

Oatley Heritage & Historical Society Projects.

<i>Month & Year of Topic</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Written & Spoken Presenters</i>
May 2012	Bentleys of Oatley	Cliff Crane

Thomas Wesley “Wes” and Noela Mary (nee Frost) Bentley
Lived in Oatley 1950 to 2004 by Cliff Crane for the Oatley Heritage Group May
2012

Wes Bentley 1915 to 2002

Wes was born in Millthorpe near Orange in 1915, the eldest of 7 children. In 1937, at 22 he was working as a shop assistant for Western Stores in Orange, and living with his parents David Henry and Mildred Bentley at their home at 70 Byng Street, Orange.

By late 1937, Wes was listed as a grocer, and now living at 61 Byng Street, Orange. The family moved often after losing their house in the Depression and being forced to rent and take in borders.

In 1941, the year he enlisted, Wes was living at 135 Dalton Street, Orange, shown as Shop Assistant. Shortly after the family moved to Sydney to escape the cold Orange winters.

Wes originally tried to enlist in the RAAF but was rejected because of a heart murmur. Later, he came to Sydney and enlisted for the army and didn't tell them about heart murmur; he was accepted – and lived till 86 with a murmuring heart.

Service record

Name	BENTLEY, THOMAS WESLEY
Service	Australian Army
Service Number	NX57694
Date of Birth	31 Oct 1915
Place of birth	BLAYNEY, NSW
Date of Enlistment	16 Jul 1940
Locality on Enlistment	ORANGE, NSW
Place of Enlistment	PADDINGTON, NSW
Next of Kin	BENTLEY, DAVID
Date of Discharge	21 Nov 1945
Rank	Corporal
Posting at Discharge	2/3 Pioneer Battalion
WW2 Honours and Gallantry	None for Display
Prisoner of War	No

Initially Wes' unit, the 2nd/3rd Pioneer Battalion, was sent to Darwin ahead of the other troops - there they were trained and built huts before returning to Sydney, and then being posted to Middle East on the Queen Mary. Noela said that years afterward writing by some of the fellows from Wes' unit was found on a drawer in a cupboard in the Queen Mary.

- Wes' unit saw action in El Alamein – he had his 27th birthday on October 1942 while fighting in the pivotal “*second battle of El Alamein*” in which allied forces breached the German line and drove the enemy back to Tunisia. It was about that allied victory that Winston Churchill said “*Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end, but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.*” After the war, Churchill wrote: “*Before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein, we never had a defeat.*”

At this time Noela and Wes rented part of an old house in Letitia Street, No. 56. This very old house with huge rooms is still standing and Noela remembers that at that time it belonged to the Judd family.

Wes & Noela took the two front rooms, and use kitchen and laundry out the back with built in tubs and a fuel, ie wood burning, copper. The remainder of the house was rented to Mrs. Daisy Blanchfield who used to go to work, meaning Wes & Noela more or less had use of the house. Noela remembers the flea plague and sitting up at night cracking them as they hopped up from the bare floorboards.

Their first child Jill was born 17 December 1949.

Wes worked the shop, Noela helped until Jill was born, then Wes was helped by a woman who had previously helped Mrs. Thompson. Their customers became lifelong friends as there were many young families in a similar position to them.

Brother Gordon, who had married Mrs. Thompson's daughter, had bought a vacant block in Park Avenue, Oatley West and built a garage on it but decided to move New Guinea with his work. He offered the garage to Noela & Wes to rent. It was only a shell, empty – no guttering even, they moved in 1950 with a baby in a year of record rainfall. Initially they caught rain in a bucket for water and also had a wood fuel copper.

They knew no one when they first moved to Oatley and Noela's brother said "make yourself known to Bob Heaton and his wife Kath who live in Lloyd St". Bob and Kath and their friends, many of whom were ex-servicemen and wives, formed a close bond over the coming years as they all had so much in common. They played a regular Saturday night canasta where everyone "bought a plate". Noela bought just the plate the first time! Many fun times were enjoyed and those still alive keep in regular contact. There was Jack and Doss Walker, Jim and Marg Keating, Ted and Heather Williams, Geoff and Barbara Hand, Beryl and Peter Hand and Bob and Kath. The Hand brothers had joined the RAAF and were sent to Canada for training where they met their lovely wives who came to settle in Australia after the war ended.

In 1952 Noela and Wes, with a loan from the Rural Bank, purchased a house at 60 Mi Mi St, Oatley West that was to be their home for 52 years.

When second daughter, Heather, was born in 1953 Noela and Wes decided that working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week was not family friendly so they sold the business and Wes took a job with Qantas as a Purchasing Officer.

Wes had developed a love of travel from his time in the Army, so with a staff discount the family would be able to do some more. In 1956 the family took up a two year posting to Darwin, Darwin being the entrance to Australia at the time and with the Melbourne Olympics that year it was a busy and thriving town. The family were housed at Berrima, and ex RAAF camp.

