GEORGE BOYD and SYBIL KANE CONNOR

PREFACE

This is one of a series of biographies of my paternal and maternal ancestors in Australia. George Boyd and Sybil Kane Connor are my parents. They were born, met, married and raised their family in New South Wales. Their story spans the Great Depression, World War II and the post-war mining boom in Australia.

The biographies of my paternal ancestors in this series are;

Thomas James Connor (1813-1880) and Anne Peake (1811-1894)
Edward Thomas Newton (1813-1882) and Eliza Martin (1817-1903)
Sprott Boyd (1814-1902) and Catherine Cutler (1819-1894)
George William Connor (1842-1873) and Eliza Newton (1843-1912)
Robert Mitchell Boyd (1849-1912) and Eliza Agnes Brown (1855-1884)
George Stanley Newton Connor (1871-1951) and Isabella Sprott Boyd (1882-1957)
George Boyd Connor (1919-2014) and Sybil Kane Whiting (1922-1995).

The biographies of my maternal ancestors in this series are;

Frances Mills (1781-1837) and her Many Partners
Thomas Kelsey (1804-1866) and Mary Johnson (1802-1877)
Richard Whiting (1811-1853) and Susanna Harley (1812-1867)
Thomas Moore (1821-1890) and Mary Jane Kelsey (1827-1874)
John Sands (1818-1873) and Marjory Moffat Chisholm (1830-1904)
William George Whiting (1838-1917) and Amy Jane Moore (1853-1935)
John Kane Smyth (1836-1891) and Ada Mary Sands (1857-1946)
Keith Moore Whiting (1882-1939) and Mary Grant Smyth (1887-1969)
Sybil Kane Whiting (1922-1995) and George Boyd Connor (1919-2014)

Each of the stories can be read in isolation. Inevitably, there is overlap between them, so some repetition is unavoidable but I have tried to keep this to a minimum. For easy reference, family trees are included at the end of each story. For privacy reasons, I have omitted the exact birth dates of living people.

Knowledge of my parents' lives comes mainly from my own recollections and from family memorabilia, but my sister and brother also contributed their memories. Much of the material information about their war service came from the National Archives of Australia, and "The Footsoldiers" by W. Crooks. The National Library's TROVE database was also an invaluable resource.

Andrew George Connor
Perth, 2018

GEORGE BOYD and SYBIL KANE CONNOR

George Connor's early years

George Boyd Connor was born at the Redhaven Private Hospital in Alfred Street, North Sydney on 8 November 1919. He was the fourth and last child of George Stanley (Stan) Newton Connor and Isabella (Ella) Sprott Boyd who owned and lived at an orchard farm called *Valencia* at Lugarno on the southern outskirts of Sydney. Ella's first child, a girl, was stillborn in 1915. George's older surviving sisters were Constance Emily, known as 'Em', born in 1916 and Catherine Newton, known as 'Kate' or 'Cath', born in 1918. Ella had all her children at hospitals in North Sydney so that she had support from her step-mother, Emily 'Tattie' Boyd who lived nearby at Wollstonecraft. George never knew his natural grandparents, but his step-grandmother Tattie, survived until a few days before George's 35th birthday.

George's father Stan had grown up on a dairy farm in Gippsland, Victoria and as a young man spent years working on sheep stations and in mining and bush camps around Gippsland and the Monaro. He returned to farming and horticulture at Pambula, N.S.W. where he met Ella, and then moved to Lugarno in 1912. He had a love of nature and the bush which he impressed upon his children. He had also learned independence at a young age, because his father died when he was three years old. Ella had a similar background, growing up on a cane plantation in North Queensland where she was influenced by her uncle Archie and cousin Reggie, both of whom were amateur naturalists and outdoor people. Ella's mother died when Ella was not yet two years old. She was educated by governesses and her stepmother before going to boarding school in Sydney, so Ella also became independent at a young age. George and Ella married quite late – he was 42 and she 31. With parents like these, George and his sisters were always likely to become independently-minded, self-sufficient people with a strong appreciation of their natural surroundings.

Valencia was a 48-acre property, including a 20-acre orchard, situated at Forest Road, Lugarno and extending westwards down to the George's River. The house was quite small – a timber plank cottage with iron roof, three bedrooms, kitchen, living room and back verandah. There was a separate laundry and of course, long drop toilet (8-10 feet deep and 6 feet long with four seats) which never needed to be re-dug. There was no electricity; lighting was from carbide lamps, a Coolgardie safe was used for food storage, and water was from rainwater tanks or, in an emergency, from a well on the property. They had a telephone (Kogarah 681), a large box on the wall with separate earpiece and winding handle – a party line. Ella used it to talk to her step-mother Tattie every night. The nearest house was about half a mile away – the Boatwright family. The nearest settlement was Peakhurst at the top of Forest Road, about five kilometres away – about an hour in the sulky. It had a store, a church and half a dozen houses. From the orchard at night they could clearly hear the steam engines and their whistles as they went through Mortdale and Oatley stations.

The two girls shared their own bedroom. George slept at the end of his parents' bedroom, which was quite large. There was no local public school, the nearest one being ten kilometres away at Penshurst - too far to send the children each day in a horse and sulky - so Ella was both mother and schoolteacher to her children. She had help from a cook named Martha Gosling and a neighbour Ethel Chivers, who came and taught the children reading, writing and basic arithmetic for two hours each day. George was quite proficient with numbers and learnt his multiplication tables at an early age, but his ability in spelling and English was average. Ella and Stan bought a piano and Mrs. Chivers taught them to play it. Ella was on the church

committee of the Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Peakhurst and would take the children there on Sundays in the sulky. Stan was a less frequent churchgoer.

Catherine, Emily and George Connor, 1920.

George and his sisters grew up during the depression years after WWI but, living on a farm, they were never short of food. The orchard produced apples, oranges, pears, plums, lemons, mandarins, peaches and nectarines. There was always bread and jam on the table. The vegetable garden produced cucumbers, carrots, rockmelons, tomatoes, beetroot, watermelons, peas, beans, cabbages, and potatoes. They had four bee hives for honey; about forty chickens that kept them in eggs; and cows for producing milk, butter and cream. Oysters and fish were readily available in the George's River.

Valencia Orchard (looking South) and packing shed.

Valencia Orchard (looking North) House in tree line at back.

When not "at school", the children had the run of the property. The orchard was located in a natural depression between surrounding sandstone ridges, caused by an intrusion of basaltic volcanic breccia – an old crater. The soil on top of the volcanic intrusion was more fertile than the surrounding ridges, which were covered in eucalypt forest and bracken fern. The forest was home to wallabies; cockatoos, parrots and other birds; snakes and lizards; spiders and insects, and flowers of all kinds. In summer, the cicadas were deafening. On the western side, there were cliffs

of honeycombed sandstone with caves, some with aboriginal paintings and middens, leading down to the George's River with its salt-tolerant casuarinas and jumble of shoreline rocks and tidal pools hiding shellfish, anemones and crabs. In short, there was a wonderful natural playground for children to explore. The children were taught that if you don't frighten animals they won't hurt you, and they became quite fearless, except when raiding wild bee hives.

Cliffs, caves and river foreshore, *Valencia*, Lugarno.

As George grew older and stronger, he began to help his father and the employees, Fred and Ernie Cross, with odd jobs around the farm. One of George's jobs was to feed the mongrel guard dogs that they had tethered on long runs around the orchard to deter pilfering. Every two days, George would take food out to 'Irish', 'Boyd', 'Nigger' and 'Leechy' who were always very glad to see him – he was their only friend. One night, 'Nigger' got off his chain, headed for the house and curled up to sleep on George's bed. Throughout his life, George always enjoyed the company of animals, and vice versa. There were five horses on the property which were used to plough the vegetable patch and to pull the sulky. The family did not own a car and initially, all the produce was sent to market by horse and cart but eventually, trucks took over this role.

Among George's other chores were helping to pack fruit at the packing shed in the middle of the orchard and collecting and preserving hens' eggs in waterglass for sale to market. In summer, he collected wild blackberries for making jam. On the southern contact of the volcanic intrusion, where the sandstone had been baked hard, Stan started a quarry for road metal which he sold to the local council. They had to drill, blast and screen the material, and load it onto council trucks. George enjoyed being involved in this activity, sometimes riding in the trucks up to Peakhurst where the load was dumped. George helped his father resharpen the drill steels, make horseshoes and repair farm machinery in the workshop on the farm. This was an early taste of mining and engineering for George, and a promise of things to come.

A few times each year, the family would make the long day trip north of the harbour (with no bridge) to visit their step-grandmother in Wollstonecraft. They would be all dressed up for the occasion and feeling rather uncomfortable. Although small in stature, Tattie was an imposing figure for the children, treating them as would a Victorian grandmother. She was a very strict, proper, and strongly religious person who had no children of her own – just three stepchildren of whom Ella was the only one living close by. The children called her "grandmother". As a side benefit of these trips, sometimes they would take a detour to places such as Taronga Park Zoo, also north of the harbour, or visit the city. Twice yearly they went to a dentist in the city.

Ella Connor with Kate (L), George and Emily (R), Taronga Zoo, c.1923.

In early 1927, Stan and Ella sent Emily (10) and Kate (8) to board at Wenona Girl's School in North Sydney. Ella had been a boarder herself at Kambala Anglican Girls School when her parents were living in North Queensland, so she knew what it would be like and clearly thought that the girls would benefit. They chose Wenona because of its close association with St Thomas' Church, North Sydney, which was Tattie's local church. Because there was no Sydney Harbour Bridge, travelling from North Sydney home to Lugarno took hours and was only practical on long weekends. For Sunday leave, their step-grandmother's place was within walking distance. George stayed at Lugarno and "*made his own fun*", in between home schooling and doing his chores. He missed his sisters who had always been protective of their little brother, and there were no other children living nearby. Occasionally on a Sunday, three teenage boys would walk down to Lugarno and include young George in their games, but it was "*a fairly lonely life*" for him - further training in independence. In 1928, Stan took George to Bonnie Doon Golf Club to watch Kingsford Smith arrive from the US after crossing the Pacific.

George Boyd Connor, c.1927

Electricity reached Lugarno in 1927. Stan and Ella bought a block of land in Penshurst and began building a house there using foundation stone that George helped to quarry from *Valencia*. At the end of 1928, after leasing *Valencia*, Stan and Ella moved to their new house at 40 Laycock Road, Penshurst, which was closer to stores, and the Penshurst railway station. They bought their first car and no longer had to rely on the horse and sulky for transport. George (9) was sent to boarding school at Sydney Church of England Grammar School (known as Shore) in early 1929. Ella knew something of Shore because some of her Boyd cousins and Bradley

step-cousins had been educated there. Like Wenona, Shore was close to George's step-grandmother's house. All the children would return home for long weekends, but it was not until the Sydney Harbour Bridge was completed in 1932 that they could return home every Sunday by train. Initially, George was in the Preparatory School and it was the first time he had mixed with children of his own age. On his first day he was given six words and asked to use them in a sentence, and was distraught because he didn't know what a sentence was. It took him a while to acclimatize to living with many children, the routine, rules and discipline of the boarding house. George was not a very gifted scholar, starting in the lowest Form 1B, but he developed a love of sports and began to excel at some of them, which earned him respect among his peers. George was born with a deformity in his left ankle – some of the ankle bones remained fused together so that he did not have full ankle movement and walked slightly on his instep. George called it a "club foot", but it was not a severe deformity, he never received any treatment for it, and it certainly did not inhibit his ability to run. At Shore, boys were expected to participate in all sports offered; cricket or rowing during summer, rugby union during winter, athletics and swimming, with tennis, boxing and rifle shooting optional. Competitions were held against the other seven Greater Public Schools (G.P.S.) in Sydney and, for swimming, boxing, and athletics, there were also intra-school competitions between the four school houses, School, Robson, Barry and Hodges. By 1931, George was in the Preparatory School rugby team, and he came first in the Under 12, 220 yards championship, second in the 100 yards championship, and was a joint winner of the Junior Championship Cup.[1]

School children, Sydney Harbour Bridge opening day, 1932.

George graduated to the senior school (and boater hats) in 1933 and became a boarder in Robson House. From Robson, he had a great view of Sydney Harbour and the new Harbour Bridge. George had been in the crowd that walked over the bridge at its official opening on 19 March 1932, although he was unhappily forced to retire not-out from his cricket match in order to walk the bridge.

The 1st Waverton Scout Troop was attached to the school, and George joined the scouts. He attended the Australian Scout Jamboree in Frankston Victoria over the summer holiday of 1934-35, travelling there by train with other scouts from 1st Waverton. Although only 15, George's running ability saw him selected in the back line of the 1935 3rd XV rugby team. He passed the Intermediate Certificate at the end

[1] Sydney Morning Herald 1 Oct 1931

of 1935 with straight B grades in Maths I and II, English, French, Physics and Chemistry.[2] That Christmas holidays, Stan drove George down to Pambula and Eden, where Stan used to have farms, to spend three weeks fishing and visiting Newton relatives.[3] George remembers spending other summer holidays visiting his uncle Ernie, aunt Lilian and cousins Newton, Allan, Avril and Mickie Connor at their wheat-sheep farm in the Riverina, and his uncle Archie Boyd at Macksville.

In 1936, George played for the 1st XV rugby team and the 2nd XI cricket team where his strength was as a medium pace swing bowler. George was selected at full back for the Combined G.P.S. 2nd XV[4] and they played games against Waverley Christian Brothers' College, Duntroon Military College and Hawkesbury Agricultural College. Sports taught him the discipline of teamwork and developed his strong competitive instincts.

In 1937, which was supposed to be his final year at Shore, George was one of the leaders of the school. He was a School Prefect, Head Prefect of Robson House, Officer in the Cadet Corps, member of the 1st XI cricket team, the 1st XV and Combined G.P.S. 2nd XV rugby teams, participant in the Athletics carnival winning places in the Broad Jump and Shot Put, and a member of the Rifle Team. He sat for the Leaving Certificate at the end of 1937 and while waiting for the results, attended the Schools Coaching Week conducted by the N.S.W. Cricket Association. George's Leaving Certificate results were Maths I A, Maths II B, Mechanics B, Physics L,[5] meaning that he had failed Economics, English and French and therefore was not eligible to enter University. Stan, Ella and George decided that he should go back to Shore and repeat the year. According to George, having to repeat was "*no big deal*" for the family.

On arriving back at Shore at the start of the 1938 school year, the headmaster explained to George that, if he had known that George was repeating, he would have become the Head Prefect of the school, but the decision to appoint Brinley Jay as the new Head Prefect had already been made. George was probably not too concerned about this, knowing that he would have to concentrate more on his studies. George often said he was *"never ambitious to be right at the top, I just let it come along. If people moved ahead of me, bad luck!"* But he was a highly competitive person in many activities.

George's final year at Shore was much like the previous from a sporting view point. He represented the school at the highest level in rugby, cricket, athletics and rifle shooting and played in the G.P.S. Combined 1st XV as a winger and goal kicker, scoring most of the team's points. At the annual Speech Day at end of the year, George Connor, dressed in his Cadet Lieutenant's uniform, and Brin Jay were jointly awarded the school's highest honour, the Brian Pockley Memorial Prize[6], the first and only time the award has been shared.

More importantly, George passed the Leaving Certificate well enough to matriculate to university. His results were English B; French B, Maths I A, Maths II A, Mechanics B, Physics B, Economics B.[7]

[2] Sydney Morning Herald 25 Jan 1936
[3] Eden Magnet 21 Dec 1935
[4] Sydney Morning Herald 17 Aug 1936
[5] Sydney Morning Herald 14 Jan 1938
[6] Sydney Morning Herald 16 Dec 1938
[7] Sydney Morning Herald 13 Jan 1939

Brinley Jay (L) and George Connor, December 1938.

Pocket and Badges from George's school sports blazer

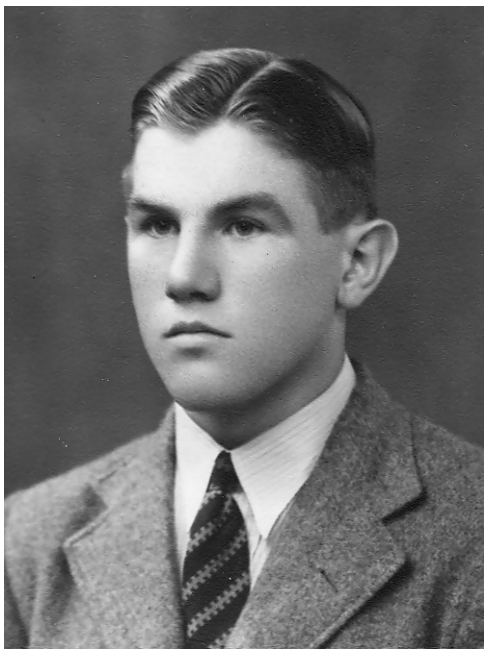
Of his Shore school days, George said *"During my time there I became part of a close-knit community. I got to know all the boys and the masters, looking after us, very well. It was quite an experience but it was also something I do not regret. It taught you discipline, it taught you how to get along with other people, it also taught you to control other people. It taught you a lot of things and, along with discipline, it gave you a lot of responsibility."*[8] Naturally, a Shore education was the first choice for his own sons. In 1941, when George was

[8] Oral History interview by Thomas Connor, 1998

Missing believed Wounded, the Shore headmaster L.C. Robson wrote of George *"There have been few more popular boys at the School, if any & none have deserved to be more popular."*[9]

When the Leaving Certificate results came out, George was attending a joint school-industry careers camp at Camden, possibly as a fall-back option in case he failed to matriculate. On getting his results however, George decided to follow a career in Mining Engineering. His father's stories of gold mining and his experience in the quarry at Lugarno paved the way for this career choice, but George was strongly influenced by his uncle W. Sprott Boyd, Ella's older brother. Sprott graduated in Mining Engineering with Honours from Sydney University in 1901, worked until the end of 1904 at Broken Hill N.S.W. and then travelled to the U.S.A. where he worked in the copper mining industry, rising to become Managing Director of the Utah Copper Company. Sprott returned to Australia to visit his Boyd family relatives in 1933, and was feted in Sydney academic and industry circles for his success[10]. His stories of the mining industry must have greatly impressed his nephew George, who enrolled at Sydney University Faculty of Engineering in 1939. While studying, George lived at home.

George's sporting career blossomed at Sydney University. Like several other members of his family, George matured relatively late in his teens. By the time he reached university, he had almost fully developed the strong, heavyset body typical of the Connor family and this, along with his speed and kicking skills, made him a more formidable opponent on the rugby field. He was selected to play for the University first grade team. After several games, George suffered a broken cheekbone in the July match against arch rivals Randwick and missed the rest of the season. University were First Grade Premiers that year and George was awarded a University Blue for rugby. George also played cricket in the University 3rd XI. George easily fitted in to the social atmosphere around the 'godless engineers', university rugby and cricket clubs. The engineers regarded themselves as a race apart and had no time for university politics or arts. Although George no doubt attracted rugby groupies, he had no time for, or experience of women and did not have a girlfriend.[11]



George Connor,
Sydney University, 1939

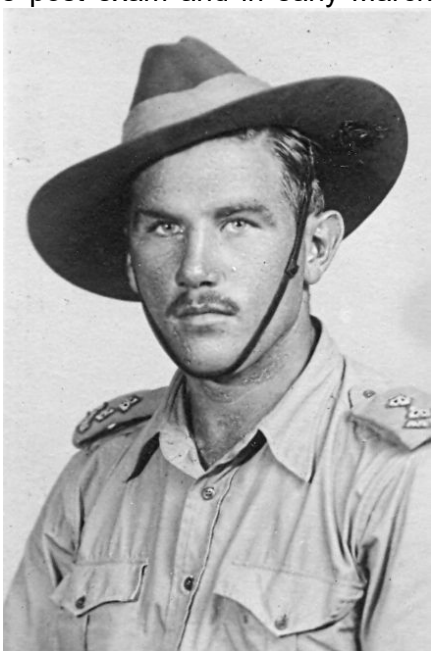
In 1939, the Connor family moved from Penshurst to a large house at 8 Roslyn Avenue, Roseville which they called *Chatsworth* after Ella's birthplace Chatsworth Island. George travelled from there to university every day by train. He was a sergeant in the Sydney University Regiment (S.U.R) Machine Gun Platoon when England, and therefore Australia, declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939. The S.U.R. was immediately assigned to temporary sentry duty at various military facilities around Sydney to prevent them from being sabotaged by German

[9] Letter from L.C. Robson to Mr. & Mrs. G.S.N. Connor, 30 Jun 1941
[10] Sydney Morning Herald 18 Jul 1933
[11] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003

sympathizers. George and his platoon were sent to guard the Holdsworthy Army Base in south-west Sydney until the immediate threat of sabotage had subsided.

George's Military Service

Gradually, George's friends began to sign up and, initially, George felt no pressure to follow them. He continued his engineering studies and to serve with the S.U.R., which held training camps during the university vacations. In the 1939-40 summer vacation, the S.U.R. spent a month in camp at Campbelltown. During this camp, George and two of his rugby teammates, John Fuller and Keith Chisholm, decided that they would join the air force. George wanted to wait until he had completed first year engineering – he had a post exam to do in February 1940 so clearly, George was still struggling academically. He completed the post exam and in early March, the three friends went to Victoria Barracks to join the R.A.A.F. They gave their particulars, passed the medical examination, and were told that they might have to wait six months to be called because the R.A.A.F. had insufficient equipment to train the many applicants. For George and especially John Fuller, this long delay did not fit with the rules of their university faculties, so they decided to enlist in the army instead. Keith Chisholm decided to get a private pilot's licence at Bankstown aerodrome as a short-cut route to joining the R.A.A.F.



Lt. George Connor, 1940.

George (aged 20) and John enlisted in May 1940 at Victoria Barracks. George didn't discuss his decision with his family. He was concerned that he would not be accepted because of his club foot, but he was lucky to encounter a medical officer who followed the University rugby team, knew of George's rugby ability, and passed him as medically fit after checking his eyesight only!

George and John were sent to the 20th Infantry Training Battalion at Wallgrove in western Sydney and spent six weeks training to be officers. George was appointed a lieutenant in the active Citizen Military Forces on 21 June 1940. At the end of this camp, both George and John were interviewed as potential young officers for three new regiments in the 8th Division. John was selected, but George missed out and was very disappointed. George was told the reason he wasn't selected was because he tripped on the mat when entering the interview room[12]. As it turned out, this was a lucky trip because John Fuller was sent to Malaya where he became a prisoner of the Japanese for most of the war.

Following his officer training, George was given a part-time job training new recruits in very basic infantry tasks at North Sydney Oval. He managed to play some rugby for a depleted University Rugby Club in the 1940 season. In early September, George was posted to another camp in Tamworth as a full-time trainer. George was the only young subaltern there – all the other trainers were World War I veterans who had volunteered to help train the second A.I.F. The new recruits were given basic infantry training - drills, obeying orders, route marches, rifle shooting, night exercises,

[12] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003

sentry duty, working in the kitchen, teamwork etc. - just getting them used to being in the army. They had very little equipment at that stage.

Lt. George Connor leading recruits, 1940.

When based in Tamworth, a company of George's recruits, some of whom had come from a strong union background in Newcastle, decided to go on strike for an additional egg ration at breakfast. They conspired not to go to meals or the canteen until they got their way, however they did not dare disobey a direct order because the penalty for mutiny was extremely severe. George couldn't force them to eat, so he decided to break the strike by taking the platoon on four-hour route marches with full kit after breakfast, lunch and dinner. After each march some of the strikers gave in until, after 24 hours, the strike broke completely. This experience probably helped to prepare George for his later life in the mines at Broken Hill. It is an early example of his strong belief in adherence to discipline, rules, and his stubborn pursuit of a righteous cause. According to George, it earned him the respect and obedience of his troops although, for some at that camp, the respect may have been grudging.

Towards the end of 1940, George was sick of being in a training camp, marching up and down and really not being in the war. He had joined the army to follow his friends, see action, and see some of the world in the process. George never thought he'd ever be in trouble at the front. As in football, he was going to survive because he was better than the opposition and would be there in the end, not that he understood what real fighting was all about. So, it was with relief and anticipation that on 16 December 1940 he was brought back to Sydney and assigned to a regular army posting as an officer in the 2/33rd Battalion. The 2/33rd had been formed in England and was heading for the North African theatre. George was to take Australian reinforcements out to them.

Over Christmas and New Year, George gathered his reinforcements together from Ingleburn and Newcastle, and managed to get only two day's pre-embarkation leave to see his family. On the 2 February, they began boarding the liner *Aquitania* and, with the *Queen Mary* and the *Nieuw Amsterdam*, sailed down the harbour and

through Sydney Heads on the 4 February 1941 to the stirring sound of New Zealand troops on the *Awatea* singing the Maori farewell song 'Now is the Hour'.

The convoy, code-named US9, joined with the *Mauretania* coming out of Melbourne, and then steamed well south of Tasmania to avoid possible mines in Bass Strait, before turning west to Fremantle, arriving there on the 9 February and departing again, escorted by HMAS *Canberra*, on the 12 February. A few days out into the Indian Ocean, the convoy slowed down and a light cruiser, the HMS *Durban* appeared on the horizon and signalled, whereupon the *Queen Mary* circled the convoy, hooted a goodbye, and headed at full steam towards Singapore with the 8th Division and John Fuller on board. The *Aquitania* and other ships proceeded on to Bombay.

The voyage to Bombay was uneventful. George earned his army nickname of "Punchy" when he entered a shipboard boxing competition. On this voyage, he also came across British troops for the first time and discovered that there were significant cultural differences between the Australian and British armies, especially in the relationship between officers and other ranks. More than once during the war, George's innate Australian egalitarian nature, his willingness to fraternize with other ranks and treat them as equals based on mutual respect, got him into trouble with senior British officers.

Lt. George Connor and
and 'lifejacket Mary', March 1941

On arriving at Bombay on 21 February 1941, they discovered that they would have to stay there for two weeks while they waited for smaller ships to ferry them from Bombay to the Middle East through the Red Sea and Suez Canal. Large ships would not go into the Red Sea because of the threat from mines. George was initially assigned to the officers' quarters at the Taj Hotel; his NCOs and troops were at another hotel, but they had a chance to wander around Bombay together and see the sights. In the next day or so, they were trucked 250 kilometres northwards and up the Western Ghats to a British army camp at Puna. The two weeks there were quite lazy. The only event of note was a rowing regatta held by the Royal Connaught Boating Club. The Australian officers were asked to enter a crew of eight, and George volunteered although he had never rowed before. In their heat, George's crew were about a length ahead until George caught a 'crab' and ended up sitting in the lap of the rower behind him. They lost by half a length.[13]

They returned to Bombay and boarded the fleet of transport ships to take them to the Middle East. Life on board was boring. They played cards, lay in their bunks, leaned on the rail, watched other ships in the convoy, watched the desert when they got to the Red Sea, practiced life boat drills, and ate twice a day.

The troop ships docked at Port Said. George and his reinforcements were loaded onto trucks and transported to Gaza on 26 March to join the 2/33rd Battalion, which

[13] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003

was already camped at Kilo 89, about five miles out of Gaza. The battalion had arrived there from England via Capetown on the 9 March 1941 and were in training, which included live field firing exercises. George was assigned to A Company under Captain Tom Cotton, known as 'Uncle Tom', who became a life-long friend.

Being the junior officer, not long after arriving George was nominated to attend an officers' training school in Cairo, but before he could attend, on 11 April the 2/33rd was posted to Mersa Matruh leaving George behind in Gaza. George took the opportunity to visit Jerusalem for three days with a British officer who knew the city well. George visited the Wailing Wall, Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque where he and the mullah had an interesting discussion about interpretation of old testament stories. George went to the officers' school in Cairo and spent about three weeks there learning advanced tactics, about the enemy, tanks, and coordinating with the air force. The school had many British officers, some of whom had already seen action in North Africa. George found time between lessons to take a trip to the Pyramids of Giza, so he was gradually realizing his ambition to see the world although he didn't mix with the Egyptians very much.

After the officers' school, George rejoined his battalion which had occupied a defensive position at Mersa Matruh on the Mediterranean coast, 450 kilometres west-north-west of Cairo. The position was part of the defensive line against the renewed eastward advance of Rommel's army. George's platoon of about 25 men was a small outpost on a flank, 500 metres in front of the main battalion defences, surrounded by land mines. They lived in zig-zag trenches, six feet deep with sand-bagged walls and tops, played cards, killed sand fleas and peered out at the desert horizon day and night, waiting for Rommel to come. Occasionally, they were targets for Italian bombing raids. George didn't know what they could have done if the German army arrived in force. If the mines didn't stop the tanks, they only had one anti-tank rifle which wouldn't even pierce a tank's armour.

The plan initially was for the 2/33rd to move to Tobruk, but as Germany's objective of taking the Middle Eastern oil fields became clearer, the Allies decided to stop their advance in Syria, which was held by Germany's ally, the Vichy French. The 2/33rd was transferred to the 7th Division and on 25 May the battalion left their positions at Mersa Matruh without having confronted the enemy or fired a shot in anger. George and his troops were transported by train back through Cairo to Ismailia where they were barged across the Suez Canal at midnight. There were trains waiting on the other side, but some German bombers raided the canal so the trains retreated until it was safe to board.

The troops were crammed into very hot and uncomfortable goods wagons, which took them north through the flat desert country of Gaza, through Tel Aviv, to Zihron Ya'ahkov where they camped on luxurious grassy banks under pines and eucalypts, and took advantage of the abundant water supply. On the 28 May, they boarded busses which took them on a 350km, circuitous two-day drive northwards past Nazareth, Tiberias, and the Sea of Galilee to Er Rama, 60km south of the Palestine-Lebanon border. Here they camped in an ancient olive grove and prepared for the invasion of Lebanon and Syria northward along the Hasbani River valley with its hilltop villages and olive-groves in the rocky western foothills of the Golan Heights and snow-capped Mt. Hermon.

