OBITUARY

Jeffery Phillip BILLS, (Pip), Flight Lieutenant Pilot

RAAF NO 417788

08.12.1923 - 21.11.2014

PART I EARLY DAYS AND WORLD WAR II SERVICE

Born on December 8, 1923 in Laura, SA, to Irvine Maynard and Geraldine Leah Calderwood Bills (nee Smith). A family immersed in books and poetry so these early beginnings ensured he enjoyed reading and quoting poetry throughout his life in particular the works of CJ Dennis, Omar Khayyam and William Shakespeare. Irvine became the manager of Walter Sully & Son in 1939 in Broken Hill and prior to this he worked for Harris Scarfs in their Blende St store where he was the proud owner of one of the first private telephones in Broken Hill.

Jeff (Pip) was educated at Laura, St Leonards Primary Glenelg, Adelaide Boys High, Goodwood Technical School and Broken Hill High School (a Golden Oldie). His school friend of 85 years from St Leonards, near the Old Gum Tree, Les Kenyon, was a welcome guest at the celebration of his life.

Pip was the middle son of the Bills’ boys, nicknamed Pip, the other two were Squeak and Wilfred after the cartoon of Medals in the Great War, 1914/1915, hence he became Pip or Phil from a very young age.

His lifelong love affair with Jeannie (Jean Elaine Wallace) began in first year at Broken Hill High School and was only interrupted when she passed away on St Patricks day, 2008. Jeannie set her cap for this lad because he was the only boy in school with shoes AND socks.

After finishing school he commenced an apprenticeship on the old South Mine, attending the Broken Hill Technical College until the war broke out. He enlisted on December 7, 1941 (the day after Pearl Harbour) and started his basic training at Mt Breckan, Victor Harbour, as flight 12, B Squadron, Course 30, followed by flight training in Benalla on Tiger Moths, Wirraways, and Ansons. He became a commissioned Pilot Oficer on 29/7/1943. Dad was shipped out to the UK via USA, marred by the development of Scarlet Fever and a quarantine period in the states. The pilots were the astronauts of the era and it was a great achievement to receive your wings.

When he arrived in the UK he discovered an Australian Coastal Squadron was seeking aircrew, the Famous 461 Squadron had formed on Anzac Day 1942 from elements of 1o Squadron RAAF, they were often called the Anzac Squadron. The excitement of joining Coastal Command and flying Sunderlands, (Then the largest operational aircraft of the war) the flying boats, meant they would go on operational flying without months of additional training.

He served with 461 Squadron, RAAF, Coastal Command from 2.2.1944 till 12.6.1945. Based at Pembroke Dock in Wales he has lately been involved in the Pembroke Historical Trust He passed the naval sublieutenants course as he was navigating on water. The roomy Sunderland flying boat allowed them to rotate stations during their long ten hour flights over the ocean. Coastal command losses during the war were the highest per capita of any commands, sadly many boats went out and were never heard from again due to bad weather or the enemy. During this time the crew of A-461 was commended for night-time sinking of U-270 in the English Channel with the aid of flares on 13.8.1944, few actually sank U-boats, let alone without loss of life. Although he lost many friends, those that returned remained in contact for many years with their annual reunions, but, sadly their ranks are now very much thinned. The escapades and operations of 461 Squadron are documented in Ivan Southall’s book “They Shall Not Pass Unseen”. He was flying in the English channel on the night before D-Day but foul weather turned them back. He happily returned to Australia on 23.9.1945 and was separated on 3.12.1945. Jeannie was waiting at the Broken Hill Telephone Exchange to start their long and happy married life together.

PART II THE MINING YEARS

From Apprentice to General Manager

A Construction Engineer

In 1946-1947 dad was repatriated to complete his Fitting and Turning Apprenticeship at Broken Hill South Limited, something of a step backwards for a commissioned officer with great responsibilities. In 1947 he was promoted to the staff position of draftsman. He graduated, in 1952, from the Broken Hill Technical College with credit in a Diploma of Mechanical Engineering , then was promoted as a mechanical engineer at Broken Hill South Limited.

On loan to Mines Exploration he constructed the Oceana Mine at Zeehan in Tasmania, a hairy drive in an open jeep on a dirt track from Burnie. The Oceana headframe is now erected in the main street of Zeehan. The family now included Lesley and James, Jeannie did the washing in the famous Gaiety Theatre at Zeehan (as it was perpetually raining) and The Central Hotel was the place they called home. There was an inordinately high number of night fires in Zeehan as the mining industry slumped, providing entertainment on Saturday evenings.

