

Rita Thompson's Story:

Ernie Thompson - I CORPS, 2nd AIF.

ERNIE'S STORY

By Rita Thompson

Ernest Henry Thompson was born on the 13th of December, 1905 in London, England. He was the youngest of six children; it was a happy and loving family. They lived variously in Lambeth, Clapham, Balham; it was usual in those days to move house fairly frequently, renting their accommodation.

By the time Ernie was born, their parents were in their forties and his mother was not very fit. Emily, the second oldest, was Ernie's chief carer.

Ernie's mother's maiden name was 'Cohen'. Her parents died when she was young, and two Aunts took care of her then. She had her own horse and carriage; her father had been a cancer specialist, and she received many presents from his grateful patients. The family was related to the Rothschilds.

His mother as a young girl was very unhappy, living with her Aunts. She ran away, and eventually found work in a hotel, where she met Ernie's father, who was the chief carver there. Ernie's father was also a skilled painter and decorator, in later years; Ernie remembered the painstaking brushwork, to resemble wood grain and the intricately carved ceilings, which had to be picked out in various colours.

Ernie had the 'Wanderlust' from his early years. While still in petticoats, and with long, curly, brown hair, at the age of four or five, he was sent to the shop, to buy some rice. When he did not return, after some time, the family went to the police station. There he was, sitting on a table, his face covered in chocolate. When about nine years of age he would be sent to the pub, with a jug, for ale for his mother. He worked there, to gain pocket money. He had fond memories of the shops being open until 2 a.m., and buying pease pudding, faggots, etc.

He did well at school, and left at fourteen. Although artistically inclined, he had no knowledge of art school, or art as a profession. He has told me of going to school with holes in the soles of his shoes, and just a scarf, over his jacket, crossed over his chest, to keep out the cold, Dickens style.

His father apprenticed him to a plumber but Ernie was most unhappy with this. He wanted to go to Canada, and Australia. He applied to join the Royal Flying Corps,



falsified his age by a year. They would have accepted him, but he suffered from bronchitis. He smoked cigarettes.

He worked his passage to Australia, when he was eighteen as a stoker. He took any job he could get when he got there. He walked 200 miles at one stage, ending up with very sore feet, which had to be treated at the hospital. He had more than one spell of working at the Melbourne Club, I have two, very good, 1926 references. He worked in all the jobs there – waiter barman, assistant cook and served the then Prince of Wales. He also worked on the switchboard at a hospital.

While still in his early twenties Ernie met a girl in a pub. She was a Roman Catholic and pregnant, so in very deep trouble. Ernie married her to help her out! There was a little boy, but Ernie seldom mentioned these things. He and his wife got on well, he said she was ‘great fun’, but, in later years she was unfaithful. Ever the gallant, chivalrous and kind Ernie, he let her divorce him. She was a nursing sister.

So, in 1939 war loomed. Ernie had dual nationality British and Australian, and treasured this. He joined the Australian Army – “Hitler was not going to get his hands on Britain”. Ernie signed up on the 9th of November 1939 in South Melbourne, Victoria. He listed his next of kin as Hilda Sharrock. Ernie eventually ended up in what became officially the I CORPS, which was officially established in Melbourne on April 11, 1940 and Lieutenant General Thomas Blamey, the 2nd AIF commander, was appointed General Officer Commanding (GOC) I Australian Corps.

After 56 days, Ernie was sent to the Middle East. He loved the voyage, on the Mauritania.

The I CORPS of the Australian Army was the main frontline corps of the army during World War II. In 1940–42, the corps was based in the Mediterranean Theatre. In 1942–45, it oversaw Allied frontline units in the South West Pacific Area.

Ernie served in Libya, Egypt, Palestine, before he was sent to Greece.

The corps took over control of Cyrenaica, Libya on February 16, 1941, replacing the British XIII Corps and in April 1941, I Corps HQ was transferred to Greece for the Greek campaign. The corps controlled the Australian 6th Division, the New Zealand 2nd Division, the Greek 12th Division and the British 1st Armoured Brigade. On April 12, it was officially renamed the Anzac Corps, a reference to the combined Australian-New Zealand formations of World War I. However, the Allied forces were quickly overcome by the German advance and I Corps HQ left Greece on April 23–24.

He told me of buying sacks of oranges, for next to nothing. He had a boy to do his washing had to pay him very little. I heard how they had to wash shave and drink, from a very small daily water ration.

Things were very bad for the Allied Forces when Ernie and his comrades reached Greece. There was supposed to be a ship which would take them off to safety but either it had already left, or it was full. Ernie spoke of being on his own, among the bushes, a target for sniper fire and firing back.

At this time, many Australian troops were trapped by German forces and were unable to be evacuated. Ernie was among these troops captured by the Germans.

They were all rounded up, and made to march a long way. The Greek people were kind, one lady gave Ernie three raw eggs – he ate them! I am sure that sort of thing helped him to survive. Some died on the way. There was dysentery among other ills. They were taken by train to Austria.

As I have mentioned before Ernie's mother's maiden name was Cohen. Not a good name for a prisoner of war, under the Germans. His Commanding Officer told Ernie to put a different name, which he did – with an Irish sound to it.

Ernie spent four years in prison camps. Three Stalags in all, one was Stalag XV111. I have his "Meat Ticket", and a few photos. He escaped three times, trying to get to Switzerland. He dyed his pyjamas but, after four days and nights in the pouring rain that disguise was pretty useless. One time, he was caught by the Italians, and spent an enjoyable night in their hut, as they gave him a good meal, and they had a fire going.