The Allies had given General Dentz' Vichy French forces in Lebanon and Syria until the 7 June to join the Allies. The 2/33rd had about nine days to prepare themselves, plan and reconnoitre their objectives. On one day, George and Tom Cotton went close to the border in civilian clothes to observe their proposed route in from Metulla. For most of the battalion (there were some WWI veterans), this would be the first

time they had faced enemy infantry. No doubt most were nervous and some were afraid, but many, like George, treated it as a great adventure. Although they had been told that the Vichy French forces probably would not put up a hard fight, there was a general atmosphere of excitement and expectancy as they waited for the ultimatum to expire.

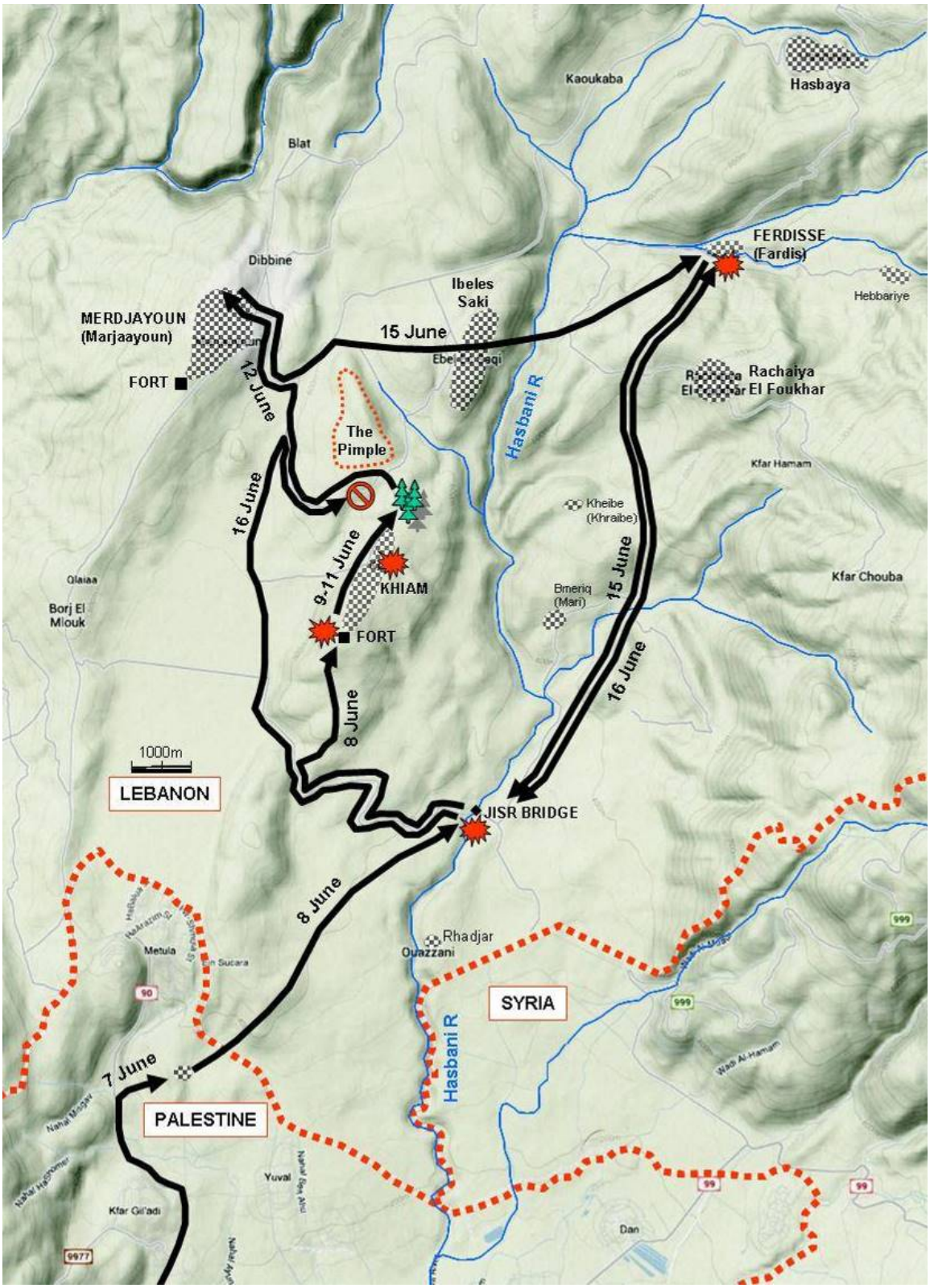
The Allies crossed into Lebanon and Syria in the early hours of 8 June 1941 (for details of the overall plan of attack and the following events, please refer to "The Footsoldiers" by W. Crooks [14] and the map on the following page.) It was bright moonlight and a cold southerly breeze was blowing. 'A' company arrived 50 minutes late at its start point just south of the border due to mix-ups in the order of transport. The platoons in 'A' Company had been assigned various objectives, which they were to achieve independently under cover of darkness. George's platoon (9 Platoon) had three objectives and they split the platoon into three sections to achieve them simultaneously. They intended to approach their targets stealthily, and silently eliminate any sentry posts. George led his ten troops to the main objective, the stone-arched road bridge over the Hasbani River at Jisr Abou Zeble. They set off at 0030 and reached the bridge at about 0400. It took longer than they expected because George's planning had been based on map contours at 50 feet intervals, whereas in fact they were at 50 metre intervals – much steeper!

It was starting to get light as they approached the Jisr bridge and they could hear singing in a hut on the other (eastern) side of the bridge. George split his force into two and while his team of five would approach from the west, the other team would circle around and approach from the east. As George and Private Jack Wayte stealthily crept over the bridge towards the hut, some dogs began barking and alerted the French, who opened fire from a fixed machine gun post. George and Jack dived for cover and after firing a few shots, retreated back across the bridge, regrouped, circled south and crossed the river to attack the hut from the south. Although it was getting quite light, George decided that the five of them would fix bayonets and charge the hut. They spread out and gallantly advanced but as they approached the hut, they came under machine gun fire again and had to take cover. George was planning what to do next when 18 Platoon of D Company arrived from the south. The French, now badly outnumbered, retreated east on horseback and the bridge was secured.[15]

By mid-morning on the 8 June, most of 'A' Company had regrouped at the Jisr bridge as planned. They were joined by the battalion commander Lt. Col. "Mad" Monaghan who next ordered 'A' Company to attack and capture Fort Khiam, situated on a commanding hilltop 3.5km northeast of the Jisr Bridge. The fort was built of concrete and stone in 1925 by the French as part of their line of fortifications facing the Palestine border. It had a low profile, thick walls about twelve feet high, bastions at each corner with firing positions, and could house about 200 troops.

[14] Crooks, William. "The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45". Printcraft Press 1971

[15] Crooks, William. "The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45". Printcraft Press 1971 pp 52-53

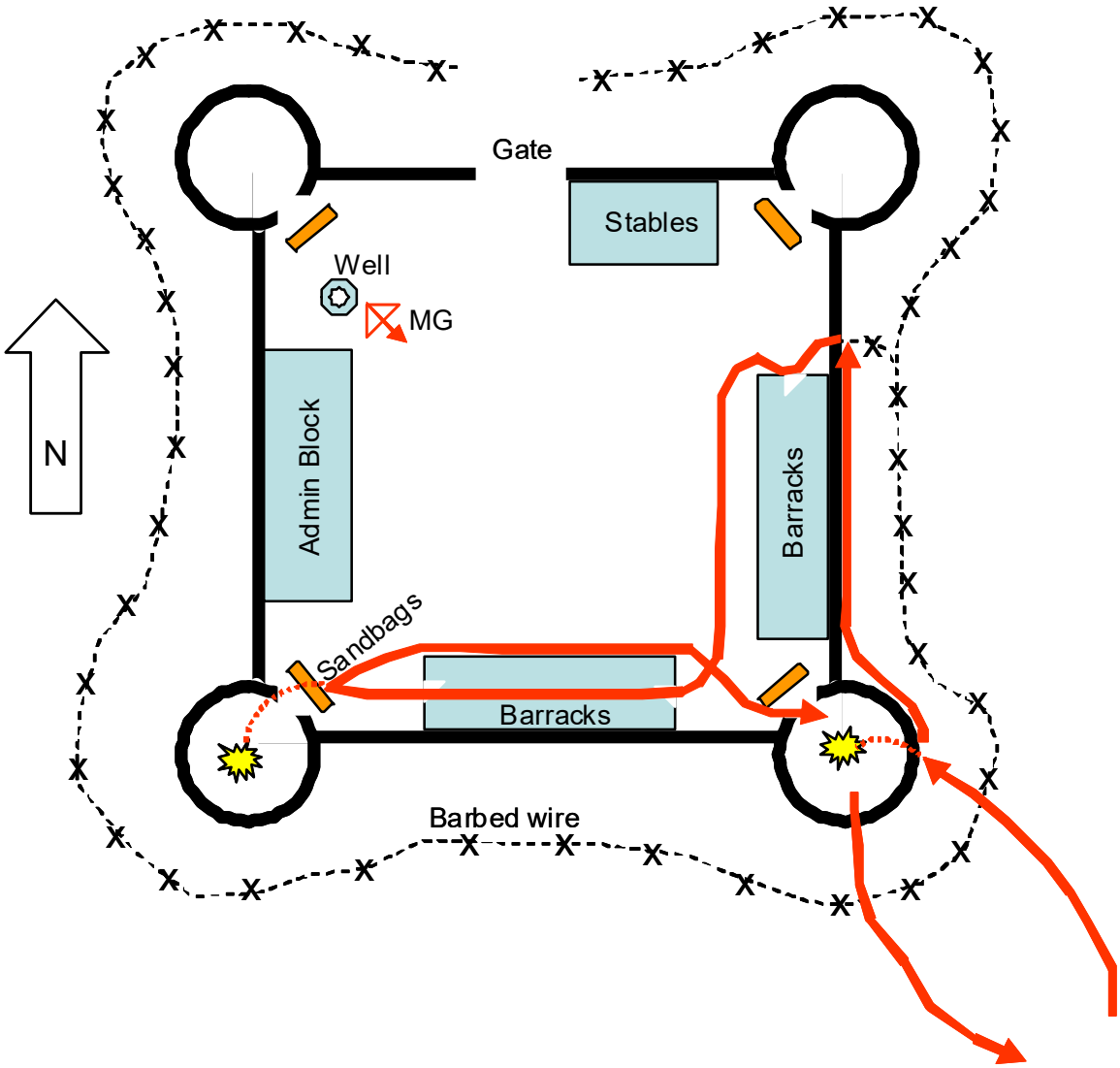


Lt George Connor's exploits, Syrian Campaign, 7-16 June 1941

'A' Company was trucked along the road from Jisr bridge to the spur which runs south from Fort Khiam. Here Tom Cotton began deploying his troops. At midday, the mortar platoon began bombarding the fort and, at 1230, the infantry began to make their long advance up the spur, with 7 Platoon on the left and George's 9 Platoon on the right flank. When they had reached a point about 300m south of the fort, the French unleashed a barrage of artillery, mortar, machine gun and rifle fire down on 'A' Company, who took cover among the boulders and rocks on the barren hillside. During this bombardment, 9 Platoon lost its first man. The troops gradually worked their way forward, dodging from rock to rock with covering fire from machine guns aimed at the firing slots and embrasures in the fort walls. George crawled up the slope, cut through the barbed wire and managed to reach the nearest corner bastion. He threw in a grenade, which allowed time for his men, Sgt Murray Sweetapple, Corporal G. Campbell and Privates Jack Wayte and Paddy Clarke to catch up with him. In George's own words, this is what followed.

"*We thought, well we will work our way along the wall to the next one and do the same, throw a grenade in etc. The walls were about 8-10 feet high, that thick [about three feet], stone. So we started to work our way along to the next one and the French had barbed wire entanglements but they had put spikes into the wall all the way up to the top and the barbed wire was in to that, so you couldn't walk along the wall. So this was a hamper. Anyway, I climbed up these spikes and looked over the wall, couldn't see anyone doing anything inside the fort. There was a barrack room just where I was looking over the wall. The barrack went right along to the one we'd knocked out on that corner [points left], it had a door just there." ..."And I looked over and I remember looking in, that door was open, no-one about, so I said to my sergeant Murray Sweetapple, I said, 'I'm going to hop in and see what's happening, give us your Tommy gun.' So I took a Tommy gun, which is an automatic, but it only had a little straight twenty round magazine in it and I put another 20 round one in my hip pocket, and I jumped in, and I thought, I'll dive in that doorway and see what's happening. So I dived in the doorway and it was full of troops. They slammed the door in my face, and I'm in a fort there with about 70 or 80 Frenchmen. So I raced along the side of the barrack room and fired in to the windows as I went, to the one we'd knocked out. But then there was another barrack running that way against the next wall. I dived into that and, as I entered, there was one Senegalese French soldier with his rifle, my magazine was empty, with his rifle and he was just lifting it up to shoot me, so I just charged at him, whacked him over the head with the Tommy gun. He dropped the rifle and put his hands up, I covered him with an empty gun, and I thought 'what do you do now? I've got a prisoner and I'm in a fort with ...' So anyway, I thought, I'll change the magazine and, on a Tommy gun, normally they have a big round magazine but this had a straight one. You just flick a switch and it will fall out, so I got the other one out of my pocket and I'm covering him and flicked the switch and it fell out and I went to put it in and it wouldn't do it. He saw I was in trouble, dived out the window and was off and I was very glad to be rid of him. I'd had the magazine upside down when I'd tried to put it in. So I went up to the far end and I threw a grenade into the corner there [pointing left] etc. I came back to the one we'd first knocked out in the corner and Murray Sweetapple, my sergeant, was there with some others and he said 'do you want some help in there?' and I said 'too right I want help'. He said 'we'll come in.' So they got up to the wall where I'd got over and they clambered up and just underneath the top, and then all jumped over. There were four of them and the French opened fire at them, and one of them got shot through the fleshy part of the shoulder, not a bad wound, as he was getting over and he fell back outside, so he was all right. The others hit the ground and took off to where I was. It was like a relay race really. Jack Wayte, he had his .303 in his hand like a baton and he just took off to where I was. The machine gun from the far corner was firing at them and the gunner must have been firing <u>at</u> them because the bullets were hitting behind them as they ran, in other words he wasn't aiming in front of them so they would run in to a bullet. In front of the doorway where I was in this bastion, about five feet high was a sand bag erection to stop shrapnel going into the doorway I suppose. Jack Wayte cleared that without touching it, with his rifle. The others, Murray Sweetapple and Campbell came and got in there. We stayed in there for the rest of the day, which I suppose was about 8 hours. We got some of the large rocks out so that we had a passage way, instead of just a narrow slit. We'd enlarged it. We held on to it. The French officer and another chap came charging in. He wanted to give himself up actually. He wanted to join the Free French. He came in with pistol in hand. I grabbed that and,*

anyway, talked to him in broken French a little bit, not that I could speak French but I had done it for the Leaving. And then when nightfall came we decided we'd get out. Tom Cotton got us out. He said he'd get the artillery to bombard it and attack it in the morning. Anyway, the French decided to leave it so, in the morning when they came there, the whole place was empty. So that was how we won that fort. I suppose we were lucky." [16]



Lt. George Connor's attack on Fort Khiam, 8 Jun 1941.
(after a sketch by Lt-Col T.R.W. Cotton, 7 Aug 1944[17])

[16] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003
[17] Official History, 1939-45 War: Records of Gavin Long; General Editor: Notebook No 58 (August 1944) – Lt. Col T.R.W. Cotton. AWM67, 2/58, 661096

L to R; Cpl Ross Campbell, Sgt Murray Sweetapple, Lt George Connor,
Pte Jack Wayte with captured French machine gun. Fort Khiam, 9 June 1941.[18]

Given his adventurous (some would say reckless) exploits on his first day in action, it is a wonder that George Connor survived the war! In 1944, George was belatedly recognized for his bravery at Fort Khiam. He was awarded a Russian decoration; the Order of Patriotic War (1st Class). He was one of only three Australians to receive this award.

On the following morning, after a long artillery and mortar bombardment, 'A' Company entered Fort Khiam and found it deserted. That afternoon (9 June), 'A' Company began clearing Khiam Village, just to the north of the fort. At the northern end of the village, they came under heavy fire from French defensive positions on "The Pimple" and decided to withdraw back to the positions around the fort for the night. The 10 June was also spent clearing the village, but there remained small pockets of resistance and it was suspected that French troops were hiding in the village in mufti. On the 11 June, Tom Cotton decided to methodically round up every male in the village and check their credentials. By midday, the task was complete and the company advanced into an olive grove short of "The Pimple", where it dug in for the night. The following day, D Company attacked "The Pimple" and secured it by the afternoon. Everyone could relax for a while, except 'A' Company which was ordered to relieve other troops occupying deep defensive positions around Merdjayoun, now the 2/33rd Battalion HQ. George's platoon defended the spur north of Merdjayoun from possible counter-attack. They stayed there until the 15 June, resting and recuperating.

At 0800 on the 15 June, 'A' Company set off on foot to reach Ferdisse via Ibeles Saki, there to occupy the village, dig in and to begin harassing the enemy by patrolling to the north and east. They reached Ferdisse at about 1500. At 1600, George spotted a French patrol approaching from the north, unaware of his platoon's presence. George instructed his platoon to hold fire until they were very close but another platoon opened fire prematurely, the French scattered and returned fire at George's platoon, who were quite exposed. The lead French scout was quite close and sniping at 9 Platoon from a split between two boulders. George was angry that

[18] Australian War Memorial Photograph Collection No 008366

they had been put in this difficult position. He borrowed a rifle and took a 500 yards detour through olive groves to reach a position to shoot the French sniper, which he did. When he rejoined his platoon, the chap next to him said '*You were lucky. Just after you left, a bullet skipped and went right across the top of the boulder that you were looking over'*.

Over the next hour, the French counter-attacked in strength all along the Allied front. 'A' Company at Ferdisse came under heavy artillery and mortar fire and French troops massed along their front. At 1700, 'A' Company received orders to withdraw back to Bmeriq, not an easy task when under fire. They had set up a company rendezvous just behind Ferdisse, but by the time George and 9 Platoon got there, because of a misunderstanding, the rest of the company had already left. George came across the 2/33rd Battalion 2 I.C. Major Clem Cummings and his patrol which was trying to contact 'B' and 'C' Companies. George was told that battalion H.Q. had withdrawn from Merdjayoun to the Jisr bridge. Major Cummings took over George's platoon and instructed George to go to battalion H.Q. and advise them of the situation around Ferdisse. George set off alone on foot, arriving at Jisr Bridge at about midnight on the 15 June. After passing on his message to the C.O., George was instructed to return to Ferdisse and take messages to Major Cummings. Still alone on foot, George arrived at Ferdisse again at dawn on 16 June but could not find anyone, so he returned to Jisr Bridge at about midday, and was told that his company was now up at Fort Khiam. By this time, George had been awake and walking for about 36 hours and was very tired. He asked for transport to Fort Khiam and was given a British driver and Blitz wagon to take him there. He fell asleep almost straight away and was woken by the driver when they stopped at an unmanned road block in the valley between Merdjayoun and Khiam. Together they removed the roadblock and proceeded up the track to Khiam.

They could see troops on "The Pimple" and assumed them to be friendly, but as they climbed the narrow road cut into the side of the hill, a machine gun opened fire on them from "The Pimple", about 180 metres away. George and the driver dived out of the truck and took shelter in a shallow gutter by the side of the track. George had a pistol with six rounds; the driver was unarmed. George decided they would work their way down the gutter to an anti-tank ditch farther down the hill. The gutter was just deep enough so that, if you kept flat, the enemy could not fire at you. George was in front and they worked their way down until they came to a boulder that had rolled down the hill into the gutter. George couldn't shift it from a prone position so he asked the driver to poke his head up quickly to see if it was clear to stand up and move the boulder. According to George;

"He put his head up, pulled it down quickly and he said 'Take a look sir' so I put my head up and about 40 yards away were six Senegalese soldiers with fixed bayonets advancing on us with a Frenchman, an NCO, in charge. So I said to this tommy driver 'It looks like we're going to be prisoners. Now remember, it's name rank and number only. That's all you are allowed to give and nothing more.' And he said to me 'Will my wife still get my allowance sir?'"..... " So I put my hand up, I wasn't going to fight six Senegalese with fixed bayonets and they came over and we stood up and this French NCO came over and I remember thinking when I put my hand up 'bloody hell, I've got to speak French now'. Not that I'd ever spoken it much, I could read it a bit. I'd passed French in my Leaving and understand it. He came over and he ripped my equipment off me and he took my wallet, he took everything. He didn't ask at all and that made me annoyed. And then having done that, he said to me in English, and I'm still thinking about having to speak French, he said 'What's your name'? and I told him and then he said 'What's your regiment?' And I'm looking him in the face and thinking 'how the hell in French do I tell him that under international law, I am not permitted to tell him what my regiment is' etc. etc. And I'm just staring him in the face. Then he said to me in English,

'What's the matter? Aren't you English?' I said 'No, I am an Australian'. And he walked off then. I don't know what he thought Australians spoke. So then I was taken prisoner."[19]

Back in Australia, George was formally reported 'Missing'[20] and then 'Missing believed Wounded'[21], which must have been very distressing for his family and friends. His uncertain status may be why the recommendation for an award for his exploits at Fort Khiam went astray. However, when the Vichy French in Syria agreed to an Armistice at midnight on 13 July 1941, one condition was that all prisoners of the Syrian campaign were to be repatriated. Although George and 65 other prisoners had been transported elsewhere by then, the Allies detained General Dentz and his staff until George and the others were repatriated. George arrived back at Beirut by ship on 15 August after two months as a P.O.W. and the first thing he did was telegram his family to let them know he was alive and safe. This was the first news the family had of George since he went missing, and *"the whole household was very happy"*. On the 17 August, he rejoined the 2/33rd Battalion at Fidar, 40km to the north of Beirut. During the five week Syrian campaign, the 2/33rd Battalion had lost 121 men including 23 killed[22].

George wrote to his parents of his experiences as a P.O.W.:

"I was captured near a town just north of Palestine on the 16th June, after 10 days of fighting. The actual fighting I will not relate, except to say the going was hard and at the time we went without sleep for days. When I look back on it the experience was amazing. You learnt more about fighting in 10 days than 2 years of peace soldiering. The name of the place was "Merdjayoun". I was on my own and no-one saw me taken so I expect that this is the reason for the rumours as to what happened to me. I was kept in a field not very far behind enemy lines and guarded by French native troops. They pinched everything I had but I was given my wallet back after much argument in broken French. My watch was hanging round my neck on a piece of string which they failed to see so I still have that. From here I was taken by truck to Beirut. There is nothing to relate about the journey except that it was rough and we had no food. The drivers were French Indo-Chinese and seemed decent little chaps. At Beirut we were treated as criminals and locked up in cells. Here I met two English air arm chaps who were prisoners. They had been shot down at sea, and picked up by a French destroyer. We were here for three days. The second day a lot of English officers were brought in, so we were formed into a community of officers in a barrack room. We were then taken by train to Aleppo, a town in the north of Syria. This took about 28 hours and on the trip we had no food or water. When we arrived there we were taken in busses to a small village called Idlib, very near the Turkish border. Here we were imprisoned in a small barracks. The major in charge was an arch b------ if ever there was one. The quarters were fair. We had beds and sheets, but that was all. He would do nothing to make us more comfortable. At this point I will describe the meals to date. The French have only two meals a day, one at eleven and one at five in the evening. Well the meals themselves were insufficient, but the worse were to come. We were hoping all the time for an armistice. Things looked as though we might get out soon. Suddenly one night, about 8 p.m. they announced that we were to go to better quarters and to be ready by 9 p.m. We left about 10 p.m. in busses and went to Aleppo air-drome where we waited about three hours. We were then put into big Douglas passenger liners and flown off in the night. Here our adventure really began. We flew west over the sea and about 9 a.m. we landed on an airport which was absolutely a mass of German airplanes. They were all over the place. We immediately thought that we were being handed over to the Germans and would be prisoners for the rest of the war. The place was Athens but we did not stay there long. They loaded us into some old bombers and flew us off. From the air the scenery in Greece was marvelous. I was in the rear gunner's cockpit so I had a good view. There was no gun, worst luck, so we were not able to try our skill as air gunners. We were landed at

[19] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003
[20] Sydney Morning Herald 4 July 1941
[21] Sydney Morning Herald 12 July 1941
[22] Crooks, William. "The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45". Printcraft Press 1971 pp 124

Salonika in Greece. Our plane kangarooed across the airfield in bounces of a hundred yards and stopped before the end. I thought the wings would fall off as it looked like a 1919 edition bomber. We were taken to a warehouse in the main town and placed on about the sixth floor. The accommodation was cracker. We had a few handfuls of straw to sleep on and no blankets. The food was brought to us on dishes and we had to eat beans and potatoes with our fingers, off bits of paper. The food was rotten (well, not going bad, but not good). It was lima beans and potatoes – nothing else. We very seldom got meat. We managed to get some eating utensils with the help of the French Consulate who was very decent to us. We were transferred out of the warehouse to a French passenger liner which was tied up in the harbour. We were imprisoned on this for about a fortnight. The commander of the boat was violently anti-British, so the treatment was not so good. He placed us in fourth class accommodation, which was more or less crews' quarters. We were only allowed on deck for two hours a day so we did not like it much. We were fed on 7 ½ oz of food a day, mainly beans (dried) and potatoes. Bread was stale and sour, but we were so hungry we would eat it dry when we could get it. It was while we were here the armistice was signed and after this they consented to put the British officers in 3rd class. We had Indian native officers and British N.C.O.s with us. We left here by train for France. I was in a 3rd class dog box with three others. We were in this for 8 days without getting out once and without washing. We had no blankets and we slept on the floor. I was still wearing the shirt and long slacks that I had on when I was captured. The trip itself was great. Jugoslavia is a beautiful country. Everywhere the fields were green and the peasants were working in their native costumes. We then passed out into the Tyrol of Austria. Here the scenery was truly magnificent. We were in the timber belt. The forests were magnificent and above them were the towering rocky mountains covered in snow. The country everywhere was green and beautiful. We passed on into Germany where things looked normal. From here through the Black Forest past the source of the Danube to France. France is a dead country. It was just like coming into a deserted city. There was complete absence of life. We were taken to the South to Marseilles and then to Toulon, the naval base. Here we were put in a fort [La Tour Royale] and not allowed to see anyone. The sleeping accommodation was rotten and food rotten. Potatoes for two meals a day. When you eat boiled spuds for every meal you get sick of the sight of them. When they arrested Dentz they hurried our trip back (first class) in a passenger boat to Beirut. We got a good welcome. Well I will end and write more later, about minor details. Give my love to Marge and Martha.

Love George

P.S. I am now at Haifa on leave having a good time.

P.P.S. Don't let this story get beyond the letter as this stuff is confidential as yet. People may read it tho."[23]

[23] Letter from GBC to his parents in Roseville. August 1941

Lt George Connor (third from right) as a POW in Syria, June 1941

For the remainder of 1941, the 2/33rd Battalion had garrison duties in Lebanon, which allowed the men to relax. On the 13 September, the battalion moved north by truck to the Legault Barracks on the outskirts of the port town of Tripoli. Two weeks later, they moved up to the high plateau 15km east of Tripoli and established a defensive position overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, Tripoli, and the oil refinery, 650m below them. They remained there until 23 October, when construction of a new defensive position began on the lowlands closer to Tripoli, and the oil storage farm and refinery.

Although they continued to strengthen their defenses and maintain their training routines, the few months that they spent close to Tripoli was like a holiday. The troops had rostered leave, giving them opportunities to visit Haifa, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and other Middle Eastern cities, and they could go into Tripoli regularly for recreation. Tripoli had bars, cafes, restaurants, nightclubs and English movie theatres, and the troops were welcomed by the inhabitants. Occasionally George would be assigned the piquet roster to help keep peace in town by patrolling the streets, brothels and bars, picking up any potential trouble makers and taking them back to camp. Mail and comfort parcels arrived from Australia; there was a weekly ration of Australian beer or chocolate; and they held sports and military gymkhanas where they competed against other units. As winter arrived, snow fell right down to the Mediterranean coast. Some officers (including Tom Cotton) and other ranks were selected to attend ski schools at the Cedars of Lebanon ski fields in the mountains east of Tripoli. George was not selected and was very jealous of those who were. That year was a white Christmas in Tripoli, and the troops struggled to keep warm.

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, the troops in the Middle East did not immediately see any relevance to them. Reinforcements from Australia continued to arrive, and there was a more immediate threat from a renewed German offensive across North Africa. The battalion began to prepare for desert warfare again and, on 14 January 1942, the battalion said farewell to Tripoli and travelled by bus and train south to Gaza, where their Middle East adventure had begun. They started training again for desert combat, but as news of the Pacific and Malayan conflict began to filter through, rumours began to circulate around the camp that they might be sent back to Australia. And the rumours were correct. On the 6-7 February, the battalion travelled by train to Suez and on the 9 February, they marched down to the wharves at Port Tewfik to board the USS *Mt Vernon*. On 18 February, they arrived with the rest of the 7th Brigade at a packed port of Colombo, having heard of the fall of Singapore during the voyage.

After argument at the highest levels of government about whether the 7th Brigade should go to Burma, Sumatera or Australia, Prime Minister John Curtin finally prevailed and, on the 24 February, the USS *Mt Vernon* sailed from Colombo. It docked at Fremantle Western Australia on the 4 March, and those on board expected a large welcome for the first Australian troops back from the Middle East. They were disappointed because the news of their arrival had been kept classified. Instead, they found Perth and Fremantle feting a horde of visiting American sailors, airmen and soldiers, mostly fresh from the U.S.A. George was assigned to be officer of the guard on the ship, but he managed to get some shore leave on the morning they arrived. He was surprised to hear from locals in a nearby pub that they felt angry with the Australian troops who had gone to war in the Middle East because they had gone overseas and left Australia unprotected. According to him, there was an atmosphere of nervous tension in the city. That night there were many fights on shore and the men on piquet duty were kept busy hauling the drunk and injured back to the ship or to the infirmary.

