles passed me with young men filling every available seat. Not that it was known at the time but they were on their way to Melbourne to enlist. World War 2 was just 7 months old.

As they proceeded past a loud voice said "Sonny you have lost your Pannikin"

Turning to look back I was greeted with raucous laughter and many voices loudly saying "You are an April Fool" son.

Growing up in Kangaroo Flat we also had living in the town two aunts and uncles and their family my cousins and most importantly my paternal grandparents. By this time my aged grandparents were living alternately between their two daughters my two aunts. Memories of our family are recognized still today in the township with the name "DOWER PARK" named after my Uncle Art (Arthur Dower)

On my 7th birthday I was told that after Sunday School to go on up to my Aunt Nan's and Uncle Phonce's where my grandparents had a Birthday present for me. The present was a lovely book called "The Boys Own Annual" I lost my Grandfather who had been a Cornish descendant miner on the 13th June 1940. He was 69 years of age. He was buried in a private grave Church of England, East Section No 4330, the land being donated by the Cemetery Trustees in recognition of his work in the community. Minister officiating was Reverend H. H. Ham.

Primary education started just 8 months before the commencement of World War 2 and my secondary education just 7 months before its end.

School during the war years was to us children interesting as we got to make Camouflage and Rabbit Nets, go on collections for people's aluminium cooking ware to be used in aeroplane manufacture.

Another highlight was going with Dad on a Saturday whilst he assisted in the digging of Slit trenches opposite the school. Whilst all the men dug I learned to ride a bike using dad's bike. I survived with a few bruises but the handlebars of the bike faired much worse.

The downside was the lack of goods for sale and Ration Books. There were no sweets in the shops.

Each of us was issued with two Ration books, one for food and one for clothing. People helped one another by giving ration coupons to friends, relatives and neighbours. My uncle Bill was our Grocer and I can still hear him saying to mum "Linda Nan, (Aunty Nan Hambridge) has no coupons for butter can you assist" and of course we could as we had a cow and made our own butter. It was my job to make the butter and I enjoyed drinking the buttermilk. Whatever excess you had in your garden you shared with the neighbours and family as home refrigeration was still some years away.

Private cars received 2 gallons (9 Litres) a month so many cars were garaged and put up on blocks for the duration of the war whilst trucks ran on "Charcoal Gas Producers" a story in itself.

Most vehicles when crossing Big Hill would be put into Angel Gear (Neutral) and would run at breakneck speed to Buckeye Creek. This saved petrol or so we thought.

We participated in many concerts, community singing and fund raisers to assist the War effort, the family visited the Upper Reserve (today Queen Elizabeth Oval) to see the Japanese Midget Submarine that had been sunk in Sydney Harbour. They had bought it to tour the country on the tray of a very large truck of the time. Today it rests in the National War Memorial in Canberra. Its visit was to boost morale and raise money for the war effort. We stood and cheered at the Fountain as the American Troops came to Bendigo. What a site that was Bands like we had never seen with Giant Sousa Phones next to tin whistles. During their stay in Bendigo they gave recitals on a Sunday Night from the balcony of the Shamrock Hotel. They were mainly billeted in private homes. We watched from our Schoolyard as the Lancaster Bomber "G for George" flew over Bendigo to help raise money for one of the War Loan's. It also now resides in the National War Memorial.

We used to take cool drinks made up by mum to the Australian and American troops as they passed our home on a training route march down the Calder Highway. The Americans used to take their troops down toward Castlemaine by train, empty them out to march back to Bendigo. Both the Racecourse and the then Showgrounds (Tom Flood Centre) were military camps.

One morning we woke up and the Americans had gone. We found out some years later that they went to Guadalcanal in August 1942 which was one of the turning points of the War. Like the battle of the Coral Sea a point that took us from defence to attack.

Buses to Bendigo were reduced to once an hour so we learned to stand and hang on to the strap as they were always full.

In class at school we had a huge map of the world on the wall and we moved the wool with drawing pins across it as battle lines changed a great Geography lesson.

My favourite teacher was Miss Wilkeson who taught me from grade 2 to grade 4. In later life and as secretary of the Kangaroo Flat Reunion Group and a senior executive at Robert Bosch in Melbourne I received a lovely letter across my desk enquiring if I was the little boy she had taught so many years before? Over a sumptuous lunch in one of Melbourne's leading Restaurants there started a friendship between Leila and Tom that lasted for the rest of her life. A friendship Libby and I valued greatly and still look back on so fondly. They say we all owe a debt to our Primary School Teacher and with Leila this became very evident to me.

Vale a great and caring school teacher, wonderful person and in later life a dear friend.

We firmly believed the Japanese were going to invade us so apart from the Slit Trenches we had covers on all street lights that prevented the lights from shining upwards. Our headlights on motor vehicles and bicycles had covers fitted and only a slit of light showing. Blinds were always closed firmly at sunset.

Now to some of the local boys that volunteered or were conscripted to the Armed Forces.

Many farewells and welcome home's were held in the Oddfellows Hall and private homes.

There were three incidents that stand out in my memory: The notification of the death of Jack Hazeldene, Allan Wild coming on leave a bright yellow as he had been on Atebrin tablets for Malaria prevention and the worry we all had for Warwick Johansson when the Japanese started using Kamikaze suicide pilots against our ships and Warwick was on HMAS Australia. My Uncle Phonce Hambridge was as my memory remembers on the South Alligator River in the Northern Territory. He served in the army for a great part of the war.

One day we all woke up and the war was over but that day will be another story. A press photograph of a little boy in short pants running down Williamson Street and reminisces of yours truly on the day the war ended was incorporated into a display at the Post Office Gallery some years ago.

Tom Luke Bendigo 20th May 2017

