

# War Stories

*An Intergenerational Initiative*

*Keeping the Memories Alive*

*A record of interviews conducted between Menai High School Year Nine students and clients of Menai District Neighbour Aid.*

*2013*



MENAI HIGH SCHOOL



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# Australia Remembers



Logo donated by Joan Decker. This was issued in 1995 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War Two.

**What follows are the recollections of some clients from Menai District Neighbour Aid. Their words are filtered through the understandings of six students. Some are written in the first person, some in the third person. This reflects the interpretation of the student recording the memories**

*War Stories*



# Freda June Barker



**T**he 2nd World War started on September 1939, before that we were issued with a gas mask that we carried around everywhere. At school and after school we had gas mask practice, which I hated because I couldn't breathe in them.

When someone said that England was at war with Germany we were all panic stricken and thought we were going to get gassed. We went around the neighbourhood and put sticky crosses on the windows to stop the glass from breaking when the bombs and guns went off. We had bombs and guns quite close to where I lived. We all got panic stricken and thought we were going to get bombed straight away. But it wasn't like that, it was very quiet up to about February when it started to step up a bit and that was the year when I was 14 and my father died and that left me, my sister and my mother.

We were issued with Anderson shelters. They were delivered to all the houses as sheets of corrugated metal in your garden and you had to put them together and dig a hole in the garden and put them together with nuts and bolts. That was a struggle because it was just my mother and sisters. Then you had to put grass on top to protect it from the bombs and whatever and it was hard work. That was where we had to sleep every night. We didn't have a door where everybody built a wooden door was because we didn't have a man to do that so we just hung a couple of blankets as a door.

When I was 14 I started work because there was no other option, unlike you children today who've gone for further education. I worked at a jeweller's shop, first as a junior. I came home on my bicycle very quickly because there was a siren telling us raids had already started. This was what happened every night. The raids came and the sirens came before I got home from work so I got home very quickly, as you can imagine. Straight down there in the shelters mum had food ready for me. That's where we slept all night and we didn't have any lighting or any candles in the shelter. We fixed bunk beds up and of course you can imagine that it was very cold and uncomfortable and I remember, for something to do, I was knitting black gloves by candlelight, out of black wool and I shall never forget that one as long as I live! Where we slept we could hear guns going and whatever was going on outside.





# Freda June Barker



When my sister was 19 years of age she got called for the war in the women's RAF. That was the age they were called in. So she went off to war as a driver in the air force and she drove lorries and she used to take pilots out to the planes when they went on the raids in Germany. That was her job and a lot of them didn't come back, as you can imagine. We used to go in to the canteen and a lot of the chairs were empty because the men didn't come back.

We had waves and waves of squadrons of German bombers coming over. I lived 10 miles out of London, which was right in the path of Croydon airport and saw swarms of German bombers come over night after night after night, dropping their bombs and you were hoping that they weren't dropping on you. That was our life for a long, long time.

My father had died when I was 14 and he was only 44. My father was a guard in the underground in London and he had to travel to the underground to get to work and he had an accident. One of his friends hit a plate layer (worker). This was during the war years. My father had to go up front to see what had gone wrong because he knew the train had hit something or somebody. I think that was what killed him.

It was a very nervous time in our lives because he had a court case to go to. We think that that's what caused his pneumonia, caused his illness. He had to go to hospital every day for a week and he died from pneumonia. Of course, these days, nobody dies with pneumonia, but you couldn't afford to pay for the drugs that they wanted him to have. So that was a bad start to our lives as well as the war.

When my sister was called up at 19 and she was called into the Air Force to drive, my mother and I were alone during the war. When I got to call-up age, I thought I'd better get more work, otherwise I would be called up like my sister. If I got called up at 19, I would be leaving my mother on her own, so I didn't want to do that. She had to work because she was a widow and she only had 10 shillings a week, pension money. That's what they gave widows in those days, 10 shillings, so she had to go to work as well, part time, and we both worked on parachutes. I became an inspectress to inspect parachutes; it wasn't man-dropper chutes. It was supply droppers. We worked in a big workshop. Every portion of the parachute was a different colour and each colour represented the item they were going to drop over the troops.



# Freda June Barker



There was talk that we were going to do man droppers, but I was hoping it wouldn't come. So I was inspectress and that was my job during the war. In the day, the sirens would go and we had to stop work and rush to the shelters outside. So you can imagine, it was in and out with not much work at all. But then of course we were doing this war work so this prevented us being called up.

During the war, we had food rationing and ration books and we had 8 penny's worth per week of meat for each person. As you can imagine, we didn't get much meat. We used to have one book in the week for 3 people and save 2 books for the weekend so we could buy a decent piece of meat for Sunday. We saw hardly any fruit during the war and I don't know what we did eat really. We had powdered egg because we were only allowed one egg per book per week, and that was a luxury. They did get some... I think it came from America this powdered egg. Tins of powdered egg and we thought it was wonderful because we could make omelettes. I rather like the powdered egg, but a lot of other people don't. There was offal at the butchers like kidneys and liver which wasn't very often. People used to swarm and queue up to the butchers because there was something to eat and to make a meal. So it was almost starvation during that time and sugar was rationed. Margarine was rationed. Sweets were rationed because I worked at a sweet canteen and I had to cut out coupons from people's ration books. It was tempting not to have a nibble of the sweets! That was my job before I went onto parachutes because I knew I had to give that job up to be safe during the war.

At home it was so cold that my mother used to order coal and they would only allow you a certain amount and if you owed too much money they wouldn't let you order anymore because you could burn more than what you could pay for. So many, many months I used to come home from school and it was freezing cold with no fire because there wasn't any coal. I used to light the gas oven in the kitchen and put my feet in the oven to keep them warm and that was what we had to do.

There was a gas fire in one of the bedrooms where we lived and we put pennies in. Mum used to tell us to save all your pennies because a penny didn't last more than 5 minutes.

Bombers came across: "drone, drone, drone", and you could hear the hum of the German bombers and they dropped bombs not very far from us. They dropped fire bombs and there was a pub down the road which got burnt out.



# Freda June Barker



They had a huge gun that motored around the streets to shoot at the bombers, mobile gun they used to call them and when they went off they really went off. One night there was a terrible bang, because I hadn't got to the shelter that night and this big bang went off and I remember getting up against the wall away from all the windows and the doors. I swear the wall moved and went back again with the vibration. I got under the table in the living room for a little while. You always feel protected when you've got something covering you. It probably wouldn't have saved me if it hit the house, but I just felt I had to get under cover. Then we went down into the shelter after that.

