

Courier Focus . . .

The life and times of "Lucky Sid" (or Professor De Date Plum)

"Want a beer," said 98 year old Sid Martin, already enjoying a frothy glass of the amber fluid and sitting in a favoured chair in the lounge-room of well known local woman Mary Opdam; the morning sun streaming through the front windows.

"A bit early, mate," I replied, "it's only 9.30."
"Never too early if you like it," laughed Sid.
"Do you smoke . . . here, have one of these."

Accepting his offer, we smoked a cigarette together while Mary filled me in on how she first began caring for Sid through "home care", a voluntary service for aged and incapacitated people.

What started as 3, 2 hour morning sessions per week 10 years ago, took the form of permanent care last May when Mary took Sid into her home when he became too frail to take care of himself.

"At the time he was very irritable and his health was very low," said Mary, "in fact, we thought he only had a few weeks left . . . now look at him," she chuckled.

"The doctor only visits once a week, he's put on a stone in weight, and he's still enjoying his little luxuries." (These include 2 stubbies of beer a day, a black coffee laced with rum and 13 Marlboro cigarettes).

"You can call me Professor Lucky Sid," announced the old fella. "I've always been lucky and I've always liked to read, either that or Professor De Date Plum—now that's got a bit of style."

Sid is full of style—a "ready for anything", gambling type who left England as a stowaway in 1906 after an argument with his boss.

"Talkin' behind me back, he was . . . that's no way for a man to act—and I told him so. Well, he didn't take too kindly to that and showed me the door," laughed Sid.

That severance from his employment in a tobacco plant was also Sid's last link with Mother England.

Australia was Sid's second preference . . . he had considered Argentina, but scrubbed the thought because he couldn't speak Spanish.

With a small bag of belongings, he jumped ship and headed 'down under'.

Finding sleeping quarters and food was no problem for an enterprising 17 year old like Sid Martin.

"There was half a dozen bunks in one cabin and I jumped in and claimed one . . . simple," Sid chuckled. "No one questioned me when I plonked myself down at the dining room for meals either!"

The only mishap on ship, was the theft of Sid's small bag containing his meagre possessions—he arrived in Sydney Australia, in 1906 at age 17, penniless, with only the clothes on his back and no

immediate job prospects.

However, these daunting prospects didn't deter a young man with as much character as this adventurous young stowaway.

He took to the bush and humped his swag for three years picking up work with the axe, by ring-barking trees or slaughtering sheep for farmers throughout NSW.

"There was only one way to kill a sheep in those days," roared Sid—"a knife through the throat."

"In the cool of the evening you'd tie 'em up in a tree and dress 'em."

Sid had his own scheme when he was short of a quid and needed a feed.

In those days most pubs provided a free lunch for patrons and Sid qualified himself by buying a packet of cigarettes and sitting out a morning session.

With a free lunch in his belly, cunning young Sid sold his fags and sought out a place to kip for the night.

A blacksmiths shop at Guyra provided lodging for Sid on a regular basis where he slept under a blanket with two dogs for company. And . . . that's the company Sid has always preferred—"on me pat malone".

"Don't tell me about mates, where are they when you want 'em," he

maintains.

Sid was lucky enough to grab a job in a country pub and worked in several such establishments all over NSW before gaining a job with W. N. Bull Undertakers of King Street, Newtown.

At the commencement of World War I Sid was working for a Kings Cross hotel and regarded enlistment as a wonderful opportunity of securing a full-time job . . .

Conversation with Sid is now a difficult and long process. He is extremely deaf and although he loves to talk, he becomes frustrated when he can't understand what you're asking him.

This is done by shouting single phrase sentences down his "good" ear until he gets the drift of the conversation.

Mary Opdam's patience and perserverance in this regard is marvellous.

Sid's war and post war experiences will be continued in the Courier next week. Although two way conversation is difficult, a morning with "Professor" De Date Plum is an entertaining and enjoyable experience.

Removing his teeth and launching into a medley of old harmonica tunes, Sid's attitude and spirit, to me are a fitting tribute to all our Australian forebears—enterprising, independent, industrious with the right amount of tongue-in-cheek humour, which has characterised Australians world wide.

More next week.

Ian Hodgkinson.



Sid Martin, at 98 'and a bit' stills plays a lively jig on the mouth organ as day care nurse, Mary Opdam looks on . . .

Courier Focus . . .

"LUCKY" SID — (A continuation of last week's story on the life and times of 98-year-old Sid Martin)

(The commencement last week, of the story on the life of Sid Martin involved his arrival as a penniless stowaway from England in 1906 and his subsequent adventures as a swaggie, and labourer in the Australian bush).

At the commencement of World War I, Sid was working for a Kings Cross hotel and regarded enlistment as a wonderful opportunity of securing a full time job...

After passing the compulsory medical test in 1914, Sid and his military mates were off to German New Guinea following only a week in camp as part of an expeditionary force connected to the 17th Battalion.

"We had no idea where we were going until they issued us with our sun helmets on board ship outside the Sydney Heads," Sid recalls.

"Soldier No. 516, I was and didn't we give them some stick in New Guinea, I'm telling ya."

