



**THE TERRITORY  
REMEMBERS  
75 YEARS**

Commemorating the Bombing of Darwin  
and defence of Northern Australia

Wendy on the wing of a RAAF Wirraway (Farrell family)

# The Territory Remembers

## Living in Tennant Creek and Alice Springs when Darwin was bombed – through the eyes of a seven-year-old girl

By Wendy Farrell

**When Darwin was first bombed, my mother, father and sisters Camille, Elaine and Melodie, lived in Tennant Creek.**

When we came to Tennant Creek our Dad was employed by the Department of the Interior, in charge of the government bores in our area and Murunji track. I believe the government drilled and equipped many bores in the Northern Territory during the war.

At one time when Dad was servicing a bore, he wrote my name 'Wendy' on the tank with whitewash. Since then that has been its name. Wendy Bore is on the map. It is below Anthony's Lagoon below Desert Bore and above Boundary Bore.

We had heard rumours that Japanese planes were headed our way. A slit trench was dug at the front of the house, which was behind the police station and gaols in Patterson Street. This trench became our favourite cubby house for years after.

My sister Camille remembers Sergeant Dinny Smythe who lived next door, taking us all out bush in a ute for fear of an invasion. I don't know where we expected the planes to fuel-up along the way!!

I remember all the convoys going through Tennant Creek to Darwin. The soldiers really loved us and always threw us their little food ration tins full of goodies; concentrated blocks of meat, fruit, desserts etc. Our family lived on four-

gallon tins of dehydrated cabbage and potatoes along with Camp Pie and Bully Beef. We also had a vegetable garden plus ducks and chooks. There was a good butcher shop in town too.

I remember my uncle Butt (Ernie Butler) who came through on the convoy. Camille and I were sitting on the front verandah of the police station, which was in front of our house right on Patterson Street. Camille said she can remember we were wearing bloomers as it was so hot. Uncle Butt walked up to the policeman who was there and said: "Do you know Lina Stiles"? We sang out: "Yes she is our mother". As mum wasn't there at that particular moment, he wrote his name on the Police station veranda, Camille said, in pencil.

I spoke to mum (alive and well at 101 years) recently, who said she spoke to Uncle Butt briefly, then she and dad drove to Elliott that night, where they saw him again and had a beer and a catch-up. There was a large platoon of soldiers in the camp set up at No 8 Bore. She said the fruit and vegetable garden there was amazing and the camp could house 1500 troops. It was named after Captain "Snow" Elliott MBE who oversaw its construction.

Uncle Butt was shot by a sniper when he went to New Guinea, never to return to Australia, his wife and three children. We were visiting my Aunty Noelle in Claremont WA years later when his personal belongings were returned

in a large trunk. Everything had been rifled through. It was so sad for them. There is a tree and plaque in his memory at Kings Park, Western Australia.

I remember standing on the wing of a Wirraway when it landed to fuel-up in Tennant Creek. Mum said Dad was fuelling the plane which had to be filtered through fine cotton to ensure it was clean.

Before we moved into our house it had been used as a government storeroom so was filthy dirty. Mum remembers when we arrived there was a rainwater tap just inside the front door with a cocky sitting on it, completely featherless, waiting for a drop of water! Mum had the house spick and span within weeks and dad put a shade house verandah along the back. They had a cyclone bed hanging upside down as a hammock.

Our main garden was oleanders, parkenzonia, chinese creeper (with the little red pods) and the flat butter beans which grew all over the shadehouse. They were lovely to eat with salt, pepper and butter.

Mum said our toilet (lavatory pan type) was used by the soldiers and it was a full time job to keep it clean, even though it was emptied regularly by the lavatory man. She cleaned it regularly with phenyl. Of course, the usual toilet paper in those days was squares of newspaper with a hole punched in the corner and hanging from wire on the toilet wall. We were also taught to throw ashes, stored in the bucket in a corner, into the toilet if we did a number two 2. There were plenty of ashes in those days with wood fires and coppers which our clothes were boiled in.

When mum went into Tennant Creek Hospital to give birth to my sister Melodie, Tiger our dog joined her and lay under her bed and could not be moved by anyone. After much effort and angry growls from Tiger, they allowed him to stay. Both my sisters Elaine and Melodie were born in Tennant Creek. Mum said Elaine was the first child in the area to be raised on powdered milk. Dad got a goat to milk for Elaine but it ate poison weed and died. Dad and I often drove to the Tennant Creek Telegraph Station and got a large container of goats cream which he placed between us on the truck seat where we had turns dipping our fingers in. My sister Camille and I went to a fancy dress ball at the Tennant Creek school dressed as 'hula girls'. Mum made the grass skirts out of green and cream army rope by unravelling it and attaching to a waistband. We wore garlands of pink and white oleanders around our necks, wrists and ankles and won first prize, a lovely writing compendium each printed with fairies.

