

A Tribute to John Graham 14-01-1925 ~ 31-08-2014

Contributed by his daughter, Teresa Vaughan.



John Graham Smith was born on January 14th 1925 in Kent, England and lived there a short while until his mother, Jessie Smith, returned with him to her residence in St Albans, England. John's father, Robert Groves, was

the principal of the St Albans School of Art and a noted artist himself having been trained by the artist Albert Strange.

John's parents met when his mother became a student at St Albans School of Art in 1923. Robert was already married with a daughter just one year younger than Jessie but it wasn't long before Jessie, living the bohemian life became Robert's mistress. This liaison was to last until the end of WWII and produced five children in total, John, Jessica, Donald who died in infancy, Seonaid and Robert Jnr.

Jessie in the months after John's birth tried to appear more respectable and just dropped her maiden name and using John's middle name became Mrs Graham and that is why John is John Graham and not John Smith.

John was educated first in and around St Albans, England and then at Poole Grammar School, Dorset, England, when the family relocated following Robert Groves retirement in the 1930's.

Whilst in St Albans John would sometimes accompany his father to visit his friend George Bernard Shaw.

Service

John joined the Home Guard at the age of sixteen and two years later in January 1943 aged eighteen enlisted in the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy. He was to be trained as a navy pilot but after the authorities found his parents were not married he was shifted to train as a telegraphist air gunner, (TAG). He was trained in England and Northern Ireland prior to being sent on active service to Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

John served in the Burma Campaign as aircrew on Grumman Avenger aircraft and was based on several smaller aircraft carriers known as escort carriers.

No. 845 Squadron was officially formed in February 1943 as a torpedo reconnaissance squadron with twelve Avenger 1 aircraft.

As a TAG in 845 Squadron John participated in bombing raids on targets in the Japanese-occupied Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) in 1944 from HMS Illustrious and HMS Ameer. The targets included Surabaya (East Java), Medan and Padang in Sumatra and the islands of Siberut and Sabang off Sumatra.

Serving with No. 845, John also took part in leaflet dropping raids over Malaya.

845 Squadron was involved in a dive bombing attack on the oil refinery and harbour installations in Surabaya.

The squadron embarked in the escort carrier HMS Ameer in protecting anti-submarine escort patrols in the Indian Ocean.

John was also based for periods at Royal Naval Air Station (RNAS) Katukurunda, Ceylon, the home base for 845 Squadron operations.

John was attached to Naval Air Transport Service at RNAS Sular, South India in 742 Transport Squadron in Beechcraft Expeditors. Its task was to link up scattered RN Air Stations in

the Far East operating regular air services between India and Ceylon.

As a result of John's involvement in the bombing of Surabaya in East Java, technically in the Pacific theatre of war, he received the Burma Star with Pacific Clasp rather than just the Burma Star. His other service medals were the 1939-45 Star, the War Medal and for his service in the Home Guard, the Defence Medal.

After the War

John was demobbed in Portsmouth and was approaching 21 years of age near the end of 1945.

John worked for Lloyds Bank for a while before becoming a foreign exchange cashier, first at Hurn airport in Bournemouth and then at the new airport at Heathrow.

John decided to travel to France; his knowledge of the language enabled him to find work at the Chatterbox Club in Paris as an English teacher. He translated comics for a few months before the offer of an airline job in Mexico caused him to move to Spain to help with learning the language before the move across the Atlantic.

John arrived in San Sebastian before moving to Pamplona. He then obtained work in Madrid with the Berlitz School of Languages and with no money had to walk the distance through an area where reactionary forces with the ongoing Civil War were based. It was dangerous.

On arriving in Madrid he found the job no longer available but his new employer sent him to Barcelona where he lived in the old town working and enjoying his life tremendously and all the while becoming fluent in the language.

John travelled to the south of Spain and near Seville he commenced training as a matador. For his first bullfight he was billed as "Il Inglese" – The Englishman. John had one fight and decided it was a lot harder than he expected so he retired.

