

Phillip McInnes – An Army Career

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Phillip was born Attilio Visocchi in 1921, the eldest son of Guiseppe and Rosa Visocchi who had migrated to Scotland just after the 1st World War. Their first six children were born in Scotland and the family then migrated to Australia in 1929, where another five children were born. They first rented a house in Cow Flat before building their own home on Carnarvon Road. All their children attended Schofields Public School.

Leaving school he worked at a variety of jobs but liking music and dancing he always took the opportunity to learn from the local musicians - namely Dick Stacey and Chummy Greenhalgh. He worked in many of the well known clubs of the day in Sydney - Oyster Bills, Showboat, Ziegfields, the Tivoli, the 400 club etc.

The Second World War

When the 2nd World war broke out he enlisted in the Australian Army, on the 24th May 1940. Because Italy had joined with Germany and realising that he would have difficulty enlisting in the Australian Army with his Italian name of Attilio Visocchi, he changed his name to Phillip McInnes. McInnes was the name of a family in Moss Vale that had befriended him.

He travelled to the Army Barracks in Moore Park, Sydney to enlist and there he met Ray Burgess, a man who became his lifelong friend. They travelled together by bus to the Ingleburn Camp where they joined the 2/6th Field Regiment as Regimental Signallers. It took more than three weeks to fully kit out the new recruits. Having worked in show business, he felt the initial weeks of their training would have been great material for a comedy film.

Being in the Artillery they were transferred to the army camp at Kelso by trucks towing their guns. The infantry were sent on a five day march to get to this Kelso camp. Phil recalled being rather envious of them, as each town they passed through they received gifts and goodies such as quarts of beer from well wishers. Training became more intense as they prepared to go overseas with the 7th Division. With their training completed they were loaded onto troop trains each carrying 700 soldiers and transferred from Kelso to Darling Harbour where they boarded the "Orion."

Off the west coast of Tasmania the 'Orion' joined the troopships, 'Stratheden', 'Strathmore' and 'Strathavers' carrying Australian troops and a Polish ship the 'Batory' carrying the New Zealand troops. Their next port of call was Fremantle, but crossing the Great Australian Bight Phil recalled many of the troops (including himself) being affected by sea sickness.

From Fremantle they sailed to the Middle East and Palestine. He made notes of the nicknames and the witty comments made about their officers. He always felt the Army preferred to perform every task it attempted by the most difficult method possible.

Their units trained in Palestine at Deir Suneid, near Gaza. They moved into Egypt through Ikingi Merut near Alexandria, and on to Mersa Matruh in the Western Desert, and then to the fighting in the Syrian campaign. After several months of battle and victory achieved, they marched into Beirut with cheering crowds lining the streets. He recalled the scraggy appearance of the troops in their tattered and torn uniforms and worn out boots. How unlike their parades in the big cities at home, wearing their smart uniforms.

Phil was invited to become a member of a concert group being formed by the 7th Division to entertain their own troops. Performing at Quastina he met Stan Russell from Riverstone, who had been dating Phil's sister Linda before he enlisted.

There was much speculation amongst the troops as training was intensified and movements appeared imminent. The big question amongst the troops was "to where". Everybody had their own theories. Some said Europe, some said Russia. Their Units crossed the Sinai Desert and were loaded onto troop trains that took them to a port on the Suez Canal. Phil was one of 5,000 troops who were loaded onto the 'Nieuw Amsterdam' and taken to Bombay, India. During the voyage they learnt that Singapore had fallen to the Japs.

At Bombay they were offloaded into three smaller Indian ships and escorted by destroyers back to Australia, the first port of call was Fremantle and then Adelaide. Phil was saddened to learn that a member of his Unit while on leave in Adelaide, had been killed in a motor bike accident.

Phil was allowed a few days leave in Adelaide and was billeted in an old home in the Adelaide Hills. Here he had the opportunity to phone his parents. How great it was to speak to the family and his mother who was in tears the whole time.

They boarded a train that carried them to Tocumwal, where they walked across the bridge over the Murray River and boarded another train that took them to Sydney. Their guns and vehicles were unloaded at Chullora and the troops went into Central to begin their leave. Phil remembered Charlie Knight meeting him off the train at Riverstone and allowing Phil to leave his bags and gun at his store, before taking him home to Carnarvon Road.

After their leave they boarded a train for Tenterfield where they began rehearsing for their concerts. Phil longed to return to his old Unit but contracted Dengue Fever and was transferred to the Australian General Hospital at Tamworth.

It was July 1942 before he rejoined his Signals Unit in Caboolture, Qld. One night on leave in Brisbane he was involved in a brawl with some American troops in a cafe that resulted in damaged furniture. Phil was given a choice - pay for some of the damage or be charged by the owner through the Military Police, who had stopped the ruckus. Phil had no money and opted to phone Dad. He was grateful to Dad when he wired him the money, but was not so impressed when Dad made sure that every resident of Schofields and Riverstone knew the story of his son's behaviour.

