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PAGE *by* PAGE
REVIEW

TED PAGE

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Contents

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
1 My Beginnings	6
2 City Living	17
3 Schooldays	28
4 Early Working Days	35
5 I Move to Melbourne	50
6 Joining the Police Force	62
7 Early Married Days	67
8 A Young Policeman	71
9 My Son, John	80
10 Some Cases in My Work as Detective	82
11 Back to School	97
12 More Cases	100
13 Officer's College	104
14 My Grandchildren	110
15 Detective Transfer	112
16 Chief Inspector	113
17 The First of My Trips Overseas	119
18 Ash Wednesday Bush Fire Investigations	124
19 Retirement	130
20 Freemasonry	141
21 Birthdays and Other Surprises	150
22 Some Last Thoughts	166

Chapter 1

My Beginnings

The event of my birth took place on February 13, 1926 in Kooranga Happy Road, Auckland, New Zealand, or so my older brother, Desmond Victor, informs me. He is of the opinion that there was a Gaol or some form of penal establishment there and that our father, John Reginald, was employed there for a period as a Warder, though I have no way of confirming this part of his then livelihood. I do recall our father telling me that for a short time he was trapping rabbits to supplement the family income during our short stay in New Zealand.

I have no recollection of our embarkation for Australia, but we landed in Sydney and took up residence for a short time in North Sydney and, from this close proximity, we were able to watch and follow the final construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

My real recollection of this structure is at a later date, when we were able to watch the official opening from temporary stands erected near the southern bridge approach. I can vaguely remember sitting up high in the stands and later mixing with the huge crowds that swelled all around the official dais. I am unclear as to whether I actually saw the mounted horseman who galloped through the crowd and unlawfully cut the ribbon, much to the anger of the crowd and the official party, or whether it is a combination listening to the story related by parents and material that I have subsequently observed. My recollections seem quite vivid; I prefer to let the reader judge.

My Brother and Sister

My brother, Desmond Victor, is three years older than me and my sister, Nancy Irene, was three years younger. Three years separating myself and my brother and three years separating my sister and I.

My brother and I did not get on particularly well. We fought occasionally, physically and with words. My sister and I got on extremely well, she being younger than me. I guess in some ways there were occasions when I felt paternal towards her. But later, my brother and I became very close. He joined the Air Force in 1940 and he was away. My father was in the army and then I later came to Melbourne. But, when we all returned home together after some 15 to 18 months apart, when we all happened to be in Sydney at home in Belvoir Street at the same time, the relationship became quite different. And, these days, rarely a week goes by that I don't ring my brother or he will ring me. My sister died of cancer three years ago. She had been fighting it for a couple of years, but we had a great relationship. She lived in Sydney and my brother still does.

Outer Urban Country Living

My next and strong memories are of a house in Morebank Avenue, Liverpool, N.S.W., a house with a corrugated galvanised iron roof, with the same material nailed horizontally to the outside walls of the house. The inside lining was of Hessian, the material that chaff bags were then made of, nailed to the wall studs and when completed were then painted with 'white wash', a slurry that was prepared by the builder and later my father. This method shrunk the material and also filled all the minute holes in the material, providing some warmth and draught free conditions.

Kerosene lamps were the order of the day, as electric lighting was neither connected or reticulated in the area. Corrugated galvanised iron for horizontal walls may seem very primitive today, but was not an uncommon form of construction and, while bitterly cold in the winter and furnace-like in the summer, it was dry, affordable and reasonably comfortable.

I have a strong and favourable recollection of my father, John Reginald, and mother, Agnes Blanche, during the winter months, placing a cardboard carton or wooden box, fitted with a piece of blanket material in the bottom, in front of the kitchen stove on the

hearth. As soon as it became cold outside, eggs would be taken from the broody hens in the chook house and placed in the box, left in front of the fire overnight, and usually in the morning when the children awoke the eggs would have hatched and the kitchen would be filled with the delightful chirping of many newborn chicks. Dependant on the weather, they would remain inside for a couple of days, feeding on a bran mash until they were old enough and strong enough to be returned to the chook house. A delightful way for children to wake to a new day to be greeted by these fluffy yellow chicks chirruping away as we ate breakfast.

Home made brooders were made by selecting a wooden box of suitable size, nailing strips of Hessian or blanket to the inside bottom, placing a hurricane lamp on the floor of an unused chook house and upending the box over the top of the hurricane lamp. The box was usually raised slightly off the ground to enable the chicks access, and when inside, the lamp alight and turned down low provided a warm environment. I do not recall any hazardous incidents happening with this primitive brooder. Today modern electric brooders provide the same service, but probably no more effectively though easier and perhaps safer.