Back in Barcelona John dabbled in a little black marketeering crossing into France and bringing back sewing needles and other items that were hard to come by in Spain. He was found out and had to leave the country quickly heading back to England in mid 1947.

John began to train as a cook at restaurants in Bournemouth and here he met his first wife Brenda Mitchell at a local dance.

Marriage and family

Brenda and John married and the first child to be welcomed into the family was Angela followed by Tony in 1948.

Near the end of 1949 John enlisted in the Merchant Navy to work as a cook and over the next five years he travelled mainly to various ports in South Africa. John also travelled to Portugal, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina.

He worked on ships bringing migrants to Australia and New Zealand and also did a lot of cross channel work into France, Holland and Belgium. He took British Troops to Hong Kong via Aden and Singapore.

On his return trips home he welcomed two more daughters, Teresa born in 1950 and Elaine born in 1952.

His biggest trip in the Merchant Navy was when he was invited to be the larder cook on the six month tour of the world to visit the Commonwealth countries with the new Queen Elizabeth and her husband Prince Phillip. The ship was the "Gothic" as the Royal Yacht "Britannia" was not ready until the final stage of the journey home. The Queen left the Gothic in Malta but not before she had

welcomed her children Prince Charles and Princess Anne aboard the ship. Here with a feast spread out in the dining room, John helped Charles and Anne by lifting them up one at a time to view the feast. Their chaperone was not happy.

Following this trip in 1954 he and Brenda decided to part.

The next year John left the Merchant Navy and concentrated on his work as a chef at the Royal Bath Hotel in Bournemouth. He gained custody of Tony, Teresa and Elaine while Angela stayed with Brenda.

He met and married Joan Cooper from Grays, Essex, east of London and everyone moved in with John's mother in Poole, Dorset. In February 1956 a son Hervey was born.

Move to Australia

In October 1956 the family set sail as migrants to Australia aboard the ship Fairsea. John had been offered the job as chef to the Australian and New Zealand athletes at the Melbourne Olympics. The trip was not without incident as his wife Joan was nearly six months pregnant with twins and as the ship approached the Suez Canal she went into early labour and was transferred to the ship's hospital. The ship was the last to sail through the Canal before war broke out between Egypt, Israel, France and Britain over ownership of the Canal. Looking back to the Canal canon fire could be seen exploding where the ship had just passed. The 'Fairsea' sailed into the Indian Ocean as Joan gave birth to twin sons. One was stillborn and the other, named Alexander after the ship's captain survived only a couple of days. Both boys were buried at sea just of the coast off Somalia.

The family arrived in Melbourne with one pram, two small suitcases and a couple of pounds. They were bussed to their new home at Brooklyn, a camp of Nissen huts. John commenced work the following day.

Their Nissen hut was home to two families, one each side. Outside the door of their side of the hut was a little path. On the other side of the path was a ditch that separated the camp from the local abattoirs. Here the family could see the cattle standing in a dry dusty paddock with no shelter, braying and smelling to high heaven. This was their home for the summer of 1956/7. Joan was very ill with hepatitis the whole of summer.

Their next home was the Olympic Village, a tiny house where they lived until 1960.

John had worked at The Windsor Hotel for a while but did not get on with the Catholic management. He sold fluorescent lights for a while, mainly in the Ballarat area, before finally getting a job as chef at the Springvale Hotel. This meant he worked Monday to Saturday, only going home Saturday night to the Olympic Village to spend Sundays with his family. In this time Joan had given birth prematurely to a little girl, but Jane only lived a day or two.

In 1959 a son Roderick was born safely.

While he was working at the Springvale Hotel, he and Joan purchased a home in the Springvale area at 6 Vincent Street, Mulgrave with his employer going guarantor for the loan. The home was of cream brick veneer construction with a triple-fronted design so typical of Melbourne homes built in this period. It had only three bedrooms to accommodate the growing family that finally numbered ten, but somehow they managed. His youngest three sons were born in this period, Joff in 1961, Andrew in 1963 and Duncan in 1964.

