My Uncle Ted a man I never met!

Edmund Charles Wellington Woodward Johnson was born in Hobart Tasmania, on 25th April 1896 and spent his childhood years at Strawn & Queenstown on the west coast of Tasmania.

Ted was the eighth child of thirteen natural and four adopted children born to Fred JOHNSON and Emma nee WOODWARD, so I imagine life would not have been dull in this large household. Ted and his siblings attended the local school; leaving when they finished primary school.

My mother was a year older than Ted and from her recollections they spent their weekends and holidays with their parents picnicking and bushwalking to a creek or spring or over to the coast where they fished or played together on the rocks. On one occasion they were walking the narrow track, their Dad in front with his gun, the children eldest to youngest following single file, and their mother; at the rear carrying the baby. Rounding a bend a large kangaroo blocked the way; it grabbed my grandfather and with arms wrapped around each other they were bouncing and jumping in circles. The children thought they were dancing and were screaming with laughter. Tiring of the affray the kangaroo let go and bounded away, while father remonstrated with the eldest ones and his wife for not helping him get rid of the animal earlier. After that when something was said or done to recall this episode and their father was present furtive looks and muffled giggles would pass between them. If he was absent they would re-enact the great pantomime holding each other laughing and bouncing around in circles.

Papers written by his mother stated that he had been a boy scout and a Scout Cadet.

Eventually in 1911 they moved back to Hobart where Ted was employed at J Walsh & Sons, Stationary Warehouse and Manufactory business. When they were leaving Tasmania in 1912 a letter of recommendation was given to him; stating he had been employed as a message boy for the past eight months, and during this time had proved himself to be an active and obliging boy always punctual and willing and was leaving of his own accord.

The Northern Territory Government was donating land to people with families to encourage settlement. My Grandfather applied and won a parcel of land on the Daly River south of Darwin that the Northern Territory had donated. The adult children staying in Hobart waved goodbye to their parents their four youngest siblings when they left Tasmania on the sailing ship ‘Airlie’, to forge a life for themselves in the Northern Territory. On arrival they stayed at a local hotel for three days while supplies and tickets on a local ship to the Daly River were bought. After an arduous journey they arrived at their destination and were met by the local policeman and other residents of the area. The after arriving by horse and cart the next day they began construction of fences, sheds, a house, and garden of vegetables and fruit trees to supply the household before they could sow their peanut crop. They employed a lot of aboriginal men and women of the Brinkin tribe both to work in and outside the house. One day when the adults were employed at the stockyards a belligerent aboriginal called at the homestead demanding one of the girls go with him as his wife. When she refused he began abusing her; so my mother and her younger sister Eileen holding a shotgun pushed the girl inside and accosted him. While he was brandishing his spears and threatening them one of the other girls went out the back and made smoke signals for alert the men. Mother used to tell people she thought her brother Ted who was 16 years old and an accomplished horseman looked magnificent as he raced ahead of the others, his horse jumping fences and other obstacles to arrive there and force the hostile man to leave.
Eventually my family had to abandon peanut farming. Unfortunately the cost of conveying the crop to market rendered the endeavour financially unfeasible, so they moved back to Darwin in 1915. Ted’s sisters Bessie and Eileen both married and younger brother Len went to work on an outback station as a stockman. From his attestation papers Ted was employed as a blacksmith striker, who I assume was his uncle William Drysdale.

In 1916 the Australian Government was calling for more men to bolster the dwindling army battalions that were desperately short of men so Ted 19 years old, his cousin and countless others from around the nation enlisted soon after.

The army described Uncle Ted as 5 foot 3 and half inches tall with black hair and greyish brown eyes and of Presbyterian religion.

Darwin volunteers were conveyed by ship to Queensland to join other battalions and receive training. Ted and his cousin Matthew joined the 47th Battalion embarking on a ship HMAS ‘Borrara’ England. Unfortunately I have none of Uncle Ted’s own words to describe the voyage from Aust to England. The diaries of other Australian servicemen describe the journey as often tedious and hot and the men were drilled and instructed in the roles they were shortly to play. The rest of the time was passed writing letters, reading or playing cards until being offloaded at Plymouth.

After two months they boarded “Princess Clemintine” for the journey to France, landing at Etaples. They then marched to the battlefields that were covered in lifeless tree stumps, mud, slush, shell holes filled with water and sometimes snow.

I know only snippets of Uncle Ted’s service beyond this point. Much can be gleaned from the records and diaries of other personnel, but little that pertain directly to my uncle. What I do know I will endeavour to share.

1. His cousin Matt was killed at in September 1917 and lies in an unmarked grave in Dernacourt.

2. Later in the battle at Passchendaele Ted was awarded a Certificate of Congratulation by the Brigadier General commander of the 12th Aust Infantry Brigade and I quote, “when all his company stretcher bearers were killed he volunteered, and his gallant work, in both carrying and dressing the wounded, he worked unceasingly under heavy machine gun fire and showed great determination.

Recommendation for Edmond Johnson to be awarded a Commander in Chiefs Congratulatory Card
Service Number 2189, Rank: Private, Unit: 47th Battalion, Date of Award: 16 October 1917

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<tr>
<th>Schedule No.</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Regt. No.</th>
<th>Rank and Name</th>
<th>Action for which commended</th>
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<tr>
<td>47th Battalion \ AIF.</td>
<td>2189</td>
<td>Private Edmond JOHNSON</td>
<td>Near PASSCHENDAELE RIDGE on 10th October 1917 when all his company stretcher bearers were killed he volunteered and did gallant work, both in carrying and dressing the wounded. He worked unceasingly under heavy machine gun fire and showed great determination.</td>
<td>Commanding 12th Aust Infantry Brigade</td>
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3. Uncle Ted sent a postcard home that contains a poem, the first verse stating.

“Oh Mother.” How I miss you, to leave you was a blow
Far worse than facing Germans, because I love you so,
The greatest blow I could receive was leaving home,
Because I grieve on leaving one and all.
4. Imagining the ever present water and mud over one’s shoes and sometimes up to their waist, fleas infesting their bodies and rats gnawing on all their belongings, would have seemed too great to bear. However in reading the units’ daily diary of the events as they unfolded, the writer describes the men marching cheerily to the front lines and at night sitting in the trenches with feet sore from standing in knee deep water all day they were conversing cheerily.

5. Uncle Ted aged 22 years was killed in action on 28 March 1918, and lies in an unmarked grave next to the railway line in Dernacourt.

6. In a letter sent to my Grandmother following his death Corporal A. M. Anderson corresponded that Uncle Ted was a machine gunner in the company and in every action had displayed unusual qualities of cheerfulness under hardship and coolness in extremity. In his last fight that was against tremendous odds he was in command of the team and the confidence he inspired in his men went far to holding the enemy in his sector in the line. Sadly his surname is misspelled on the war memorial in Darwin and when his mother pointed this out to the Council she was told it would be too costly to change it. However my nephew, Robert Shewring, in Darwin has told me that he has been working to have it changed and the Council is now going to delete all names and add missing names and redo those that were incorrect. Johnson Park in Nakara, a suburb of Darwin, is named in his honour.

Ted a man who I had never met remains in my heart and I honour him for his humanity, love of family, and country. RIP

Contributed by Joy Davis Member No. 295.