

## **The Memories of Lorna Cooper, nee Baker**

My name is Lorna Cooper and I was born on 9 May 1920. I grew up in East Maitland in my parent's home at 18 Brunswick Street. My parents were James and Laurel Violet Baker; they married in 1910 and mum was a Spence. I had two older sisters, Marjorie Laurel (1911) and Mercia (Micky) Irene (1914), brother Wilfred (1917), then me and my two younger brothers, Frederick (Fred) and William (Billy). Sadly, Wilfred died in 1922.

We all attended East Maitland Primary School and then I went to West Maitland Girls High School, noting that the boys' high school was in East Maitland. To get to school I would catch the train from Victoria Street Station across to West Maitland and then walk up Church Street to the school on top of the hill. The Government gave us a rail pass which we had to pin to our tunic. My brothers could walk to their high school but for those wanting to do an apprenticeship they went to the technical school at West Maitland. When the Hunter River flooded Maitland would be cut in half but because the railway line was never flooded, I still had to go to school. The boys' High School would close down during flood time.

When I left school, my first job was working at a men's tailor in West Maitland and my dad organised this job for me. I was making first class men's clothes and could make a suit right from the shoulder pads to the bottom of the trousers. I completed my apprenticeship as a tailor, around the time the war broke out.

I can remember when war broke out because that was when I went to Sydney. I got called up and joined the VAD's [Voluntary Aid Detachment] I remember my mother wasn't very happy, but on the other hand she didn't mind. Because I was called up my two younger brothers didn't have to be called up and I was only two hours from home. My elder sisters by this time were married so they didn't get called up.

I had my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in Sydney in May 1941, and I think I was doing clerical work at the time. We had lost our father in February of that year. I enlisted in the Army on 9 November 1942, because it would let my brothers finish their schooling. I was a member of the Australian Women's Auxiliary Service (AWAS) and we did our basic training out at Ingleburn. Don't go there in the summer as Ingleburn can be very hot and is a terrible place! When we were on parade occasionally, we would get told to 'stand easy' which meant we could relax a bit. We had to stay in position but at least we could move our feet. We had male instructors, but a Major Mort was in charge of all of us. I don't know how long we were there for, but it seemed to be for ages.

Occasionally we did get leave and I remember going out to dinner with the girls. I remember being on some leave from the hospital and a group of us girls were in Sydney when a Jap midget submarine came in the harbour. We were on the shore and saw what happened when they sunk the sub. We all saw it and we all knew what was going to happen. But we couldn't wait around as we had to scurry back to the hospital, but fortunately we knew the short cut down a lane back to the hospital! Some of the girls I remember from those days were the Webster sisters.

My first unit was 113 Australian General Hospital which was located at Concord, a suburb west of Sydney. As for the jobs I did, from memory it was everything and when we were given a job, we were just told to get it done. We had contact with the patients who were there and there were some who could talk, and they liked the company. They were alright and weren't badly injured men, but they were there for treatment. When I was promoted to Corporal and received my two stripes, well that was a surprise. Plus, I also got a pay rise of a few shillings a day - a lot of money- along with a train pass. I found that the girls who had just arrived were coming to me as they had to learn from somebody what they were supposed to do. While I was at

Concord, I did get some leave and would catch the train home, and this helped me to keep in contact with my family.

Our daily routine was reveille at 0600, breakfast at 0700, lunch at 1200 and dinner 1700. Lights out at 2230 but I was well asleep before that. When we were at Ingleburn, we lived in barrack blocks with all girls sleeping in the one long room. When I was at Concord, I had my own room with a little wardrobe to hang our uniform up in.

I soon found when travelling in uniform that some of the men, army and civilian, would have a slur at you because they didn't respect women in Army uniform very much. With the Army men I think this was a resentment because they thought we were given preferential treatment which was not true. We weren't treated any better than anybody else and we did our fair share of washing the floors and digging the gardens. It didn't worry me as I could do all of this already.

How I met Gunner Robert Cooper was through my Bother-in-Law, Fred Paff. They were both on leave and were from the north coast region of NSW. Fred married my second eldest sister, Mickey, in 1940. Freddie brought his mate around to our home in East Maitland, when they were on leave. Although his name was Robert everybody always called him Bob. I'm not sure how Bob and I kept in touch, but I probably wrote him some letters from Concord.

I do remember one night we slept in a park not far out of Sydney. When a girl was in uniform, a lot of the hotels or boarding houses wouldn't have you even if you wanted single rooms, which was a real slur for us. With sleeping in the park, we were really lucky because we had two overcoats. We put one on the ground and one wrapped around us to keep us warm.

