

Part 05: Transcription Oral History Interview with Laurie McEwen

SPEAKERS

Laurence McEwen, Megan Spencer

This is Part 05 of the Oral History Interview with Laurence McEwen, recorded on the 8th of November 2020 in Wallaroo, South Australia, conducted by Megan Spencer for the Virtual War Memorial Australia.

Megan Spencer 00:17

Is there anything else you want to say about reflecting on the war and your involvement in it - and Australia's involvement in it?

Laurence McEwen 00:26

No... We were busy doing our own thing, our own chores. And that was it. We did it. Particularly in the last part of the war, I used to be in charge of the canteen. And that was a full time job really, you know - it did, it kept you busy.

Megan Spencer 00:51

So the end of the war comes around. And you were saying before that you don't really have a particular memory of that moment when they told you war was over...

Laurence McEwen 01:02

Yeah, well everyone knew, it was all broadcast. Yeah, for sure. Yeah.

Megan Spencer 01:08

Was there a sense of relief that it was over?

Laurence McEwen 01:11

Oh, yes. Yeah. Thank goodness, we can go home now!

Megan Spencer 01:17

That was the first thing you thought?

Laurence McEwen 01:18

That's dead right! That's dead right.

Megan Spencer 01:21

But it was a while before you went home, wasn't it?

Laurence McEwen 01:24

Oh yeah - months! Oh, well, they had to clean up!

You see at Finschaven, Wewak, was the area where the Japs had really got themselves entrenched.

And there were quadruple the casualties there than what they were along the whole Kokoda Trail! That was very, very fierce fighting. They were embedded - they had just virtually had to be dug out! Because they'd been there for years, you see.

And also, the other thing I remember about the war, was the Coral Sea Battle. On that particular day, aeroplanes flew over of our camp all day long, nonstop. And we didn't know the results at the time, but I've learned since, that they sunk eight or nine Japanese transports. And they had the invading force on them.

Megan Spencer 02:39

So these aeroplanes you could see were Allied aeroplanes, is that right?

Laurence McEwen 02:43

Yes. Yep. That's right. They were going all day! All day long.

Megan Spencer 02:48

Was it noisy? Could you hear them?

Laurence McEwen 02:50

Oh, yes, you could hear them, see them, yep. Mainly bombers, Boston Bombers mainly. Yes, but it paid results. They sunk ships, in fact, they were criticised for shooting troops in the water.

Megan Spencer 03:10

The Allies were?

Laurence McEwen 03:12

Yeah, well, it was an invading force. And they stopped 'em! Yeah. That really was a real turning point of the war I reckon.

Megan Spencer 03:23

Did you yourself experience the blowback from that, like, the aftermath of that? Were there more people - more Australian soldiers that you were going out in the field ambulances, to pick up?

Laurence McEwen 03:38

No, no... I think if they had fellows that - well, it used to be apart from us almost. You know, patients could be brought up in cars or [by] other people, even their own ambulances. And we weren't part of that. We were looking after the transport side of our own unit. Yeah.

Megan Spencer 04:11

So when you were still in New Guinea after the war was over, did you have anything to do with transporting Australian ex-prisoners of war at that time?

Laurence McEwen 04:25

No, no, there were no ex-prisoners of war. Not Australian, none there. No, the only transporting I did of - they weren't prisoners - you'd get an ambulance full, and take them down to the plane... They were 'gaga'. Their mind was gone.

Megan Spencer 04:53
So people who'd had war -

Laurence McEwen 04:56
- experience. Yes. Yeah, they were -

Megan Spencer 05:01
- it wasn't called PTSD in those days was it? It was called something else, like war -

Laurence McEwen 05:05
- yeah, I don't know what it was. And we were warned. You had to - whilst you were in charge them in your unit, waiting to get [them] on the plane and so on, they said, "Watch your unit all the time. Because they're likely to do anything". They'd loosen nuts, or - they'd do anything. They weren't normal.

Megan Spencer 05:32
So these were Australian troops who'd had -

Laurence McEwen 05:35
- Aussie troops -

Megan Spencer 05:35
- Aussie troops who'd had real emotional problems during warfare, or as a result of their warfare, is that right?

