

## **Mr. Eric Abraham, Centenarian Extraordinaire**

by Dr. Leslie Whitaker

Spring, 1998, is the time to celebrate two special events in Brisbane, capital of Queensland, Australia. As with all Australian and New Zealand cities, the end of April is the time to celebrate ANZAC day. However, this spring saw a once-in-the-century celebration for an ANZAC hero of World War One, Mr. Eric Abraham celebrated his 100th birthday on April 20, 1998.

Born at the end of the 19th Century, Mr. Abraham has seen Australia grow from a frontier society, much like the American Wild West, into a modern 20th Century country. A few examples from everyday life can serve to describe the differences between a boy growing up in rural Australia one hundred years ago and today's experiences.

There was no electricity in rural Queensland on the farms where Eric grew up. One of his chores was to tend the oil lamps which served the same function as our light bulbs. The lack of electricity also meant that there was no refrigeration for keeping foods from spoiling. Food spoilage was a very real problem in the hot climate of northern Australia. Each farm family made its own cooler for keeping dairy products like milk, eggs, and butter. There were no electronic sources of entertainment either. No radio, no CDs, no video games, no TV, no movies! However they did have one source of "canned" entertainment, the gramophone. All other entertainment was live.

For live entertainment, people would gather, from 10 to 15 miles away, at a farm with a good sized floor and hold a barn dance. While 10-15 miles may not seem like a long distance in a car, imagine loading the family into a buckboard wagon or picking up your girl friend in a buggy, or (if you were lucky) getting on your saddle horse and riding to the party. All family members were expected to do their share to contribute to the smooth functioning of the house and farm, but when it was time for a party, they all enjoyed these special evenings with their neighbors and friends.

In 1908 in the towns and villages of Queensland, all perishable food stuffs were delivered by the milk man, the meat man, or the Green grocer (vegetables and fruits). The meat man drove an open wagon with beef or sheep carcasses hung from a rack. When he got to a house, the house wife could order any piece she wanted and he would cut it for her then and there. Remember this was long before plastic had been invented, that the village roads were unpaved and dusty, and that horses pulled the wagons. You can imagine the amount of dust, manure, and other impurities which settled on these meats before they got into the home! Careful washing and thorough cooking (often for hours) seems to have solved most problems of contamination.

Eric was really just past boyhood when England entered what was to become the first world war in history. Australia is a member of the British Commonwealth and hence supported England in this war. The war lasted from 1914 to 1918 and engulfed the entire globe. Therefore, even young farm boys in Australia were recruited to fight on the side of

England during a long, cruel conflict. Eric had taken his first job as assistant Post Master in Boonah, Queensland, when the army recruiters and a rousing brass band ignited his youthful patriotism. Eric Abraham joined the 25th Battalion. This group of diggers (soldiers) left Sydney, Australia, on March 31, 1916 to join the 25th Battalion in some of the most famous battles of the World War One, the War to End All Wars.

By his own admission, at 17 years old Eric Abraham, who joined the war as a Private, was "unsophisticated, very unsophisticated"; however, by the completion of his tour of duty, four years later, he was very sophisticated. He has reported several of the incidents which led to this rapid maturation under wartime conditions. The stories he relates can be both humorous and bloody. He was discharged in October, 1919, older, wiser, sophisticated, but not at all hardened or bitter.

After the War, Mr. Abraham returned to Australia where he had a very successful career in government service. Mr. Abraham was working for the Commonwealth government on special assignment in Rockhampton in January, 1940, when Australia entered World War II. He was transferred back to Brisbane, Queensland, to serve on the Price Commission. This was a protected occupation and as such Mr. Abraham was barred from enlisting in the military. Therefore, he was in Brisbane for the duration of the war. He watched Brisbane grow from a small, provincial capital to a city of 1,000,000 seemingly overnight. General Douglas McArthur had his headquarters on the campus of the new University of Queensland in a Brisbane suburb. Mr. and Mrs. Abraham entertained American soldiers for Christmas dinner each year and he remembers them as very well behaved and pleasant young men.

Mr. Abraham is now retired in Chapel Hill, a suburb of Brisbane. For the past 20 years, his close friend and companion, Ms. Beryl Wilson, has been insuring that Eric mend his youthful life-style habits of rich food and wine, while continuing his youthful athletic interests—Eric played a mean game of clay court tennis until he was past 85. He still enjoys a weekly round of golf with Ms. Barbara Wintringham at the local course. Thus Mr. Eric Abraham, Centenarian Extraordinaire, enters his second century sound of mind, body, and spirit. We wish him continued health.

