

Alexander Leslie (Les) Emmanuel Aberley

Les Bottles (Grandson)



My Grandfather, Alexander Leslie Emmanuel Aberley, was born in Kaniva, Victoria on 9th January 1901.

He enlisted for Service in Bathurst, NSW. On his Enlistment Papers his enlistment date reads 1/5/17, making him sixteen years four months old. As his parents were divorced he probably lied and said that his father had passed away. Therefore his mother must have signed his papers so he could enlist. Maybe he caught her at a vulnerable moment, a moment of weakness, I don't know, but she signed his papers nonetheless and his Enlistment Papers state that he was eighteen years four months old.

One month later, on the 16th June 1917 he sailed from Sydney on the *HT Beltana* to France as a member of the 17th Battalion AIF.

Using these dates I estimate that he would have served approximately 14 months on the Front Line, at which time he was "found out". His Service Records show that on the 2/10/1918 it was discovered that he was under age. He then made a sworn declaration, which stated that he had lied about his age. He was then sent to a working party. What this was I can only guess, maybe digging trenches, carrying supplies, wounded soldiers, or any task to help make his unit run on a day-to-day basis?

I ask you, the reader, to stop and think for a while. Imagine you are 16 years old, you are in a foreign country a long way from home, from your loved ones, fighting a war, artillery shells exploding, machine guns and rifle bullets whizzing around your head, your mates dying all around you, you are up to your armpits in mud and slush, you are scared for your life, no doubt he would have grown up very quickly! I know when I was 16 years old I was at home safe in my hometown of Riverstone, chasing girls, mucking around with my mates, probably getting into strife, thinking about things a 16 year old boy should be thinking about, not off fighting a war, things that I could not do if it was not for my Pop and others like him. I know that he was not the only under age soldier to go to war, but, whilst I do not glorify war, his act of enlisting and serving his country at any age, let alone such a young age, makes me proud and honoured to be his Grandson.

He departed France at the end of 1918, aboard the *HT Berrima*, then from England on 2/1/1919 to Australia and he was discharged on the 17/3/1919 in Sydney. He was presented with a “Letter of Thanks”, from King George of England, for his services as were countless others who served. This letter, along with Pop’s war service medals, are held by my cousin, Warren Aberley.

After leaving the Army he moved back to Bathurst where he met my Grandmother, Hilda Jean Baker. They married on 18/11/1919 and moved to Riverstone, NSW where they bought “Clive Cottage” sometime in the late 1920s. Reading other articles posted with the Riverstone Historical Society I have discovered there was a Volunteer Defence Corps in Riverstone and, in Pop’s papers I found that he served for approximately 12 months in the VDC. I can only assume that Riverstone is where he served his time with them. This was also referred to as a Militia. He was discharged from this group on the 23/12/1942. I actually have a photo of him in his militia uniform. On 26/12/1942 Pop enlisted in the 2nd World War and was posted to the Sydney Coast Artillery as a Bombardier. He was discharged on 31/10/1945, serving approximately two years.

Pop loved animals. He used to train greyhounds. He also entered them in local races. I remember Nan and Pop had a horse plus a few fox terriers, some chickens and one of the best vegetable gardens in Riverstone and, in his spare time, he volunteered for the Riverstone Bushfire Brigade, something I understand he did for approximately three years. I believe, in his early days, he used to cut wood and sell it to locals to help make a living.



Les with two of his greyhounds.

“Clive Cottage” is situated at 53 Lytton Road West Riverstone, out near the cemetery. Lytton Road runs close to a creek and it runs close to the Meatworks’ fences. All of this land was rather flat and prone to flooding and, when Riverstone flooded, it was inundated with water. It went through every flood Riverstone has endured. My uncle Victor liked playing a piano that Nanna had in the lounge room. This piano also endured a few floods until it had to be thrown

away due to water damage. “Clive Cottage” was built, before 1900, by convicts. It was used as a halfway house for the convicts that worked up in the mountains and slept there on time off and in between shifts. Originally it consisted of a one-room structure with a large fireplace. It still stands today, although owned by someone unknown to me.

Les, as he was known, was a very active member of the Riverstone Returned Services Club. I believe he was a founding member and there was a room named after him. I can remember, as a young man, having many a beer in the “Les Aberley Room”. I seem to recall that this was a poker machine room.



Hilda and Les Aberley with Warren and Joy Aberley.

As a legacy of his time in France, Pop suffered terrible coughing fits. Whilst in France he was gassed. I believe the gassing eventually killed him and no doubt Post Traumatic Stress would also have been something he would have had to endure. He never talked about his military service or what made him sick, but as a young boy I recall him attending hospital on many occasions, due to the coughing.

Alexander Leslie Emmanuel Aberley died on my birthday, 9th February 1975 and is buried in Riverstone Cemetery alongside his wife, Hilda, and one of his sons, Victor, with other family members close by.