



# CAPTURING CONVERSATIONS

**A snapshot of local history**

MEALS  
ON WHEELS®

  
WILLIAM KIBBY VC  
VETERANS ASSOCIATION





**Meals on Wheels SA has been a well-known and loved service in South Australia for over 70 years and we have no plans of slowing down!**

Our vision is to support well-nourished people thriving within their communities by providing food services, creating social connection and promoting wellbeing.

Meals on Wheels SA supports South Australians to enjoy life by delivering food with love, making it easier to live well and remain engaged with their community.







### The William Kibby VC Veterans Shed – A Place to Belong

At the heart of Glenelg North, the William Kibby VC Veterans Shed stands as more than just a workshop - it's a lifeline. Here, veterans gather not only to tinker and build, but to reconnect, share a cuppa, and speak openly with others who've walked a similar path. Whether it's working on a project, tending the quiet Michael Herbert Memorial Garden, relaxing in the Millie Dorsch Wellness Centre or having a yarn with a visiting mental health professional, the Shed offers a space where veterans feel understood and valued.

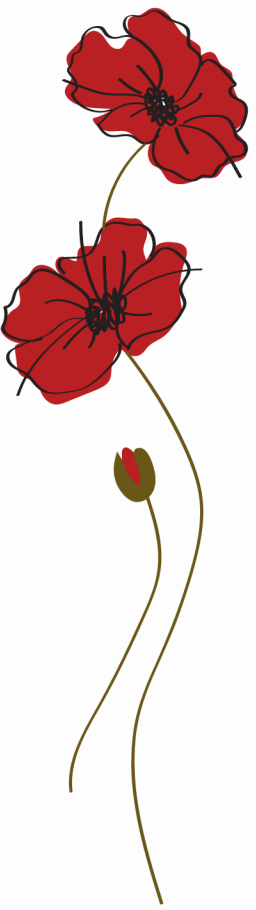
Run by the William Kibby VC Veterans Association, the Shed supports wellbeing by fostering connection, routine, and mateship. Lunches, outings, and guest speakers are all part of the mix. No one's left behind - costs are covered where needed. It's a place built on shared experience, where purpose is rediscovered and community thrives.

For many, it's not just a Shed - it's a second home.

Find us: 40 Kibby Ave, Glenelg North SA 5045







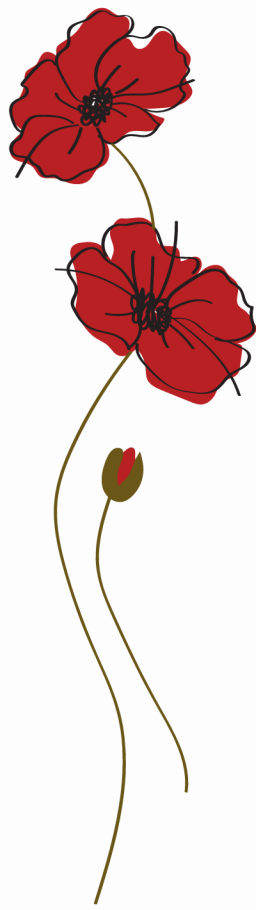
**Capturing Conversations** began with a simple idea: to honour the voices of veterans whose stories are too often left untold and bring together people that would have otherwise never met.

Held at the **William Kibby VC Veterans Association**, the project brought together volunteer writers and veterans, within their newly opened wellness space.

At **Meals on Wheels SA**, we recognise the need for social connection and to strengthen communities. Our vision is to build well-nourished and independent communities in South Australia.

This meaningful collaboration between Meals on Wheels SA and the Association is a natural fit as it celebrates the **wisdom, courage, and lived experience** of older Australians - particularly those who have served. It's locals chatting with locals. In a space named for nurse Lieutenant Millicent Dorsch, and beside a shed that honours Sergeant William "Bill" Kibby VC, these conversations found their rightful home.

Each interview is a reminder that **legacy** lives on through **connection** and becomes treasured slice of history. We are grateful to every veteran who bravely shared their story, and to the community that continues to grow around them.



**"The quieter you are, the more you can hear"**

**- Ram Dass**

The stories and quotes in this book are real-life accounts from South Australian veterans. Some content may trigger strong emotions for readers. If you need support, contact Open Arms – 24/7 National Support for Veterans and Families on 1800 011 046.

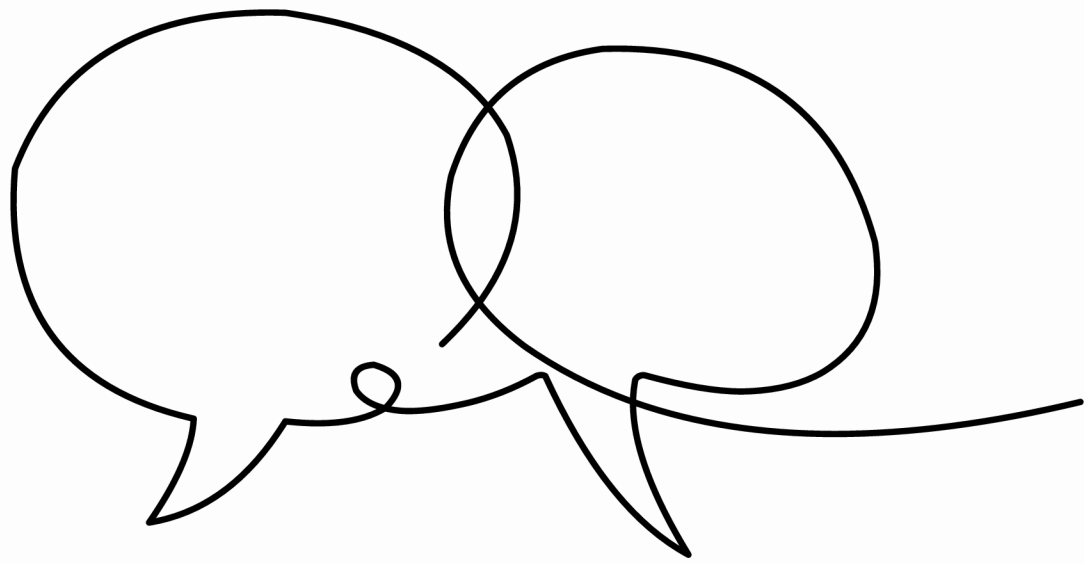
Some of the photographs used in these stories are not intended to represent specific items referred to throughout the book. They serve only as a generic depiction of the activities and equipment discussed.

Images and stories from veterans cannot be shared without permission.

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# CONVERSATIONS

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# MEETING CAMMO JOHN

For some, retirement is about slowing down. For others, like John - known affectionately as Cammo John at the Shed - it's an opportunity to reconnect with community, rediscover old skills and continue helping others.



Photos: Cammo John, members of the VC William Kibby Veterans Shed on site, woodworking at the Shed.



John is a true local. He was born at Glenelg Community Hospital, went to Brighton Primary and High School, lived down the Bay, and even spent time as a taxi driver around Glenelg. His deep ties to the area have shaped his identity and community spirit. "I've always been local," he says with pride. "Brighton and Glenelg have been my stomping ground most of my life."

Before retirement, John led a diverse working life. He served in the Australian Army as a signalman during the Vietnam era - although he didn't serve overseas due to a change in government policy. After his service, he returned to a career in advertising, which was eventually cut short by the industry's shift from black-and-white to colour - particularly challenging for someone who is colourblind.

To provide for his young family, John took on shift work at the Metro Meats plant, working in the smallgoods section where he smoked hams, ran the smokehouses and packed orders for delivery. Later, he drove buses for children at special schools for more than two decades. "I thought I'd only last a week," he says. "But the kids were in the best place they could be, and the staff really cared. I ended up staying 23 years!"

After retiring, John looked for a new way to stay active and connected.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted his regular volunteering at Minda, and it was during that time he finally decided to walk into the William Kibby Veterans Shed - something he'd been meaning to do for a while.

**"It turned out to be one of the best decisions I could have made."**

"The first bloke I met had served in the same unit as me, at the same time," John says. "We didn't know each other - we were in different sections - but it was an instant connection. That's what happens here. You feel like you belong."

The Shed quickly became a place of purpose and community. John spends his time sanding timber, building planter boxes and crafting wooden items like breadboards. One of his proudest projects was helping build raised garden beds for St Jude's Church in Brighton, as part of a Glenelg Council initiative.

He admits he came in with some woodworking skills, but says the real beauty of the Shed is the learning that happens through sharing. "There's always someone who knows more than you do," he says. "And they're happy to teach you. That's the kind of place this is."



The Shed, once a male-dominated space, has also become more inclusive in recent years. With the introduction of associate membership, more women have joined, some of whom are also ex-service personnel. The group runs barbecues to raise funds for insurance, maintenance, and safety equipment - keeping the doors open and the machines running.

"Coming to the Shed gives me purpose," says John. "It's not just about the projects - it's the mateship. You're never alone here."

But the Shed isn't John's only outlet for giving back. For the past three years, he's also volunteered as a driver with Meals on Wheels at the Warradale branch. He delivers meals alongside fellow volunteer Janet, who first invited him to join when her previous delivery partner stepped away.

John looks forward to his shifts, not just for the service aspect, but for the people. "Some customers want a chat, others just want their meal dropped off," he says. "You get a real mix. Some of them don't have many visitors, so you might be the only person they see that day."

He says the same goes for fellow volunteers. "There are some real characters at Meals on Wheels," he laughs.

**"Everyone's got a story."**

"Volunteering with Meals on Wheels keeps me grounded," he says. "You meet all sorts of people - some just want a quick hello, and others really want to talk."

Whether he's sanding timber or delivering lunch, John finds joy in the connections he makes and the contribution he continues to offer.

"People make life interesting. That's why I keep showing up."

## Where Stories Live: Capturing Conversations at the William Kibby VC Veterans Shed

Many of our heartfelt *Capturing Conversations* interviews have taken place in a space that holds deep meaning - both historically and in the present day. Tucked alongside the William Kibby VC Veterans Shed is the Millie Dorsch Room, named in honour of South Australian nurse Lieutenant Millicent Dorsch, who served in World War II and was tragically lost at sea during the 1942 evacuation from Singapore. Her courage and compassion mirror the values we see in the veterans and older South Australians whose stories we've captured in this space.

