

PLOD ESSAY: Militia, Rations, Blackout, Air Observers, Telegrams; World War II in Wonthaggi

On Saturday 23 November, a ceremony will take place to commemorate the Wonthaggi Voluntary Air Observers Corps that watched our skies during WWII. Because of the coal, Wonthaggi was considered to be a likely target and our citizens did their part in watching for enemy planes. Nell Sleeman and her sister, Freda, were Observers. Here are some of Nell's memories of war time Wonthaaggi:

In about 1936, a bunch of men decided to form a Militia. They recruited quite a few young fellows and used the Town Hall for training and drilling and practised once a week, then at weekends go on training exercises. They had Army uniforms and used to swank about thinking they were god's gift to humanity. When I was on afternoon shift on the phones at the Post Office, I would hear the racket from the Town Hall: shouted orders, marching, etc. Came the war, very few of them joined up. A few did, and when they did, they mostly went in carrying promotion to officers. They, incidentally, were hated by the local soldiers and one in particular, according to stories handed down, had to watch his back in case he was thrown overboard while they were going overseas. During the war, these boys were always referred to as 'the Chockos' and they weren't very popular with the volunteers, who were called up after the outbreak of war. They turned out to be as good as the other soldiers, but the stigma was always there.

Beau and I were married in 1941 and six months later, he joined up. Didn't say much for me, did it? My brother, Snow, joined the Air Force and Beau settled for the Artillery, for heavens sake! The Army discovered that he and Arch Opie had worked in the State Mine Office so they were both transferred to Headquarters Australia 1st Army.

Once [my brother] Snow joined, Mum was always nervous about getting a telegram. She got three in 1942: first one said 'missing'; second one said 'missing, presumed dead'; third one said 'missing, killed'. It was terrible. We couldn't take in

that our wonderful, talented brother was killed.



In those days, when a girl married, she gave up her job, but a few months after Beau joined the army, Hutchy, the Post Master, came up to see if I would come back to work. Much to Beau's disgust, I did on the condition that I could have time off when Beau came home on leave. With that agreement I went back to work. Most men-folk in pre-war years had the opinion that they were the breadwinners and the women shouldn't work. The war changed that thinking.

The blackout came in as well as the rationing of butter, tea, meat, clothing, sugar, material and all cotton goods. Ration books were issued to everyone. I can't remember all the amounts that were allowed, but I definitely remember we only had 6 oz. of butter per person a week. The ready-made clothing was pretty skimpy, and if you ran out of coupons during the year, well, that was that, and you just couldn't buy anything until the following year when you got the next lot of coupons. Wool wasn't rationed and this was the time that knitted frocks came into vogue. I knitted dresses and a suit for myself and another frock for Freda. This way you could have more dresses without

forking out coupons. When Beau came home on leave he was issued with coupons for butter, tea, sugar and meat to last for the two-weeks' leave. We weren't too badly off because there was Dad, Mum, Freda and myself, but Mum was forever running out of butter.

The Blackout was **BLACK**, too. 10 pm closing was abolished, all shops closed at 5 pm. I remember coming off work at 10 pm one night and before I got my night vision, I had to feel my way out from work. I could hear footsteps coming down the street past the State Bank, but I couldn't see anyone. So, I landed in the gutter and just stood there until whoever it was had gone past. I thought afterwards that he or she must have thought me wacky because, by then, they would have been able to see in the dark, while I was still blind.

The priorities on the switchboard changed, too. Calls from the Air Spotters took precedence over any other calls. Pine Lodge Guest House had been taken over by the Navy as a Naval Hospital and they came before other calls. I wanted to join the A.A.W.S. but, as usual, Beau said, 'No'. So Freda and I joined the Air Spotters. Before they built the lookout tower, they had a converted bus perched up on Reservoir Hill; it was done out in photos of all the airplanes: Aussie, Jap, German and British. There was a telephone and binoculars and as soon as you heard a plane, you had to get outside with the binoculars, try to identify it, ring through to a number in Melbourne to report. The theory was supposed to be so they knew where every plane was. Daytime was easy, but when we had to do the 6 to 10 pm shift, I reckon we reported some pretty funny planes.

The girls at the exchange got pretty friendly with the Petty Officers who ran the switchboard at the Naval Hospital. They seemed a nice enough bunch. One of the girls got very involved with one of them. Her boyfriend was in the Army in New Guinea, and, in the end, it was a toss-up just who she would settle for, but, finally, the Army won. The hospital and

the Air Observers kept us pretty busy all the time.

The War? How did it affect us? Life went more or less the same. We were safe but the strain of having anyone in the forces went on and on, everyone waiting, but not admitting it, for THAT telegram!

When the war was over at last the town had celebrations everywhere. The business area was decorated with bunting and arches were built down to the railway station with greetings flapping to welcome home the returning soldiers. We didn't join in so much knowing Snow wouldn't be coming home.

The boys who came home were changed. Beau went away one kind of man, but came back a different person, and I think that could be said about everyone who joined the Army, Navy or Air Force. Living in a man's world, in a tent housing four or six men for four years (in Beau's case) and forming close friendships... It must have been hard to readjust to an ordinary life again, once the war was over. After four years of taking orders and having other people think for you, it must have been hard to pick up your life again where you left off and start to make decisions again. No wonder it took them years to return to 'civvy' life again.

When Beau was de-mobbed he came home skinny as a rake. He was so thin that when he tried on his pre-war pants, they fell off. With the shortages and all the men after new clothes it was hard to get clothes together. The only way we managed was by going from shop to shop in Melbourne until Beau would strike one of his ex-army mates who always seemed to have something under the counter.

Such a lot of local boys didn't return, so young, such a stupid waste.

by Nell Sleeman