Early on the 6 March, the USS *Mt Vernon* sailed for Adelaide and docked there at midnight on the 9 March. News of their impending arrival had reached Adelaide and the welcome there was warm, even in the early hours of the morning. The troops travelled by train up to Woodside in the Adelaide Hills, where many of the officers were billeted out with local families. They were told there would be no leave, apart from day leave to Adelaide, but being so close to home, many decided that was unacceptable after two years away and went A.W.L. At one stage, the 2/33rd had 230 absent without leave! Most returned voluntarily. The battalion stayed around Woodside, training and going on long route marches to stay fit, until 25 April when they entrained for a five day, very uncomfortable journey to Casino, N.S.W. where they set up a bush camp in an isolated area between Casino and Kyogle. George and the other N.S.W.-based men were given a week's home leave from 6 May, and George went to Sydney to see his family.

Soon after returning from leave, George and the Battalion travelled to Caboolture, Queensland where they set up a tent camp in heavily timbered country about four miles north of the town. They contributed to establishing the "Brisbane Line", a defensive line to halt any potential invasion by the Japanese, and they trained for combat in the tropical climates of northern Australia and the Pacific Islands. They practiced beach landings, assaults and river crossings at Bribie Island, constructing and overcoming barbed wire entanglements, manning observation posts, and they went on long route marches with full gear. In June, they moved to a nearby camp at Petrie. George found that his club foot severely hampered his ability to go on long marches, so he was assigned to the Bren gun carrier platoon.

The battalion, with its Bren gun carriers, boarded the *Katoomba* and the *Cremer* at New Farm on the Brisbane River and slipped their moorings at 0300 on the 1 September 1942. By dawn they were out of sight of Australia and heading north. During the voyage, George was informed that he, the Bren gun carriers and the mortars would be staying to defend Port Moresby. George argued hard against this decision and petitioned the Brigade Commander not to be left behind, but to no avail. He "*was very down and out and disappointed.*'' Luckily for George, the mortar platoon leader Lt Matt Todd became ill, so he stayed behind and George went with the battalion, although he was a spare officer with no troops under his command. The Battalion commander, Lt-Col Alfie "Boy" Buttrose told him "*I'm giving you a submachine gun and I want you to walk twenty paces ahead of me wherever I go. You're my bodyguard, runner and everything else*."[24] The battalion disembarked at Port Moresby on 9 September and went by truck through town with its "atmosphere of desperate defeatism"[25] to the Sogeri Plateau. Here they stripped down to battle order, distributed ammunition and stores, and changed their khakis for jungle green uniforms.

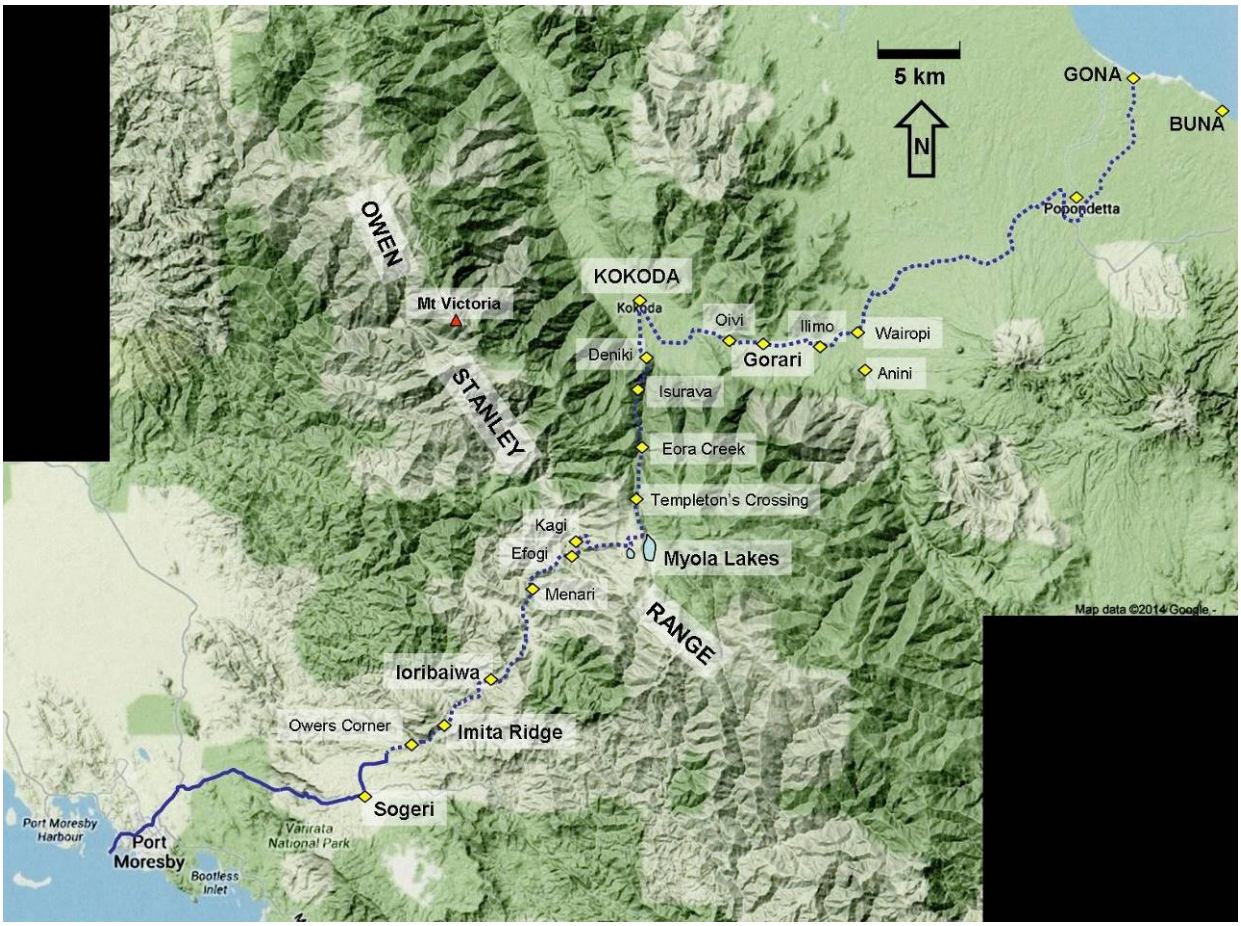
Orders to advance were issued that evening and filtered down to the troops by midnight. Among the orders were that officers' and NCOs' badges of rank were to be removed; first names were to be used; and that the wounded would have to fend for themselves – a chilling thought. The advance was to be led by 'D' Company, starting at 0400 on 10 September from McDonald's Corner at the southern end of what became known as the Kokoda Trail. They had heard all sorts of exaggerated stories and rumours about the Japanese soldiers and their brutal methods, the jungle, the country and the climate, and everyone was very tense, jittery and nervous. But they also knew that the Japanese advance needed to be stopped.

The first few days were a learning experience. They met wounded and exhausted soldiers heading back to Port Moresby with more ghastly tales from the front line; and they became exhausted themselves as they struggled through mud and up steep slopes carrying 55 pounds per man. The first night was spent at Uberi village, and nine men from 'D' Company didn't get that far. The men discarded as much excess baggage as possible to lighten their loads for the future. The following night, 'D' Company reached Imita Ridge. It stormed all night, everyone was soaked and no-one slept. The following morning, Lt-Col Buttrose (with George in tow) also arrived at Imita Ridge. As George described:

"Our troops had never been in the jungle, and we didn't know how the Japs fought in the jungle. You couldn't see anywhere. It was just, you know, thick, and they could have crept up on you anywhere. So we put in a rule that at night, anybody that walked got shot. If you wanted to go to the toilet you crawled. And you never got up because you didn't know if the Japs came in - how could you tell? It was dark, thick jungle. About the fourth or fifth day we went up to Imita Ridge which was the first big ridge we had to get, and we were sent out on the right flank and Alf Buttrose told me as it got near dark, what to do, messages to company commanders, where they were to go, which I went out and did, came back to battalion head quarters and that night I was sleeping in two big roots from a fig tree or something – a good spot I thought – and about 10:30 at night out in one section all hell broke loose. Rifles went off, grenades went off, and Alf Buttrose the CO said 'Connor!' 'Yes sir'. 'Go out and stop that rot!' It's the first time I've told a CO what to do. I'd have been shot the moment I moved out. We lost an officer and about five men that night. A pig had gone through the lines. Someone had got panicky and started shooting and that's what happened. They were nervous. Later on, after we'd been there for weeks, it wouldn't have happened. But we'd just come off the

[24] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003
[25] Crooks, William. "The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45". Printcraft Press 1971 pp 148

ship. We'd gone into a place where we didn't know what the Jap did or how he fought and everyone was nervous."[26]



The Owen Stanley Campaign and Kokoda Trail

From Imita Ridge, the 7th Brigade could hear gun and mortar fire up ahead at Ioribaiwa Village and Ridge where battalions of the 21st Brigade were fighting. 7th Brigade was to relieve those battalions which had taken the brunt of the early Japanese advance since 26 August. The 2/33rd battalion's first contact with Japanese was on 15 September at Ioribaiwa Ridge where they met stiff resistance. On the 16 September, the Brigade commander unexpectedly ordered a withdrawal, with 2/33rd battalion to set up a defensive position astride the main track and hold it for four days while the other units withdrew to a stronger defensive position at Imita Ridge. The 2/33rd set up a series of rolling ambushes for the Japanese as they followed the Australian withdrawal and on the morning of the 17 September in one ambush, they killed about 50 Japanese soldiers. As they withdrew, George was enthusiastically setting booby traps and preparing observation posts in the trees, but there was no other major contact with the Japanese until they successfully reached their holding position behind Imita Ridge on 19 September.

For the next five days, the battalion remained in their rear defensive position and could relax slightly. Their spirits lifted with delivery of rations, mail and other supplies, news of the Japanese defeat at Milne Bay, and with the deployment of two artillery pieces which opened fire on Ioribaiwa. Their contacts with the enemy had dispelled many of the myths about Japanese superiority in jungle warfare. George had some spare time at Imita Ridge. He spotted a mango tree with mangoes on it

[26] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003

about a quarter of a mile away on the edge of a cliff and thought he would go and have a feed. *"So I wandered off on my own, pistol with me, and when I got within 100 yards of the mango tree or thereabouts, walking through the jungle, I heard Japanese and I sighted them and they were digging in near the cliff, about a hundred yards away and no-one knew they were there."*[27]

He reported back to the CO who dispatched some troops to deal with them. This is one of the very few times that George actually saw the enemy in New Guinea. Most of the time, the Japanese were hidden by the jungle, which also became the Australians' friend.

Lieutenant Connor on the Japanese O.P. ladder on Ioribaiwa after the Japanese withdrawal. 28 September 1942.

On the 23 September, the 2/33rd Battalion started patrolling towards Ioribaiwa again, and on the 28 September, the entire Brigade, with 2/33rd Battalion on the right flank and artillery in support, attacked the Japanese positions. They were surprised to find the positions deserted and much equipment left behind.

The Japanese had begun to withdraw, back across the Owen Stanley Range towards the north coast at Buna and Gona, and the Australians were hard on their heels. The Japanese left small groups behind to ambush, harass and delay the Australians' advance along the trail. When one of the other officers fell ill, George was given a posting as 2 I.C. of 'D' Company, commanded by Capt Tim Clowes. George's role as company 2 I.C. was to secure and distribute ammunition, food and other supplies, and to make sure that the troops kept up with the leaders. This last task was very difficult with so many men in poor health, and many obstacles such as fallen trees across the track. Inevitably, the company used to get strung out along the trail.

He described the conditions and the fighting during the Owen Stanley campaign:

"the tracks were mud. It was humid. You never took your clothes off; you wore them continually. Occasionally you might be lucky if you were back behind where the fighting was, to be able to strip off and wash yourself in a cold stream. You had to sleep with all your clothes on in case the Jap came. It'd rain on you. I used to sleep on a slope and dig a little trench around me so that the water running down wouldn't get on you. You put your groundsheet over your head and you'd just lie there. Now you weren't cold. It was humid and hot, or warm temperature, but you were wet all the time." "You couldn't see the enemy, he couldn't see you very well, we had a muddy track that wide [arms outstretched] that you were advancing over. If you went off it you might encounter loya vines or whatever it was. It was very hard to do any flanking movements." "The actual fighting wasn't massive – small patrols against small areas, that sort of thing – it wasn't a mass attack. You had no artillery, it was just rifle fire or bayonet or whatever you had, that's all there was. So it was individuals against individuals more than anything else, and trying to keep your morale up. The health of the

[27] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003

troops. I went into the Owen Stanley show at about 15 stone and I came out at 10 stone 10. Now I was just skin and bone. All you got was some bully beef and biscuits and that was it. And if sickness hit there was no medical supplies." "I got malaria, dengue fever, but malaria half a dozen times, and a lot of the troops were the same." "For malaria, we didn't have anything." "But I don't know, I suppose you just keep going. What can you do? You've got malaria, it's six days walk to get to the hospital. You might as well stay with your troops." "But I've no doubt the fact that we lost a lot of the troops to dysentery and malaria and those sorts of things was we couldn't do anything about it. They got so weak some of them, they couldn't keep going." "So those were the things that took the toll – same with the Japanese, they were really struggling in the end." "They weren't fighting very hard – they'd fight and hold you and then suddenly withdraw, and gradually went back, and it wasn't till they got back to Buna-Gona that they really fought"...[28]

George's worst experience of the entire war happened near Myola. .. "*up near the top of the Owen Stanleys near Myola Lakes, I was going with my troops, following the Japs. They'd withdrawn and we went out on the right flank because there was some firing going on there in the jungle, and I came across an open space probably the size of this room and lying on the ground were 10 to a dozen Australian troops, dead. They'd been dead for months. The Japs had killed them on the way through and just left them there. A terrible sight, rotting bodies, maggots, everything. Some of my troops couldn't face it. They were just sick on the spot." "They'd been caught. They looked as though they were all lying in positions where they'd probably been swamped at night or something. But they were all just lying there. In their uniforms..."*[29]

After the war, George rarely spoke about these traumatic experiences. As he said in 1998, *"At this distance from the war, I think that one of the things about the war and fighting and seeing people get killed etc. is that your mind shuts it out and the only things you remember really are the funny bits, the amusing things, and I think that if you couldn't do that then eventually, you'd become mentally insane, thinking about all the bad things."*[30]

As they captured Myola Lakes and then Kokoda, resupply by air became easier and their conditions improved a little. The 2/33rd continued along the trail, occasionally taking up the lead position in the Brigade and encountering enemy resistance. On 8 November, as 'D' Company approached the village of Gorari between Kokoda and the Kumusi River, the lead troops came under heavy mortar and gunfire. George was working his way down the track with Capt Kevin Power, O.C. 'A' Company, when the firing started. George described what happened; *"there was a creek bed we were near and there was a tree near the creek bed and it had roots coming out like [an umbrella] and the creek had undermined them so there was a little cavern under the roots. I got into this and I can remember saying to Kevin Power who was lying in the creek about 20 or 30 yards up 'I'll be OK but you're going to cop it. You're out in the open.' We used to joke with one another on these sorts of things. Then all of a sudden there was a loud explosion and a mortar bomb came down on top of the roots above me – I was lucky the roots were there, it would have hit me, - it exploded and I got shrapnel in the leg and in the arm. I went back to the RAP and they said, 'well, walk back to Kokoda', so that's what I did." "It was only about a day's walk back from where we were to Kokoda, so it didn't worry me at all. I limped, but you just had to do it and my wounds, compared to what some of them had, they were walking back with broken legs and all sorts of things and they had to get back or help with others etc."*[31]

George was flown back from Kokoda to Port Moresby and was sent to the Army hospital there. He was taken to the operating theatre, a long open-air marquee where patients were swallowed at one end, examined and X-rayed, anaesthetized, operated on and disgorged at the other end, all in full public view. George was X-rayed and, after some consultation, the doctors decided not to remove the shrapnel from his

[28] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003
[29] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003
[30] Oral History interview by Thomas Connor, 1998
[31] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003

upper left arm and left knee, and sent him back to hospital where he spent several weeks recovering. The shrapnel never caused him a problem in later life.

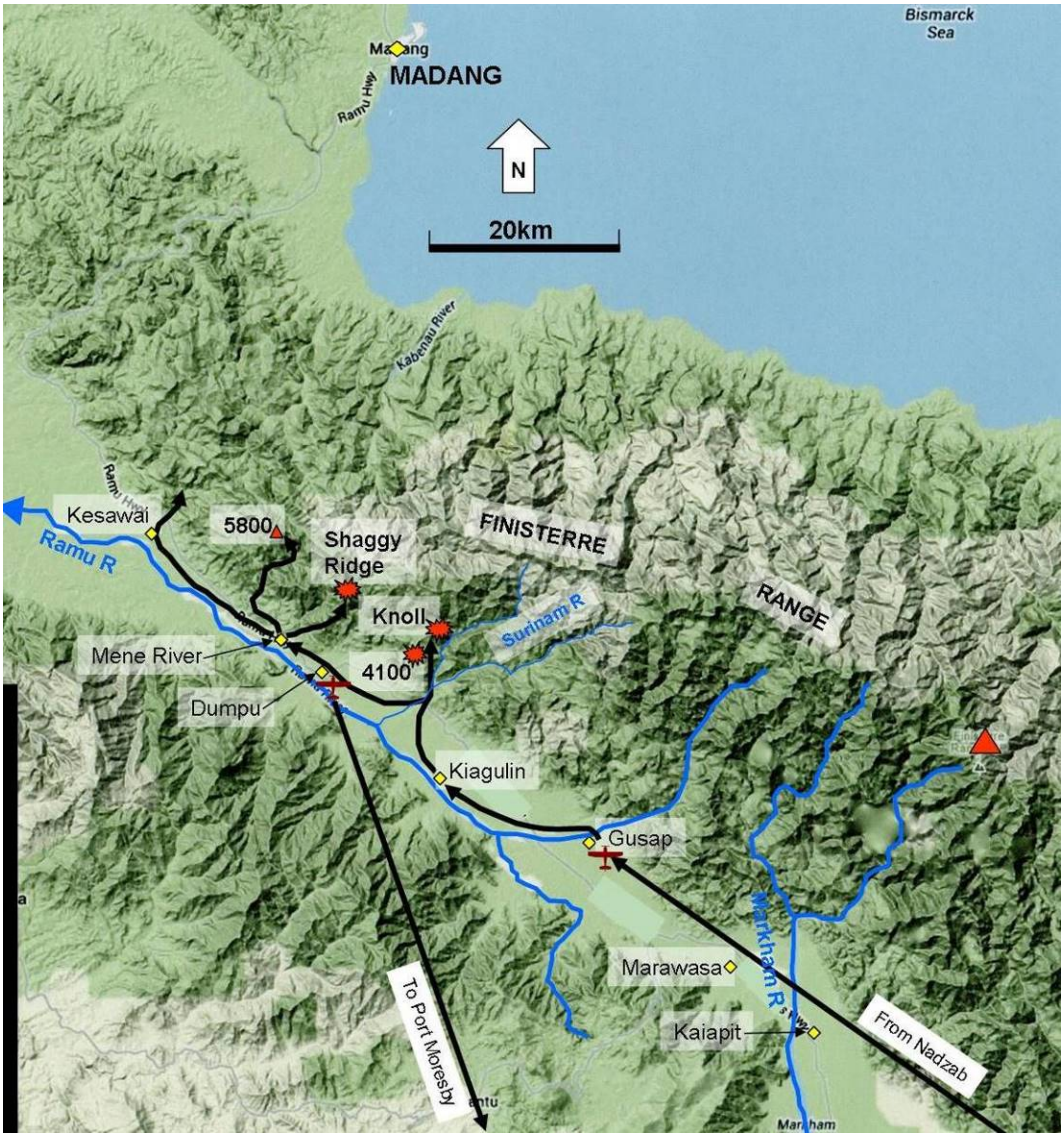
The Gorari battle, where George was an early casualty, turned out to be fierce and lasted three days. At the end of it, the Japanese resistance on the trail crumbled but the Australians, especially 'D' Company, also suffered many dead and wounded. Their losses continued during the subsequent battle for Gona where the Japanese made their last stand. By the time the 2/33rd battalion was relieved of duty at Gona on the 4 December 1942, the battalion was down to 165 men and when they flew out of Popondetta to Port Moresby on the 15 December, 120 men were classed as fit. Perhaps George was lucky to have been injured earlier. George rejoined the battalion at their camp on the Sogeri Plateau near Port Moresby, and it must have been distressing for him to see the sorry state of his surviving mates and to learn of the deaths of many, including Capt Tim Clowes. On 31 December, the battalion sailed from Port Moresby aboard the SS *Cremer* and arrived at Hamilton Wharf, Brisbane on 8 January 1943 to a very warm welcome. They had two weeks of home leave before beginning to prepare for the next 'show'; the Lae-Ramu campaign.

Gradually, the 2/33rd Battalion reformed with old soldiers and many new volunteers under Lt-Col Tom Cotton, the new battalion commander. By the end of March 1943, the 7th Brigade was again in full training centred around camps in the Atherton Tableland and Ravenshoe, inland from Cairns. The battalion carrier platoon which had stayed behind in Port Moresby at the beginning of the Owen Stanley campaign, was amalgamated with other carrier platoons into a carrier company at 7th Division level. George was again assigned to this new carrier company because of his ankle problem with walking long distances.

The carrier company followed the infantry battalions to Port Moresby in July and, although they remained in training, the carriers learned that they would once again be left behind in the Port Moresby. For George, this was a great disappointment, but this time he could not persuade anyone to allow him back into the infantry. After weeks of training in local conditions near Port Moresby, the infantry was to be airlifted into Nadzab, an airstrip on the Markham River 21km west of Lae which had been captured by US paratroopers. On the 7 September 1943, while waiting to board troop planes at Jackson Field in Port Moresby, a fully-loaded Liberator bomber crashed on take-off into a convoy of trucks carrying the 2/33rd Battalion. 'D' Company was the worst hit. In that single accident, the battalion lost six officers and 140 other ranks killed or injured, including 112 from 'D' Company. Capt J. B. Ferguson of 'D' Company was killed. If George had been fit for infantry duty, he probably would have been in Capt Ferguson's place, and perhaps George felt some survivor's guilt over this.

When it was decided on 10 September 1943 to raise another 'D' Company, George was one of the first to volunteer. By 15 September, Capt Kevin Power with Capt George Connor as 2.i.c. had gathered 138 men for the new 'D' company and begun intensive training for battle. On 30 September, the company boarded six transport planes to take them north to catch up with the 2/33rd battalion, which had been in action against entrenched enemy positions around Lae but was now at Marawasa on the watershed between the Ramu and Markham Rivers. Unfortunately, two of the six transports had to return to Port Moresby so 'D' Company became split. While Kevin Power took the bulk of the company to Marawasa, George tried to arrange alternative transport. On 4 October, they reached Nadzab; on the 6 October, they cadged an airlift to Gusap but had little idea of the whereabouts of the main body of the battalion, which was rapidly advancing down the Ramu River valley. Early on the 7 October, they marched off down the track towards Dumpu and reached the battalion

at dawn the next day at Kiagulin, where they were camped. Tom Cotton used the opportunity to reorganize his officers and George was appointed O.C. 'D' Company.



Capt George Connor's exploits, Ramu Valley campaign, October 1943-January 1944

The Ramu Valley is a wide, flat valley covered in kunai grass, with high ranges to the north and south, from which many fast-flowing feeder tributaries enter the Ramu River (see map above). It can be extremely hot and humid, with swarms of mosquitoes and had a deserved reputation as malarial and typhus country.

It became clear from patrol reports that the Japanese forces were concentrated in defensive positions along the Finisterre Range, with well developed track systems leading northwards back to the coast. The 2/33rd left Kiagulin on the 10 October with orders to take the Japanese positions they had identified in the valley of the Surinam River. As the Battalion approached the Surinam River, they could see Japanese forces in defensive positions on top of the 4100 feature which overlooked the entrance to the Surinam valley, and of course, the Japanese could see them also, and waved. Lt-Col Tom Cotton ordered his battalion to move into positions to attack and capture the 4100 feature the following dawn. George Connor and 'D' Company were ordered to secure the hill on the right bank of the Surinam to protect this flank. The hill was actually almost a sheer cliff and at dusk, 'D' Company reached a position

850m above the valley floor among rocks and caves, which turned out to be a native burial ground. Meanwhile, Brigade HQ had given orders for the 4100 feature to be taken that night, 'B' Company was assigned to attack the hill and was moving into position for their assault. That night, with no covering fire and surprise an important element, 'B' Company made the first night attack of the whole New Guinea campaign and successfully completed its mission.

On the morning of the 11 October, 'C' and 'D' companies were withdrawn to the Surinam river crossing and then advanced up the river to support 'A' company, which had been observing another Japanese defensive position at the "Knoll". At 1100, Lt-Col Cotton ordered 'A' company to begin the attack on the Knoll, a narrow ridge line with three high points, and burnt kunai grass slopes offering little in the way of cover. 'A' company was repelled. 'D' company, under George's command, attempted a left flanking move to put themselves into a position to rush the Knoll under cover of mortar fire, but they became trapped on a narrow kunai grass-covered shelf below an almost sheer slope, and were 'sitting ducks' for the enemy. Mortar fire was unable to target the Japanese position accurately, and George ordered his troops to dig in as best they could. That night it rained and they spent the night in their flooded foxholes. The following day most of 'D' company remained pinned down in the hot sun, occasionally being sniped at, while preparations were made for an attack on the 13 October with air and mortar support. The aircraft and mortars pounded the Japanese positions for an hour before the attack and it appeared from the air that the enemy was on the run. At 1000 as planned, 'D' Company frontline began their charge, but immediately met a volley of fire and grenades from the enemy, who clearly had managed to survive the aerial strafing and bombardment relatively unscathed. Two men managed to reach the Knoll, but at this stage, George received orders to withdraw and he yelled at his troops to "*gather up your wounded and get back out of it!*"[32] The battalion withdrew. In this single, short attack, 'D' Company lost two men and had 31 wounded; the greatest number of battle casualties ever suffered by a company of the 2/33rd battalion.

No doubt George was devastated by the loss of his men. As he said later; *"I had a responsibility for the men I had under me. I had a responsibility to the people above to do the things they wanted me to do, but I had a responsibility for the lives of all those people. There's an old saying in the army, 'men are expendable like ammunition'. It's a very old saying but the thing is you never waste ammunition. So you never put a person into a position unless it was absolutely necessary. And the other thing as far as I was concerned, I would never put a person into a position that I wouldn't put myself, and I led them in action, with them all the time. We understood one another and I was responsible and if one of them got killed, it was my fault."*[33]

[32] Crooks, William. "The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45". Printcraft Press 1971 pp 346

[33] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003

16 Platoon, D Company, attack on the Knoll at Surinam, New Guinea, 13 October 1943. A sketch by Terry Cook from a field sketch drawn by Sergeant W. Crooks just after the attack.

That night, the 2/31st battalion relieved the 2/33rd battalion, which withdrew and camped at the entrance to the Surinam valley. On the afternoon of 14 October, they arrived, very dispirited, back at Kiagulin. On the same day, the 2/31st walked onto the Knoll to find it deserted, the Japanese having withdrawn to the high Finisterre Range.

On the 18 October, the Battalion moved to a new camp further down the Ramu Valley, beyond Dumpu and just east of the Mene River. This was their base for the remainder of the Ramu campaign. They were no longer in the direct firing line and spent their days patrolling up into the foothills, maintaining their training, and helping the engineers with roadwork. Occasionally at night they were drenched by storms and struck by lightening as the monsoon built. But overall, the conditions at the Mene River camp were tolerable, even comfortable, and it was *"a pleasant war"*.[34]

On the 21-23 October, George led 'D' company on a patrol farther down the valley to Kesawai to reconnoitre possible airfield and bridge sites. They did not come across any enemy forces, only the defensive pits and equipment they had left behind. *"Throughout this patrol, there was admiration for the stoicism of the O.C., Captain Connor, who always suffered from an old football injury to an ankle. The two-day splashing about the swamps of Kesawai had swollen it so badly that his foot looked like a balloon. He neither complained nor mentioned the matter to anybody however, but his obvious limping and his set face told a story of the discomfort he must have suffered on this patrol."*[35] The "I'm fine. Don't worry about me" attitude; not wanting to be a burden to anybody and rarely complaining are typical of George Connor.

[34] Crooks, William. "The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45". Printcraft Press 1971 pp 353

[35] Crooks, William. "The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45". Printcraft Press 1971 pp 354

From the 9-29 November, 2/33rd Battalion relieved the 2/27th in their defensive positions on Shaggy Ridge. 'D' Company was around Guy's Post, in the rear. The foremost defensive pit on Green Sniper Pimple, half a day's climb along the narrow ridgeline track from Guy's Post, was only 40 metres from the foremost Japanese pit beyond the northern end of Shaggy Ridge. These forward positions were often shrouded in mist but on a clear day, they could see Madang harbour 60km to the north. There was occasional sniping backwards and forwards and occasional shelling, but overall, the time spent on Shaggy Ridge was boring. George used to roam about the battalion's positions chatting and playing poker, and hatching schemes to get the enemy to show themselves and become targets for snipers. On the 29-30 November, the battalion returned to the Mene River camp and its routine, but from the 10-15 December, the Japanese counter-attacked at various positions along the Australian fronts and the 2/33rd was on alert again. Fortunately, the counter attack did not reach them at Mene River and they could relax somewhat, although the scare meant that they prepared new defensive positions.