Bob was in the Royal Australian Artillery and had been in Darwin during the bombings. He damaged his ankle when he dived into a trench and was evacuated to a makeshift hospital at Katherine. After the war Bob had a lot of trouble with that leg and I'm pretty sure we didn't get any assistance from war service. Looking back, we were a bit stupid really because no records had been kept of his injuries. While I could get first class employment it was more difficult for Bob. Years later, Bob showed us when the guns were placed around Darwin.

In 1943 we married at Saint Peters Church of England in East Maitland, up on the hill. My oldest sister Mickey made my wedding dress and Bob wore his uniform. Somehow, we had arranged a few days off; I then went back to Concord and Bob went to Port Moresby. When I was discharged in 1943, I went to live in Newcastle within walking distance from Newcastle Station. Bob was in New Guinea for a long time until he was discharged in October 1945. We kept in contact by letter and fortunately the mail service was very good. Everybody was waiting for mail time as this was a big thing, getting a letter.

After the war, with our young daughter Lorraine, we all moved to Kempsey and leased a farm. Because of the bad weather including black frosts we couldn't make a go of it. We moved into Kempsey and bought a house in Clyde Street which believe it or not it got flooded in 1949. I'm not sure what happened with the home as Bob could have sold it. In those days men just did things and didn't worry, whether the wife agreed or not. That was it! Before Bob joined the Army, I'm pretty sure he was doing farm work as he was a born farmer.

Our next move was to Canberra where Bob joined the ACT Police Force and I found employment with the Public Service. Somebody must have told Bob how wonderful King Island was and that there were Soldier Settlement farms available. I was working in the library of the old Parliament House and would deliver documents to other departments using a Government car and driver. The Government didn't tell us anything, but you could look at documents.

Around 1955, Bob started to apply for farms in Tasmania and later, when he had been allocated a farm on King Island, there was a big celebration in Canberra. He was very excited

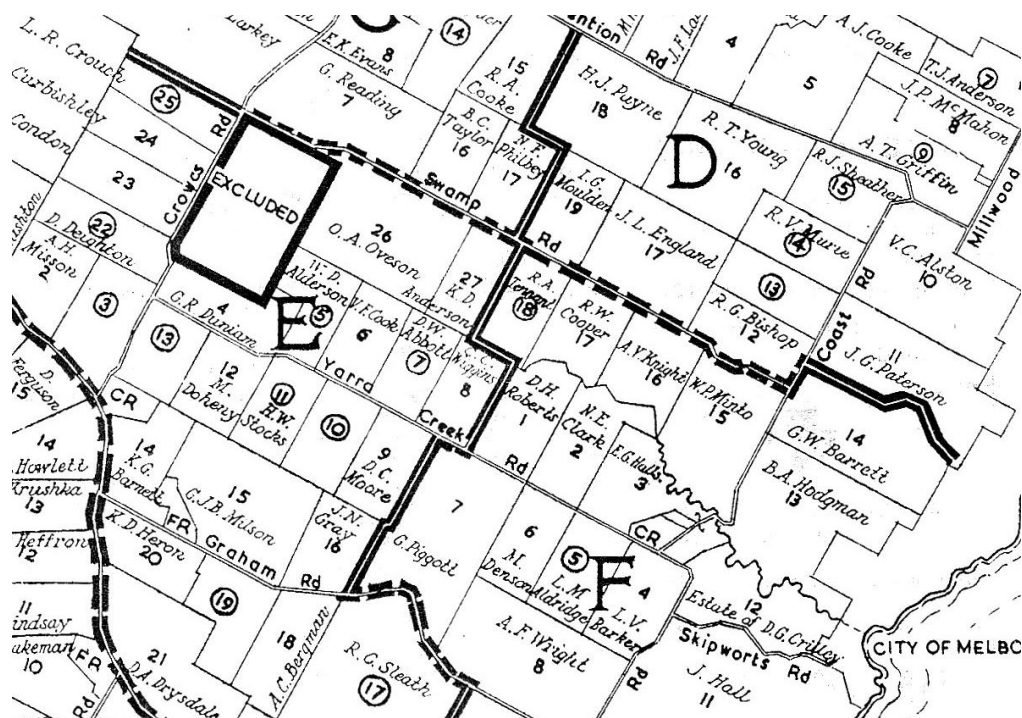
and told me. 'We've got a farm. We've got a farm<sup>ii</sup>.' Then he said it was on King Island. So, I asked him, 'Where's King Island?', so you can see how much I had been told beforehand. So anyway, Bob went first, and Lorraine went to see him in the Christmas holidays because she was still at high school in Canberra. Also, Bob was employed on the Island by the Agricultural Bank, and could set everything up on the farm, while I still worked in Canberra.

