

# Growing Up During the Second World War

When I look back on my childhood and compare it with that of today, I believe that, in many ways, we had it much better in those days. The adults had to contend with war, but to us kids, life was innocent. My first recollections are when I first started school, age 5. I think, in those days, you started school when you turned 5, regardless of what time of the year.

We lived about a mile or so from the public school and my mother walked me to school that first day. I didn't like being left there, so walked out and all the way back home. My mother walked me back to school and they sat me on a rocking horse in the corner and I must have been content with that as I stayed.

I had only been there for less than a year when my brother, Brian, who was 2 years older than me, got up to his usual tricks and managed to upset his teacher so badly that we were taken from that school and placed in a Catholic school only a block up the road from where we lived.

Nevertheless, didn't take long for Brian to be at it again, fighting with, and bashing up, every kid in the school who was bigger than himself (he never picked on anyone smaller). The only boy whom he couldn't beat (and who could not beat him) was a kid named "Grumpy" Hall. Grumpy was about the same size as Brian and, one afternoon after school, they fought until I got bored and went home. When mum asked where he was, I told her and she went to break it up.

Brian and Grumpy were best friends from that day on. Mutual respect at work?

We were at that school for about a year before Brian managed to get into trouble again by throwing an inkwell at one of the nuns – black ink all over her nice white habit. So, off we went again, back to the public school.

At this time I was half way through 2nd class. It turned out that the catholic school had us so far advanced on the public school that, having been tested to see where I should be, I was placed straight into 3rd class and, even though being a year younger than the rest, immediately topped the half-yearly exams. I repeated this at the end of the year.

I continued being in the first couple at the top during 4th class and had no problem when the music teacher told me to stop singing as I was "flat". (He was the school music teacher.)

This did not worry me until we went up to 5th class where my refusal to sing had the music teacher dragging me off to the headmaster's office where I received 6 cuts of the cane (they used a length of cane and struck it hard on the open hand) every day for the rest of the year. I still refused to sing – if I wasn't good enough to sing in 4th class I decided I wasn't good enough to sing in later classes.

This caning continued through 6th class and the same question after each 6 cuts: "Are you going to sing tomorrow?" and they got the same answer: "No!"

All this had a detrimental effect on my averages. In those days all exams were judged in percentages; 100% being best and 50% being a minimum pass. I dropped from having all between 98% and 100% to an average of around 75%, depending on my opinion of the teacher. If you failed to get an average of 50% over all subjects, you failed and had to repeat the class. Not like today when they put kids up

each year regardless of their grades. This, to me, gives no incentive to many kids to do well.

Was I strong-willed...or just plain pig-headed? Obviously both!

Regardless of the problems, I managed to pass the exams at the end of 6th class and therefore went up to High School. Here I ran into the same problem with the music master and was dragged along to the head-master's office once again.

However this head-master had more sense. He looked through my record and said: "you are not going to sing, are you?" I said "no". He then told the music master that music was not an essential subject for my future and that if I didn't want to sing, I didn't have to. The music master was obviously incensed over this but, finally...some sense shown!

Anyway, during all this time, life had gone on and the war had been the main subject of worry; at least for the grownups. For us kids? It created a lot of fun.

My first recollection of the war was when the Japanese entered the war and my Uncle Bert, along with most Australian soldiers, was brought home from North Africa to fight the Japanese. I remember the British didn't want the Australians to come home; they wanted them to stay and fight the Germans to protect England. The British considered it more important to save England than Australia; after all, Australia was just a colony! The Japanese taking Australia was secondary to them. However, they could no longer dictate policy to Australia.

I remember Uncle Bert allowing me to hold his 45 calibre revolver and how it was almost too heavy for me to hold.

My home town, Tamworth, was considered a prime target for Japanese air raids as it had a large training base for fighter pilots. Squadrons of fighters and trainers were constantly flying above the town.

Consequently, we had to build air-raid shelters in our back yards and were subjected to mock bombing raids now and then. This was all great fun to us kids.

The Tamworth air space appears to have a lot of "air pockets" in it as, quite often, when a formation of fighters flew over, one would appear to suddenly drop down out of the formation as if it was going to fall to earth and then, just as suddenly, would level off and reform with the squadron. This could be quite frightening when you found yourself in the path of the "falling" plane.