Green Sniper Pimple, Shaggy Ridge.[36]

From the 18-21 December at short notice, the Battalion was sent to capture the 5800 feature, where aerial reconnaissance indicated the presence of a sizeable Japanese force. The battalion had artillery support and captured the feature easily, finding that most of the Japanese forces had left there some time before; just a few stragglers were found. This was the last engagement for the unit in Papua New Guinea. They returned to the Mene River camp on 21 December and, apart from Christmas celebrations, fell back into camp routine. The unit marched out to Dumpu airstrip and flew back to Port Moresby on 1 January 1944. Soon after, they learned that the unit would return to Australia. On 8 February, they boarded the *Kanimbla* and disembarked at Townsville on 10 February. Most then went on 24 day's leave.

By early April the battalion had regrouped near their 1942 camp at Petrie near Brisbane. Life at the camp was fairly relaxed as news came of victories in the Pacific against the Japanese and that the Allies had landed in Normandy. Leave was given liberally and many of the men brought their wives to Brisbane and stayed with them, rather than at camp. Periods of R&R combined with light training were arranged at Redcliffe (10 days) and Burleigh Heads (7 days). George played football again for the battalion rugby league team. On 8 August, after seven days of parade-ground training, the entire 7th Brigade marched through the streets of Brisbane amid large crowds and with great fanfare. Soon afterwards, they received notice to move back to training camps in North Queensland and by the 29 August, they had arrived at Kairi near Atherton, with its tropical rainforest, rivers and steep hills - an ideal training ground for tropical warfare. Training exercises began in earnest on the 1 September.

[36] Australian War Memorial. Number 064260

George came up before a Medical Board in October 1944 and because of his ankle, which caused him so much difficulty during the Ramu campaign, he was graded A2 meaning that he could no longer serve in the front line. Naturally he was disappointed. Through luck and the misfortune of others, he had managed to get to the front on three campaigns despite his ankle. A fourth time looked unlikely and the war seemed to be nearly over so he asked to be discharged so that he could resume his university studies. On the 17 October 1944, shortly before George departed Kairi and his unit, the battalion paraded for presentation of the Order of Patriotic War First Class to Capt G.B. Connor for his actions at Fort Khiam. The medal was presented on behalf of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics by Major General Milford, G.O.C. 7th Division. With the decoration came an entitlement to receive 25 rubles a month for 5 years, and free transport on any Russian ship or train. George said later *"I felt a bit honoured, you know. I felt I'd got something out of the war."*[37]

Capt G.B. Connor with Russian decoration. Oct 1944.

George "Punchy" Connor was later described by Bill Crooks, who served under him, as *"Skilled and down to earth, nothing was impossible to George. Big and thickset of stature, his platoon often said he was 'too damn fit'. Lieutenant Connor was always to be where the fight was thickest." "As Captain Connor, George was to leave the unit in 1944 after a medical board caught up with him at long last with a bad ankle, that he did his best to hide. This popular officer was a great loss to the battalion when he left."*[38]

Reflecting on his wartime experiences later in life, George said *"the war was companionship and one of the best training grounds, to my way of thinking anyway, for management you could have. As an officer, you have the responsibility of people's lives on your hands. You've got to show leadership and good sense in looking after them and seeing everything get done. To me, one of the greatest things I got out of the army was learning how to manage people and to get things done in difficult conditions"*.[39]

Those of us who have never been to war can have no real idea of what it must have been like – the horrors which our fathers never talked about, the depth of the friendships they made, sealed by shared experiences.

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[37] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003

[38] Crooks, William. "The Footsoldiers: the story of the 2/33rd Australian Infantry Battalion, A.I.F. in the war of 1939/45". Printcraft Press 1971 pp 42-43

[39] Oral History interview by Thomas Connor, 1998

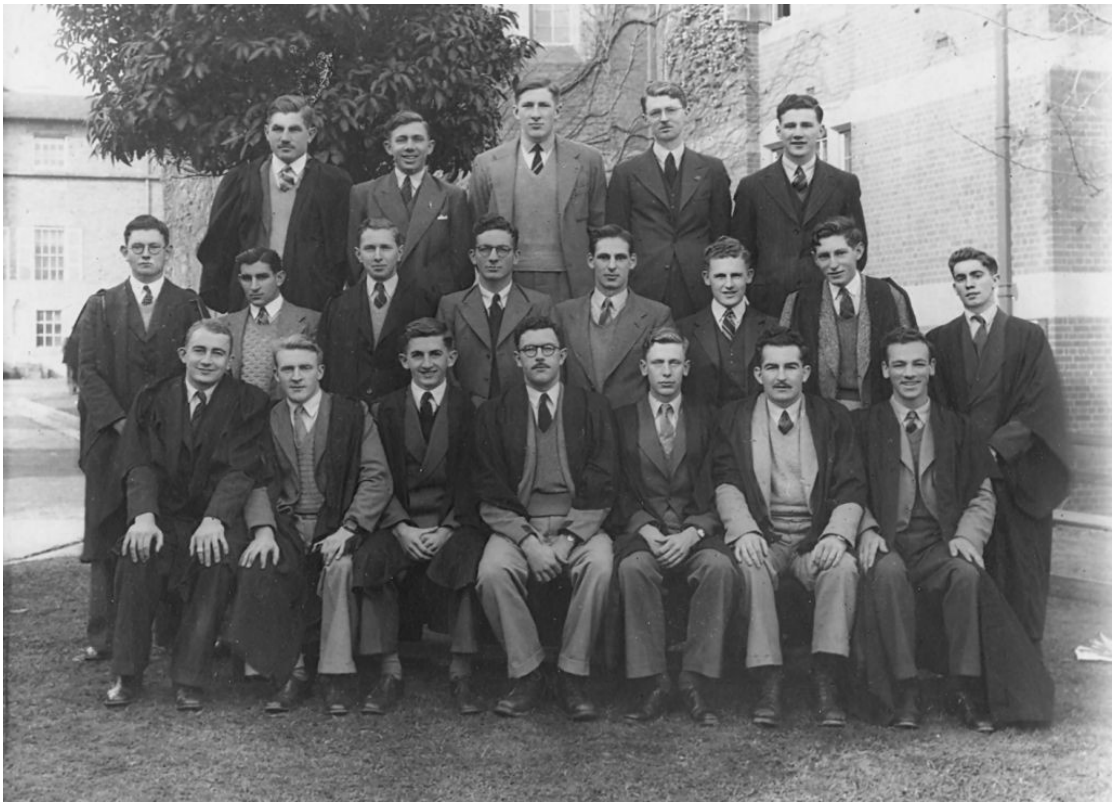
George's University years

A more mature George returned home to Roseville and, in January 1945, started his second year of Mining Engineering studies at Sydney University, although he had forgotten most of what he had learned in 1939, his first year. *"I went into the maths lecture. Dickie Lyons was the lecturer, and he put on the board a big integral sign and integral equation and said 'now you all remember that comes down to that' and I could only remember the integral sign! So I had to start really from scratch."* But George enjoyed University. He found the professors were considerate to the problems he faced on returning after a five-year gap. Over the next three years, George learned that Mining Engineering is not an exact science. In the mining course, he developed a broad, but not exhaustive knowledge of many aspects of mining. He studied geology for two years, metallurgy and the treatment of ores, chemistry, physics, mathematics, building construction, ventilation, surveying theory and practice, and numerous other subjects related to mines and mining. As his professor Ted Eastor explained, George was not being taught to regurgitate facts, but to analyse a problem, know what books to read and which people to consult to help solve the problem. In that sense, George thought that Mining Engineering was easier than civil, aeronautical, electrical or mechanical engineering.

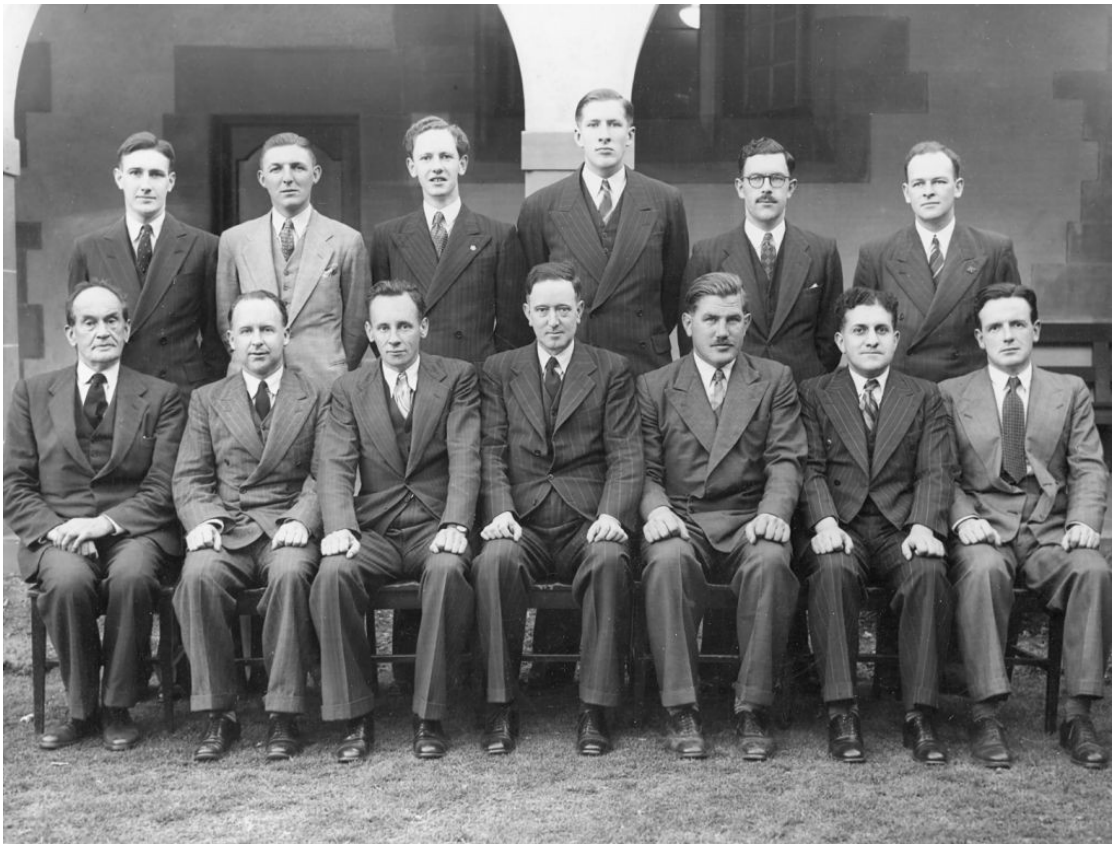
After the war, George participated more in the life of the University, although his first allegiance remained to the 'godless engineers'. He was a member of the Board of the Sydney University Union and became its treasurer. He was also on the Council of the S.U. Engineers Association. He rejoined the University Cricket Club and played in the 1944-45 season. He was captain of the University Rugby team, in the backline with his old school friend Basil 'Jika' Travers. George travelled from Roseville to practice during the week, and on Saturdays after every game there was usually a keg of beer underneath the grandstand. George got to meet a few women at these parties, although he didn't have a girlfriend. In 1945, University won the competition again, and his father Stan would sometimes come and watch the game. Occasionally, George found time for a game of golf with his father Stan at Bonnie Doon Golf Club. In June 1946, George broke his leg playing rugby and was out for half the season.

George Connor (right), Sydney v Queensland University match, 23 May 1945

Sydney University First Grade Rugby Team, September 1945, Premiers. G.B. Connor seated second from left



Sydney University Engineers, 1945
G.B. Connor back left.



Board of Directors, Sydney University Union, 1945-46
G.B. Connor seated third from right

On 10 August 1945, two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, effectively ending the war. Japan formally surrendered on 16 August and George drove his old school and army friend Bruce Laing into Sydney city centre to celebrate along with thousands of others. Everybody was drinking and dancing and it was "quite a night". George's old unit, the 2/33rd Battalion, had been fighting in Borneo when the war ended and from the 17 August, George's old comrades-in-arms began returning home in dribs and drabs to be discharged from the A.I.F. George probably met every ship that docked in Sydney with returning 2/33rd personnel. On one of these occasions, he helped carry ashore the kit of one Capt Terence Whiting, a stranger, who was later to become his brother-in-law. In November 1945, although not all the battalion had returned from duty, George helped arrange a meeting of the 2/33rd battalion members to start a 2/33rd Battalion Association. George was elected the inaugural secretary of the Association. Several of his friends married soon after arriving home and George was best man at a few weddings, including the wedding of Bill Henderson, an old school friend. Probably the last member of the 2/33rd to arrive back in Australia was Lt Col Tom Cotton, in April 1946. Tom had met a girl when based in England at the start of the war and proposed to her by letter and telegram. George and his sisters were conscripted at short notice to arrange the wedding in Sydney in August 1946, and act as best man and bridesmaid. Everywhere there were wartime reunions. George had an impromptu one in a busy Sydney city street when a tram pulled up in mid-block, the driver got out, shook George's hand and yelled *"G'day Punchy, it's good to see you again!"*

George gave up cricket as a summer sport at the end of 1945 on the suggestion of his friend Dr Bruce Laing, and joined the Palm Beach Surf Life Saving Club at the northern extremity of Sydney's beachside suburbs. At that time, there were only a few houses at Palm Beach, mostly weekenders because it was (and still is) too far to commute in to Sydney each day. About 95 percent of Palm Beach S.L.S.C. were university students who would catch the bus to Palm Beach on a Friday afternoon and return on Sunday night or Monday morning. The members could stay at the surf club for eight shillings a week (a shilling a day and two shillings on Sunday). They had to buy their own food and cook it, use the kitchen and keep it clean.

Palm Beach drill team, Australian S.L.S. Championships, Maroubra 1946. John Gray, flagbearer; George Connor, beltman.

The members had to be on life saving duty, swim every morning, keep fit, patrol the beach and participate in competitions but, according to George *"it was a good social life and there were always things going on, and I really enjoyed that. I had good fun there."*[40] It was a bohemian existence, mixed with camaraderie and some keen competition.

'Surf race start, Manly 1940s' by Max Dupain
(G.B. Connor in foreground)

George became captain of the club in mid 1947 because he was an "oldie" among mainly school boys. He had a long board – hollow ply with a drain plug – which he won in a poker game, and which was on the wall above the bar for many years (and still may be there). George participated in Surf Life Saving competitions and carnivals on his board, with line and reel, in the surf boat and in the surf.

At Palm Beach, George began to take a greater interest in women, and as a bronzed life-saver and first grade footballer, women certainly took an interest in George. His first steady girlfriend was Gloria McGarrity who was a local girl from Waratah Road, Palm Beach. George was 26 and Gloria was about 18 when they met but, although young, Gloria was certainly the pursuer in this relationship. In fact, Gloria said that in a fit of pique, she "picked up" George when another man had refused to take her to a

[40] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003

dance at the surf club. George was not a great conversationalist – he was rather shy and introverted, especially in female company – so Gloria was forever offering him "a penny for your thoughts". George nicknamed Gloria "Penny", and the nickname stuck for the rest of her long life. George and Penny's first relationship lasted only a year or so. Penny broke it off in 1947 and got her parents to tell George the bad news, but they met up again much later in life.

George Connor (looking a little uncomfortable) with Penny McGarrity at her mother's place, *Lion Isle*, Waratah Road, Palm Beach. 1946

At Palm Beach, George also met Sybil Whiting, who he probably recognised as the secretary of the Professor of Engineering at Sydney University. However, George didn't appear to take much notice or invite Sybil out on a date while he was still going out with Penny. After Penny dumped him, George's old friend Bill Henderson told him that Sybil was interested in him, which gave George the encouragement he needed.

Sybil Whiting's early years

Sybil Kane Whiting was born on 24 August 1922 at her father's residence *Astolat*, 119 Marsden Street, Parramatta. Syb, as she became known, was the fifth child of Dr. Keith Moore Whiting and Mary Grant Whiting (née Smyth). Syb had three older brothers, Terence (Ted), Ivan and Philip (Pip), and her older sister Rosamund (Ros). Her brothers were between five and ten years older than Syb because the First World War interrupted the Whitings' family planning. Syb hero-worshipped them and they, in turn, took great care of their little sister.

The Whiting family was relatively wealthy. *Astolat* was a rather grand, two-storey, three-chimney, 17 roomed brick house with verandahs, attic rooms, turrets and a tennis court. It has since been demolished. By all accounts, Syb's father Keith Whiting was a warm-hearted, generous and popular man although he was very busy with his medical practice. The surgery was situated close by at the corner of Marsden and Macquarie Streets but the practice stretched from Parramatta to Pennant Hills and Penrith. For recreation, he liked playing bowls, golf, billiards, tennis and above all, fishing – all activities and pastimes that do not allow much time with children. He called young Syb his "little fat wombat" as a term of endearment, and possibly to distinguish her from Ros, who was tall and gangly.

To satisfy his love of fishing, in about 1921 Keith bought the house at Palm Beach. The house had been built in 1917 and was one of only a handful of houses along the beach front at that time. The family used to drive up to Palm Beach on many weekends, tackling the long, winding dirt road in their large Chrysler. He also bought a 45 feet motor launch called the *Hirondelle II* which he moored in Pittwater and used for fishing up the Hawkesbury River and outside Broken Bay. The Palm Beach house became a meeting place for the wider family.

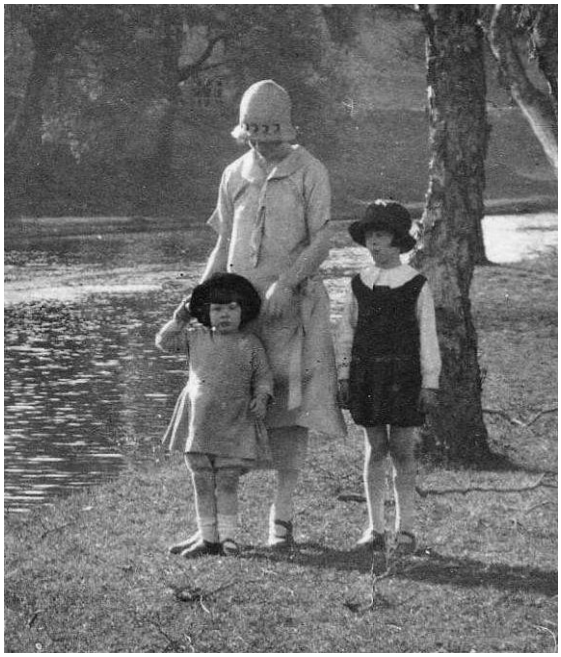
Whiting's house, *Kimriekong*, 2 Palm Beach Rd, Palm Beach; and the view from the balcony of the beach and the Kiosk, with the family returning from the beach. 1932

Syb's mother Mary was quite a stern looking woman and held the Victorian attitude that children should be seen and not heard. She was not an affectionate person but she had a soft heart and clearly adored her children (and grandchildren when they arrived). Sybil was taught Victorian etiquette and manners from an early age - Manners Makyth Man could have been one of the Whiting family mottos. Mary was a Presbyterian and brought her children up in that church. They regularly attended St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Parramatta, although the children attended Anglican schools.

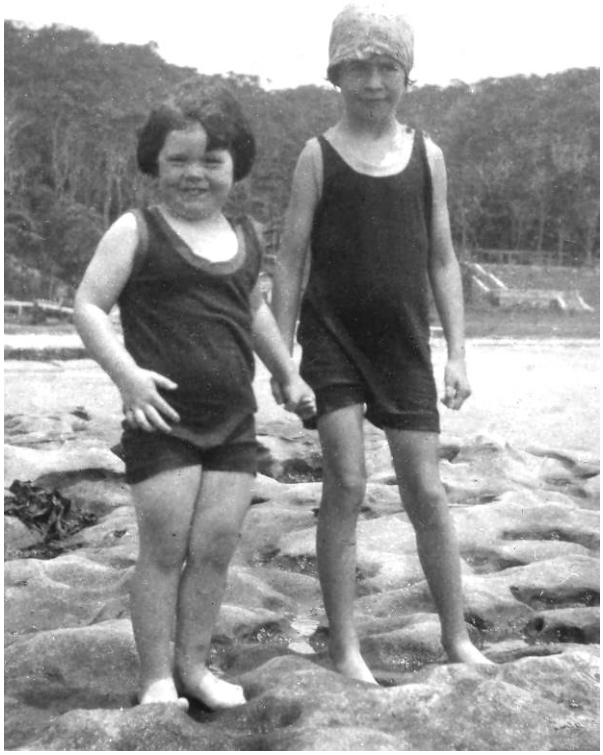
Syb and Ros had a full-time nanny, Kathleen Edwards nicknamed 'Nanny Woodlands' for unknown reasons, who looked after them much of the time, and there was a cook-cum-housekeeper at *Astolat* named Sophie. Some of Sophie's recipes have been handed down through the family. Nanny used to take them for walks in Parramatta Park, to the shops in Parramatta and to the beach and rock pool at the southern end of Palm Beach. Syb probably had a closer relationship to her Nanny, than to her mother.

Syb developed asthma as a young child and often had serious bouts of coughing which would keep her bed-ridden for days. Nanny became a full-time nurse during these times, when brother Philip said Syb *"would cough her little heart out, night after night"*. Despite this affliction, Syb certainly appeared healthy enough, was a happy little girl and developed a reputation as a bit of a mischief maker – which is evident in

some of the photographs below. Her habit of poking out her tongue when concentrating hard also appears to have developed at an early age.



Syb, Nanny Woodlands and Ros (l to r)
at Parramatta Park and the Palm Beach rock pool. c.1926



Sybil and Rosamund Whiting,
Palm Beach c.1926

Sybil Whiting
c.1927

Cousins. Palm Beach, December 1926. L to R: Julian Hore, Adrian Hore, Sybil Whiting, Lois Hore, Mary Smyth, Marjorie Smyth, Huon Hore, Ros Whiting, Judith Smyth, Phillip Whiting, Ivan Whiting, Terence Whiting.

Sybil and Ros attended Miss Joan Waugh's Tara Anglican School for Girls, which at that time was located at the Waugh family home *Tara*, 39 George Street Parramatta, within walking distance of *Astolat*. Joan Waugh and her two sisters, Belle and Cassie who helped to run the school, were Syb's aunts-in-law (sisters of Dr Richard Phipps Waugh, who married Keith Whiting's sister Elaine).[41] Sybil showed her aptitude for creative writing and drawing at an early age. She had a large vocabulary, probably developed as a result of her love of reading. The subjects of her writing were usually drawn from the natural world; gardens and flowers, the bush and the sky, birds and animals, and the sea – the environment at Palm Beach was clearly her inspiration. Sybil wrote the following story in December 1932 (aged 10) and received a mark of 100%.

Christmas Examination. Sybil Whiting.
Composition.

"There was great commotion down in the gulley, for it was the first day of Spring, and the birds were celebrating it with a concert.
The Emu was presiding as he was the biggest bird, and as he always did on these occasions. He stood beneath a tall gum tree, and in front of him all the birds were sitting in a semi-circle. There were all kinds, big and small, and they all had their new coats on; some were very pretty and some were plain brown.
"I think we should open with a chorus", said the Emu.
"Yes, yes, a chorus," said all the birds. They sang with all their heart.
"Spring is here, Spring is here".
It was a song they sang every Spring, so they sang it very well. Then they all sat down again.

[41] Hawkins, Jenny. "Moore or less related" 2007. p201.

"I will give you three minutes to find out the best singer among you all," said the Emu. In three minutes he said "Time's up."
Immediately there broke forth such a chattering. Every bird was calling out the name of the bird it thought sang the best. There were cries of "Reed-warbler, Jacky Winter, Cocktail, Silvereye, Lyre Bird and many others.
"Order, Order," screamed the Emu. "We will have a competition to prove who is the best singer," said he.
"Surely there is no need to have a competition, "I" am the best singer".
The Emu looked round to see the Lyre Bird.
"You are certainly not the best singer," he said. "We will start from the smallest birds upward, all the birds that profess to sing step to the middle of the clearing.
The first one to sing was the Blue Wren or Cocktail. When he had finished, the Lyre Bird ran up and stood in front of the little bird and mimicked him. The birds really could not help laughing, but when the Lyre Bird mimicked all the other birds, they became angry.
"I think the best singer will be the one the Lyre Bird can not mimic."
So the competition went on and the Lyre Bird mimicked every song until there were only three more birds to sing, the Bellbird, Butcher bird and the Magpie.
The Lyre Bird mimicked all three.
"Let the other birds try now," said the Emu.
"Oh, why do you waste so much time? You must admit that I am the best singer," said the Lyre Bird. "Oh alright," said the Lyre Bird.
Then the other birds that could not sing came out.
Most of the other birds just gave a loud shriek, which the Lyre Bird mimicked with great ease. He had mimicked them all, and was strutting up and down, when a voice said "You haven't mimicked quite all yet."
Every one looked up, there sat the Kookaburra, everybody had forgotten him,.
"I have been watching all the fun," he said. "See if you can mimic me."
Then he threw his funny bill into the air and began to laugh; the longer the Kookaburra laughed the longer Lyre Bird's face became, until it was as long as its tail.
Then he began his mimic.
"Ha, ha," and that was as far as he got.
The Lyre Bird couldn't bear being laughed at, so he ran away as fast as his legs would carry him.
After he had gone, the Kookaburra said "I suppose I have won the competition, but let us all end up with a general chorus", and they did.
The Lyre Bird never plays with the other birds, you will always hear him mimicking them, all except the Kookaburra.

School holidays were spent at Palm Beach or sometimes visiting her cousins the Hore family, who had a property called *Redcliff* near Grenfell N.S.W. At age 11 (1934) Syb left Tara and went to school at Meriden, an Anglican school for girls at Strathfield. Syb travelled there by train each day from Parramatta. At Meriden, Syb met her lifelong friends Dawn Gregg (later Mrs. Bill Kirkwood) and Betty Heinz. At school, Dawn and Syb were inseparable mischief makers, especially in chapel. Dawn recalls; *"Syb and I shared such a long and happy life of growing up, school days, young womanhood, early years of 'going out' and so many interests in common. We met in Junior School of Meriden and remained in the same class for the rest of our school days. We shared a common interest in art, oil painting, music, piano and writing, and especially the School Magazine. In fact, we competed for years for the Junior and Senior Magazine Prize. Tennis was our sport, and we played a lot of netball. We also had a great love of reading, and went through the series by Mary Grant Bruce, L. M. Montgomery etc, often living out in our imagination the lives of the characters as we read one book after another until we had exhausted the lot. We played on each others courts with mutual friends, improving our tennis." "So long ago she had attacks of asthma, and spent many weeks in bed. I used to travel by train from Strathfield, on my return journey, and then bus to Castle Hill. On many days if she were not at school, I called in on the way home, left her some homework and collected some she had done, and of course, enjoyed the chance to see her. She was a very bright pupil; missing school did not set her back and she remained at the top of the class most of the time."*

During the days in bed at *Astolat*, when not doing schoolwork or reading, Syb practised her sketching, drawing, and piano playing. Her sketches were of sophisticated men and women (usually smoking) in evening dress and grand surroundings, and some portraits. Perhaps she was influenced by her aunt Marjorie Smyth who spent some time as a bohemian artist in Paris in the 1920s. Syb's artistic skills gave her great pleasure later in life.

As Dawn said, Syb was a very good student. In 1934, Syb received the Special Prize for Design (gift of Mrs. Vi Eyre) and the Form IIIA Sewing Prize. In 1935, Syb was Dux of her year and received the Physical Culture Prize (gifts of Messrs Bjelke-Petersen Bros), a Junior Honourable Mention Certificate, and prizes for Divinity and Languages. In 1937, Syb was a Train Monitor; won the Church Missionary Society, Tanganyika Examination Intermediate First Class Honours Prize; passed her Music Examinations of the A.M.E.B, Pianoforte practical Grade II with Honours and Theory Grade IV with Honours; and at the British Music Society's Eisteddford won the Under 15 Piano Solo and shared with another candidate the McMenamin Memorial Prize for the most promising pianist in all sections. In 1938, Syb did the Intermediate Certificate and passed with 'A's in all of her subjects, English, Geography, French, Art, History, Mathematics I, Physiology and Music[42]. Syb also won the Special Art Prize Form VA (gift of Mrs. Vi Eyre); the Music Prize for Excellent Performance Generally (gift of Miss Hirst); the Junior Taubman Prize for School; and was first place in the British Missionary Society's Inter-Schools Eisteddford. In 1939, her last year at Meriden, Syb was a probationary school prefect, a member of the Tildesley Shield (Inter-School Tennis) Team and won the Special Art Prize VI B (gift of Mrs. Vi Eyre); the Music Prize for Excellent Performance Generally (gift of Miss Hirst); and passed her AMEB examinations.[43]

Dawn often spent holidays with the Whiting family at the Palm Beach house. The men and boys used to go fishing outside the heads while the women and girls swam and sun-baked. Syb used to get seasick and never caught the fishing bug, so she did not accompany her father and brothers outside Broken Bay. Dawn remembers *"lovely holidays at Palm Beach, when bush surrounded most of the houses, and we roamed about the different trees and wildflowers. We explored the headlands and worshipped the beach. We spent lovely days on the Hirondelle anchored in Pittwater. We had no choice on many occasions but to listen to the test matches in silence. On one occasion I remember Syb writing a poem, and can only recall the first line, 'Lying on the sun-warmed deck with the salt wind in my face...'. It so exactly said it all."*

SAILING

Lying on the sun-warmed deck,
With the salt wind in my face,
I gaze up to the blue blue sky,
And watch the white clouds race.

I see the wind-filled sails,
That seem to dazzle white;
And the seagulls wheeling overhead
From the left side to the right.