His family sent him food and clothes parcels, but he never received them. How he would have appreciated that woollen underwear, those pyjamas and socks. They had to wrap their feet in rags. They boiled their teal leaves again and again, and had to drink ersatz coffee. Soup was made with potato peelings; a small allowance of rye bread was given daily. They considered themselves better off than the Russian prisoners, whose camp they could see nearby. Red Cross parcels – some did get through. There was sometimes some mouldy cheese in them, which no-one would touch, but Ernie ate it.

They were sent to make a railway, but much sabotage went on, track was destroyed almost as soon as it was laid. Ernie suffered a fractured knee and a fractured spine, with ankylosing spondylitis in later life he suffered continual back pain, and could only do light work, for a small wage, after the war. While in prison camp, he suffered from diphtheria nephritis and beri-beri. The last being a deficiency of Vitamin B. The doctors gave him Vitamin B injections, but they only had blunt needles.

One time, in sick bay, with three other very ill patients, Ernie, with a temperature of 102 degrees, had to nurse the other three, he being the fittest.

The prisoners found various ways of keeping up their morale. They put on theatrical productions – Ernie remembered "Glamorous Nights". Ernie himself spent a great deal of time working out systems for betting on face horses. This he did for the rest of his life, but we never did become rich as a result!

The years passed, and 1945 arrived. Ernie was in the habit of resting on his bun after lunch, but, on this day, he went somewhere else. American planes dropped a few bombs – when Ernie came back, there was a crater, where his bunk had been. When he was born, he was covered in a cawl – there must be a basis to the superstition that such a baby would lead a charmed life, protected.

The war was nearing its end. The Americans dropped supplies on the camp. Each soldier received a daily tin, containing such things as – bacon, butter, cigarettes, soap and toilet paper – what welcome luxury. Soon they were released, by the Americans and flown to Eastbourne, on the south coast of Sussex, England. It was a rough flight, in an old Dakota.

Ernie recuperated there, for three months. He was very thin, and the four years had taken their toll mentally. But he was able to visit his family in London. His parents had died during the war. His main contact was Emily, who more or less brought him up. Jean her Daughter, lived with Emily, and Jean's Husband, George. Jean called Ernie "Dream Boat". He was able to take them chocolate and cigarettes – very welcome, as luxuries were in very short supply in those days of rationing.

So Ernie returned to Australia, and was discharged from the army in October 1945. I think he had a period in hospital, to recover as far as he could, from the psychological trauma. He had deep sores on his heels, and remembered the doctor who healed them, with gratitude.

I have his 'Certificate of Discharge'

VX3392 PTE
Headquarters 1 Aust. Corps
Australian Imperial Force
Discharged at Royal Park, 2/10/1945
War Badge: R.A.S Badge A96229
Signed: Major H.M. McCluskey

Ernie's rank at discharge was Private.

I have Ernie's Campaign Medals. He did not claim them at the time; he was a modest and self-effacing man. I encouraged him to send for them, when we lived in Wiltshire (1968 to 1990). He did so then.

A friend let him stay in his disused radio station, in Cooktown. Ernie loved it there; he had a baby wallaby for company, who would eat his flour, and nuzzle him awake each morning. He would go down into town, and some days would spend time with (Sir) Russell Drysdale. They swapped sketches – I still have Sir Russell's – a biro sketch of a little girl he was in the street. I have placed it in the care of London Legacy who have had it restored. Ernie painted a nice scene, in oils, from his abode on the hill; there was a mimosa tree in it. The flies kept annoying him, trying to eat the oil paint. Ernie had to arm himself with a good stick, to keep the wild boar away, when he returned up the hill at night.

Ernie spoke of Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne, chiefly. He remembered Scandinavian twin girls, identical, who lived in the same boarding house. They had a habit of pretending to be the other twin. Ernie travelled around a good deal, working for as long in a job, until he had enough money to move on, always renting. Some of the jobs he had – sheet metal worker, shipping clerk. His employer gave him a retired race horse "Greysteel", for his work on a ranch. He loved that horse. He hunted crocodiles and fished for copra.

Ernie longed to be an artist – he worked nights, security guard, in order to study art by day. Under Ernest Neumann, an Austrian art teacher he continued to paint, mostly in oils, for the rest of his life. He gave away any paintings he was never successful in selling. His painting of “The Siege of Tobruk” remained in a Wimbledon art shop, unsold, for many years. He submitted paintings to the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in London, but they were always rejected. He made charcoal sketches of the Nile.

Ernie was very friendly with an actress, whose name was June. She was often to be heard on the radio, in Australia. Her family hoped they would marry, but Ernie would not take that step just after World War 2, Ernie was offered the job of Batman, to a high ranking officer, but he declined. That officer became the Governor General of Australia.

Ernie was a keen race-goer and must have been quite lucky with his bets. He used to buy silk shirts and socks, nice hats and good clothes with the proceeds.

The years went by, and, in 1952, Jean his Niece wrote to say that Emily, who virtually brought him up, was suffering from Angina, and they were worried about her. So Ernie returned to England, enjoying the sea trip once again, but more luxuriously this time, never to go back to Australia. He had the task of discouraging the attentions of various mature ladies en voyage. He always retained fond memories of his life down under, and in the army, despite his experiences.

I could write of our life together, in Surrey, Cornwall and Wiltshire, if anyone would be interested. When we met, Ernie was 51 and I was 25. Ernie died, of chronic bronchitis, in Wiltshire, in 1990. He lives on, in my memory. Please forgive any inaccuracies – it is his life, as he told it to me.