The Shed itself honours Sergeant William "Bill" Kibby VC, a plaster designer from Edwardstown who gave his life at El Alamein and was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery. His story is one of sacrifice, duty and dedication - principles carried forward by the veterans who gather at the Shed today. It's fitting, then, that this is where we met 'Cammo John', a local Army veteran, woodworker and Meals on Wheels volunteer, who shared his story of service, community connection and purpose after retirement.

Spaces like these are more than just rooms - they're places where legacy, memory and community come together. Our deepest thanks to the William Kibby VC Veterans Shed for being generous hosts, and to the many veterans and older community members who have shared their stories so far.



Photos: William Kibby VC mural painted by Sean Halfpenny on the outside of the Men's Shed; Lieutenant Millie Dorsch; Sergeant William Kibby VC.

# A LIFE OF QUIET SERVICE



**Malcolm was born in 1942. Growing up, he remembers having a “lovely mum,” who was the secretary of the local church. At Christmas time, the family would go carol singing, and the children went on Sunday school picnics. His mother also organised picnics for senior citizens - something that, Malcolm suspects, inspired his own skills for organising events and people.**



Photos: (Top) Malcolm being interviewed by Stephanie, (Bottom) Malcolm dressed in his William Kibby VC Veteran Shed uniform.

His father worked as a labourer, maintaining wooden bridges across the state. He wasn't a talker, but that suited the family fine, because, as Malcolm puts it, “Mum never stopped talking.” Once, she insisted his dad “growl” at Malcolm for misbehaving. Dad looked at him and simply said, “Hello, son.” That was it - that was enough to stop Malcolm in his tracks.

In Malcolm's childhood, there was no television or telephone. In those days, as a child “you could go places on your own, walk to school, play with the ferrets or the trotting horses across the road, or join a game of cricket.” He remembers it wasn't until 1956 that his girlfriend (now wife) had a TV, and they'd go to her place to watch shows like Perry Mason.

Shops felt different too. Goods were weighed out individually: butter, broken biscuits, blocks of ice delivered on a trolley. The butcher would give him a slice of fritz.

He has fond memories of pie-and-sauce shops at the Coles Café on Rundle Street and the old Balfour's shop.

Malcolm went to Cowandilla Primary School, near the airport, then on to Adelaide High. He still catches up with eight mates from those school days every six weeks or so for coffee and conversation (but never about ailments; that's the rule).

At school, Malcolm was interested in medicine but didn't make the university cut. Instead, he volunteered with St John's Ambulance and, at 17, joined the Navy, where opportunities in health care seemed more accessible. He served from 1960 to 1969 and loved it. His role - something between a nurse and what we'd now call a paramedic - meant he was often the sole medical person on board, responsible for the health of a crew of 250.

One time, when his ship was involved in war games off Sydney Harbour, he diagnosed a sailor with appendicitis. The captain questioned his judgment. “Are you sure?” he asked. “Yes, Sir,” Malcolm replied. The ship was diverted to anchor off North Head so the sailor could be transferred to hospital. Hours later, confirmation came: it was indeed appendicitis—and just in time. The captain's only response? “Good.”



Photo: Stock image





Onboard, Malcolm earned nicknames like “the passenger” (since no one quite understood what he did) or simply “Doc.” In one emergency, a crewman suffered a severe head injury. As the man lay vomiting on deck, Malcolm rolled him onto his side to prevent choking. His helpers - mainly cooks - promptly joined in the vomiting. The sailor eventually received a steel plate in his head and returned to service. Malcolm was never called a passenger again after that.

Malcolm married in Sydney, but he and his wife agreed to wait until he left the Navy before starting a family. She had no local support network, and they didn't want her raising a child alone while he was deployed. Despite extensive training, the Navy didn't award qualifications that translated to civilian life, so Malcolm retrained in lab work at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital as part of his Naval training. Whilst working on Sydney's North Shore at the Naval Hospital, one Christmas Day he responded to several emergencies, including a call to assist a man with a ruptured ulcer, before spending the next 10 hours in the laboratory.

He also organised recreational outings for hospital staff - boating to nearby uninhabited islands to relax, drink and listen to live music.

Back in Adelaide, Malcolm studied microbiology whilst working at the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science. Starting as a lab technician, he rose to become lab manager. He also served as President of the South Australian Union Organisation, the largest union in South Australia.

Social justice became a strong focus. He recalls how a senior Hospital Scientist was denied superannuation and couldn't get a bank loan because she was a woman. Malcolm worked to change that. At the time, blue-collar workers had no superannuation at all. He played a role in negotiations with the Keating Government that led to employers contributing nine percent toward workers' retirement savings. He also argued against paying super as a lump sum, warning it would just be spent on a trip around Australia - leaving people reliant on the pension again.

Malcolm served as both a Councillor and later as Mayor of Yankalilla, all while actively volunteering with Meals on Wheels SA. Noticing a need for greater social connection in the community, he used his role as President of the local Over 50s Club to secure land and funding for the establishment of a men's shed.

After moving to the Holdfast Bay area - home to one of the highest number of veterans per capita in South Australian councils - he became Secretary of the William Kibby VC Veterans' Men's Shed. With backing and support from veterans and non-veterans, in particular Jeff (Treasurer and Project Manager), the association secured grants and are building a strong supportive community.

Today, Malcolm focuses on good governance and administration. Alongside Patricia, he puts together compelling funding applications - so much so that the Minister for Veterans' Affairs once visited just to commend the Shed's mural and grant process, promising to return whenever they needed him.

Malcolm looks back on his life with a gentle sense of pride. He and his wife raised two beautiful children who have both gone on to lead fulfilling lives.

**“What could be better?” he asks.**



Photos: (Top) The Memorial Wall at the William Kibby VC Memorial Garden, (Bottom) Stock image



# PAINTING PEACE

**Outside the William Kibby VC Veterans' Shed, local man Sean stands in front of a wall, paintbrush in hand, working on a mural that brings together his military past and his journey through recovery.**

Sean joined the Army in 2008 and reached the rank of Lance Corporal in 2013. He served in Afghanistan, and like many veterans, came home carrying more than just memories. It wasn't until the birth of his son that the full weight of his experiences started to catch up with him.

Sean was diagnosed with PTSD and began looking for ways to heal.

**That's when art came into his life - not as a career, but as a form of therapy.**

Sean explains that his art began simply as therapy. He didn't set out to become an artist; he just needed a way to get what was in his head out onto the canvas.

He joined an art group for veterans and other frontline workers. It was during one of those sessions that someone from the Shed visited and asked if anyone would be interested in painting a mural. With encouragement from his teacher Sean put up his hand.

"Art therapy takes your mind to other places," Sean says. "It gave me something to focus on - and a sense of self-worth."

One of Sean's pieces, The Gentle Soldier, went on to be exhibited at Parliament House and is now part of the Australian War Memorial's collection. But the mural he's working on now feels especially meaningful.



Photo: Supplied. Credit: NewsWire/ Dean Martin

It's local, it's personal, and it reflects the community he's part of.

The mural will feature symbols from across the three services - a plane, a tank, and a ship - as well as portraits of local veterans and significant figures: William Kibby, Michael Herbert, Millie Dorsch and possibly Jamie Larcombe.

"It's a local painting locals," Sean says simply.

**"It feels right to be doing it here, for this local community."**

He hopes the mural will become something people stop to look at for years to come - a piece that makes their eyes wander across the wall as they reflect on the different stories and elements captured in paint.

Sean still sees his art as a hobby, but one with potential. More than that, it's become an important part of how he stays connected and grounded.

For Sean, it's not about creating something perfect - it's about honouring the people who've served and finding a bit of peace along the way.



Photo: Sean in action painting at the William Kibby VC Mens Shed



Photo: The Gentle Soldier - Sean Halfpenny



# A LIFE SHAPED BY WAR, MEMORY AND REINVENTION



In 1970, Rob was 20 years old when his birth date was drawn in the national service lottery - a simple marble that altered the trajectory of his life forever. From that moment, he had a year to prepare and to worry.



Photo: (Top) Supplied. (Bottom) Rob being interviewed by Sirina in the Millie Dorsch Wellness Space.

The looming possibility of going to war cast a shadow over everything. There were ways to avoid Vietnam - alternative service with the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) and other exemptions, such as university and Rob knew people who took those paths. But for him, it wasn't so simple. As anxious and apprehensive as he was, he believed in the war. His family did too - it was sold to them in the newspapers everyday as necessary. Everyone wanted him to go to war to protect their land and country. But no amount of belief, born of patriotism and duty, conquered his storm of fear.

He turned 21 just before reporting for training. It should have been a time of celebration, but for Rob, it was a time of mental and physical deterioration. He was anorexic, deeply unwell, and many of the photographs from that period have since been destroyed - he couldn't bear to look at them. What he does remember is leaving on the train to Puckapunyal and the image of women in bikinis waving to the train

from the Warrnambool caravan park to the departing young men. It was hot, and the heat would become a constant presence, from training to war.

Rob began his basic training at Puckapunyal, then Singleton for Rifle Infantry Training, before moving to Townsville, where he underwent seven to eight months of gruelling preparation. The training was intense and thorough. Eventually, he and his unit, the 4th Battalion were deployed to Vietnam aboard an aircraft carrier - the name of which Rob can no longer recall but thinks it may have been the HMAS Sydney. Much of that time is a blur. He says now that he probably was already starting to suppress memories to cope. Rob remembers crossing the equator, a ceremony marking it, but like so much of his service, the details have intentionally been dulled by the awful fog of the war to come.

He remembers the heat, the humidity, but to him it felt not much different to Townsville. He can recall the leeches, which he says were huge. Particularly memorable, he recalls, because there was little protection from them and each day the men in his patrol would compare various creative ways to remove them. The mosquitoes were bad as well and to this day he can't stand the stench of Aeroguard which had been a constant go-to since Puckapunyal. In Vietnam the men had to smell like the jungle or else risk discovery. Most hauntingly, the death of a friend beside him. He remembers the blood, his open chest, and what the man said as he died. The memory is certain, but the details drift off in time - another soldier remembering the same man's last moments differently. In recalling this - no surprise given the conditions. Rob now accepts both versions of that tragic event - small memory fragments around one core fact: a mate was killed. It's all a stark reminder of how trauma can fracture memory, bending and reshaping it at the time, and over time.



## The lottery that shaped a life

After his first divorce, though, the effects of trauma - what we now understand as PTSD - began to surface. He's spent much of his adult life learning how to live with it, navigating not just the scars left by war, but the stress of everyday life.