The flag afluttering in the breeze,
The sea whipped into foam,
The little wavelets sprightly dance
Wherever my eyes roam

The frothing of the bow-wave,
The freshness of the breeze
I love to go asailing
Across the azure seas.

Sybil Whiting Form IVB
Meriden Magazine November 1935

[42] Intermediate Certificate, Sybil Kane Whiting, Meriden Strathfield
[43] Meriden Magazine 1934-1940

Sybil Whiting (left) and Dawn Gregg (next to her), Meriden c.1938

During the Christmas vacation in 1938, Syb's father Keith Whiting died suddenly of a heart attack while the family was staying at Palm Beach. He was only 56, and Sybil was just 16. It must have been a very difficult time for her, and for the entire family.

Sybil Whiting (centre) and other Meriden students going to AMEB examinations at the Conservatorium of Music with Miss Hirst. c.1939

L to R: Sybil Whiting, Philip Whiting, Hugh Shephard, Helen Lavender, John Dibbs, Ros Whiting, Palm Beach c.1939.
(Philip, Hugh and John enlisted in the A.I.F. together in Jun 1940)

Dawn and Sybil (2nd and 3rd from left), Mt Kosciusko, September 1939.
They all fell in love with their Austrian ski instructor.

Syb returned to Meriden in 1939 but did not go on to do the Leaving Certificate, although she clearly had the potential to go to University and obtain a degree. Miss

Hirst also encouraged Syb to take her talent for piano further and study for an A.Mus.A. at the Conservatorium of Music, but family financial problems after her father's death, the generally lower career expectations for young women in those days, and the outbreak of war with its pressures on the Whiting family meant that Syb did not follow either of these paths. I think she probably regretted this later in life, particularly the music. Syb was a perfectionist and high achiever, always believing that her work was never good enough, and perhaps this trait contributed to not continuing her education.

Sybil and Dawn, Austinmer January 1940,
with their ever-present books (and quite short skirts)

After leaving school at the end of 1939 and a holiday with the Gregg family at Austinmer, Syb went to Macquarie Business College to learn secretarial skills. It was there that she met Rachael Robinson (later Mrs. John Townend) who became a lifelong friend and confidante. The Second World War had begun, and on graduating from business school Syb became a civilian secretary in the Commonwealth Public Service, employed by the Department of the Army at Victoria Barracks, Sydney. Her brothers Ted, Ivan and Pip all joined the A.I.F., leaving Syb and Ros at *Astolat* with their mother. Syb had boyfriends, one of whom was Lt Bill Drysdale of the 2/5 Independent (Commando) Company. Bill was killed in action at Lae, New Guinea in October 1942, so Syb, like many other Australians at home, was personally affected by the war and must have been very concerned for her brothers.

Sybil wearing a pearl brooch given to her by Bill Drysdale. ca Feb 1942

Sybil, bridesmaid to Dawn, Jan 1942

Syb's great friend Dawn Gregg married an airman, Pilot Officer Bill Kirkwood, in January 1942 at Parramatta. Syb was her bridesmaid. The Kirkwoods moved to Adelaide, and because of distance and changing priorities, Syb and Dawn's close relationship was harder to maintain. In mid 1942, Syb's cousin Peter Waugh and his new wife Pat, both recently graduated in medicine at Sydney University, came to live at *Astolat*. Peter enlisted soon afterwards, leaving Pat at *Astolat* for the duration of the war. Both Ros and Sybil found Pat Waugh very difficult to get along with. Sybil became godmother to Dawn's first child Susan, born in August 1943. Dawn's focus naturally moved to her family while, for Sybil, life was becoming unsettled.

Sybil's Military Service

In October 1943, not long after turning 21 and armed with a reference from the local Presbyterian minister, Syb decided to enlist in the Australian Women's Army Service (A.W.A.S.), which had been established in 1941. Ros accused her of trying to escape from the difficult atmosphere at *Astolat*, but initially Syb's work didn't change much, simply swapping civvies for a uniform. Surprisingly, she was classed medically A1 – even though Syb declared past episodes of asthma, bronchitis and pneumonia on her application form, Syb had been relatively free of chest problems during her late teens. She even took up smoking! Syb's mother was probably horrified, having three sons already serving in the A.I.F. and only Ros left at home, but her philosophy in times of adversity was always *"The end of a chapter - turn the page and start a new one"*[44].

[44] Letter from Aunt Sybil Hore to SKC, 25 Feb 1974

After a month of training, Syb was appointed Specialist Group II (stenographer) at HQ NSW L/C (Victoria Barracks) and spent the next year working much as she had done pre-enlistment, however, in February 1945 Syb volunteered for overseas service. From thousands of volunteers across Australia, Syb was one of 386 selected to form the A.W.A.S. Lae contingent. To be selected, the volunteer had to be single or the wife of a P.O.W. and have the skills necessary to fill a particular role. This was the first time that Australian non-medical women had been posted to active military service outside Australia.

Pte Sybil Whiting,
February 1945

The Lae contingent collected in Brisbane in late March 1945; Sybil was based at the St. Lucia Barracks, Queensland University. They were issued with tropical gear and started taking their Atebrin anti-malarial tablets[45]. Syb met a new boyfriend, Peter Sykes, and spent Easter at Southport with him and other new friends. There was much speculation and rumour about if and when they would go overseas, but on 28 April all leave was cancelled and phone-calls banned; church services were held the following day, so they knew that departure was imminent.

L to R Joy, Sybil, Nola (front), Winnie and Ros, Southport Qld. April 1945

On 2 May 1945, the A.W.A.S. contingent, including Syb, sailed on the MV *Duntroon* (affectionately nicknamed “the Dunny”) from Newstead Wharf, Brisbane for New Guinea and was posted to Headquarters 1st Australian Army[46]. They arrived in Lae five days later having sailed, escorted outside the Barrier Reef, in beautiful weather

[45] Beveridge, Jean. "AWAS Women Making History" 1988, Booralong Publications
[46] National Archives of Australia. Military Record for NF465227 Sybil Kane Whiting.

the whole way. They were commanded by Col Margaret Spencer, a popular officer nicknamed “the Little Colonel”, being only 152cm tall.

AWAS contingent disembarking at Lae, 7 May 1945.
(Pte Sybil Whiting in foreground)

Amy Taylor, another Parramatta girl in the A.W.A.S. contingent, described her time in Lae as follows:

“My memories of my service in New Guinea will never be forgotten. We sailed on the Duntroon to Lae, 350 female soldiers, with 1500 men. When we arrived in Lae the wharf had been washed away, and we had to go ashore in landing barges. The men gave us a warm welcome, as they knew that they could then move to the more forward areas. We were driven by trucks to our barracks, which ironically were in Butibum Road, a barbed wire compound that was to be our home for the next twelve months.
I was appointed to the barrack staff in charge of stores and supply as well as the entertainment coordinator. Free time and relaxation were necessary to keep up the morale, and allow the girls to circulate away from their war jobs. It all worked out very well.
During that time I developed malaria. Tropical ears and skin problems and boils were another complaint that many suffered. However, we survived and continued to do the job we were sent out to do, which turned out to be a great success.
There were Japanese and Formosan P.O.W. s there, and it was quite a shock to see them being marched into our barracks, where I had to issue them with tools to clean our drains, and we found that the Formosans, that were also prisoners of war, were good gardeners. It was quite an effort to try and make the tropical muddy place look a bit presentable, but they did the job well. However, we still did not trust them.
We were still there in August 1945 when peace was declared. It was quite an emotional time. Word came through of the release of some of our men who were prisoners of war. It was hard telling some of the girls that their husband or brother would not be coming home, but great

rejoicing when word came that some had survived. However, we still had to do our jobs, and were not sent home until early 1946."[47]

Syb was allocated to Hut 11, with 21 other women who became good friends. The huts were subdivided by wardrobes to give each soldier a little privacy, but they shared their accommodation with various creepy crawlies, rats, snakes and flying foxes. The women set about making their huts and the compound as liveable as possible. They started gardens around the compound for growing flowers and vegetables.

The Hut 11 Gang.
L to R Front; Joy, Marj, Sybil. Back; Paddy, Win, Marie, Mon.

Sybil, and at work in the G (ops) hut with Shirley Wild, Lae, May 1945,

Syb was one of five secretarial staff attached to G (Ops) Branch under the command of Capt. Bill Henderson, an ex-Shore student and friend of George Connor, although at that time, Syb had not met George. Syb and her friends worked six days per week, and every day had to pass the P.O.W. camp on their way to work. Following the Japanese surrender, a lot of her work involved typing and sending messages and

[47] A. Taylor. City of Parramatta R.S.L. sub-branch. https://parramattarsl.com.au/rsl9/Amy%20Taylor.htm

recording events associated with troop and equipment movements back to Australia, and future administration of the territory. She enjoyed working for, and liked Capt Henderson and Col Spencer. In December 1945, Syb was promoted to Corporal which carried a pay increase of about one shilling per day, and then to sergeant in January 1946 although there was some administrative foul-up associated with this last promotion.

Syb was a great letter writer, sending on average a letter a day while away from home to her family and friends back in Australia. She described everyday life and work in Lae to her family, but to her close girlfriends Rachael Robinson and Dawn Kirkwood, Syb described the social life of the contingent and especially the details of the romantic connections made in Lae, both others' and her own. And there were several.

Sybil kept up a regular correspondence with John Dibbs, a long-time friend of her brother Philip Whiting. It appears that at one stage John wanted the relationship to go further but Syb saw no future in it. The long-distance romance with Peter Sykes lasted until about July 1945. He was followed by a string of Lae-based men; Cam, Harvey, Doug, Lawrie Rixon and lastly Hal. There is a possibility that Hal and Syb became secretly engaged, but Hal was an American and the relationship didn't survive their repatriation to the U.S.A. and Australia. There were times when Syb was miserable, homesick, full of insecurity and thought she might be 'left on the shelf'. Syb visited the Lae War Cemetery where her old flame Bill Drysdale is buried. But there were many happy times too. Trips to the rest camp at Salamaua beach seem to have been the favourite pastime, but they also went swimming upstream in the Busu River, sailing in lakatois, aquaplaning and picnicking at other beaches near Malabang, Bukup and Labu. There were concerts with visiting entertainers such as Gracie Fields, native sing-sings at local villages, parties, open-air movies (sometimes in the rain), tennis, and dances at the Nadzab air base[48].

'A' Branch Picnic, Malabang, Aug 1945

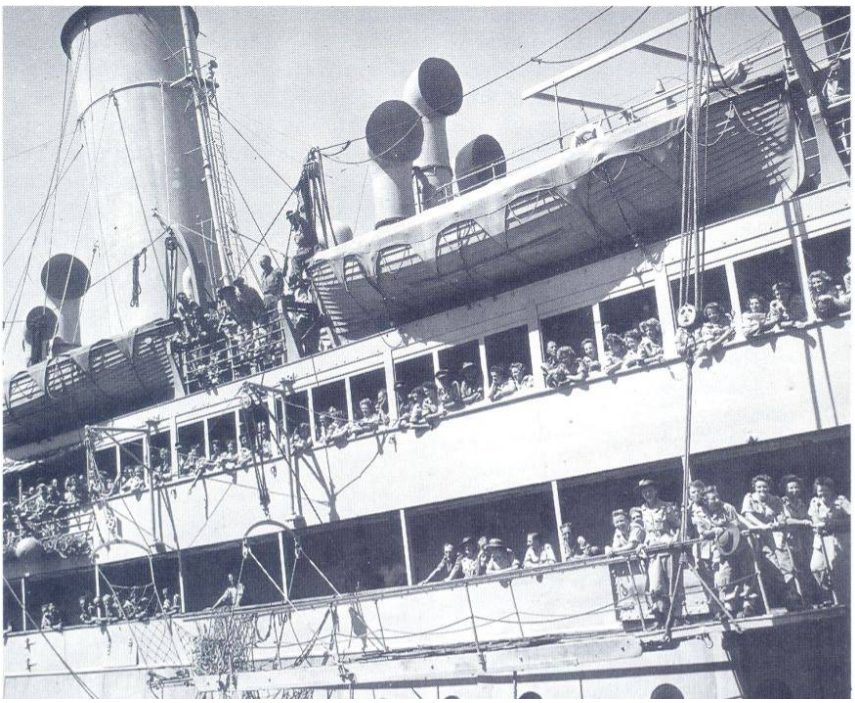
Salamaua Rest Camp, Dec 1945

On 28 February 1946, the last of the A.W.A.S. contingent, including Sybil, boarded HMAS *Canberra* for the trip home. They cruised down the inner Barrier Reef passage, landing briefly at Bowen and sailing through the Hinchinbrook and Whitsunday Channels before disembarking in Brisbane on 9 March. Amy Taylor described the return:

"We disembarked from the troopship Canberra and received a tick-a-tack welcome with a parade through Brisbane. A wonderful feeling and a great experience. We were glad to be back in Australia – home. We stayed there to retrieve our kit that had been left there when we were issued with our tropical gear, and then proceeded by troop train to Sydney. What a welcome we had, our families pressing against the barriers waiting for their daughters to

[48] S.K. Whiting Note Book

return. What a shock they got to see us all alight from the train with bright orange faces that had been the result of taking the anti-malaria tablets, which took about two months to wear off. We were not a pretty sight."



HMAS *Canberra* docking at Brisbane, 9 March 1946[49]

After a couple of days at Fraser's Paddock in Brisbane and some tearful farewells, the Hut 11 gang travelled home to their families and pre-war jobs. But they reunited on Anzac Day in 1946 and 1947.

Syb always spoke fondly of her time in Lae; she remained friends with her close group of A.W.A.S. hut-mates and after 1983 attended regular reunions. But it was not until 2000, after Syb's death, that the A.W.A.S.' service overseas was officially recognised by the unveiling of the A.W.A.S. Lae Contingent Memorial Plaque at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

Cpl Sybil K. Whiting,
Anzac Day 1946

Sybil was discharged from the A.W.A.S. on 12 July 1946 and obtained a job as secretary to the Professor of Engineering at Sydney University, possibly with help from sister Ros, who had been working at the university for some time. It was here that Syb first noticed George Connor, an undergraduate Mining Engineer. Syb became more interested in George after seeing him at Palm Beach and probably set up opportunities for them to meet 'accidentally' at the beach, but George did not show any interest in pursuing her. Eventually, Syb had to ask a mutual friend, Bill Henderson, to let George know of her interest. Most Connor wives complain that they had to work hard to get their men.

[49] Courier Mail 10 Mar 1946

George and Syb began to get serious in about October 1947, George's last year at University, and they saw each other a lot although, according to Syb, this did not extend to sex, somewhat to her disappointment. George graduated at the end of 1947 with a degree in Mining and Metallurgy at Pass level[50]. In December, without asking permission from Syb's family, George proposed to Syb on the steps of the Whiting's house at Palm Beach - a whirlwind romance! He explained that he would be leaving Sydney shortly to spend 1948 getting practical mining experience at Broken Hill, which meant separation, so he told Syb that he didn't want an answer for four days. Syb accepted and they decided to get married the following December. Rachael Robinson also became engaged in December 1947 – perhaps there was some competition involved.

George and Syb shopping for a ring, Sydney, December 1947

Engagement and marriage

George took Syb to Roseville and asked her to wait outside while he went and told his family. When he announced to his father, mother and sisters that he was engaged, their surprised reaction was "who to?", whereas Sybil had told all her family as soon as she could, and no doubt had been keeping Rachael and Dawn fully informed of developments throughout the brief courtship. Then the couple went shopping for a ring in central Sydney.

As a requirement to become a mining engineer, George had to spend a year working as a miner. He could have chosen to do this at any of the numerous mining operations around Australia, including some coal mines quite close to Sydney, but because Uncle Sprott had gone there, he decided to get his practical experience at Broken Hill in the far west of the state, 1100km from Sydney. It is closer to Adelaide than Sydney and is in the S.A. Time Zone. Peter McLeod, a fellow mining engineering graduate, also chose Broken Hill. In 1948, it was not acceptable for engaged couples to co-habit, and the mines at Broken Hill would not provide accommodation for Syb, so George went to Broken Hill by himself while Syb stayed at home at *Astolat*. Their engagement was announced in the newspapers on 6 January - by that time George was already in Broken Hill.[51]

The year 1948 for Syb was more of the same routine; daily travel to work at Sydney University, occasional weekends at Palm Beach with family and friends, attending weddings and other outings with her close friends. Syb was Rachael Robinson's

[50] SMH 31 Dec 1947
[51] SMH 6 Jan 1948

bridesmaid at her wedding to John Townend. And she took every opportunity to show off her engagement ring.

Sybil, at *Astolat* (L) and Sydney University (R). 1948

For George, 1948 in Broken Hill was a continuation of his experiences at University. He joined the Zinc Corporation, one of the large mines along the Broken Hill Line of Lode. He said; *"they trained you well. Now I had a degree in mining and metallurgical engineering and I went to Broken Hill. First job they say, you go and join the union, get on the end of a pick and shovel and learn what hard work is. So for the first twelve months you were a miner. And that was one of my best trainings. I learnt all of the lurks that miners had, what they were trying to do etc. The safety things. The next job I had was holding a tape for a surveyor for six months. Then I became a surveyor, then I was in the ventilation department etc...."*[52] George earned the respect of the miners he worked with. He was something of a legend for his prowess with a spaller.[53]

George lived in the Mine bachelors' quarters (the 'Batch') at 168 Mica Street, Broken Hill, along with many other single mining professionals. He joined the Hornets Baseball Club where he was a hitter and left-outfielder for the A Grade team. He played rugby for the Zinc Team at fullback and was a stand-out player. The baseball and rugby seasons coincided, so he was very busy on winter weekends and probably celebrated hard post-game. When the cricket season began, he joined the Zinc Underground team in the inter-mine ZC-NBHC competition.

George got back to Sydney twice during 1948 – once when there was a death at the mine and afternoon shift on a Friday was cancelled, so George caught the afternoon plane to Sydney. He arrived at Parramatta unannounced to find that Syb had gone to the pictures with friends. He went to the theatre and waited until they came out, then asked if he could walk her home – big surprise! While engaged, they slept together 'with one ear on the lookout!' In mid June George flew back to attend the Conferring

[52] National Archives 'Australians at War' interview no 1175. 2003
[53] Ore Bits. 4 July 1980

of Degrees ceremony at Sydney University. On another occasion, Sybil came out to Broken Hill for a few days. Sybil was left to arrange the wedding.

Dawn Kirkwood, Sybil, Betty Heinz

The wedding party at the church

George and Sybil were married on 10 December 1948, at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Parramatta, by the Right Rev. A. M. Stevenson, M.C., M.A. Dawn Kirkwood was Syb's matron of honour and Betty Heinz was her bridesmaid. Norm Peach was best man. Unfortunately, neither George's nor Syb's father could attend the wedding. Stan Connor suffered a stroke and was an invalid at that time.

The wedding didn't go smoothly. When entering the church, George's mother, Ella, tripped and broke her arm. Ella sat through the service nursing her arm and straight afterwards, Syb's brother Dr. Terence Whiting took her back to his surgery to have it treated. Stoicism was a characteristic of the Connors. George and Sybil spent their honeymoon at Jervis Bay, south of Sydney, where they lazed on the beach, ate ice creams, and dined at the Naval Lodge.

Honeymooners, Jervis Bay

Broken Hill (1949 -1980)

Sybil and George left for Broken Hill in January 1949. Initially, there was no company accommodation available for them. They were taken in temporarily by the Anderson family; Struan, who was Assistant Underground Manager at the Zinc Corporation, his wife Betty and their four children who lived at No. 7 Zinc Cottages. While George went to work underground each day, Sybil was expected to help Betty, who was ill, to run the household - she had to learn quickly about cooking and caring for school-aged children. Having very little experience of cooking, Syb called on the expertise of Sophie, the cook at *Astolat* during her childhood, and bought a C.W.A. cookbook.

After a few months at the Andersons' place, a dwelling became vacant at the mine. Sybil and George moved to the No 1 Flat, Zinc Corporation and began to set up their own home. They had no furniture and, for a time, lived very basically.

The flat was on the side of a hill close to the main entrance gate of the Zinc Corporation mine. It was one half of a rectangular building, with thick walls made of local stone and cement, high ceilings, tall and narrow sash windows set in brickwork, a peaked roof of galvanized iron and a porch at the side entrance. It may have been built in the early 1900s and followed the design of many country houses constructed during that era in the hot, South Australian desert environment. Its thick walls and high ceilings provided some relief from the very hot summer weather (there was no air conditioning) and the fireplace provided warmth on freezing winter nights. It was surrounded by rocky, dusty desert and mine waste dumps, with a few straggly native shrubs at the back near the clothes line. Despite the dust, the dry Broken Hill weather seemed to be good for Sybil's chest problems.

No. 1 Flat, Zinc Corporation in 1950, and in 2012 (with the porch and chimney gone.)

The other half of the building (No 2 Flat) was occupied by Brendan Thompson, the mine geologist, and his wife Eileen (called Nell) who were of the same age as George and Syb and were great company for the new arrivals. Being married women, the trade unions in Broken Hill forbade Syb and Nell from gaining paid employment in the city, so as childless wives they had to find ways to occupy their time. Syb continued to read as a hobby. She joined The Book Society and received a hard-backed novel every month by post, which she devoured avidly and then waited impatiently for the next one to arrive.

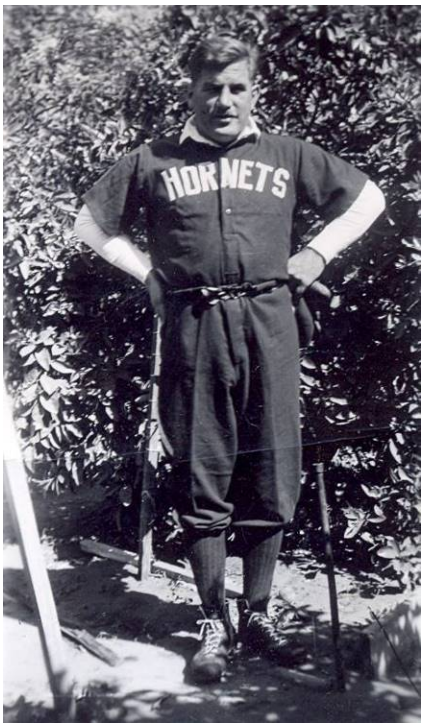
Radio was the only other home entertainment available. The first fifteen-minute episode of the radio serial "Blue Hills" was broadcast on A.B.C. radio on 28 February 1949, shortly after the Connors arrived in Broken Hill. Listening to this early soap opera and the "Country Hour" became a lunch-time ritual for Syb and also George,

who walked home for 'crib' each day when not underground. At night, they listened to concerts (classical), radio plays and comedy shows from England such as "Hancock's Half Hour", Beyond our Ken", "Around the Horn", "Take it from Here" and "The Goon Show". There was a local commercial radio station, 2BH, but Syb and George never listened to it, preferring the A.B.C. station 2NB.

George and Syb began to collect some basic furnishings for their home. Electrical appliances were not readily available because the mine electricity supply ran at 50 cycles/second whereas nearly all appliances available in the local stores were designed to operate with the town supply at 60 cycles/second. Consequently, many of the mine electrical appliances were hand-me-downs. Most of the furniture available in Broken Hill was not up to the high standard that Sybil was accustomed to, although George's taste was for basic furniture that you could put your feet up on, so they had to compromise.

George and Syb both smoked. George used to receive a ration of 240 Craven A cork-tipped cigarettes each month from the Army. It came by post, wrapped in thick brown paper and tied with white string, traced in red pencil. They also liked an occasional drink, and their routine was to have a pre-dinner sherry together every night. Beer was George's drink of choice, but like his father, he always drank in moderation and rarely swore.

They bought their first car with a loan from the bank – a black Wolseley 4/50, N.S.W. registration number CB-437. Syb learned to drive it with George as a demanding and probably impatient instructor, but at least Syb gained some independence and could go in to town for shopping etc. Syb was a very careful and timid driver. They took in their first stray animal, a tabby kitten, which would be the first of many strays collected by the Connors. They had some unwanted visitors also – a brown snake got in to the house one day and curled up under the copper in the laundry. Syb had to retreat to the Thomson's place until George or Bren came home to kill it.



George continued playing cricket in the four-team mine competition. In the 1949-1950 season, he played for Zinc Underground and the 1950-51 season for Staff, a

sign that he had completed his apprenticeship as a mining engineer. During the winter, he played baseball for the Hornets Club, and rugby for the Zinc Mine team. George became a selector and coach for the Broken Hill rugby team which played matches against touring rugby clubs from places such as Wellington, N.S.W.

In 1950, the family increased through the addition of a large black cat named Mama, and then the birth of their first child, Andrew George Connor, called Andy. The birth was difficult, but Syb was helped through it by the family G.P., Dr. Franziska Schlink, a chain-smoking Broken Hill institution. Nell Thomson also gave great support to the young mother. A pram and a cot were added to the household furniture, and the clothesline was always full of nappies.

Andy was a healthy baby, and it was a relief to George that Andy did not have any sign of ankle deformity which had dogged his own life, or the asthma that affected Syb. Syb took up knitting, bought a treadle Singer sewing machine and started making clothes for herself, and overalls for Andy out of corduroy and old blankets. He was the first grandchild in the Connor family, but was well down the list of Whiting grandchildren. Many photos were taken to send back to the families in Sydney.

Syb flew to Sydney in May 1951 for her brother Philip's wedding and took Andy to introduce him to the Whiting and Connor families - Syb's mother was on an extended holiday with Ros in the UK and Europe at the time. In early August 1951, George flew to Sydney to attend his sister Emily's wedding, standing in for his father Stan who was bedridden. George was very sad to see how helpless his father was and how much work was needed to care for him, and probably hoped he would never reach that stage.

One afternoon soon after returning from Sydney, George was called in by his supervisor Jim (later Sir James) Foots, who assigned him to manage an exploration drilling programme for lead and zinc in Northern Nigeria for six months. He was not allowed to take his family and was given until the following morning to accept the

assignment, or not. Syb and George discussed it and decided that George would accept and that Syb would take Andy to Sydney and stay with George's family at Roseville for the duration. Being a young mining engineer just beginning his career, and given his military background, George probably didn't consider he had much choice but to accept the assignment, even though they both knew it would put a lot of stress on their relationship.

Leaving Mama the cat with the Thompsons, the family drove to Sydney in their Wolseley, taking about 3 days to get there via Cobar over very rough roads. George flew out of Sydney for London, via Fiji, Hawaii, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Denver and New York on 12 September 1951. It was a very sad farewell for both of them. He wrote a note to Sybil from Sydney airport; *"Dearest Syb, Just a note to tell you I love you and will be thinking of you always. Look after yourself and Andy and may God Bless you both and keep you safe till I return. All my love always my Darling. I love you. George"*. And later; *"I had my last look at your dear unhappy face at the window. I can always picture Andy the day I left. I came downstairs and Kate had him. I said goodbye to him and he gave me a look and then turned away."* It was a real wrench for him.

During his day-long stopover in San Francisco, George visited his Uncle W. Sprott Boyd and family, who showed him around the city. He was impressed with the supermarkets, abundance and variety of food wrapped in cellophane, vending machines, and automatic cars, all unheard of in Australia at that time. In London, George met the managers of the Nigerian project, which was a joint venture between The Zinc Corporation and The London Tin Corporation, and was given detailed instructions about his assignment from Watson Connor (no relation). He also had time to socialise with his mother-in-law Mary Whiting and sister-in-law Ros Whiting who were staying in London. On 26 September, he flew to Kano in Northern Nigeria via Amsterdam and Rome, then flew north again to Jos.

George spent six weeks in Jos preparing for the arrival of the drilling crew, buying supplies, transporting them by 3-ton trucks and Landrovers along rough and boggy roads to their bush camp at Wase, setting up the camp, negotiating with local traders and the headman of the local village to supply labour, and planning the detail of the drilling programme with the company geologist, Tony Meehan. All of this was very new to him and a challenge he relished; he wrote *"it seems to be fantastic to be here in the middle of Africa and it makes you feel quite Livingstone-ish."*

Back in Australia, Syb was having a very rough time. Soon after George left Sydney and probably aggravated by the stress of saying goodbye, she had a severe asthma attack and was hospitalized. Andy was cared for by his Auntie Kate who became a surrogate mother - Andy often called Kate "Mum", much to Syb's disappointment. Andy's behaviour became very "wearing"; he would refuse food and Syb felt that she was not being a good mother. After a course of injections Syb recovered and left hospital, much thinner than when she was admitted, but the Roseville household remained a stressful place. The car, although useful, was always requiring attention and was a constant source of worry for Sybil. And they had a flea plague. George's father Stan developed pneumonia and spent some time in hospital. He recovered and returned home, but on the 3 November, he died at Roseville of coronary and cerebral arteriosclerosis, aged 81. Syb attended his funeral at the Northern Suburbs Crematorium, and soon afterwards decided to move to her old home *Astolat* to stay with her brother Terence's family for a while.

Sybil and Andy, December 1951

The drillers arrived on site near Wase, Nigeria on 10 November and by mid December had finished the first two drill holes. George was immersed in the day-to-day issues associated with running an exploration camp in a remote African country: replenishing and maintaining the camp, drilling, water and fuel supplies; employing, supervising and paying the local labour force; accounting for expenses; dispensing medicine and first aid; maintaining discipline and dispensing justice when needed; adjudicating in local disputes; writing home often; writing reports and letters; sampling the drill sludge and cores; surveying the drill holes; shooting game for fresh meat; growing vegetables, etc. He had a short-wave radio on which he could pick up ten stations, including the B.B.C. and sometimes Radio Australia, so he could listen to cricket test matches, music and drama. There was alcohol, plenty of food and some white company, but the living conditions were fairly rough and over a period, George shared his tent with insects of all types, scorpions, spiders, toads, snakes, a pet kitten, chooks and monkeys. Technical visitors occasionally visited their camp and provided some variety of conversation and news of the world. For reading material, there was a small library which George quickly exhausted, so Syb arranged to send him copies of “The Bulletin” magazine.

