

Soldier, policeman, amateur historian

SERGEANT Bill Wintle has fought his last battle. The first Peace Officer to guard Government House, he took his post on 23 December 1938 and remained there until his retirement on 19 August 1962.

Bill Wintle died on 3 June 1986, in his 89th year. He had been wounded at Ypres in World War I and was living in Melbourne when it was decided that the Peace Officer Guard should take over the gate at Government House Canberra. He served under six governor-generals and achieved the unusual distinction of being presented twice with membership of the Royal Victorian Order for services to the monarch.

After his retirement from the Commonwealth Police (which incorporated the Peace Officer guard in 1960) he was active in the Canberra Senior Citizens Club where he met Ruth Baker, a widow nine years his junior. They married in 1968 and together founded the Canberra Pensioners Social and Recreation Club. Bill fought strongly for premises for the Club, and in 1975 gained occupancy of a converted hostel building. It stands today, surrounded by car parks and a main road near Canberra's city centre.

Ruth Wintle, Bill's second wife, lives in Canberra, and is still active in community affairs.

We here reproduce a few extracts from Bill Wintle's memoirs, *Glory without Power* published in 1984.



My day of retirement

Arrival in Canberra . . .

our shoes and stretch out. Our boy Bill and girl Anne slept well, but my wife and I could only doze. Between 6-7 a.m. Tuesday morning we arrived at Goulburn and our carriage was shunted off the Sydney portion of the train, and at 7 a.m. we started on our journey off the main line to the Capital City. The country was dry and bare and I was wondering if what my wife had been told, that we would eventually arrive in a desert, could be true. Just after 9 a.m. we arrived in Queanbeyan, N.S.W. and discovered we were very close to our destination (approx. 6 miles). On the move again after a short stay, we pulled into a small station just before 10 a.m. and my wife said "This is it". Startled, I replied "Oh no, this is a suburb or a siding, not Canberra City". I never saw such a dilapidated place and was fully convinced it was not the Capital City of Australia, but to satisfy my wife, I went to the door of the train and was approached by a Policeman, who asked if I was Peace Officer Wintle, as he had come to meet me. He then introduced himself as Const. Perriman. I confirmed my wife's suspicions stating that she was right (as she mostly was) and we all filed out on the platform with our luggage. Const Perriman, (Ivan as I knew him later) escorted us to his car, an old blue Chev. tourer, and conveyed us to the "Acton Guest House", where he said arrangements had been made for us to stay pending the arrival of our belongings. After seeing us settled in he said he would pick me up later to meet the Superintending Peace Officer (Cd. H.E. Jones) who was also Chief of Police for this great City. Furniture transport arrived and we duly settled in our new home "The Lodge" on Thursday, 22 December 1938. The children were very pleased (as was My wife and I) as the Acton Guest House meals had proved to be terrible and scant. On Friday 23 December I took over the post, which I must remark was in a filthy condition. On Saturday, Christmas Eve, my wife wanted to do some shopping and get in a few groceries, meat, etc. and we thought the shops would be open on Saturday evenings. I saw the Butler, Mr Cowell, and he said the shops were closed in Canberra, but open in Queanbeyan, 10 miles away from our home, in N.S.W. He offered me his car but as I had no licence to drive, young Alistair Scott drove us in. We went to a butcher shop for meat, and when I asked for a leg of lamb or mutton, the butcher said "not in those trousers": I still had on my uniform trousers. Apparently, recognising a stranger, he would not serve me as the meat business closed at 5 p.m. However after considerable persuasion and explaining our plight, he allowed me to have a leg of mutton and we returned home about 10 p.m. Before going any further I wish to state that I had an interview with Captain Bracegirdle who explained my duties, my working hours were to be 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily and I was to have Sunday off, the Chief of Police refused to supply a relief for reasons I afterwards learned, in the meantime I was working virtually 7 days per week. I met the Caretaker, Tom Stephens, who turned out to be a great friend whom I was to lose tragically through his death about 3 years later.

Right to search . . .

