

HISTORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN BLINDED SOLDIERS ASSOCIATION

The Australian Blinded Soldiers Association was first mooted, and its formation agreed upon, in Melbourne in 1921, when blinded ex-servicemen from various States had gathered to confer on matters relating to their future welfare. However, owing to certain difficulties, the Association was not inaugurated until the year 1929 when, by mutual agreement of the States, the now properly constituted organisation, known as "The A.B.S.A.", was formed.

It will be gathered from the foregoing, therefore, that the State Associations were first formed. These inaugurations followed immediately upon the return of our men from St. Dunstan's. These State Associations came into being as a result primarily of the friendships and fellowship created at St. Dunstan's - that wonderful hostel founded by the late Sir Arthur Pearson and known throughout the world, and to which our fellows were sent from various hospitals to be trained in suitable occupations, befitting them for their future lives. Upon their return to Australia our men missed greatly those friendships and forthwith it was agreed that they form themselves into Associations for mutual help and advancement.

The authority of the A.B.S.A. or Federal Body is vested in a Council, comprising two delegates from each State Association; a President, Vice-President and a Secretary-Treasurer, and the amalgamation of our forces, with its resultant united representation, is one of proven benefit to all concerned.

The aims and objects of the A.B.S.A. are chiefly to assist in the activities of the State Associations of Blinded Soldiers, to represent all Australian Blinded Soldiers in matters which may affect their welfare generally and which could not otherwise be dealt with conveniently by the State Associations acting independently. However each Association is self-governing, still retaining its autonomy or right to deal with matters of domestic nature.

Our other objects are many and varied, but, without wishing to reiterate or go further into detail, it is felt that sufficient is written in the foregoing to illustrate the work of our organisation and again is evidenced the practical value of combined effort and of helpful co-operation of all States during the whole of the period generally to date.

The Australian Blinded Soldiers Association is not an opposition body to the Returned Soldiers League or other soldier organisations.

Bearers of the State Branches R.S.L. held official positions also in State Associations of Blinded Soldiers; for instance Mr. Fraser East and Sir R.D. Huish who were both Presidents of Queensland R.S.L. were also Vice-Presidents of the Blinded Soldier Organisation of that State; Mr. D.M. Benson, former Secretary of the League in W.A., held the position of the President W.A.B.S.A. for many years, and for a like period Mr. Reynolds, ex-Secretary of R.S.L. in South Australia has carried out the duties of President of the S.A. Branch of Blinded Soldiers. It will be noted, therefore, that the Returned Soldiers League and Blinded Soldier, or Blinded Ex-servicemens Organisations are very closely allied.

INAUGURAL MEETING

The A.B.S.A. Conferences are held biennially, or as near to the two years' regularity as may be practicable. The Inaugural Meeting was held in 1929 at Perth, Western Australia, and was opened by Colonel Collett, the then President of the W.A. Branch, R.S.S.A.I.L.A. The Second Conference was held in Melbourne in 1932 and was opened officially by the Lord Mayor at that time, Sir H. Gengault Smith. As the year 1934 marked the beginning of Victoria's Centenary Period, Melbourne was again the venue of our all-Australian gathering. This, the third Biennial Conference, was opened by the former Lord Mayor, the late Sir William Brunton.

EMPIRE CONFERENCE

Immediately following the A.B.S.A. Conference, an Empire Blinded Ex-servicemens Congress was held in Melbourne on November 5th, 1934, and was opened by His Excellency, the Governor, Lord Huntingfield. This Congress was organised by the A.B.S.A., and among those in attendance at the Opening were Lord Milne and Sir Ian Fraser (now Lord Fraser) (delegates to the British Legion of Ex-Servicemen) Sir Cluther Mackenzie and Mr. Selby, representing New Zealand, Colonel T.E. White (later Sir Thomas White, Australian High Commissioner in London) the Australian delegates and many others interested in Blinded Soldier Welfare.

