

TWO YEARS IN THE ALLIED WORKS COUNCIL
MAY 1944 - MAY 1946

by Marjorie Andrew

I was working in the Highways & Local Government Department in Adelaide when the war started. After the return of the Australian troops to Adelaide in 1942, I joined the Cheer Up Society and helped at the Palais and No.1 Hut after work. Before that I was for a while in the Voluntary Service Detachment, where we learnt to march & wore a grey overall. My mother became seriously ill early in 1943. For nine weeks I visited Rua Rua Hospital, walking up O'Connell St. & Barton Terrace alone in the black-out. On the day of her death a friend, Millicent Viner left Adelaide to join the Allied Works Council in Alice Springs.

The death of my mother and the loss of friends in the war had upset me and I wanted a change. The Highways Dept. had helped build the North-South Road (the Stuart Highway) with the N.S.W. Dept. of Main Roads, and the Queensland Main Roads Board, and by 1943 was classified as an essential service. It was nearly a year before I was released to join the Allied Works Council.

I was on call for a week, as transport to the Territory was stretched to the limit with troop transport. I received a telephone call at 6 a.m. on the 28th May, 1944. Could I be ready in an hour? A taxi called at my grandfather's house at North Adelaide and took me to Parafield. I was the last to enter the plane. There were 12 Army men, mainly officer and one girl, who became my room mate. I was air sick as we touched down at Mt. Eba and Oodnadatta for petrol and a meal, which Eleanor Irvine was expected to serve. The assistant pilot was very kind to me while I was air sick, and I was saddened to hear of his death in an aircraft accident at Renmark some months later. We arrived 12 hours later, where Millicent met us and took us to No.1 Hostel.

Accommodation for the first week was in the old Recreation Hut, a galvanised iron building with 12 beds for the new arrivals. Three girls arrived by the Ghan that evening. There was a brazier in the middle of the hut, as the nights were very cold by May. There were 2 grey army blankets on the bed. We provided our own linen.

On the Monday morning I started work in the Accountant's Dept. on the ledger machines. It was mainly recording the cost of work done by the Civil Construction Corps, such as building of roads, camps construction work in the Territory. In my section were three other girls, one being Chinese and one man.

I do not remember much detail of my work after 50 years, but we worked hard 5½ days a week with 2 nights overtime a week for some months. One job I do remember, was reconstructing the wages sheets of the workmen in Darwin which had been lost in the Darwin raids. The figures were extracted from ledger sheets and I heard the Taxation Dept. in Adelaide was quite pleased with my effort. Stenographers and machinists were paid £5 a week, clerks more and board was free, so we all saved money as there was very little to spend it on.

We walked along Tod~~d~~ St. to Hartley St. ^{to work} There were about 180 girls living in the two hostels. We had to be over 21 to be allowed into the Territory. They were from all states, and some had been displaced by the war. One girl was on the last boat from New Guinea, leaving her uncle and fiancé behind on the wharf, never to be seen again. She

used to have nightmares and call out "The Japs are coming". We carried parasols in the summer and in the winter many of the girls' legs were scarred with the cold and the hard mineral water and no stockings because of rationing. We walked back to the hostel for lunch.

For the first 9 months I shared a room in a galvanised iron hostel. We did our own laundry, cleaned our rooms and ate in the Hostel dining room, waited on by stewards. Meals were quite good in Alice Springs, although one got tired of "goldfish" and baked beans after a while. There was a matron in charge of each hostel, and she brooked no absenteeism. There was a Medical Aid Post staffed by a nurse at work, and there was the Alice Springs Hospital run by the Army for the army, civilians and aborigines.

The last 9 months we spent in a new hostel built of masonite with a larger room, an open wardrobe and the luxury of a wooden shelf for a dressing table. We had burgundy hessian curtains and bed spreads (sent from town and not needing ration tickets) and a view of Mt. Gillen. Sometimes we had Saturday afternoon tea parties in our rooms when a girl was going on leave or had a birthday. There were also parties in the new Recreation Hut.

