

A SHORT RESUMÉ
OF THE
EARLY DAYS
OF THE
WOLLONGONG
SUB-BRANCH
OF THE
R.S. & S.I.L.

AUGUST 1940

A short resume of the
Work, Achievements, and History
of the
Early Days
of the WOLLONGONG SUB-BRANCH
OF THE
RETURNED SOLDIERS & SAILORS IMPERIAL LEAGUE
OF AUSTRALIA.

By
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A. BRIEF HISTORY
OF
THE WOLLONGONG SUB-BRANCH
OF.
THE RETURNED SOLDIERS & SAILORS IMPERIAL LEAGUE
OF AUSTRALIA.

In writing a brief history of the early days of the above Sub-branch, may I state that I don't think there is another branch of the R. S. S. I. L. in this State, or for that, in the Commonwealth of Australia which has history (as far as Soldiers matters are concerned) as has this branch.

A history which any organisation should feel very proud of. To be able to state that this sub-branch is the oldest in the State is something out of the ordinary, but to be able to say that right from the conception of Soldier Organisations this branch has had one long continuous run right through the years, is tribute to a happy and Glorious reign indeed.

This sub-branch with its enviable position should be one that all soldier residents of this town should be proud to be a member of.

In the early days of the War a few of the boys had returned home, and a branch of the first soldier organisation was formed. This was the old R. S. Association, Wollongong being one of its few branches.

It was not long before this Association ceased to function and closed down.

But not so with Wollongong Branch who, with its few members decided to keep going as an organisation of its own, knowing that the time would come again when another Association would be formed. So you see that when it did happen, and the present League was formed Wollongong was ready to affiliate and was the first sub-branch of this League which is the official organisation to-day. So Wollongong sub-branch has ever since without one break been in active service. It is certainly a distinction to be proud of.

It was in March 1918 I was asked to attend a meeting at the Town Hall one Saturday afternoon, there being five all told, those present were, J.S. Kelly, Ted Powell, President and Secretary, and our late beloved Patron Bill Cochrane, O.B.E. and Geo Graham, (Fluffy).

When I became secretary the Branch included returned men from Port Kembla, Corrimal and Dapto, and meetings were held alternately at these centres every month and as sufficient men returned to these towns sub-branches were formed and Wollongong has the distinction of being proud parent to Port Kembla, Corrimal, Austinmer, Bulli, Dapto Kiama and Nowra.

As time went on and the boys began to return in greater numbers the importance of the branch became more noticeable not only with the branch's activities but in a civic way as well and was always represented at all important functions in connection with the town.

We held our monthly meetings in the Mayor's Room, Town Hall and the Committee met at the "DUG OUT" a shop in

Lower Crown Street. Meetings were so largely attended we were soon forced to find larger quarters. The committee of the School of Arts kindly came to our assistance with the use of the lecture hall and that was our home for a good many months. When it was found that the membership was increasing to such an extent and the work of the branch was becoming more heavy it was imperative that a permanent office or Headquarters would soon have to be found. It was then that the shop which soon became known as the "Dug Out" became the first home for the Returned Men, a place where they could come and go when they liked and bring their troubles and grievances which were many, to be rectified.

Our monthly meetings were still being held in the School of Arts but as the membership still increased it soon became evident that a club room of our own would soon have to be found.

It was not long before our hopes of a club room or hall were soaring skywards.

The Wollongong Citizens Memorial Committee had asked us for our suggestion as to a Memorial and of course naturally we were strong for Club rooms or Memorial Hall, and at the citizens meetings held we moved to that effect but unfortunately we were not strong enough and the Hall idea was defeated, and that was that. We still had the "Dug Out".

An amusing incident happened at that meeting which is worth remembering. A speaker in opposition to our motion for a Memorial Hall remarked that it would be useless to

build as a Memorial a hall which in a few years time interest would wane with the returned men and the Hall if built would probably fall into hands of some undesirable body or organisation. All the soldiers needed was a place where their meetings could be held a drawing room or some other room he suggested.