After returning to Oatley in 1958 they reignited friendships and over the ensuing years Wes took on community responsibilities with the RSL, Oatley Bowling Club and the 2/3 Pioneers Association, becoming Secretary and President. Noela acted as his secretary and together they keep the group together, supporting the men as they aged and being there for the many widows as the years passed.

In 2000 the members of the 2/3 Pioneers Assn applied for an award for Wes but as it was the year of the Olympics it was given to sportsmen. Noela has kept the many glowing letter that were written to support the award.
The Assn met every month and on Anzac Day, the last meeting being held this year as there are only 6 men left – all in their 90s.

Wes died 2 January 2002 aged 86 from prostate cancer. The service by a Salvation Army Chaplain who was with the 9th Division in the Middle East was attended by 200 people, with the wake at Oatley RSL.

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Noela Bentley nee Frost

Noela was born in Nottinghill Road, Lidcombe in 1925 during the depression at a midwife's house.

Her grandfather, James Frost, worked as a stonemason on Prospect Dam and when it was completed bought land in Lidcombe 34, 36 & 38 Raymond St. (so named after 2 councillors Lidbury and Larcombe). As this suburb was the next to Rookwood Cemetery James would be able to get regular work as a stonemason and has many headstones there bearing his name.

James was a great horseman and won many medals with the Parramatta Lancers. Noela's father, Henry James, was also a keen horseman and enlisted with the 7th Light Horse Brigade on turning 18 in 1915 and was sent to the Middle East during World War 1. During his time there his father came with remounts (fresh horses) and there is a photo of their meeting in the desert. Henry James was returned to Australia ill and weighing only 6 stone.

Noela's grandfather sold 2 of the blocks of land cheaply to his 2 sons, George and Henry James "Jim", and Noela was born shortly after a house was built on the site in 1925. Her grandfather died of pneumonia from the stone dust when she was a baby, and her maternal grandfather had died in 1900 also from pneumonia – no antibiotics then!

Noela completed her Intermediate Certificate in 1939 aged 14 and did a business course with Stott & Underwood at Parramatta for one year. Starting work with AGE Australian General Electric was convenient as they had a factory at Lidcombe and she stayed until enlisting at age 18 in 1943.

The war had really bought the community together, Noela remembers knitting many socks for the troops and selling tickets for the chocolate wheels conducted by the RSL to raise money for the returning injured soldiers.

A bomb shelter was built under Lidcombe Town Hall and Noela volunteered there doing messages or whatever was needed to help the war effort.

Her father Jim was in the VDC – Volunteer Defence Force – as he had experience from WW1. His and his father's names are recorded on the memorial at Lidcombe Park. Noela's mother Bonnie, worked at the local canteen set up for men on leave, made camouflage netting used to cover guns in the Middle East, and billeted English sailors many times.

Noela applied to join the army the day after turning 18 on 6 May 1943 and was accepted 1 June. She had come from an army family, with both father and grandfather involved and her older brother, Gordon, also having joined at 18.

Noela's mother thought she would be refused on medical grounds as she had been a sickly child, but Noela left the form for illnesses blank so passed the test.

Service Record

Name	FROST, NOELA MARY
Service	Australian Army
Service Number	NF461185
Date of Birth	6 May 1925
Place of birth	LIDCOMBE, NSW
Date of Enlistment	1 Jun 1943
Locality on Enlistment	LIDCOMBE, NSW
Place of Enlistment	PADDINGTON, NSW
Next of Kin	FROST, HENRY
Date of Discharge	23 May 1946
Rank	Signalman
Posting at Discharge	Australian Womens Army Service
WW2 Honours and Gallantry	None for Display
Prisoner of War	No



After the written test the officer said "You have very good handwriting and with your experience at the Lidcombe bomb shelter we will allocate you to Signals"

AGE was a protected industry and it was not easy to obtain a release but was pleased to be accepted and became NF461185

"I clearly remember my first day as an AWAS, 1st June 1943, when we were transported to Ingleburn Camp and installed in huts - it was freezing! I remember getting up in the night and putting on every item of clothing I had and still feeling cold."



As young women alone for the first time it didn't take long for friendships to form in the camp and those friendships remain to this day, though sadly very few are still living.

After 6 weeks Rookie Camp learning the basics of marching and Army life the trainees we entrained at Central Station for Albury and trucked to Bonegilla Camp nearby (later to become a migrant hostel). Bonegilla was even colder than Ingleburn. This new Signals Unit began to learn Morse Code and after 6 weeks were entrained to Melbourne and a Sigs Operators Course with extensive code practice on the wireless. The camp was in the grounds of Ivanhoe Grammar School, which may sound glamorous but the officers occupied the beautiful old stone buildings whilst the new recruits were housed in 10 long corrugated iron huts, each holding about 20 beds made from fencing wire with straw paillasses (mattresses) and bare timber floors, and it was FREEZING!

“We were a very compatible and happy group and had quite a few wags that were always up to something to stir the officers. I was 18 and very naïve as I had never left the security of home before so it was great fun to be with girls my own age. We were like sisters and took great care of each other.