The men who worked around the hostels and waited on table, lit the coppers etc. belonged to the Civil Aliens Corps. They were foreigners who had not become naturalised Australian citizens. One was Stefan Haag from the Viennese Boys' Choir and later to be wellknown for his work with the Australian Opera. A German married one of my friends. They seemed to have an easier time than the soldiers.

There were about 4000 soldiers in Alice Springs at this time, consisting of two transport units, the 121st and 122nd. They drove troops and supplies along the Stuart Highway, otherwise known as the Bitumen or the Track. Also there was Administration, Ordnance, Supply, A.E.M.E., the Hospital and the Staging Camp, where the soldiers were in transit after their long trip on the Ghan, often in cattle trucks, before going north by convoy.

The men in the office were permanent public servants, older men in non-essential jobs, who had been called up under the Manpower Act and a few returned servicemen invalided out of the army. Their hostel faced the Tod and was next to No.2 Hostel.

Alice Springs was the Administration centre of the Northern Territory after the Darwin raids. Mr. Abbott the Administrator lived in the Residency and Brigadier Loutit was in charge of the army. The banks, government offices, some civilians including Chinese had been evacuated to Alice Springs after the raids. There were also the locals, graziers and the aborigines. We were all civilians under Army control, and one had to have a permit to enter the Territory.

We did not see many aborigines, They were mainly in reserves out of town. Some of the men worked as laborers for the army, manning the night carts. They seemed to enjoy the work, always wearing army great coats even in the hottest weather.

A canteen provided necessities such as toothpaste, soap, etc. and tinned foods unavailable down south. We were allowed a ration of 100 cigarettes and two bottles of beer a week, the same as the army. I used to send my tobacco ration and tinned food to my grandfather down south, when a friend went on leave.

We had an enjoyable social life. There was a dance every Friday night at the Catholic Hall, and an occasional ball organised by the army units or local organisations. Usually on a Sunday we went to a "Sergeants" or Officers' mess for tea. We went to the open air picture theatre where we sat on deck chairs covered with our grey blankets to keep warm, and chop picnics on the Charles or Todd rivers. We played tennis after work on the Provost' courts next door, where a big army tennis tournament was held. Occasionally we were allowed to go to the camp theatre for a concert and once to any army boxing match. There were football matches between army units, an amateur theatrical group, horse riding and walks. We walked a lot as civilian girls were not allowed in army vehicles, a regulation sometimes ignored by our army friends. Father Eather, the Catholic padre and a local grazier lent us their cars, and even with petrol rationing we managed to visit local sites such as Simpson's Gap, Standley's Chasm, Emily's Gap, etc. Occasional visits to local townspeople's homes were much enjoyed.

A week after I arrived, the first Henley on Todd was organised to raise money for the Red Cross Queen competition. The boats on the dry Todd were manned by A.W.C. men and Army teams. Millicent Viner became Queen and £4,400 was raised for the Red Cross by the competition.

It is said we helped pioneer tourism in the Territory. Len Tuit and Kurt Johansen, two local men, organised trips for us over long week ends. We would leave on Saturday afternoon with our swags (blankets) and our rations from the hostel. About 12 of us would sit on steamer chairs lashed together on the back of a truck. Len usually took a soldier with him to help. We went to Hermannsburg Mission, where we picked up an aborigine, who guided us to the Finke River and Palm Valley. We camped on the sands of the Finke, sleeping between two big tarpaulins with a campfire nearby, and sometimes dingo cries in the background. We also went to Glen Helen Gorge and the Mica Mines near Mt. Palmer. It would cost us about £2. We returned covered in red dust.

The "Overlanders" was made while we were in Alice Springs and we watched one scene being filmed at Emily's Gap. Some of our staff with theatrical experience were engaged as extras or in small parts. We met Daphne Campbell and the leading man, and heard Chips Rafferty speak on his film life.

I went home on leave after a year, travelling on the Ghan, a very interesting journey. Another A.W.C. girl and I had a Turkish Bath at the old Adelaide City Baths to get rid of the red dust.