He's found solace in many things: running marathons, meditation, yoga, tai chi, painting, writing, and podcasting. These practices have helped him to find balance and to process what he cannot forget. They are the tools he uses to stay grounded, to make peace with a life that was dramatically altered by the roll of a marble.

Rob often talks about the lives and lies we're sold - the romanticised dreams of youth. The idea that you grow up, meet the girl, get married, and live happily ever after. But life rarely follows such a script. He feels



Photos: (Top) Rob chatting to Sirina.  
(Bottom) Rob

Rob's return from Vietnam is as vague as his departure. He recalled being told they were going home. It was October 17, 1971. He was flown back in a Hercules. Rob laughs. It was deafening. All the movies lie about it. Four big prop motors. Anyone who has flown in one would remember the noise and described the plane as the tradesman's van of the army. They landed in Sydney and then boarded another plane bound for Melbourne, upon arrival there they were transported by bus back to the barracks to collect their discharge papers an action known as demobbing. Sitting on the bus looking at the people they passed Rob could not understand how everyone appeared to be living a normal life. Why was no one acting cautiously, why weren't they looking over their shoulders? It was just another version of reality of which he was divorced from.

Rob's life before Vietnam was similarly disjointed. He migrated from Holland to Australia at the age of seven, a formative time when identity is still taking shape. That migration, he believes, forced him to reinvent himself - to leave behind who he had been and become someone new. He attributes this event with the ability to reinvent himself and, after Vietnam, he did it again. The war became a haze, a disconnected past that no longer belonged to the new him, something

that he was happy to leave behind, unexplored in his memory.

Briefly returning home to Victoria after his service, Rob didn't stay long. He moved to South Australia to begin a new life, where few people knew he was a veteran. The Army had granted him free tertiary education, and he chose teaching. Over the years he became a teacher, a writer, and a mentor to young people helping to navigate and forge their own paths. One lecturer in particular from Adelaide Teachers College, Madge Mitten, had a profound influence on him. She was tough, but she believed in him when no one else did. She encouraged his creativity and pushed him towards the arts. There was also a Physics lecturer, Ron Tindall, who also left a lasting impression and gave Rob a quote that sticks with him today.

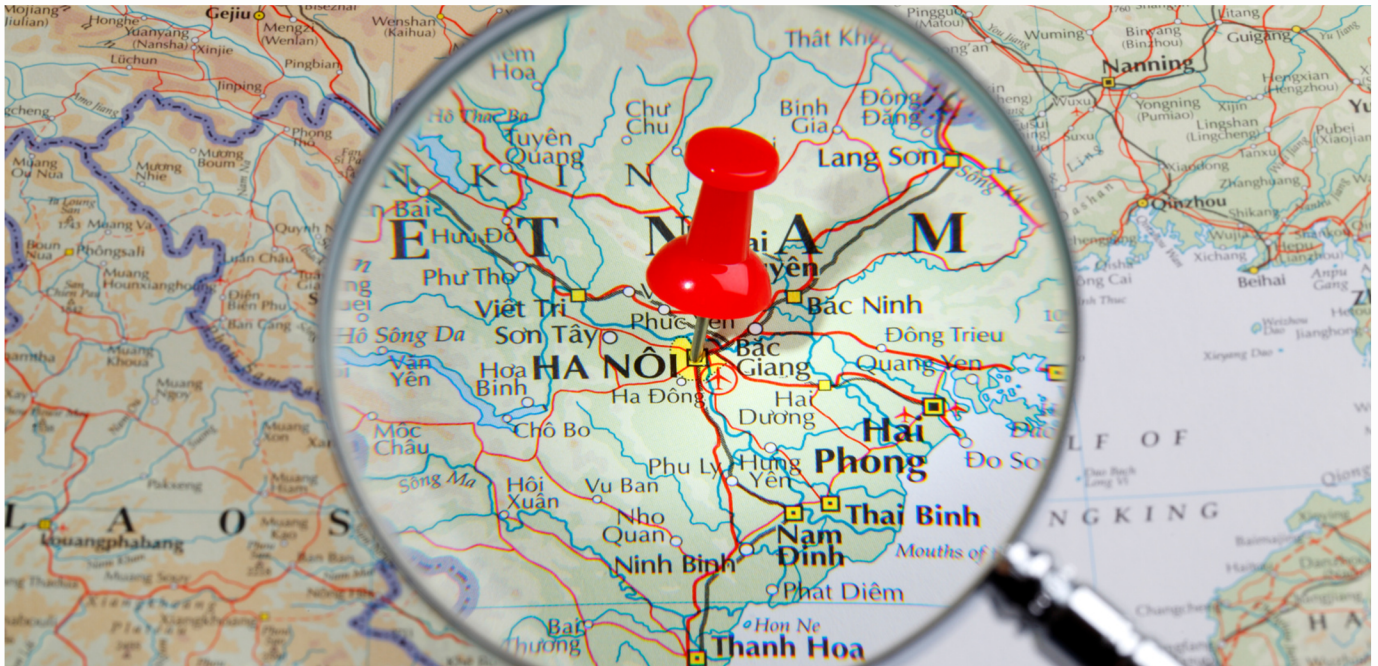
**"Science describes everything but it doesn't explain anything."**

Rob reflects on the people who have touched and influenced our lives and that Madge Mitton unbeknownst to her was one of these people. He hopes he has 'paid that forward' by doing likewise.

But even as Rob built a new life, the past wasn't done with him. For years, he forced everything into the background, locking it away in what he calls "the fog of war."

he was indoctrinated into that ideal, only to have it shattered by war. Yet, it's not bitterness that defines him - it's reflection. He understands now that everyone has a journey, often shaped by events far beyond their control, and maybe also lost to them.





He understands now that everyone has a journey, often shaped by events far beyond their control.

His story, like that of so many veterans, is one of quiet resilience. His time in Vietnam, though shrouded in fog, left an indelible mark. It altered his identity, his path, and how he sees the world. But it didn't stop him.



He recreated himself not just once, but again and again—migrant, soldier, teacher, artist, runner, writer. He kept going.

Rob believes deeply in the power of storytelling. In sharing his experience, he hopes others can see the importance of capturing conversations, listening and understanding the lives we so easily overlook.

Every person carries a story the world rarely sees, shaped by hope, trauma, chance, and choice. Rob's journey, with all its hardship and transformation, is a testament to how even the most unchosen paths can lead to lives of quiet significance.

And though he would choose to erase everything he lived through in that war, Rob continues to move forward, leaving behind something meaningful in the minds of those he's taught, spoken with, and inspired.



Photos: Stock images

## ABOUT THE WRITER

Sirina has been writing for as long as she can remember ~ starting with letters to pen pals and family, then moving on to short stories and online competitions. She is currently working on a historical romance novel set during the Napoleonic era, centred around smuggling and the secrets it uncovers.

Sirina enjoys exploring characters in depth, fascinated by how life experiences shape people's decisions and relationships - both fictional and real. Based in Adelaide, she draws inspiration from history, human resilience and the emotional experiences that connect us all.





# DIGGING INTO THE PAST, LOOKING TO THE FUTURE



**Learning that Peter was an army vehicle mechanic is not entirely surprising. He's a tall, broad guy and carries himself with confidence. We meet at the William Kibby VC Veterans' Shed and any time we're standing, I am looking up! Luckily, Peter is quite willing to sit in the Memorial Garden as we chat with our backs to the autumn sunshine.**



*Photos: Peter being interviewed by Chris in the Memorial Garden at the William Kibby VC Veterans Shed*

"I'm the oldest of two children," he tells me. "Myself and my brother were six years apart." Peter's childhood was spent in the north of Adelaide, moving suburb-to-suburb, with a brief foray running the General Store at Mount Mary.

Peter's father Harold built the first shop at Angle Vale, literally. "He'd go to work for the council, and he'd come back via the yard on Main North Road, pick up a ute load of Besser Blocks and come home and lay them."

Peter's mother, Edna, ran the store for several years. "That was during the changeover to decimal currency. I remember that doing mum's head in. She had a little dial to convert from pounds, shillings and pence, into dollars and cents. In those days people would come in and buy a packet of cigarettes, and take the change from a 10 shilling note in petrol."

Peter eventually went to Elizabeth Boys' Technical High School. "In my third year we had a career day. I finished up with a whole lot of information about army apprenticeships. I was five days off turning 17 when I joined the Army as an apprentice motor-mechanic."

## A Military Man

Peter's career with the army began with a four-year apprenticeship that took him through to age 21.

"Two years of theory work," he says, "then two years out with the unit, putting it into practice. The final assessment was right across the whole gamut of your trade. I loved it." The Vietnam war was ongoing at the time Peter enrolled, but he says he wasn't worried. "As a tradesman, the only combat duties you would have would be night-time pickets, and maybe fill a position in a patrol." And Peter couldn't be sent overseas as an apprentice anyway. "I finished my apprenticeship in December '74, and they'd already made the decision they were bringing them home."

Edna's brother was killed in New Guinea. "I remember the day I joined the army going out on the train from Adelaide, and Mum running the full length of the platform. I wondered, years later, whether she had memories of Allen leaving on the train and never coming home. She never discussed it."

Peter's training unit was based in Victoria, which is where Peter met Lyn, who he would marry on his 21st birthday. "And we've never been apart since. We just had our 50th anniversary."

Their first posting was to Puckapunyal, Peter working on earth-moving equipment, then transferred to working with Armoured Corps doing tank repair of the Leopard Tank Layer. "The two pieces of bridge sit on top of the tank. It's very complex hydraulics. It rolls one out, drops it down, locks it together, then rolls the whole things out, 22 metres of bridge."





Photo: Stock image

Peter speaks positively of the time with the Leopard. He credits his Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM) with giving him a greater understanding of discipline. "He took me under his arm, and said 'You might be RAEME (Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers) but you're also attached to the Armoured Corps' and as such was expected to perform the same as any Armoured Corps Warrant Officer."

Peter's next posting was to the Proof and Experimental Establishment at Port Wakefield. "I had four and a half incredible years there." Peter supported the range with the work of test-firing, and his stories from this time have relish to them.

"We used to fire everything from small arms, up to 5" naval rounds." He gives me details of when a 4.5" round was accidentally loaded into a 5" barrel, from the staffing coincidences that led to the initial mistake, to the systems that meant it wasn't picked up. "They keep immaculate documentation. They knew where it came from, where it went on the trailer, when it came out of the trailer and into the gun... It's hydraulically rammed so you don't feel any loss of resistance. They put this full chamber canister behind it and fire it."