I couldn't go out like you youngsters do at night, it wasn't safe when the raids were on so our life was put on hold really for going to dances and going out with friends like you boys and girls do (which is great). I wouldn't want you to go through the life that I went through.

At the end of the war, Hurricane and Spitfire planes got going and they were the ones that beat the German bombers. They deterred them from coming over because the fighters could see them. They didn't stop them completely, but they didn't come as often. Then the Germans brought in the doodle bug (flying bomb). It was like a plane but there was no pilot in it. It was fired off like a rocket. They had a really definite sound that I can still hear it today now even. It would go "weeoo weeoo woo weeoo" and we knew it was a flying bomb. When the engine cut out, you knew it was going to come down. So we used to look at it and you would either stand there or get behind a tree and you just hope it wouldn't come near you. They only lasted about 5-6 months or so, the flying bombs. It was long enough anyway.

So that was a scary time. They were terrifying really when I worked on parachutes and we were going in and out the shelter all day long (night as well). We were working one day and a doodle bug came and all the people who lived on Robertbridge road where I lived were told they could go home. We were allowed to go home and I thought "please let it not be my house" and I was afraid to turn the corner until I saw my house was still standing.

One Sunday afternoon, when the weather was nice, I was sitting in the back garden near the shelter in the sunshine. The house that was just next door to us had a side window up the stairs. I happened to go inside, and a doodle bug just dropped on the other side of the road and where I'd been sitting was all broken glass. I was very lucky that I had moved away. We went round to have a look and the house was just down to the ground. I was just in the middle of the bombing. Not that I was in London, but when it hit London the sky was blood red with the fires that were going on.



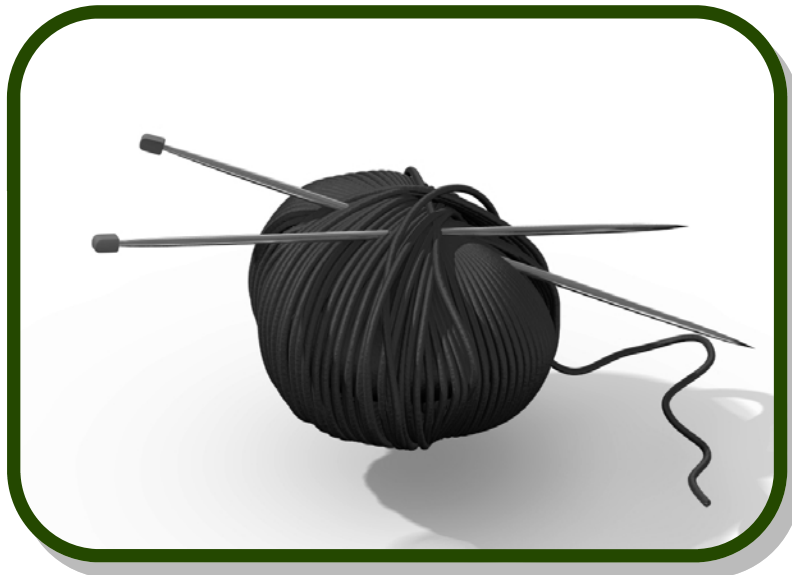
# Freda June Barker



During the war Lord Haw Haw used to speak and try to demoralise the British people. He was an American so at the end of the war, he was hung as a traitor. Mussolini was an Italian dictator because they didn't really want to fight the British but they did because they were on the German side. Mussolini and the lady friend were hung on a lamp post by the Italians themselves because they didn't want to go to war with the British. Hitler was a dictator, beast of a man, and his lady (Eva Braun was her name) they committed suicide because they knew they would get shot or whatever. Their bodies were taken outside and burnt.

The Pope, who was Italian, was all for the Nazis and some say he helped them to escape to Argentina. 1939-42 was when we had these squadrons of German bombers coming over, and the doodle bugs 5-6 months after that

I didn't have any really young life as I should've been having, because I couldn't go out at night. You children today, I'm glad that you've got a good life, a safer life. I wouldn't want anyone to go through all this but it might sound depressing and miserable but it wasn't really. I had a good mum; it was a pity I lost my father. I mean it sounds scary and frightening but everybody helped each other and we were all in the same boat. So we had to accept that that was our lives.





# Dot Brindle



**D**orothy Brindle was 16 when the war started. She lived in Mascot. She had one younger brother. He never went to war because he was too young at the time. Her father kept his job through the depression years. "I was lucky; I really didn't feel it like some of them."

Dorothy was 14 when she started work. She went to high school but had chosen to leave to go to work. Her mother took her to find work in an office. "I told my mum that I didn't want to sit in an office and work all day." Her mother then agreed to find her a job in sewing as this is what she liked to do. They started work at 8am and finished at 5pm. They worked every day, the majority of people catching a tram to work in the city. After 4 years she became a fully qualified machinist. Her work building was burnt down during the war. Her employers found everyone temporary jobs until they had a new building.

There were various forms of entertainment in those days. There were movies at which a news reel would be played first. "We used to see some lovely movies." Dorothy and her friends would often save up their money and go somewhere for a weekend. It was a great retreat and an enjoyable pastime. Women used to go on picnics in the national parks. They would catch a train and walk the rest of the way. They would take steak and onions to eat for lunch.

Dorothy's husband served in World War II. "You didn't know if your boyfriend would come home alive." He was a prisoner of the war and was forced into working for the Japanese on a railway. He had said that some of the men did a poor job, hoping that the Japanese would go across and they would collapse. The men were fed on a mere half cup of rice, sometimes with cooked dog or cat meat. The water they received was not clean and caused a lot of disease. A lot of men got sick because of their diets, however they were still made to work.



# Dot Brindle

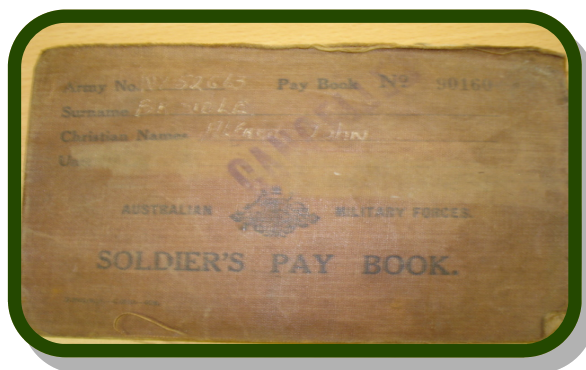


Dorothy's husband came home on a big American aircraft carrier from Japan. When they knew that they had won the war, the men in Japan were dropped food to fatten them up. "They came home bloated really." Dorothy was lucky that her husband came home and was even able to start working just weeks after his return. The men who went to war were able to keep their old jobs when they came back.