It would be a pleasure to be able to take that same gentleman over the present palatial Memorial Hall which now stands and point out the wonderful interest still maintained after so long a time. Nothing has "waned" not even a keened desire to do some thing better as the years go by.

I felt I should mention this because when you look at the fine hall standing up in all its glory it seems as if in defiance to that lake of enthusiasm which was suggested.

However we still had our hopes of getting somewhere and as the work of the Branch still increased our energy to find ways and means to procure a hall also increased.

The opportunity came again, this time from the most unlikely place.

The Wollongong Branch of the Red Cross Society were the donors of a billiard table to the Bomaderry Convalescent Home and as the Repatriation Dept had decided on closing the Home they gave the donors the right of disposing of the different articles. The Society wrote and asked us would we accept the billiard table which we willingly did. Here was our chance, it was certainly a great chance and gratefully

accepted.

The conditions were that we should go and get it, and get it we did, which is a story in its self. However the table and fittings arrived safely in Wollongong and were stored for the time. That was the real gift which started us in earnest to look for somewhere to erect it. We got in touch with Mr Powell, District Engineer, Public Works who was a good friend to all returned men and through his efforts we had the promise of a part of the old Public Works building in Market Street. Unfortunately the rooms available were not the size to carry a billiard table. This was a hard blow to us but one that we were soon over because we next had the offer of two rooms in Crown Street, over Bevan & Sons and this time we were at last in the first Club rooms of the Wollongong Branch, and it was certainly a most interesting time while we were housed there. Of course bad times came as well as the good.

However the time came when it was found necessary to enlarge on the two rooms and two more were taken over to accommodate the large increase in members, an up to date library was formed wireless and piano were installed and everything done to make the club rooms a success which would carry it along a career of many years.

Then in 1928 a move was made to the Central Chambers where much larger accommodation were made. It was at this time that the citizens were asked to join in and a Soldiers Club was formed. This was needed as the heavy financial burden in taking over these new premises would be great.

This club proved to be a very good asset, and now we come to the crowning joy of all, ~~as~~ at last the long wished for Memorial Hall of our own was built, and what a magnificent achievement, for in 1935 the sub-branch moved into its own home and one that will stand for many years as a monument to the reward of a wonderful career. And so ends the history of the advance of the club rooms from the humble room in the "Dug Out" to this wonderful building in 20 years.

Now for some early work of the sub-branch.

As you know the first activities of the Branch has played a very important part in the success of the League not only in Wollongong but in other parts of the State as well.

Anzac Sunday, I think I would be safe in saying originated with the sub-branch. In 1917 we decided to commemorate the Landing and as most of the Returned Men were working around the district we decided to hold a service on the nearest Sunday to the 25th. This was held on the Show Ground and was the first service of its kind to be held, of course reference was made in the churches and in some churches services were held but the first public service was held by this sub-branch. As we were not sure of the weather being fine for holding the service in the open air we decided on the Town Hall. In these days the parade of Returned men were drawn from the district, buses being engaged to bring the boys in from Pt Kembla and Austinmer to Dapto. With the aid of the other patriotic bodies, the Town Band Corrimal and the Salvation Army hands you will

Understand that the march was some event and attracted a much larger crowd than it does to-day, although it is wonderful to know that these services are still held on the nearest Sunday despite the big parade now being held in Sydney each Anzac Day. /

From the Town Hall a move was made to the Crown Theatre where a larger hall was necessary to accommodate the larger crowds attending the service. A service was also held on the day its self and a concert at night in aid of the Distressed Widows Fund. The welcome home of the boys as they returned home was another feature of the branches' work and hardly one man failed to receive the welcome on the night of his return. Every night and every train was met and with the bands, and motor cars and the boys marching we gave them a great welcome. Some nights as many as three trains were met and this I can say was one of the most enthusiastic events of the branch. The following incident is worth telling, During the "Flu" epidemic the branch was notified that all "welcome homes" had to be discontinued while the epidemic was on. We could not quite see why the welcomes were any more dangerous than picture shows and other entertainments and as our welcomes were carried out in open air we decided to carry on under threat of prosecution and the next we held were much greater than any before, showing the citizens were behind us in giving the boys the proper welcome. A good many of the boys will remember these welcome homes.

