

THE IMPACT OF WAR ON THE CHILTERN COMMUNITY

The declaration of War always results in devastation and the senseless squandering of lives.

Young men & women, often eager to serve their country or romanced by the thrill of it all, have their futures stolen from them.

Some are killed in battle... others return home and are plagued by the memories of War.

Tonight we will offer you a glimpse of real stories of real people, who fought for us all.

One such soldier was Martin Balsarini.

Martin was born in Chiltern to Martin & Antoinette Balsarini in 1895. He left his home like so many other boys to fight for King and Country. He endured the adversities of war in a merciless desert.

A 4th Light Horseman, 12th reinforcement, Martin fought in the battle of Beersheba. Through the grueling heat of desert war that he and his mates braved, they didn't know if they or their horses would last long enough without water. The men and horses alike, shared the rations of that liquid gold - water.

On one occasion after the Anzac Mounted Division (Desert Mounted Corps) launched a series of attacks against the strong defenses which dominated the eastern side of Beersheba (resulting in their capture during the late afternoon) The Australian Mounted Division's 4th and 12th Light Horse Regiments (4th Light Horse Brigade) conducted a mounted infantry charge with bayonets in

their hands, their only weapon for mounted attack, as their rifles were slung across their backs.

Part of the two regiments dismounted to attack entrenchments on Tel es Saba defending Beersheba while the remainder of the light horsemen continued their charge into the town, capturing the place and part of the garrison as it was withdrawing.

This young man from the county town of Chiltern came home knowing the anguishes and misery of war, yet he never spoke of what he had been through until his later years.

He lived out most of his life in Chiltern Valley, where he and his sister Kit, were dairy farmers. He was a kind and generous man who also spoke his mind. When they eventually sold the farm, they moved into Chiltern.

Nearer the end of his life he would speak of incidents from the War. He spoke of the heat of a Turkish desert and how the men were so hot in the desert, they cut each other's hair with the horse clippers. They were not vain - they were desperate men.

Sometimes he would wander, mid-conversation, to the dark place in his memories and then return vocally abusing the enemy.

Many men, just like Martin, brought the reality of war right to our doorstep, when it was learnt what they had been through.

His saddle is featured here as part of our Chiltern Remembers exhibition.

David Martin OAM

Eric Bloom born was in 1902 in Camperdown and in 1939 he married Doris Cathro in Lane Cove. After their marriage they lived in Chiltern where he established a boot repair business.

Enlisting in the 2nd AIF on 18th June 1940, Eric had already served 5 years in the civilian military forces. He trained at Bendigo, Seymour, Bonegilla and Bathurst and just 2 days preceding his departure from Australia, Eric reported sick and spent those, his last days ever with his family, at home in Chiltern.

When fit he left from Fremantle on 7th August 1941, his destination, Singapore. He served in Malaya from Sept 1941 until withdrawn to Singapore in Feb 1942.

After the fall of Singapore, Eric was interned at Selerang Barracks, Changi. On July 19th Eric was marched for 8miles to Japanese POW camp known as No 1 Prisoner of War Camp, British North Borneo, with the other prisoners.

Doris received letters from Eric - the last being dated 15th Feb 1942. Then she was advised by the Minister of the Army in the April, that they had no definite information of his whereabouts.

It was not until 27th March 1943 that the Minister advised Doris that Eric was reported as being a POW at the Borneo Camp.

A number of postcards were sent by Eric from the Camp, however only 3 arrived before his death.

Japanese records state that Eric died on the 8th of Feb 1945 at Sandakan Camp. Bombardier Dick Braithwaite, who was one of only 6 survivors of the Sandakan atrocity, wrote to Doris in November 1945 advising her, he had known Eric extremely well as

they had lived in the same hut. He indicated Eric had contracted Malaria, lapsed into a coma and died very quickly. Like so many soldiers he was buried then later moved. He rests at the Labuan War Memorial Cemetery. He left behind in Chiltern, a wife and three daughters.

“Letters from the Front” is an Athenaeum publication that reports many stories of young men over in war-torn foreign countries, and the elation they experienced seeing someone from home created at the time.

Although just pen and paper the correspondence is alive with emotion when there is mention of meeting anyone with a connection to home.

These snippets of those ‘Letters from the Front’ reinforce stories of Bravery... of Camaraderie and the Australian Spirit.