Many of the men had to get treatments for war related problems but Dorothy's husband and some of his friends were in reasonable health. Some of the men came home a little deaf because of the noise in the mines or in their work areas. Of course Dot's husband had seen a lot of his mates die and had some malaria whilst in the war, but was better off than most. His brother-in-law had to tell him that his mother had died while he was away at war.

Dorothy still has a watch, an army pay book and photos that travelled with her husband. They had been through prisoner camps and the mines in Japan. They had also made it through a river that he was forced to swim across because a bridge had been blown up. Her husband had a doctor with him. He used to take photos of the war, which of course, were destroyed by the Japanese. However, they kept the proofs and buried them. After the war they found them and had vital information that the Japanese didn't want anyone to have.

Almost everything was rationed for the people who stayed at home. Most of these were women and children. You couldn't go and buy a dress or shoes, everything was rationed. You would have to wait until you had saved up enough coupons to receive those privileges. Mothers found it hard to make meals as meat and even potatoes were rationed. Ladies would line up for a bottle of beer on New Year's eve and cigarettes were rationed. Dorothy didn't smoke but would save the cigarettes she received and save them for when she sent a parcel to her boyfriend. Dorothy was lucky that she could sew. "There was a black market going on and sometimes you'd get a bit of material." "It was hard getting through."



# Freda Taylor



**F**reda was born in Nottingham, England during 1928. She was a child during the Great Depression, but doesn't remember what was going on at the time. Her mother was a typical housewife whilst her father was a shopkeeper. He had a bad accident in the mid thirties, which caused mass psychological damage and bad eyesight, therefore was deemed unfit to go to war, which commenced in 1939.

At the age of 13, Freda's school was bombed and partly destroyed. She thought there would be no school because they didn't have a place to work, but the teachers found a way to still teach. During that time most houses had a special room used for "best" occasions, so the teachers went knocking on doors asking if they could utilise the rooms for teaching. She stated, "Everyone sat on the floor with only a small electric heater to keep them warm and I can remember turning up in all my winter clothing – freezing cold." Teachers struggled to cope with the change, as well as the students. The home economics rooms at school were mainly destroyed, which devastated her, as she loved cooking lessons. The school was repaired after the war, when Freda had already left School and gone to a Business College. She stayed there for 2 years before starting work at sixteen.

Much office work was done by women while the men were away at war, though, when the men returned after the war, women had to leave, as ex-servicemen's jobs were returned to them.

In Nottingham, enemy planes frequently flew over the city to bomb industrial areas, but any bombs left over after a raid, would be dropped on towns as the planes returned to Germany. On clear nights the River Trent, running through Nottingham would show up in moonlight, leading the planes to a good target. Large bombs called Molotov Cocktails made of steel filings, would do enormous damage as well as starting fires.

My school friend's brother who joined the British Army at 17 and a half (under age) and was sent to fight in North Africa and Italy, was taken prisoner of war in Italy in 1944. He and other prisoners were given their black piece of breakfast bread the night before, and rats came from the nearby river to steal it.

The Italians were friendly people, both to the prisoners, and to English people when they were taken there as prisoners of war. Many worked on the farms and were often heard singing as they worked.



# Freda Taylor



When the war ended there were mass celebrations, bright lights and much happiness. Freda said "It was like the Olympics, but much more exciting." Though the fighting had ceased, a trail of devastation was left. All street signs had been destroyed, in case of an enemy invasion. Sand bags were everywhere to support damaged houses.

Freda's friend's brother was demobbed in 1945 (released back into civilian life) and subsequently joined a bank in London, which was recruiting officers to work in Australia and New Zealand. In 1950 he applied to be transferred to Perth, Western Australia, and he and Freda were married one week before sailing on a 6 weeks' voyage, and they found a home in Fremantle, W.A.. They lived in W.A. for 16 years and then transferred to Sydney in 1969, and NSW has been home ever since.

When asked a few questions about today's society and the effect that WWII had on the world she responded accordingly:

## **What is your view of the war that is occurring in Afghanistan?**

"When will they learn? Already thousands of men and women have died because of WWII, all from the one man. I think it's pretty obvious who that is. As for us learning something from the war – *we haven't!* I hate that we have to hate the opposing side and I really don't think that Australia should get involved in anyone else's battles. I can't imagine the world will ever be at peace

## **Did you ever have a chance to meet an opposing soldier?**

"Yes, in fact I did - multiple times. If you just met the soldiers walking along the streets with nothing but the clothes on their back they would be really friendly, mostly, and they were all like the rest of us. They were just a bunch of guys forced to go to war."

## **Can you tell me something that has significantly changed since the time of war?**

"I think that men and women's place on earth have turned! Men are mostly staying at home, while the women are going out to work 9 to 5! We can thank war time for that. I wish I could take you back decades and show you what has changed over time."





# Maria Kelly



I was born in 1924. When the Second World War started I was only 14 years old. I lived in a small village in Italy. Throughout the war I was very frightened. We had to be very careful when we walked around. I lived in a village which didn't have much, but the enemy were bombing a lot. You could hear the planes overhead.

In 1941 I lost my mum when she was 54 years old and I was only 17 years old. My brother enjoyed farming so he lived on a farm and it was just my dad and I. We owned a little house which had a cellar. We had stairs that went to the kitchens and bedrooms. When they bombed next door it destroyed our stairs so we couldn't get to our bedrooms. We had no running water so we would go with a bucket to get it. I wasn't a great cook but we used to make our own bread.

When I finished school I was only 12 years old. When I was in fifth form I had to complete it twice as I was only very young. After school, my mum sent me to sewing classes. Opposite to where I lived was a place which made suits and pants. I went there to learn how to make pants. When my mum was alive we were doing well as she was a farmer's daughter so we always had food, but after she died it was a struggle to eat.

My dad went to visit his sister and afterwards he was hit on the ribs by a grenade. We could hear the bombing as the large town wasn't far away. This particular morning I went up to the hospital with my dad and the Germans bombed the hospital and the Germans took our shelter which a man from our village made. My friend came to see me and check on me. I asked her to come down the stairs and then the garden was bombed. We had a big door which went down to the garden and there was a table which split into two. After that, we had nowhere to go. We had no idea of why they would bomb a small village like ours.