"After they surrendered we tied them up in a tree, and flogged 'em, just like they did to the natives, who we sent away first, so they couldn't see what we were doing."

Sid remembers the inability of Australian soldiers to come to terms with army rules and regulations. "We didn't salute our officers, but that's because we'd never had an army before — it was all new to us: 'matter of fact, back in Australia, after New Guinea, I stuck three stripes on me arm and promoted meself to sergeant", roared Sid.

"I was bringing some new recruits from the big

army base at Liverpool into town, when the commanding officer said "You're no bloomin' sergeant" and told me to get back to my regiment." "Last promotion I got", laughed Sid.

One month later, in 1915, Sid was one of 20,000 soldiers belonging to the 17th Battalion and Lighthorse brigades sent firstly to Egypt, then on to Gallipoli.

"The 'Gypos' didn't know what to make of us, 'specially when we started playing two-up amongst ourselves."

"You know", chuckled Sid, "they watched everyone look up into the sky and thought the pennies spun their way down from heaven, and when we all looked down to see the result they thought the pennies continued down into 'ell."

As part of the 2nd Division, Sid landed at Suvla Bay, about 12 miles from Anzac Cove.

"The Turks were waiting for us, it was awful", Sid remembers.

"General Bridges was in charge and he was killed a fortnight after we landed". Sid and fellow Aussie soldiers had very little to fight with. They made many of their own weapons and survived for nearly 6 months on bully beef, biscuits and plum jam. Fresh water was brought to them by ship

from Alexandria.

"Our trenches were only 50 yards away from the enemy and ya weren't game to have a peep over the top without getting ya head blown off, So we made our own periscopes from four pieces of pipe joined together as one with a mirror at the top and bottom."

"We made our own bombs too out of jam tins filled with sand and cordite," continued Sid, "and threw them by hand at the Turk trenches."

As mentioned last week, Sid Martin loves to sing and play the harmonica.

His reminiscences are punctuated with appropriate songs and tunes from his era. Opening a beer, and wetting his whistle, Sid, with great gusto, launched into just such a song:

"leeee — want to go

home,

leeee — want to go home,

I don't want to go to the war anymore, Where there's whizz bangers and Jack Johnsons Galore,

Oh, take me over the sea Where the enemy can't get at me, .

Oh my, I don't want to die, leeee — want to go home!"

"Jack Johnson was the name of the heavyweight boxing champ of that time," explained Sid. "He really packed some punch



and so did the huge shells fired from our war ship Queen Elizabeth 12 miles off Gallipoli. Those shells went screaming over our heads constantly so, and that's what we called 'em. —Jack Johnson's.

The retreat of AN-ZAC troops from the Gallipoli Peninsula is, of course, legendary.

Sid recalls the ingenious way troops rigged up their rifles to containers which, when filled from a slow

trickle of water, released the trigger, firing a shot towards the Turk trenches.

"What was left of our troops all got away — they didn't know a thing about it", said Sid. "We had to improvise over there to survive."

Sid returned to Australia after the war, still in the Army and still getting paid.

"The repatriation boys set me up by fixing me with a permanent job on

the trams — a job I did for 34 years without a sick day," roared Sid.

"Rain, hail or shine I worked out on the foot-board of the city trams — it was fantastic."

Sid recalls meeting many characters and in particular a run-in he had with Bea Miles — a legendary personality of that time. "She wouldn't pay her fare so I opened the door and told her to get off. She shut it again, I opened it, she shut it and so it went on — but she still didn't pay — never did", said Sid, "but that time she kicked me in the shins anyway."

Sid's two brothers also enlisted and fought overseas in W.W.I. One brother was killed in France, the other captured and imprisoned there. "He escaped but they caught him and threw him back in the clink. He was too young to shoot, so they kept him as a prisoner," said Sid.

"After the war that same brother went swimming with a mate at Gunnedah and drowned. You wouldn't believe it," he continued, "Don't know what his mate was doing."

"Anyway, they called me up there for his funeral. His mate told me my brother owed him a quid and asked me for the money, the bludger."

"Don't talk to me about mates," he said. "You're better off being ya own donkey."

After taking another good slurp of beer, Sid set-

tled back with his beloved harmonica and played another lively tune.

Mary Opdam, Sid's full-time nurse, spoke to me fondly of the old man's sense of humour.

"It comes through in all his tales and songs — he's quite a character and now happy and content to be living here with company and someone to look after him," she said.

Sid has lived in the Camden Haven for 30 years and is well known for entertaining the crowds at the Laurieton United Servicemen's Club each Anzac Day.

He has been an avid reader, particularly of war stories and has read every available book on the subject from Laurieton and Port Macquarie libraries. He remains in remarkably good health for his age and amazed (and embarrassed) everyone recently at a local restaurant by getting on the floor and completing 20 push-ups (knees bent). He still reads with the aid of a magnifying glass and large print.

Sid completed his own story with a song from his wonderful past:

I'm an Aussie, I'm an Aussie Working on the line, Black pudding and gravy Every dinner time, 25 Bob a week plus all my overtime.

I'm an Aussie, I'm an Aussie Working on the line." "HERE'S 'Too-hee' Sid." "I'll have that beer now." —Ian Hodgkinson.