

In the field and on the field

A highlight history of Australian Rugby Union

**Interview - Dr Charles 'Chilla' Wilson, Army Wallaby
By Janet Roberts Billett, Cooee History and Heritage
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JRB: Charles, could you give me a little bit of detail about yourself, your education, where you were born and educated, and what you were doing when you joined the army. Thank you.

CW: --- and I went to Marist Brothers College Ashgrove initially, as my education and then went to the Griffith Grammar School for five years. I graduated then and commenced doing a course in medicine, that was a six-year course at the university. I took seven years, I won't tell you why - not thinking properly. So at this stage I was playing rugby with the Queensland University side. We had a very strong side. I played for them for about five years in the A Grade. We won the premiership five times in a row, so we were very strong.

Then from the medical point of view, I did my traineeship at the Mater Misericordiae Hospital in Brisbane, and finished the course and at that stage I was contemplating going overseas, so I had to do something, so as my brother had - [he was] an orthopaedic surgeon, he was a captain in the army for a couple of years preceding me, and he talked me into joining the army, because they then were incorporating starting a rugby union side to compete in the Brisbane competition.

JRB: Right. Now that suggests you joined the army just to play rugby. Is that correct?

CW: No, it wasn't really correct. I couldn't - I had finished my term at the hospital and my brother advised me if we were going to go overseas and get a higher qualification, as was the thing to do then, that he encouraged me to join the army because he was already in the army for two years.

JRB: I see, yes.

CW: So when he left, I virtually took over where he was. So he went to England and I did my one and a half to two years with the army.

JRB: This is permanent army, isn't it?

CW: You could join it - it was the permanent army, I suppose you mean, but I wasn't in permanently.

JRB: No, and you joined as a medical officer?

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CW: I joined as a medical officer.

JRB: Where were you based?

CW: Yeronga Camp Base Hospital in Yeronga Brisbane.

JRB: Is that when you started playing rugby?

CW: With the army, yes.

JRB: How many - were you a fairly strong team?

CW: We were actually a strong team, because at that time the army somehow was introduced into the A Grade rugby system in Brisbane. I don't know the background to that, but it was the time of the national service traineeship and there were a lot of young good footballers in that. One of my jobs was to examine all these young guys that had come in for their short term with the national service trainees so that's how I think - that was a great help for the rugby, because we had a fairly strong side, and did quite well. I haven't got any details of the games, but we were quite a strong side.

JRB: For how long did you play for the army rugby union?

CW: Two years, two seasons.

JRB: During that time, was that when you were picked for the Wallabies?

CW: That is correct, and that's when I was picked. I was picked for the Wallabies in 1956 for a game down in Sydney against New Zealand, and the team then was selected to tour the UK, and I was left out, and that caused a bit of a decry up in Queensland here. But in 1958 Australia toured New Zealand and I was captain for that, and I was still in the army then, when I was captain of the Australian touring side to New Zealand.

JRB: The Wallabies?

CW: Yes.

JRB: So presumably you got time off for that from the army?

CW: Yes.

JRB: How long did you stay with your university team?

CW: Prior to that?

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JRB: Yes.

CW: How long was I playing for them?

JRB: Yes.

CW: Since 1951 to 58, about seven years.

JRB: That was with the Wallabies? No, the army?

CW: No, playing for the university was the competition in Brisbane.

JRB: The university, right.

CW: Yes, and 1956 I was selected to play for Australia in Australia, one game, against New Zealand. We got beaten. I was dropped for the tour - the next year was to the UK and I wasn't invited. A lot of criticism. It was better for me that I didn't go because the next year I captained Australia, in 1958, whilst in the army, and a tour of New Zealand. We did very well on that tour.

JRB: That sounds pretty good, actually. You were pleased about that?

CW: Well I was, yes, in retrospect. I wasn't at the time, being dropped, but then I didn't think properly - I came out of it very well, put it that way.

JRB: I'm wondering, apparently there are two players, ones Kaye - a chap called 'Danny' Kaye, his nickname.

CW: 'Danny' Kaye, yes.

JRB: You obviously do remember him?

CW: I remember him, and he played in the backs and he was a very good player, but I haven't seen him since, I don't think.

JRB: Was he army as well?

