



**DR A.K. SEWELL:
TRAM PHOTOGRAPHER**

Melbourne Tram Museum

30 May 2021

A series of photographs taken by Dr A.K. Sewell in the late 1930s are well known amongst Australian tram enthusiasts, but few know anything about the man himself.

Arthur Kenneth Sewell was an eminent Sydney pathologist, a founding Fellow of the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia, and a war veteran.

Born in 1915 in Glebe, Ken (as he was known) attended Fort Street Boys High School, before studying at the University of Sydney. He graduated with a Bachelor of Science in 1935, then Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery in 1939, becoming a registered medical practitioner in June 1939.

Towards the end of his studies, from December 1938 to January 1939 Ken visited Victoria, where he travelled with Mr A.C. Clarke, photographing trams in Melbourne and Geelong. Later in 1939 Mr Clarke visited Sydney, where he and Ken photographed steam trams at Kogarah and Parramatta. Prints of the photographs were given to Melbourne-based Mr Clarke, who gave copies to Mal Rowe, a student of Clarke's at RMIT in the mid-1960s. One of Ken's photographs appeared in John D. Keating's 1996 book *Mind the Curve! A history of the cable tram*.



Cable grip interior, 3 January 1939. This photograph appears in John D. Keating's 1996 book Mind the Curve! Photograph by Dr A.K. Sewell.



Dr A.K. Sewell and Mr A.C. Clarke, with Mr Clarke's mother, on a cable grip at the Johnston Street Collingwood terminus, 3 January 1939. The Collingwood service closed on 15 April 1939. Photograph from the collection of the Melbourne Tram Museum.



Cable grip, Nicholson Street terminus, 27 December 1938. Mr A.C. Clarke is seated on the right. Photograph by Dr A.K. Sewell.

After 12 months as a junior resident medical officer at Parramatta District Hospital, in mid-1940 Ken was appointed as a non-resident pathologist at Sydney Hospital. The war was raging in Europe and North Africa, but it was not until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 and the fall of Singapore to Japanese forces in February 1942 that Australia came under direct threat.

Although enlisting in August 1940, Ken was in a reserved occupation, and thus was eligible for an exemption from active service. In May 1941 he was commissioned as an Honorary Captain in the Reserve of Officers, Australian Army Medical Corps. But in early 1942, as the Japanese advanced across the Pacific, the Australian Government called up over 100,000 men previously granted exemptions. In January 1942 Japan invaded the Australian-administered territory of New Guinea, opening the New Guinea campaign, which would continue to the end of the war in August 1945.

The Australian War Memorial estimates that around 7,000 Australian servicemen died during the campaign, with many thousands more injured or incapacitated with diseases such as malaria and dengue fever.

After being transferred from the Reserve of Officers to the Militia, Ken was initially assigned to 9 Field Ambulance, before embarking on a series of postings across various units. In September 1942 when he was stationed in Milne Bay, New Guinea, he transferred from the Militia to the Australian Imperial Force, the transfer taking effect from January 1943. He served in Australia, New Guinea (including Milne Bay and Lae) and Torokina, Bougainville, before returning to Australia in March 1946.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

094066

Captain A.K. Sewell examining a culture plate, 106 Casualty Clearing Station, Torokina, Bougainville, 16 July 1945. Photograph courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.

At the end of the war in August 1945 there were almost 600,000 Australian servicemen and women in uniform. About 224,000 were serving in the Asia-Pacific region and a further 20,000 in Britain and elsewhere. Many required medical treatment and rehabilitation on their return to Australia. While the military took initial responsibility for medical care, for eligible personnel this was subsequently transferred to the Repatriation Department (now known as the Department of Veterans' Affairs, or DVA), originally established by the Australian Government in 1918 to assist veterans in returning to civilian life.

From March 1946 Ken was stationed for five months at 106 Australian General Hospital (106 AGH) at Bonegilla (Victoria), a 400-bed specialist tuberculosis centre, before being assigned to 113 AGH (Concord) in Sydney. Administration of this hospital was transferred to the Repatriation Department and in May 1947 it

was renamed Repatriation General Hospital Concord. With over 2000 beds, at that time it was the largest hospital in the southern hemisphere.

Ken's full-time military service ended in December 1946 when he was transferred to the Reserve of Officers. He remained on the Reserve with the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps until December 1964 when he retired as a Captain at the age of 49.

Back In civilian life, Ken joined the Repatriation Department where he spent just over 30 years as a pathologist, retiring as a Senior Specialist in 1980.

In 1951 Ken was awarded a Diploma of Clinical Pathology by the University of Sydney, and then in August of that year he married Freda Blitz (née Tonkin).

Ken was active in the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia since its beginnings in 1956. When the College was founded he was a member of its Committee for Employment and Practice in Pathology as well as chairman of the Committee for Technical Affairs. He served on the College's Board of Education for 20 years, launching and providing editorial guidance for the College's Broad sheets – scientific articles on different topics of interest, usually prepared by Fellows of the College. His work for the College was honorary and unpaid, requiring a significant commitment of effort and hours.

It appears that Ken continued to be active professionally even after ceasing employment with DVA, finally retiring from the College in 1991. He passed away in 1995, survived by his wife Freda, two sons and their families.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Debbie Deston, of the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia together with Warren Doubleday and Mal Rowe from the Melbourne Tram Museum for assisting with the research for this article.

REFERENCES

ANZAC Research Institute (2021), [The ANZAC Research Institute Commemorates its 20th ANZAC Day with a Rich History](#), media release, 21 April 2021.

Australian War Memorial, [Remembering the war in New Guinea](#), Australia-Japan Research Project.

Commonwealth of Australia Gazette (1965), [Australian Military Forces](#), 7 October 1965, page 4344.

Commonwealth of Australia Gazette (1980), [Retirements and Dismissals](#), 10 July 1980, page 2.

Government Gazette of the State of New South Wales (1939), [New South Wales Medical Board Legally Qualified Medical Practitioners](#), 14 July 1939, page 3499.

National Archives of Australia (1939-48), [Arthur Kenneth Sewell – NX153244](#), service record.

NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages.

Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia, *College Council Minute Books*.

Sydney Morning Herald (1932), [Honours: Leaving Certificate](#), 28 January 1932.

Sydney Morning Herald (1951), [Marriages](#), 13 September 1951.

The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate (1940), [Brevities](#), 29 May 1940.

University of Sydney (1965), [Calendar Supplement](#).