

Background

Men of ripe colour reared in Liberty!

Soldiers and kinsmen – road-men that we knew,

Over all ills of land or sky or sea

Snow-fall or red wind, goes our love to you.

Salt of your courage shines in everything.

Here in the flags – in all the bells that chime;

In the endowed bewilderment of Spring

While the slow moons walk to the Summertime.

TO THE MEN OF THE ROADS

This previously unpublished poem of John Shaw Nielson dedicated to his friends in the Country Roads Board, is published by kind permission of the La Trobe Library.

Before the First World War, the roads of Victoria were in an appalling condition. This was not unusual as all roads in the country were in a similar plight. During the winter, many roads were impassable due to wet weather so that many regional communities became isolated and disadvantaged by the state of the roads. It was also a time when the number of motor cars and trucks was rapidly increasing bringing a new emphasis on speed, mobility and all-weather travel. In 1910 there were 12,000 motorized vehicles in Victoria, by 1915 there were 38,000 and by 1930 there were 180,000.

The Country Roads Board (CRB) of Victoria was appointed under the *Country Roads Act 1912* and instituted on 26 March 1913. Its purpose was to investigate the condition of the roads in the State and, in consultation with all the municipalities, determine which roads were to be declared as main roads. These roads were then gazetted and became the responsibility of the CRB for their construction and maintenance. In undertaking this mission, the CRB became the first State Road Authority in Australia.

But the optimism and energy of this new organisation was soon thwarted by the outbreak of war the following year. Much of the money that the Government had allocated for roads was diverted to Australia's war effort and 35 members of its staff enlisted to "*serve our Sovereign Lord the King*" to "*resist His Majesty's enemies and cause His Majesty's peace to be kept and maintained.*" This was a serious drain on the resources of the CRB.

Since then, the CRB has undergone much change. In 1974 it absorbed the Highways Branch of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works and, in 1982, the West Gate Bridge Authority. In 1983 it was retitled the Road Construction Authority (RCA). At the same time, in 1983, the Road Traffic Authority (RTA) was created by the amalgamation of the Transport Regulation Board and the Road Safety and Traffic Authority. Then the RCA and the RTA merged in 1988 to form VicRoads. In July 2019, after 106 years of service, VicRoads was closed down altogether and now road management responsibility in Victoria is vested in a division of the Department of Transport.

Staff members of all these organisations volunteered for active service in both World Wars and the Korean War and some were conscripted into the Vietnam War. Their stories are the basis of this book as well as those who joined the organisation after their return from war.

Some of these stories are remarkable and, taken as a group, they display the full gamut of warfare – death, injury, sickness, suffering, tragedy and luck. A few reflect the feeling of despair of loved ones at home and of the unfulfillment of dreams. Some of the heroes were still teenagers. Surely, those who enlisted had no concept of what they were about to enter – especially in the First World War. This war was fought on the other side of the world at a time when few Australians would have ventured so far, and for those who perished, there was little hope of loved ones ever being able to visit the graves or memorials of the fallen.

Unfortunately there will be some who are not mentioned because the passage of time has erased them from the memory of those still living. I have not purposely excluded anyone – I have only included those that I could find.

The wars had a great effect on the CRB and its operations as demonstrated by the following extracts from its annual reports.

The 27th Annual Report in 1940 stated:

“Up to 30th June 1940, 133 officers and employees of the Board had enlisted for service abroad with the 2nd AIF or the RAAF and three had enlisted for the Naval forces. For home services six officers and employees were called up for limited periods or for the duration of the war, and 12 members of staff were loaned to the Commonwealth Government to assist in carrying out urgent tasks.”

In the 32nd Annual Report of 1945 it was recorded:

“It is with deep regret that the Board records that nine members of its staff paid the supreme sacrifice during the war. Each of the officers was a young man of more than ordinary ability and great promise, to whom the Board looked to fulfill important positions in the future ... During the war 48 members of the staff and 590 employees joined the fighting services.”

In both these reports, there is a distinction made between officers (or members of staff) and employees. Officers were those people who were on the permanent staff of the CRB including engineers, surveyors, draftsmen and women, accountants, and clerical officers. Employees were usually field people such as overseers, clerks of works, tally clerks, labourers, chain men (in survey gangs), plant operators, drivers and road workers.

Given the huge number who enlisted in the Second World War, the people mentioned in this history are only a small fraction of all those who served.

The 32nd Annual Report of the Country Roads Board also stated:

“With the cessation of hostilities, the Board is now awaiting the release of officers and employees still in the services with a view to their returning to their normal duties.