Laurence McEwen 05:43
Yeah. Mmm, yeah.

Megan Spencer 05:45
So where were they taken? Those fellows?

Laurence McEwen 05:48
They were taken back to probably Queensland somewhere, I would think. Those guys would have to have special treatment. And most of them as I know it, got well.

Megan Spencer 06:05
They would have got well?

Laurence McEwen 06:06
Yes.

Megan Spencer 06:07
Yeah, they probably had just had enough?

Laurence McEwen 06:09

Yes, well, you know, it affected different people [in] different ways. We used - in the ambulance side of it - they had a little fella, and it got to him. Every day he'd have his gas mask on, he'd have his steel helmet on. And I think the air raids used to get to him. Because, as soon as an air raid [happens], the normal thing is straight into your trench, because you never know where a plane is, or what would happen. And that guy got worse and worse and worse. They had to ship him back to Australia.

He just could not - it got to him. Yeah.

Megan Spencer 06:54

So we'll call it 'war stress', the stress of warfare...

Laurence McEwen 06:56

Yep, you're dead right! Yes. Yes, that is dead right. You must control yourself. There's no doubt about that. Yeah.

Megan Spencer 07:12

And how did *you* manage to do that? Because you would have felt the fear as well I would imagine?

Laurence McEwen 07:17

My religion, my faith. I believe that God would take me when he wanted me.

Megan Spencer 07:25

And you're still here [laughs] - that's amazing, isn't it?!

Laurence McEwen 07:29

Yes! [Laughs]

Megan Spencer 07:30

To tell the tale!

Laurence McEwen 07:31

Yeah, maybe, you never know! You see? You never know. Isn't that funny? You wouldn't believe how appropriate that remark is. Because, here last Tuesday, when I fell, I scored my elbows dreadfully...

When we were at Mingary - I must have been 5,6,7,8 years old - I don't remember what age. But my job was that: Mum used to milk the cow, and when she finished milking the cow, I used to open the gate, take it into the next door neighbour's, and let it water, because you couldn't get water anywhere else.

And the water was in a well, and in those days it was built up like a big round 'cupula' and had a bit of a door thing or something in the centre where they could maintain the well. And on this particular day, the cow darted her way across to the left - she was after the vegetable garden. I knew that couldn't happen! I ran straight across this cupula [and] went through it.

All I remember is looking down [at] the black glistening water - don't ask me how I got out of it, how I got up! All I remember is, that night I had to sleep with Mum.

Now, I reckon I must have been hanging like this -

Megan Spencer 09:25
- elbows out!

Laurence McEwen 09:26
Elbows... Coincidence? Coincidental?! Now you can make up your mind! [Laughs]

Megan Spencer 09:35
You've landed on your elbows again!

Laurence McEwen 09:37
Yes, yes, that's right. Yeah. I've got not the slightest recollection of how I got [out]. All I remember: I can still see that black glistening water here -

Megan Spencer 09:53
- getting out of the well...

Laurence McEwen 09:54
Yeah, and how I got up or what happened, I do not know. Yeah. So there you are.

Megan Spencer 10:05
So you remained in the Army until March 1946. You would have been part of the big clean up in New Guinea. But you did come back to Australia after that, didn't you?

Laurence McEwen 10:18
Yes, yes, yes...

Megan Spencer 10:19
Do you remember where you came in and about what time? Or at least where you went back to?

Laurence McEwen 10:26
No, I don't. Might have been through to Sydney! We come in through Sydney once.

Megan Spencer 10:33
I've got it here actually... [consults notes]

Laurence McEwen 10:35
I don't know...

Megan Spencer 10:36
... It was Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia. Yeah.

Laurence McEwen 10:47

I don't remember. I don't remember.

Megan Spencer 10:50

And were you just as busy cleaning up after the war effort?

Laurence McEwen 10:54

Oh, yes. We still had the hospital running. Yeah, right up until the - there was a lot of troops up there.

Megan Spencer 11:03

In New Guinea?