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During his time at the Springvale Hotel, the tradition of having the family Christmas meal on Boxing Day evolved. John was required to work on Christmas Day so the following day was an obvious alternative. Even after his retirement and relocation to Rushworth, this tradition continued for well over 50 years with the last one held last year at Maz and Andy's pub.

For many years, two other English families also joined in the Boxing Day celebrations. Cyril Butler had worked with John Graham at the Royal Bath Hotel in Bournemouth prior to migrating with his wife Glenys and children Joan and Phillip. Cyril had also obtained a position cooking for Olympic athletes and had arrived in Melbourne with his family earlier in 1956. The Butler family also shifted into the Olympic Village after the Games before later settling in the nearby suburb of Preston. Ted and Alice James and their three children Christopher, Carol and Alison had arrived in Melbourne on the same ship as the Graham family. Alice had volunteered to care for the four Graham children when Joan was hospitalised on the ship.

Politics

After settling with his family in Mulgrave, he decided to become involved in the Australian Labor Party and formally joined the local Springvale Branch of the ALP in 1964. Over the years, he served in every possible position on the local branch executive and was also a delegate to state conferences of the party. He was campaign director for ALP candidate Neil Wilkinson in the seat of Holt for the 1969 Federal elections. Labor polled well but narrowly failed to win in Holt and nationally at those elections. Then for the 1970 Victorian elections, he was campaign director for ALP candidate Ken Bathie in the electoral district of Springvale. With those experiences behind him, he was the endorsed Labor candidate for the electoral district of Caulfield in the 1973 Victorian elections. Although not defeating the sitting Liberal member, he improved the Labor vote against the tide.

He credited his political awakening in the mid-1950s to his brother-in-law John Cooper of Grays, Essex. The Cooper family was keenly interested in British Labour politics and John Cooper held various positions in his local British Labour Party structure. He also went on to serve as a Labour councillor for the Borough of Thurrock. Politically, John Graham supported a now unfashionable socialist agenda of considerable direct public sector involvement in economic activity and held the position of Chairman of the Socialist Education Committee of the Victorian Branch of the ALP in the late 1970s. In this role, he held forums on socialism for ALP members in regional areas of the State at Benalla, Porepunkah and in the Dandenongs in the period 1978 to 1980.

On Saturday evening 29 May 2004, he was presented with a forty-year membership medallion by the Premier of Victoria, the Hon. Steve Bracks, on behalf of the Victorian Branch of the ALP at a ceremony in Melbourne held in the Clarendon Room of the Melbourne Exhibition Centre. A memorable evening for all the members of his family present, he was able to renew friendships with a number of his old comrades who were also receiving their medallions and associated life memberships of the Party at the ceremony.

John was also involved in union activities and represented the Federated Liquor and Allied Industries Employees Union of Australia (referred

to generally as the Liquor Trades Union) on the Victorian Trades Hall Council and as a delegate to Labor Party conferences in the decade leading up to his retirement. He was President of the Victorian Branch of the Liquor Trades Union from 1975 to 1977 (a photograph of an honour board containing the names of the union's presidents and secretaries is contained on page 243 of "The History of the Liquor Trades Union in Victoria" by Alleyn Best published in 1990 ISBN 0 646 02852 9).

From 1972 until his retirement, he used his catering and managerial skills as a Commonwealth public servant. He worked for the Federal Government agency Commonwealth Hostels Limited, later called Commonwealth Accommodation and Catering Services, variously part of the Department of Labour and the Department of Administrative Services. He retired from the Commonwealth Public Service aged 59 in 1983.

He says that in his whole career he was unemployed for a total of one week in England prior to coming to Australia.

Other community activities included service as a volunteer with the Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau. He served as its president early in the Bureau's existence.

He was admitted as an Associate Fellow of the Catering Institute of Australia.

John Graham was appointed a Justice of the Peace on 2 December 1980.

New life in Rushworth

After his retirement, he and Joan sold their home in Mulgrave and on 3 January 1984 relocated to the old gold mining town of Rushworth in central Victoria, a town they had grown fond of during family holidays in the area.