When the war was on, there were dances in the evening, my mum would allow me to go but my father didn't. One afternoon my friend suggested that we and two boys would sit around an open fire and just talk. My dad was very strict and he wasn't even happy with this small gathering. We had nothing in those times, that is why I loved dancing so very much. I also used to sing in a choir at church.

When the war was finished I was 21 and the English came after the Germans had left. The Eng-



# Maria Kelly



When the war was finished I was 21 and the English came after the Germans had left. The English were staying in a big camp or villa. I was going up to my uncle who was a farmer and this soldier said to me 'Would you like a lift?' and I said: 'no thank you'. He asked me again and I said no as I was frightened.

One afternoon he found me and said there was a dance at his villa and he asked me if I would like to come. I said no, as my dad wouldn't like it as he was very strict. As I had lost my mum at 17, I think he felt he needed to protect me.

Men and women would go down to the camp to do washing and other chores. The soldier would drive up every morning and one day he asked me if I would marry him. At this time a lot of English men wanted to marry Italian girls. A superior of my fiancé came and asked me what kind of girl I was. He warned me that I was going to a place where I didn't know the language and my fiancé said I would learn. We were married on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September, 1945 by the wharf. My husband stayed in Italy for a while and then he went for a holiday in England to visit his mum. When he came back I moved to the camp with him. When I was 22 I moved to England, it took a week by ship. In England I lived with his mum for three years and then we bought our own house. My husband fought in the war for several years. When he was fifty-four years old he developed cancer and he passed away at the age of sixty.

When my children were grown up, my son was the first one to move to Australia. I would visit him and then my daughter went to live in Australia. She asked me to come to Australia too. I was on my own as my husband passed away and my children were married. In 1999 I moved to Australia. I am now 88 years old. I have seven grandchildren, 10 great grandchildren and three great-great-grandsons.



# Stefania Syzman



W

hen I lived back home in Poland we were living next to a big forest with bison and there were Polish nobility and German nobility. The Russian nobility used to come and hunt in there.

In 1941, the Russians were coming from one side and we had partisans hiding in the forest who were fighting the Russians, who were coming from the other side. So a lot of people got killed, 129 men were killed. My father was in line to be shot too, but when they shot the bullets he fell with the other ones pretending he was dead so he survived but my grandfather got killed and my mother had a bullet in her leg to the day she died.

One of the Russian partisans was killing the Polish people in the town and village because they thought we were hiding the Polish partisans who were fighting the Russians and the Germans, which was true, but none of the people would give them away, so they shot all the people for practically nothing.

After that the Russians led the Germans to invade Poland again. When they came in they wanted to know where the partisans were hiding but no one would tell them. They then sent somebody to the town hall in the city to tell us what was going to happen to all of us. Everybody thought that they were going to shoot all the men, so the women went. My mother went over there and they said "You've got half an hour to get ready, you can take what you can carry and then you have to leave". Mum had four children, I was the youngest one at five years old, and she was pregnant. All she could take was a few little things and they packed us into trucks that were for the animals.

The lorries took us to the station and packed us into some cattle trains and took us to the prison camp. It was the gas chambers where they had people exterminated. Once they got us down there in a room they told us we had to strip because we were going to be "cleansed". Whilst getting undressed, getting ready to go into the showers from which we would probably never come out, a German officer came in and said: "This lot of Polish are Catholics and are not Jews so they are not to go to the showers and are here for work".



# Stefania Syzman



So we were told to get dressed again and were taken to a factory. Because my father was a carpenter he had to work in the factory, building coffins for the German army and my mother worked there as well. My sister was 9 years old and she had to scrape all the glue off the coffins with my brother. We had one little room where we were able to live and were given rations for living.

I can't exactly remember how long I was there before we were liberated, because I was actually really young, but the English came and liberated us. It was towards the end of the war and again we were put into camp, but this time it was under the English and Americans. We were given passes for a social worker and we had to wait until we could go overseas somewhere. We were told we could choose to go back home or go overseas. My father asked if we could go to our own place, our land, our home but it was all burned and we could only go back where the Germans used to occupy Poland but then Poland repossessed that land back so they called it repossessed land. So we actually signed for Argentina but my sister got married and her husband signed to go to Australia. After we had survived the war together, no one wanted to be separated again so my father asked the immigration department if we could change to come here and they said yes so we waited 8 months.

When we came here we came to Western Australian and my sister was in Sydney so we again needed to wait to be reunited, but we did. We were told to work for two years in whatever job we could find to pay for the fare, so my father and brother worked with a pick and shovel, putting the Water Board pipes in. In those days there was no machinery like there is now and they lived in a tent all week and only came home on the weekend, winter or summer.

My brother in law was given the job, with my sister, of working on a farm but, the thing is, the farmer had no money to pay wages. He used to give them cheques which had no money to cover them. After six months or so, my sister went to the bank. Because they were on a farm, the only way to get to the bank was to catch a coal truck. They went every day to transport the coal, but the bus only went once a week. When she got to the bank the teller said there was no money to cover the cheques, because they were no good. There was no translation, nobody to help her and she was standing there crying because she didn't know what was going on.

Lucky for her, there was one lady who spoke German and she said: "Do you speak German?" and my sister replied that she did. This lady told her the farmer who had given her the cheques was





# Stefania Syzman



no good and that there was no money in the bank. So asked her what she should do and explained that we had been working for him for 7 months now. The German-speaking lady replied that she would have to go to the immigration department in Liverpool. My sister had no idea where Liverpool was and asked how to get there. The lady helped get my sister onto a truck and asked the driver to drop her off at the immigration department in Liverpool.

When she got down to Liverpool the poor thing was standing there and didn't know what to do, she was upset and crying. She heard two young men talking between themselves and they were saying: "I wonder why that young girl is crying ... something is wrong" and they were speaking in Polish. She went over and they told her not to worry, they were in the English army so they spoke English very well. They asked her to come with them and that they would fix it up for her. So she went to the immigration department and they explained to them what had happened. The immigration department said they would come and they would relocate her into a different job. They went to the farmer who only had one thing that was worth money. It was the bull that he used to take to the Easter show. So they took the bull, sold it, payed them what he owed and gave them another job.

My brother in law went to work in a coal mine and my sister was pregnant at the time so she stayed at home. By that time, we were able to get transported to Sydney. My sister wrote to us when we were in Sydney that she was in Camden.

When we arrived there my mother said it was like the end of the world, and it was. There was nothing there, only the coal mine, one little shop and no translators for us. Nothing like now. You have got television and mobile phones. Nothing like that. When we arrived in the country we never complained like other people, who even burned houses down. Nothing like that. As I said, my father and brother lived in a tent with a pick and shovel and didn't complain. So we appreciated this new country very much.



