

A Charters Towers school moved into the bush during World War II to make way for a military hospital and not only survived but thrived for a year in marquees and tin sheds. Former *Townsville Bulletin* journalist JOHN COLEMAN, whose brother Neville was one of the students, writes about the adventure. John was a student of All Souls' in 1943 when it moved to the Charters Towers Racecourse where the horse stalls were classrooms and marquees around the racetrack were dormitories

In early 1942 with Singapore fallen, Darwin bombed and Australia facing invasion, All Souls' Anglican School in Charters Towers moved into the bush on a riverbank and in a remarkable educational feat continued to operate there for a year in tents and tin sheds.

The permanent school, on the town's outskirts, had been requisitioned as a military hospital so headmaster Robert ('Bidgee') Mills evacuated the 22 staff and 172 students 50km north to a patch of the Burdekin River on Gainsford Station where All Souls' not only survived but thrived.

By year's end 186 students had passed through the camp school.

On October 9-10 the former students have been invited to a reunion at All Souls' — now co-educational with the girls' St Gabriel's — and the unveiling of a memorial with an honour roll, erected with the support of the State Government, near the river camp site.

The boys, who included my brother Neville as a 10-year-old from our neighbouring cattle station, were housed in six military marquees and 40 smaller tents with a big iron shed serving as a chapel, dining hall and classrooms.

The boys stripped for their daily baths in the river and homework was done by carbide lights.

They cheered as US Air Force and RAAF fighters buzzed the school on their way north for target practice on the Basalt Wall — with one pilot strafing the river, scattering swimming teachers and wives.

The camp had two playing fields with goalposts cut from ironbark, the boys raised wild pigs and grew vegetables.

Teachers drove the school truck to Charters Towers for supplies.

The boys built an antbed tennis court and a stockyard for milking cows, one recalling how they had to go searching for the 'missing' cows just before a maths test.

A tent was reserved for the school's founder in 1920, the burly and the saintly Bishop of North Queensland, John Oliver Feetham, of the Bush Brotherhood.

English master Ted Evans wrote of the camp school: "Do you recall the dust and the devastating rainstorms, the everlasting corned beef and the threat of Jap invasion?"

"We see again the carbide lights around the wireless at the time of the evening news, the shining faces of boys around the galley fire cooking the fish they caught on some idyllic upriver expedition, the cadets as they valiantly storm a hill armed with sticks in lieu of rifles, the excitement when the supply truck came rolling in at sundown..."

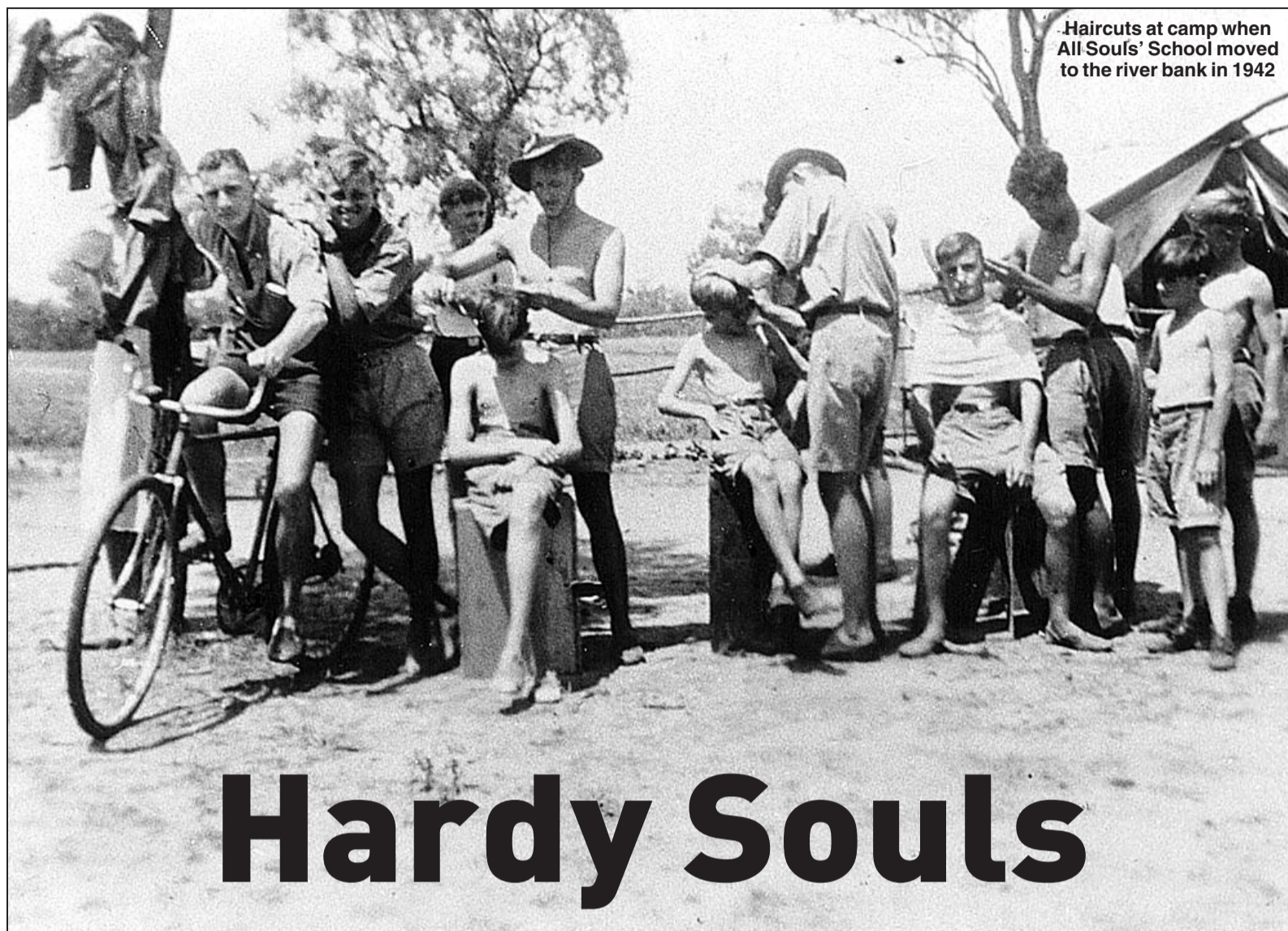
Evans also wrote how 'the boys are learning more than they are taught — the spirit of service, of co-operation and the joy of a job well done with head or hands'.