**"And we had about 30 feet of flame come out of the barrel, and you could hear it going g'dung-g'dung-g'dung-g'dung-g'dung down the barrel. Instead of going about 10k down range, it went about three!"**

Peter talks about his time in the community, playing sport and going fishing and crabbing, but eventually, "The big elastic band of Puckapunyal dragged me back again, and I went back to the School of Armour, as an Artificer: Vehicle."

As part of his Artificer training, Peter had to complete a technical report understanding and designing a braking system for a trailer. "We had to go through and explain the functionality of every valve, long-hand. That taught us to go in and fully understand the internal workings. Then we had to design a system. We went into PBR, the brake manufacturers, and talked it through. The guy there said 'Do you wanna make one up?' 'I'd like to do that!' So he assembled the whole lot so we could photograph it on the trailer, and that went into the report." Peter was eventually promoted to Artificer Sergeant Major, the senior technical person in the workshop, supporting others with their trades. "That took me up to my 20-year mark."

By this point, Peter had been in Victoria for four years, and his Dad had been diagnosed with bowel cancer. "I said, 'I'm going back to Adelaide one way or the other.'"

Peter managed to find someone with the same trade in Adelaide, who wanted to move to Melbourne. Through contacts in postings, Peter negotiated for him to be posted to Melbourne, and for Peter to fill his role in an Army Reserve unit in Adelaide. Though he stayed in this position for four more years, it would be his last job in the military.

Not too long after getting married, Peter and Lyn had started their own family, and by now they had three teenagers. So in the mid-90s when the army tried to move them to Townsville, it was time to call it a day. "Dad's bowel cancer was getting worse, and the kids were in high school. We had a meeting with the family, I said we're either going to Townsville, or I get out. We all agreed that we weren't going to Townsville."

I ask Peter how he feels about his military career, and he is positive, but also thoughtful.

"I served 24 years and never went overseas. I never went to an ANZAC Day parade for about 15 years after I got out. I thought I wasn't a veteran."



Photo: Stock image

"I was just someone who put the uniform on and went to work. I really put myself down until someone said to me 'You signed the same piece of paper, signed your life away to the government to use in whichever way they see fit, including giving your life for your country.' So, the fact that they chose not to send me, that's not my problem. I was ready to go, should they say go."

Peter even packed his bags on a number of occasions for peace-keeping rotations, but those expeditions were cancelled before he could be deployed. "I carried that burden for a number of years. Now I see myself as a veteran, and the fact that they chose not to send me overseas, maybe I was lucky, maybe I wasn't."

### A Family Man

Peter's first child, a daughter, was born in 1976. Then, "one in '78, and '81." Peter speaks proudly about all three of them. "My eldest daughter worked for Coopers Brewery for 25 years." Peter tells me she ended up in a very highly placed role. "Her eldest daughter turns 21 next month, and her youngest is only four. Their eldest just presented us with a great-grandchild, so we're now great-grandparents."

"We didn't think we were old enough, but we're loving it."

Peter's son was a construction engineer, supporting the building of the desalination plant at Lonsdale, and the new Royal Adelaide Hospital.

"He knows his Australian standards inside-out." He and his partner have two sons now, "so he became Mr Mum. He's a good cook, good gardener. He got all his grandfather's skills. Skipped me and went to him!"

Peter's youngest daughter has spent 21 years in the police force, with a partner who is a talented electrical engineer. "We've had three good children, and they've all had good jobs; we've got seven grandchildren and one great-grandchild."

When Harold, Peter's dad, knew the end of his life was close, he set down some family history. Peter smiles a bit telling the story.

"He wrote down about five or six pages. He wrote the family tree down, everything from memory. Looking back, I'm in awe of how accurate he was." In 2002, in Harold's final days, people gathered. "The whole family came and saw him, in hospital. He was just flat on his back, couldn't move." Harold had had a brother, Laurie, who passed away much younger, dying in the early 1960s. "Dad suddenly sat bolt-upright in his bed and said 'Hang on Laurie, I'm coming.' And then he was gone only hours later."

After Harold passed away, Peter put the document he had written in a bag and hung it in the wardrobe.

Peter had moved from the army into a private training company, run by one of the army reservists he had known in his final posting.

He was a part-time mechanic and a part-time writer of training materials.

"Eventually they said, 'You're too valuable to be spinning spanners. We'll have you up in the office full time.'" When I ask if he missed the mechanical work, he laughs. "No, I was an average mechanic. I was never one to tinker at home. I was a mechanic at work, and then came home, and that was that. But I worked my way up from shit-kicker to 2IC."

Peter's mum would stay with them sometimes, and he remembers one weekend, speaking to her about coming down. She asked for help packing her bags. It was a hot day and I had nothing to do, so I thought 'stuff it' and left work at 4pm. I got to Mum's, knocked on the front door...nothing. I waited a bit, knocked on the door again. Nothing. Walked down the side and peeped through the kitchen window, and she was slumped over the table. I panicked, jumped the fence. The back door was locked, I hit it with my shoulder and it just splintered, shattered. I called the ambulance. They were good, they were there very quickly."

Peter thinks his mum misunderstood the air conditioner, and in trying to turn it up, switched off the cooler. "It was just pumping in hot air, and the house was shut up like Fort Knox."

When Peter got to the hospital, Edna was in a bad way.





Photo: Stock image

"All her organs were shutting down. The doctor said 'We can save her, but she'll be on a machine for the rest of her life.' Mum and Dad always said they wanted to be kept comfortable, but to let nature take its course. We sat there with her until 11.30, and she was just dozing off to sleep. We thought we'd go home, and about 15 minutes into the trip we got a phone call that she'd gone."

"Unfortunately neither of them met any of our grandchildren. Mum was knitting little booties, and she couldn't get the sizes right. She'd make one, then try a different needle. We finished up with about five different boots, all in different sizes," Peter laughs. Then he adds, "Our grand-daughter's still got all of them. Says she'll never part with them."

### A Historian

That document Harold had written was still in Peter's cupboard, and after a while, he felt he had to do it justice. Peter started reading, and researching, and hunting.

### "I'm a 7th generation Australian. My family came out in 1848."

William and Mary Edson travelled on the *HMS Sibella* as migrants with their children. William had been in the Royal Artillery, but went into farming when he arrived in South Australia. They settled in Lyndoch, and their second son, also named William, got married at 17 to a young woman of 21, confusingly also named Mary. The younger William and Mary moved about, trying their luck in a number of places.

William even went to the goldfields at one stage, though his obituary

says that he was not very successful. "I don't know how they define that though," Peter says.

Because not long after he returned, William bought 460 acres of land at Black Rock, where he stayed until he died. Peter knows his lineage by heart. "It's William, William, then Alfred Charles. He's buried in Lyndoch at the feet of his grandparents. Then it's Alfred William, then Harold Albert, then me. When you're going from Gawler through Sandy Creek, where the swerving bend is, every one one of the vineyards there, the family's owned at one stage or another."

On his mother's side, Peter has the Bartholomew Family Bible, listing his mother's family tree. There are stories there too. "That's got in there Annie, who I thought was my grandmother; then it comes down to Myrtle Dora, and her sister, Edna May, my mother." But when Peter went digging into records held by the Mount Pleasant Heritage Room, there was a surprise, Edna's mother was actually Myrtle Dora. "Mum's birth certificate says she was born in the Medindie Salvation Army Hospice for unmarried mothers. It says who her correct mother is, but her death certificate lists her other parents, her grandparents. She was taken and handed to her grandmother, who raised her as her own. We don't know what happened, and there's none of that generation left."

Peter has been researching his family for a couple of decades now, and has seen the internet unlock stores of information. "I use Trove a lot. It's a digitised newspaper. I'll spend hours just trawling through." Peter said he would start reading of an evening, "and next thing I'd get a knock on the study door and my wife saying 'Are you coming to bed? It's 4.00 in the morning!'"

I ask if there's a family history of military service, or a pride in having served.

"There's seven Edsons from my family in the Canberra War Memorial. I found my mum's brother there."

"We bought several poppies, when we went over years ago, and we had one left over, that we tied inside the car. I sold that car to my son, and it's still there. His boy asked 'What's that?' and my son said, 'Don't touch that. That just stays there.'"

Despite that though, Peter says that his family has mainly been farmers. "No heroes, or anything like that. I think we just have a pride in the family, not in the serving side, necessarily."

### A Student of the Mind

The company that had employed Peter out of the army kept him on for 10 years, but after the Southern Expressway in the late 90s, there was a construction downturn in Adelaide; things got difficult.

Trainers had to be let go. Then, "the CEO came in to see me and said, 'The Board said I have to cull further and the only place I can cull is you.'" Peter moved to another company doing training work, which was soon sold to a new owner. In the end the owner got tied up with ice (the drug). "I kick myself I didn't pick it. I went to hire a machine one day and they said 'Nup. Your bills are three months overdue.' I went down to the finance office, kicked the door in. The poor girl there said, 'There's no money in the bank. I've got nothing to pay with.'"

As the situation became clear, Peter decided to leave. "With his drugs, the boss was doing crazy things and that did my head in. I had a really bad bout of depression. I was going to work at 8.00, and home in bed by 9.00, in tears." Peter tells me he tried medication, but hated its effects on his memory, so he tried out a program through Onkaparinga Council offering a free Cognitive Behavioural Therapy program.

"That's the best thing I ever did."



Photo: Stock image

"They asked some hairy questions at times, gave me some homework. Unpacked my mind and put it all back together. And my issue is conflict. I don't deal with it. Growing up, Dad would say, 'We're going to do it like this.' And Mum would say, 'What if we did it that way, would that work?' And Dad would say 'Yeah, it would, but we're gonna do it this way.' And that was the end of the conversation."

**"Then you join the army, they say 'Jump,' you say 'How high, and when can I come down?'"**

"Later on, as you get higher up, you give an order, and it's done, no question. Then you get out into civilian street you say 'Do this,' they go 'Nah, I'm not doing that.'"

### On Legacy

Peter is retired now, after getting out of that last tricky job, and he says he wants to leave something behind, write a book, and put his perspective on the family characters he has learned about through his research.

"I've recorded the trip out, started with the two great-great-great-grandparents, and I've gone as far down as our great-granddaughter."

"When Mum died, all these things from her family started coming up, and I wondered, why did I not know this before? And I've got photos of every grave of all my direct ancestors except Mum and Dad. They were cremated and their ashes were spread at Enfield Cemetery, not in a crypt wall or anything."