# Stefania Syzman



This photograph was taken in Germany just after the end of World War II.  
Stefania is on the left, wearing a dark dress.

*War Stories*



# Joan Decker



**J**oan Decker was born in Sydney, Australia. She was 13 when the Second

World War began in December 1939. She was just starting high school and lived in Paddington.

## Home Life

She used to knit for the soldiers as an activity at school, which was quite popular as wool was a readily available resource throughout the tough times of rationing. One of her teachers brought this experience to her attention. They had rations books for food and clothing. "We didn't have Warragamba Dam so there were water restrictions; we got our water from Prospect Reservoir"

Joan had to leave school at the tender age of 14 and tells of other's similar experiences. "Lots of people had to leave school at a young age because of the Depression years. People couldn't always afford to be at school. I met another girl who had to leave school when she was 14."

Joan had a job in the lay-by department at Farmers (now known as Grace Brothers) on the corner of George Street and Pitt Street,) which she described as "good fun". At the very beginning of World War II, as rationing started, she says she was "run off her feet in the lay-by department". As the war progressed, retail wasn't considered an essential industry and many people had to leave the department store to be moved into essential industries. "If you couldn't find a job in essential industries, they would put you wherever they wanted you."

World War II opened up many opportunities for women in the work force that they did not have previously. "I applied for a job with the Commonwealth Government when I was 15 ½ and worked for the army at the old Showground."

Entertainment was always busy. "You would have to book your seat for the picture show. There were plenty of cinemas in town." Pubs usually had closing of 6 o'clock, and beers came in bottles, not cans, called quart bottles (which were 1 ½ litres).



# Joan Decker



## Joan's wartime Memories

Joan recalls the experiences of soldiers in the 7<sup>th</sup> division, who went on the Thai-Burma Railway. They were skeletons when they came back.

Joan was a member of the Women's Air Training Corps. The history of the Women's Air Training Corps had its beginning in 1938 where a group of young ladies, who had a common interest in aviation, formed the Australian Women's Flying Club.

These young enthusiasts perceived that there would be a role for women in the near future to assist in the national defence of Australia, as at the time war clouds were gathering in Europe and Japanese expansion had begun to the North of our country.

In 1940, after the outbreak of hostilities, these dedicated ladies altered the name of their organisation from the Australian Women's Flying Club to the Women's Air Training Corps. As the Women's Air Training Corps they were recognised by the authorities as an organisation that could legitimately hold formal military type meetings, conduct war effort training and wear an appropriate uniform.

As a civilian clerk with the Army, Joan was a despatch runner with a yellow and blue armband, taking messages to various offices as there were no phones. They were based in the Hall of Industries, known as the Show bag Pavilion while their toilet facilities were in the Hordern Pavilion – "a bit of a trek if you were in a hurry!"

There were slit trenches in the Moore Park area, which were used for air raid drill. There was a drought throughout much of the war so there were red "Don't waste water" signs everywhere (Warragamba Dam was not built then). Home deliveries of food stopped because food rationing for the war effort meant that everyone had to shop at grocery stores.

Because of the blackout restrictions, people always carried a torch at night to attend local picture shows and dances held at the local Town Hall. The Trocadero near Sydney Town Hall and the Tivoli Theatre near Central Station were both popular dance halls. A popular place for people to meet was at Bebarfald's Furniture Store, now Woolworth's corner.





# Joan Decker



Clothes were recycled, summer shoes were “Jesus Christ sandals” worn with fake tanned “stockings”. Mums stayed at home cooking for shift workers. Pubs had six o’clock closing and quart (about one and a half litres) bottles of draught beer were placed in sugar bags to take to the dances. Joan remembers that even a keg could be sourced for a big party and there was always a market for SP (starting price) bookmakers, with races being broadcast on the radio. Street photographers did a roaring trade taking their photos in the street, so even though, on the surface, people didn’t look that busy, Joan remembers that “we were all doing our best to support the Army, Navy and Airforce as well as the Merchant Marines.”

Americans were based at Herne Bay, Georges River (now Riverwood) and they used Bankstown Airport as their air base. The De Havilland Aircraft Company was located at Bankstown until recently and their building now houses an interesting air museum.

The Shire and St George areas experienced a mock invasion when an army officer decided to show the authorities how poor Sydney’s defences were. He was a descendant of Charles Wentworth and went on to become a federal member of Parliament.

Joan received the Red Cross medal for training as a VAD in the Women’s Air Training Corp, Ambulance Squadron. Her training and expertise in her division required bravery, hard work and dedication.

As a final thought, Joan notes that the increasing size of the crowds at memorial services show that our fighters, their supporters and allies have not been forgotten.



# Joan Decker



GIRLS OF 15 YEARS AND UPWARD  
ENROL NOW WITH THE

## Australian Women's Flying Club

N.S.W. DIV. OF  
Women's Air Training  
Corps

Become FIT Mentally & Physically  
and Train in

### AIRCRAFT

NAVIGATION  
PARACHUTE COURSE  
AIRCRAFT IDENTIFICATION  
CONSTRUCTION &  
MAINTENANCE

AERO ENGINES

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FIRST-AID (Primary to Advanced)

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UNARMED DEFENCE

V.A.D. DETACHMENT

CLASSES 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.

PHYSICAL TRAINING . . . . . Mondays and Fridays

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DRILL . . . . . 3rd Saturday each Month at 2 p.m.

FOR MEMBERSHIP PARTICULARS APPLY  
221 GEORGE STREET. PHONE BW 5321

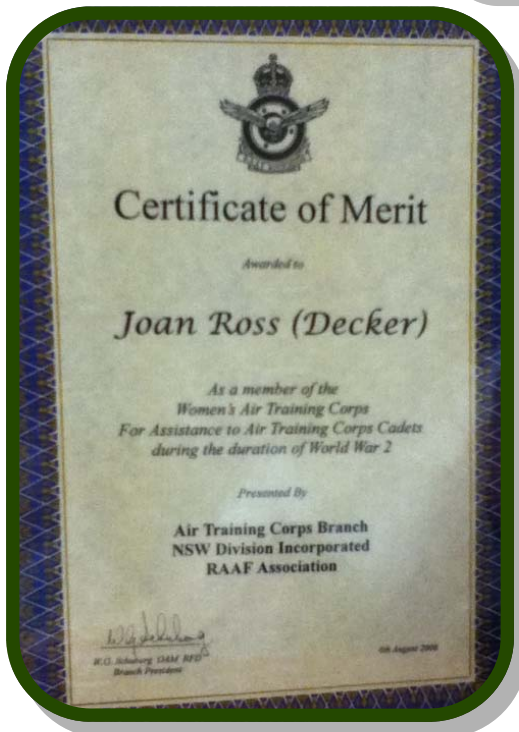
The Ideal Printers, Crows Nest. XF 1174.