Visits to other sub-branches were also organised and were always popular. These started as early as 1919 when the first visit from a sub-branch was made by the Balmain Branch who met our members in a game of cricket on the Show Ground, and other visits were made by the Ryde, Helensburg, Pt Kembla Kiama and many others.

The branch decided on providing sport for their members. We entered a team in the local 1st Grade League Football Competition and although for two years were not successful as a winning side they did gain the honour of being the best dressed team in the competition, their khaki jerseys with the red rising sun and khaki shorts with socks to match were certainly an attraction. A team entered in the 2nd Grade Cricket Competition were also very much appreciated. A Soccer team was also entered. This idea of providing sport for members was a good one. It gave them a chance of taking part in organised sport which was otherwise debarred them, and brought the members together a good deal. Dancing was also indulged in a lot and in 1920 I think, we held our first Ball and this is still a feature which I am pleased to see after so many years as popular as ever. The Annual Dinners is another. The first Dinner I should say, was held in the Wellongong Hotel and although only a few returned men attended (for only a few had returned then) it was a success and it was decided to make it an annual affair. The next couple were held in the School of Arts but owing to such a large muster on the third occasion

It was necessary to engage the Town Hall. This was easily the most popular event of the year and this tells me that we are about to celebrate the 20th Dinner and that means a wonderful record of not one year missed in 20 years.

Another very popular affair which took place every Anzac afternoon was the motor excursion which was arranged by your late patron as his treat to the boys. As many as 30 and 40 carloads would leave the Town Hall crowded with Diggers for an afternoon's outing. The arrangements for Armistice Day, or I should say, week, for it was a week's celebrating of course, were taken over by the branch. Two processions a day were held. One day we held three. A difference occurred over the time of the official procession we had already held two, so what was another? We ended up on the Show Ground with a huge bonfire that took nearly a week to build. It was some fire.

The "Dug Out" was our Head Office at the time and was open both day and all night for arrangements to be made.

The branch was always represented on all soldiers affairs and on many civic committees as well. The sub-branch was always recognised and invitations were received on all important occasions. A notable event in the early history of the branch was the visit of the Hon W.M. Hughes, Prime Minister in 1921. The controversy was running high over the means of paying the soldiers' gratuity.

Mr Hughes was here to open his campaign and he

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consented to explain the payment of the gratuity next day if we could muster the Diggers. Of course as word had to be sent to all the districts in so short a time it took some doing. However it was done and a large meeting was held in the School of Arts where Mr Hughes explained the scheme. This was the first occasion, and was a proud one for the branch as even Members of Parliament, Press, etc, did not know themselves what form it should take.

Mr Hughes was met on his arrival in Wollongong by the Diggers and escorted to the Town Hall.

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that at most of the activities of early days are still being carried on with the same energy and untiring enthusiasm after so long and it is a wonderful fact that the branch, 20 years after its formation still holds the proud position of being one of the leading branches in the State and the most popular.

The important aim of the League is the welfare of the soldiers and their dependants and this was made the chief object of the branch and was always their first business, and is the reason why the branch and the League its self is in the position it is to-day. There was nothing in Soldiers matters that was not done by the branch for the returned man.

In the early days we did not wait for them to come to us but went to them and asked them for their grievances if they had any, for the branch to adjust. We wanted them to know that their troubles were the branches' trouble and this they certainly did.

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Pension were our chief objective in the early days and there was always plenty of trouble connected with it.