It was at the Ivanhoe camp that one funny incident occurred. One very cold night my new found friend in the next bed said “I’m freezing Frosty” – my maiden name was frost so I soon became” Frosty” and retain the name to this day with my Army mates. So she suggested that we get in bed together and in no time we were warm and drifting off to sleep. The next thing I remember was a touch shining in my face and an angry woman officer demanding to know “what are you two doing in bed together?”

Of course we told her the story of how cold we were and wondered why she was so hostile. “Report to the C.O. (Commanding Officer) at 9am and get back in your own beds!” which of course we did but fearing we would be discharged in the morning. At 9am we marched into the C.O.’s office in the main building and there sat a huge man who scared the daylight out of us.

“What was the idea of you two being in bed together?” We told him our story and imagined he would believe us as we were innocent but instead he roared

“Are you two lesbians?” We looked at each other wondering.

“Do you know what a lesbian is?”

Again he roared and again we looked at each other and I meekly said

“Oh yes, that is someone who acts on the stage I think”

“Oh my God” he said as he shook his head

“Go back to your hut – case dismissed!”



I was so pleased that I had given him the correct answer and he had dismissed us as I thought we would be dishonourably discharged – what a disgrace – and all for just being in bed together.

It was only after the war when I was married, had a child and was out with a group of tennis ladies that the word “lesbian” came up in conversation and the

meaning was revealed to me, and I understood the C.O's reaction! My father always said "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing"

After 6 weeks the group were entrained to Indooroopilly near Brisbane for specialist training. Here the housing was tents with the occasional snake for company. The group were to be known as the *Wheatstone Section – No. 1 Australian Submarine Cable Section*, and spent many days in an old garage in Brisbane learning the sounder. The cable was a line connected directly from Port Moresby to Townsville as teleprinters were not yet in use.

The next move was to Townsville where a camp was constructed at Stuart to house the Section (on the road to Charters Towers). The next 18 months were spent there doing shifts of 8 hours each, 24 hours a day, with 9 days on and 3 days off. The Sigs Office was a concrete bunker of a building built into the side of a hill.



"Days off were sometimes spent on Magnetic Island, where we swam and walked around the island. We had some great times there together, occasionally a concert party would come to entertain us. The girls made 2 piece swimsuits for themselves from tea towels, the time passed very quickly and then back to work".



In August 1944 Noela and another Sig, Rita, were sent for an advanced Sigs Ops Course and passed with distinctions, returning to Townsville.

"Rita was great fun – she had been secretary to Reg Ansett in civvy life and put her age up to obtain more pay – 4 shillings and 8 pence a day was not enough for

Rita. One day I remember we were assigned to prepare supper for the officers, and she suggested instead of cheese on the sandwiches we cut up 4"x4" bars of soap – and we did!"



In July 1945 as the war was nearing its end the Section was transferred to Melbourne's Fawkner Park. This camp was built to house American troops but their officers refused to occupy it as it was so bad – just Masonite huts. So the camp was allocated to the Australian Army!

At the end of the war the Signals Section received via Wheatstone, and passed on the many messages coming from POW's from around the world to their families who had been waiting to hear if they had survived. This was a very emotional experience.



Noela was discharged on 21 May 1946, having served a few days under 3 years, she found civilian life hard to adjust to at first and missed the company, the sad and the happy times together.

Noela enrolled in a Rehabilitation Course as a comptometer

operator and began work at David Jones soon after in the Invoice Control Section.



When Noela met Wes in 1947 they had an immediate affinity. They had much in common and Noela was able to help Wes with his anxious state as she understood what he had been through, they were married in 1949.

Noela loved her 55 years living in Oatley, their beautiful garden with flowers, fruit and

vegetables, 2 children she adored, caring and supportive friends and many ways to keep active as she aged taking up bowls (becoming president of the Oatley Bowling Club), U3A classes, craft, theatre and trips locally and overseas.

After Wes's death in 2002 the time came to make a decision about looking after a house and garden alone.

"My daughter Jill suggested I look at a Retirement Village at Tea Gardens, not far from where she lived. I was reluctant to leave my friends of over 50 years, but on a subsequent visit the CEO of The Grange, Gail, said "Noela I have just the place for

you”. Gail showed us No. 187 which was just being built – immediately I could image myself there with a new house, well-maintained gardens and a lovely courtyard looking onto them. I have been here 7 years now and am very happy. I would love to do more but am grateful for how much I can manage, still going to U3A lectures and outings, Red Cross, RSL Auxillary, Probus, trips locally and I have made some wonderful friends with whom I enjoy lunch and dinner outings. Everyone is so kind I am as “happy as a sandboy” and I count my lucky stars each night and think “Wes would have loved it here”.

Daughter Jill and husband Peter live nearby and we love having time together. My other daughter, Heather, lives in Sydney and has developed a post teaching career doing interesting lectures for U3A, we enjoy long phone calls. I have 2 great grandchildren and another due in February. I am indeed fortunate!”

Noela Bently November 2011