### *Gramophone*

It played a record cylinder shaped rather like a can with both ends cut out. A pattern of holes and raised bumps were made in the wall of this cylinder and it was inserted into a hand-crank machine called a gramophone. When someone turned the handle of the gramophone, metal prongs vibrated when they struck the raised bumps and this music was amplified by a large horn so that people in the room could hear it. When you see a picture of the RCA dog listening to his master's voice he is listening to a gramophone.

### *Homemade Cooler*

The coolers all shared the same basic cooling design. A box frame was built and a cloth made of material Australian's called "hessian" (burlap ) was hung over it. This rig was hung in the shade of a tree near the kitchen. Then a hose was attached to the top of the cooler box and turned to a very slow drip. This dripping water wet the hessian cloth and

the desert breeze evaporated the moisture. The result was a cool interior in which foods were safe from ants, flies, and spoilage.

### *Oil Lamps*

When oil burned, it produced soot which blackened the glass shield around the flame. Keeping this glass clean was a weekly chore best performed by the child or a woman with small hands. Even after the glass was clean, the wick itself (made like a candle wick except wider) had to be trimmed. Otherwise it would burn sooty and the glass cleaning had to be done all over again!

## **Stories From World War One**

by Dr. Leslie Whitaker as told by Eric Abraham

Eric Abraham related several stories from the war. They are intended to give one an idea of what it was like to fight in the first World War. He talked about his "baptism under fire", the last flight of the Red Baron, being a telegraph operator during the Battle of Passendale, a mysterious dead soldier, the human will to survive, and some of the general living conditions.

### Baptism Under Fire

PVT Abraham's baptism under fire occurred in France, on the Somme, a primary battleground for most of the four year conflict. Abraham was a telegrapher and as such was assigned to the Signal Corps and sent to the front lines in France. The first time he heard shell fire close by was his first day in the field. He had been assigned to carry rations to the troops at Sausage Gully. He was carrying a sand bag full of tins and bully beef, while his partner was carrying a dixie (an earthenware dish) of stew. When the nearby Allied guns fired a salvo, the noise was so loud his knees buckled and he fell to the bottom of the trench. A more experienced soldier laughed and explained that it was only their own guns firing; however, he warned that it would get bad when "Fritz took umbrage" (German guns fired back). Abraham reports that the resulting chaos was so great that he does not remember delivering the rations or even returning to his base. The next day, he was very embarrassed until another soldier explained that everyone suffered from the same terror when first under fire. The man said, "Anyone who tells you otherwise is either a liar or wasn't there or both!"

### Last Flight of the Red Baron

Abraham remembers one of the more famous dog fights (aerial combats) from this war: the last flight of the Red Baron. It was 21 April, 1918, around breakfast time when this episode occurred. The 14th Brigade's Signal Company A.I.F. (Australian Imperial Force) was seeing action on the Villas Bretonneaux front on the Somme near the village of Corbie. Dog fights were common in the sky above and the troops paid no particular attention until a cry began, "The Red Baron is up!" Abraham reported: "There was the Red Baron's red tri-plane a few hundred yards away, in full flight, flat out, chasing one of our planes with the red, white and blue roundels on its fuselage. Our chap was hedge hopping (i.e., flying low), weaving right and left, up and down, and the Baron following him in his every movement. In a few seconds, out of the blue, another plane, with red

white and blue roundels, swooped down from the sky, and latched on the tail of the Baron, gave a few bursts from his guns, and the Baron's plane took a nose dive straight to the ground. From all around came cheering, indicating that hundreds of our A. I. F. troops witnessed the demise of the Red Baron. " Abraham has added, on other occasions, to this story, that he thinks how cruel the war must have been to hear a group of men cheering as another fell to his death.

#### Telegraph Operator in the Battle of Passiondale

In the Battle of Passiondale during the latter part of 1917, the 14th Brigade Section of the 5th Division fought in action so heavy that soldiers were on the front line for four days and then relieved for 14 days to recover. Abraham and two others were assigned to handle communications on around the clock shifts. One day, Eric relieved Ray Hawk. Hawk had just stepped outside the pillbox and spoken with a Sergeant when a shell hit at the opening of the pillbox. In the communications pillbox, candles were blown out, papers scattered, and dust covered everything. Abraham rushed to the opening and saw a twelve foot wide shell hole. Hawk and the Sergeant were lying on the rim of the crater. Hawk was dead, but the Sergeant was only unconscious. The Sergeant suffered no long term injuries, but Hawk was dead. They had been within inches of each other when the shell hit. As a result of Hawk's death, Nick Walsh and Abraham had to staff the telegraphy machines 24 hours. Abraham brought his gear from dugout 70 yards away. Walsh decided to wait until the next day. That night, Walsh used Abraham's blankets and slept in the room next to the pillbox. The next day, Walsh went for his gear but couldn't find the dugout. During the night, a shell had landed and destroyed everything. Either or both men would have been dead if they had not had to take on the extra shift and hence been on duty or sleeping at the pillbox because of Hawk's death.