As the Japanese moved relentlessly towards Australia, and Darwin and Broome were heavily bombed, a useless army general proposed that we abandon the north of Australia and make a stand at what was then called the "Brisbane Line". Fortunately for Australia, we had a strong Prime Minister in John Curtin who refused this plan and continued the fight in Papua-New Guinea. He realised that if they got as far down as Brisbane, nothing would stop them coming further south and taking all.

Having lived in Port Moresby, I don't believe the Japanese could have made a landing there, as their ships would have to enter through the narrow reef opening in single file, leaving them open to annihilation by Allied guns. The alternative was to try and come down across the mountains; hence the battle ground known as the Kokoda Trail. Here, in the rugged and hellish mountains of Papua-New Guinea, they were defeated by determined Australian forces.

While all this went on, Brian and I, and often one or 2 other kids, would go out into the hills around Tamworth every weekend trapping rabbits. We were all only between 7 and 10 years of age but, as country kids, were quite familiar with taking to the bush and looking after ourselves.

These rabbits provided us with pocket money from the sale of skins and also from selling rabbit carcasses around the neighbourhood. Rabbits provided the main source of meat during the war as all

foods, especially things like meat, were extremely rationed. We all had vegetable gardens and chickens in the back yards to provide the other food essentials that could not be bought. In other words, to survive was to be self-sufficient.

Dad had a car and during the early part of the war we were still able to drive down to Sydney for holidays.

However, this came to an end when, on the way back to Tamworth after a trip to Sydney, we were coming down the hill towards Wiseman's Ferry (this was the only way across the Hawkesbury River in those days) when we blew a tyre. I remember a small wayside garage just before you reached the bottom of the hill. There were no new tyres or tubes available and the spare had already been used. So what they did was fill the flat tyre with grass - as tight as possible - and drove the rest of the way back to Tamworth on this. Can you imagine doing that today? That was the end of driving around - the car went up on blocks as tyres were unprocurable till well after the war.

We moved several times during the war period, at times living with our grandparents, on both sides, as well as in rented houses. Tamworth had a gaol that had been turned over for prisoner-of-war use. Many of the prisoners were Italian and they were happy to go out and work on the farms without making any attempt to escape. They did not want to be in the war on the Nazi side. During school holidays we would often stay out on one of our uncle's farms (Ab and Queenie Quick at Goonoo Goonoo) and the Italian "prisoners" working there would make sure we had a great time, taking us with them around the property and teaching us how everything worked. They always made sure we had a great holiday.

After the war was over, many of these prisoners returned to Australia as migrants and have helped to make Australia what it is today.

One of the greatest memories I have of those war years is the evenings, especially in the winter, spent in front of a blazing fire.

There were no such things as TV and radios were extremely rare (or wireless sets as they were called in those days). Lights had to be kept to a minimum and blackout blinds were on all windows. Blackout wardens patrolled the streets at night and if they saw a sliver of light there would be a knock on the door and warning to "fix it".

My mother was an excellent pianist and had the voice of an angel; my father loved his banjo, so there were many nights of sitting around the fire with the air full of music (and no, I did not sing – just enjoyed lying back in front of the fire and listening).

My dad had been "manpowered" to run part of the newspaper/printing office. As the newspaper was not classified as an exempt business, they did this by rejecting every effort he made to join the army, saying his eyes were not good enough. I know he always felt terrible about this as both his brothers and his brother-in-law, as well as all his friends and same age work mates, were in the army.

Now and then my mum's sister would arrive for a few days (she was a teacher who was moved around from school to school) and bring her violin with her and the evening music sessions would be something never forgotten. Aunty Huldah was a brilliant violinist; good enough that she had soloed a number of times with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and other orchestras. She could have made it her career, but preferred teaching. She went on to be the first female head of a teacher's college in Australia.

My dad could play many instruments. He had his beloved banjo, a piano accordion (this he bought when we moved to Goulburn and could not afford to take the piano with us – no regular moving vans as we have today). He could also play the piano and it took him only a matter of hours to perfect playing the accordion. He took over a guitar I had bought to try my hand at, but quickly found I was useless.