Laurence McEwen 11:04

Yes, up around Finschaven. Yeah. So that was a big operation. We lost something like 50,000 men up there! There was dreadful, dreadful fighting. Yeah. So, there was - there was still a lot of troops there.

Megan Spencer 11:25

Did you lose any members of your unit at all during the raids or anything like that?

Laurence McEwen 11:32

No. We only lost one guy that I know of, and that was in the initial stages when we're going up to establish Koitaki. You had to go across the Laloki River, which was a pretty fast flowing river. You had to go across. One of the boys from the ambulance side of it, he was going across and all of a sudden he disappeared. We think he must have been hit by a log or something. But we lost him.

Megan Spencer 12:13

In the river?

Laurence McEwen 12:14

Yeah. That was the only guy that we lost, that I know of.

Megan Spencer 12:22

Is there anything else that sticks out in your mind about your time in New Guinea and during the war, that you want to tell me about? That we haven't covered so far?

Laurence McEwen 12:32

No, I think we've covered most of it. Most of the time we were conscientious doing our job. And the job used to vary a lot, too. Because the 'docs' or the Colonel - you'd never know when you'd be called on to drive them. Your unit - and all your cobbles were there - and you had to do your own washing?![Laughs] Oh, yeah, that's right. Yes!

Megan Spencer 13:17

So do you recall when you came back to Australia at all? Do you remember thinking, "I'm going home?"

Laurence McEwen 13:23

Oh, no. Not really. I don't. All I remember is the day that I passed in my rifle. And then I was discharged, yeah.

Megan Spencer 13:36

That was right at the end of your service...

Laurence McEwen 13:38

Right at the very end, yeah.

Megan Spencer 13:40

So was it a bit of a blur coming home?

Laurence McEwen 13:43

No, I don't remember.

Megan Spencer 13:46

So I think you came back to Queensland and stayed there for a bit? And then you went to New South Wales for a bit.

Laurence McEwen 13:52

Yeah.

Megan Spencer 13:52

Do you recall what you were doing there, in either of those places?

Laurence McEwen 13:56

Yeah, we probably - we must have stopped at Sydney. Because Tommy and I wanted to walk over the Sydney Harbour Bridge, which we did. And we were too late to get back to camp. And a couple of MP police were looking at us. [Laughs] So we turned around and walked into the railway station. It was an underground station right near the Bridge there somewhere, going for our lives. And it was quite a long walk. And the cops evidently knew it because they didn't trouble to follow us!

Well, we waited for some while, come out: thank goodness the cops were gone.

Megan Spencer 14:51

So you missed curfew, did you?

Laurence McEwen 14:52

Oh, sure. Yeah, we did.

Megan Spencer 14:55

Did you get written up for that?

Laurence McEwen 14:57

No, no. No, we got back to camp - I don't know how we got back to camp. We got back - no, there was no curfew on! That's right. That was in Sydney - Sydney Showgrounds! When we got back, we just rolled into bed. Yep. [Laughs] Yes.

Megan Spencer 15:23

And at that stage were you looking forward to seeing your family and Teresa? Were you in contact with them at all?

Laurence McEwen 15:32

I don't know. I don't remember ringing them. No, I couldn't ring Teresa - I couldn't ring my parents: none of them were on the phone! And for sure we didn't send a telegram [either].

Megan Spencer 15:46

So how did you get home then? Obviously, you would have taken a train back to South Australia. So can you remember that final part of your service at all?

Laurence McEwen 15:56

No, no...

Megan Spencer 15:58

Did you have anyone to meet you at the station at all?

Laurence McEwen 16:01

No. No, they dropped us off at Adelaide. And we caught the train from Adelaide home to Gawler. That's right. Got home.

Laurence McEwen 16:14

See, when I got home: my brother Ken is not there. He's a Passionist priest in New Zealand.

Thelma, the oldest daughter, she's in Canberra as a typist.

Maureen was there - she wasn't home. I think she was married. She was a hairdresser.

So there was no one home except Mum and Morris, the youngest one of the lot, yeah. And he was working in town somewhere at that time.

