

ROADS TO WAR

David Jellie

Perhaps

*Perhaps someday the sun will shine again,
And I shall see that still the skies are blue,
And feel once more I do not live in vain,
Although bereft of You.*

*Perhaps the golden meadows at my feet
Will make the sunny hours of spring seem gay,
And I shall find the white May-blossoms sweet,
Though You have passed away.*

*Perhaps the summer woods will shimmer bright,
And crimson roses once again be fair,
And autumn harvest fields a rich delight,
Although You are not there.*

*Perhaps someday I shall not shrink in pain
To see the passing of the dying year,
And listen to Christmas songs again,
Although You cannot hear.*

*But though kind Time may many joys renew,
There is one greatest joy I shall not know
Again, because my heart for loss of You
Was broken, long ago.*

Vera Brittain

Dedicated to her fiancé, Roland Aubrey Leighton, who was killed at the age of 20 by a sniper in 1915, four months after she had accepted his marriage proposal.

Preface

In the foyer of the Head Office of the Country Roads Board (CRB) in Kew, Victoria, were two Rolls of Honour commemorating staff members who served in both World Wars. When I started working there in 1961, I often glanced at them as I entered the building but the names meant little to me.

The Roll of Honour for the First World War was for all the men of the CRB who served, while the one for the Second World War was for those who died on active service. There are 35 names on the one for the First World War and 16 on the roll for the Second World War.

The Roll of Honour for the Second World War was unveiled by the Chairman of the CRB, Donald Darwin MM ISO, on 5 November 1952 in the presence of the members of staff and relatives of the deceased officers whose names appear on the plaque.



Donald Victor Darwin unveiling the CRB Honour Roll for the Second World War at the Exhibition Building, 1952.

Most people entered the building with scarcely a glance at the names of these men and yet each name had a story to tell – some more terrifying than anything we can imagine. Their names meant nothing to us – twenty of them never returned to tell their own stories and now they are names on two largely anonymous plaques, displayed on an anonymous wall and now anonymous in our memory. With this record, our memory of them will last a little longer, recalled in a spirit of pride, gratitude and comradeship. Even though we didn't know most of them, it is important that they are remembered in the tradition of Anzac and because they were workmates. We should remember them.

The CRB officers and employees who enlisted for the First World War – as recorded in the Board's Fifth Annual Report – are shown in Chapter 2. To this list should be added Major W.T.B. McCormack who was a Board Member in the first CRB. He became the second Chairman of the Board in 1928.

The Roll of Honour for the Second World War records the names of 16 men who died on active service but there is one other name which should be on it, Ernest Lingenberg, who died on the Kokoda Track in 1942.

Appendix 1 – from the 41st Annual Report of the CRB – shows all the CRB staff and employees who enlisted in the Second World War. There are 60 members of staff and 536 employees on it. A lone woman, Miss T. Storey, is included in the list. I could not find a woman of that initial and name in the National Australian Archives but I found Miss Valerie June Storey who, in many ways, fits the bill, but I can't be sure.

In addition to the men named on these rolls, there were many others who joined the CRB after the wars. They too, had stories to tell – but few did so. I worked alongside many of these men without knowing their stories. Indeed, I had no inkling that many of them had even served during the wars.

There was at least one Boer War veteran in our midst – Evan Davies. Evan was assistant to the Chief Draughtsman of the Title Survey and Records Section which was housed in one of the tin sheds at the rear of the Exhibition Building after the Second World War. Unfortunately the Victorian rolls for the Boer War have not yet been digitised so I have no other information about him.

I started work as a design engineer in the Bridge Branch of the CRB in 1961. This was only 16 years after the end of the Second World War and I soon became aware of the legacy of war. Many of the people working there were Europeans. In those days they were referred to as ‘displaced persons’, but, in reality, they were refugees who could not return to their war-ravaged home countries for fear of persecution, or people who wanted to forget the fracture of civilization in Europe and so got as far away as possible.

My first boss, Erwin Matzner, was a Croatian Jew who was a captive of the Nazis (or so I thought); Greg Cikalov was born in Russia but shifted to Serbia to escape his Menshevik-leaning family’s persecution; Branko Tavcar and Vladimir Doric were Yugoslavians with a dread of communism; Mr and Mrs Halafoff were Russians who were incarcerated in a Nazi concentration camp where their son was born; brothers Frank and Gus Kroyherr were Hungarians as was Sam Ujvari – and there were others from Poland, Italy, the Netherlands, the Baltic states and, of course, the UK. Ernie Renz, a German, has a different story - serving in 8 Employment Company of the Australian Army. I knew all these people who worked with me in Bridge Division, and there were many more working in other branches and divisions of the CRB.

I also became aware that there were many men that I worked with who were prisoners of war of the Japanese, including the Chairman, Ian (Paddy) O’Donnell OBE. I was puzzled early in my career as to why Paddy came down from his office in the rarefied air of the executive suite on the fifth floor to sit and chat with our pipe-testing officer, Frank Jackson – until someone told me that they were prisoners of war together and that Paddy was ever-vigilant in providing support to Frank.

There were also prisoners of war of the Germans amongst us but I knew nothing of them.

Veterans of the First World War were still working then, including the first two Chairmen I worked under – Donald Darwin MM ISO and Caleb Roberts MC. Caleb’s successor, Ian O’Donnell, as I mentioned above, was a prisoner of war and his successor, Ted Donaldson, fought in the south west Pacific area with the 8th Divisional Field Artillery.