From Caboolture all the troops were loaded onto four trains and transported to the Brisbane dockside where they boarded the 'SS Maetsuycher' bound for New Guinea. He remembered Port Moresby for its stifling heat and the hordes of mosquitoes. He learnt just how bad the War was going and how poorly equipped we were, while marvelling at the Americans with their planes and construction equipment arriving in great numbers.

In Port Moresby he met up with Vern Luckman, another Riverstone identity who had just returned from active service in Milne Bay. They discussed how the tropics and the intense humidity aggravated problems such as dermatitis, diarrhoea, tinea, and malaria.

At times they received letters and parcels from home, always a wonderful present to receive and a real boost to the morale. He recalled the day he opened a parcel from his father, it appeared to be a stale loaf of bread, the crust crumbling away and revealing a bottle of Dad's wine.

He learnt his father was working with the Civil Construction Corps on the Bells Line of Road, from Kurrajong to Lithgow. His sister had joined the WAAF and was stationed at Forest Hills Air base at Wagga Wagga. Also his younger brother Ron was applying to join the Navy.

In December 1942 he suffered his first attack of malaria, a disease that was to cause him much suffering in the coming years. He recovered and with his old unit they were now in the midst of the fighting in the jungle.

Seeing the bodies of soldiers from both sides caused him to reflect on the fighting, that soldiers are not heartless, but war is just that, in the field of battle. War isn't really nice, it looks much nicer in capital cities with big bands leading smartly dressed soldiers, with colourful flags flying from tall buildings.

Several more attacks of malaria resulted in him being diagnosed with malarial debility and he was returned to Australia. He recalls his mother and family being visibly shocked when they saw how thin he was. After a lengthy period of recuperation he was released from hospital, and determined to rejoin his unit, he caught the train to Townsville.

Here he boarded the small Dutch ship 'Thedens' on its way to New Guinea. Arriving in Port Moresby he was amazed to see how much difference the Americans had made. It was now a busy and efficient port, nothing like the shambles he remembered from his first visit.

On shore he learnt that Stan Russell was dangerously ill in hospital with Scrub Typhus and not expected to survive through the night. He pleaded with the nurses to be allowed to see him. He was shocked to see how dreadful he looked, on oxygen, propped up with pillows and struggling to talk.

Recognising Phil, Stan asked how his sister Linda was. This led to a little more conversation and Phil said "You don't look as good as the last I time saw you, when Riverstone played Schofields Rugby League at the park". Stan gave a weak smile and closed his eyes. Next morning Phil went to the hospital, expecting to hear the worst. He was surprised when the Sister said "Through the night he seems to have passed the crisis, he seemed to pick up immediately after your visit yesterday".

Phil suffered another attack of malaria but was thankfully returned to duty with his unit a short time later. After another long train trip home, Phil recalled thinking at the time all railway workers deserved a medal for their wartime efforts, the movement of personnel and goods was far and away above what was expected of them, or what our railway system had been designed for.

He arrived home to another wonderful family welcome, a family he was so proud of. He met up with Stan Russell who had been returned home, his health improving every day, and was even better when Linda came home on leave.

While home on leave, Phil took part in a march past of the 7th Division through the streets of Sydney, a heavy downpour failed to dampen their spirits that day. As most people were aware the 7th Division was known as the 'Silent 7th' as a lot of their operations occurred when, for security reasons, they couldn't be publicised. A newspaper front page headline covering the march read - 'The Skipping, Sopping, Silent, Seventh'.

Another malaria attack saw him admitted to the 1st Australian Orthopaedic Hospital that was run by the Army and the Red Cross. Aware of his musical talents the Red Cross asked him to organise a

show for the patients, many of the patients doing their own acts. The shows were titled 'Hospital Blues' and 'Cheers For Atabrine'. They were memorable shows. Patients were wheeled in from all over the hospital. He still smiles today when, despite their smashed bodies and illnesses, he recalls how much they laughed and enjoyed the shows.

Stan Russell recovered and rejoined his old Unit, taking with him his pet carpet snake that was useful when buying a beer in a crowded bar.

Phil was now back with his 2/6th Field Regiment. Training for the Balikpapan landing was on the Atherton Tablelands, and their final effort before leaving Australia was a landing practice at Trinity Beach, near Cairns. The troops were loaded onto the 'Westralia', 'Manoora', and the 'Kanimbla' and taken to Morotai Island, the actual jumping off point for the Balikpapan landing .