The house was set on a block of land approximately one acre, and we were able to maintain two horses and a buggy. A post and railing fence surrounded the whole area and I have a vivid memory of sitting on the top rail of the fence as a five-year-old, and old Dolly, one of the two horses, coming up behind me and seizing me by the shoulder, causing serious bruising and a lot of pain, before dad was able to release me. I was thereafter very cautious of that bad tempered mare.

Camping Out

Often, the family would take the horse and buggy to the bush out past Holdsworth and Green Hills, which at that time was an artillery firing range for the Liverpool Military Camp opposite, and spend the day or the weekends or even longer, camping under canvas

or at times under the buggy. These times were especially enjoyed as we collected buckets of mushrooms to take home, and explored the bush in and around the area, as well as the Georges River that flowed right through the area.

The buckets full of this lovely edible fungi were hung by hooks to the buggy axle and springs, and transported home for cooking and preserving in some way so that mushrooms were on the menu for some months. Camping out under the stars in the cool weather never seemed to bother anyone, particularly if the camp fire was kept well-stoked before everyone turned in.

On one occasion on the upper reaches of the Georges River, Dad shot an extremely large goanna, which was intimidating the camp's occupants. It was dragged onto an anthill near the riverbank and left. The next time we returned to the same location some weeks later all that remained of the reptile was the outline on the ground and the bones, the remainder having been consumed by animals, birds and the ants. Picked absolutely clean. The regular excursions into the bush were for the prime purpose of trapping rabbits, and the traps were set and placed, middle to late afternoon, and recovered about sunrise on the following day. Up to two-dozen traps were set each day, and in vigorous breeding times they were set twice a day. The resultant catch was immediately slaughtered and skinned and the carcasses sold at one of the several butchers in Liverpool.

The carefully removed skins were turned inside out and placed on stretchers made of 10 gauge fencing wire and hung on low branches until ready to return home, when they, like the hurricane lamps and buckets of mushrooms, were hung on the buggy to sway rhythmically with its motion over the unmade roads or grassy terrain.

The pelts were also sold to a local skin dealer, and fetched a price according to the number of skins per pound avoirdupois weight, which varied according to the season. Winter pelts, because of their heavier coats, often varied between six to eight to the pound weight, while summer pelts may only run 12 to 14 to the pound weight, being lighter and thinner in the fur content of the coat. In those

Depression years, the remuneration from their sale often provided more than a supplemental wage to the household; they frequently provided the difference between eating and going hungry. I look back with admiration how parents struggled in all kinds of ways to provide sufficient nourishment for their families during these struggling times of mass unemployment.

Mass Unemployment

As a Returned Serviceman from World War I, having been a regular soldier serving in the British Army from 1912 until 1919, our father was able to pick up some part-time employment for a few weeks at a time at the Liverpool Army Camp with various New South Wales-based units, who annually conducted 'Bivouacs', exercises or weekend camps. At that period, he seemed to be attached to the 'Pioneer' Battalions, who were responsible for 'making' and 'breaking' camp. Later, I recall him in a Reserve capacity with the Sydney University Regiment, and I can still in my minds-eye see him in his smart dress Uniform, the jacket of royal blue with gold facings and his gold Staff Sergeants Insignia, a crown and three stripes on the arm.

He remained on the Reserve List with the Sydney University for several years, and was from time to time transferred to other units to set up 'camps' in the bush, such as Kangaroo Valley, the South Coast of New South Wales, and at Middle Head in Sydney Harbour, a permanent unit overlooking the mouth of the Harbour towards the entrance, where North and South Head garrisons stood sentinel and where the Pacific Ocean rolled in.

On one of his annual camps at Middle Head, I joined him for a week, keeping out of sight to avoid being seen by the Commanding Officer who, as it eventuated later, was aware of my unofficial presence on the muster roll. This establishment had permanent barracks, constructed of corrugated galvanised iron on roof and walls, and each section had a wide verandah extending the full length of the building, which contained the sleeping barracks.

The verandah was used for machine gun training, where gunners

would 'make up and breakdown' the guns, the tripod, the cartridge belts and the cartridge boxes. This activity had a certain fascination for me and when I thought none of the Senior officers were in the vicinity, I spent some time watching. I was also a keen observer of any other activities that were undertaken. On suitable occasions and when the weather was appropriate, one of the men was detailed by my father to take me down to the beach, which was about 15 minutes walk. This was a pleasant break from the soldiering routine for the member and most pleasing to me because I liked the water so much.