Government House was gradually becoming a hive of industry. During the alterations, tradesmen from all States were coming for the big money earned with overtime. Captain Bracegirdle sent for me and asked me to keep an eye on things and after some discussion, it was decided that any materials leaving the job were to be checked. Notices were immediately posted to that effect. However I was unaware that the men resented the notice, and referred it to their Union, saying it was a reflection on their honesty. Letters were written to the Press and in one paper, there was a large headline reading — HAS A PEACE OFFICER GOT A RIGHT TO SEARCH. The Chief of Police came and asked me what it was all about and if I had searched any workman. I told him I had not, nor had I even suggested it. Furthermore I would not do so until instructed to do so, or knew without reasonable doubt that a person was carrying stolen property on his person. A conference was held between Union Leaders and Captain Bracegirdle. The Captain decided to take the notice down and thus avoid an anticipated strike. He told me of the outcome of the Conference and said — Let them carry on. That's the gratitude you get for trying to help them.

As I stated the men were from all States and as I had had experience with men stealing tools from one another on buildings in Melbourne, I knew what would eventuate. After the storm had settled and the men were working quite happily again, a man came to me one morning saying — Officer someone pinched my hammer. It was quite new etc etc. I said — That's bad luck. He then said — Aren't you going to do anything about it. I replied — My boss tried to protect you fellows from this sort of thing happening, but your Union objected, now you had better get your Union to find your hammer, as I am not a bit interested. Consequently the tool pilfering went on right through the job and one day even a steel tape was pinched, worth £4.10.00, but I just let them carry on and stew in their own pot.

Collision . . .

Whilst I was in hospital, two Airforce planes collided over my house; one Airman was killed. My wife was first to arrive on the scene. One airman had parachuted in the paddock, and my son who was returning from work saw the other one land near a pine tree in the drive. My son rushed to my office and rang the Police and the Ambulance. I may mention here that a piece of one of the planes motors, approx. 60 to 70lb in weight, fell on the roadway in front of his car, narrowly missing it.

Carve-up . . .

At about 8.30 p.m., the A.D.C. rang me and said there was a disturbance in the staff dining room. Could I come up. Some of the staff had been left behind including the Butler and the Chef. I proceeded to the Staff Dining Room and on arrival I saw the Chef sitting at the table with his knives and choppers preparing to carve up the Butler. I walked in and said — What the Hell do you think you are doing. "A am going to kill him," he replied brandishing a large carving knife in his hand. I took the knife from him. I grabbed him and frog-marched him to his room and threw him on his bed. He had had a few drinks and suddenly he started to abuse me and said I could not touch him or arrest him. I was now annoyed myself, and I put him on his feet, out the door and down to the Main Gate and my office. Half way down the drive he began to cry and pleaded for his wife and children. I fully intended to ring the Police Patrol to take him into Canberra, but after he promised no further disturbance, I let him go and he went to bed quietly. I saw the A.D.C. and Miss McKell and assured them that everything would be alright now and my Officer on patrol would keep a sharp look-out through the night. The A.D.C. contacted Admiralty House, Sydney, and Mr Chef was on his way by air to Sydney in the morning, dismissed forthwith.

Snake story . . .

One Sunday morning I received a telephone call from Col. Rodrigues saying that on his way to the cellar he had found a big snake. The Col. had left a footman at the top of the steps and I went up with my 22 Rifle and shot it. It was a good size, just on 6ft. The Painters were painting my cottage one hot day when they too discovered a snake. It was basking on the drive. I disposed of him with a piece of conduit finally, but before I got near him, he hid in a storm water drain under the driver. A painter aided me. We attached a large garden hose to the tap. He turned it on full and I hit the snake first go. It was over 6ft long. Government House was a terrible place for snakes; my wife even encountered one at her kitchen door. He quickly met his Waterloo also. I don't want to bore my readers with snake stories, but I must relate this one. H.E. Lady Slim's private secretary rang me and said there was a snake in her office. I advised her not to panic and not to go near it. I arrived, and entered her office cautiously. As I did not want to make a mess of the carpet, I delayed the killing and the snake made for the door which led to the verandah. I followed and dealt it a crippling blow with the conduit, opened the door and finished the job. The door was facing the Dining Room and H.E. was just escorting his guests to the lawn after finishing their lunch and H.E. brought the guests to view the intruder. He was a 4½ft long brown snake. The secretary was perturbed over the incident but she was very brave and did not move from her chair as I had told her on the phone. Concluding these snake stories, I wish to make my observation that the only good snake is in fact a dead one.