BLINDED MEN MEET H.R.H. THE DUKE OF GLOUCESTER

It will be recalled of course, that this was the very auspicious occasion of the visit to Australia of His Royal Highness, the Duke of Gloucester who, on the second Tuesday in November (during Congress period) honoured our members by visiting our clubrooms in Bourke Street, Melbourne and meeting personally Sir Ian Fraser, Sir Cluther

the Conference held in Melbourne in conjunction with Victoria's Centenary Celebrations. Therefore, South Australia agreed to take the 1936 Conference, with that States Centenary period; it would appear that this was becoming a habit; as a matter of fact all so concerned were well suited by the exchange of such meetings. The last mentioned Conference was held in Adelaide and was opened officially by Colonel Fowler-Brownsword, an eminent soldier, and on two occasions, His Excellency, the Governor of S.A., Sir Winston Dugan attended the gathering.

The actions of the smaller States (that is, State Associations having small memberships) in each taking its turn and accepting responsibility of staging and assisting in convening our Conferences, is worthy of special mention, and following upon S.A.'s grand effort, the Queensland Blinded Soldiers Association was not outdone in the matter of conducting our 1938 Conference in Brisbane, a very successful Conference which was opened by His Excellency, the Governor of Queensland, Sir Leslie Orme Wilson. It is worthy of note also, that in spite of the long distances of travel, all our State Organisations (excepting Tasmania, where there was no Association at that time) were fully represented at this particular meeting.

A succession of Conferences followed in Melbourne and Sydney, a biennial in the first-named Capital in 1940, a Special Meeting in Sydney in 1941, a biennial, Sydney 1945. Adelaide as the venue of our next Conference in September 1947, the function being declared open by the late Sir Eric Millhouse, K.C., Federal President, R.S.L.

At all five last mentioned Conferences, our deliberations were devoted almost entirely to matters of the training, welfare, rehabilitation, etc. of the "newly-blinded ex-servicemen". Early in the 1939-45 war, the Federal Government had very graciously agreed to send the men to St. Dunstan's for such reorientation, but that policy was subsequently altered owing to the changes of theatres of war, etc. However, in 1947-48, the Government reverted to its previous arrangement, by virtue of a magnificent offer by Sir Ian Fraser and St. Dunstan's, and our unanimous and pressing overtures. As a result 19 war blinded - 14 from Victoria, 3 from W.A., 1 from Queensland and 1 from S.A. were afforded the opportunity and sent to St. Dunstan's.

A Special Meeting of the A.B.S.A. was called in April 1949 and was held in Melbourne, and in October of the same year, our 9th Biennial Conference was held in Perth, W.A; it was opened by General Whitelaw, and the significance of the gathering was

reason for the inability to hold such conferences in that state.

The 10th Biennial Conference was staged in Sydney, by the N.S.W. B.S.A. and was declared open by Capt. Cyril B. Smith, O.B.E. Deputy Chairman, Repatriation Commission, who retired on January 20th, 1953.

His Excellency, the late Sir John Laverack, Governor of Queensland in 1953, opened our Biennial gathering, held in Brisbane in May of that year and he (Sir John) and Lady Laverack graciously tendered our party a grand reception at Government House during our happy stay in the State's Capital.

Hobart, Tasmania, was the venue of the 12th Biennial Meeting opened by the R.S.L. Treasurer, Mr. Hawker, acting for Mr. Luke, Deputy Federal President R.S.S.A.I.L.A. Mr. J. Dwyer, V.C., Minister for Agriculture, and other leading citizens were present at the opening, including member the late Capt. Frank Marriatt, M.L.A. for a quarter of a century, and father of Senator John Marriatt, an esteemed member of the present day Federal Government. Mr. Fred Marriatt, (brother of Senator John) is a member of the Tasmanian Parliament.

Our 13th Biennial Conference of the Association was held in the South Australian Capital in April 1957, and was declared open by His Excellency, the Governor, Sir Robert George. We were also favoured in gracious manner by a timely visit of His Excellency, the Governor-General of Australia, Field Marshal, Sir William Slim, who, upon learning of our presence in Adelaide at that time, had expressed a wish to meet us. The Governor-General, visiting South Australia on an important mission, very kindly consented readily to giving us half an hour of his most valuable time, and chatted to each of our delegates in turn. We were happy indeed about such kindly and generous a gesture.

Our 14th Biennial Conference was held in Melbourne, beginning on 11th April 1959, and opened by Sir George Holland, Federal President of the R.S.S.A.I.L.A.