Peter wants to put a plaque to his parents on a wall of remembrance. "Somewhere people can go that's got some reference to them, a plaque that you can go and put a little flower or something. If it's not too expensive I want to make glossy-page documents I can give to each of my children and grandchildren and say 'this is where you're from.'"

"Now I'm starting to get older, you realise your own mortality. I've lost a few good friends along the way. One of them, he developed Alzheimer's. That was so sad to watch him go from being so independent - he'd go sailing on his own, single-handed and to see him deteriorate."

"I think about my young family and wonder where are they going to go to? You think about housing. I've got a foot in each camp about global warming."

"I'm not a denier, and I think we're contributing to it, but I don't know if we're the main reason. But provided it doesn't go too quick, I think the human race is smart enough to adapt. I think we will meet it somehow."

I ask Peter about his philosophy on family and he seems taken aback, as though he hasn't thought about family as a subject, despite so long researching his own.

**"I suppose it means the world to me. It's the centre of our universe. That's why we do everything, for them. We put the family first before anything."**



Photos: (Top) Stock image. (Bottom) Peter and Chris in the Memorial Garden



## ABOUT THE WRITER



Chris is a social worker, husband, and father of two daughters, who loves writing when he can find the time! He has a particular love for poetry, and for the ways that words can build connections between people and the world around and within them.



# BOOMER: A LIFE IN LABELS



Late autumn at the William Kibby VC Shed. You speak plainly, no performance, just the steady laying down of memory. Sunspots on the bright flowers in the memorial garden. The brass plaques shine. Sorrow and pride.



Photo: Top: Graham being interviewed by Lara in the Millie Dorsch Wellness Space. Bottom: The William Kibby Memorial Garden

## "Get up soldier."

That was the command that pulled you out of sleep like a rope through the ribcage. You were used to orders. But this one tasted of smoke. You were bundled into a church hall with the other men, not knowing why. Training or war. Terror in every breath. They kept you awake for days. For 12 hours, the only sound was the shriek of a baby piped in through the speakers. You never forgot. What war feels like when you're on the losing side. Assaulted. Degraded. Stripped of identity in the name of an unnamed enemy. You ripped off your labels one by one until you were clean-skinned. Some labels had stuck so long they felt like scars.

## Australian

You come from a long line of Australians. Your father. Your grandfather. Your great-grandfather - all born on this continent. It was your great-great-grandfather who arrived from England, a tinsmith who made and sold billy cans. He wore a funny little cap. Smoked a pipe.

On his 100th birthday, when they asked him the greatest thing he'd ever seen, he didn't say the railways, the lightbulb, the first photograph of his own face.

Not the aeroplane, the cinema, the telephone. Not penicillin in a Petri dish.

"The miniskirt," he said.

They don't make men like that anymore.

Or if they do, the world doesn't ask them what they saw.

## Son

Your mother was the great unknown. She was the vast ocean. The ice wind blowing off southern rocks. Hidden in the deepest fissures of the earth, on the farthest moon. She was in the folds of your cuffs. That is to say, everywhere. That is to say, nowhere. You never knew her. Your father fought in Borneo. Your grandad fought in World War I. Neither spoke a word of what he saw. You don't remember either of them laughing. There's a silence that rolls down the years like pennies in an empty well. An absence of sound. A theft of memory. Borneo killed your father in the lounge room, aged 55. Cold hand. Cold glass.

A silence that spread from him and through the house. You were raised by his grandparents. The kitchen was Nana's sanctuary. Her prison. You remember her bent over the combustion stove. The smell of roasting lamb. New bread rising.

She used to catch chickens round the leg with a wire hook. Broke their necks clean. Those were the days of swaggies knocking on the back door for jobs. And there was always work to do. Killing and butchering sheep, milking the cow, taking scraps to the chickens, checking their water.



Photo: Vietnam Veterans Day 2023. Memorial Garden William Kibby VC Veterans Shed

You remember how the swaggies spent so much time alone they lost the easy way of talking. Not like you. You always had something to yarn about. Until Nana told you to go out and play. Perhaps there were moments - yeasty air, heat rising, stove hot - when she paused to wipe her forehead with the back of her hand. Kept the hand there and letting it fall to her stomach. Bent slightly, like she'd been winded. Sound of her breath, slow sense something buckling. Face hidden. Quiet moments in which she oozed unhappiness. Before spooling it all back in. Carry on soldier.

### Boy

You ran the bush tracks. Skipped school with your mates. Learnt how to catch yabbies and skin rabbits they all called bandicoots. Fished for redfin and bream along the river. Sleek-bodied platypus slipped past like secrets. You lived off what you caught and killed, or snatched from the fruit trees at Wilson's place. When you climbed the tall hedge of cypress pines, you could see down over the church. Go farther, where the trees knotted together, and you could look down onto the nunnery. You were eight years old, standing on top of the hedge. The nuns' white underwear danced on the line below - held your eye like a magic trick.

'Hey. Boy.'

You looked over, startled. Father Frank calling again. You were untouchable at the top of the hedge. He lifted his cassock - skirts billowed round his ankles as he gave chase. You stepped along the hedge, trying to escape. You didn't see the gap. You fell straight through the space between two pines, like the parting of the Red Sea. Fell right down to the world below, thinking all the time and ever since, how the gap seemed to appear directly under your foot. Like the act of a vengeful God.

The milkman who ran the dairy had a draught horse for deliveries. When no one was watching, you'd walk past the dairy and scoop a cup of milk off the top of the vats. Cream so thick it made you sick if you drank it on a warm day. The milkman kept the horse in your family's paddock. You overheard him once complaining to your Pop. "Betsy's getting slower every day, something must be wrong with her." You held onto your secret. How it was Betsy you learnt to ride on, at night, when your grandparents were asleep. No saddles. Just you and your friends, riding free in air as thick as treacle.

You respected your friends' parents like your own. Family mealtimes.

Sleeping under their roofs. Slipping in through their front doors. Those were the small things. The big things you learnt later. Mourning the people you'd known for years as Mr Clarke or Mrs Sanders or the Brickhills. You learnt their first names at their funerals. Mumbled their favourite hymns. Hoped it was enough.

### Drifter

You didn't want to build houses like your father. Or tear them down. You tried studying, but it didn't hold. Couch surfed. Floated for a while. Watched your mates turn twenty-one. Watched them take up trades, buy cars, settle down. The army had always been there. Running in the blood. Someone once told you, "Evil prospers when good men do nothing." You couldn't be a do-nothing man. Something in you said, do more. Not louder. Not faster. Just more. Something that would break the cycle of standing still. You joined the army. You were twenty-three.

### Soldier

It felt right from the beginning. Like slipping into a pair of favourite boots. There was structure. Order. Family. Mateship under canvas. Parades. March-outs. Dirty jokes. Long silences. Understanding a man without needing to speak.



They called you Boomer. You weren't sure why. You worked with the engineers. Old bridges made from timber and brick were being replaced with concrete and steel. The old ones had to go. You set the explosives in dirt and dust. Wore earmuffs. Watched the debris form a cloudy ball in the air. Heard the crack of wood hitting metal. There was no OH&S. No safety rails. Just stand far enough back. Sometimes, you didn't. Once, you felt the whole world stop.

It was 1980, and the army were advertising. You helped make a recruitment video on the Murray River. Tested the borrowed boat alone. When the engine cut out, you knew you had no choice - you'd have to swim, pull it to safety. So, you jumped.

The river held you under. Pockets of your overalls filled with water and grit. You lost all sense of up. Thought it might be the end. Later, you flopped onto the riverbank, face down, spitting grit on the wrack line.

Your mates said, "We thought we'd lost you." Held up your sodden beret. It had come floating past, as if a body would follow.



*Photo: Stock image*

### **Boomer**

Memories embedded like shrapnel. You still remember how the menu in the mess hall read like a plan of operations. Mashed potato and red meat meant action. Rice and fruit meant peace.

One night you were ordered out of bed. Told to strip off your labels. You marched to the wharf and stood by a huge steel ship. Waited for hours in the dark. Prepared for a war that didn't start. Training for a threat that never landed, in the end. Never flew ahead. You were prepared for what never came. Prepared still, truth told. Every day the threat moves closer. You stayed busy. Signed up for every course: driving, radio, rear party, forward party, honour guard, camp duty, convoy training. Kept your bag packed. Wore your webbing, bumpack, ammunition, water. Ration pack. Out in the bush, you always ate the condensed milk first - straight from the tube. Then drank your tea, your coffee, black.

Mud. Silence. Heat.

Kept busy all the time. Busy enough to still the whole world. Resting through fifty-degree heat in the Simpson Desert. Travelling by night and never complaining. Not even to yourself. You kept going. That was the way you were built. No reverse gear. You learnt to adapt. Pulled a sledger through sand that might as well have been snow. So hot it was freezing. "Weather's perfect," you'd say - every day. Can't complain. If you complain, you're lost. One night, drinking sundowners in a dusty bar, you asked, "Why do they call me Boomer?"

"Big mouth," one mate said, and the others laughed. But another leaned in. "Nah, it's not that. It's the coat of arms. Emu and kangaroo. Can't go backwards, mate. Neither can you." You'd heard it before - that the emu and kangaroo were chosen because they only move forward. Like the land itself. Like the people it shapes. You nodded. Eyes already on your mate in the corner. Local boys starting to crowd him. They thought he was alone. He's never alone. You set down your drink. About to move off. And every

time you see the coat of arms - the kangaroo, the Boomer - you remember.

### **Ghost**

The years spun like plates. When your time was up, they called you in. Asked what you wanted to do. You still thought the army was a racetrack - a course that could be run. You didn't yet know it was a river. And that it runs through you. You left. Found work driving trucks. Kept moving forward. The old fear still caught at the back of your throat, but you didn't notice it anymore. Until you drove into the town where you grew up. The dairy had been pulled down 30 years ago. A ghost town. You turned into the grounds of the old Catholic church. Found yourself face to face with Father Frank. "You look awfully familiar, boy. What's your name?" You smiled. The past never stops chasing you.

### **Veteran**

When you think of your proudest days, you think of the flag. You think of Anzac mornings. Of standing tall on Martain Street in Albury. Twelve deep on the lane, the crowd. Sun winking off your medals.

But your proudest moments weren't your favourite. Your favourites came later, when the crowds had thinned. In the quiet back rooms of pubs. In bars. In the slow, steady unbuttoning of lips. The unlatching of tongues. When men began to speak. The things they carried - and never told. What your dad couldn't say. What your grandad couldn't name. Terminal secrets. Man-made prisons.

