



75th Anniversary of the Bombing of Darwin

Commemorative Service at the Shrine of Remembrance Forecourt Melbourne

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Keynote:

**Victorian Education Department Teachers and
'When the War Came to Australia'**

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Good morning, All.

I can remember quite clearly the teachers who taught in Grade 2 as part of what were called the infant grades when I was at state school (or what is called 'primary school' today). My Grade 2 teacher was a very young and capable Miss Winfield – but there was another older male teacher whom I and many other children regarded with quite some awe. His name was Mr Newell. We overheard other teachers call him 'Bill' which was amazing information to children back then – to know a teacher's first name. Mr Newell looked very old at the time but I've calculated since that he was probably only mid-late 40s. He wore a lot of blue, seemed tall to a child, was slender, quiet, gentle and he ran an extra class for the Grade 2 children who were especially good at Maths. He had good-posture and a stately presence about him. I can picture him quite clearly. But, of more intrigue was the rumour of the whispered kind that Mr Newell had 'been in the war'. I think this was something that parents initially knew and the word filtered around that way. Mr Newell's war wasn't, however, the Vietnam War which was halfway in its duration at that time – his was WWII. For

whatever little we children knew of what war meant, we knew it was ‘a bad thing’ and I personally recall that, even as a child, I found it hard to reconcile that quiet, kindly Mr Newell had been in a war.

When we school children moved from the old red brick building that was the infant school to the other old red brick building that was the ‘big’ school of Grades 3-6, we encountered the school’s head teacher or, as we would say today, principal, Mr Dare. Mr Dare was not unkind, but he was strict, as a head master typically was whether or not he had been in a war. The fact is though, that I can expressly recall my mother telling me that Mr Dare had fought in WWII and, with hindsight, I now see many evidences of that fact.

Many Victorian schools at the time on Monday mornings had assemblies on asphalted quadrangles where children saluted the flag and sang ‘God Save the Queen’. At my school we children then formally marched to classes to the beats of a drum and shrills of a fife band. If we didn’t march properly, Mr Dare called us back to do it again, perhaps twice more – and I do wonder if some boys realised that making mistakes would delay the start of Monday morning lessons. Mr Dare also oversaw the training of the drum and fife band at lunchtimes – boys on drums and girls on fifes. I was in the fife band in Grades 5 and 6. We fife-players would march behind the last students marching to their classes and the drum boys would follow us until all classroom doors were shutdown the long school building’s corridor. But my overriding memory is how Mr Dare took Grade 6 once a week for PT, ‘Physical Training’. Mr Dare’s ‘PT’ was ‘in addition’ to the standard other sports and games we played with the visiting Physical Education teachers. He’d change out of his suit and tie into a blue tracksuit that looked old at the time and run with us out of our classrooms with us in full uniform – no sports gear – wearing tunics, ties, shirts and Bata scout shoes (with their compass in the heel if your family was rich enough) and run with us around the school oval once if not twice, do push-ups, star-jumps and a swinging arrangement on the monkey bars. He and we would jog on the spot when not doing anything else. Hot and sweaty we children would then run back with him to our classrooms, tumble into our metal-framed desks that had the wooden box tops and lids on hinges, and lessons would resume. Mr Dare would often emphasise at Monday morning assemblies that being fit was very important.

Several years ago, I bought the book entitled the *Education Department’s Record of War Service, 1939-45*. Originally distributed in 1959 to every Victorian state, high and technical school as well as to many WWII teachers and Education Department officials, it is now somewhat rare. Schools threw away many such copies in the 1960s-80s due to some teachers’ considerations, especially in the post-Vietnam War world, that the book belonged to ‘past times’ and ‘militarist times’ and that the best means to preventing militarist tendencies and wars in the future was to remove all evidences of them in the past. In my copy of the book, I easily found William Newell and Stanley Dare pictured as younger versions of how I remember them.

I learned that William (Bill) Newell had been a primary school student-teacher when he enlisted in the RAAF in mid-1942 after the bombing of Darwin by Japanese forces. He eventually became a leading Aircraftman. He was sent to Darwin to serve as a radar operator before serving in New Guinea until war’s end, then returning to primary teaching.

I learned that Stanley Dare had been the head teacher at Hexham State School in Victoria’s Western District when he enlisted in January 1941 for service in the Australian army before the bombing of Darwin. Following the bombing, he was posted to Geraldton in north Western Australia, serving later in New Guinea until war’s end and attaining the rank of captain.

The Education Department's book allowed me to look up other teachers. I learned that one former male primary teacher, Pilot Officer Robert Martin, was part of the squadron that helped repel an assault on Timor in January by the same Japanese bombers that later attacked Darwin. He was killed in action while flying to Java between the Timor and Darwin raids.

Indeed, the Education Department's War Service Record tells of 1,775 government primary, high and technical school teachers who left their classrooms and served across Australia, largely in the north and after the bombing of Darwin, but also in New Guinea and the Pacific, the Middle East and Europe, in dangerous situations where we do not today picture teachers at all: on foot in jungles, deserts and forests, on ships in tropical waters and in cold waters, in the air, in training accidents, in combat and as prisoners of war. 123 Victorian government school teachers died during the war years – with a large number in air combat which quite surprised me - and so very sadly, some died as prisoners of war. The War Record notes, however, that many more died in the years after or died early deaths as a consequence of what they had endured. Indeed, when my year level of students had just commenced our educations in high school – in Form 1 (or what is today called Year 7) – we learned with shock that Mr Dare had died suddenly of a heart attack. - Was that because he had been excessive in his own 'PT', or that being a head master was a stressful job, or was he, indeed, weakened because of what he had suffered physically and mentally in WWII? He would have been about 50 which, even then, was very young to die.

I've undertaken a great deal of research on Victoria's teachers who served, suffered and died in WWI, but I was struck by the 'extent' of mobilisation of teachers in WWII to northern Australia and New Guinea especially after the bombing of Darwin. What a transition they made from blackboard to battlefield. And what a transition from battlefield to blackboard. How remarkable that so many of the men I have read about in the book, including Mr Newell and Mr Dare, could return to schools and 20 years later be teaching children 12 years old and younger, and be teaching them well.

Life must go on. So what can we learn from these accounts? We must learn not to take for granted the fact that we can meet here, now, at this very moment, in safety and in peace. This moment does not exist in isolation. It is influenced by the past. And understanding the past and the present enables us to make informed choices for our present and for our future. Now that I know the histories of Mr Newell's and Mr Dare's service, what they experienced, where and why, I wish I could thank them for their service. They could never have guessed that, 40-50 years later, a former-pupil would recall them on the Shrine forecourt and say that. Such would be utterly beyond their comprehension and expectation. But events like today are how we show our gratitude - and our humanity – to those who have gone before us and those who are still with us. I now make a real effort to thank veterans and serving personnel for their service, and I wonder if you may think to do the same. Again, how very fortunate are we that we can meet here now, at this very moment, in safety and in peace.