As a resident of Rushworth, he was elected to the Council of the Shire of Waranga and served from 1984 to 1992. As the only Labor-supporting councillor in a National Party stronghold, he described this experience as "...difficult but interesting and had been a most rewarding and worthwhile experience".

Recognising the value to any community of a local paper, John became a valuable member of the team which puts the Waranga News together each fortnight. Together with his late wife, Joan, he worked hard on the management of the paper, and in particular, the distribution to subscribers all over Australia and beyond.

He and wife Joan were also instrumental in the formation of a new branch of the ALP in Rushworth not long after their arrival there. John invited the then Speaker of the House of Representatives and Member for Batman, the Hon. Dr Harry Jenkins to be the guest speaker at the inaugural meeting of the Rushworth Branch.

He was appointed by the Victorian Government to the Board of the Waranga Memorial Hospital in Rushworth, serving from 1985 to 2002. He was instrumental in the establishment of Waranga House, an aged care hostel in Rushworth and served as a member of its Board from 1989 to 2002.

He has also been an active member and office holder with the Rushworth and District Historical and Preservation Society Inc., continuing with this involvement after he had withdrawn from other aspects of his public life.

Volunteering with AESOPS

John began devoting more time to the aid organization 'AESOPS' using his knowledge and experience in the catering business, which was

in great demand in the region where the tourist industry was booming and the local communities required expert tuition in catering for the trade. His periods as a volunteer began in 1988 and he worked in several small countries in the Pacific region until 1999.

These postings were:

Stowaway Village Motel, Tonga (from 27 January to 30 March 1988).

Hibiscus Hotels Limited, Solomon Islands (from 4 February to 6 March 1989).

The Islands Hotels Ltd., Gizo, Western Province, Solomon Islands (from 28 March to 12 April 1990).

Treasure Island Ltd., Lautoka, Fiji (from 1 May 1992 to 10 November 1992).

Nukubati Resort Limited, Labasa, Fiji (from 21 July to 20 August 1993).

Hagen Park Hotel, Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea (from 18 May to 5 July 1994).

Hagen Park Hotel, Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea (from 11 July to 11 August 1995).

International Dateline Hotel Ltd., Nuku'alofa, Tonga (from 15 July to 7 October 1996).

Otintaa Hotels Limited, Kiribati (from 3 February to 20 April 1999).

His wife, Joan accompanied him on a couple of these volunteer placements including the first one in Tonga and then in the Solomon Islands.

Following Joan's death from Motor Neurone disease in March 1992, he was to meet his future wife Sera during an extended placement in Fiji where they were both working in the same resort. John and Sera, a widow with three teenaged children, Tubuna, Eta and Dolly, were married in the large backyard of the Graham home in Clarkes Lane, Rushworth in January 1993. After an initial period, Sera's children joined their mother in Rushworth and the younger two attended Rushworth High School for several years before making their own way in the world.

Whilst the major interests in his life have been his family, he has always had a passionate interest in politics and shown a fondness for red wine and whisky.

John has always been an avid reader of The Age newspaper and it was delivered to him from the 1950's until his dying day. He loved poetry and classical music with a passion. However, he had also quietly been a coin collector. He began this interest just prior to the introduction of decimal currency in Australia in February 1966 and put together almost complete collections of Australian pennies and halfpennies.

Sadly Sera died in 2009 and is also buried in the Rushworth cemetery. Dolly moved in to the family home to help care for Dad and with the wonderful staff from Benetas, the nurses and Pauline and Meals on Wheels ladies, Dad managed to stay at home for another four years, enjoying watching Dolly's children grow around him.

In September 2013, with increasing frailty, John moved into the Waranga Aged Care residence that he had helped set up all those years ago.

He was cared for and felt safe and happy. The staff was wonderful with him and let him dictate his approach to living the way he wished to.

In his last days he was surrounded by all of his children, Angela, Tony, Teresa, Elaine, Hervey, Rod, Joff, Andrew and Duncan and their families.

He is also survived by his siblings Seonaid and Robert who reside in the UK.