There were many social events in Tennant Creek. Once mum took down the chintz kitchen curtains and made herself a ball gown by hand. She was very beautiful and a wonderful ballroom dancer. She said halfway through the evening the gown started coming apart as it was hand stitched. Dad was a very good saxophone player and was joined by the many talented soldiers who joined in with their instruments at all the dances. One trumpet player looked the image of Errol Flynn. Thanks to the local open-air picture theatre we were up to date with all the movie stars.

My sister Camille remembers the air raid shelter at the state school, which we all raced into when the headmaster blew his whistle. We were all required to knit squares of wool which we were told would be sewn together to make hot-water-bottle covers for the troops. Not for Darwin that's for sure, with the heat up there. The knitting was shocking.

All the houses at Tennant Creek had wood heaps along their back fences. One day I found a box of matches and, starting at one end, proceeded to strike them. As I moved along I couldn't see any flames (this was daytime) so proceeded to light more matches. When I reached the end, the whole back yard was ablaze. Parents rushed out as there was a huge dump of full 44-gallon drums of petrol behind the fire. It didn't 'blow' and I don't know why. Anyway, I got a good hiding. Petrol was rationed then of course and a very valuable commodity.

I remember breaking my arm at the elbow trying to mount a boys' bike on my way home from school. I told mum a willy-willy tipped me over and I only told mum the truth the other day. My arm was set at Tennant Creek hospital but the doctor suspected it might have been set crooked as there was no X-ray machine there. I was flown to Alice Springs where my arm was reset by a leading army bone surgeon.

There were army tents everywhere in the Alice Springs hospital grounds as well as a post office. I had free run of the place, but spent most of my time skidding along the wide hospital verandas at top speed with my slippers on and my arm in great jeopardy! I also helped the nurses by re-rolling sterilised gauze bandages.

One day my sister Elaine tipped Lysol on her leg and developed a running sore which would not heal. To mum's horror, Tiger our dog licked the scab off Elaine's leg and within a few days it had healed.

Mum was a great horsewoman and had a lovely little mare called Dixie-Anna. She had been out exercising her horse with the local constable, who was on a black stallion. It appears that he kept brushing the stallion against mum's horse which ended up in mum being thrown. She was dragged for quite awhile with her foot in a stirrup and was covered in blood. All I could do was scream at the top of



my voice when I saw her. I probably thought she had been shot by the Japanese! I remember they put her in a warm salty bath.

Camille and I went to Katherine to stay with Peg and Dinny Smythe and their children Brian and Jan. He was the local Sergeant of Police and great friends of mum and dad. He had been our neighbour in Tennant Creek. On one occasion they took us to one of the amazing concerts put on by the troops. Peg allowed us girls to wear her ball gowns to show off to the soldiers. We were allowed to bake little patty cakes and ice them for the men.

What a fuss they made of us all dressed up with makeup on as well. We really believed them when they said we looked like film stars. Dressed up for the soldiers, we three girls wore 'Carmen Miranda' turbans around our heads, which was the rage back then. The concert was outstanding as most of the men were professional musicians, singers and actors. I can still remember some of them dressed up as women. Hilarious!

Mum went to South Australia and worked at Parafield Airport. She took two-year-old Elaine with her. Her job was to sew old silk parachutes onto Tiger Moth frames and then give them five coats of paint. She told me they had to sew the chutes on with lock-stitch. They were training planes.

One day one of the big bosses approached the girls telling them not to go into a 'certain' hangar. Immediately the coast was clear, they all slipped in and had a look. Lo and behold there was a Messerschmitt German plane which was badly damaged. How it got there they did not know, and they were unable to enquire as they weren't supposed to know about it. We wondered later if the pilot had defected.

When we moved to Alice Springs, we all wore lovely tan leather Australian Women's Army Service boots to school after they had been cut down to our ankles.

After the war, our family went to Darwin and purchased ten acres in Nightcliff bordering onto Bagot Road. Our father Ted Stiles started a trucking business, Outback Transport. His main depot was in Peel Street Darwin until he built a home and depot in Bishop Street.

*Wendy Farrell (nee Stiles) was born in the West Australian goldfields in 1935, the second of five children of Edward and Lina Stiles. The family moved to Tennant Creek in 1936. Wendy married Mervyn Farrell in 1956. They worked on cattle stations and managed the Wayside Inn at Timber Creek and Outback Transport. Wendy then worked at Ross Park School in Alice Springs for 12 years as a Library Assistant before starting Loveys Deli in Lovegrove Drive around 1988. Together they had five children and 51 years of marriage. Although Wendy now lives in West Australia close to her two daughters, she visits Darwin every year, as she is still a Territorian in her heart.*