The next day, an officer staggered into the communications pillbox badly shell shocked. Abraham gave him tea and sat him down. The officer gasped out the story of his dugout being hit by a shell. He had fled immediately. On further questioning, it became clear that he had left his servant, Snow, in the collapsed dugout. Men hurried to the dugout and rescued Snow, "a complete mess but grinning like a Cheshire Cat!" How can this happen? Two men in each of two stories with such different outcomes for the members of each pair. Death or Insanity (shell shock) for only one, while the other was unscathed. "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." Quotes Abraham.

#### Mysterious Dead Soldier

The next story concerns a mysterious death. At Retaliation Farm on a quiet afternoon, Abraham went out for a walk. He noticed a German Sausage Balloon (these balloons actually served as observation posts) over the enemy lines, but did not pay much attention to it. On his walk, Abraham found a dead German. This was a first class mystery because there had been no action in the area for some time, Abraham was well behind his own lines, and there was no evidence of the cause of death. The German had no valuables on him. Abraham stopped to think about the situation and that almost proved to be a fatal mistake. The German observer in the balloon called in fire on Eric's position. The first shell, named a Whiz-Bang for a sound it made, landed a short distance away. The second shell landed closer and Abraham made a hasty retreat. That night Abraham and an

intelligence officer returned to the body. No further evidence was discovered to clear up the mystery of the German behind Allied lines or the nature of his death.

### Will to Survive

It was a dark and stormy night, 3:00 am, cold, wet, windy when a wounded soldier staggered into the communication dugout. Abraham was the signaler on duty. He administered what first aid he could, including tea and two aspirin. He dressed the soldier's leg wound with iodine and fresh bandages and sent him on his way to the medical officer's dugout. The man had walked in from a distant trench on a leg wound which was very severe. Abraham never asked how he was gotten shot in the leg in a trench warfare, but he did ask how the man had managed the walk. The wounded soldier replied, "We never know what we can do until we have to."

### Living Conditions

One wartime winter on the Somme, the Allied and the German (Axis) forces fought back and forth to capture, lose, and then recapture the same terrain. At one point the Allied forces returned to the same place they had vacated a month before. The one good thing about this was that they could occupy the same dugouts they had used earlier. The dugout Abraham moved into had a big shell hole just outside the dugout. Such shell holes were useful because they held water and the soldiers used this for washing. This morning the ice was 3 inches thick. Abraham cracked it with his trenching tool and washed up in the cold water. A bit later, he had time to do some washing of clothes, etc., so he then opened hole further to get more water. As he pulled the ice away, he looked down into the water and saw a dead German soldier in bottom of the hole. Such terrible discoveries occurred without warning in a time when men killed one another and moved back and forth across the land in the name of nationalism and freedom.

On a pleasant afternoon, Abraham was out for a walk, crossing a muddy area on board planks called duckboards. He heard an airplane behind him, but didn't pay a lot of attention until he heard the machine gun bullets striking the wooden planks. At that point, he dove off the duckboards and into the mud. The bullets were close enough that the pilot probably thought he had scored a kill. However, Abraham knew that he was just a lucky digger covered in mud.

The next story is a bit humorous from this distant time perspective of 80 years, although it must have been macabre at the time. The soldiers had spent the night inside a tunnel at Tunnel Hill. Abraham reports only that it was a ghastly place. In the morning, the men went to shell hole to wash up. Abraham was met there by laughter from his comrades. They suggested that he have a look in a mirror to see what was so funny. He did and saw that rats had eaten half the hair off his head during the night! Abraham's only comment was that he supposed he could sleep through anything in those days.

The boy, Eric Abraham had enlisted in the Australian Imperial Forces in 1915 at the age of 17 ½. The man, Eric K. Abraham, Sapper #4355, was discharged in October, 1919, older, wiser, sophisticated, but not at all hardened or bitter.