Private Stanley Rosegren of Chiltern Valley wrote home in 1915:

“The bayonet charge was grand and exciting but I did not see the last of it as quite suddenly I fell like log. Shot through the right ear and down the neck I thought my time had come when I saw the blood running out of my head. I became unconscious and when I came to, I was bandaged and in terrible pain. 3 other chaps and I waited until 3 the next day then were taken to a hospital ship where I lay unattended for another 18 hours. They took the big shrapnel bullet out of my shoulder. I marvel at it having gone through part of my head, down the right side of my neck, and lodging under the right shoulder blade, & me still being alive. I hope that by the time you receive this letter I will be able to walk about. I will be very deaf in the right ear, have a couple of bad scars, but I don’t mind.”

Private W Gannon also wrote home in 1915:

“I have been 5 weeks in the trenches and I am feeling grand. Robby and the other Chiltern boys are splendid. I was surprised a few days ago to run across Billy Pinkerton one of the first volunteers from Chiltern. Then another in 1916- I wrote about 20 letters to people in Chiltern, wishing them a Merry Christmas but I was told by our Colonel the barge carrying the mail was sunk. I received safely the lovely box of assortments you and Dad sent me. Today Robbie, Dick Ferguson and I had a tin of sardines out of the box of luxuries you sent.”

Private Neil Bernard writes in 1917 from No 2 Australian Auxiliary Hospital, Southall, England to his father in Chiltern:

“I am now getting on well and have been transferred to this Australian hospital. I am now able to step up all day and walk about. I was before the Medical Board a day or two ago, and the verdict was that I was unfit for further active service. Since then I have been told that I am on the books to return to Australia and will leave here about the beginning of February. I am terribly disfigured from the wounds. Only half my nose is left and no roof in my mouth yet, but the doctors say they can fix me up. I am also practically blind in the left eye. The doctors told me it was only one in twenty that would live with wounds like mine. When I got wounded we were charging Fritz's first two trenches, and just got to the first when I got knocked out. A lot of our poor lads fell that morning.”

David added his own memories as a soldier in Vietnam to this.

Eunice DePiazza

May 1943 Trainee RAAF pilot Frank Robinson, in preparation for the South Pacific theatre, had to fly a Wirraway plane solo, south east from Deniliquin to Tocumwal on the Murray River.

He was forced off course due to other aircraft and bad weather.

Getting dark and running low on fuel he eventually saw a clearing where he thought he might land and threw a flare to the ground.

Unfortunately the flare blinded him temporarily.

He flew through a gum tree and lost part of his engine and left wing. His plane then landed on nearby telegraph wires which slowed the plane and flipped it onto Nurse Rose Carter's house.

On the home front, men women and children stepped up when our able bodied men were at war. With all the physically capable young men away there was a gap in the workforce. These gaps were filled by women, children and the older members of the community. One local farmer had to leave the farm to work on the Kiewa hydroelectric scheme when the young men went to war. In his absence his son 12, left school to milk cows manually and no doubt his mother increased her already abundant workload to help him. Women and the older citizens worked harder and engaged in these new tasks as well as their day to day jobs. They worried about loved ones and grieved those they lost, whilst they endured the increased workload - all with limited food and resources.

Women dealt with the effects of war, only the circumstances and consequences were different. E.g. managing children and family responsibilities alone as well as suffering their silent fears for the

future. And in the way that Mother's do they ensured their family was nourished before themselves. Others on the home front did what they did best and knitted providing warm sox and scarves for the soldiers. They organized events to raise funds to send a few comforts of home to the soldiers.

In the cities during World War II some women were actively recruited into jobs that had always been the preserve of men; they worked in factories and shipyards, as members of the Women's Land Army and as Official War Artists.

There are many stories of the celebrations here in Chiltern when Japan surrendered and the War was over. For most, it is hard to imagine the feelings that were surfacing in the crowds that had faced adversity for 6 long years. The rations, the workload, the fear, but most of all the worry for loved ones and locals likewise, were drawing to an end.

Another impact was the aftermath of war. Refugees flocked to our country seeking a new life. Their homes and livelihoods had been destroyed by war. In Australia they had a second chance and worked hard to find a niche for their families and to build a new future. There were no handouts back then - it was work or no money.

In Chiltern many of the refugees that settled were Italian and various other European descents. They learned our language and integrated into society despite the labels of “wogs” and “Ities.”

Many were market gardeners and cooks. In the cities they did factory work. With many families occupying a residence and doing shift work. There were stories told of the beds never being cold. As one got out - the next shift got in. This was made as a derogatory remark but it was in fact, the way they could move forward in their new homes. Today ‘we’ benefit from what they brought with them - their work ethic, cultures, cuisine and an appreciation of wine impacted on a beer drinking society.

