

Parts 01 & 02: Transcription Oral History Interview with Laurie McEwen

SPEAKERS

Laurence McEwen, Megan Spencer

Megan Spencer 00:01

This is an interview with Lawrence McEwen. It is conducted by Megan Spencer on behalf of the Virtual War Memorial Australia on the 8th of November 2020 in Wallaroo, South Australia.

The topics covered are the experiences of Laurie McEwen as corporal of the 3/14th Australian Field Ambulance in Australia and the Pacific South West Area (SWPA) during World War Two from the 21st of October 1941 until the 14th of March 1946, a total of 1606 days in active service.

Laurie McEwen was born in Gawler, South Australia on the 6/10/1920. He was educated at Gawler Secondary School and he studied accountancy thereafter in his work for Chrysler, later Mitsubishi, and became a registered accountant.

His significant postings were in the CMF and in the Second Australian Imperial Force (2AIF) , in the South West Pacific Area and in Australia. Service numbers: S39870 and SX30940. Service medals include the 1939-1945 Star, the Pacific Star, the War Medal 1939-1945 and the Australian Service Medal 1939 - 1945, and his employment status is now happily retired.

So that's your introduction? Does that all sound correct?

Laurence McEwen 01:37

Yes, it's all correct.

Megan Spencer 01:38

All right. Well, let's get into your story Laurie. And first of all I want to say, it's a privilege to meet you and thank you very much for telling me your story -

Laurence McEwen 01:49

- Same.

Megan Spencer 01:50

It's the first time we've seen each other in person. We've spoken a couple of times on the phone.

Laurence McEwen 01:55

Yes.

Megan Spencer 01:56

So, tell us a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up?

Laurence McEwen 02:04

I was born in Gawler. And I grew up at a place called Mingary, which is just this side of - down from Broken Hill. My dad worked on the railway. And we lived there for several years. It was a railway stop, mainly, because the engines had to have water.

We moved from there down to Belalie North, which is just this side of Jamestown. Most of my schooling was done there at Belalie North. And when we got to the stage that we had to have senior education, my dad moved down to Gawler. And all my senior education was done at Gawler. Yeah.

Megan Spencer 03:03

So you moved back where you were born?

Laurence McEwen 03:06

Correct.

Megan Spencer 03:08

And would you mind just telling me for the record the date of your birth again?

Laurence McEwen 03:12

Six - ten - nineteen twenty [06/10/1920].

Megan Spencer 03:15

So you move back to Gawler to do your secondary education. How far did you go in high school?

Laurence McEwen 03:21

I think, ah, we qualified in the intermediate seven subjects I think it was. And then - jobs were scarce in those days - my parents nominated me for a correspondence course with Hemingway and Robinson, for accountancy. And I did all my studies by correspondence - the whole lot. Yeah.

Yeah. Started that off. And of course, when the war come, that was interrupted. Yes.

Megan Spencer 04:05

What was life like for you back in the early days? Was it tough? Or, how would you describe it?

Laurence McEwen 04:12

No [laughs]. We were kids. We enjoyed everything. It wasn't really tough. When we were at Mingary, I think it would have been tough up there, particularly for Mum. I still remember the day they had a big dust storm. You could see it. They used to over-graze in those days until they found out how to manage their properties. And you could see it coming. And I can still - we were all sitting in the front bedroom with Mum. You couldn't see anything out the window across the road or anything, but you could see the dust trickling down in front of you. So it wasn't a 'pleasant' locality, really.

Megan Spencer 05:06

And pretty tiny towns, the first couple of towns you lived in, weren't they?

Laurence McEwen 05:10

Yes, very small towns. Yeah - Mingary there would only be, 1-2-3... 6-7 buildings all together. Yeah. We were up there for several years. Same at Belalie North; Belalie North was larger. That was wheat growing up through there. But the same thing - there wasn't a great number of houses there.

Megan Spencer 05:36

But it sounds like you had a pretty fun childhood - have you got siblings as well?

Laurence McEwen 05:43

Oh, yes. Yeah. Brother Ken. He's passed away. Ken was a Passionist priest; he's passed away. Morris: he's passed away too. And I've got a sister, Maureen. She lives over at Glenelg.

Megan Spencer 06:06

How old is she now? Do you know?

Laurence McEwen 06:08

Oh, she must be ninety I reckon. I don't have much communication with her, but she sent a birthday card for my hundredth birthday. So I'll ring her when I get a moment. Yeah.

