

At War: With Our Boys in the Forces

Mary Johnston told of an incident that happened in Epping Church during the years of World War II, which seems to typify the attitudes prevalent in the Seventh-day Adventist Church at the time and the choices that church members had to make.

Mary's father had lost his job during the Depression and subsequently was employed as an overseer on the docks. He was received into the Epping Church by baptism on the 4th September, 1937.¹ He arrived at church one Sabbath just after the Second World War started, to find the pulpit draped with the Union Jack. He sought and was granted leave to speak about it, and argued that such a decoration was inappropriate for God's house, given that Adventists believe in the separation of church and state. One of those who had placed it there retorted 'That's nothing more than we'd expect from you, with your red-neck friends on the wharves'.²

This was an allusion to the supposed Communist sympathies of all those who worked on the docks, and uses 'red-neck' in a way different to its current usage. It reflects the variety of attitudes to Great Britain as the 'Mother Country' and the 'class' differences within the community. The Seventh-day Adventist young men in Australia were faced with the decision of whether or not to bear arms, initially against Hitler and all he stood for, and later in defence of their country against the Japanese. Some chose to serve as non-combatants, which was the church's position. Others felt it was just to fight. Whatever the choice, the little community of Epping Church cared about what their boys were doing.

The Australasian Record in 1943 included a section entitled "With Our Boys in the Forces" with the words Loyalty, Honour, Truth and Purity in the border surrounding the heading. As well as devotional items specifically directed to the Adventist servicemen, they and their families were invited to send in news and excerpts from letters for publication. Maybe Epping's mothers were particularly proud of their sons – they certainly sent in a lot of material!

In 1943, under the subtitle 'A Sydney Boy in England', the Australasian Record published 'Extracts from a letter written by Pilot Officer Denis Patrick to his parents in Epping, N.S.W. Denis trained in Australia, Canada, and England, and is at present stationed in Scotland with an Australian Squadron, Coastal Command.'

Following five paragraphs about his life in England which included the reassurance for his parents that *"We have an alert once every night, but as a rule nothing much happens, though some places nearby have caught a bit of a bashing,"* Denis Patrick wrote: *"Yesterday was Mother's Day. No, I did not forget it for a moment. How well I remember the Mother's Days we celebrated back at the little Epping kirk, all decorated with flowers; tiny tots in white frocks singing songs about mothers. In fact I can remember blushing myself once over 'Mother Macree'. I suppose you do too. I wonder if Mother's Day this year was all it used to be. If we boys were not there in body, we were well represented in thought. "When in Alberta, Canada, I went to a service in the Adventist church at Calgary, but as it was a hundred miles distant from my airport it was impossible to go again. I was made very welcome, the service being very similar to those of my own home church. I received the Testament with the Epping members' names inscribed therein, which I very much appreciate."*³

After it was noted that a recent cable received from Denis stated *'Returned safely from operations in North Russia, large mail received.'*, 'a poem composed by Denis's mother' followed:-

¹ SDA Minute Book, Church Roll as at 1st January 1947.

² Mary Johnston, telephone interview with Carlene Bagnall, 12 October, 2002. Mary recalls this remark as being made by Doug McPherson.

³ Australasian Record, 1 February 1943, page 6.

REMINISCENCE

QUEENIE PATRICK

There was a time (could I forget?)
When the Sabbath sun shone through
The Gothic windows on the heads
Of the boys in the old church pew.
In Sabbath best each lad was dressed,
And he sang a youthful treble;
Nudged his neighbour, watched the clock;
Part saint, and partly rebel.

The boys sat still in the old church pew
As the rise and fall of nations
Fell on their ears from the sacred desk.
They are now at battle stations,
And Sabbaths come, and Sabbaths go;
The sky is a murky hue
With burst of bomb and whirr of plane,
For the boys of the old church pew.

“Mothers Day” is but a dream,
The hymns are hymns of hate;
The bright-eyed boys from the old church pew
Are tossed on the Sea of Fate.
We pray the old home cords will hold,
That the test will find them true;
That once again the Dove of Peace
Finds our boys in the old church pew.’