"They know, too, they are creating something that is infinitely worthwhile and carrying on with something despite difficulty and discouragement," he wrote.

Headmaster Mills, in his 1942 report, said: "We lack many comforts, but I have admired the wonderful spirit which all have shown in this venture."

"Many of you have displayed self-reliance, initiative, bush skill, a true spirit of service, and character traits that would not be evident in ordinary school life.

"It has given an opportunity for boys, not outstanding as scholars



Haircuts at camp when All Souls' School moved to the river bank in 1942

Hardy Souls



Gymnastics at All Souls' camp school, 1942

They cheered as US Air Force and RAAF fighters buzzed the school on their way north for target practice on the Basalt Wall — with one pilot strafing the river, scattering swimming teachers and wives

or athletes, to show their talent in a very practical way.

"The camp gave you an opportunity to display your desire to be pioneers like your forefathers."

Despite the hardships, the school produced its highest academic results with open scholarships to the University of Queensland awarded to two students out of 18 for the state.

The boys' health, from swinging axes, other physical work and sports, was also excellent.

Sports records were set with cricket, swimming and football competitions held and boxing in a ring under an ironbark tree.

Student Robert Peut achieved five open athletic records including the 880 yards in 2 minutes 6.8 seconds.

He enlisted in the RAAF before

the end of the school year and was killed when his bomber was lost over Europe in 1944.

Three bursary students came from Palm Island settlement and a Gurindji boy, Joseph Croft from the Northern Territory, became school captain. He went on to study at the University of Queensland, thought to be the first indigenous student to attend university in Australia.

The following year, 1943, the school moved to the racecourse in Charters Towers where students lived in military marquees around the racetrack, the horse stalls with dirt floors became classrooms with seniors in the grandstand. I was one of those students.

We watched just across the rubber vines as US planes roared off on bombing missions from what is now the Charters Towers Airport.

There was the memorable day when, with whistle blasts, teachers ordered us to pack suitcases and walk to the railway station after a stray bullet burst a mustard gas bomb at the US base.

Then after walking some distance came the all-clear and we returned to the racecourse. Nurses from adjoining Mount Carmel College, also requisitioned as a military hospital, came to nurse the sick when a measles epidemic swept through the school.

Conditions continued to be tough with food rationing. Standard fare was porridge, syrup and overcooked casseroles with only powdered and condensed milk for 'sweets' on tuckshop days.

When Bishop Feetham visited the school, he treated the small boys, including myself, to cocoa, biscuits and Bible stories in the military-style cookhouse before bedtime.

On D-day, June 6, 1944, we packed our suitcases again and walked down the hill to the permanent school.

About the author: Author and journalist John Coleman began his career on the *Townsville Bulletin*, where he won a Walkley Award. He later worked in Brisbane, London's Fleet Street, Canberra and New York. He now lives in Glen Innes from where he continues to freelance in journalism.