The system in those days of pensions was much below what it is to-day. With the monthly police report on the Diggers pensions were always being reduced or stopped. This gave us a lot of work and was the means of always sending a large batch of cases on to the Head Office and in a great number of cases we were successful. In one week 30 cases of complaints about pensions were sent to the Head body. We certainly kept that department busy. Well we asked for it and we certainly got it and as our aim was that the branch was there for them it did not matter what their complaint was, we had a go at it. I think matrimonial affairs were the only ones we kept out of altogether although one case was brought to us by a Digger (we had already had his pension restored to him), His wife was in Queensland and would we write to her for him and give her a sort of reference or something, but there was nothing doing. When the time came for the gratuity forms to be sent in it made a very busy time indeed for the Branch and the first month 500 claims had been filled in and sent on and as these had to be signed by a J.P. it was necessary to have one stationed at the "Dug Out" every night to cope with the demand. To show how much trouble we went to to assist in this work one case comes to my mind in particular. A mother wanted her son's gratuity the son having paid the supreme sacrifice. It was necessary to get both parents consent and as the father was in

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Queensland he had to be found. With the aid of the branch there he was found and his consent given after a long time as he didn't want the gratuity himself nor did he want his wife to have it either. However the wife received it and still another good deed was done by the branch.

Another case was of a Digger having a good job here who was arrested for wife desertion. He was willing to provide for her, here £20/-/- bail was on him and the branch came to his assistance with the bail. He appeared on the day and was remanded to the country town he had left. Another £20 was needed for him to appear there, again we came to his assistance and he was O.K. again, and I am pleased to say, won his case. Repatriation claims were also another big task undertaken. Free issues of overcoats, for which forms had to be filled in, claims for tools, Furniture, etc all fell on the branch.

War decorations, (medals) also claims were made and had to be presented to each man through the branch. The distribution of funds, Canteen Funds etc, was always seen to by the branch and many diggers and dependants benefited by it. The branch was always on the alert for anything that would be of assistance.

The branch received many letters of thanks from Soldiers dependants showing their gratitude for some service rendered. It showed that the branch was carrying out the object of the League in looking after their interests

Another important matter and one that was never allowed to be overlooked was the effort to find employment

for the returned men. This was in the early days a serious matter. So many Diggers on their return found that old jobs they had had were either filled or that they were closed down. The branch was always to the fore in obtaining jobs and some Diggers are to-day holding jobs found for them by the Branch. May I mention that the works at Pt Kembla, especially the "Metal Manufacturers" did, and were always ready to assist the branch by giving employment.

We were always on the alert to see that preference was given to returned men. (this was before the Preference Act became law)

One case in point was that the P.M.G./^{Dept} had put on a number of men who were not Diggers with the excuse that there were no married returned men available. This was brought to the notice of the Federal Member for the district Mr H. Lamond who was always a staunch helper for the returned man with the result that a phone message came through to the branch from the Dept asking for the names of returned men out of work. About 20 Diggers were given the Jobs and the non-Diggers put off. Some of these men are still holding their jobs to-day with the Dept.

The branch circularised business people and different organisations as the Show Committee, Wollongong Race Club who held meetings every month, Electoral Office, Wollongong Council, and others with good results. The work of the branch in this respect was so outstanding that we were on several occasions complimented by the Head body of the League. This may seem to some as savouring of "blowing our

own horn" but it is not so. We were very much in earnest on this question of preference, so much so that on one occasion two large indignation meetings were held over an appointment with the Council of that time in not giving a Digger the position of Life Saver. Some of the members will no doubt remember the fight we had and although not at the time successful it did a lot of good later on. Your branch was one of the first to fight for preference in the State and was represented on the Deputation to the Speaker, now Sir Daniel Levy, selected at the State conference. It was when the Act (the present preference Act) was being passed by Parliament a deadlock occurred, voting being equal the Speakers casting vote deciding it. This was in 1921 and that Act being amended is in law to-day.

There are many other instances which the branch was responsible for and these mentioned are a few to show that the branch was solid for the returned men inasmuch as that the welfare of themselves and their dependants must come first always. The returned men soon came to know this and the reward came to the branch when in one year the 300 membership mark was reached and not one known Returned Man was not joined up. Another case of preference I think should be mentioned and that was the appointment of a Repatriation Doctor. Dr John Kerr was appointed but on the principle of preference we thought that a returned Medical man should be appointed and as Doctor Kirkwood was a resident of the town at the time we sought to have him appointed. We all knew the good work being done by the soldier's friend,

Dr Kerr and we know no man could do better, still the stand we had to take was one of principle. However it turned out satisfactorily for everyone. Dr Kerr received a reward some years afterwards from the League, receiving the highly honoured "League's Certificate of Merit" which all Digger's will join in saying no man deserved more.