I remember going to church to celebrate VE Day. and a few months later the great excitement of driving down Todd St. on VJ Day. War news came to us by The Mulga, a little Army paper or by letters from home. Some of our girls went out to help at the aerodrome as prisoners-of war were flown home through Alice.

Peace was bringing change. Girls on leave did not return. Clerks were dismissed to make way for returned men. All the talk was about the move to Darwin, now Administration centre for the Dept of Works and Housing as we had become. Four of our most efficient stenographers had been sent to Adelaide River in February, 1945, where they lived and worked in a compound surrounded by barbed wire. They moved to Darwin a few months later, some of the first civilian girls to return there.

In November I was chosen to go to Darwin. We had a choice of road or air. I flew in a bigger plane this time about a 30 seater. We arrived in the Wet to a crowded hostel (3 to a room) called Town Mess near the railway station. We waited a few days for our ledger machines to arrive by road. We worked in a masonite building on Mitchell. St. with shutters

high up and very few fans. We wore only a bra, panties, dirndl skirt and blouse and the sweat poured off us. At Town Mess we did our washing pioneer style in tubs on the ground. While there we had trouble with prowlers. The provosts were rung, and we were told that as we were civilians they could not help. Sgt. McNab, the only policeman at the time could do nothing, so the senior architects, engineers, etc. patrolled the hostel for a week or so.

In January, we moved to Marrenah House on the esplanade, which had been done up after occupation by the Navy. We were two to a room but with a view of the harbour and a sea breeze, as the building was on stilts. Our washing hung underneath and we had a proper laundry with a copper and troughs. The meals were not very good, as supplies were scarce as the army was moving out and civilians returning. I seem to remember meals of tough frozen beef, dehydrated potatoes & tinned vegetables. We slept under mosquito nets and were issued with mosquito repellent. I had a bad attack of prickly heat over Xmas, and my room mate had to go to hospital with infected sandfly bites.

Darwin was a shock. The harbour was full of bombed ships, the "Neptuna" acting as a wharf. We saw the ruins of the post office, and the banks in the centre of the town, and the damage done to Larrakeyah Barracks and the hospital and other buildings. Most of the houses had suffered under 3 years of army occupation. The frangipani, poinciana and the green grass hid some of the shabbiness.

There were 17,000 troops when we arrived in Darwin but there was a steady exodus. I remember waving farewell to the army girls on the Westralia. The airforce squadrons gave wonderful farewell parties, flying food in from down south. The Darwin Hotel was navy headquarters and I went to a formal dinner there, very different from the relaxed messes of Alice Springs.

Transport was still a trouble for civilians. A bus driven by one of the senior architects took us to work, and back. Otherwise we walked in the heat. We were allowed in service vehicles for official functions and outings and we were lucky enough to get out on the Harbour to Mica Beach in an army launch a few times. We also visited Manton Dam and Berry Springs and the Army farm at Adelaide River and the War Cemetery which had Dutch and Japanese graves there then.

Supplies were short. When a ship arrived, the wharfies, who had just returned, went on strike and the ship had to be unloaded by the army. I remember being presented with a fresh lettuce as a great treat by an army friend. Our canteen was closed, and we had to queue outside Cashman's store for the beer ration, which did not arrive for six weeks.

Visitors from the outside world began to arrive. Lord & Lady Mountbatten drove through the streets in a jeep to great cheers. We pooled our shabby clothes, so the girls invited to the reception for the Mountbattens would look respectable. We were asked on board a Portuguese naval sloop. Senior officers arrived for the War Trials held in great secrecy across the harbor. Buyers from all parts of Australia arrived for the big disposal sales. The Post Office girls and other Government department employees moved into our hostel.

My leave was due and I left Darwin at the end of May, 1946 and returned to Adelaide, resigned from the A.W.C. and was offered a job as a machinist in the Harbors Board. My two room mates are now dead and only about 6 of us meet for our Xmas reunion when we recall the happy times spent in the Territory.

I attach copies of maps of Alice and Darwin and my permit when I returned from leave in 1945.