CW: I think he was army. I, in the back of my mind, thought he was from Victoria. Whereas Van Gelder, the other army player, I think was from South Australia.

JRB: Did they go on and do more significant contribution to the army rugby do you know?

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CW: I think so. They were good players, you know, they weren't in the first side, but they filled adequately for the other games, so no, they were very good.

JRB: So they weren't in the Wallabies with you when you were seconded to the Wallabies to play in New Zealand.

CW: Yes.

JRB: Were they involved in the team that you captained in New Zealand, the Wallabies?

CW: Yes, the three main games.

JRB: What were the highlights then of the tour of New Zealand?

CW: Well, you know, New Zealand was considered to be the best rugby union side in the world. There was always opposition between Australia and New Zealand. It's a thing that's been there and still is and always will be, you know. New Zealand are fanatical about their rugby and they had a marvellous tour of the UK later on - they were always a good side and it's always a great honour to go to New Zealand and play them you know.

JRB: Very good. Any low lights, any problems or difficulties?

CW: No - injury-wise or anything?

JRB: No, in any way?

CW: There were no problems at all, no. It was a marvellous tour. You know, it's laid on in New Zealand, as you know, any team that tours New Zealand wherever you go, you're welcomed and it's a religion to them, and it was then, and is now.

JRB: That sounds fascinating. Then when you returned, you were still in the army, weren't you? How much longer did you then serve in the army?

CW: I'm just a little bit vague about this, but when I came back I went overseas. I must have completed my two years in the army and then went over to do my studies overseas.

JRB: That was your post-graduate, wasn't it?

CW: Post-graduate, yes. Those days in medicine people went overseas to get these higher qualifications. I don't know why that was, but it was, and it turns out you get a lot of good experience, you know.

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JRB: Yes, and that was in surgery, I think you told me?

CW: I initially did general surgery, but then changed to gynaecology over there. See you have to do so many years of a subject before you can sit for the examination. I couldn't do that in Australia - with the rugby in the background, because that helped me overseas, you know, already played rugby, good, he can join us in rugby over there. It was for me, quite easy to get jobs at good hospitals. So what you had to do is go overseas, work for two years in obstetrics and gynaecology before you can sit for any examination. So that's why I was over in England for four or five years.

JRB: In retrospect, your army experience - was that a good experience do you think?

CW: I suppose from the rugby point of view not so much, but it was interesting. I enjoyed it very much and met a lot of nice people. As I said to you before, my brother was involved in the army before me and he gave me a lot of advice, but yes, I enjoyed it very much. Very much.

JRB: Am I correct in maybe assuming that in a sense that was your national service? I know it was on at the time, but you would have deferred it, wouldn't you, if you had been doing medicine at that period?

CW: Yes.

JRB: Your national service, would you have deferred your national service and then done it when you finished your degree?

CW: Oh, I don't know - - -

JRB: It seems to me that was about the equivalent. You didn't regret being in the army, obviously, as you said, it gave you a very good experience.

CW: Absolutely not, no, I enjoyed it very much. Very much, indeed.

JRB: Then you came back to Australia when?

CW: I came back to Australia then - wait til I get my little piece of paper - it was about 1964. So I was over there for quite a while.

JRB: Right, you were. By then I presume you actually worked as a gynaecologist obstetrician. Is that correct?

CW: That is correct.

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JRB: Did you retire from that or are you still practicing?

CW: Sorry, I only played for a year or so when I came back from England and I played a lot of rugby, as I said, before in England. I played against the All Blacks over there on two occasions, and involved a lot with the Scottish side. I have Scottish ancestry, you see, and they thought I could play for Scotland, but they stopped that way of getting into the Scottish side, so I didn't play there, but I did play against the All Blacks in England and then we came back and played for the London Scottish and London Counties and then came back in 1964 to Australia when I was coach captain of West Rugby Union. I couldn't play for university and I don't think army were playing then, but I'm not sure, but I wouldn't have been eligible to play for them anyway.

JRB: Right, I see. Thank you, Chilla. Unless you can think of some army people - other army people that you played with? You can't remember any other names or?

CW: I'm sorry, I've looked everywhere. I haven't even got a photograph. They must not have taken a photograph.

JRB: Because you would have had it otherwise.

CW: I certainly would have it otherwise. But I'm going to have another look.

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