Megan Spencer 06:25

So there were four of you kids, is that right?

Laurence McEwen 06:28

Yeah, no, there was another daughter, Thelma. She lives in Canberra, married - went to Canberra when she was very young. I haven't seen her for years. Yeah, Thelma, that's right.

Megan Spencer 06:45

So five children?

Laurence McEwen 06:46

That's correct. Yeah. Yeah.

Megan Spencer 06:49

Running around the dusty paddocks?!

Laurence McEwen 06:51

That's what we used to do. That's what we used to do. Play in the sand. Yes.

Megan Spencer 06:58

Wow! So, do you recall what you finished your studies at the senior college in Gawler?

Laurence McEwen 07:10

Oh, what year? I would have been what, 16, 17 I suppose. So, 16, 17, that would have been 1936 or 1937, yeah.

Megan Spencer 07:26

Just before the war. And when did you go to start working at Chrysler?

Laurence McEwen 07:36

Oh, [in] my senior school I did a commercial course, so I could typewrite, do shorthand... Still, I couldn't get a job and I went to Muirden's College. My parents did all this - but if you went to Muirden's College they guaranteed your job. I was only there three days and got a ring from Mitsubishi - or 'T.J. Richards' as it was in those days. I was interviewed. Yeah, got the job. Seven-and-six a week!

I lasted fortnight. And I went into them and I said, "I've got to get another job," I said. "I'm not making any money at all. I'm running out of cash". So they jumped me up to twelve-and-six! [Laughs] So I stopped with them.

Yes. And we used to travel down from Gawler for several years. All right up until the war.

Megan Spencer 08:46

How long was that trip - that commute - that you did to work?

Laurence McEwen 08:50

Well, we used to catch the train in the morning at half past six. And it took about an hour, hour and a half to get to Adelaide. Then we had to catch a bus out to T.J. Richards over out at Keswick, and that was what, 20 minutes or so.

Megan Spencer 09:10

A pretty long commute each day back and forth...

Laurence McEwen 09:12

Oh, yep, that's right! And in those days, we used to work Saturday mornings as well! So it was, yeah.

Megan Spencer 09:24

So Laurie, the war came along in 1939. Just before we get into how you enlisted; your lovely wife Teresa... Did you meet her around the time you started at work?

Laurence McEwen 09:39

Yes. Yes, they used to have Thursday night or Friday night shopping. And we used to always go down the street because it was, you know, it was quite an event! We - not only us - used to do it, but everybody used to do it. It was great!

And Teresa and a friend used to go down and that's how we met each other. Yeah. In the night. You'd see two good-looking girls there [laughs], you'd say "Hello, hello". Yeah. [Laughter]. That's how - and it started and, oh gee, [I was] friends with her for quite some time before - yeah, that's right - before we started going together.

And, one Saturday morning, I got on my bike - that was our only mode of transport. I used to pay two-and-six a week in Adelaide before I could get it.

But one morning, yeah, on a Saturday morning, that's right, I went over there to see if she was around and she come out over the front fence. And we were talking away. Beautiful lass she was. And I kissed her! [Laughs]

She said, "Oh, you shouldn't have done that!" and ran around the side of the house. I thought, "Crikey, what have I done? What have I done?!" [Laughs]

But she came back. Yes. And since that moment, she's been the only girl in my life.

Megan Spencer 11:36

Wow. So how old were you, do you reckon, when all that happened at the front fence?

Laurence McEwen 11:42

Oh, twenty I reckon. And I was still studying.

Megan Spencer 11:50

And was she [Teresa] working at that time?

Laurence McEwen 11:53

No. Her mother was disabled. She could not use one arm. And Teresa used to look after her. She was with her mother. Yeah, that's right.

Yeah - no! She had work. She used to work in a butcher's shop down the main street in Gawler. She was the champion strawberry picker in South Australia. I don't know whether she worked while I was away at the war, but prior to that, she was home, yeah, helping with her mum.

Megan Spencer 12:32

Right. So 1939 rolls around. And you would have been nineteen [or] twenty around that time. So war breaks out in September of '39: Australia is at war. So what happens around that time? Because you didn't enlist in the CMF until a bit later, did you...