Our 15th Biennial Conference, held in Perth, May 8th to 12th 1961, was opened by E.C. Townsend, Esq., M.B.E., Sr. Vice-President, W.A. R.S.L.; the 16th Biennial in Sydney, in the third week of May 1963, opened by the former Governor of N.S.W. His Excellency, Sir John Northcote; the 17th held in Brisbane in 1965, declared open by the Hon. the Premier of Queensland, Mr. Micklin, and the latest to be held was in Hobart, April 1967, and was opened by His Excellency the Governor of Tasmania, Sir Charles Cairdner.

(Our Joe) announced that, owing to ill health, he unfortunately considered it necessary that he should retire, after having held the post of President of the A.B.S.A. for 36 years, and here we, the blinded soldiers, and their folk and friends alike appreciate that he officiated during such a lengthy period with much vigour and distinction.

OFFICE BEARERS

The bearers of respective posts of A.B.S.A. over the period 1929 to date were as follows :-

Our first President, Mr. R.H. Gregory, Equity Lawyer, 1929-31, 2 years; P.J. Lynch, C.B.E., 1931-67, 36 years; the late E.R. Glew, M.B.E., who had been an ardent worker for blinded soldiers for 8 years prior to the formation of the Association, was Secretary-Treasurer, 1929-34, 5 years; A.F. McDonnell, M.B.E., Secretary-Treasurer, 1934-61, 27 years; J.A. Whittle, O.B.E., of S.A., our first Vice-President, 1949-59, 10 years; C.H. Porter, N.S.W., Vice-President, 1959-67, 8 years; T. Melbourne, Secretary-Treasurer, 1961-63, 2 years; and R.R. Archer, M.B.E., Secretary-Treasurer, 1963-67, 4 years.

The Officers for the current term are - President, E.R. Blackmore, Brisbane, Capt. in the forces, Second World War; Vice-President, W.H. Luck, (N.S.W.); Secretary-Treasurer, J. Mason, Woody Point, Queensland,

D.A. Tregent, H.B.E., B.A., LL.M. has been Hon. Solicitor to the Association since its inception to date, August 1968, that is for 39 years.

A.B.S.A. HONOURED

All members of our Organisation felt highly honoured and delighted when, in 1953, the Federal President, Mr. P.J. Lynch was chosen as representative of the Commonwealth Disabled Soldier Associations to visit London for the Coronation of Her Most Gracious Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II; his account on his return, of such inspiring ceremony, was most encouraging and interesting.

VISIT OF LORD AND LADY FRASER

Lord Fraser of Lonsdale, as Chairman of St. Dunstan's and Chief of Blinded ex-servicemen of the Commonwealth of Nations, kept his long standing promise to visit Australia, eventually to meet us here in November 1959, when representatives came from New Zealand, in Donald and Mrs. Malher and Jim and Mrs. May and G.

House, Collins Street Melbourne on 12th November, when all assembled and our Federal President P.J. Lynch invited Lord Fraser to take the Chair; the respective Representatives reports, advices and the discussions of the Meeting were most enthusiastic and enlightening, and ended in a very happy vein. Various other functions held in conjunction with this most important visit were - a luncheon at the Athenaeum with the R.S.L., a dinner at Legacy House, a dinner with A.B.S.A. at Scotts Hotel, a reception for our illustrious visitors by the Vic. B.S.A. at Scotts (afternoon), a like reception at the Caulfield Sub-Branch R.S.L. (evening), a parlour coach trip to visit Healesville Sanctuary, other gatherings and finally a "Smoke" Social with the V.B.S.A., all such functions - in short - a reunion to mark the visit of Lord and Lady Fraser.

EMPIRE CONFERENCE, LONDON, 1960

Shortly after Lord Fraser's return to England in the early months of 1960 we were highly delighted to have word advising re St. Dunstan's Council's decision to hold an Empire Conference in London in July of that year, all Commonwealth countries being cordially invited to send representatives to attend, resulting in the following acceptances :-

The U.K. by Lord Fraser, Chairman; Mr. D.A.Lloyds, Secretary and Mr. C.D. Wills, Welfare Superintendent.