War Stories





# Joan Decker



War Stories



# Dawn Fletcher



Dawn shared some of her family memorabilia with us.



*War Stories*





# Dawn Fletcher



*War Stories*



# Nancy Elliot



*lived in Katoomba at the time of World War 2, and I was 9 years*

*old. I remember the look on my parent's faces when Winston Churchill came on the radio and announced that war had been declared with Germany. There were many differences in life before compared to life during WWII...*

There were many hardships faced throughout this time. It made it difficult with everything being in short supply. Everyone had to have the house blacked out at night; blankets were put up at the windows so no one could see in. There were no street lights, which didn't really matter because there weren't many cars driving on the road anyway due to petrol rationing. Everyone was given ration books which had to last for a month. You received a certain amount of coupons per family, suitable for the number of people in the family. Tea, coffee, sugar, butter, meat and clothing were all included in the rations. "Sometimes we were lucky to have people that would come around and sell us the rabbits they'd killed. That would supplement our meat ration."

Everything was in short supply. There was a second hand clothing store in town where you could buy school uniforms without coupons. The uniforms were navy with a white blouse. When you grew out of uniforms, they weren't thrown away or given away like today. Instead, mothers would fix them, whether that meant sewing, cutting, or changing them because you had to make do with what you had. "If sheets got thin in the middle, you would cut it in half, sew the outsides to the middle and hem the thin parts because you couldn't buy new ones. Boot polish was another thing we didn't have, but we would make our own with soots from the fuel stoves and leftover fat from cooking. Even toothpaste was scarce and we had to brush our teeth with soap and water."

We never received information about the weather on the radio, as we previously did. At school, there were many frightening air raid drills. There would be air raid signal alarms that would go off at the beginning and at the end of the practise. "When we heard these warnings we would have to walk out of the school, and down to a park, where we would lie and hide under bushes. Then, we were only allowed to come out when we heard the second warning, and return to school. We got used to it as time went on, however it was still very frightening."



# Nancy Elliot



They were trying to evacuate Sydney, so we had people come to our house to check how many rooms we had. They wanted people billeted to houses and you had no say in it. We had 3 people come stay in our house, people we didn't know at all.

## Childhood memory

"I remember one of my friends and her brother had a large backyard. One day, there were four of us kids and we decided to make a dug-out; we were all very excited. We put a stove in there so we could have a fire, and there was a little chimney but it didn't work so every time we lit the stove, it smoked and we had to get out... we couldn't stay in there. We would try and cook potatoes on this little stove. It was just some fun that we would have. I guess you could say the dug-out was like a cubby, but underground. They also had a lovely apple tree and on our way to school we would pick an apple, and you could eat it on your way."

At this time, there were no school buses. I lived a fair distance from my school, and I had to walk in all weather conditions on an uphill route. There was a specific day when I walked home from school and it was so cold that my hair was frozen and it had to be thawed over the stove.

## Entertainment

For entertainment as a young girl, I would go to the picture shows, school social clubs which were held once a month or go for walks. "Apart from that there wasn't much to do. We didn't have cameras or any technology like these days, but if you went to the pictures you were really entertained."

## Experiences at war

Throughout World War II there was the war in Europe and the war in the Pacific. At age 9, I was concerned about the war in the Pacific and the advancing Japanese. There were Japanese soldiers that would take photos, locate prime positions and plot their attack. One Japanese soldier dressed in civilian clothes and actually came to my house and asked my father to take photographs from my back veranda, which had a good view of the sand hills at Cronulla and the city.





# Nancy Elliot



## ***Did anyone in your family go to war?***

Well, my father worked in essential industries, along with 2 of my brothers so they didn't go to war. My father and one brother were opticians, and the other was a printer. I had 2 brothers that went to war. It wasn't conscription, they volunteered. Everyone was for fighting for our country.

## ***Where did they serve?***

My husband's grandfather, Jack Elliot and Jack's brother, Lionel Elliot fought in World War I. My own brother, Keith was tragically killed in World War II by the advancing Japanese soldiers on the border of Malaysia and Singapore. Japanese soldiers attacked from behind, coming from Thailand on bicycles with very little noise, allowing the Japanese troops to ambush the troops successfully.

My brother Jack was born in 1924 and was 18 when he signed up. Jack was shipped to Papua New Guinea to look after the Japanese Prisoners Of War, and has a permanently stiff leg from this duty.

The war finished in 1945 and I married in 1950. Everything was still in very short supply, you couldn't get buildings materials, fridges, stoves and even blankets were hard to get your hands on.



*War Stories*





# Ron Ashby



## R on Ashby's Story

*"We struggled but we survived."*

I was born in 1930 and I lived through World War two. I lived in Charlton, London. I had four brothers and a sister. It wasn't a pleasant time as the world was coming out of a depression. My father was out of work and we had no money and therefore no food. There was no dole or national assistance so we struggled to eat. I can remember crying for food as a young boy. This lasted for two or three years. To find work, my dad would walk for an hour and a half, stand outside a factory with a crowd of other men and a man would come outside the factory and select people for a job that day. The factory was in a place called Charlton. We moved here when my dad was looking for a job and one day my dad got a job and everything picked up, it was suddenly roses!

Until I was nine years old there was peace in the world, it was lovely. Suddenly in 1939, Hitler invaded different parts of Europe. Hitler took France and came to the border of the English Channel which was only 26 miles of water between France and England. I was living in London. Due to the agreement between Poland and England, when Poland was invaded by Germany, we, being England, were now in the war.

The main target for the Germans was London where I lived. We were bombed every day, all day and night. On one occasion a bomb exploded next door and blew the tiles off our roof and shattered the windows. The bombing continued from 1939 till 1945. Even at school we were bombed. We would be sitting in class and the air raid siren would sound. The sound of bombs would be heard all around us. We would have to rush to the basement and hide and hope nobody would drop a bomb on the building. This was a constant issue. One day after school the street was filled with school children. An enemy plane came overhead and machine gunned all the kids in the street. I threw myself on the ground and just hoped nothing would happen. Things like this happened all the time, you lived with it.