Megan Spencer 16:52

So when you got home to your house -

Laurence McEwen 16:55

- yes -

Megan Spencer 16:55

- was it just your mum who was there?

Laurence McEwen 16:58

Yep. Yeah.

Megan Spencer 16:59

And was that a surprise for her?

Laurence McEwen 17:01

Oh, yes, of course it was. You know, when I left, they were *all* there! And you go back, *no one's* there! And Dad, he was still working on the railway. And he used to do 8-hour shift work, rotating shifts. And I forget whether he was home or not.

All I remember was, I used to buy tobacco whenever I could, in the canteen. It used to be in tins. Beautiful, beautiful tobacco - or I thought it was in those days. I used to smoke. And I always used to buy a tin of it whenever I could. It was always rationed. You could only ever get one or two tins, you know. And that was the maximum. And I saved a couple of dozen of them, for Dad. So when I got home, that was his present.

Megan Spencer 18:04

Did you get anything for your mum?

Laurence McEwen 18:05

No. No, never, never thought of it. Well you see, there's a lot of those things in life that you learn, but, you don't learn them in the army! Your life there is different altogether. So you do miss social life or social things for four-and-a-half years. There's no doubt whatsoever about that! And that is a big part of your life, particularly at that age. Yeah.

You don't realise it yourself, because you've never experienced these other things - giving birthday presents and so on, that kind of thing. Oh, you didn't. It wasn't part of your life - never had been!

Megan Spencer 19:02

So how did you feel about leaving the army?

Laurence McEwen 19:07

Happy! [Laughs]

Megan Spencer 19:09

Say that again for me?!

Laurence McEwen 19:11

Happy! Because as soon as I made peace with Mum and so on, "I'm going over to see Teresa!" And that was it. I grabbed her. Yeah!

Megan Spencer 19:24

So that's the first week you were back from being out of the army?

Laurence McEwen 19:28

Yeah. And we were married, oh, as quickly as we could, then. Because we both wanted to get married. And fortunately, her mother didn't want her to leave home. She wanted to still be cared for. And I was agreeable to that. So we live with her mother, oh - we lived with her mother for years! That's the way it started. And it worked well. We had two or three children when we were with her mother.

And then we moved into our own house in Kelmscott. That's right, we moved down there - and we took her with us! And her husband - he was due to retire. When he retired, we took him down - we looked after him as well. Yeah. And that was - they were lovely, lovely people. They were. We all got on well together. Lived as a complete family. Yes.

And then, of course, it was work - work at Chrysler.

Megan Spencer 20:51

So you went back to your job, because you'd also done some more study while you were in the army. So you would have progressed a bit in your accountancy, and then you went back there. And did you do the same job again?

Laurence McEwen 21:03

Virtually the same job. Yes. That was the costing side of things, because they had a big press shop. And they used to manufacture the dyes, and had machinery to trim all the dyes up. They were getting into quite a big organisation. And then I was merely a cost clerk.

Laurence McEwen 21:36

And I kept studying and used to advise them; they knew I was studying. And a job come up in the accounting section. We used to have three machine operators - three women operating machines who used to record all the detail. And that detail used to go into the accountant, who used to do the monthly accounts. And reconcile - you [were] virtually running two accounts all the time. One was 'cost control' and the other was 'cost account control'.

Laurence McEwen 22:23

And the cost account control used to be all the manufacturing side of it. So come at the end of the month, you've paid so much wages over there. And the other part of it had to agree with it. And that was the accountant's job. So I started on that as the accountant. That's right. And I must have been pretty well qualified by then. I know I only had two subjects to do when I come back after the war. Yeah, that's right.

Megan Spencer 23:00

So Laurie, what was life like after the war for you? Did it take long for you to adjust to coming home? Did you have any issues to deal with? How did you feel about coming back home?

Laurence McEwen 23:14

Oh, I was glad to get back home. The biggest issue was to get married to Teresa. Once we made that decision - Tommy Phillips was my best man - once we made that decision, we settled down.