Laurence McEwen 12:52

The war made no difference to us at all. In fact, we didn't know it was on. The only time that we did know it was on [was] when a military band came up to Gawler and paraded in Gawler. And that was really our only and first taste of what the war was about.

Megan Spencer 13:18

Do you think that's strange in hindsight? Because a lot of people talk about the war sort of changing everything as soon as it broke out...

Laurence McEwen 13:26

No, it didn't. No; we were never asked to enroll. Because we were leading -

- you know, when you start work at half past six in the morning and home at half past six at night - and we used to work Saturdays in those days - you had a pretty busy life. But no, the war had no influence on us at all.

Megan Spencer 13:55

You didn't listen to it on any of the news reports on the radio at that time, with your family, or anything like that?

Laurence McEwen 14:00

No. I don't think we even had a radio?! I don't remember. No, no... Yeah, we were we were busy studying, or at work. Yeah. Yeah.

Megan Spencer 14:21

Could you tell us now a little bit about how you came to enlist in the CMF in 1941?

Laurence McEwen 14:30

Yeah, I turned... Ah, 1941, that's right, the sixth of October - I turned 21. I got a letter saying that they wanted me in the CMF. And, the 20th of October I think it was, I was in. Yeah.

Megan Spencer 14:53

How did you feel about the letter and being called up to enlist?

Laurence McEwen 14:58

Great! [Laughs] I thought, "What an adventure!" Yeah. That's what I thought about it in those days, for sure.

Megan Spencer 15:11

Did you enlist with friends?

Laurence McEwen 15:13

No, by myself.

Megan Spencer 15:16

And where did that happen? [And] do you recall what that process was like?

Laurence McEwen 15:20

Yes, we [went] straight down to Warradale, a group of us was formed - I don't think any individual unit was formed at the start. But they taught us to march... Gave us a '303' and taught us to use that and shoot with it. And also taught us to drive a truck.

That's right, that was from the 20th of October. And then the Japanese invaded Pearl Harbour on the seventh of December.

And the next thing, we're on a troop train having Christmas dinner at down Taillem Bend somewhere, right? We didn't know where we're going. We were just on the troop train, a group of us. And - that's right - we were formed as the 3rd Field Ambulance.

And the next thing we're in Sydney, there's a big ocean liner there, the Aquitania, a big four-funnel liner. And a few days later we were in Port Moresby.

Megan Spencer 16:53

That's pretty swift, isn't it -

Laurence McEwen 16:55

- oh sure, yes -

Megan Spencer 16:55

- going from enlisting in the CMF and then up to Moresby? Just before we go up to New Guinea; did you form friends pretty quickly once you joined the CMF?

Laurence McEwen 17:08

Oh, yes, yes. We were in tents. And it was either four of us or six of us I think, in the tents - and you made friends with everybody who was in there. One particular guy, Tommy Phillips, he come from Broken Hill - he was a bit older than what I was - he became a very firm friend. He was with me right through the war.

Megan Spencer 17:39

And afterwards as well?

Laurence McEwen 17:42

No - he was best man at my wedding and I only saw him once after that. He went back home to broken Broken Hill. Yeah, yeah.

Megan Spencer 17:58

And how did you parents and your family and Teresa feel about you joining the CMF at that time?

Laurence McEwen 18:05

I don't know. I do not know. Teresa would have been disappointed for sure. But I don't know. Well, it was the law, what you had to do. And I think that they accepted that. Yeah, for sure.

Megan Spencer 18:25

Laurie, you ended up in the Medical Corps in the Field Ambulance - how did that happen? Did you get to choose what unit you - tell me how that happened?

Laurence McEwen 18:36

I don't know. Whilst we were in the Field Ambulance, we weren't in the medical side of it. We were in the 'other' side where we used to look after the ambulances and the vehicles, and maintain them and guard them, and drive them. We used to drive the doctors around or the staff and so on. So whilst we were in the Medical Unit we were we were not 'medical'. Sure, we looked after them. Yeah, yeah.

Megan Spencer 19:15

I see - well that would explain why they got you to drive trucks as part of your training.

Laurence McEwen 19:20

Yes, yes - yeah, they trained us up for it.

Megan Spencer 19:23

What else did you do in your training?

Laurence McEwen 19:25

Oh, they took us on [to] different places to camouflage us - how you could camouflage yourself. And they took us out once and you had to find your way back home, but that was as a group and that wasn't very difficult.

Megan Spencer 19:48

Was it tough physical training for you?