War Stories



# Ron Ashby



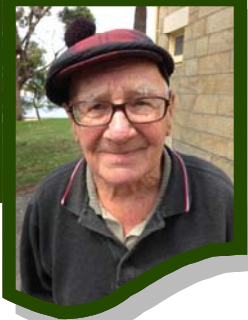
1944 was the climax of the war for me. In July 1944 I was 14 and my older brother was 16 years old and we belonged to an organization called the 'Boys Brigade'. We would march around on the streets on Saturdays and Sundays. It was a great organization for kids as it kept them off the streets. My brother and I would go every evening to 'Boys Brigade' where there was always something on, like playing the bugle or learning first aid. On this particular night in July we started out walking which took around 40 minutes. In our street there were only two cars which would travel the streets every day, so we would walk everywhere. We were walking to the Boys Brigade and about three quarters of the way, we were passing a sports field and then sirens sounded. We then heard a flying bomb which was a plane that was filled with explosives; it had no pilot and only had enough fuel to last to the destination, which was London. When the plane ran out of fuel it dived and crashed down. The explosives then blew up and it blew up everything. One of these bombs was coming towards my brother and me. The engine then cut out and it began diving towards us. I threw myself on the ground and my brother ran into the public air raid shelter. I watched the plane dive and crash and then explode. I saw piles of wood, bricks and tile in the air. We didn't know then but the bomb didn't reach us. We then continued to Boys Brigade and participated in an activity.

At around nine o'clock, which was the time we went home, a junior officer came and said he would go home with my brother and I. I was unsure why he wanted to come. We got to the top of our road where we lived and there were two policemen and an ARP (Air Raid Protection) officer who was a man in charge of keeping people safe during an air raid. This man said we can't go down there. I replied "But we live there". He then asked where, and I replied: "number eighteen, down the bottom". He gave me a funny look and said that we better go down. We got down to our house and there was a pile of rubble around eighteen inches high. That was our house. We were devastated. We had no idea where our brothers, sister and Mum and Dad were. Our air raid shelter was demolished. It looked like a giant had come and torn it to pieces. We had no idea what to do. Suddenly, our beloved home was just a pile of rubble on the ground. There was nothing worth saving except a small wind-up clock. We picked it up and shook it. It still ticks and is located in London with my sister-in-law.

We were told that one of my brothers died as a brick was smashed in his head. My older brother Fred, who was with me, went off to see if he could identify him. I went to a big air raid shelter and sat on a chair, having no idea what to do. I sat there all night feeling sad.



# Ron Ashby



A few weeks before this catastrophe, I had won a scholarship to any university in England, Wales and Scotland. The next morning, my brother Fred was at work and I went down to school and told the headmaster that I couldn't come to school anymore. He was very annoyed as he wanted praise for his school. I then went down the road to a factory named Harvey's. I asked for a job and they gave me one straight away. My only possessions were the clothes I was wearing.

For the next nine and a half months, my brother and I worked every day and slept on the factory floor at night. My brother Fred worked in the factory opposite mine. We then learnt that my dad received the blast of the bomb in his face and in his body. He had a broken arm and leg and eyes were completely shredded to pieces. He could not see, he was totally blind. My mum had a piece of timber driven into her face. She had the top of her arm sheared off with a flying house brick. They cut the timber off my mum's face and took her and my father to hospital. They were critical and hung on the edge of life and death for quite a while. My youngest brother, who was six, was hit in the head with a flying house brick and we had to arrange for a funeral. My two other younger brothers and sister were covered in house bricks. For those next nine and a half months my parents were taken to hospital in Wales to escape the bombing and my brothers and sister were taken out of London and taken to a place called North Hampton.

Mine and my brother's life was working, sleeping on the factory floor and eating from a canteen at work, which had delicious food. We borrowed money to keep us going until we received pay and I started working. All we had were the clothes we stood up in and we went to the Red Cross and received donated clothing from the United States and Canada. We managed to survive, food was easy as there was a lovely canteen, but clothing was hard. We also struggled for money at first. We had no one to help us. We were 14 and 16 years old yet we became like adults. We lived on the equivalent of one dollar a week.

We worked six days a week, from seven in the morning till six at night and we ate then we slept on the floor. On Saturdays, however, we finished at 1 p.m. An aunt who lived way out of London offered us to go to her home on Saturday afternoons. We then jumped on a tram and a bus and walked up a long hill to get to our aunt's house. We had to walk past a cemetery to get to our aunt's home. A bomber bombed the cemetery and it blew up all the corpses in every direction. It was the most foul and vile smell and we had to walk past it every Saturday. We walked up quickly and breathed through our mouths.



# Ron Ashby



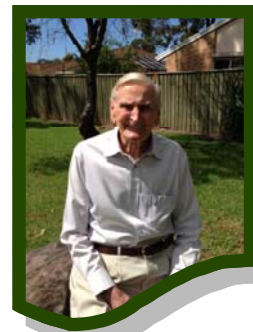
When we got to our Aunt's place we had to sneak past her flock of geese. When we got inside, our Aunt Flo's we had a roast dinner, a hot bath and clean clothing. We had not had any clean clothing that week; we worked all day and slept all night in the same clothing until Saturday. On Sunday morning we had breakfast and made our way back to the factory. Saturday night was the best night as we could sleep in a proper bed. She had three sons fighting in the war, so she had three spare beds.

After those nine and a half months my parents came home, although they were still badly injured. They fought their way back to health. My mum had a hole in her face, where the piece of wood had driven through it and my dad was blind. My family eventually got back together and my dad got a job at the same factory where he worked before. One of my brothers would take him to the factory and then someone else from the factory would take him around during the day. Eventually we were back together and I started to attend the Boys Brigade again.





# Ray Langshaw



**W**hat was your association with the war and how did it affect you?

I was not involved in the war because I was too young, but my father fought in the First World War. He fought in France and my brother was a pilot in the Second World War. He flew over Germany on bombing raids.

I turned nine during the Second World War and was 15 years old when it ended. My memory of the war was as a kid, and I got my knowledge of the wars from my father and my brother.

## **How old was your father during the First World War?**

My dad, he would have been 18 when he joined the army, it was the age requirement. He would have been 22 when he came back from the war. He did his training here and then went to France and did training there and then fought there. He was a transport worker who had to supply the front line with ammunition, equipment and food. It was all horses and carts in those days and he used to tell us stories about how his horses got bogged and he would have to help out the horses and some of the hardships he went through.