And okay, I settled into the job at Chrysler. It wasn't a high paying job at that stage either. But, everything worked right. And we were quite happy - had a marvelous life. Yeah.

Megan Spencer 23:50

So that was the main thing for you - you wanted to come home, be with her and pick up from where you'd left off?

Laurence McEwen 23:56

Yep. Yep. That's just what we did.

Megan Spencer 23:59

And you did that?

Laurence McEwen 24:00

We did that. Yeah. We did that.

Megan Spencer 24:02

Did you do things like commemoration? Was marching in ANZAC Day parades part of this or joining RSLs and that kind of thing when you first got back from the war?

Laurence McEwen 24:13

I joined the RSL. But I never went to any of the marches or the parades. Because we were living at Gawler; the parades were in Adelaide. And we were busy people because our children started to come along. And that was our whole life, really. And it was the same when we moved from there and went down to Kelmscott.

What happened there? We could never get away for a holiday because there wasn't a great deal of money around. And we had Teresa's mum and dad with us. Her dad never used to be home much. He used to be a 'ganger' right down the southeast on the roads.

And we bought a car. I built a six-by-four trailer. Put a top on it. We bought a tent and a stove, dumped all the kids and everything in the car and had our holiday! Yeah, every weekend - any long weekend - we used to come up to the Northern Beaches and go crabbing. And that was the only way Teresa and I could get away together. And we did that, that was very successful.

We did that for years, we took the kids and travelled all over the place: down to Mt. Gambier, Victoria, up here...

Megan Spencer 25:56

So Laurie, did you talk much about your experiences in the war after you got back?

Laurence McEwen 26:00

No. I don't even talk - I've talked more to you about my war experiences than anyone.

One day when we were the Wallaroo RSL - we were out the back, it was a big table and there must've been eight or nine of us out there. And we were only out there because I was out there with Mark, my son; he used to smoke.

And sitting on the end of the table, there was a lady and the husband. I didn't know them. Down the other end of the table, there was a fella there that was, "Yeah, I was there. Yeah, yeah, I did this..." He was rating all his war experiences.

Megan Spencer 26:53

In World War 2?

Laurence McEwen 26:54

No, it was later than that - Vietnam or something like that. And the guy sitting next there, he had tears streaming down his face. And the girl, she said, "God, he can't he can't take it. We'll have to go home".

So, everybody at war has had a different experience: some much, much worse than others. So I don't, I never - if I talk about my war experiences, it's not the bad parts of it. Because I would hate to do that to guy! Absolutely hate it.

Megan Spencer 27:42

How do you think you were when you got back? Do you think you'd been adversely affected by what you'd seen and been through it at all?

Laurence McEwen 27:50

No, no, no, we were in touch with everything that we did. We knew what we're doing. We did it properly. They were unusual things that we did, unusual experiences - dangerous too at times, there's no doubt about that! Hard rations for months and months... And things you remember... A fresh meat boat'd come in, maybe once every three months! You'd get one meal of fresh meat. And the next meal, you get fresh lamb's kidneys. And I used to hate the damn things!

Megan Spencer 28:35

"Lamb's Fry"!

Laurence McEwen 28:36

Lambs Fry! I used to hate it! Yeah. Then you'd get three meals of Lambs Fry - yeah, I used to hate it. I used to like the gravy - that's all I used to [like], yeah.

But no, no, we were in control of ourselves, knew what we're doing. Yeah, no, it was an experience in a lot of ways. There's no doubt about it.

Megan Spencer 29:05

It's not an experience that you regret at all?

Laurence McEwen 29:07

Ah no, no, no... In a way, I don't think you can regret it. You can look back and say [if it had] never happened, "I would have done certain things with my life," or "achieved more". And you could have achieved more, too... If I'd done my studies much more quickly - and I was only twenty-one - [the] opportunities were there...

But no, you couldn't regret it. You couldn't, no. No way. Perhaps that's why I say, "I don't like war", or, "it's a waste of time". And a lot of it is, I suppose.

Megan Spencer 29:56

Do you think World War 2, your experiences in it, helped make you the person that you are today?