Laurence McEwen 19:51

Nah, nah... Well we were only young, you see? No...

Megan Spencer 19:55

Was it hard training drills that they put you through?

Laurence McEwen 19:59

No, nope, not really.

Megan Spencer 20:02

Were you fit?

Laurence McEwen 20:03

Oh, yes, yeah, yeah... [Laughs] I think so. I had no troubles anyway.

Megan Spencer 20:12

Did you enjoy training?

Laurence McEwen 20:15

Oh, yes, of course we did - we used to have fun! When you were with a group of guys - had a little corporal fella telling you what you should do and what you shouldn't do - yeah, we used to have a lot of fun for sure. Yeah. [Laughs]

Megan Spencer 20:32

What did you do for fun?

Laurence McEwen 20:35

I couldn't tell you now...

Megan Spencer 20:38

Couldn't - or won't?! [Laughs]

Laurence McEwen 20:40

Oh, I wouldn't necessarily cause it. But when you've got a group of guys like that, and... Tony Myers was his name, that's right, Myers... He was so cocksure of himself! And of course, he was a prime butt for everybody to have a go at him! Yeah. Particularly to ask him, you know, very 'awkward questions' [laughs].

Megan Spencer 21:12

It sounds like there was some good morale in your group?

Laurence McEwen 21:15

There was, great morale. Yeah, there was.

Megan Spencer 21:20

You became Assistant Corporal and then you became a corporal. When did all that happen?

Laurence McEwen 21:25

No, that's ah -

Megan Spencer 21:27

- or was that later?

Laurence McEwen 21:28

That was later. No we were just a group that got up to Moresby, for a start, yeah. Yeah.

End of Part 01

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Start of Part 02 of the Oral History Interview with Laurence McEwen.

Megan Spencer 21:45

So just before we take off up north; you said you joined the CMF, the war effort at that time, because it was "a great adventure". Was there any other reason that you might have joined up? For example, did you have family members who had been in World War 1 or anything like that?

Laurence McEwen 22:07

No, no. The only other reason was the fact that the government called us up. That's the only other reason. No, none of our family were 'army people'. No, that was the only reason. Yeah. [Laughs]

Megan Spencer 22:27

Thank you. That's fine, just curious; everyone's reason for joining is different -

Laurence McEwen 22:33

Well, I can understand myself being a bit thrilled about it. Because we lived up in the bush, just as a family at Mingary - and at Belalie North. And then when we came to Gawler, we weren't able to move around very much because we had no means of transport. We just didn't have the money. And the only way that I got around, ultimately, was, when I got work, I bought a pushbike on 'time payment'. And well I used to pay two-and-six a week for it. And then we could move around.

And that was the first time that we were able to move around to people or go and see things, or do things.

Megan Spencer 23:35

You'd never been interstate?

Laurence McEwen 23:37

Nup, nup, no.

Megan Spencer 23:39

Well it must have been exciting, the prospect of [going away]?

Laurence McEwen 23:45

Yes, it was. You know, I thought, "What an adventure that will be." Yeah. 'Course in our thinking too, we had no knowledge of what war was like. But anyway...

Megan Spencer 24:06

So you're on that train, stopped having your Christmas dinner at Tailem Bend. So you were shipped out on that train, around Christmas time, just a few months after you -

Laurence McEwen 24:16

- yes, Christmas Day it was.

Megan Spencer 24:16

Christmas Day?

Laurence McEwen 24:17

Yeah, 25th of December. Yeah.

Megan Spencer 24:21

What did you have for Christmas dinner on that train? Do you remember that?!

Laurence McEwen 24:25

[Laughs] I don't know. I don't know.

Megan Spencer 24:28

Hopefully something nice?!

Laurence McEwen 24:30

I could not tell you! Well, it was a full troop train. Yeah, it was.

Megan Spencer 24:37

So you're on the train for a day, a day-and-a half, to get to Sydney?

Laurence McEwen 24:41

Yes. Yeah. We must have slept on the train that night. And the next day, we were in Sydney, yeah. And when we got to Sydney, it was straight down to the wharf and we were loaded onto the boat.

I don't know if it was the end of December or early January, because, they were worried about Japanese submarines. And, the troop ships, they went right out to sea to have Navy protection.