George, a driller and Tony Meehan (geologist), Nigeria November 1951.

Nigeria was a great learning experience for George. He came to understand something of the African culture and traditions, and how difficult it is to integrate those with western customs and traditions. Democracy as we know it, and African tribal customs which respect a dominant headman, do not mix easily. Dictatorships are the norm. And he learned something about religious tolerance also – his head man, Hassan, was a Muslim, most of the workers were Pagan, with a sprinkling of Muslims and Christians, who all seemed to tolerate each other at that time.

George, Tunga Nigeria, March 1952

Syb wrote to George often and he waited impatiently for the mail to arrive from Australia, usually after a two-week delay. Although he had people around him, he was desperately lonely and missed his wife and son terribly. Syb wrote all about his son's new achievements and exploits – temper tantrums, wearing his first pair of shoes, falling head first into the orange barrel, putting potatoes down the toilet, taking the keys from mum's bag and trying to open the car boot, pulling an iron vase over and crushing his finger, eating a snail, swimming at Palm Beach, refusing to eat some foods, catching measles, fighting with other children, Christmas present opening, getting eight teeth, and so on. Syb's own news was often depressing. A few weeks after Stan's death, Syb moved back to Roseville, but it seemed likely that Ella would have to sell the Roseville house so Syb would not be able to stay there for the duration. George's sister Emily was pregnant and moved back to Roseville in early 1952 just as Andy caught German measles, but luckily, Em did not catch it also.

At the end of 1951, Watson Connor came down from London to see George. He told George that they were considering extending the drilling programme right through the wet season and may want George to stay on until October. Once again, George did not feel he had much choice in the matter. He said that he would prefer to be relieved

but would stay on if absolutely essential and no-one else was available. He broke this news to Syb in a letter dated 5 January 1952 and she received it at about the time that her mother and sister returned from the UK, so Syb had someone close for support. Even so, Syb became very miserable and depressed at the news. She wrote to George about feeling insecure in their marriage, her failure as a mother, spending too much money, blaming the company for their situation and George for being a 'soldier for the company', not wanting to go back to Broken Hill and, of course, the additional stress brought on another asthma attack. Syb and Andy moved back to *Astolat* to stay. Of course, her reaction made George miserable also, and he tried to reassure Syb, but he had his own insecurities about whether there would still be a job for him back in Broken Hill and if so, would there still be a company house available for them? He wrote; *"Sweetheart I know that Z.C. appears to you as a big impersonal thing which just uses people but dearest when you are in big business you have got to have people who will do jobs or it is not worth employing them. I know you think we are being victimised and maybe we are but someone has got to do the job and the fact that is us is fate. I know this does not help you in your resentment of our being apart but dearest we might never have met but for a sort of fate."* Ever the optimist, he believed it would all come right in the end.

In mid February, George had good news from London that the drilling programme would not continue over the wet season. He wrote to Syb at *Astolat*, telling her the good news. Meanwhile, Mary and Ros Whiting had decided that they could not stay at *Astolat* with Terence's family and started looking for a new house in the Parramatta area. In April, Syb and Andy moved to Palm Beach and, by May, Mary and Ros had found a house at 14 Katia Street, North Parramatta, and Ella had sold the Roseville house. Syb had more bouts of asthma and bronchitis at Palm Beach and Ros cared for Andy while Syb recuperated.

Back in Nigeria, the weather was building up to the wet season - hot days and violent afternoon thunderstorms; tempers were getting frayed, and the Africans were trying to milk as much as they could from the drilling programme before it packed up, including theft of stores and valuables. George uncovered a gang stealing galena from one of the small miners in the area and became embroiled in the local justice system for a time. They had a break over Easter up on the plateau at Jos, and then made a concerted effort to complete the drilling programme by 20 May. On 22 May after packing up and seeing everybody away, George left the camp and headed for Jos airport. He arrived back in London on 26 May but had to wait until the 16 June for a seat on a flight to Australia, which gave him time to visit his Boyd-Roper distant cousins at Forde Abbey in Dorset.

The family was reunited on 20 June 1952. After some leave in Sydney, they drove back to Broken Hill via Mildura and saw relatives and friends along the way. By the time Andy's second birthday arrived, they were back in their flat at the Zinc Corporation and into the routine of Broken Hill life. The Thompsons were still in the adjoining flat and had produced their first child, Claire, so Nell and Syb had a common interest and Andy had a younger playmate. George studied for his Mine Manager's Certificate and passed the exams in October 1952 [54]. On weekends, he played cricket for the Staff team in the ZC-NBHC competition and was a handy all-rounder. He gave up baseball and rugby.

In early 1953, George and Syb were 'promoted' to a better house on the mine lease, No. 11 Zinc Cottages. It was a circa-1930s semi-detached brick residence with a low-peaked corrugated iron roof, garage, back verandah, established front lawn and garden and a fenced back yard with some fruit trees. Syb and George went to

[54] Barrier Miner 5 January 1953

Adelaide to buy some better furniture for their new abode, including a lounge suite, armchairs and a red cedar dining table. There was a laneway at the back and some casuarina bush at the front of the house – a cul-de-sac. Beyond the bush was the railway line to Adelaide which was the main haulage route for zinc and lead concentrates from Broken Hill to the Port Pirie smelter in S.A. At that time, the locos were all steam driven, so there was a pervasive smell of coal, mixed with wet concentrate.

No 11 Zinc Cottages,
in 1953 (Andy in front) and in 2012

Having space and better soil for a garden was a luxury. Syb and George immediately began growing vegetables and planting flowers. George's green thumb probably came from his upbringing on the orchard at Lugarno and his speciality was vegetable growing, whereas Sybil was more interested in growing roses and cottage garden flowers and shrubs. Some of Andy's first long words were the names of flowers. She tried very hard to grow a daphnia bush in the front yard, but it struggled to survive. The climate in Broken Hill was perfect for growing citrus and, with the cold, frosty winters, most stone fruit did well also.

Syb and George now had neighbours on both sides, usually families with young children. As happens in isolated mining communities, some of these neighbours became life-long friends. Although thrown together for just a few years, they developed strong bonds, stayed in touch at Christmas and, when occasionally re-united, effortlessly took up where they left off. The Australian mining community in the 1950s was quite small and closely knit. Mining professionals moved around to different mines and different companies, but they followed each other's progress with interest through the Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, sometimes met at conferences and sometimes found themselves posted to the same place. Close neighbours at No. 11 included the Hardwick, Cuthbert and Andrew families, which all included small children. The neighbourhood was quite safe – the railway line, back lane and mine gates were 'out of bounds' but within those limits, the children had the run of the place, including a small abandoned quarry.

Catherine Mary Connor was born at the Broken Hill & District hospital in 1953. Once again it was a difficult birth and Syb spent a long time recuperating, first in hospital and then at home. George employed Miss Wooley as a housekeeper and child minder for Andy while Syb was recovering and he was still working.


Catherine, 1953. (six weeks old)

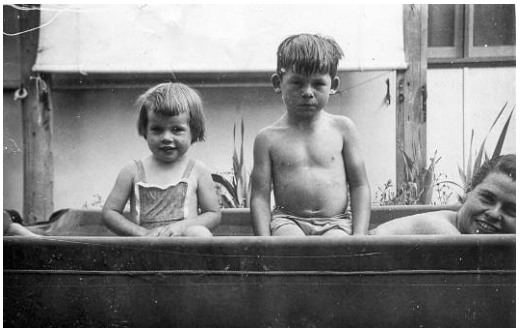
Compulsory part-time National Service training was reintroduced in 1950 during the Korean War. All males turning 18 had to register for National Service in the Army, Navy or Air Force, and undertake 26 days of military training per year. In early 1953, the 8th Army Engineer Regiment established a depot in Broken Hill. George said he was 'conned' into joining the unit to help train the national servicemen, which meant that he had to attend parades, go on weekend bivouacs and an annual camp of 14 days. He didn't enjoy this very much, but the national servicemen needed to be trained so he saw it as his duty to help.

On the annual camp in March 1954, some of the national servicemen had too much to drink. On the train journey from Broken Hill to Murray bridge, many left the train at Yunta and Peterborough to buy beer at the local hotels, and when ordered by George and other officers to return to the train, they became threatening and abusive. One sapper was charged and found guilty of 'conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline'[55]. One of the young national servicemen remembers George as follows*; "He was a big bloke, about six foot, solid, no fat on him," Mr Brealey said yesterday. "We heard that he had fought in Russia and won Russia's highest bravery award. When he was training us in Murray Bridge, he'd make you run at him with a bayonet. He'd flick your elbow, you'd go flying into the air and land flat on your back with George kneeling on your chest - with your bayonet in his hand."*[56] George eventually became a major and 2 I.C. of the unit. He said he was really glad when National Service was eventually abandoned in 1957, although he also said that the men who went through the army national service training often became the preferred leaders of the underground workforce – shift bosses and foremen.

In March 1954, Queen Elizabeth visited Broken Hill and spent about three hours driving around in an open-topped Humber, umbrella raised against the sun. At that

[55] Barrier Miner 8 April 1954
[56] Barrier Daily Truth 24 May 2014

time, Broken Hill was a city of about 30,000 people. The royal party drove into the Zinc Corporation mine lease close to No. 11. George with Andy on his shoulders and Syb with Catherine in a pram lined the street and waved as they went by. This visit was probably special for Sybil who greatly admired the young Queen. Later that year, Ros Whiting came out to Broken Hill to visit her sister and meet her new niece Catherine. Andy proudly showed her around the garden at No. 11. By that time, Andy (4) had been going to the local Zinc Kindergarten for 8 months and was learning basic reading and writing. As summer approached, George bought a shallow, steel-framed canvas pool for the back yard which was a great hit, with the neighbours' children too.



In December 1954, Jim Foots resigned from the Zinc Corporation to take up a position at Mt. Isa Mines (he eventually became C.E.O.) and the company announced a re-organisation. George was promoted from Mining Engineer to Assistant Underground Manager of the New Broken Hill Consolidated (N.B.H.C.) Mine, his first step up the corporate ladder. George was not a highly ambitious man, believing that if you do a job to the best of your ability, rewards and promotion will come. There were two Assistant Underground Managers appointed at N.B.H.C., the other being Bob LeMessurier.[57] Both reported to Underground Manager John Whiteman. There were many talented men on the staff at that time, such as R.P. Hooper, F.F. Espie, J.L. Liebelt and R.T. Madigan, all of whom went on to become leaders of the Australian mining industry.

George usually took a three to four-week holiday over the Christmas – New Year period, and nearly every holiday was at Palm Beach. This was in contrast to most of the rest of Broken Hill that preferred holidays in Adelaide and along the South Australian coastline – Larg's Bay and Victor Harbour. For the 1955-56 Christmas holidays, the family headed for Palm Beach by train. They had a double bunk sleeper on the Silver City Comet. George slept with Cath and rolled on her dolly during the night, causing much distress. The old Wolseley had reached the end of its useful life and while in Sydney, they bought a new car, an FE model Holden sedan (BOF-518) in Syb's favorite colour aqua green. They drove it back to Broken Hill, very slowly to make sure the engine was run in properly.

Richard Kane Connor was born in 1956. He was a few weeks premature and spent some weeks afterwards in a humidicrib. This was the last, and most dangerous of Syb's three childbirths. She caught pneumonia during the final weeks of her pregnancy and was extremely ill for a while. Dr Schlink thought Sybil or the baby might not survive and told George that if he got Sybil pregnant again, she would personally castrate him! While Syb was in hospital and recovering, Miss Farrow was employed as house-keeper cum child-minder. At that time, Andy was spending most of the day at primary school, and Catherine was at kindergarten. After Syb came

[57] Barrier Daily Truth 10 December 1954

home, they employed a woman, Jean Staker, to come in once or twice a week to help with the washing, ironing and cleaning.

Sybil and children, November 1956

On Saturday mornings, the family would go shopping into the city, and spend the morning walking up and down Argent Street. This is where the banks, doctor's surgery, chemist, clothing, shoe, hardware, furniture and electrical stores were all located. It was also a social outing; George and Syb would always meet someone on the street and stop to talk for a while, much to the children's annoyance. For the 1956-57 Christmas holiday, Andy and Catherine flew over to Sydney, accompanied by an air hostess, while George, Sybil and Richard drove. Perhaps a long car ride with three young children would have been too much for Sybil, who had developed bronchiectasis, a condition in which the lungs lose their elasticity and constantly produce mucous. To control this condition required her to do decongesting exercises every day for the rest of her life, and a bronchial inhaler was always at hand. It was a rough flight from Broken Hill to Sydney during summer in an old DC3 aircraft and Andy was not the best traveller. They were met in Sydney by George's sister Kate and her husband John Maddocks, who hoisted Andy high over his head and was subjected to a stream of vomit for his trouble. Before George and Syb arrived in Sydney, perhaps as revenge, John managed to teach Andy a song which, these days, would be considered politically incorrect and of which Syb strongly disapproved!

Richard, Catherine and Andy, 1957

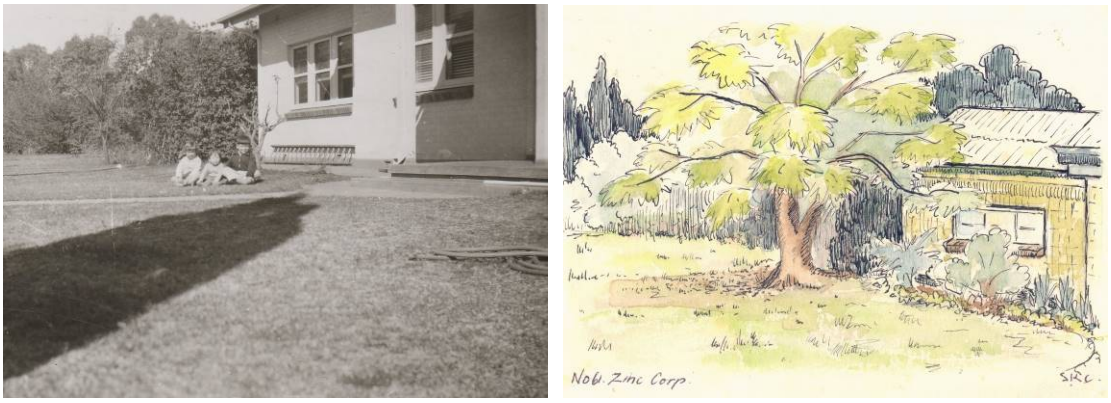
George and Sybil, now with a young family, had to think about their children's education. From an early age, Sybil read to her children every night, enlarged their vocabulary, encouraged them to write and to draw and to learn to play an instrument, and there was always some music in the house from the radio. George taught his children practical things – how to make a bow and arrow, basic carpentry, whittling, kite making, how to kick a football, oil a cricket bat, swing a golf club, mow the lawn and last but not least, the multiplication tables. They both encouraged their children to help in the garden and taught them about the natural world. They encouraged their children's hobbies, and to join organisations such as Sunday School, the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides.

Syb and George did not push the children heavily towards the Church and religion, but they lived and promoted Christian values. Neither would describe themselves as religious people. Syb initially liked going to the Presbyterian Church in South Broken Hill, but when it became a Uniting Church she stopped attending. George was brought up in the Church of England but it was quite 'high church' in Broken Hill and neither of them liked that either. After a few years, they only attended services at Easter and Christmas. Later in life, George declared that he was an agnostic, and that he thought religious intolerance was the cause of most of the world's conflicts.

Their openly loving and respectful relationship was a great example to their children. Honesty, bravery, integrity and self respect were values they taught when the opportunities arose. Basic courtesy and politeness were insisted upon, especially towards elders, and Sybil was a stickler for good manners, although George was less so. Swearing was out of the question. They tried to instill pride of appearance in their children, with limited success. Much of the time around home, the children went barefoot and Syb would complain they looked like 'guttersnipes'. They both handed out discipline when necessary – George could be scary when he was angry, which wasn't often. Sybil would threaten to 'spiflicate' the wrong-doer – a scary sounding word.

After attending the Zinc Kindergarten, all three children went to Alma Public School in South Broken Hill from age four until they were twelve years old. Broken Hill High School was very large and did not have a good academic reputation, so George and Sybil decided that they would send their children to boarding school when they reached high school age. Soon after they were born, Andy and Richard were booked in to George's old school, Shore, and Catherine was booked in to Wenona, where her aunts had gone to school.

In 1957, George's mother Ella died and he went to Sydney for the funeral. The same year, George was promoted to Underground Manager, Zinc Corporation and the family upgraded to a stand-alone house, No. 61 Zinc Cottages, located on the other side of the mine operations in South Broken Hill and much closer to Alma School. It was one of a seven-house subdivision enclosed by a two-metre-high cyclone-wire fence separating it from Wentworth Road, Twin (Zinc) Lakes and the Mine plantation. This was a larger house with a bigger garden area and an orchard. It had a screened back verandah with a concrete floor on which Richard, as a toddler, dropped a glass and then cut his finger very badly. Sybil and George bought new furniture, including a Waldorf upright piano. There was a separate garage – a home for redback spiders. The orchard had apple, pear, plum, orange, grapefruit, peach and nectarine trees. There was a wood pile to feed an open fire place in winter, a newly invented solar hot water system over the front porch, and an evaporative air-conditioning system. At the back of the orchard was a gravel laneway ('The Bumpy Road') and a children's playground with swings, sandpits and a see-saw. For close neighbours, there were John and Barb Nixon, Brian and Marg Andrew, Bob and Helen LeMessurier and their young families. Slightly further away were the Madigan, Whiteman, Nicholson, Webster, Hardy, Liebelt and Espie families. It was a perfect, safe, outdoor environment for bringing up young children.



No 61 Zinc Cottages, photo in 1957 and a pen/watercolour sketch by SKC in 1961

Twin Lakes was a mecca of grass and water in a desert town, and the Connor family made full use of it; boating, catching yabbies, feeding the ducks, and kicking footballs, but the water was too murky and contaminated for swimming. While the children were small, the lakes were 'out-of-bounds' unless a parent accompanied them. Broken Hill had a full-sized swimming pool in the centre of town and there was a small, indoor heated pool at the Zinc Mine. In the late 1950s, a new full-sized outdoor swimming pool was built near Alma School, the Alma Pool (since filled in), and this became a meeting place for families on hot summer afternoons and evenings. The Connors went there often. On weekends it was packed. Few people in Broken Hill had their own back yard pools – to have one was the height of luxury. For most people, a cooling off under the garden hose while washing the car was normal water sport.

Zinc – NBHC Mine Leases, 2010

South Broken Hill (Patton Street) became the family's shopping centre as Sybil often drove the children to school nearby. The mothers would take it in turns to load up a car each morning with children, each with a packed lunch, and make the run to Alma. Seat belts were unheard of. Children who were old enough to ride a bicycle to school were expected to do so, but bicycle tyres were forever getting punctures from three cornered jacks and required frequent mending. Eventually, someone invented 'prickle-proof tyres' – a godsend! South Broken Hill had a single block of shops, a butcher, greengrocer, grocer, baker, tailor, two milk bars, and a post office. The milkman and the baker delivered daily, and the grocer delivered once a week with everything in large brown paper bags, but there was always a need to go to the butcher and greengrocer. Jean Staker continued to help with the ironing and cleaning.

Sybil set about designing and planting the garden at No. 61, with advice from the mine horticulturalist, Reg Gould, who lived close by. She was involved in the Alma School Parents and Citizens Association and supported their annual art and flower show. Syb began entering the flower competition in 1959 with vases of flowers, but started to get serious from 1961, entering single blooms – rose, sweet pea, delphinium and gladiolus. In 1962, she won the Grand Champion bloom with a single Peace rose, but she was quite embarrassed because the judge happened to be her mentor, Reg Gould.

At No. 61, the Connor family started collecting a string of stray animals that became pets. Mama cat had died; the next cat was Tiger, a large tabby, that lived for many years, but there were other kittens and puppies that arrived unannounced, usually looking mangy and scrawny. Three dogs adopted the family at No. 61. Timmy was a black Staffordshire cross, very stocky and strong, that actually belonged to the Macfarlanes, who lived on the other side of Twin Lakes, but he seemed decided to stay with the Connors most of the time. He was very stubborn and established himself as the top dog of the block. There was a red Kelpie called Tammy which belonged to the Hardys, who lived not far away. Tammy was lean and hyperactive, with a tongue that was permanently lolling out. And then a large stray brindled dog arrived, which George unimaginatively named Greyboy. He was covered in fleas and badly infected with ringworm and George spent a lot of time curing him. He was George's dog. The three dogs co-existed happily and used to go exploring together, which eventually led to the downfall of Tammy, who was shot by a sheep grazier on the edge of town for chasing sheep. Greyboy was also shot but he recovered. They also used chase cars on the Wentworth road and I think that is how both Timmy and Greyboy met their ends.

The children with Tiger,...

....and Timmy, at No.61.

Both Sybil and George played social tennis - George on Saturday afternoons with the men at the Broken Hill Club, and Sybil during the week with the local women. There were several asphalt courts close by and a single lawn tennis court. George sometimes played squash, and he always played in the Diggers' Day Golf tournament on Anzac Day. Sybil took up painting again and went to art classes run by Evelyn Erricks. Initially she painted still life but soon turned her hand to landscapes and later, portraits. On some days, Syb would drive the children out of town to a dry creek or a hilltop and start sketching and painting while the children explored the surrounding bush. Her preferred medium was watercolour because the smell of oil paints and thinners affected her breathing. Sybil never thought that her paintings were good enough, but she was eventually persuaded to exhibit some with other "Brushmen of the Bush" and sold a few works. Deciding what price to put on her works was always stressful for her because she worried what her friends would think.

Picnics out of town were a family treat. The farthest the family travelled was to White Cliffs, where they spent a day or so noodling for opal chips on the old spoil dumps. Mootwingee (Mutawinji) was a long day trip, usually taking visitors to see the magnificent aboriginal cave paintings and rock formations, and have a picnic in a creek lined with old river gums. Closer to town (within 50km) there was Umberumberka Reservoir, Silverton, Thackaringa, Pine Creek, Stephen's Creek and The Pinnacles. The picnics were usually prepared sandwiches but sometimes George would take a small griddle and there would be sausages and chops for lunch

and of course, tea from a home made billy, over an open fire. There were more formal picnics arranged by the mining companies for their staff at places such as Penrose Park, and then the spur-of-the-moment picnics such as when Stephen's Creek began flowing after heavy rain. Sybil always took her painting equipment.






Paintings by Sybil Connor, 1960s

In 1960, the Menindee Lakes Water Storage Scheme was completed which gave Broken Hill an assured water supply and provided a new holiday destination for the townspeople. Menindee is on the Darling River about 110km southeast of Broken Hill, connected eventually by a good bitumen road. On Friday afternoons, there was always a stream of traffic leaving town to spend the weekend swimming, water-skiing, fishing and camping at Menindee. Some of the neighbours built shacks at Lake Menindee or had caravans at Copi Hollow but for the Connor family, Menindee was a place to visit for the day, and rarely for an overnight stay. Sybil preferred to get away from the neighbours and find as pristine a picnic spot as possible. Having another car in sight was one too many; buildings and especially power lines were an eyesore.

The annual summer holiday to Palm Beach was the highlight. The family would usually take two or three days to get there by car, and it was usually stinking hot! Going via Cobar was a rough road with few places to rest, refresh and refuel. On one trip, the car kept boiling and the family had to wait often to let it cool down. The car had no air conditioner so George would wet a tea towel or nappy and hang it in the window as a primitive evaporative air conditioner. Unfortunately, the car filled with dust. Syb took a few turns at driving, but George drove most of the way and Syb lit cigarettes for them both. The children in the back were unrestrained. Occasionally they would make a hammock from a blanket strung between the back windows and try to sleep in that, but the road was very corrugated and sleep was difficult. The family passed the time playing “I Spy”, singing songs, spelling words and reciting multiplication tables. Reading in the car was impossible and a cause of much travel sickness. Driving via Cobar, the family usually got to Sydney as quickly as possible without driving overnight. They would find a motel somewhere for the night, after driving around until they found one that Syb was happy with. Occasionally there were stops to visit Bet Heinz when she lived in Orange, and ‘Chesty’ Barrett, an old army friend of George’s who worked at the Wellington Caves. And there were sometimes emergency stops to visit a doctor and remove a foreign body from a child’s ear, nose or throat.

Sometimes the family would drive to Sydney via Mildura, which added to the distance, but the road was almost all bitumen so the trip was far more comfortable. It also gave the family an opportunity to detour and visit friends and relatives; the Walcott family at Horsham, the Whiting family at Gundagai and the Hore families at Grenfell. All these families lived on grazing stations so the children got to ride horses, collect eggs, and other country activities. On one holiday, they met the Walcott family at Robinvale, near Mildura. The children swapped cars and had gone about 20 minutes towards Horsham when someone realized Richard was missing. They retraced their steps and found him obliviously reading comics in a store where they had stopped for ice cream.

On reaching Palm Beach, airing the house to get rid of the mouldy smell and stocking the fridge and pantry, George would take off his shoes and socks and, as far as possible, stay barefoot for the rest of the holiday. The children did the same. There were few days when the family did not swim. All the children learned to swim in the rock pool (‘Bogey Hole’) where Sybil had spent so much of her childhood and where George had to train when he was a surf life saver. Johnny Carter from the Palm Beach Surf Club ran the swimming classes. George taught his children how to catch a wave and body surf, build sand castles with moats, how to fish, and how to make a sword out of a Norfolk Island Pine frond. Sybil taught them about the shells and other flotsam and jetsam on the beach, and the sea life in the rock pools - crabs, anemones, limpets and cunjevoi. On rainy days, the family played cards and board games, or read books, and listened to the radio. Cricket test matches had priority if they were on. After about 1958, George used to hire a television but Palm Beach was

a long way from the transmitters and the house was down close to the beach so reception was very poor, even for those days. George spent a lot of time trying to adjust the aerial. Television did not reach Broken Hill until 1962. George was the main cook during the holiday. Salads, ham sandwiches, and bread, butter and strawberry jam snacks were the norm, and take-away food was a treat. The whole family liked Chiko rolls!

George in relaxed mode, Palm Beach

Upstairs, the Palm Beach house had several bedrooms, all with high, cast iron framed beds and hard, horse hair mattresses, a breeding ground for fleas. Mosquito nets were essential. This was the main living area. Downstairs, there were two large rooms and a shower that the family never used, but there was plenty of space for visitors. Cousins on both sides, and Syb's old friends would come to stay for a day or two, and Syb's sister Ros usually stayed longer. The Connor children met their Sydney cousins often enough to build lasting relationships. If the holiday included Christmas, usually the Connors would travel south to have Christmas lunch with the Pearson and/or Maddocks families in Mosman. Apart from one or two trips to

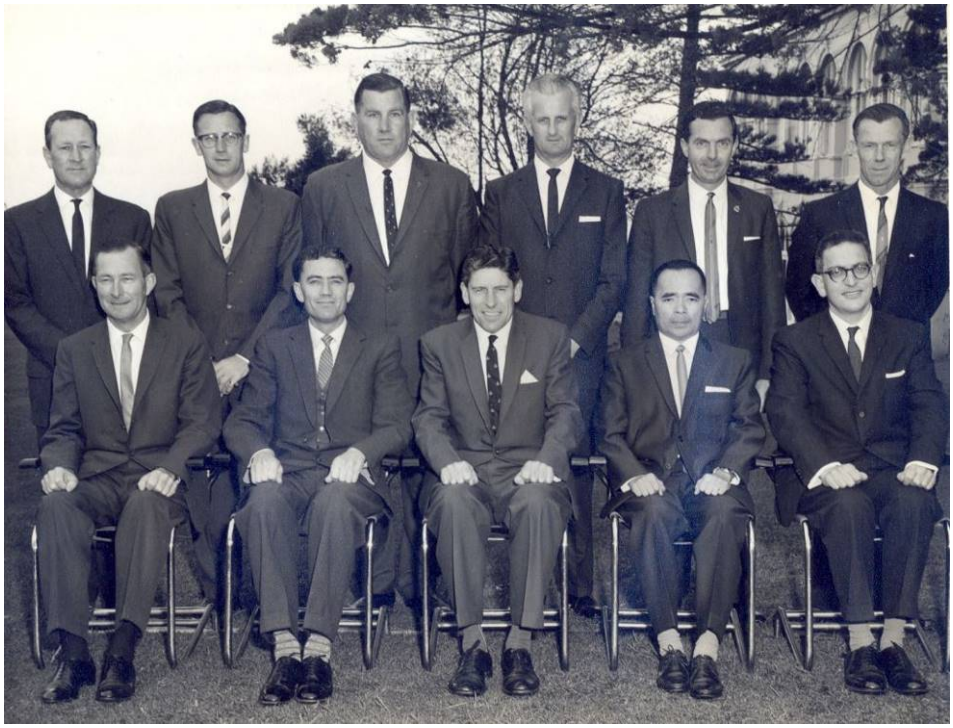
Parramatta to see Syb's mother, sister and brother, or to Sydney for school and business reasons, the family avoided leaving Palm Beach.

Connor and Pearson cousins,
Palm Beach, 1960

Connor, Pearson and Maddocks cousins,
Palm Beach, 1966

Connor, Pearson and Maddocks cousins,
Palm Beach, 1972

In 1962, the Consolidated Zinc Corporation and R.T.Z. Ltd of London combined to create Conzinc Riotinto of Australia (C.R.A.) Ltd and to finance development of the Hamersley iron ore discoveries in W.A. This prompted a re-organization of personnel, and the company sent George to a three-month management school at the Australian Administrative Staff College at Mt Eliza, near Melbourne. This was a sign that his C.R.A. employers believed that George had management potential, and was destined for higher posts. At the school, he met people from other industries and gained a broader appreciation of business issues and of working in a multidisciplinary team. They worked in syndicates to analyse and propose solutions to management problems, and George began to widen his network of business contacts.