I have refrained you will notice from mentioning any names in connection with this history because so many had given such valuable service and time for the cause that to miss any one would be a serious mistake and this could easily happen after so many years. But to record the first Patron, President and Secretary would only be proper and they are as follows:-

Patron, Late W. J. Cockrane, O.B.E.

President, Mr. J. J. Kelly

Secretary, Mr Ted Powell,

and Mr G. Graham, (the late) was a member of the committee.

I would like to say here that after 20 years of your sub-branch only five Presidents have held office, these being, J. J. Kelly, late Norman Smith, Herbie Herd, Jack Scott and Charlie Dawson who is still holding that office.

I am sure that every Digger will join with me in saying that this would not be complete without some record of the services rendered in the early days of the branch of the late Patron, Bill Cockrane, and every Digger of those days will join with me in saying that any success which the branch has made Bill, with his great understanding of the returned man had a part in. His unselfish and untiring

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energy and courage in standing for the "Digger" always, was grand. His duties were many and he could be always day and night at his office working for the Diggers.

I was asked to detail a list of offices held by him during the war years. They totalled over 30, War Loan, Citizens Committee, Repatriation, Recruiting Campaign Secty, Anzac's Furlough, Peace Celebrations, etc, were only a few which he held. Bill Cockrane was a true "Digger" in every sense and although his disability would not allow him to enlist he did his duty on this side as well as the man on the other side.

Being physical disable made his action the greater and the assistance he gave to the Diggers was greatly appreciated not only in this district but in other parts of the State and when at the close of the War names were being submitted for recommendation it was the unanimous wish that his name should be sent and he was invested with the Order of the British Empire. A great honour but a higher order would have been one which he richly deserved.

I remember one case of a claim being turned down by the investigations officer of the Repatriation and Bill sent on the claim to the Head Office with the same result. He next wrote to the Minister for Repatriation who referred him back to the Dept. This would have been enough for many men, but not for Bill. He wrote and told them as Patron of the League he was handing the claim over to them for instructions. It was not many days after that Bill received a letter to the effect that the case would

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be enquired into, with the result that the claim was satisfied. Bill was like that, nothing was to great a trouble to gain the objective. His advise and support were always at hand and in those early days of war it was needed badly, and a great deal of the reward is due to him. In the early days he laboured hard in the cause for a permanent home for the returned Diggers cause and if it was possible for him to see to what heights the branch had succeeded to, the wonderful Hall which now stands, I do know that his wish and ambition would have been attained. No better reward could be his that that his collection of photographs of his pals should adorn the walls of such a memorial. His wish has been realized.

You remember the first visit to Sydney of General Birdwood. At the welcome in the Town Hall Sydney, Bill was with us and after the welcome Birdwood came down to speak to some old veterans, came over to Bill and enquired his name. He thought a moment, and said " Yes, I know of you, I sent you my photograph for your collection. I have heard of your good work for my Australian Soldiers and I thank you for it."

Bill came with us always on all occasions. A trip would not be complete without him. He is still with us, if not in the flesh, he is in spirit. I know this may be the feeling with you, as it is with me on any occasion at which I am attending soldier functions I see Bill there too, and he will always be there with us. His name will always be fresh in our memory. His early labours for the Branch will

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always be felt.

In concluding this memoir of the early days of the Wollongong Sub-branch of the R. S. & S. I. League I should state that the idea of placing on record, was to bring to the notice of a lot of members who were not resident here in those days, the early work of the branch, and not for any other reason.

Perhaps later on a record of those people and outside organisations who so nobly came and gave their services should be recorded also.

By,
Corporal SYDNEY BRYDON WELLS.

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August, 1940.

E.H.H. 10/9/40