Laurence McEwen 30:04

Oh, I don't know. I've always had certain principles, certain beliefs. And I've never deviated from them. If they've ever been criticised or anything I've held up to them. I have.

And there are occasions in your life... They came to me after I was retired from Chrysler. Before I got out of Chrysler, I got into the computer game. They wanted computer people. So yours truly said, "Yep, an advancement". [Laughs] Yeah, that's right.

So I became a computer - I designed the system, operated, introduced the system, so on... And I finished up - I used to be in charge of the keypunch operators in those days. We had about a dozen of them I think it was! And our computer used to run 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Or, there was only one spare shift left.

That's right, and then after [you] retired - when our 'super' matured they got rid of you at Chrysler. So we took a holiday, just did nothing for 12 months. Then I started work again and I used to go into businesses that were in trouble. And with the knowledge that I had with the costing and reconciling to the general accounts and so on, I was ideal for sorting out anybody that was in trouble.

And I did that for, hell, it must [have been for] four or five, six years [for] different people.

Megan Spencer 32:19

Sounds like being in the Field Ambulance business!

Laurence McEwen 32:21

[Laughs] Yeah, that's right.

Megan Spencer 32:23

Do you think the war taught you things that you took home with you, to the rest of your life?

Laurence McEwen 32:30

Oh, it must have; yes, it must have, there's no doubt about that. I can't think of specific things, but it must have. Well, you congregated with different guys, talked about different things. You met them in different times. It did, yeah.

There's a lot of things that you don't remember. For instance, when we were at Aitepe, I had to go on a vessel - they wanted some supplies, medical supplies, further down the coast. And I had to go on that, down the coast, talk to the crew and so on, on the way down. Landed the stuff on a beach somewhere - I don't know where the Japs were, or [where they] weren't - but the troops were there. Landed the supplies and then come back. So that was a trip that was unusual, fraught with a certain amount of danger.

But you know... Really, you don't take notice of danger. What's the use of taking notice of it? You don't worry about it. Otherwise you'd be a nervous wreck! Well, you know, you see certain planes up in the air, not far away... You don't know where they're gonna drop the bombs. You know? It is an experience [laughs], there's no doubt about it. Yeah it was. Well, we used to make the most of it, for sure, we did.

And funny things happened! We called down to a Yankee camp with the ambulance for some reason. We were to meet somebody there. And sure, we pulled up there. Started to talk to a couple of fellas. Next minute, the air raid siren goes! Oh, God! You should've seen the Yanks run everywhere! [Laughs]

Megan Spencer 34:52
What did you do?!

Laurence McEwen 34:53
We looked at one another and laughed! Because we'd been though so many raids, it'd finish up you never used to worry about them, unless you could hear planes coming, or something like that. So we just sat there, talking! [Laughs] I don't know what the Yanks thought of us! Probably thought, "Mad bloody Australians!" [Laughs]

Laurence McEwen 35:18
But anyway, things like that happened all the time. It was a different life. And it was a good life. There's no doubt about it, it was a good life. Yeah... [I] learned to play chess up there.

Megan Spencer 35:32
To play chess?

Laurence McEwen 35:33
Yeah, chess, learned to play chess, that's right. None of the guys in the troop could beat me. We got one of the doctors who was supposed to be very very good at chess. "Well get him down". They did. What d'you know? 'L.J.' did him!

Megan Spencer 35:57
"L. J. McEwen, chess champion"!

Laurence McEwen 35:59
Yeah. So you know, there are bright spots and so on. We did, we lived a good life. Yeah. It wasn't an oppressive life or downtrodden life, no. No, we always had something going. Yeah.

Well, that's natural in a group of a group of fellows. We used to drive the luggage, the baggage [garbage] truck, with all the refuse in it. Every morning - we had an old utility, 'Bessie' we used to call her - and that was a daily chore. I had to drive the rubbish over to the tip. The other guys used to sort the rubbish out and look after it and so on.

Laurence McEwen 36:50

You were... You were occupied. Yeah. Yeah.

End of Part 05 of the Oral History Interview with Laurence McEwen.