A few months later he wrote: “According to this week’s ‘Flight’, Harry Lethbridge (of West Australia), my cabin mate from Nova Scotia, is missing. Most of my old friends who trained with me have returned home or are missing.

“Epping Young People’s Society sent me a delightful comforts parcel, for which I thank them very much. The Australian Comforts Fund also sent a parcel of peaches and cream, chocolates, etc. We greatly appreciate the efforts of all you good folk at home in remembering us.”

The article concluded: ‘A recent cable said that Sgt. Pilot Colin Finch, also of Epping church, had returned to England from the Middle East, and the two friends had met in London.’

Brother Doug McPherson, another member of the Epping Church, in New Guinea after eighteen months of service in the Middle East wrote:-

“I have to thank you for everything this time – letters, papers, books, and parcel. The cake came a couple of days ago, in very good condition. I am not going to cut it, but am keeping it until Christmas Day. Then when dinner-time comes I will cut the cake and pudding and feel that we are all eating part of the same Christmas dinner. This is the third Christmas I have spent away from home, but you can think of me as you sit down to dinner, not as being miles away, but as one of the very happy circle which we are able to recall in connection with our Christmases, for that is how I like to think of it.

“9/1/43. It is Sabbath morning. Everyone is out, and so with your most recent letter I am prepared to spend a quiet Sabbath morning with you. It’s hot here, and very still; and down along the river hundreds of parrots are calling and chattering to one another. Sitting here, my mind goes back to those mornings when we used to walk up to church in the heat. We were all so happy, and I used to get so much pleasure in walking home with our friends after the service, then unlocking the cool house and preparing the

dinner, while you cooled down a bit. It's a long time since I had a Sabbath with you, and how I look forward to our next one together!"

Later in 1943 he wrote from Western Australia: "It is my day of rest, and I am up on the 'Matterhorn'. I never valued the Sabbath as I do now, when I must work all day and till 11.15 each night of the week to make sure of getting it. Beside me is a bag of choice selections – a book of poems, the 'Signs of the Times', and the book 'Gospel of the Hereafter' by J. Paterson Smyth, which the padre has lent me. (Twice a week I try to have a twenty-minute chat with the padre. His face is an inspiration, and what he tells me is the wisdom of a man whose faith is not shaken by the stormy conditions in the world.) I have not my Testament here this morning, as I have lent it to Ronald. He is a Hebrew who is interested in me because I keep the Sabbath. In my turn, I have recommended him to Jesus Christ. Hence the absence of Moffatt and the Revised Version."

In July 1943 this was published from a letter by Sergeant Colin Finch to his mother: "There are one or two good things that come out of a war. You are probably wondering how my early training stands up to the tests of life in wartime. It is my personal belief that at such a time a man gets closer to God than at any other time in his life. Never before have I prayed so earnestly, and it is due to the fact one realizes the danger he is in and looks to One who can save him. I remember when we crashed in the desert. I was thrown on the floor as the plane bounced, and expected to be killed within the next thirty seconds. I found I was praying before I realized it. We escaped death, but our plane went up in flames. Some called it luck, but I know better than that.

"Please remember me to all my friends at church. How I wish I could be back amongst them! May this war soon be over."

Four months later there is this entry: 'Sister Finch of the Epping church, Sydney, has been the recipient of tragic news. Her youngest son, Pilot Officer Colin Finch, lost his life in an aircraft accident in England. We assure his parents, his sister, Mrs. Noel Stacey, and his two brothers, Desmond and Noel, that we mourn with them and the members of the Epping church.' At the time of his death he was an instructor at Cambridge in the United Kingdom. Pr W. Morris who had baptized him in July 1939, shortly before he enlisted, wrote in his obituary: 'He went through the rigorous campaign of the Middle East, and bore grateful testimony to the mercy and goodness of God in bringing him through unscathed. "I know that God is real," he said, and as he made his flights into the unknown he always put his hand into the hand of God.'

I cannot think of a better philosophy to see us through life – Know that God is real, and as you make your flight into the unknown of each day, put your hand into the hand of God.