Lorraine was there when her father had the accident on the farm. When I got the message that there had been this accident, I flew from Canberra to Melbourne so I could catch the Ansett plane to King Island. But when I got to Melbourne the bookings had been changed. I was no longer flying to King Island but to Launceston, where I stayed with the Methodist minister and his wife. They were the Manzoney's, and they looked after me while Bob was in hospital. Because it took time for Bob to recover, we had to relinquish the farm. He was a paraplegic and they said he would never walk again. There was a return to Canberra while Bob was having treatment. He was such a determined man that after 12 months of extensive physio he was able to go back to the Island. We were allocated a farm on Swamp Road<sup>iii</sup>.

After the war I found my service in the Army did not have a negative effect on me. One week I was working for the Army and the next week I was rushed with jobs. One thing with females in the services during the period of war was that people realised that women were capable of taking charge to keep things going. As for the damage that the war did to my husband Bob, I really do not know as he kept it to himself - it was nearly a taboo subject. A whole lot of stuff fell on to me as his wife, but fortunately I was lucky with my training as I could pick up a job.

When we lived on King Island, at various times, some of our nephews came to live with us - Ray, Jim and Peter - and Jim is still on King Island. Eventually we sold up and left the Island. Bob died in September 1995 and is buried on the island, so I eventually returned here around 2012 and have been a resident in the Netherby Nursing Home ever since. I think one of the luckiest things of our marriage was that we could work together.

February 2019



Map showing part of the Pegarah Soldier Settlement Estate. The first Cooper farm was Lot 6F and the second was 17F. Acknowledged to National Archives of Australia – King Island Finances Report 1964



*On 19 February 2019 at the Netherby Nursing Home, Currie, King Island, Lorna Cooper in her 99<sup>th</sup> year was presented with World War Two Certificates of Service for herself and late husband, Robert Cooper, by Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Gary Barker (left) and Mr Vernon Philbey of the King Island RSL Sub-branch. Photograph by Margaret Stansfield*

### **The Memories of Lorraine Boon**

My name is Lorraine Beverley Boon (nee Cooper) and I was born in 1941 at Crown Street Hospital in Sydney. My eventual fostering with Robert and Lorna Cooper was, I understand, through contact with Mrs Constance Leister who was Lorna's aunt. Constance, at the time, was head of the Land Army Girls at Batlow in southern New South Wales and must have found out about me. The fostering was organised by Child Welfare of the NSW Government, and the process was for a family to foster a child, later leading to adoption.

My earliest memories of being in the Cooper family are really wonderful and date from the home in Clyde Street, Kempsey. I was very much part of the family and not long after the 1949 flood we moved to East Maitland and lived with my grandmother, Mrs Laurel Baker, as she had a big home. The family had lived comfortably until my grandmother's husband died in 1941. He had been a mine's inspector and part owner of a coal mine. My grandmother took in boarders, mostly from families that she knew and definitely no strangers! My grandmother was absolutely wonderful to me, and got on really well with my father who used to do a lot of odd jobs around her home.

As I grew older, I knew my parents had served during the war, but my father or mother seldom spoke about it. However, he was fascinated with the fuzzy-wuzzies from New Guinea. I can remember one time while in Kempsey going to meet this little boat that came from Port

Moresby. Somehow, dad found out that a friend that he had met during the war was onboard. I was there when the two men reunited. We also took our dog, *Sauna*, who he had named after one of the New Guinea men. Although the two men did not embrace, I could tell they were really pleased to see each other and chatted in Pidgin English. My father was really joyful as he loved the natives of New Guinea. He said without the help of the natives a lot more Australian men would have died because they knew the jungle, and we didn't.

However, I do remember him telling me when Darwin was bombed for the first time in February 1942. For years, in a cupboard we had the gavel and umbrella that he had saved from the Court House in Darwin during the bombing. When a new museum was opened in Darwin in 1992 my parents made sure both items were returned to Darwin. I also know that after Darwin, he was sent back to the east coast at Newcastle and was later sent to Port Moresby. Although he was a gunner in the artillery, he did a lot of truck driving around Port Moresby.

In 1950 my father applied to join the ACT Police Force, was accepted and did his training somewhere in New South Wales. I would have been in Grade 4 when we moved to Canberra and stayed there until I finished school. Our first home was in Farrer Street in Braddon and then we moved to Musgrave Street, Yarralumla - a very nice suburb near Government House. In the early 1950's, Canberra just had a north and south with a river separating the two areas.