Australian Administrative Staff College, Syndicate B, Nov 1962
(GBC back row 3rd from left)

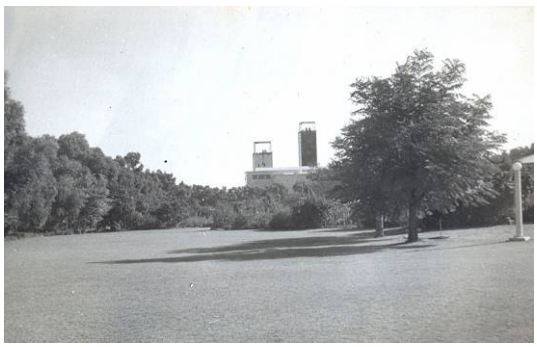
As in the army, George's management style was to lead from the front. He was quite prepared to get his hands dirty, jump in and help a mining team with their work if it was needed. And being a large, strong man with big hands, he was very capable of hard manual labour. He believed in management by walking about (MBWA in business management jargon). He went underground a lot to see how things were going and to talk to the miners. The miners developed a system to forewarn the mining teams of his arrival at their workplace, but having worked as a miner and knowing their routines and lurks, he often managed to turn up unexpectedly.

A sign of acceptance by the workforce at Broken Hill (and anywhere in Australia for that matter) is to be given a nickname. In Broken Hill, George earned the nickname "Big Ugh" because of his imposing physique, and because he was terrible at remembering people's names and would often just grunt in reply to a greeting from someone. He was well aware of his nickname and as long as it was said to him affectionately, he didn't mind people using it. One new draftsman didn't understand the rules and when George was looking at the draftsman's work one day on his rounds and asked questions about it, the draftsman just replied "Ugh" to his questions. After a pregnant pause, George put a big hand on the plan and scrunched

it into a ball, saying "*Looks like you haven't finished this yet! Have it on my desk by the end of the day*".

George lived and worked by the old army leadership principles "Be Firm, Be Fair, Be Approachable, and Be Honest". He was certainly firm – some described him as martinet-like, but this was restricted to military, regulation and safety issues – things that were not negotiable. If George had a strong opinion about a particular subject he would argue it forcefully and loudly, and would occasionally thump the table with a big fist if he felt strongly enough. Everyone knew where George stood on a subject, although in social circles and at home, he would sometimes take a contrary view just for the sake of having a good argument. Later, Cath would sometimes engage him in these arguments if she felt strongly about the topic, but Sybil and the boys rarely got involved.

Andy went to board at Shore school in Sydney at the beginning of 1963. Later that year, George was promoted again, to become Production Manager reporting to the General Manager. This came with a move in 1964 to a larger house at No. 101 Zinc Cottages, not far from No. 61 and with a view of the N.B.H.C. head-frame. This house was set in about one acre of gardens, which included a formal rose garden, rock - cactus garden, lawn tennis court, large orchard and extensive lawns. It came with a gardener and a house-keeper supplied by the mine. The house was large with rooms for entertaining guests, and a huge kitchen with under-floor heating. When the children were away at boarding school, Sybil and George rattled around in it. They played tennis and entertained at home more often.



No. 101 Zinc Cottages and grounds, 1964

The house-keeper was Mrs. Nancy Arthur, a neat, diminutive, polite woman who came every weekday and helped with cleaning and cooking. Sybil and Mrs. Arthur kept a fairly formal relationship at first. Eventually Mrs. Arthur became a part of the family but I don't think she ever called Sybil anything other than 'Mrs. Connor'. The relationship with the gardener was less harmonious. The gardener believed that he had full planning and decision rights over the garden, but Sybil had strong ideas of her own and wanted to have a say in what happened. Eventually they reached a compromise because the garden was far too large for Syb and George to manage on their own – they needed the gardener.

As Production Manager, George's role was no longer simply technical, focussed on mine management, annual production and cost targets. It required him to think more strategically about the mines' future, deal more closely with the community, the unions, the suppliers and the other stakeholders. George fell easily into this role. Having been involved in Legacy and in sporting organisations in Broken Hill since arriving there, he already had a wide network in the community.

George joined Legacy in about 1960. Legacy is a charitable organisation established after WWI to provide services to Australian families suffering financially and socially after the incapacitation or death of a spouse or parent, during or after their defence force service**.** George always had a list of 5 to 10 Legacy war widows in Broken Hill that he assisted in any way he could, including arranging for tradesmen to fix problems around their house, picking them up from the train or plane, delivering skips of old mine timber for firewood, arranging and taking them on organized picnics, monthly lunches and to the Annual Legacy Christmas party, providing advice and sometimes, financial assistance. In 1970 George was on the local Executive Committee, attended regular committee meetings, and helped with fund raising, including standing in Argent street and selling badges for the Annual Legacy Day appeal. George and Sybil took in a legatee's son, Dean Lanthois, as a boarder for a while.

As her children grew up, went away to school and became independent, Sybil also started to take an interest in the wider Broken Hill community. Sybil began by delivering Meals on Wheels to old people around town. This brought her in contact with the St Anne's Home of Compassion which was a Catholic-run orphanage and old peoples' home in South Broken Hill. The Home of Compassion also housed numerous aboriginal children from the Broken Hill and Wilcannia region. Sybil volunteered to teach painting to anyone who was interested and spent a morning each week at the home. Later, Sybil joined the Women's Auxilliary of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. This was primarily a venture which raised money through art shows, raffles, an annual RFDS Ball and, each October, through the RFDS Christmas Pudding production run. For Sybil and her friends, the two weeks spent producing 2000 Christmas puddings was just as much a social event as it was a fund-raising volunteer activity. First mass production of RFDS Christmas puddings began in 1965 and the tradition was still alive in 2013 when it raised $40,000.

Along with promotion came an expectation that George and Sybil would entertain mine visitors and guests at their home and at the Director's Cottage. Broken Hill was an historic mining centre with an outstanding ore deposit which attracted mining people from all over the world. In 1965, the Commonwealth Mining and Metallurgical Institute (a London-based professional organisation) held its annual Congress in Broken Hill, so George and Sybil were expected to provide hospitality to visiting dignitaries. One of the benefits of accompanying visitors was that Sybil had a chance to go underground. This was somewhat of a milestone at Broken Hill because, traditionally, women were banned from going underground for 'superstitious' reasons.

CMMI Congress 1965. Planning, ...

and playing host,

Underground 1966. Sybil (2nd from left next to Shirley Liebelt) and George (right, the only one with dirty miner's boots).

George had been a member of the Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy since 1963 and was an active member of the Broken Hill branch. As a requirement of his management role, he was a member of the Broken Hill Mine Managers' Association which met at least monthly, and he strongly supported the St John's Ambulance Brigade which ran safety competitions and training for all the Broken Hill mineworkers. He attended numerous staff retirement and long service award functions, became patron of the Broken Hill Cameron Pipe Band in 1967, presented prizes at the South Broken Hill Bowling Club, Broken Hill Golf Club, and at school speech nights.

In 1966, Catherine went to board at Wenona Girls School and in 1968, Richard went to Shore Preparatory School so that he would have a year of overlap with Andy. In 1969, Andy went to study geology at the University of New England. With all the children away at school or university for most of the year, and only Sammy the dog at home, George and Sybil took the opportunity to travel more. In 1969, George was selected to attend the R.T.Z. Conference in London, and to visit other mining operations. Sybil decided that she would take the opportunity to visit her brother Philip and his family who were living in Jinja, Uganda at the time. As it turned out, George departed early and Sybil had to travel by herself to Uganda, via Mauritius. The stress of travelling overseas alone built up until, by the time she was due to leave, Sybil had become quite ill. Her chest problems often became worse when under stress. On arriving at Jinja, the doctor was called and Syb was immediately sent to bed with a course of antibiotics.

Meanwhile, George was in South Africa where he visited the Premier Diamond Mine, Elsberg Gold Mine, Welkom Gold Mine and Palabora Copper Mine. He noticed that there was a general tension in the air and a lack of friendliness. He felt uncomfortable trying to talk to black miners, who at that time were living under the Apartheid policy and were regarded by their (white) managers as servants – very different from the egalitarian attitudes that prevailed in Australia and Broken Hill, and contrary to George's management style. Communication was also a problem – English was a second or third language at most mines. From South Africa, George visited mines of the Zambian Copperbelt before meeting up with Sybil in Jinja, at the Whiting's place on the shores of Lake Victoria, where Philip Whiting was working for the United Nations on a fishing project. By that time, Syb had recovered her health sufficiently to travel on to London.

As part of the R.T.Z. conference, George visited base metal mines in Finland (where he had a sauna and drank far too much) and then flew via Paris to the silver-lead mines at L'Argentière in the French Alps, while Sybil stayed in London. Sybil flew back to Australia from London in a B.O.A.C. Boeing 707 after being away for six weeks. George stayed on and went first to Sweden, visiting polymetallic mines around Boliden, the Laisvall Lead Mine, and then north across the Arctic Circle to the Kiruna Iron Ore Mine. Kiruna reminded him of Broken Hill – just cold instead of hot. Then he flew to mines in Argentina and to Ireland briefly before heading back to Broken Hill after being away for two months.[58]

In December 1969, Sybil's mother Mary Whiting died, so the annual holiday to Palm Beach was not as happy as usual. In fact, this was the last holiday that the Connors would spend in the Whiting house at Palm Beach because it was sold in 1970 after Mary's death. None of the family could afford (or wanted) to buy out the others as the value of the house and land, and annual rates and taxes had increased so much in forty years. The house last sold in 2011 for $4.76 million.

During 1970, Sybil flew to Sydney occasionally to take care of Whiting family business, while George had a week-long visit to mines near Kalgoorlie, Western Australia and went to the Anzac Day march in Sydney. In September 1970, George's commanding officer during WW2, Tom Cotton, died in Melbourne, leaving his estate to Pam, his widow, and after her death to Andy, his godson. Tom and Pam had no children of their own. George spent time in Melbourne helping Pam to sort out the estate, move house and settle down again. Pam became a regular visitor to Broken Hill after that – part of the family. The other important event of 1970 was that George gave up smoking. One Sunday he found that he had run out of cigarettes and was angry that he would have to drive down to South Broken Hill to buy some more. He

[58] Letters from GBC to SKC between 13 Apr and 8 Jun 1969

decided then and there that it 'was silly' to let smoking rule his life, so he went 'cold turkey'.

On 1 March 1971, George succeeded Jack Liebelt as General Manager of C.R.A.'s mines in Broken Hill. George was surprised at this appointment – he thought that the company would appoint someone from Melbourne head office to the position. The promotion came with a move to a relatively new and grand house in an acre of landscaped gardens at 74 Wentworth Road, not far from No 101. Being General manager entitled George to a driver (Don Willoughby) and a luxury car, which initially was a Humber Super Snipe. George struggled with this concept of having personal servants and flashy cars - it did not fit with his egalitarian management style – but eventually he was persuaded that everyone in Broken Hill expected the General Manager to have these trappings of office and that he should not buck tradition. The house came with gardening staff (Don Robertson) and house help (Liz Bates and Sheila Andrews), so Sybil had to get accustomed to giving instructions. Mrs. Arthur also followed the family to No 74.

George Connor, General Manager, 1971

For George, becoming General Manager meant that he was one of the top three businessmen in the only significant industry in a town of 35,000 people, so he was in high demand for many community causes and events. He became the leader of the Mine Managers' Association, and a clear target for the strong Trade Unions in Broken Hill. He was also required to travel more, to Melbourne head office for meetings and to Sydney occasionally to confront or lobby politicians. He was in high demand to attend training workshops and pass on his experience to younger people in C.R.A. Some of the future captains of the Australian Mining Industry worked under George. John Ralph, Nick Stump, Leigh Clifford, Vince Gauci, Ian Johnson, Bryan Davis, Mick O'Leary and Ian Smith all became Chairmen and/or Managing Directors of major Australian mining companies and George followed their careers with interest. In 1967, the University of N.S.W. had established a new training college (the W.S & L.B. Robinson College) next door to George's new home and he supported their efforts as far as possible. The company ran its own apprenticeship scheme and hundreds of mining tradesmen graduated from the C.R.A. mines and spread to other mines. The human resources developed and trained in Broken Hill were always being raided to help establish new mining ventures around Australasia, such as Bougainville, Kambalda, Weipa, Hamersley, Cobar, Woodlawn and Argyle.

At the end of 1971, Catherine left Wenona and went on to study social sciences at the University of New South Wales. Andy completed his B.Sc. in geology at the University of New England and went back there in 1972 to study for an Honours degree. Andy began working for C.R.A. as an Exploration Geologist at the start of 1973, but on the company's condition that he would never work at Broken Hill, presumably to avoid any accusations of nepotism.

Sybil had more time for art and entered paintings in the CWA Art Competition in 1973, with some success.

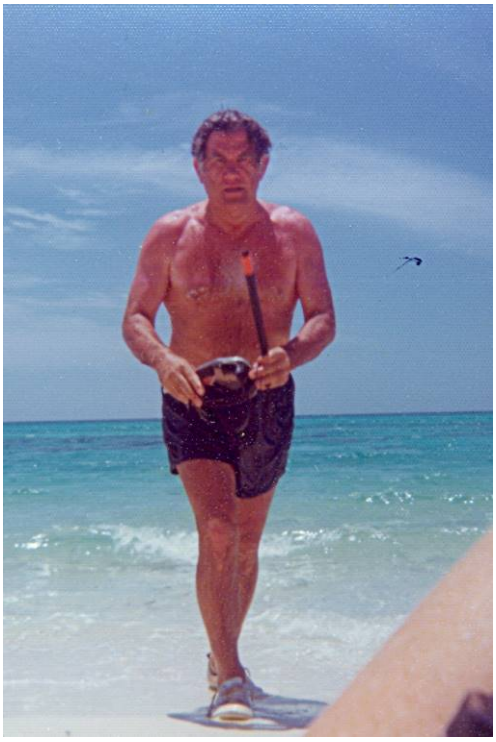
MRS GEORGE CONNOR is pictured with her oil painting that took first prize in one section of the CWA art competition at the Civic Centre. Mrs Connor's entry was acclaimed by judges Tom Offord and Kevin "Pro" Hart.

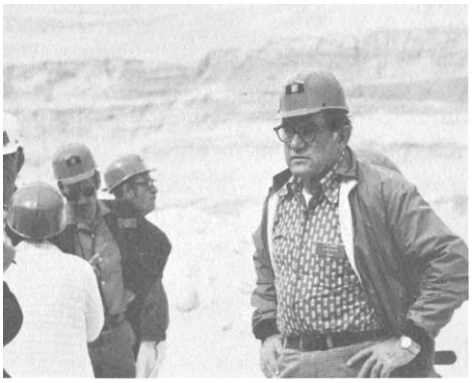
At the end of 1973, Syb and George celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary at Dirty Dick's Music Hall Restaurant, Neutral Bay with Cath, Richard and Ros – Andy was working in Kalgoorlie on the other side of the country.

Celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary, 10 Dec 1973

Richard left Shore School at the end of 1974 and went on to study Mining Engineering at the University of New South Wales. Cath graduated from UNSW and started social work in Sydney, so George and Sybil saw less and less of their children and began to travel more. They chose destinations within easy reach

because of Syb's concerns about long distance air travel. In August 1975, they flew to Fiji, taking Cath and Richard with them. In 1976 they spent a month at Palm Beach and then in May flew to the Whitsunday Islands in Queensland for two weeks, staying in resorts and exploring Hinchinbrook Island. They even indulged in some skinny-dipping! George probably had several weeks of annual leave owing to him which he had to use because, in November, they flew to the Isle of Pines, New Caledonia for a week or so. In between, George attended the R.T.Z. Mining Conference in the Western U.S.A. and visited the copper mining areas in Arizona where his uncle Sprott had forged his reputation and career.



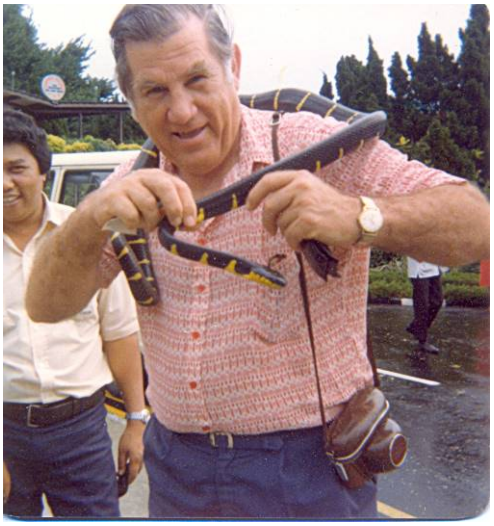


Clockwise from top left: Sybil on Hinchinbrook Island; George at Isle of Pines;
Syb at Isle of Pines; George at Sierrita Mine, Arizona. 1976

In his role as General Manager, at every opportunity George would explain to the workforce and the community that the ore bodies at Broken Hill were almost depleted of economic reserves, and that Broken Hill and its people needed to begin planning for a future that was less reliant upon mining for its wealth and employment. Perhaps during their holidays, George and Sybil began thinking about their own future and planning for retirement. As early as 1977 it appears that they had settled on retiring

to the Bowral - Moss Vale area on the Southern Highlands, south of Sydney.[59] From there they could travel easily to Sydney and Kiama to see family and friends and, unlike Sydney, the climate on the highlands would be much kinder to Sybil's health.

In mid 1977, Andy announced his engagement to Jan Stokes, a teacher he had met when stationed in Mt. Isa, Queensland. Jan flew to Sydney in August 1977 for a pre-wedding introduction to Sybil, George and Cath. Andy and Jan were married in Redcliffe, Queensland on 10 December, coincidentally on George and Sybil's 29th wedding anniversary. In early 1978, Andy and Jan moved to Port Augusta in South Australia, about a five-hour drive from Broken Hill, so George and Syb took opportunities to visit Adelaide and the Flinders Ranges with them in between George's regular trips to Melbourne to attend Australian Mining & Smelting Ltd board meetings. They had holidays in New Zealand and visited Singapore in 1978.



George and Sybil in Singapore, July 1978

L to R: Pat Dewar, Sheila Andrews, Jan Connor, Elizabeth Bates, Sybil Connor
Visiting underground at N.B.H.C. Mine, Jan 1979

[59] Letter from Cedric Whiting to Sybil Connor, 20 Nov 1977

Retirement in Bowral (1980-1995)

1980 was a momentous year for Sybil and George. Their first grandchild, Judith Emily Connor, was born at Port Augusta, and they visited her soon afterwards. On 27 Jun 1980, George retired from the workforce after almost 33 years with the Zinc Corporation and New Broken Hill Consolidated mines. In 1947 the year before George joined the mines, annual ore production was 454,000 tons per annum. In 1980 production was 1,100,000 tonnes of ore. George said at his retirement function that *"Mining engineering is a good profession and if I had my time over again I'd make the same choice – I'd become a mining engineer and work in a place like Broken Hill. Both Sybil and I like the city and we have enjoyed the time we have spent here."* Others described him as *"A man of competence in his job and integrity in his dealings with others"; "a man widely respected both on the mine and throughout the community"; "a tough but fair minded negotiator" "capable of arguing his own point of view with great vigour."* Union officials *"were never in doubt about where he stood or how he felt about an issue." "But those who worked with him quickly came to know that George Connor has a quiet and kindly nature that belied his somewhat forbidding appearance."*[60]

The company maintained a Provident Fund and provided cheap accommodation throughout their time in Broken Hill, so George and Sybil were comfortably off in their retirement. George had invested spare funds into a portfolio of blue-chip stocks, recommended by his old school friend and stockbroker A.B.S. White. George was offered ongoing work for the British Phosphate Commission on Christmas Island, and an ongoing non-executive directorship of AM&S, but he decided to retire completely from business and never seemed to regret it afterwards. He said, *"In six months I`ll be out of date with what`s going on there"*.[61] He described retiring as a time of uncertainty and said *"I guess it will take about 12 months to adjust to what we want to do".*

[60] "Ore Bits" Vol. 14 No. 11 July 4, 1980.
[61] CRA Gazette 31 Jul 1980

They bought a three-year-old, three-bedroom house at Lot 3, St Clair Street, Bowral on a 2851m^2 block, the first house they had ever owned. They left Broken Hill in July 1980 with their two old cats PK and Black-and-White Kitty and set about making the Bowral house comfortable and establishing a garden. The house was set high on a slope looking south across a green, tree-filled valley. Very few house roofs were visible from the front verandah, but there was one large house farther up the hill at the back which was owned by Clement Semmler (of the ABC) and his wife. The only detraction as far as Sybil was concerned was a line of ugly power poles and wires along St Clair Street. Sybil set about planting an 'arboretum' in front of the house to hide the offending structures.

Both Sybil and George enjoyed gardening, which was probably the main outdoor activity they shared in retirement. Syb was more interested in the design and aesthetics of the garden, and she liked to visit other gardens on her travels and gather ideas. Unlike Broken Hill, Bowral has four distinct seasons so European trees and gardens thrive there. Bowral`s mean rainfall is 730mm per annum (compared with 260mm at Broken Hill) and it sometimes snows in winter. Bowral in spring – tulip time - is a magnet for lovers of gardens. Flowers were always important in Syb's life and there was often a fresh flower arrangement in the house. In keeping with his upbringing in Lugarno, George was more interested in the productivity of the garden - he managed the vegetable patch and the two or three beehives in the back corner of the yard, but he was the earthmover, pruner and lawnmower who helped Syb realise her grand designs. He also indulged his love of wildlife and had a menagerie of local kookaburras, magpies, currawongs, crimson rosellas, skinks, frogs, mice and spiders that he fed and befriended.

George and Sybil, c.1983, in their Bowral home

Sybil in the front garden of the Bowral home.

The Bowral home became a meeting place for the family, especially during the Christmas - New Year holidays. Andy, Jan and Judy moved to Canberra in October 1980, about two hours' drive away. Richard and his girlfriend Narelle Birney were married in Camden the same month and were living in Sydney. Catherine had graduated from U.N.S.W. with a Bachelor of Social Work and after a longish sabbatical in Europe, settled in Sydney also. So, for a short while during 1981-82, the family were gathered in a relatively small area and saw each other more often than usual. More grandchildren arrived; Kate in 1981, Thomas and Tim in 1982, Claire in 1984, Geoffrey in 1986 and Max in 1994. The cousins met each other most Christmases while they were growing up and important family links were forged at these gatherings.

In Bowral, George and Sybil were also much closer to a wider circle of family and friends, - within two hour's drive - and they took full advantage of it. Sybil's sister Ros Whiting and George's sisters Emily Pearson and Kate Maddocks all lived in Sydney. Sybil's brother Philip Whiting and George`s first cousin Alan Connor lived down the mountain in Kiama. Bowral was just off the main Hume Highway linking Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney, so more distant cousins and friends would sometimes break their journeys to call in and visit.

In his retirement, George kept in touch more often with his sisters Emily and Kate. Kate had fallen on hard times and George and Emily decided jointly to purchase an apartment for her in Cremorne. Emily died in 1988, leaving her share of Kate's apartment to George. George celebrated his 70th birthday in Bowral which was an opportunity for George and Kate to get together with their cousins Alan and Doreen Connor, Avril Walcott, and 'Mickey' Alldridge, plus some of Sybil's relatives and friends.

Tanilba Bay, December 1984
L to R: Tim, George, Ros Whiting, Les Stokes, Andy, Judy, Nessie Stokes holding Claire, Richard, Kate, Sybil, Nell, Tom, Jan.

Bowral, August 1987
L to R: Judy, Narelle, Kate, George, Tom, Sybil, Richard, Tim, Cath, Claire, Andy, Geoff and Jan carrying Geoff,

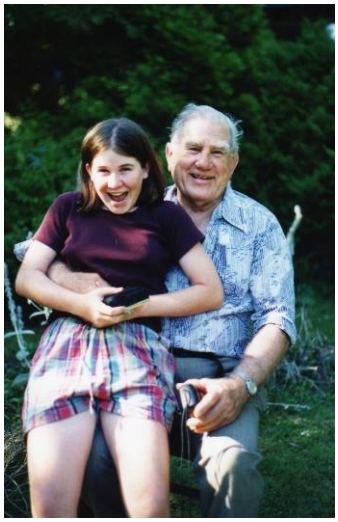
Lemon Tree Passage, December 1990
L to R: George, Les Stokes, Richard, Tom, Nessie Stokes, Cath, Ros Whiting, Tim, Geoff, Nell, Judy, Andy, Kate, Jan, Sybil, Claire.

George ('Pa') was an inveterate tickler and teaser, and encouraged his grandchildren to feed the birds, while Sybil ('Granny') tried to teach her grandchildren manners and encouraged them in the arts. And she passed on her favorite recipes, collected over a lifetime. The garden was an adventure playground, and a rough footpath down the hill beside the drive became a 'luge' track for the cousins, using an old tricycle for the sled.

Pa and Judy 1981

Pa and Claire 1984

Pa and Claire 1989



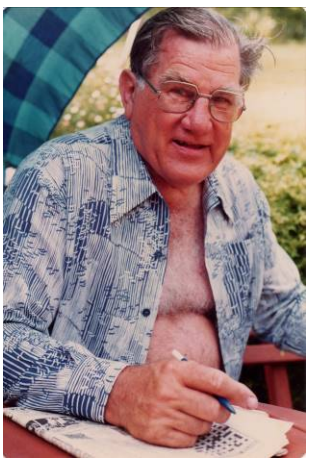
and 1996

One Christmas when George was carrying Claire on his shoulders, his hearing aid was dislodged and fell on the grass. One of George's pet kookaburras swooped down, picked up the hearing aid and flew off with it.

George and Sybil decided to buy season tickets to the Australian Opera. During the season, they would drive down to the Sydney Opera House, staying overnight with Sybil`s sister Ros, or with Cath. They became members of the National Trust and would visit houses and gardens with Rachael and John Townend, driving as far west as Canowindra for the weekend.

George and Sybil had separate interests also. George played golf once or twice a week at the Bowral Golf Club and was a regular B-Grade player with a handicap in the 15 to 20 stroke range. His ankle condition made it difficult for George to rotate fully through a golf swing. He was a holder of debentures in the Bowral Golf Club and, for some years he was club treasurer which meant that he had to account for things such as poker machine takings and to deal with the NSW Government bureaucracy.

In retirement, George lived through the blossoming of the computer age, but he never used or owned a computer – even the electronic calculators he used were very basic ones which, for a person with an engineering mind and passion for organization, seems rather strange. He kept old-style ledger records of his investments, wrote letters in longhand, sometimes used a slide rule, always went to the bank teller to withdraw cash – never the ATM, persisted with writing cheques to pay bills, never had a mobile phone, and I doubt that he ever understood or used the internet. Despite seeing his children and grandchildren take up these new technologies with gusto, he never showed any interest in learning how to use them, although they would have helped him in many of his retirement activities.



George tackled the crossword puzzles in the Sydney Morning Herald every day and loved studying the columns on chess and bridge. He played contract bridge weekly at the local bridge club and was probably quite competitive although he always said that it was just for fun. He liked to say that he followed the KISS method of bridge bidding – Keep It Simple Stupid. Under the bridge club rules, George

had to rotate partners and tables at each meeting, so he played with a range of people with varied skills. It helped him to meet people and he made some good friends there. George also took some classes in Italian and Asian cooking. He remained an active member of Legacy and had several Legacy war widows in the Bowral District that he visited regularly and helped where he could.

Connor family reunion, Albury NSW, 5-6 October 1985 (Sybil and George, seated centre left)

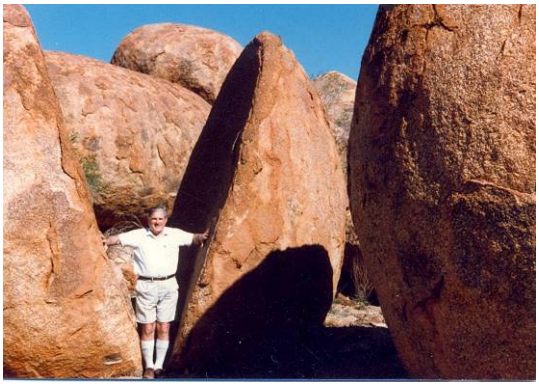
In October 1985, the descendants of George's uncle W.E. Ernest Connor organized a family reunion in Albury N.S.W. This was a great success and many family members were introduced to each other for the first time. It prompted George to begin researching his family history in greater detail, making contact with distant Connor, Boyd and Newton cousins and writing to people in England to discover more about his Connor ancestors. He produced a series of family trees, all written, drawn and ruled up by hand, which must have taken many weeks to plan and complete. George's first cousin, Eleanor Sprott Boyd Boushey, who lived in California and who George knew quite well, was also tracing the Boyd family history, and they corresponded on the subject. Eleanor published "The Boyd Family Story" in 1995. George's sister Emily died in 1988 and George read the eulogy at her funeral service at St Thomas' Church North Sydney.

Sybil continued with her art and joined a local art class. The teacher encouraged her to experiment with new techniques and media – oil painting, impressionism, collages with mixed media and materials, and linoleum cuts. Syb also tried portrait pencil sketches and paintings, but she was rarely happy with the outcome. In 1989 Syb joined Judy Chapman`s pottery class and started to produce sculptures in terracotta and porcelain.

George and Sybil continued to travel extensively within Australia. They kept in touch with their friends from Broken Hill and, most years, the Connors, Hodders, Gilfillans, Parsons, Porichs and LeMessuriers would select a venue somewhere and spend a week together – the Hunter valley, Blue Mountains, Healesville, Barrington Tops etc. In 1983 they returned to Broken Hill for the Broken Hill Centenary as guests of the city.

Healesville Victoria 1989. L to R: Max and Roma Hodder, Betty Porich, Bob Parsons, Marg Gilfillan, Vito Porich, Sybil and George Connor, Merl Parsons.