Megan Spencer 25:23

So you were escorted, I would think, up to -

Laurence McEwen 25:26

- oh yes. Well, the troop ship, the Aquitania, was a big vessel. [And] it wasn't only the [Field] Ambulance [unit] that was on it. It was the - virtually the initial troops that were going up to Port Moresby.

Yeah, there were a lot of troops on board. I couldn't tell you how many numbers, but gee, there were a lot a lot of soldiers, yeah.

Megan Spencer 25:52

So how did you feel about getting on that troop ship? Do you recall the atmosphere? Do you recall thinking, "Gee, it's getting close now", like, "we actually *are* going to war"?

Laurence McEwen 26:01

No. It was novelty of it. Absolutely, the novelty: being on a big vessel. Yeah, for sure.

[I] still remember Bob Shepherd. He was a fellow that came from the Adelaide Hills - a lot of them were country boys. And when we got on the boat, he said, "I'm feeling sick!" And the boat was moving about a quarter of an inch! [Laughs] Yes, I still remember him, Bob Shepard.

Megan Spencer 26:36

Did you get seasick at all?

Laurence McEwen 26:37

No. Oh - I got squirmy on some of the vessels - not that trip, but coming back home. But I used to go out on the top deck in the fresh air. And you'd be all right.

Megan Spencer 26:56

So how long were you on that ship, do you think, before you got to Moresby? How long was that trip?

Laurence McEwen 27:01

Oh, I don't know. Several days. Yeah.

Megan Spencer 27:05

So you get to Moresby: tell me about that moment.

Laurence McEwen 27:11

Oh, well. The vessel couldn't go into Port Moresby Harbour, so we had to come off in 'lighters', that's right, they took us off to the wharf.

Megan Spencer 27:27

And lighters are smaller vessels for troops to get off?

Laurence McEwen 27:31

Yeah. And then they formed us up in the ranks and marched us straight off as a complete unit up to what we knew as 'The Three Mile'. And at The Three Mile they had a hospital already set up - all the wards were set up. And our accommodation was set up. So we went straight up there, yeah.

Megan Spencer 28:02

And you were in Three Field Ambulance at that time, is that right?

Laurence McEwen 28:05

The Third Field Ambulance, that's right. And there were a lot of fellows that weren't AIF men - they weren't "SX" men - they were called up. And a lot of them were conscientious objectors as well. Yep.

Megan Spencer 28:24

Serving in in the Medical - or the Ambulance Corps?

Laurence McEwen 28:26

In the medical side of it, yes. Yeah, that's right.

Megan Spencer 28:29

So at that time, technically you were still CMF. But then you became AIF - then you became "regular army". Can you tell me about that process? Did they tell you before you left that you were going to be changed over to regular army? Or how did it come about?

Laurence McEwen 28:48

No, no, no; to join the AIF was entirely voluntary. And I don't know what prompted us to do it, really. But Tommy Phillips and I, we talked to it over, and we decided that we'd do it!

The opportunity must have come through the unit somehow, asking for AIF guys... I think that's what started it off. And we both wanted to do that. So that's what we did.

Megan Spencer 29:28

Was any part of that reason, that decision, motivated by wanting to serve once you got there?

Laurence McEwen 29:34

Oh it could be, yeah; yeah for sure. Yeah. Yeah. True.

We enjoyed what we were doing, yeah for sure. We thought we were doing a good job.

Megan Spencer 29:48

So you got to the Field Hospital that was set up - that you were part of - when you first arrived in Moresby. So what kind of work did you do when you first got there?

Laurence McEwen 30:00

Dug a slit trench! [Laughs] That was the first thing that we did! Well, there was a reason for it too: every night - or every other night - you could hear this plane coming across. It used to come across to 'The Seven Mile' - what they used to call 'The Seven Mile'. That was where the big airstrip was.

And this plane would circle around there, circle around there, then he'd come around to The Three Mile where we were... And where we were in The Three Mile, a big valley used to run right up - that's where all the troops were in, through there. And this plane used to come along, quite low, though it was a big Kawasaki Flying Boat. Very slow. And then he'd go into Moresby and he'd circle around and around, looking for targets I guess...

Megan Spencer 31:03

This is a Japanese plane?

Megan Spencer 31:05

Yeah, yeah. Then he'd come back over us. And then he'd go back to The Seven Mile, drop his bomb, and away we'd go. Yep. That used to happen frequently.

End of Part 02 of the Oral History Interview with Laurence McEwen.