After the war, my father had been trying to return to farming by applying for Soldier Settlement farms but was not successful. How he found out about King Island I do not know, but my mother said very little about it to me. In those times parents only told you what they wanted you to know. Looking back on it I don't think mum was that keen to move to King Island because we were quite comfortable where we were, and I was happy there with all my friends. I do remember my mother asking my father, 'Where is King Island?' I was around about 14 at the time when my father left the Police Force and went to the farm on Workshop Road, King Island. I remember visiting him during the school holidays in January 1956 and flew by plane from Canberra to Essendon in Melbourne. I had to have an overnight stay at a hotel which had already been booked, and the next day caught the Ansett DC3 aeroplane to King Island.

As for my first impressions of King Island I just took things as they were, as that is the way I had been brought up. My dad met me at the airport near Currie in his truck, and then we went straight to Grassy. Some people were selling up and dad bought a table and chairs, so we would have something to sit on, but he already had a bed for me. Fortunately, the Closer Settlement Board had built a house and a dairy on our farm. There was no electricity, so we had Tilly Lamps, no phone, a chip heater in the bathroom to heat the water, but the toilet was inside; that was modern. There was also a copper that we used to wash our clothes. A fire was lit under the copper to bring the water to the boil – washing was a lot of hard work. The farmland had been mostly cleared by the Closer Settlement Board, but there was no garden or trees. Dad was in the process of building fences and had some dairy cows.

This was the first time in my life that I had been alone with my father but, while he always had spoken with me, he still never discussed the war. It was on 14 January, the day after I arrived, that dad had the accident. I remember that we had to bring in a cow that was due to calve. He was on the horse and told me to close the gate after he had moved the cow through. I did this and when I turned around, there was a horse in one corner and the cow somewhere else, but no dad. I saw him lying in the long grass and ran to him. He couldn't call out and I could see he was badly hurt. I raced inside to get some blankets to keep him warm because he was shivering. I then went straight across the road to Norm and Mary Clarke who were milking at the time. The poor people had to stop milking and came straight over. Norm didn't have a vehicle and also didn't have a licence to drive dad's truck; I don't even know if he could drive.

Then fortunately someone came along in a small truck, who I think was Les Aldridge. So, dad with a broken neck and paralysed down one side was lifted in the back of the truck and taken

to the hospital in Currie. He was then flown out to Launceston where he spent many months in hospital. My mum was informed about the accident and I think this was done at the hospital by the doctor. I remember hearing that my father had been told that he would never walk again. The Clarke's were very good to me and to help brighten me up they had a party. Mary was a real character and I think I stayed with them for a week until I flew out to Canberra on my booked flight.

Soon after I arrived home my mother flew to Launceston and lived with the Manzoney's for around nine months until my father was repatriated back to Canberra. Dad had to have a lot of physio at the Canberra Hospital, but my father was a determined man otherwise he would just have lay down and died any time noting that he also had pneumonia while in Launceston. He had a cast around the top of his head and chest, and used a knitting needle to scratch himself. I never met the Manzoney's, but they were really good people and looked after my mother while she was staying with them.

I know that the Closer Settlement Board rescinded his farm on Workshop Road, and it was allocated to another settler. I assume once my father had some mobility, he must have contacted the Board again because he was allocated another dairy farm on Swamp Road in mid-1957. My recollections of the second farm was that it started off as a dairy farm and dad then went into beef stud cattle and some stud sheep. Dad could never ride a horse again but used a Landrover as his wheel chair. He was disabled down his right side, but could walk initially with the aid of crutches and did work the second farm. He was a good farm manager, but mum and I had to work including milking the cows early on. So, mum had to adjust from being a big town girl to a farmer's wife. The second farm, like the first had a dwelling but was still without electricity and phone.

As for me, around 1959 my father got me a job at the Yarra Creek Primary School which was near the Yarra Creek stream on Coast Road (Millwood Road). The headmaster was Mr Maurice Obourne and I was a teacher's aide. The headmaster gave me some on the job training on how to prepare lessons, stand in front of the class, give instruction and also keep control. The headmaster lived in an Education Department home nearby where the school bus was also kept in a shed. I had a turn in all classes up to Grade 6 and there were a lot of children at the school. The Soldier Settlers must have been very productive men and women and I remember that the nearby camp was called 'Nappy Valley.' My work at the school for the 12 months I was there, brought me in contact with many Soldier Settlers. As for hardship I really didn't see much as most of the people who came were not so badly off. For some families they weren't suited to farming or the isolation of the Island and left. Looking back after the passage of 60 years I really loved it even though it was something I wouldn't have chosen to do. But at that time, you did what your parents said.