For several years a great deal of apprehension was felt for the welfare of certain members of the Board's staff who were prisoners of war. It is with a feeling of great joy that reference can now be made to the fact that all of these officers have been released. Heartiest congratulations are offered to them and to their families on their safety, and the hope is expressed that they will not suffer any permanent disability as a result of their unenviable experiences.”

Elsewhere in this report, the CRB's sensitivity to the needs of its staff members who may have required assistance due to their war service, was expressed.

“Shortly after the outbreak of the war, a fund was inaugurated by the Board's staff for the purpose of assisting any cases of hardship suffered by members of the staff as a result of war service, for providing comforts for service personnel and to enable contributions to be made to charitable objects without the necessity for making constant appeals. The fund is built up by regular contributions by the staff supplemented by the proceeds from functions held from time to time. An amount of £2,800 has been collected from the commencement and valuable assistance has been rendered to such organizations as the Red Cross, Australian Comforts Fund, Lord Mayor's Hospital Appeal, &c.

A large number of parcels of food and comforts were forwarded to officers and employees of the Board in the fighting forces during the war period. The organization has also been utilised for assisting several appeals such as food for Britain, clothing for inhabitants of devastated areas, &c.

The 33rd Annual Report for year ended 30 June 1946 described in more detail the new challenges it faced not only in attaining appropriate staffing levels but also the need to train staff to the required levels of qualification required for the new technologies. It stated:

“Since the termination of hostilities the officers who have been absent on service and to whom reference was made in the last annual report have now returned to duty. Some of these servicemen, however, have been granted leave of absence to continue or commence studies at the University under the Commonwealth rehabilitation scheme; it is recognized that these officers will be much more valuable to the Board on the completion of their academic courses.

The Board views with concern the loss of a number of very valuable officers holding key positions in its service, through their accepting positions at higher salaries in Commonwealth Departments and industrial organizations. Apart from the inconvenience caused the position becomes serious at this period when the Board is faced with the necessity of putting in hand a large number of works which had to be deferred during the war years, many of which are now extremely urgent. The increasing reliance on research and engineering investigation also calls for additional professional staff, and for a high standard of qualification of technical officers.

In a properly organized Department the positions of officers are graded according to the importance of their duties and the salaries paid are fixed accordingly. Under these conditions grave anomalies are likely to be created should action be taken to increase the salary of an individual officer if inducements are held out to him by another body. The Board feels that the only satisfactory method of dealing with such a situation is to revise the salary scale of all officers, having regard to the ruling conditions in the profession at the time. It appears essential in the national interest when important public works require to be put in hand that the organizations responsible for these works should be able to retain the services of men who have been specially trained over a long period of years. Whilst in some cases replacements of officers have been obtained, it is necessary for some time to lapse before the newly appointed officers become familiar with the special problems they are required to handle.”

The road network of Victoria is the physical asset having the highest monetary value in the State. Roads play a huge part in our social and economic development. The soldiers, sailors and airmen and women mentioned in this narrative all contributed, not only to the safety of our nation, but also to the standard of living we enjoy today through the construction and management of Victoria’s state road network. Many of them were pioneers.



After the First World War - Staff of the Country Roads Board at the Land Titles Office - 1921.

Back row – left to right: W. Birrell*, I. Coffey, D. Ebbs, A. Kerry*, D.V. Darwin*, H. Wood*, E.J. Hicks, R.F. Jansen*, L White*, R. Foster*, Mr Hart.

Middle row standing – left to right: Mr Hargraves, F.W. Hine*, Mr Aspinall, Miss Oliver, Miss H. Watts, Miss M. Wood, Miss E. Couve, Miss E. Young, Miss Palmer, Miss Long, Miss A. Phillips, Miss Weller, Miss E. Young, Mr Rankin, Mr Phillips, Mr Campbell, Mr A. King, Mr J.V. Whitehead*.

Centre seated – left to right: F.R. Oldfield, W.T Williams*, W.L. Dale, T.G Bowden, A.E. Callaway, T.H. Upton*.

On ground – left to right: Mr Tonks, N.E. Vaughan, A. Phillips.

* Indicates returned servicemen whose stories are included in this narrative.

Messrs Hart (extreme right in the back row) and Vaughan (sitting in the middle on the ground) are wearing RSL badges but I have been unable to retrieve any records of them.



Board members of the Country Roads Board – all veterans of the First World War.

From left: Caleb Roberts, Bill Neville and Donald Darwin.

Taken at Darwin's retirement presentation -June 1962.