Morebank Avenue

I have jumped ahead somewhat but it seemed appropriate as a continuation of his military involvement at Liverpool and other places.

Across the paddocks at the rear of the house in Morebank Avenue, there was a very large pond, more like a lake really, encircled in the shallows with rushes which grew luxuriant and vigorously. At one end the locals maintained a clear area of rushes, and had erected a rather crude diving board, which was used by the older children in the hot months. We were continually warned away from it by our parents, however this did not prevent us from swimming and diving when the opportunity presented itself. It also didn't prevent us from collecting frogs and tadpoles. In winter, and in bare feet, I can still remember walking across the frost-covered grass, to find that dipping the feet into the pond water gave some relief to the frost bitten appendages. Most children in the area at the time went bare-foot, even to school.

Initiation to School

It was here that I commenced my education at the Liverpool State School, which included both Primary and High School classes in the one curtilage. I recall without happiness or joy, as a five year old, my introduction to this seat of learning. The school and playground of bare earth and large proportions soon saw me lost in its anonymity of several hundred children at playtime and lunch-time. I recall my

misery trying to find my older brother at lunch-time to seek some solace, and unable to locate him, but joyful when he found me for the four-mile walk home at the close of the school day.

Though I suspect she must have done so, I do not recall my mother taking me to school on the first day. My firmest recollections are of an enormous school playground, with many huge gum trees in and surrounding it, and a multitude of youngsters milling around playing a variety of games simultaneously, an event that can seemingly only happen in a school yard.

Residency at Chester Hill

A couple of years later we moved closer to Sydney to an outer-urban area, Chester Hill which was for the most part scrub and bushland. The road upon which our house was located was approximately one mile from the railway Station, in a group of three, surrounded by large blocks of ground but not cultivated in any way. An elderly couple, the Bryants, were our nearest neighbours; a retiree, who spent much of his spare time making 'crackers' or 'fire-works' for the Guy Fawkes Day celebrations. This day commemorated the attempt by that individual to blow up the English Houses of Parliament.

On the vacant scrub land opposite to his house, and some weeks beforehand, Mr Bryant would set up most of his accoutrements for a firework display, and during this time our family collected brush and small fallen trees and prepare a huge bonfire, which was used by Bryant as the centre piece for his display. They were a huge success and great pleasure was derived by the 20 or 30 neighbour spectators who gathered to witness it.

One particular year things were progressing wonderfully well, with Catherine Wheels and Jumping Jacks giving a spectacular display to all. Suddenly a Catherine Wheel that had been ignited and was spinning furiously on its nail on a pole, spun free and landed in the large cabin trunk which was used to store the finished product, and you guessed it, before any action could be taken all the fire crackers in the trunk ignited, and then followed the most wonderful, concentrated

display we had ever seen. True, it only lasted a short time, but how magnificently it made the twilight evening. Rockets streaking into the air, Jumping Jacks bouncing in every direction and scattering the spectators, explosions and showers of sparks everywhere.

Angry disappointment from Bryant, apprehension from many of the smaller children, and a mixture of humour tinged with sadness from the adults, culminated what was to have been a wonderfully proud spectacle for all concerned. Baked potatoes in their jackets, done in the embers of the bonfire accompanied by community singing, provided some solace to the disappointed. Certainly no disappointment for the youngsters who retained the joys of the evening for long afterwards.

As there was no school at Chester Hill, we walked to the railway Station and embarked for Regents' Park, several Stations closer to Sydney, to attend primary school classes. Between these railway Stations and parallel to the railway line ran the main eight-foot diameter water pipes that provided part of the water reticulation for Sydney. Two pipelines lay side by side, and delivered their contents to a large holding reservoir on the outskirts of Regents' Park. The pipelines were a great source of interest to the children, and they played on them and in their vicinity, for they were readily accessible.

On one occasion after school, we were met by our parents at Chester Hill Railway Station, who were particularly concerned, as we had not arrived home at the appropriate time. Enquiries made revealed that we had not alighted from the train with the other children. It was getting towards early evening when my brother and I idly walking along the pipeline, approached the train embarkation point, to find our anxious parents waiting to receive us, not with open arms as we thought, but with angry admonitions and punishment for our failure to come home by the train, and causing them considerable fear heartache and then considerable anger when they discovered no harm had befallen us. That was the first and last walk home on the pipelines.