Australia by P.J.Lynch, Federal President; A.F.McConnell, Federal Secretary-Treasurer and E.W.Snelling, President of South Australian B.S.A.

Canada, New Zealand and South Africa also sent Representatives. Conference discussion dealt with a comprehensive agenda of matters mutual in design, namely war pensions and allowances, suitable professions, occupations, trades, employment, welfare, after care, etc., and the delegates reports, advice and information furnished were of immense proven interest and, again, enlightenment to all present. The carefully prepared programme of social events likewise proved tremendously enjoyable and included -

A Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace Grounds (representatives being presented to Her Majesty, the Queen); a visit to Hampton Court by invitation of Sir Neville Pearson, Bt. and Lady Pearson and a dinner at the Mitre Hotel; a reception at the home of Lord and Lady Fraser, (St. John's Lodge); Luncheon at House of Parliament as guests of St. Dunstan's Council and the U.K. Minister for Pensions, Mr. Carpenter; a visit of inspection at St. Dunstan's Training Centre, Brighton, representatives attending the Annual Meeting of the Royal Society for the Blind; a reunion of College annex students etc. The entire social programme was one of joyous celebrations, happy reunions of

as St. Dunstan's, was founded by the late Sir Arthur Pearson, Bt., son of an English Clergyman. Sir Arthur, whose sight had failed prior to the First World War, but who was possessed of a truly wonderful national spirit, was quick to realise the inevitability of men and women being blinded whilst serving in the forces of the British Commonwealth, requiring suitable and early training, early teaching, reorientation, rehabilitation, etc. had enlisted the aid and support of other generous British folk, and their ready co-operation resulted in quarters being found in Regent's Park, London for such purpose. Quickly "wheels were a-turning" - the project gained momentum, St. Dunstan's advanced, expanded rapidly, and men from the War were thus being befitted for their life anew. When hostilities had ceased in 1918, hundreds of war-blinded had been admitted, men from all parts of the Empire, and so the activities have extended over the years including the Second World War, the numbers increasing during such periods of time to many thousands - all to be hospitalized, cared for, all with very high praise for the Medical Staff, the Nursing Staff, members of Voluntary Aid Detachments and many others. Much praise is due also to the instructors, the teachers - to the legion of good friends engaged in the activities abovementioned.

By March 1965, St. Dunstan's had completed 50 years of this magnificent work, and to mark the occasion of its Golden Jubilee, the Council arranged a reunion to which representatives and other friends from the Commonwealth countries were invited. Sir Neville Pearson (President) and Lady Pearson, Lord Fraser (Chairman) and Lady Fraser and members of the Council left "no stone unturned" to ensure the happiness of their guests, and the functions, etc. so pleasing were -

A Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace with Her Majesty, the Queen, present; receptions and banquets at the homes of members of Council, and reunions of St. Dunstaners generally, on a large scale - all joyous celebrations and everybody mighty happy. Federal President P.J. Lynch (our Joe again), Mrs. Lynch and the then Federal Secretary-Treasurer, Robert Archer, M.B.E. and Mrs. Archer represented Australia on the special occasion abovementioned.

APPRECIATION RED CROSS

For some years now the Australian Red Cross Society has made available a grant of \$800 annually, to augment our funds to meet our administration and other expenses, and we are truly grateful for such tangible assistance.

REPATRIATION COMMISSION

requests relating to matters of our war pensions, allowances, etc. (our bread and butter); in short, we are deeply appreciative of the actions of the several Ministers for Repatriation, Social Services, Health and the Government generally,

ST. DUNSTAN'S

We are most grateful to Lord Fraser, the Council and staff of St. Dunstan's for having cared for and trained our blinded men from the inception of the Training Centre; always shall we retain the memories and benefits of such teaching which has inculcated in us a spirit of self reliance and a confidence in overcoming our handicaps - a teaching which, we feel, is further enhanced by our reading three famous books, the first written by the late Sir Arthur Pearson, entitled "Victory Over Blindness", and the other two, by Sir Ian Fraser, now Lord Fraser of Lonsdale, "Whereas I Was Blind" and "The Story of St. Dunstan's".

Alan Foster McConnell
August 1968.