While the war progressed and the Japanese were being repulsed, life went on for us kids. The shortages of food, clothing and shoes didn't worry us. We were quite happy to skip around in a pair of old shorts and bare feet. Good clothes and shoes were only for going to school.

As I said earlier, we were country kids and were free to come and go and roam the hills around Tamworth as we pleased, unlike the same aged city kids who were limited as to where they could go and what they could do because of the risks involved in city dwelling.

Country kids learned from a very early age to make their own fun. Brian and I built canoes out of old corrugated iron that we would flatten out and, with our dad, rode the rapids in the Peel River.

Riding the rapids in the Peel River was not really dangerous as the waters were shallow and the pools in between were quiet and smooth. However, for kids our age, they were hugely exciting, especially as the canoes we made were not particularly stable; plus, these were times we always had our dad with us.

We roamed the hills with our rabbit traps and camped beside creeks and, sometimes, in an old concrete "bunker" that was built into the hills out of town. We never learned how it came about, but in the winter time we made good use of this concrete room with its open fireplace.

When, in season, we would spend days out in the bush picking blackberries; filling kerosene tins that had been turned into large buckets. These, mum would turn into blackberry pies and blackberry jam that took the place of the sweets you could rarely buy.

As he approached his teenage years, Brian had become a brilliant cyclist, both on the track and on the road. He simply did not know how to give in and, hence, they kept handicapping him to the point where they would have broken the spirit of most boys. Instead he just kept on improving and still beating them.

The knowledge of his ability spread until the stadium used to be packed and gambling on the races became rife. To point up what a draw card he was is to explain that, on one occasion, due to ill health, he was scratched from the racing and half the crowd groaned and left as soon as it was announced he would not be riding. As well as beating all the juniors, he would go out in the road races and frequently beat the seniors. I remember the police pulling him up one day for "speeding" - 42 mph in a 30 zone.

There is no question, if he had not had a fateful fall that caused some damage to the brain that upset his balance, he would have been Olympic material.

I was 11 when the war ended and I can still remember the crowds of people marching down the main roads dancing and yelling and, in general, making a lot of noise. We kids strung a number of the steel ends from the newspaper rolls on rope and crashed then all along the road as we went.

With the war over and the servicemen all returning, I think my father felt lonely and out of it, so it was not long before he applied for, and took, a job in Goulburn to rebuild the newspaper and printing business there that had been drained of manpower by the war and, hence, badly run down.

So our time in Tamworth ended; however, I still call Tamworth home.

My family all went on ahead of me, allowing me to finish my first High School year. I had just turned 12. I then took the train to Sydney where I stayed for a few days with my mother's parents.

I learned two things that Christmas: One that I do not panic in a crisis, and two, I learned what it was like to blister badly from sunburn.

My grandmother took me to Bondi Beach (I had never been to a Sydney beach before) and immediately dived in and, when I surfaced, I realised I was a long way out and being taken further out. When I tried

swimming back I got nowhere. I had seen the sandy bottom was all ridges so I simply dived down and pulled myself forward along the ridges, popping up every now and then for a quick breath and to see what progress I was making. From about 150-200 metres or so out I slowly dragged my way back to standing depth.

Coming from the country, I had no knowledge of rips and currents, nor any knowledge of putting your hand up for help, etc. Just used my head to get out of trouble. It worked.

That night I found out what sunburn was...I had blisters the size of 20c pieces all over my shoulders and back. This is something I had never experienced before. In the country I used to go straight from red to brown over night without any feeling of burning; once in Goulburn, just going brown over night was normal again. Something in the salt air must have made the difference.

I had previously spent holidays in Sydney at an uncle's place on the water at San Souci, but never had a burning problem there, either. Perhaps by the time the river reaches San Souci the salt has dissipated somewhat.

Anyway, on to Goulburn and the start of my next 2 years of high school. This period, and the problems I had there, are documented in another story, "So School Sucks!", but I will repeat a little about it here.