Chester Hill Excursions

A wonderful expedition that took place at regular intervals was a walk along the nearby railway lines. Passing steam trains sometimes involuntarily dislodged coal from the engine tender and fell alongside the tracks, and this was gathered with much fun and put to good use. It was not until later years that I discovered our walks were coincidental with the arrival of a passing steam train and, by some curious mishap, the fireman always seemed to inadvertently dislodge several large lumps of coal from the tender onto the tracks as the train puffed past. A grin and a friendly wave from both fireman and driver gave both the recipient and the donor great joy, the railway men being only too well aware how fortunate they were to have full-time work, and how much assistance we derived from the unwitting charity of the New South Wales Government Railway System. A wonderful supplement to the wood gathered for cooking and heating.

Daily and Sunday newspapers were also thrown from the train windows by passengers and railway staff and often provided the only means for adults to keep abreast of current events. Such was the charity and assistance given by so many more fortunate people during those early and middle 1930s Depression crisis.

Not too far from our house, about one hour's walk through the bush, ran a small creek, filled with water discoloured yellow by the clay of the surrounding area, where we were sometimes taken during the hot summer days to have a dip and cool off. On one particular visit, I saw my father swim for the first and only time. Standing on the bank fully clothed, directing we children in our paddling and swimming lessons, the undermined clay bank gave way under his weight and movement, causing him to lose his footing and tumbling him into the water, much to the amusement and raucous laughter of Mother and we children. The sudden disaster soon righted itself, as partly stripped and with his singlet and shirt spread over the nearby bushes, he and the clothing soon dried off in the mid-summer sun.

The toilet facilities at the house were typical of the time and location -a small out-house situated some 30 yards from the back

door down a narrow dirt path with its doorway facing away from the house. It was an occasion when we had some visitors call during the afternoon, and two little girls, one older and one younger than I, offspring of the visitors, had been outside playing. Who instigated the incident will never be known, but by some means the three of us were inside the 'dunny', only to be suddenly confronted by my mother in the doorway, we, endeavouring to light cigarettes butts and having a bit of a puff. More lectures, more punishment. It was here at this house that my father constructed a very large walk-in aviary, which was occupied by a large number of native birds found in the surrounding bushland. A regular chore for we children, was to walk into the bush with a 'tomahawk', a very small hand axe, and select and cut several suitable large branches of shrubs and trees of a type the birds usually feed on and nest in, and drag these home and erect them in the aviary.

The method of trapping the Silver Eyes, Finches and other small birds was simple, cheap and effective. A stout cardboard box, or a plywood 56lb butter box was placed upside down on the ground in the vicinity of the aviary, some bird seed meagrely scattered on the ground in the vicinity of one side of the box, and a more substantial amount placed under the upturned box. A short piece of twig, about four inches long was obtained, and about 50 metres of thin string; one end of the string tied to the centre of the twig. The twig was then stood upright under the edge of the box in the centre so that one side of the box was completely off the ground making a gap the length of the twig. The string was then "played out" along the ground until it was almost taut and the slack removed. One of us would then hold the string taut and wait patiently until a bird or birds alighted to feed on the seed and eat their way under the box. SWISH!! A quick pull of the string and the birds were imprisoned under the box to be removed carefully and placed in the aviary.

A similar trap could be made by placing four housebricks on edge in the form of a square leaving an enclosed hollow in the centre. Another housebrick placed on the top of the square to completely

enclose it, the top covering brick was then raised at one end and the string and twig method again employed to initiate the closure of the trap. Despite the crude construction and triggering mechanism, the traps were very efficient, cost nothing and with co-ordinated timing resulted in many birds being captured easily and without injury. Pigeons were sometimes trapped by the 'box method' and the resultant pigeon pie for an evening meal was a delicious treat for all, and a useful budget supplement at no cost.

It was whilst living in this house that I experienced an event at a local Church that fascinated me and has remained with me, with some impact. We were regular attendees at the Church and Sunday School and on this particular occasion was attending with my family, when a number of the congregation retired briefly, returned dressed in white coveralls of some kind, and walked down the steps near the pulpit, into a large area with approximately three foot of water in it. When each parishioner waded to the centre of this pool, they were completely immersed by the Minister. A full immersion and baptism, so I can only assume it was a Baptist Church. I think I must have been a little frightened or in awe of the event, as the recollection is so vivid and often returns when a conversation or event triggers it.

Regent's Park

A brief residential stay. We moved to Regents' Park and lived almost opposite the large reservoir that I have previously mentioned, which was a 'header' or 'feeder' for the Sydney suburban fresh water reticulation. On the house property there was the usual garden shed in the back yard, myself, Desmond, and at least one other lad were in the shed and somehow gained possession of some point 22 short rimfire bullets. One of us, and I am not sure who, struck the end of the cartridge case with a hammer a number of times with the inevitable result; BANG! This brought our parents hurrying to the scene; and yes, the punishment ensued.