

ANZAC DAY WITH DAD

Geoffrey Wells

Dad was a World War II returned soldier, but he never looked forward to Anzac Day.

In the week leading up to it his face would take on a blank look, as if the life was being erased from its surface. You'd catch him looking out the window with eyes that saw and didn't see, his chin tilted, his mouth drawn into a small, tight smile.

I was a boy of six or seven. It would have been only ten years or so since his discharge. I knew there was a march and wished he'd be part of it, wished he'd join the grave men walking along the streets with their clinking medals, cheered by people smiling and waving flags. He never did.

I remember for a few years some of the men of his unit would come to the house—quiet, grey men, in suits and hats, deferential to Mum, moving carefully around the best furniture in the lounge. They'd have a drink and talk for a while. I'd stand outside the door listening to the murmured conversation, the clink of glasses. There were no jokes, none of the banter you'd expect in a group of Australian men drinking together. Then they would stand, shake hands, put their hats on and leave. They'd hardly touched Mum's cake. After a few years they didn't come any more.

We knew Dad had fought in the Desert. He admired Montgomery, because, Dad said, before El Alamein the battle plan had been entrusted to all the troops, down to the corporals and privates, "in case things went wrong"; that appealed to Dad's egalitarian sympathies. But we didn't know much more than that, because he almost never spoke of his war. Only once he told me of working on signal wires under fire; he'd heard the whine of a shell and had thrown himself on the ground; the shell had landed right next to him, there, almost within touching distance, half-buried in the sand—and hadn't exploded, it was a dud, "or you wouldn't be here", he said, with that tight smile. I was left to wonder what he'd lived through in those moments on the ground, waiting for the shell to explode.

We knew also that, as a sergeant, he'd refused a commission so he could stay with his men; the same men who came to our house on those few Anzac Days. He still had his army sleeping bag, made of heavy canvas. There was the apocryphal story of him sleeping on the desert sands, aware of a scratching underneath the canvas, revealed in the morning as a six-inch scorpion. There was the Morse sending key he'd kept and taught us to use. But beyond these little splinters of information, of his long, five-year war we knew very little; hardly the facts of when and where it had taken him, certainly nothing of his lived experience.

Post-traumatic stress wasn't recognised in those early years. On discharge these men were simply expected to get on with it; and somehow most of them did. In one way or another they managed to push aside or forget or cover up what they carried with them. We knew Dad took some kind of pill, which helped to settle, he said, "a nerve in his stomach." Later we discovered it was a strong sedative. He'd been prescribed it not long after his discharge and took it for the rest of his life,

through the raising of a big family and a career. Looking back, it was the strength that must have been needed to hold it all together, and the unrelenting strain of it, that most impressed itself on us.

There were cracks, though, if we'd known them as that. After retirement, he and Mum travelled a bit, back to the landscapes of their youth. One night, in a hotel, the fire alarm sounded; Dad emerged trying to evacuate Mum, back in some war zone chaos. Later, visiting us during our stay in the US, we were watching Fourth of July fireworks. I happened to glance at Dad; he was white, shaking. I lead him inside and made him a cup of tea. He couldn't speak.

So when nearly sixty years after the war it couldn't be held together any longer perhaps we shouldn't have been surprised; but we were. He'd been so strong, even formidable, for so long, the war, it seemed, long forgotten. Now it was all he wanted to talk about. You would go to visit him, and within a minute he would be off on yet another part of it, events that were ordinary, or moving, or shocking; but all of it new. Even Mum hadn't heard any of it. For seven years he looped and circled, filling in at random those five missing years. It overpowered him: and, in the end, Mum, too. The Department of Veterans' Affairs refused to assess him for benefits because, they said, it had been too long, and the causal link to the war couldn't be established. Come and listen to him, we said; but they never did.

So, like Dad, I don't look forward to Anzac Day. There's no doubt about the honour due to the bravery, the living courage of these men and women; boys and girls, many of them, after all. But there can be no sanitising these wars. They are wars which have seen entire generations of men and women killed or maimed or living their lives under the shadows. We honour and pity those who fought, and can hardly contemplate what they had to endure nor the courage with which they faced it; not just then, but year after year. But that they had to endure it is nothing to celebrate. These are immeasurable tragedies, not just for someone else, but for our own: for Dad, for Mum. If anything is to be taken from it, it is the quiet clarity of the sober, grey men who walked away from our home on Anzac Day, all those decades ago—which said, without having to say it: never again.