The speaking was slow. But it came. The kind of things that kill you if you keep them in. The kind of words you can't carry alone. The need to be understood.

And suddenly, the labels crack. The silence breaks.

## Man

You have worn many names. Son. Soldier. Ghost. Boomer. Drifter. Boy. Australian. The ex in ex-serviceman stands for former. But you've come to believe it also stands for experienced. You became experienced in the army. Though it never seemed to count, and your service years howled unheard down the decades. Still, you carried your confidence, your honesty, your integrity - the tools you honed - forward into the world. You carried nightmares, too. You lie awake, wondering how you handed over your life and your body like a blank cheque. The dog days still chase you down. That hunted feeling has never quite left you.

Then one morning, you're standing in the kitchen, ready to wash your cup and go to work. You find you can't. You're an engine turning, failing to catch. For months you watch the slow unravelling of your life in the slipstream. Until everything you built has left you, and you are driving your car, trying to find a safe place to sleep. You have learnt to see your wounds.

They are invisible, long-open, long-pouring.

**You found other men who understand. Men whose names are stitched into the story of the armed forces.**

You learn your place. A ripple in the fabric of humanity, echoing outward. You live with the damage. You accept what the army gave you. Getting your clothes ready the night before the day. Socks on first. Shoulders back. Losing the taste of fear inside your mouth. Uniform pressed and neat, after all this time. Soldier on.

Most of your labels were stitched on by others - but this one, you chose.



Photo: Graham stands proudly in his shed uniform

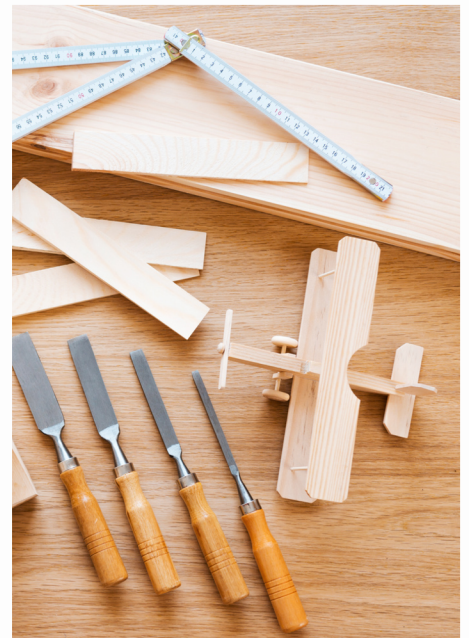


Photo: Stock image

## ABOUT THE WRITER



Lara Saunders is a writer of experimental fiction that delves into the complexities of human nature when it cracks, and the stuff we are made of runs out. She holds a degree in Creative Writing, and her work has been recognised in several competitions, including twice being shortlisted for the Victoria University Short Story Prize and three times longlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize. In 2021, she was awarded the South Australian Emerging Writers Fellowship to Varuna, the National Writers' House. In 2022, she won The Moth magazine's Short Story Prize, as featured in The Irish Times, and her story "Kippy Day" was published in two parts by Litro Magazine (UK). Lara is the co-founder of Mockingbird Writers, a collaborative space offering critique, workshops, retreats and support throughout the year.



# A LIFE WELL LIVED



Photo: HMS Diana prior to the nuclear blasts

**Ken Stephens was born in 1933 in Barry, South Wales - a bustling coal port in its heyday. His early memories included a Greek sailor, Leo, bouncing him on his knee and singing, "When I Grow Too Old to Dream." That song and spirit of music echoed through Ken's childhood.**

Singing was a feature of the Stevens household. Ken said he could always hear his mum coming home before he saw her, from the songs she would be singing. "Mum was a force to be reckoned with." Not only did Ken regard her as the 'fountain of all knowledge,' but she was stubborn and had a wicked sense of humour, all traits that Ken shared with her.

Ken's Dad used to race dogs. One such dog, Lady May, was more a pet to Mum than a racing dog. One time Lady May was way out at the front of a race, and all bets were on her. Mum was near the finish line, and was shouting, 'come on Lady May.' The dog heard her voice, stopped running the race, and trotted over to Mum for a pat. Dad was not pleased.

During "The Blitz", a bombing campaign by Nazi Germany against the United Kingdom during WWII, the Germans wanted to close Barry Port because of the coal exportation, but they never managed. As a kid, Ken and his mates were thrilled watching dogfights and placing bets on whether the Me109, the Spitfire or Hurricane was going to win out. When two houses were bombed in their street, they were delighted to play among the ruins. The only fear they felt was from the sound of Stuka Dive Bombers as they screamed down.

Childhood mischief ran strong, spending time 'raiding' the nearby neighbourhoods. One member of his gang would distract the bakery owner, while another would creep in and steal a wad of gooey bread dough in their hands. Ken recalls being distracted one time by an elderly lady who had lost her hearing aids, and by helping her find them he became a bit of a hero, which was odd considering his thieving intent. Once he found a discarded rations book in the street with the chocolate allocations gone, but nevertheless, Ken and his mates

cached in the biscuits and ate them all. His Mum was not happy with their dishonesty when she found out.

Traditions shaped his early years. Guy Fawkes Night meant bonfires and fireworks - stolen if need be. New Year's Eve, the first person to enter the house after midnight had to be dark-haired, carrying whisky and coal for luck. Ken noted at the time wakes were open-casket affairs, followed by sandwiches and spirits. Christmas morning meant a pillowcase filled with fruit, toys, and - if they were lucky - a banana from the Geest Line from the Bahamas.

Ken's father, a merchant seaman, survived three U-boat attacks during the war but later sadly died of syphilis in an asylum. After he was removed from the family, Ken's mother took advantage of scholarships for naval orphans, sending Ken off to boarding school at eight years old. He was short, swarthy, and often picked on - but he refused to let it define him. He developed a "sod you" attitude and threw himself into diving, boxing, running, and gymnastics, quickly earning a reputation for his grit. Though he was short, other students bigger than him in the boxing ring, were in fear of their lives.

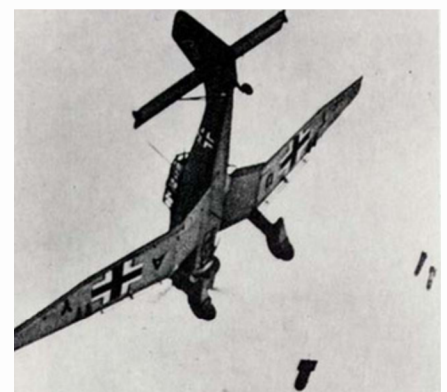


Photo: Stuka Dive Bomber WWII



*Photo: Completion of Ken's Physical Trainer Course, 1954*

At 15, Ken joined the Royal Navy as a boy seaman. By 18, he was "Able Bodied," which entitled him to a daily tot of rum. He didn't drink, but he cleverly traded it, forgoing a watch post to another person.

During the Korean War, Ken served on HMS Brags Bay, shelling enemy shores and rescuing downed American pilots. Each rescue earned their ship a bucket of ice cream from the U.S. Navy.

Transferred to an aircraft carrier, he found camaraderie in chaos. His friend Selwyn once radioed an "elephant" sighting 'Elephant passing right to left' - forgetting to mention it was on a barge. Another time, Selwyn hid his uniform in a slops bucket, went AWOL to find a brothel, and was dragged back mid-act by military police, unapologetically claiming, "Hang on fellas, I'm not done yet."

On another occasion the ship that Ken was on got its propellers entangled in cables near its mooring in the Hahn River. As one of two shallow-water divers aboard, Ken helped untangle ship propellers using rebreathers (Underwater Breathing Apparatus) that only lasted 15 minutes. He felt anxious while he was on this job, fearing the wrong officer might accidentally start the engine and the propellor would chop them to pieces. What haunted him more were the floating prisoners of war - Korean captives with severed hands or fingers, pushed into the freezing river to bleed to death and die. Some were already gone when Ken's ship arrived.

Others they managed to save. In 1956, Ken was aboard the HMS Diana when they were sent to 'observe' at the Montebello Islands and experience the fallout from two atomic bomb tests.

The idea of the admiralty was to test whether the fighting capability of a warship would be compromised by the fallout from nuclear bombs. The ship tried to avoid exposure to the radioactive fallout by spraying the ship with seawater using their powerful pumps during the exposure periods. The crew were trained in cleaning the ship and themselves after the fallout event had ceased.

During the atomic tests, they wore standard 'anti-flash' gear. This was made from an absorbent material (probably cotton, like the lining of slippers), including gloves and balaclava of the same material. So, the clothes absorbed particles of radioactive material while they cleaned the ship. After cleaning the Diana, they simply dumped the contaminated clothing overboard, then they had a shower. The 'boffins' and their assistants were the only ones who got to wear sophisticated decontamination suits. Some crew members wore Roentgen-meters (Geiger counters) to monitor the level of radioactive exposure. After the tests, the ones that showed high readings were thrown overboard. Ken believes this is so the Royal Navy could not be held accountable for any claims as to ill health in the future (and they never have admitted liability for their inhumane experiments to this day).

Afterward, HMS Diana was also sent to the Suez Crisis, where they sank an Egyptian frigate that attacked them. Despite the firefight, Ken's crew risked their lives to save the enemy survivors. It is an unwritten law of the sea that all survivors of warfare, be they enemy or not, must not be left to drown. Ken then trained as a Physical Training Officer (PTO) in Portsmouth - graduating top of his class. He led the ship's physical programs, organising soccer matches in every port they docked. On leave, a motorbike accident enroute to see a girl led him instead to Sheila, a wonderful clerk he later married.

He left the Navy in 1958, drawn to Australia after seeing the clean shores of WA during his atomic test days. Settling in Adelaide, he took shift work in a chemical factory before retraining as a social worker in 1981. He had started as a nurse at the Strathmont Centre, a facility for people with intellectual disabilities, but was horrified by the psycho-social and physical abuse, he witnessed.



*Photo: young Ken proudly wearing his naval uniform*





Once qualified, he returned to reform it from with new rules requiring two staff at every resident interaction, removed abusive staff and helped reshape care standards. It became one of the proudest accomplishments of his life.

Later, Ken became a Probation and Parole Officer (PMPO), eventually leading the southeast SA region. He wrote pre-sentence reports for judges and guided parolees as they re-entered society. One Moroccan prisoner, who had murdered a family in a fit of rage, struggled with freedom. Ken's job was to get this man back into the swing of civilian life. Sensing the man's disorientation, he simply sat with him on Rundle Street, watching life go by. Ken needed to check his car and thought to himself, "this man could just run off." Then he thought, "no wait, if I rush back I would demonstrate distrust." When Ken returned from checking the car and found the man still sitting calmly, a deep bond of trust was formed. Ken's take away lesson from the day was – 'Trust is never wasted'.