During the 1980s, their children moved around a bit. Richard and Nell moved to Tanilba Bay and then Lemon Tree Passage; Catherine moved from Leichhardt to Forresters Beach; Andy and Jan moved from Canberra to Brisbane, then to Sydney and in 1986, to Karratha, Western Australia, leaving their old black Labrador Gypsy behind in Bowral. George and Sybil visited them all when they could, although going west was a long hike. Nevertheless, they visited W.A. in 1989; in 1991 to babysit their grandchildren, and again in 1994. They took the opportunity to visit other parts of Australia too.



The Olgas, NT

The Pinnacles, WA

Cable Beach, Broome WA

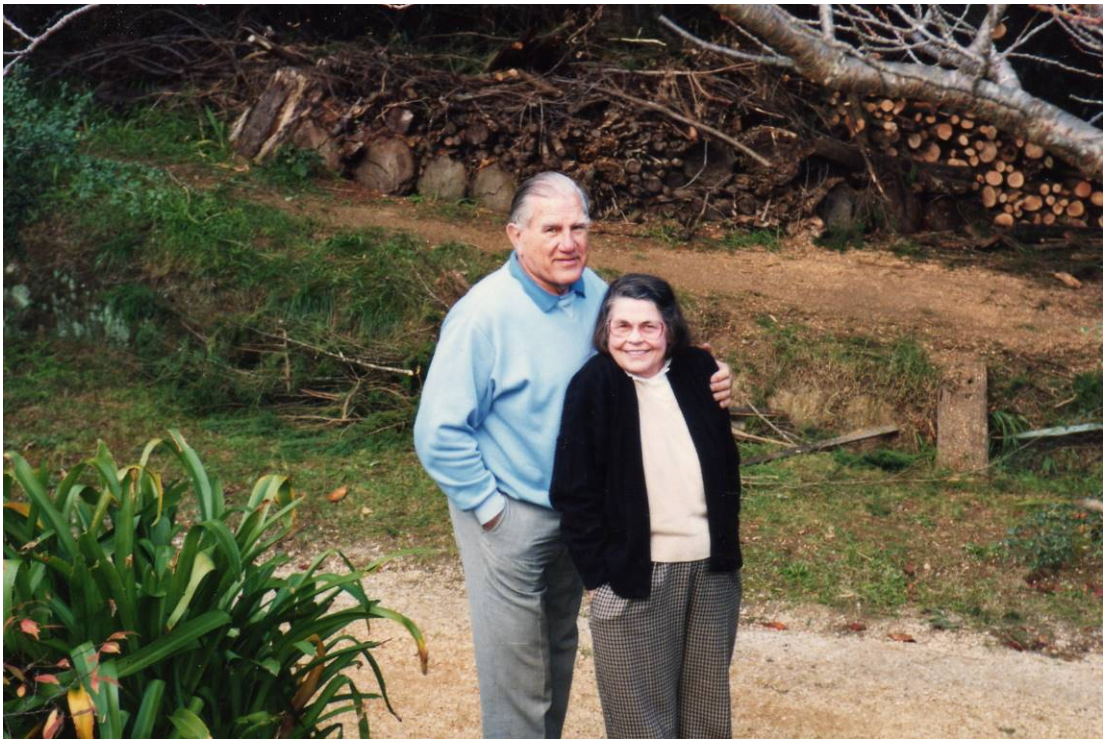
Lake Monger, Perth WA

George and Sybil also kept in contact with the friends they had made during military service. George was a member of the local R.S.L. club, although he didn`t use the clubhouse much. He always attended Anzac Day ceremonies, either in Sydney or Bowral, and he attended reunions of the 2/33rd Battalion in N.S.W. After years of inactivity, the members of the A.W.A.S. Lae Contingent began to hold reunions, and Sybil attended several – 1983, 1986 (Southport), 1988 (Melbourne), 1992 (Brisbane) and 1994 (Perth). During this period, the A.W.A.S. Association (Victorian Branch) lobbied for greater recognition of their service. An A.W.A.S. flag was designed and dedicated in Canberra in 1990 and is flown at A.W.A.S reunions. But full recognition of the Lae Contingent in the form of a remembrance plaque at the National War Memorial in Canberra did not happen until 2000.

AWAS reunion Southport 1986:
L to R Back; Sybil, Ruth, Ros, Marg. Front; Marie, Monica, Jean, Larry, Bobby, Pat.

AWAS reunion Perth 1994: L to R; Marie, Win, Sybil, Nola, Monica

AWAS Lae Contingent plaque, Australian War Memorial, Canberra



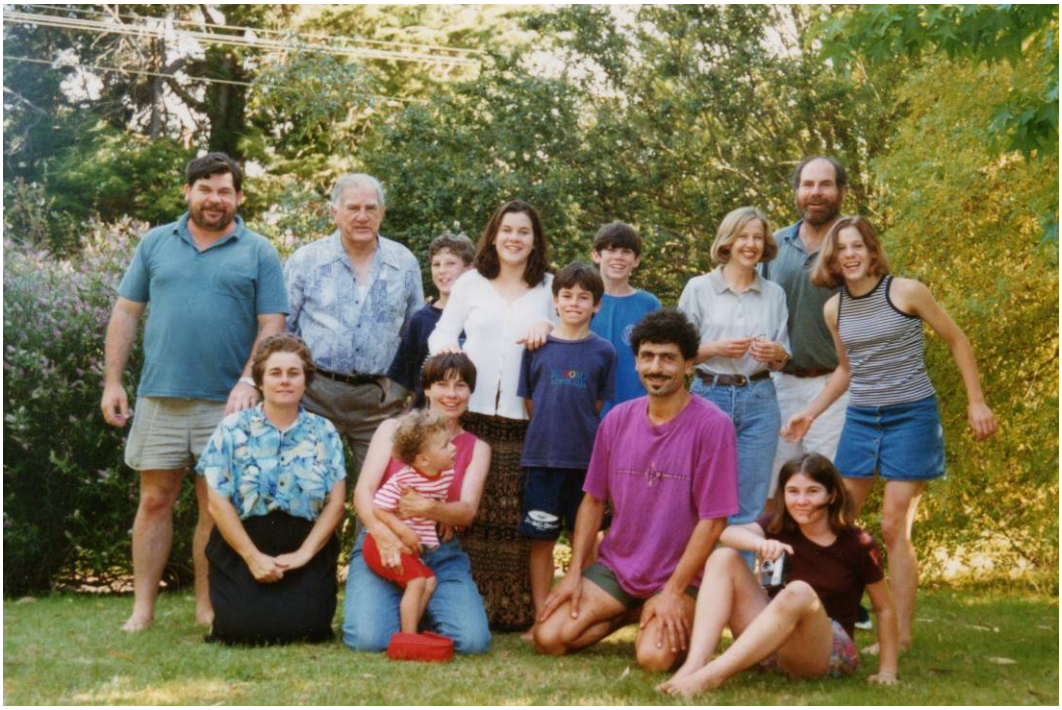
George and Sybil at Bowral, June 1992

Although Sybil liked Bowral's climate, the cold winters always brought risks of colds and influenza which Sybil found hard to shake off. In the winter of 1995, one of these bouts of flu' developed into pneumonia and she was hospitalized in Bowral. Despite modern antibiotics and breathing aids, Sybil finally lost her fight to live after a lifetime of struggling to clear her lungs and to find her breath. She died on 26 August 1995, two days after her 73rd birthday, with George and her children by her side. I wailed uncontrollably at her bedside and I thought for a moment that Dad might start also, but he managed to control himself and did his grieving in private. Although George had seen many people die during his life, this was probably his first close experience of the death of a family member.

Sybil was cremated at the Northern Suburbs Crematorium in Lane Cove, Sydney on 29 August 1995, and the family gathered at Rachael and John Townend's home in Pymble after the funeral.

George's widowhood 1995-2014

After Sybil's death, George remained in the Bowral home for another five years, and it continued to be a meeting place for the family at Christmas time. George also took road trips in his Mitsubishi Magna to visit relatives and friends in the Eastern States, travelling west to Adelaide and Horsham, south to Melbourne and Alberton, and north to Brisbane. Andy and his family had moved to Perth in 1994, and George visited them in 1996, 1999, 2004, 2005 for Claire's 21st birthday and lastly in 2008 for Tom's wedding.



Bowral January 1996
L to R: Andy, Jan, George, Tim, Cath with Max, Judy, Geoff, Tom, Gus, Nell, Claire, Richard and Kate.

Bowral, January 1998
L to R: Andy, Claire, Richard, Gus, Nell, Tim, Geoff, Cath, Max, George.

Bowral, December 1999
L to R: Nell, Richard, Geoff, George, Gus, Tim, Kate, Max, Claire, Tom, Nessie, Andy

George continued to spend his days in Bowral gardening, reading the daily Sydney Morning Herald and doing the crosswords, playing golf and bridge, caring for his Legacy widows and watching TV. He would drive down to the shops in Bowral most days, have a coffee in Springett's Arcade and read the paper. Some people would pass by and say hello, but often George's poor memory for names failed him. The Sydney Rugby Union games were shown free to air on Saturday afternoons and George liked to follow the fortunes of his old club University. He kept up with his remaining army friends, but he was becoming one the few surviving members of his army unit, and each day he scanned the death notices in the paper.

25 April 1998. George leading the 2/33rd Battalion, Anzac Day March, Sydney.

In 1998 while Andy was visiting Bowral, George had a serious bleed into his upper bowel after dinner one evening and fainted from loss of blood. After struggling to stretcher George down the internal stairwell at the Bowral home, he was rushed to Bowral Hospital, where the doctors gave him a transfusion and stabilized him, however they could not stop the bleeding entirely because George was taking blood thinners and tablets for high blood pressure. They only had a very limited supply of his blood type, B positive, in stock in Bowral, so he was airlifted by helicopter aerial ambulance to Sydney. In preparing for this flight, a nurse decided to fit George with a catheter. He objected angrily and eventually pulled the catheter out on his own in an act of pure defiance. He was never a good patient!

In Sydney, he ended up at Concord Repatriation Hospital. Despite a couple of colonoscopies, the doctors never found the source of the bleeding, which eventually dried up. Kate and John Maddocks and others came to visit him. Later that year, Kate herself was hospitalized, but did not recover and died on 19 December aged 80, leaving George as the only surviving sibling. Gill Maddocks recalls that George was very kind and considerate in helping Kate's granddaughter Katherine to cope with the loss.

George's health scare and Kate's death probably made him consider moving to a smaller house, closer to medical assistance if he needed it. The Bowral home was too large for a single person, and the garden and lawn were becoming hard to manage alone. In 1999 George was contacted again by his post-war girlfriend from Palm Beach, Gloria 'Penny' McGarrity. Penny had married Adrian Henchman, a lawyer, in 1957 and had a daughter Edwina and son Alexander. Penny had been widowed since 1989 and spent much of her time at the family home at Waratah Road, Palm Beach. George had kept up his membership of the Palm Beach Surf Club; Penny came across George's name in one of the club's newsletters and, as she had done back in 1945, decided to "pick him up again". By October they were seeing each other often and George stayed at Palm Beach regularly. A bit embarrassed, he broke the news of the relationship to daughter Catherine but assured her that *"nothing happened; I'm too old for that stuff"*. Penny's daughter Edwina was less approving of the relationship.

Perhaps Penny helped George decide to leave St Clair Street and lease a villa in the Kenilworth Gardens Retirement Village in Bowral. In 2000, he moved into Villa 50, a 1½ bedroom self-contained unit, close to the community centre and dining hall. However, George kept pretty much to himself, preferring to cook his own meals or have them brought to his unit. He spent a large part of each year away from this home visiting Penny or his family. Downsizing meant that many of his possessions from the Bowral house had to be split up among the children, or sold.

Soon after moving, George was contacted by a historian, Glenyss Barham, who was writing a history of the Lugarno suburb. They met, and George recounted his childhood memories of growing up at the "Valencia" orchard. Glenyss published her research in 2003[62] and George was invited to speak at the book launch at the Lugarno. George went back to Lugarno a few times in the 2000s.

[62] "Riverside Reflections. Memoirs of Lugarno" Glenyss Barham. October 2003. Parker Pattinson Publishing

George and Penny, Palm Beach, October 1999

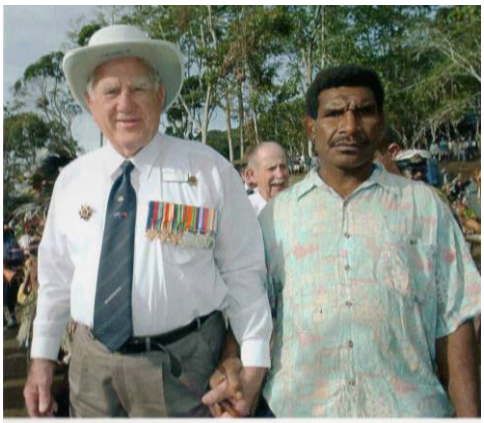
George at Villa 50, Kenilworth Gardens, Bowral.

In 2002, the 60th anniversary of the Kokoda Campaign, George was one of 10 veterans from around Australia who were invited to attend the dedication of a memorial to those who served in the campaign, at Isurava in Papua New Guinea. He was the only representative from the 2/33rd Battalion. It was the first time George had returned to Papua New Guinea since the war and brought back many memories. The veterans met in Brisbane on 11 August and attended a dinner hosted by the Minister

for Veterans Affairs, Danna Vale, at Victoria Barracks. On the 12th they flew to Port Moresby and on the 13th they drove to Sogeri and on to Macdonald's Corner and Owers Corner, the southern start of the Kokoda Track. That evening back in Port Moresby at the Australian High Commission, they met the Prime Minister, John Howard. The following day, the veterans flew out to Popondetta in a C130 Hercules and then up to Isurava by defence Chinook helicopter for the dedication of the memorial by Prime Ministers John Howard and Michael Somare. George read from the Gospel of St John Chapter 15 *"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends".*

Isurava Memorial 14 August 2002. The veterans with the Prime Minister John Howard (with garland) and his wife Jeanette. George Connor 5th from left.

George Connor talks with the Prime Minister



George Connor is escorted to the memorial by a local

On the way back from Isurava, the veterans stopped briefly at Kokoda Village where they were welcomed by locals in full ceremonial dress and visited the local museum and war memorial. Back in Port Moresby that night, they had a reception at the house of the Head of Australian Defence Staff. On their last day in Papua New Guinea, the veterans visited the Bomana War Cemetery. George particularly wanted to find the graves of some of his friends from the 2/33rd Battalion who were killed when the Liberator bomber crashed onto their convoy at Jackson Field on 7 September 1943.

Bomana War Cemetery 15 Aug 2002. George Connor 4th from left.

After a harbour cruise and farewell dinner, the veterans returned to Australia the following day.

On arriving back in Australia, George found that Penny had been hospitalized. Penny died on 24 August 2002 from liver failure. George attended her funeral but, after that, he lost contact with Penny's daughter Edwina and grandsons Thomas and Hamish. Edwina's second husband Simon Storey was very appreciative of the kindness and gentleness that George showed to Penny and her family, saying after George's death *"George was one of the most wonderful and dearest men I have had the good fortune to know".*

After Penny's death, George began to think more often about his own mortality. He sometimes said that it was unnatural for a man to outlive his two partners and two sisters. He reviewed his will and added a codicil to leave money to his seven grandchildren. George also began to feel the effects of old age. Many years of favouring one ankle over the other eventually led to back and hip problems. Over time, he had both hips replaced and recovered well from the operations, but his arthritic back could not be repaired and he stoically bore the pain for many years. He began to struggle around the golf course but was too proud to hire a golf cart and gave up playing golf. He continued playing bridge where he had some good friends. Eventually George could no longer march in the Anzac Day parades – one of his last was with grandson Max in 2005.

George and grandson Max being interviewed, Anzac Day Parade, Sydney 2005

At grandson Tom's wedding, Perth 2008. L to R; Judy, Gus, George, Nell, Tim, Kate Randall

By the time George came to Perth in April 2008 for grandson Tom's wedding he was using a walking stick full-time and could not march in the Anzac Day parade, but he sat on the sidelines in the front row and watched granddaughter Claire play and march in the Combined Districts Band.

Other symptoms of George's old age were that his memory and his hearing deteriorated further. He had difficulty hearing what other people were saying, even with hearing aids, which meant that he gradually became less communicative, and the television volume became louder and louder over the years. George continued to drive his Mitsubishi Magna everywhere and maintained his travel independence, but

the car collected more and more dents and scratches as his judgement deteriorated and reaction times fell. Often, George could not remember or explain how the damage had happened. After age 75, drivers in N.S.W. are required to undergo annual medical checkups before their unrestricted licence can be renewed. After age 85, drivers must pass a practical driving assessment every two years to retain their unrestricted licence. After George's 85th birthday in November 2004, George's doctor expressed some concern in recommending renewal of George's unrestricted licence, so George applied for a Modified Driver's Licence, restricting him to within a 10km radius of Bowral. George was forced to use the train to get to Sydney, or further afield, and he began to lose some independence. Richard and Nell often called in on their way to and from Canberra to visit and check up on him, but George never wanted people to make a fuss of him, or to be a burden to others, saying in a deep voice "*Don't worry about me, I'll be all right!*"

George at 90. 8 November 2009, Forresters Beach.

George's 90th birthday celebration was a big affair. Cath hired a function room at Forresters Beach and invited many Connor and Whiting relatives to celebrate with him. Many old work colleagues from CRA sent their congratulations. Everyone had a tag with their name and relationship to George, which is just as well because George would have had great difficulty remembering them all.

George's 90th; surrounded by Connor relatives

George's 90th: surrounded by Whiting relatives

In June 2010, George fell when negotiating the steps between his Villa and the Kenilworth Community Centre. He twisted and fractured his left femur below the post supporting his replaced hip. The break was very complex and required two operations to set it in place with bolts, screws, supports and wires. During one of these operations George's heart stopped. He was revived and eventually was fitted with a pacemaker. The leg took a long while to heal and George was in the Southern Highlands Private Hospital for about three months of rehabilitation. George was not a good patient for the physiotherapists and, despite their best efforts, by the time he was discharged, George had lost significant leg muscle condition and mobility. When he left hospital, he had to use a walking frame to get around. Driving was out of the question, so George voluntarily surrendered his driving licence (although he later claimed they took it away from him). George gave his car to his granddaughter Judy who continued to use it for many years.

With restricted mobility, George had lost a lot of his independence and it was clear that his Villa at Kenilworth was not a long-term living option for him. Although George could have moved into higher care accommodation at Kenilworth, Cath and Gus decided to offer George the self-contained flat below their house at 1 Binang Avenue, Forresters Beach. Here, George would still have some privacy, but there would be family on hand for help when he needed it, for conversation and company and, importantly for George, the company of Cath's pet dog Negrita and cats Ravi and Heather.

The flat downstairs at Forresters Beach, January 2011

George moved to Forresters Beach in October 2010. The flat was decorated with familiar things from George's life in Bowral and Broken Hill - his old cedar desk and standard lamp, family photos, some of Sybil's paintings, books about the war, his collection of classical music records and CDs, his dressing and bedside tables, lounge chair and the bronze statue of 'Cassini' that originally belonged to his great grandfather Dr. Sprott Boyd. Outside, there was a shady porch next to a fish pond, which attracted other wildlife – insects, frogs, lizards and snakes.


Outside the flat at Forresters Beach, January 2011

Most of the time, George insisted on eating upstairs with the family which involved a difficult climb up an internal staircase, but Cath did as much as she could to provide a safe environment for him. Lunches were usually taken downstairs on the porch, and George would feed the fish in the pond. George didn't want to leave the house much, although Cath offered to take him anywhere. He seemed to lose interest in the outside world beyond television, except for the occasional reunion of 2/33rd members at Gosford, lunch at the café beside the Terrigal Surf Club and visit to the doctor. He just didn't "*want to be a bother to anyone*", having seen how much care his father needed in old age.

In 2012, George had another fall, this time in the bathroom, and broke his other (right) femur in several places. He lay on the floor there for a while until someone found him because he didn't want to disturb anyone by using his emergency call button. This break was as severe as the first and required a long operation which, according to the doctor, was touch and go. At one stage, his heart stopped and he had to be resuscitated.

After months of rehabilitation at the Berkeley Vale Private Hospital George returned to the flat at Forresters Beach, but he required a much higher level of care than before, having lost even more mobility. Cath cared for him most of the time – he required help getting in and out of bed, in dressing, taking medication, moving about the flat and preparing meals. Nurses came two or three times per week to shower him and if necessary, dress his wounds. Andy and Jan, Richard and Nell, occasionally stayed to give Cath a holiday break, and George sometimes spent a week in respite care in the Tarragal House Nursing Home at Erina.

For George, life probably became very confusing, and perhaps frustrating. His short-term memory was failing badly. He kept a calendar diary to remind him of what day it was and what was due to happen each day, and he needed coaching to remind him of who people were and how they fitted in to his family and his life. His book-keeping, which he had kept so meticulously for years, became neglected. The crosswords became more difficult to start, let alone finish. And he watched the news endlessly because, to him, it was all new.

George's first great grandchild, Sam Alexander Miller was born in 2013 to Kate and Eric. Grandchildren visited as often as they could and George was always happy to see them and ask how they were going.

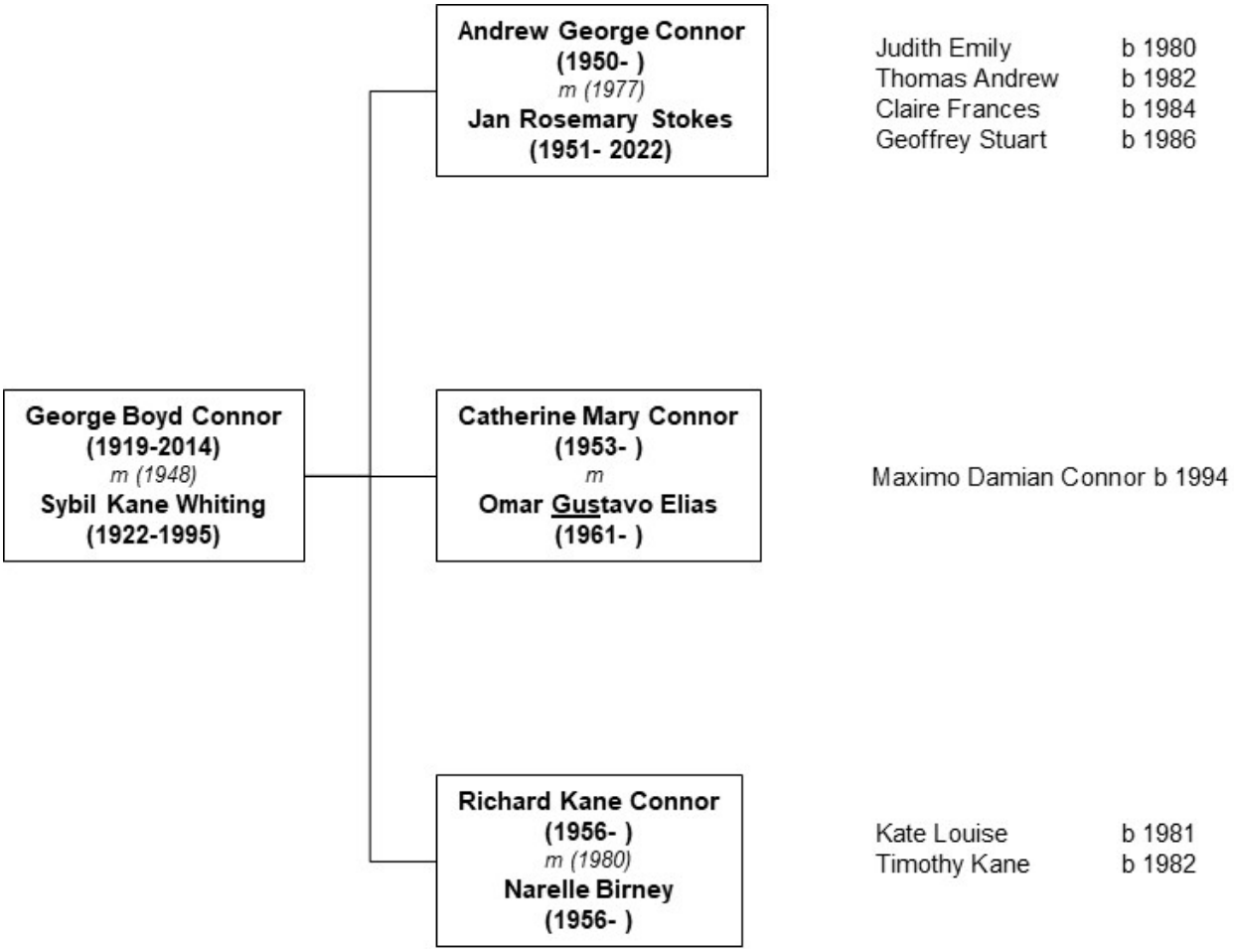
George with great-grandson Sam Miller.

George with eldest grand-daughter Judy, 27 Nov 2013

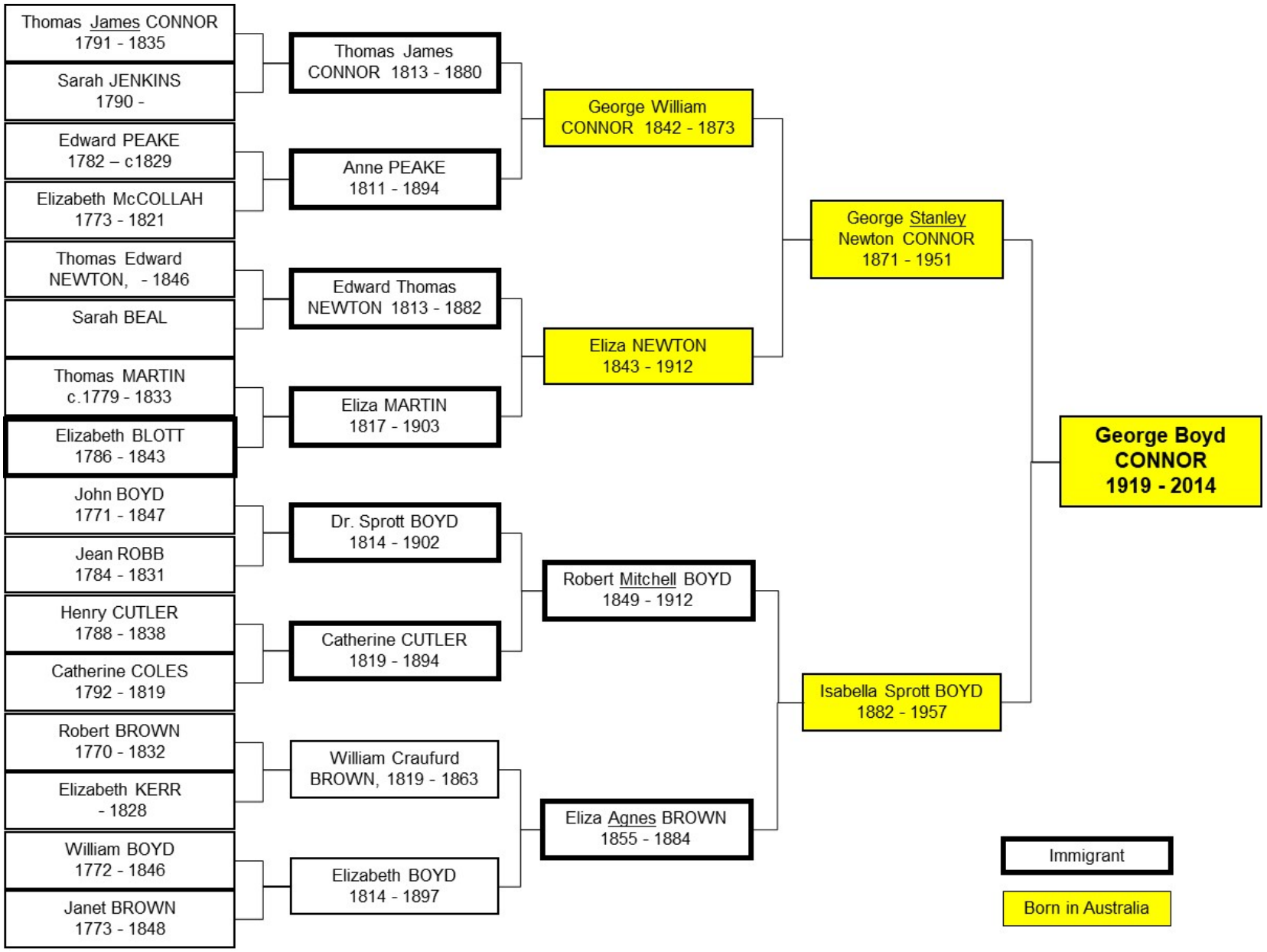
But George became quite tired of life. He often said that he had "*passed his use-by date*", and sometimes asked Cath how his life is going to end. He wished that he would just not wake up one morning. And that is sort of the way it happened. George went to respite care at Tarragal House and, after being there about a week, didn't wake up after his after-lunch nap in his chair. He died peacefully on 20 May 2014.

George's funeral service and cremation were held on 24 May at the Palmdale Lawn Cemetery and Memorial Park, Palmdale. George's son Andrew and grand-daughter Kate read the eulogies, describing George's life and what he meant to them. Ray Gibson from the 2/33rd Battalion Association also made a speech on behalf of George's AIF mates, past and present. Many nephews, nieces and cousins attended. George's ashes were placed next to Sybil's at the Northern Suburbs Memorial Gardens, North Ryde, where his mother's and father's ashes are also placed.

GEORGE AND SYBIL CONNOR'S FAMILY



ANCESTRY OF GEORGE BOYD CONNOR



ANCESTRY OF SYBIL KANE WHITING