It was now 1945, the atom bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Japanese eventually surrendered. The troops were now much happier and relaxed, many were helping the natives return to their houses. The Japanese soldiers, now prisoners, were being used as labourers to build roads etc.

A few months later the Australian troops were on the 'Manoora' bound for home, Phil recalling watching Borneo fade away in the distance and wondering what it would be like returning to civilian life. They left the 'Manoora' in Brisbane and travelled by train to Sydney, arriving on the 16th November 1945. Again Charlie Knight gave him a lift home to a wonderful family welcome, mother bursting into tears, and the house was full of visitors all afternoon. Linda and Stan were making wedding plans, and Doris was going out with another soldier, Keith Talbot.

Phil recalled his thoughts when accepting his discharge and at the time wrote –
"Although happy to be out of the Army I was extremely sad as well. I thought of all the wonderful blokes with whom it was my good fortune to have served. Even some I could describe as no-hopers, had their good qualities, and most of them were never found really wanting.

We had our dead and wounded mates. Fancy being buried in a place like New Guinea. Mates, you were unlucky both ways, to cop it, and then to be laid to rest in such a God-forsaken place. But wherever you are, you and the rest of the blokes, you will never be forgotten, certainly not by your mates from the 2/6th Field Regiment."

After his discharge Phil changed his name back to Phil Visocchi. He was happy to be a civilian again but was really missing his Army mates. He soon learnt at home that the Army style of giving orders did not work with the family, his younger brothers and sisters simply took no notice.

He went for several job interviews, feeling disappointed and a sense of frustration when told by some employers he lacked experience. He eventually got a job as a clerk at the Riverstone Meat Works and enjoyed working with a lot of his old school friends.

The Korean War & Japan

Phil was now married and, having problems settling down, he applied in August 1950 to enlist in the K Force to go to Korea. He changed his name back to Phil McInnes. K Force was a special Unit of experienced Army personnel from the previous war. They went initially to Japan and while there he badly damaged his knee and was unable to continue training. He remained a member of the Royal

Australian Regiment and in accordance with the CO's direction he became the Unit postie, an experience that he regarded as quite unique.

In 1951 he returned home and was admitted to the Concord Repatriation Hospital where he was declared fit for non-regimental duties only. He was transferred to the Armed Forces Stores/Canteen Services and spent the next 20 years working at Ingleburn, Holsworthy, Wagga Wagga, Duntroon, Williamstown and Woomera. In the meantime he had been promoted to a Warrant Officer.

The Vietnam War

After a period spent in Darwin he returned home and then completed the Jungle Training Course at Canungra, Qld. In March 1969, Phil received notice he was going to Vietnam as the Officer in Charge of the Stores and Bulk Stores at their base in Vung Tau.

The war in Vietnam was not going well. Though the morale of the Australian troops was high, the American troops appeared to be losing interest and there was a realisation that the War was never going to be won.

Phil recalled the Rugby League Grand Final in 1969 between South Sydney and Balmain, Souths being raging hot favourites and Balmain the rank outsiders. In Vietnam interest was at fever pitch; during the week prior to the game the Australians were doing their best to con the American troops into supporting Balmain, which they did. One of the Australian Officers bought himself a large toy rabbit (Souths mascot) and decorated his office with the red and green. On the day of the game the mess halls resembled a racetrack with their bunting, ribbons and the bookmakers.

The Aussies were stunned when Souths were beaten. When the Americans came to collect their winnings it was decided to hold a funeral to bury the toy rabbit. Phil described it as an impressive ceremony with one American stating "You wouldn't have got a better service at our Arlington War Cemetery".

In 1969 Phil was awarded the Long Service and Good Conduct Medal for services to the Armed Forces. America was moving to disengage itself from the war, but the North Vietnam troops and the Viet Cong were continuing the fight. Drug trafficking was becoming a major problem.

Phil, reflecting on his thoughts of the war at the time, wrote "I personally feel, to interfere in another country's sovereignty should be regarded as a capital crime. I was proud of being a soldier in the service of my country, but ashamed and soiled at invading another country that could never in our wildest dreams have been a threat to our security. The only benefit to any invading country under these circumstances is to bolster their own economies".

At this time Phil became very disillusioned with the war and wrote of other unpleasant experiences. He was a very happy man to be granted six days leave at Xmas to return home to see his family. He returned to Vietnam to complete his tour of duty and was returned to Australia in February 1970.

He was discharged from the Army on the 4th January 1971, but rejoined the Defence Department as a civilian. He was placed in charge of the NSW Bulk Store for the Australian Services Canteen Organisation. Later he was further promoted to be the Area Manager for the Newcastle/Singleton Area. Through illness Phil was declared unfit to continue duties and retired from the Services on the 6th February 1983. So after a career spanning more than 43 years, Phil, as an Australian can feel very proud of his service to this country.