

Home thoughts from abroad

By Pat Scott

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A LOVELY story of an elderly man who, as a child, was rescued from Glasgow and brought up in Huntly has reached the Huntly Express - all the way from Australia.

Sandra Paulka contacted the Express after finding a photograph of her uncle, John Paton Cummings, reading a copy of the newspaper in the bottom of a trench while he served with the Australian army in the Korean war in 1950.

John, born in May 1928 in Carlton, Glasgow, was the youngest of three children. He had an older brother Willy and a sister Jean.

During the Great Depression, when John was six years old, he was taken by the government and placed in a Children's home in Stobhill for about three months.

Conditions in the home were poor. He slept in a crowded room with up to eight beds and recalls not having lunch at school and having to wash under a tap outside in the freezing cold.

However, life was to improve for John and two other boys when they were placed with a family at Fernbank in Huntly, where they spent eight happy years with Mrs MacDonald - who they called Aunty - and her husband Willy.

Mrs MacDonald ran the house and Willy was a gamekeeper. Ms Paulka said her elderly uncle still has vivid and happy memories of the time spent there.

He tells her stories of how there was a great garden with berries, potatoes, carrots and other vegetables.

John speaks of the bee hives for honey and also hundreds of chickens and ducks, which he often had to dress after they were killed.

Ms Paulka took up his story: "During summer

they would sell scones and cakes on a trolley with bags of flour and meal, and attend church on Sundays.

"Winter time was freezing, the road would be blocked with snow drifts and the loch would be frozen over.

"John remembers often wearing leggings that Mrs MacDonald rubbed in chicken fat so the snow and water would run off them.

"Mrs MacDonald would always dress them well for school and they were well fed. He went to Gordon Primary School, then into secondary until he turned 14 and left.

"On Sundays, he and his friends would play near Huntly Castle and often meet in the town square and then go to the football ground where they would play the card game brag.

"They also went fishing in the Deveron and Bogie rivers, and attended dances in the Stewart's Hall on Saturday evenings."

When he left school, John got a job with the Forestry Commission working in the sawmill with the three cutters. As the billy boy he would make the tea and mark the logs for cutting.

Once promoted, he was given a big Clydesdale horse with which he pulled the chained logs ready for loading. He also worked with the wood cutter with saws and axes.

John left the work in the woods and went to England, completed a radio operators' course and



John Paton Cummings, who was brought up in Huntly after being sent from Glasgow during the Depression.

in 1946 - when he was nearly 18 - he joined the RAF Regiment.

Offered the choice to go to either Germany or Palestine, he chose Palestine. During his 18-month stay there, he led convoys through the Suez Canal and back and forth to Egypt and Jordan.

On his demob, Mr Cummings returned to Huntly and worked for the Morrison family who took him into their home while he worked as a timber cutter.

In 1950 he saw a newspaper advert for men wanting to join the Australian army. He went to London, passed a medical and came back to Huntly to await departure.

He was stationed in Korea for around 12 months during the Korean War. Even during the darkest

and bleakest days in the trenches, he looked forward to the regular delivery of the Huntly Express which he read avidly.

Ms Paulka said: "He went from Korea to Melbourne in Australia on a ship called the Ormandy and lived in the Watsonia Army Barracks. He eventually moved out, married and had three children.

He is now 87 and has very fond memories of growing up in Huntly. He never saw his parents again after he was taken away, but the families he grew up with and Huntly itself have a very special place in his heart.



During the Korean War, John Paton Cummings looked forward to regular updates from his adopted home town of Huntly, via the Huntly Express.



John Paton Cummings, who now lives in Australia, pictured in his younger days with a kangaroo.



John Paton Cummings as a young soldier.