In 1954 they moved to Conrad Mine at Howell below the Copeton Dam. Country life involved bush dances and instruments (the comb and tea chest). He was Santa Claus at the Stanborough State School Christmas Concert, and entertained the Governor General Sir William McKell, dredged for Tin at Tingha and with Jeannie provided thirty miners and himself with sustenance during the 1954 floods, no SES in those days!

Returning to the South Mine in Broken Hill he continued his construction and designed the mill, the crushing station, the conveyor extension and the BHP headframe in the centre of town, but, the most memorable for many years was the construction of Bills’ corner where an old skimp dump was converted into tennis courts, bowling greens and a clubhouse on the corner of Bonanza and Eyre streets. A hive of social activity , particularly on summer nights in the 50’s and 60’s. Always a team player, he acknowledged the contribution of his staff to all his endeavours.

He toyed with a future in the SA Tramways Trust but settled on becoming a rail standardization officer and then moving to North Broken Hill Limited as a senior Mechanical Engineer in 1958.

He again focused on construction but travelled the world seeking new ideas, From Kruger National Park, in South Africa, he returned with the dreaded road humps to Broken Hill, from Sudbury in Canada and South Africa was the elliptical No 3 shaft, other ideas for sinking mines, were developed from Kiruna, in the Artic circle, and the States such as the computerized and refridgerated vent system, the underground winder and the three story office block next to the metallurgical laboratory. Chairman, Bill Bailleu wanted the Imperial lake built as an emergency water supply for the mine with a dam, island and dam wall, plus dozens of introduced fish. Sadly no one could predict the rise of vandalism. The consideration to provide staff with the best amenities was always paramount in his thoughts, Penrose Park was at its prime for mine picnics and the development of Texas Downs as a river retreat provided many families with an enjoyable riverside holiday time.

His promotions at North Broken Hill Limited was in 1977 to Operations Manager, and to General Manager in 1980, a rare position for a Mechanical not a Mining Engineer.

In 1972 he became a fellow of the Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy and a Fellow of the Institution of Engineers. In 1980 he was on The Broken Hill Water Board and he served on the prestigious (Now extinct) Mining Managers Association (MMA).He was a member of the Chamber of Mines and Patron of nearly fifty sporting and cultural associations in Broken Hill such as the Cameron Pipe Band, St Patricks Racing Club, Swimming, baseball , softball and Footy clubs, and the Race Course Trust.

Jeff was a Legatee after the war and helped many of his wards in their careers, it was pleasing to have one join us in the celebration of his life. My brother recalled how he was dragged out of bed on a cold winter night to chop wood for a Legacy widow who had no supplies and was using women’s magazines as fuel. One of his war comrades left a widow, with no formal education and five young children to rare, he vowed from that day his daughters would get a good education that allowed them to work independently if ever in such a position. Despite money not always being abundant they shepherded their children through school and tertiary education and made sure they all had shoes and socks. The recent reunion at Will St Infants School, now Railwaytown , showed Lesley as the only student in kindergarten in a school uniform.

When the government threatened to tax the superannuation back in 1983,(still on the agenda now) he ,and a few colleagues, took early retirement to enjoy time with their loved ones. Dad progressed from hunble apprentice to General Manager , no small achievement in a lifetime of great things.

Independently living and techno savvy, Jeff in his 91st year had a sudden stroke but after a few days at the RAH he passed away peacefully surrounded by his loving family and great granddaughter to be, to be happily reunited with his beloved Jeannie.

THE FINAL CURTAIN

A celebration of the life of Jeffery Phillip Bills was held at Partridge House , Glenelg on Thursday, November 27th. 2014.

It was an air force celebration with the coffin draped in an airforce flag, sword, gloves and pilot’s cap , the ode recited by Wayne Jones and the last post played by Major Colin Smith was a fitting culmination to a life well lived.

There was not a dry eye in the chapel when Louis Armstrong sang What A Beautiful World to accompany the slide presentation of his life prepared by his granddaughters. He was surrounded by dozens of his loving family, neighbours and friends, Airforce and mining colleagues, apprentices and managers, Legacy personnel and his Legacy ward, school friend and children’s friends.

A moving farewell to a great man who served his country, his community and his family with distinction, who will be remembered and respected as a mentor, professional engineer, a dear friend, one of life’s true gentlemen, a dear bloke of exceptionally high calibre ,with a keen sense of humour.