The servicemen of the CRB – there are no women’s names on the honour rolls – came from all ranks and disciplines of the organisation – accountants, clerks, surveyors, labourers, engineers,

drivers, draughtsmen, plant operators, and chainmen. Apart from Miss T. Storey previously mentioned, I have found one other woman, Flying Officer Patricia Marr of the Royal Air Force, who joined the CRB after the Second World War.

It is impossible for we who have never experienced war to understand the horror and terror of battle. We can proselytise all we like about the evil of war but, nonetheless, we must admire all these men and women who went off to war believing they were doing their duty. For those who returned, hardly a day would pass when they didn't think about the terror of their experience and of the people they served with who didn't make it back. Every serviceman and woman suffered. Those who were not hit by bullet or shrapnel or who never experienced gassing were, nevertheless, casualties of war. They carried these scars for life and this is why their bonds are unusually close – bonds that exist only from shared experiences in combat or suffering. Some may have been heroes and some were not but all of them served with heroes. For those that survived, they deserve long and happy lives of peace.

I have written elsewhere about the randomness of war – how warfare does not discriminate between who lives and who dies. All wars are alike. They comprise chaos, boredom, bravado, folly, terror and trauma. But war is unique for every individual. Despite the differences between people in intellect, education, stature, athleticism – the fate of war does not discriminate amongst them. In war, there is a true brotherhood and sisterhood, galvanised by dependence on each other - and the support and desperation of mates. Many of the bravest survived and many of the bravest died. Many pushed themselves beyond limits that they never imagined possible.

I knew many of the people included in this narrative but I am ashamed that I did not know their stories. They were my mentors and colleagues and, with one exception, they never talked about their experiences in war. They were men of peace and I still cannot imagine them undergoing the travails and terror of battle. Some did not see battle at all but they deserve inclusion. They volunteered for service but their health, age or specialist skills – or the timing of their enlistment – precluded them from active service. Their tasks were to support the servicemen on land, sea and in the air, and their contribution was vital to the war effort.

There is one aspect of war that I am hesitant to mention and that is, for some returning servicemen, it gave them an opportunity to forge a new and better career than they would otherwise have had. I think this is especially so for those who returned from the Second World War.

When troops returned from the First World War and disembarked at docks across Australia, they carried, alone, the effects of their experiences in this terrible and destructive war. They entered a nation that had few social safety nets and even less opportunity. They stepped straight into the pandemic of the Spanish Flu and the Australian economy was suffering from the toll of the war effort. The Great Depression was just around the corner and the CRB still suffered under restrictions imposed by wartime controls. Peace had returned but the plentiful labour supply and cheaper materials of an earlier era did not return. Continuation of the wartime policy of concentrating on road maintenance, rather than construction, stifled the development of the road network for which future generations would pay.

The Australian Government established a war pension scheme in late 1914 to help wounded veterans and the families of those who were killed. However, the growing number of casualties prompted the need for a new, comprehensive and centralised repatriation scheme. In 1918, the Australian Government created the Repatriation Department to help returned veterans resettle in the Australian community. The department introduced programs assisting veterans to develop their vocational skills and find jobs, and supported their independence through pensions and loans. Soldier settlement schemes were also established and administered by the states.

The Department also provided medical services to meet the extensive and varied needs of veterans and financial assistance for their dependents. It was an enormous undertaking which had no model to work from. The long-term costs of ongoing medical care and welfare benefits following the war were on a scale never before encountered.

In 1922 the Federal Government established an unemployment relief plan to provide work for the poor – including many returned servicemen. The CRB provided work for these men who had to live in tents in the distant, mountain regions of East Gippsland to earn a pittance at roadmaking. They had no idea of how their families were faring and they had little social contact with the outside world. The works were chosen to maximise the advantage of excess unskilled labour and usually involved timber clearing and earthworks. Efficiency on these projects was only 65 to 75 per cent when compared with contract-labour jobs, as road-making machinery was sparingly used. It is little wonder that many of them gave up after a few weeks.

Ironically, I think that Australia was a better place to return to after the Second World War. Australia had the experience of the demobilisation from the First World War and organisations such as the Repatriation Department and the Soldier Settlement Scheme had matured. The Department of Post-War Reconstruction was actually formed during the war - in 1942. It was involved in developing veterans' entitlements to help them settle into civilian life. An important consideration was to ensure that civilian employment opportunities were created at an appropriate rate as the size of the military was reduced. The Department implemented the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme offering vocational or academic training to men and women who had served. Its purpose was to aid in the return of ex-service personnel to civilian employment. It operated from 1942 until last acceptances were taken in 1950.

Some of the people you will read about participated in this scheme – including engineers, surveyors, accountants and scientists. Their education was perhaps, the only positive outcome of their war experience.



The cover of the first issue of the magazine Repatriation, published in 1919.

I have a one-generation family connection to both World Wars – I had uncles in both - so that I still have an awareness of war, but my children and grandchildren have little concept of the darkness of those times. So the names recorded on the Honour Rolls and War Memorials around

the country are now largely forgotten except for the distant and ever-diminishing memories of family members. This is why I have written the stories of these people to ensure that their names live on for a little longer. We owe it to them.

David Jellie

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