Soon after I left King Island, I married an ACT Police Officer and we raised a family of three daughters. Later my parents bought a block up near Bungaree on the coast, which was used during winter to feed the stock. Later, they had built a home just south of the Ettrick River mouth on South Road and lived there for a while. Around 1979 they moved to Upper Mount Hicks, near Somerset, in Tasmania. Although Dad was retired, he took his best stud cattle and sheep over. I always kept in contact with my parents and was not surprised when they told me they were selling up and moving. While there, my parents set up a host farm to cater for tourists, and I do remember that poor old mum had to do all the work. My family and I did visit them before they moved into Wynyard.



*Lorraine Boon alongside portion of the original barn at Lot 17F on Swamp Road, now 502 Robbins Road, Yarra Creek, King Island on 13 March 2019. The barn dates from the time her father was allocated the farm in July 1957. The farm was later purchased by the Muller family whose son runs it. Photograph by Margaret Stansfield*

One thing my parents did tell me was that before they married in June 1943, was that they visited my father's parents at Euroka, near Kempsey. Mum has always been a very thin girl and his family were big people including the women. Apparently, his mother took him aside and said, 'I don't think she will be much help to you Robert as she is too thin'. Well, mum is nearly 99 and has done the hard yards all these years. Dad told me that, not mum and she probably never knew. He also told me that shortly after they married Lorna became pregnant, and was also ill. Sadly, they lost the baby and it took a long time for her to recover. This probably is the reason why she was discharged from the Army in October 1943, well before the war was over, and why I was adopted.

My parents eventually settled into retirement and dad wrote a book 'Born in the Bush – the memoirs of R.W. (Bob) Cooper' that was published in 1993. The book is now sold out but has been helpful to me in recalling some long past dates and names. With dad's death in 1995 it was not expected. He was a volunteer counsellor with Lifeline and had just completed a night shift when he had a massive heart attack. Dad is buried in the King Island Cemetery in Currie and there is a plot alongside for mum. It was my dad who chose his resting place as King Island as he didn't want to be buried in Wynyard because of the clay. He had been to too many funerals where the coffin was lowered into water and bobbed around. He didn't want to go to a watery grave, so he chose the sand of King island as his resting place.

Mum stayed in Wynyard for many years until she had the fall and that was when the family arranged for her to be a resident in the Netherby Nursing Home in Currie. When the Doctor

told us, that mum could no longer care for herself he mentioned that she could be sent to Devonport or Launceston. But I said, 'Please don't send her there as in her Enduring Guardian Document she has written that she wants to go to King Island'.

Dad was very outgoing, a hard worker, would fight for what he believed to be right, and would readily talk to people. I am sure when he was on the farm, he was at peace with himself as he loved farming. Mum tended to be the opposite as she was quiet and retiring until stirred up – then she would say what she thought! My mum never complained even if she didn't like something as she just got on with life. I believe dad's success throughout their married life was undoubtedly due to the support he received from her. Although I was adopted, no parents could have loved me more than Bob and Lorna did, and I have always loved them. I am very proud of my heritage and they always treated me as their daughter.

I have some of my mother's letters from WW11 and two have poems in them. The first one is written on an envelope addressed to Private L.C. Baker (VAD), VAD Training Bay, F. Block, Ingleburn:

Our Sergeant waits for us  
And shows us how to turn.  
While the flies come out to pester us,  
Way out at Ingleburn.

We see him every day except when he's on leave.  
And then we get another bloke  
And you don't know how we grieve.

We think he's lovely  
And he thinks our drill is vile  
Sometimes we wonder  
How he manages to keep that smile.

Our Sergeant waits for us & we're keen to learn.  
How to swing our arms & keep in step  
Way out at Ingleburn.

The second one may have been sent to Robert just before a wartime Christmas Day:

I know what I'd like for Christmas  
I'd like to be with you  
Beside a shady billabong  
With a picnic lunch for two.

But ere those glad days come again  
When we can laugh & play.  
There's a job of work that must be done & that without delay.

So, till it's done I'll think of you  
With every passing day  
And hope my dear that you'll enjoy  
This wartime Christmas Day.

© Gary Barker

---

<sup>i</sup> The submarine attack in Sydney Harbour occurred on 31 May and 1 June 1942 six months before Lorna enlisted in the Army on 9 November 1942. Lorna may have been in the VAD at

- 
- the time.
- ii Lot 6F; Workshop Road is now Yarra Creek Road.
  - iii Lot 17F; Swamp Road is now Robbins Road.