Eunice added her memories of having two brothers in the war.

Rosalie Kirwin

I am going to take you on a journey to the 1943 when the second tragedy of World War was on our doorstep and another young Chiltern man left to fight for his country.

Back then our country was at war with Germany and Japan.

A young man who had lived all of his life in Chiltern, Laurie Chambers, was keen to join the Armed Forces, however he was only 17.

He was a relatively ordinary boy who lived in this small town in extraordinary times. Most of his life he had lived in either depression or war. Laurie sought and received permission from his

Mother, to join the war effort and then he left his town, his home and his family, for who knows where.

His first stop was Pt. Cook where he commenced training for the air force.

Whilst there, he was engaged in the duty of collecting and delivering the mail. It was a responsibility that he took seriously, as it was even more imperative that the mail reach its destination in war time.

One day en route with the mail he was flagged down by a superior officer. Laurie did not stop. His orders were that no-one stops the delivery of the King's mail, especially in war time.

For this action he was court marshalled. However it was determined that he was absolutely correct in his actions and his verdict of 'not guilty' was celebrated.

As a consequence of this positive result for Laurie, he was shipped off to the Pacific and active duty by the incensed officer. On the way to the islands, he was stationed in Darwin to undergo further training in preparation for what was to come.

He had the good fortune there to meet a young man, Roy Nish, who lived in Peechelba. Relative to how far he had travelled, he was considered a neighbor to his home town of Chiltern.

Roy had been overseas and was returning home. They became friendly and Laurie asked if he might do him a favor on his return to NE Victoria. Laurie shared a passion for reading with his Mother and knew she would enjoy the book he had just finished

so he asked Roy if he might drop in, if he had an opportunity on his way through Chiltern and give it to his Mother.

Roy agreed and took the book. Back then the highway went straight through the main street of Chiltern so this was an easy task.

Laurie left Darwin soon after - the Pacific his destination.

Eventually he reached Morotai, a small island in the Netherlands East Indies in the Pacific.

The Battle of Morotai (part of the Pacific War) began on 15 September 1944 - continuing until the end of the war in August 1945.

The fighting started when United States and Australian forces landed on the southwest corner of Morotai, which the Allies needed as a base to support the liberation of the Philippines later that year.

The invading forces greatly outnumbered the island's Japanese defenders and secured their objectives in two weeks. Morotai's development into an Allied base began shortly after the landing and developed two major airfields. The base and facilities played a large role in the defeat of the Japanese on the Island. Morotai remained an important logistical hub and command center until the Dutch reestablished their colonial rule in the NEI.

The war over, Laurie was happy to be going home to his family and they were just as happy for him to be coming home. The troops were all engaged in clean up duty when Laurie found an abandoned jeep in the jungle. His superior officer said he could

have it if he fixed it up and used it to assist with jobs around the base.

Back in Chiltern Roy finally made it to Laurie's home. The book had travelled many miles over months and now the war was over, but true to his word, Roy took the book to Laurie's house.

He was no doubt drilled by Laurie's Mother about Laurie's health and wellbeing, even though he was soon to return, it was a link to him.

Back on Morotai, Laurie had the jeep up and going and was busy doing jobs. This day was no different he was heading to the docks as he had done so many times, to collect something for his commanding officer and as he rounded the corner, he was hit head on by someone travelling on the wrong side of the road.

Laurie died that day on an island far from home and his family. It was a few days before Laurie's parents got the news by telephone from Jack Howes at the Post Office.

Their boy wasn't coming home, he had been killed on active duty even though the war was over.

He was already buried far away in a place they were never able to visit.

Roy had in fact delivered the book the day Laurie died.

Whether by chance, some strange twist of fate or by some higher deliberate design.

The book was titled - 'Officially dead!'

Laurie's family still have the book and several of the newspaper articles, obituaries and a letter written to his Mother from a lady she didn't know, who lived in East Bentley.

She wrote she had heard the news of Laurie.

It was signed simply - 'from another mother who grieves.'

Finishing acknowledgement

The people treated the soldiers we have spoken of with the utmost respect - as they deserved.

Even though they fought a war on the other side of the World it was for their King, the Empire, Australia, their homes and families.

They chose to put their life on the line and those at home did everything to support them.

In another war, young men went to fight for us again, many were ripped from their homes and lives because of a random lottery and were not shown any of the respect or honor the former soldiers were showered with.

Many conflicts since have been and gone. The people at home often think, it's not our war. But still men and women give the ultimate gift of their lives, that we all, may be free.