Ken's love for sport never faded. For a long time, he was involved in long distance horse riding, in a competition called 'The Quilties.' These were endurance rides over 160 kilometres, where the only aim was to make the distance within 24

hours, with rider and horse confirmed to be in good health along the way and at the end by qualified vets and doctors.

In 2019, Ken set out on a remarkable kayaking voyage down the length of the River Murray from NSW town of Bringenbrong Bridge at the mouth, a distance of over 2,500 kilometres. While he did most of the distance on the first trip, he came back and completed the whole voyage in 2024, and at the age of 91, he became the oldest person to do so. In the process of achieving his goal, he fundraised for DEBRA, a charity supporting children suffering from a rare genetic skin condition called Epidermolysis Bullosa.

Ken never attended ANZAC Day parades, believing war should not be glorified. But he plans to join his grandchildren at one once his medals have been replaced (he has misplaced them), so they'll understand what he endured.

Ken said he lives life like 'someone had left the gate open.' He has lived a good life. His children are his greatest achievement and they were doing well. He admitted to making some bad decisions but always adopted the attitude of 'so be it', and he got on with life without too many regrets.

In the end, he said, he would like to go 'slipping and sliding in the mud into the grave.' He does not give up. Even now at the age of 92, he still works out on his rowing machine for half an hour every single day, in a determined effort to get fit enough to walk longer distances, and to do the things he still wants to do before the end. These include the Murray to Mountains Rail Trail, and the 1000km long Munda Biddi Trail in Western Australia, from Mundaring to Albany.

**Now that is what I call a good life!**



*Photo: Ken Stephens, 86, and his 70-year-old Teddy setting off on a marathon row for charity. Picture: AAP/Roy VanDerVegt*



## ABOUT THE WRITER

Stephanie is a counsellor and psychotherapist, and has her very own private practice.

She suffers from a great deal of curiosity about the world we live in, the universe, and everything really.

And she loves to write stories and poetry for the wonder and magic of it all.

# FRACTIONS OF TIME: FAR-REACHING EFFECTS



Photo: Geoff (holding binoculars) - Diving team 1967, preparing for work up

**Geoff served in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) for 12 years before making a considered decision to step into a life beyond being a single sailor. Those years coincided with Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war, which was a critical period in the country's history and resulted in significant social, political and cultural consequences.**



Photos: Da Nang 1968, when reality sinks in. Right: Geoff and Vonnie deep in conversation.

Individuals of that time, including Geoff, were all involved in one way or another, and the past is a story that stays with us long after it has gone. Fractions of time; far-reaching effects.

We meet Geoff as he begins his secondary schooling. Geoff is none too pleased at this point, "pissed off" in his words. Living near Birkalla Oval, Geoff was zoned for Adelaide Boys High School and had been looking forward to attending school in close proximity to the city.

The Education Department had other ideas and Geoff found himself among the first cohort of students to attend the newly established Plympton High School. By the time he reached third year, Geoff had had enough and planned, along with six of his friends, to join the Junior Recruits of the Navy. Geoff had been talking it up with his mates, sharing stories of his Dad who had been in the Navy. Geoff's Dad has been the biggest influence in his life and, in later times, the two strengthened their bond through conversations about what must have been parallel experiences – Geoff in Vietnam and his Dad in World War II.

Geoff and his mates all attended the Recruiting Office for their medicals. Once again, Geoff was stymied in his chosen path. All the boys passed, with the exception of Geoff. This time it was the Ishihara test for colour blindness that was the hurdle and Geoff's application to the Junior Recruits was not accepted. He was advised to return in two years time and apply again through the general entry process. With all his schoolmates in Western Australia with the Junior Recruits, Geoff made the decision to leave school anyway and worked at Harris Scarfe in the city until the 2 years had passed.

The recruitment call up was to HMAS Cerberus in Victoria and Geoff caught the overnight train from Adelaide to Melbourne to report to base. The initial training was for three months and Geoff fitted in well, enjoying the physical fitness aspects of the course, as well as the high ropes, swimming and general service training. After 10 weeks, Geoff was granted leave and found his way to the White Ensign Club in Melbourne (1952-1972). The club was a source of ready alcohol, which at that time was nearly impossible to get from licensed premises after hours or on a Sunday, and, according to Geoff, and said with a smile, "this was the start of a lot of problems". Geoff was 17 years old.







Photos, Left: 1965, Subic Bay P.I - Getting the good oil from the old salts (Geoff center 17 yrs old). Right: Hawaii 1966, getting ready for the unknown

After Melbourne, further specialist training was conducted at HMAS Penguin in Mosman, Sydney, and at HMAS Waterhen, located within Sydney Harbour, which was a base for the RAN's mine warfare forces. During this time, Geoff's living quarters were located in the HMAS Culgoa, a depot ship from World War II, which had been converted to house sailors from the HMAS Waterhen base. Geoff's tasks included mowing the lawns, painting the gutters white and cleaning out the rubbish. Geoff did wonder how his training had led him here – to paint rocks white. There were recreation facilities on the Culgoa, including a converted bar space at the front of the ship, and a sense of community and mateship prevailed. Geoff mused, "I have certainly hit the right place here.", and it was where he stayed for two months. Geoff's first posting was to the crew on HMAS Sydney, which earned the nickname of the 'Vung Tau Ferry', for its role in transporting Australian troops and equipment to and from the Vietnam war. Geoff was on board for the very first of these assignments. The rules and discipline of the navy were something to get used to. Everything had to be in its right place and there was daily cleaning and scrubbing. Sailors slept in hammocks and these needed packing away every day

so that the white tiles underneath could be washed and scoured. Disciplinary actions included loss of income and loss of leave.

Before heading out on his first voyage, there was an incident which has stayed with Geoff and gave him cause "to think twice about things." Army trucks carrying equipment would drive up the ramp onto the ship for offloading and troops were to be picked up from Townsville. At that time, opposition to Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war arose and the first major protests in Sydney were in 1965. Protests were fuelled by opposition to the decision to send troops and to conscription. A number of people – men, women, children, babies, had gathered at the dockyard gates and were shaking them. Geoff was called to the flight deck and told to run out the fire hose. The hose was filled with protein foam, which had a distinctly unpleasant smell. Geoff was given the call to hose the people down with it. The crowd dispersed, as was the intention, but Geoff was left uneasy: "What are we doing here? These are our people ..."

An unexpected drawback for Geoff became apparent early in his career as a sailor – as soon as he got through the Heads of Sydney Harbour, Geoff was violently seasick.

This didn't change the expectations of his role. In those days, there were no ready tablets or injections, or indeed any sympathy. Geoff just had to get on with the job, albeit with a bucket attached. Needless to say, those jobs took longer than they otherwise may have.

Scrubbing the aluminium plates on board with diesel oil needed to be done every four hours and there was no stopping until the job was finished. After 4 or 5 days, Geoff and his stomach became acclimatised but this respite was temporary and Geoff continued to be seasick each and every time he left the port.

Engaged on the 'Vung Tau Ferry', Geoff headed to Vietnam. His role was as a lookout on the bridge, high up looking for 'dots' of movement in the pitch-black dark. Geoff distinguished himself by falling asleep and crashing to the deck, which earned him a reprimand from a senior officer. Geoff had sailed into the middle of a war and recalls the sights, sounds and smells of that time vividly. Geoff was in shorts and on fire watch, not that he knew what to do with a firehose. The HMAS Sydney was stationary in port offloading troops and equipment for 3 or 4 days. A United States (US) Cruiser was situated nearby, its guns shooting into the hills – flames

“coming out of the end of each barrel. There were planes overhead bombing and helicopters landing. A couple of big cargo ships further along the coast were blown up and everyone was a bit edgy”, remembers Geoff. The tension was palpable in Geoff’s retelling of it. The ship and its crew survived, returning to Sydney for cleaning and repair.

In December 1965, Geoff had not yet reached the legal age of adulthood in Australia, but this, his first year of service, had extensive impact on the adult that he was to become. Geoff took leave over Christmas before returning to HMAS Cerebus.

Becoming a Marine Technician was next. This wasn’t Geoff’s first choice. He wanted to be a signaller but the colour blindness ruled him out, then an electrician, but he was excess to that intake and after Marine Technician came Cook and he definitely didn’t want to be that! The HMAS Stuart was Geoff’s next assignment. HMAS Stuart was a state-of-the-art anti-submarine frigate and was involved in the trial and development of the Australian designed and manufactured anti-submarine guided missile system, the Ikara. Named after an Australian Aboriginal word for ‘throwing stick’, the Ikara was an invention of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). Generally considered

superior to the US Navy’s Anti-Submarine Rocket (ASROC) at the time, because it offered more accurate guidance during flight, Geoff, as one of six divers on board HMAS Stuart, participated in exercises using the missile to sink both nuclear-powered and conventional submarines. Although it didn’t eventuate, the RAN was courting the US market for this new technology, and Geoff found himself in Hawaii for three weeks. For an 18 year old, this was heady stuff.

After Hawaii, HMAS Stuart embarked on a tour of duty with the Far East Strategic Reserve for just over 10 months. Geoff and his crew mates visited countries including Thailand, Taiwan and Japan. In 1966, the HMAS Stuart, with Geoff onboard, was patrolling the coast off Malaysia, as part of a broader Commonwealth naval presence under British command, supporting troops on the ground in Borneo, during the Indonesian Confrontation.

The Vietnam war was intensifying and the HMAS Stuart involved in providing logistical support by transporting equipment and supplies from places such as the US Naval Base at Sasebo in Japan to the Subic Bay facility in the Philippines. Geoff clearly recollects one such time where he and some crew members were permitted onshore. They travelled through thick jungle to

Sattahip in Thailand. The jungle receded and the full potency of an American airforce base in all its loudness and brashness emerged. Welcome to Cactus City said the arch over the entrance. The airfield at Sattahip, although officially a base of the Royal Thai Navy, became a key frontline facility for the US Airforce in the mid to late 1960s, principally because of its close proximity to the countries of Vietnam.