He also told us about being strafed by the enemy, there were lots of stories about this. My father, after the First World War, had come back and was training to become a carpenter. He had a job with Maritime Services, in Sydney Harbour, and when there was the attack on Sydney Harbour by Japanese midget submarines, one of the first people they called in was him.

## **Where does your brother come into picture?**

My brother had been a pretty quiet person when it came to talking about what happened in the war. His job, as a pilot in England, was to try to fight off the German bombers that were trying to bomb England. He lost a couple of his men who were shot down and I think that affected him and he became very quiet about the war. Of course, when the war started to turn, my brother then had to be retraining the flying bomber planes to bomb Germany. In this part of his war work, I think that he thought that they were really going too far. He said that they used to just drop bombs everywhere in Germany, and that the German cities were just a pulp, there wasn't a building left standing. From what my brother tells me I think it was overkill.



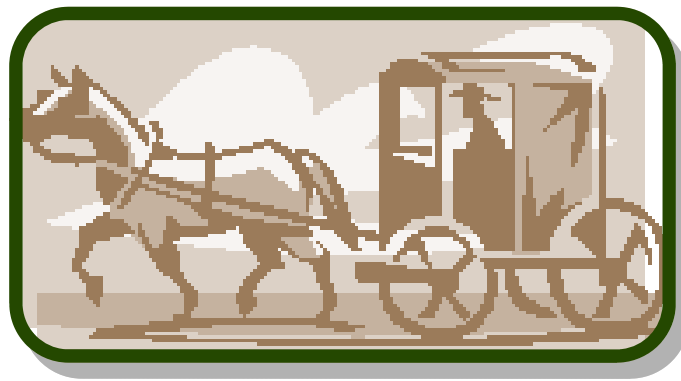
# Ray Langshaw



Ray is a man who I could talk to for hours on end, I was truly blessed to have had this opportunity to learn about his life and his father's and brother's lives.

His stories were of such purity that they put me in his shoes for the hour that we spent together. His sense of humour, and yet his seriousness about the matter unfolded when Ray was telling the story. He has truly had an amazing life and his father's and brother's lives were just as amazing, filled with hardship but with the persistence that a true soldier needs.

Thank you Ray for sharing your stories with me. Yours sincerely, Zak Rowlands



*War Stories*



# John Mays



**J**ohn lived at home during the war, therefore he did not fight. He says; "Everybody did in those days!"

He was heading on holiday when the war started. As he reached his holiday, he and his family were asked to evacuate and go home so that the troops could move in.

At one point in time he worked in a factory in England during the war.

John joined the British Air Force in 1943 and finished training in 1945. He says; "I volunteered for the Air Force because I didn't want to go into the Army!" He was also very good at maths, so thought that flying the planes would be easy for him – and they were! Amy Johnson flew from England to Australia using the same plane that he had – the Gipsy Moth. He calls it the "Tiger Moth". His training was based in Wales and South of England. They trained in the afternoon, and played football in the morning to keep themselves entertained.

After a while, he became an engineer for the RAF (Royal Air Force) as they had too many people who were flying planes and not enough who were building them. He volunteered to become one.

A bomb was dropped close to his house in Doncaster. He says; "It shattered a window near a canary in a cage, blew the canary out of the cage and up the stairwell. When we found the bird it was perched, shivering with no feathers left on it!"

During the Great Depression the majority of John's family worked in the mines as there was always work to be done there. But his grandfather was the only farmer in his family. When he had a job, the pay was around \$1 a week, but the prices of everything were much cheaper back then. During WWII rations were sent out and you ate very little all the time. He says; "But you could always get some fish and chips!"

John married in 1941 on Christmas Day and he spent a lot of his hard earned coupons on it too. He quotes; "I had to have it on Christmas Day because it was the only day I could have off from work." His brother-in-law, named Ray, had visited Buckingham Palace to receive a special George Cross Award for doing 40 successful army operations in a row. Ray died during a special operation, causing much grief to all his family.



# John Mays



John and his wife had a child together in England then moved to Australia in the 1950's. John is still healthy and well with a daughter, granddaughter, and even a great-granddaughter by his side.

This is what John believes about wartime in the present, such as the war in Afghanistan; "The person who builds the biggest bomb is the winner . . . and what does it prove?!" We had a word to John's daughter as well about this and she stated; "Technology is getting out of control, so if anyone starts a world war again, it will most likely end a lot quicker than in previous times and have a lot more people dying."



*War Stories*





# Tony Kelly

## Chapter 1

### VICTORY DAYS



Right: The crowd filling Times Square on May 7, 1945 celebrates the end of the war in Europe. The joy of New Yorkers, however, was slightly premature. Germany formally surrendered in Berlin on the following day. Fighting, however, continued to the 9th when the Soviet Red Army won control of the Czech capital, Prague.

6

This photograph comes from a book by Sean McKnight called VE Day in Photographs

It captures the pure joy and excitement experienced around the world when the war was finally over.

Local man, Tony Kelly, was in this crowd in Times Square New York on 7th May 1945 celebrating the end of the war in Europe.

*War Stories*



# Students Reflect

## *Student's reflect on their experience:*

### **Isabella Rolfe:**

I had a great time learning about life during World War II. It was a very rewarding experience.

### **Samantha Turpin:**

I really enjoyed this experience, it was something that you cannot learn at school and hearing about it from the people who actually experienced these moments was amazing. Thankyou to everyone involved.

### **Angelina Cassiniti:**

I have richly benefitted from the War Stories program, I thoroughly enjoyed the program and learnt so much from the experiences that people in our local community have endured.

### **Zac Rowlands:**

Ray is a man who I could talk to for hours on end, I was truly blessed to have had this opportunity to learn about his life and his father's and brother's lives. . He has truly had an amazing life and his father's and brother's lives were just as amazing, filled with hardship but with the persistence that a true soldier needs. Thank you Ray for sharing your stories with me.

### **Anthony Yeung:**

During this project I have learnt a lot about war and its experiences and really enjoyed speaking to the veterans. Their first-hand experiences have given me a deeper understanding of what war was like during that that period.

### **Jordan Harper**

During my interviews with both people, I have discovered that many hardships were faced, but still more memories were formed. Both of my interviewees were extremely friendly and bubbly. I have enjoyed the learning experience and have gained so much knowledge from it. I thank the subjects of my interviews, my other helpers and Ms Kerr for this wonderful experience..



# Student's Reflect

*Student's enjoy their experience*



*War Stories*





# Students Reflect



Students left to right: Samantha Turpin; Anthony Yeung; Isabella Rolfe; Zac Rowlands; Angelina Cassaniti and Jordan Harper.