The end of the war meant thousands of ex-servicemen were out looking for jobs. As ex-servicemen, they could pick and choose what they wanted to do and be relatively sure of getting it - especially officers. It has to be remembered that most went straight from school into army/navy/air force life. Consequently, they never had much in the way of qualifications.

I believe those that had been officers had the pick of jobs, as they were considered the "elite" of the services and, for no real reason, more intelligent.

So it was that the start of 2nd year saw us with a new English teacher. He marched into the classroom and fired a question at us. As he appeared to be looking directly at me, I answered. In those days, classrooms were divided, boys on one side, girls on the other. Because of my hearing I was seated against a wall on his left as he faced the class. He promptly went off his brain, telling me that he was not talking to me. Turns out his question was aimed at a girl sitting on the other side of the room.

Unfortunately, we had not been warned that his eyes had been badly damaged in a plane crash – he had been a fighter pilot and crashed twice before being grounded because of eye damage.

This, obviously, made him very sensitive and he was always in a bad mood and should never have been considered for a position as a teacher.

From that day on he did his best to make my life, and that of the girl he originally aimed his question at, miserable.

To give an idea of the type of guy he was, my mother went to his home to try and talk to him. Instead of inviting her in and explaining his problem with me, he stood at his front door with my mother on the road outside his front gate and wouldn't talk to her. He simply left his German Shepherd dog to jump and snarl at my mother from inside the gate. This was a school teacher?

Unfortunately for both him and myself, I was not one to suffer fools, and gave as good as I got. If he could play at that game, so could I.

I was too young and not mature enough to realise that I was the one that would lose in the long run as English was a compulsory subject and that, through fighting back, my studies would suffer. Yes, I

certainly helped make his life difficult by simply not allowing him to break me; even after he sneaked up behind me and smashed my face into the desk using a hand full of books. The girl was more compliant, so did not get in as much trouble, but still suffered his wrath for the next 2 years.

Another twist to this story is that the English Master to the school was our class history teacher (schools had a number of English teachers under the control of an English Master).

He was the first to jokingly tell us that he had some brain damage from a racing car crash years before; and he certainly acted like it, even if he did have a good sense of humour.

Knowing the problem I had with our English teacher, he would mostly argue English with me all through the History period. As the other kids would get bored and start talking, they would be sent to stand against the back wall or out in the corridor; hence little History was taught.

Our English teacher was also the Sports Master (and just as bad tempered with that) so I continued to infuriate him in the field as well.

However, this intransigence on my part (call that pig-headedness) caused me to fail English in my final third-year exam (only by 1%, but that is all it took – and, to this day, I believe he deliberately failed me). As English was a compulsory subject, passing all the other subjects made no difference...you failed!

At the time this did not worry me as I was quite a good artist and had won a scholarship to a major art school but, when I fronted up, found I could not enter until I was 17 (“Go away and come back when you are 17”, they said). Apprenticeships were plentiful, so I finished up working in the printing industry.

When I was 15 we moved to Sydney and 3 months later finished up in hospital with Polio. The amount of nerve damage to the body, including my arms, ended my dream of a future in art as I no longer had proper control of my arm; unable to contain the jumping nerves that made it impossible to write legibly, I had to learn to use a typewriter and forget my dream of art that required a steady hand.

It was not until my late teenage years that I realised I would like to go to university and study Psychology. It was then that I realised what I had lost by fighting the teacher instead of using him.

Not having my Intermediate Certificate meant I could not do what was called a Mature Age Matriculation to gain admittance to university. This was a three-course examination that could be taken when you were 21 and, if passed, allowed you entry to uni. English was still a compulsory subject, but by that time English was a major part of my job as a typesetter so would have given me no problems.

I could not face going back and doing the whole 3rd year over again to get my intermediate certificate, so accepted that was the end of that dream.

Wars continued to come and go. While I was doing National Service the war in Korea raged on and, as an 18-year-old in a specialist unit and full of adventurous ideas, I was tempted to go. However, as it looked like ending soon, I was talked into finishing my apprenticeship first. By that time it was over. It is a well documented fact that youth are willing to go to war thinking they are indestructible.

However, despite the failures, and the polio damage that plagues me to this day, I have fitted a lot into life and enjoyed it all.



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