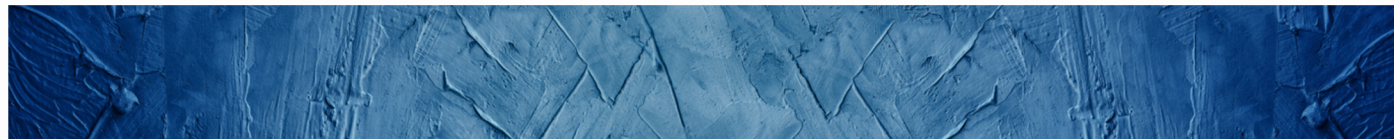
Geoff observed this facility – the runways were full of B-52 bombers and personnel worked in 8 hour shifts across the day and night. Everything was on. There was a 24-hour liquor outlet and a stage where bands from the Philippines were playing rock music – also around the clock, creating an almost surreal experience.

HMAS Stuart was a destroyer escort ship and it was in this guise that Geoff crossed paths twice more with the HMAS Sydney of his maiden voyage. Constructed in Australia, the HMAS Stuart was to escort HMAS Sydney into safe harbour at Vung Tau on her 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> voyages in ‘67 and ‘68 respectively. 1968 was the time of the Tet Offensive and Geoff remembers an urgency about quickly offloading supplies and disembarking troops.



Photo: Geoff and Vonnice in the Millie Dorsch Wellness Space





Given that there had been instances of ships being damaged and even sunk by the use of underwater mines, the captain of the Stuart wanted to ensure the safety of HMAS Sydney. He ordered six divers, of which Geoff was one, to check the ship's hull and anchor cable. Under normal circumstances, the safest time to do this would be during a dodge tide in the Saigon River, but these weren't normal circumstances. Geoff explains that the divers were all tied together using armbands. Wearing just cotton overalls and a set of tanks, their world was pitch black once they were submerged. The current was too strong and the group was ripped off the anchor cable and tangled together underneath the ship. It was "like a washing machine", says Geoff. The divers each carried a knife and managed to cut themselves apart before being dragged out to sea. They emerged in the middle of the ocean where they were spotted by a boat crew. Geoff and his fellow divers were relieved to be picked up by US navy personnel and returned safely to HMAS Stuart.

The HMAS Sydney withdrew unscathed to return to Sydney. "When we left the place, (Vung Tau Harbour), it looked like a Guy Fawkes night", recalls Geoff.

The HMAS Stuart remained in the area for further operations. The ship travelled north towards the Demilitarised Zone, hugging the shore. Using double sets of blackout curtains to achieve complete darkness at night, they moved in stealth. Geoff understands that the ship was acting as a 'listening post', tuning into communications via electronic surveillance and gathering information that contributed to the overall intelligence picture in the war. At one point, Geoff was on the upper deck during the night to check something when he heard the noise of an aeroplane. Geoff knew it was close and then the sky and the Stuart was lit up with a powerful beam directed from the aircraft. Not sure if it was friend or foe, Geoff immediately dove underneath a winch for cover and declared he "lost several kilos in the process". He later learnt that the plane was a US gunship, nicknamed 'Puff the Magic Dragon', the military version of the DC-3. Geoff continued patrols with the HMAS Stuart, drawing back periodically to Hong Kong for much-needed rest and recreation.

When asked about his times in Vietnam, Geoff responded, "I've been back once. I said I'd never go back but then a mate persuaded me – just the two of us.

**"It was fantastic. We went back to all the places we'd been. So much had changed."**

Geoff was speaking about the country but he could just as easily have been talking about himself. We are all shaped by the intersections and interactions of people, places and times in our experiences and these stories offer a glimpse of Geoff's time in service. Relying on other people for his very safety taught Geoff about the importance of team and performing in difficult circumstances meant calling on inner reserves and capacity. Critical situations revealed personal capabilities that, without that pressure, might have remained unknown - or at least untested. In his final year with the Royal Australian Navy, Geoff took on a pivotal role as an instructor at the Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Defence (NBCD) School in Jervis Bay Territory. Geoff was tasked with teaching senior sailors the essential skills of rescue operations, firefighting, chemical protection and safeguarding damaged ships from sinking, a position he clearly enjoyed. After leaving the navy, Geoff transitioned into the civilian world. His proudest life moment came when he married, and becoming a family man brought more joy.

Geoff had left the navy but he took the lessons of discipline, responsibility and commitment with him, profoundly impacting his character and his life.



## ABOUT THE WRITER....

Vonnice is a mostly retired educator, working part-time mentoring and coaching newly-appointed school principals. She is the mother of two adult children - a daughter and a son, and Grannie to a girl and a boy from Generation Alpha. Vonnice has always enjoyed communicating ideas through the written word and hopes to do more writing as time permits.

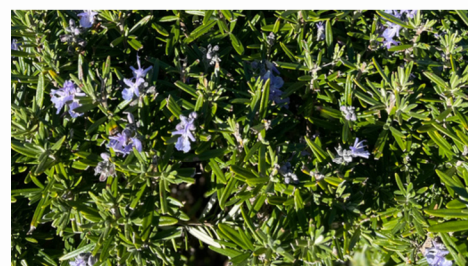


Photo: Foliage from the Memorial Garden

# WARREN, PLENTY OF LIFE LEFT TO WIRE UP!



**"You just pushed through."**

Despite the rough start, there were many memorable moments - such as winning Miss HMAS Brisbane in 1984 (pictured) and a round-the-world trip from Sydney to Singapore, the Maldives, the Seychelles, Kenya, Sri Lanka, and back home. "That trip was one of the best - we even got to go on Safari in Africa. And I had a great boss, who's still a mate to this day."

**Warren grew up in Robinvale, a small town near Mildura. But when his older brother joined the Navy, Warren's course began to shift. Warren's father thought it was a good idea for him to go for an interview.**

Warren wasn't immediately sold on the idea of joining the Navy. "I passed all the exams, an interview with the psychologist was the last thing to complete, they must've seen something in me. They talked me around, and eventually, I said yes."

But military life wasn't without its challenges. A hydrogen sulfide gas leak on HMAS Stalwart during one deployment, and a major motorbike accident three months later nearly ended his career. "I was in bad shape. Multiple injuries. It was a long road back".

Leaving the Navy at 25 gave Warren a second chance to carve a different kind of life. That chance came in the form of a backpacker he met in Australia. They moved to Yate in England, they married, had a child, and Warren retrained as a domestic electrician - a transition he picked up quickly. "No one checked your quals over there - you just proved you could do the work."

Returning to Australia in the year 2000 later proved more difficult. "It was a nightmare - Medicare, licensing, all the red tape. But I got back on my feet and started my own electrical business."

It was on a casual bike ride that Warren first discovered the Veterans Shed.

At 16, most teenagers are navigating high school and part-time jobs. Warren was entering military basic training. "It was strict. No room for error. You got up early, followed orders, and learned quickly what discipline meant." He joined the Electric and Technical Weapons (ETW) branch, commonly known as the "greenies". The role meant working with Gun Mounts and Missile Launchers - Electrical Hydraulics.

His first few postings kept him land-based - HMAS Leewin, HMAS Cerberus in Victoria, HMAS Kuttabul Garden Island in Sydney, and later the ship HMAS Brisbane. His first sea posting. Warren also served on Ships HMAS Hobart, Stalwart and Swan. His last sea posting was HMAS Gladstone Patrol Boat. "The patrol boats were top-heavy and narrow. I got seasick constantly, vomiting into garbage bags while still trying to do my job."



Photos: (Top) The ships crew HMAS Brisbane 1984  
(Bottom) Warren - Vice President, proudly wearing his shed uniform



"I was riding past and saw it. I popped in, and they welcomed me straight away. Now I'm there twice a week. I go for my physio, other appointments, and I stick around the shed to wire up things or fix whatever needs doing."

Warren isn't just another face at the Shed – he's Vice President. He helps manage committee meetings, runs workshops, and brings his technical know-how to everything from compressor systems to electrical safety upgrades. "It feels good to use those skills again and help the Shed."

The social side is just as valuable as Warren has met some great blokes. For him it's not about sitting around – they work, problem-solve, and talk.

One of Warren's biggest concerns is the future of the Shed – it needs younger people. "Getting younger veterans involved is hard. Some don't know we exist. Others think it's just a place for old guys drinking tea." He notes practical barriers too – transport, work schedules or simply a lack of awareness.

Warren reflects it could be the perception that if there's no pub or beer fridge, it's not a 'real' veteran space. "But that's not what we're about."

Warren is passionate about ensuring the Shed stays relevant. He wants to attract members with a common thread.

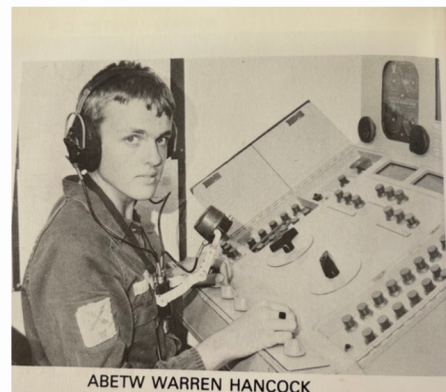
**"Running a Shed takes more than a hammer. We need all kinds of hands on deck."**

Warren has an inspiring outlook on the future for himself. These days, he rides his e-bike to the Shed – and plugs it in to charge while he's there. His future plans include more travel – Surfers Paradise, Vegas, Cambodia, and anywhere else he can soak up new experiences. "I am retired, that gives me a few more good years to really enjoy life."

When asked if he identifies as a veteran first, "Honestly, I think of myself as an electrician. That's what I've done for most of my life. I didn't get involved in the veteran space until a few years ago.

Some blokes are really into the military identity. For me, it's part of who I am – not all of it."

Despite injuries and the scars of service, Warren remains fiercely driven to build an amazing life for himself filled with new adventures on the horizon.



**ABETW WARREN HANCOCK**  
Photo: Warren operating the 5" 54 calibre gun mount control



Photo: Warren winning Miss HMAS Brisbane 1984

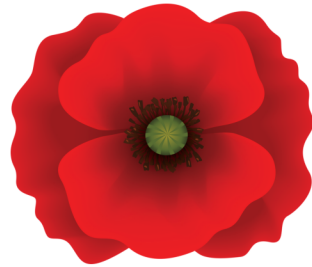


## ABOUT THE WRITER

Sarah loves listening to stories, leaning into people's lives and finding out what is at their gooey centre.



Photo: HMAS Brisbane



## THANK YOU

A heartfelt thank you to the veterans who generously shared their stories.

Your words have brought to life not only personal journeys but also an important piece of our local history.



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