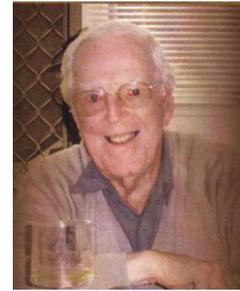


Colin (Bob) Watson – S14640 (1919 – 2011)

As told to Ken Hayes. Edited by Paul Spencer and Christine Hancock

During a conversation with Paul Spencer (Secretary), Ken Hayes (Almoner) and myself on the way to visit Daw Park Repat Hospital (2nd February 2011) for a presentation, Ken mentioned that he was conducting his first “recorded” interview with the Voice Recorder that the club has purchased. Ken was using this to record individual member’s military histories.



Subsequently I agreed and Ken interviewed me on the 28th March 2011. I was born on the 16th July 1919 and grew up in Prospect S.A. I attended Prospect Primary School and then Nailsworth Technical School. I have four brothers and three sisters. I was born number 6, eight children in total and I am the only surviving member of my family. No family members served in WW1 but my brother Dudley served in the Middle East (2ndAIF).

I wanted to join army in 1938. I rode my pushbike from Prospect on Monday nights for training and got home about 11.00pm at night. I attended camp once a year, first at Woodside and our accommodation was in tents.



I then enlisted on the 19th December 1938 (3rd Field Company), Royal Australian Engineers at Keswick S.A. I attended the Woodside Army Camp 1938/1939 and then Warradale in 1939.

One of the Engineers projects I was involved in was in relation to bridge building with “folding” boats: Training occurred near Long island near Murray Bridge. Folding boats could be used next to one another to make them into pontoon bridges to bring traffic over from one side of the river to the other. The folding boats had a crew of four plus the Commander

One incident that occurred related to Sgt Trevor “Nuggett” Russell when doing boat drill. The other Boat Commander (Lieut Ligertwood) stood at the bow of a boat and gave orders to stop the boat “way enough”. He said “enough” which meant one more stroke, then raise oars, then oars out of rowlocks and await the next command. However the guys under “Nuggett” Russell probably had too much to drink, and they tossed the oars into the Murray River and the other four boats and crews went chasing after them as they floated on their way to Taillem Bend! An incident I had not thought of for years.

When on full time duty in January 1940 a party of 32 consisting of two 2nd Lieutenants, two Sergeants and twenty eight Sappers of 3rd Field Co (RAE) were sent by rail to Alice Springs and camped on the other side of Todd River in tents. We built basic buildings at the base of Anzac Hill as staging camps for Alice Springs. My experience in the building trade prior to my enlistment assisted me in this period, especially with my rank of Sergeant.

When completed we drove out several miles from the Alice looking for ant hills. I remember it was quite a distance. When found we knocked them down, loaded them

into a truck, brought them back to camp and spread the soil onto the ground using water to make it wet. Then it was levelled and rolled prior to laying malthoid on it for the floor.

There were so many men sick due to what I believe was very poor sanitary arrangements. It was noticed that the utility that brought our food to the camp was the same vehicle that took away the sanitary waste material. Accommodation was very basic, all very primitive in tents. Food in the Alice was very basic, mainly sausages, potatoes and some vegies. We were tried with kangaroo meat but it was not generally liked.

In relation to Americans – there was a few as part of an Advance Party. The C. O. of the Alice Springs Camp was Lt. Col. Loutit, who I believe was the former Manager of the Yellow Cab Company in Adelaide. One day as sergeant I was making the rounds of the camp site when a man dressed in shorts with a towel over his shoulders approached me and said is that the building? I just made the comment “get lost” and kept on walking.

I was later approached by Lieut. Ligertwood who said that Col. Loutit wants to see you and I will accompany you. Then I discovered that the person I said “get lost” to was Colonel Loutit! I haven’t thought about this incident for years.

Towards the end of my time in the Alice there was torrential rain for several days and the River Todd flooded. People from all over the outback came to town to see it. But it washed out the rubbish etc. from river bed. It’s funny how incidents stick in the mind.

I returned to Adelaide with the group and several of us then enlisted in the 2nd. A. I. F. 4th Field Squadron RAE on the 29th July 1941. My Service No. was SX 13857 and our previous service was made continuous. We were trained at Bonegilla NSW but following a recurrence of “tummy” problems first experienced in the N. T, I was admitted to the Repat Hospital in Caulfield Victoria. I was later discharged from the AIF 20th May 1942 and I then re-enlisted in the AMF on the 21st May 1942. Due to this I was given a third Enlistment No V281554 Unit (Movement Control).



Ida Joyce Ragless

The transfer to the AMF proved beneficial in more ways than one. Firstly I was given the opportunity to transfer back to South Australia to serve at Port Adelaide in Unit ‘Docks Control.’ And secondly this is where I met my future wife when she was posted to Unit Headquarters to serve on our Unit telephone switchboard. How lucky can one be!! I met Ida Joyce Ragless who was serving in the AWAS (Signals Section), Service Number SF65171 in 1944. All the other Army boys eyed her but fortune went my way and we were eventually married in 1945 at the Holy Trinity Church, North Terrace, in Adelaide. I was discharged 23rd November 1945 with the rank of Staff Sergeant. After my official

discharge I returned to the building trade.

Not what you might say was an exciting period of time in the army, not having served overseas; but then some would say I was lucky not to have been involved with actual military conflict.

In 1947 on a block of land in Warradale I had purchased for £81 (pounds) I built a home, the total cost of which was £1700 (pounds). Our repayments per month were £6-14-00 (the currency in those days). Perhaps it is interesting to note that my weekly wage at the time was £5-12-00 per week. The housing loan was from War Service Homes.

From 1946 to July 1964 I worked with a building company as a Construction Foreman. We moved to Mount Gambier in July 1964 and returned to Adelaide in 1977, and I retired in 1981. The time spent in Mt Gambier was with the S.A. Housing Trust as Senior Clerk of Works, and then in Adelaide from 1977 to retirement as Senior Works Supervisor.

Joyce and I have two lovely daughters who have given us two granddaughters, and two grandsons. I feel very grateful for my life after my army service, firstly for my 67 years of marriage to Joyce, and to the time I have been able to volunteer for community organisations. 16 years in Toc H, 21 years in the Lions Club, and at present I have been in the Brighton Bowling Club for 30 years including 20 years coaching and two years as President. I also had the honour to be granted Life Membership. It is the people that I have met and worked with along the period of these times of my life that I am so thankful and grateful for.

For many years I have attended a reunion of members of Engineers Units just prior to Anzac Day, most recently at Warradale Army Barracks where we were entertained by the current Engineers Units. These occasions ended in 2009 with only a few of us left. Those reunions have played a very important part of my life and I will always treasure them.

This interview has reminded me of many incidents that I have not thought about for years and I have enjoyed the experience.

Bob passed away shortly after this story was done following a brief illness.