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Front cover images: The Bell family residence at 953 Albany Highway, East Victoria Park; Private Alec Bell checking a young Vietnamese Montagnard boy for fever.



PRIVATE ALEC ERNEST JAMES BELL (1946-1968)

Postal officer, Son, Brother, Uncle, Hero



Birth and Family

Alec Ernest James Bell was born on 28 March 1946, the second youngest of six children, to Robert Edward Arthur and Florence Rose Elizabeth (nee Jones) Bell.

Robert Bell was a fitter and turner employed by Western Australian Government Railways at the tram depot, colloquially referred to as the "Carbarn", that was located at the East Perth end of the Causeway. Prior to marrying in 1933, Florence worked in the tailoring trade and was a skilled seamstress.

Life in Victoria Park

In 1939, the Bell family moved into their forever home at 953 Albany Highway (on the corner with Camberwell Street), East Victoria Park. It was a Federation-style, two-bedroom, double-brick and iron house with a wide front verandah. It was still standing in the early 2000s, but no longer.

Alec went to primary school at Our Lady Help of Christians School, East Victoria Park, and secondary school at St Francis Xavier College, now part of Ursula Frayne Catholic College. He left school in 1961 aged 15 years and went on to work as a telegraph boy at the local post office around 1962, later becoming a postal officer at the GPO.

War Service

Private Alec Ernest James Bell (Service Number 5714453) was called up to Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies' National Service Scheme on 13 July 1966 and began training at Puckapunyal, Victoria, later joining the 3rd Infantry Training Battalion based in Singleton, New South Wales.

During his training as a rifleman, Private Bell also undertook training as platoon medic and, by 7 December 1966, joined the 7th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (RAR) in which he would serve with 1,183 others as a platoon medic known as Private 'Dinga' Bell, a man with great compassion and care for his mates.

Platoon Sergeant Tom Bourke described the day Private Bell lost his life, when his platoon ambushed the enemy close to Bien Hoa airbase, South Vietnam.

"Private 'Dinga' Bell was platoon medic on the late afternoon of 29 January 1968. In the first few moments the Platoon Commander, 2Lt O'Brien, and all the NCOs were wounded including Private Bell who had received a direct hit from a rocket. Even though shockingly wounded, Private Bell tried to get to the other wounded. When he could not move he gave orders to another soldier as to how to help them. Even when we finally got him on to the Dustoff stretcher, Private Bell was still giving advice as to the care of the other wounded. As he was lifted up through the trees the enemy opened fire again. The Dustoff was forced to leave the area with Private Bell and stretcher hanging underneath. We later learned that he was dead on arrival at hospital".

Legacy

Private Alec Bell was buried in Karrakatta Cemetery in Grave KA 727 on 15 February 1968.

A memorial flagpole and plaque was dedicated at Xavier College in the late 1970s/1980s by the Bell family and the Korea and South-East Asia Forces Association. The memorial was later moved and now resides in a special commemorative garden at the front entrance to the Balmoral Street campus of Ursula Frayne Catholic College.

Plaques, memorials and even a public park have been placed and named in honour of Private Alec Bell, but they are just reminders of the legacy of the man. This true blue Australian son whose bravery, and selfless disregard for his own safety, whilst being mortally wounded himself, most likely saved the lives of the eleven other soldiers wounded in the enemy engagement along with him.

Lest We Forget