Cornflakes for a General . . .

I had my own cow for milk for my family. Lady Gowrie said the milkman was not going to deliver to Government House, as he could not get tyres for his truck and could not be sure of sufficient petrol with the rationing having been introduced. Her Excellency asked me if I could get a couple more cows and supply Government House and other residents with milk. It would also assist the War Effort. I did this and was milking 4 cows during the War years to keep up the supply. I sold the milk to the House and residents for sixpence per quart, and all went very well. It was quite a lot of extra work for me as I had to hand feed them. The residents were Mr Scott, Head Gardener, Mr Brill, Caretaker and Capt Bracey, Official Secretary. I did the deliveries myself. General Douglas McArthur arrived at Government House after leaving the Islands in the Pacific and the Chef, Miss Donald rang me saying the General required an early breakfast. Could I supply fresh milk for his cornflakes at 6 a.m. I said — Oh Hell! O.K. Send one of your staff down to my house for it, which she did, punctually at 5.50 a.m. General McArthur looked very pale and worried when he left Government House but I am confident that my milk was not the cause. Another American guest who arrived for a few days was Mrs Roosevelt. A smiling and charming lady

Confrontation . . .

said yes. He then said isn't it a beaut. Can I have a drive. His Excellency drove it up to the House and showed Her Excellency and the family and then they put the wagon in the garage. My rostered hours were 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and I can assure you it was not strictly adhered to, but I have no complaints, as I was able to take time off when convenient. One day I went over to my office about 8.50 a.m. and I was only there a few minutes when the Police car pulled up near the back gate and out got one of our fellows with two stripes on his arm, as he got out of the car he said good morning Sgt. I reciprocated. I said what is the trouble and he replied no trouble, I was sent out by the Inspector and the Deputy Commissioner to look over the post. Did I jump. Get to hell out of this and get back to head office and tell them I sent you back with my compliments I roared. Do you mean that Sgt. I said get going. He went back and told them what I had said. My telephone rang and a bit later the Inspector said the Deputy Commissioner wants you to report to him sharp at 11 a.m. I said O.K. In the meantime I received a telephone call from His Excellency, Lord DeLisle. Sgt he said all the chauffeurs are out, would you drive a car and take Miss Walker to the Canberra Rex Hotel, she has an appointment there at 11 a.m. I replied Yes Your Excellency. I rang the Inspector and told him and said I could be a few minutes late. I drove Miss Walker into the hotel and hurried away from her and arrived at the Head Office, approx 7 minutes past 11 a.m. The Deputy Commissioner received me and got into me straight away, where have you been. I told you to be here at 11 a.m. I said did you not get my message from the Inspector. By this time he had me properly stirred up and I said who is the boss, you or the Governor General of Australia. He then got into me about sending the two stripe officers back to the office. I said I am in charge out there, if you were relieving the Commissioner in here, would you like me to come in and have a look to see if you were doing the job right. Anyhow what's that girl doing over there. She is a shorthand typist taking notes he said. I said send her out or I will say no more. He would not send her out, and he said do you refuse to answer any further questions, that's right Sir I said. Alright I will recommend you to Mr Whitrod for some disciplinary action to be taken against you. I think I said thanks, you just do that. The Commissioner Mr Whitrod was a gentleman compared with this fellow. To cut the story short I was waiting to be called up by the Commissioner, but I have still never heard a word. However when I retired I called in to see the Commissioner Mr Whitrod and I asked him if he had any complaints from the Deputy about me and I told him the story. He said — No, Bill and good luck, you have done a good job. I think I said goodbye to the Deputy but had no conversation.

Lord DeLisle had quite a busy time, entertaining and trips and visits to



Sir Dallas Brooks presenting Good Conduct Medal and Long Service Medal, 1962