

A photograph of an elderly man, Ken O'Brien, smiling broadly while walking outdoors. He is wearing a dark blue blazer over a grey V-neck sweater and a light blue collared shirt with a dark tie. He has several medals pinned to his lapels, including a large rainbow ribbon medal on his left lapel and several smaller medals on his right. In the background, other people are visible, including a man in a dark jacket and a woman in a pink top. The setting appears to be a public event or ceremony.

Reminiscences of a Country Legatee

Ken O'Brien

REMINISCENCES OF A COUNTRY LEGATEE

Legatee Ken O'Brien

My long association with Legacy began in 1952 when I was approached by my good friend Ron Williams to become a foundation member of a new group to be formed in New Norfolk to be known as the New Norfolk Group of Hobart Legacy.

Ron had been a close friend of mine since he moved to New Norfolk in the late 1940's to take over an existing clothing business. During World War II, Ron had served with the 2nd/40th Battalion and had been taken prisoner. Soon after his return to Australia, he had settled in Launceston and had joined Launceston Legacy. On his taking up residence in New Norfolk, he had transferred to Hobart Legacy.

By the early 1950's there were many Legacy widows from two World Wars and many children, some very young, in the district. Ron was clearly unable to handle all these families himself and as a consequence he was given permission to form a Legacy Group here.

Everything Ron did was carefully planned and executed with his boundless energy even though he suffered many health problems as a result of his years of incarceration.

The initial New Norfolk Group consisted of Ron Williams (ex-Army) Joe Dixon (Navy) Angus Bethune - resident at Ouse (Air Force) Eric Windsor (Army) and Ken O'Brien (Army).

As can be seen, the personnel were chosen to cover the three Armed Services, and all of us were self-employed which was an important factor as will be shown later.

At the time, Legacy was almost exclusively made up of ex-officers - I was the only member of New Norfolk Group who was an "other



rank” - and I noticed this particularly when social functions were held at the Naval and Military Club where I always had to be signed in by another member of our group. However, I hasten to add that at no time was I ever made to feel uncomfortable about rank.

After the proposed members of the Group had given their verbal assent to membership we had a visit from several members of Hobart Legacy who gave us a talk on our obligations as Legatees. This served to strengthen my resolve that this was an organisation to which I could relate. Legacy only invited membership from those who had the necessary skills and the dedication to carry out the ideals of the organisation. We were told that nobody was thanked by Legacy for what they did - it was considered that acceptance of membership meant that a Legatee was obliged to do whatever was required of him without complaint or excuse. We could forget about such things as re-imbusement for telephone, postage travelling etc. and that all social expenses were paid personally by the members so that all monies raised was used for the benefit of the widows and children. So the New Norfolk Group came into being and we were inducted in Legacy on the 4th February 1953.

We agreed that the Group would meet for lunch at the Bush Hotel each month. At the first meeting, a Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer were appointed with the proviso that each year the positions would rotate so that each member would take their turn in filling the various positions. The dependents throughout the district were allocated to the members, with each Legatee being assigned some active and some supplementary widows to look after.

The New Norfolk Group covered the Derwent Valley from Bridgewater to Derwent Bridge, so those families at Hamilton and Ouse were mostly allocated to Legatee Angus Bethune with assistance from Legatee Eric Windsor. The latter had a dairy farm at Hayes (near New Norfolk) but also a property at Bronte Park so he often combined visits to his property there with calling on widows along the way.

In the 1950's, World War I widows were mostly in the 45 - 55 age group and a good number (but not all) were young adults. Having lived through the depression years these widows were content to live modestly but of course very few had been able to save for retirement or had superannuation. World War II widows were naturally mostly a generation younger and with very young and school age children. As country Legatees, we wanted to ensure that Legacy dependents were not disadvantaged by their isolation from Hobart. Although it was not possible for the children to attend Friday night activities at Legacy House, every endeavour was made to have them attend camps and Christmas functions. As very few of the widows (if any) had their own transport, the Legatee Advisor was the one who provided the means of getting to and from these activities. I well remember one Christmas Party at Legacy House (some were also held at Government House) - it was a lovely day, perfect for golf but I had to do my duty by a widow with three children and transport them to Hobart and back. On the return journey one of the children was sick by the side of the road - thankfully not in my much prized new Station Wagon - while Mum said she would be glad when Christmas was over she was sick of kids parties, and the one they had attended was the fourth that week.

One of the “hazards” of the early days was that some of the WWII widows were still only in their 20’s and 30’s and some were “socially active”. This posed a problem for Legatees calling on them - there were always neighbours watching and the Legatees were well known business and professional men - so to overcome this problem it was sometimes necessary to call in another Legatee or for a Legatee’s wife to accompany them. It was always considered necessary to see the widow in their own home so we could make a better assessment of their position.

At the monthly meeting, each Legatee gave a report on the families under his care. This was very useful as it enabled the Legatee to get the opinion of four others to ensure that the correct action was being taken. When the Group was first formed, a cash advance was made to us with any two Legatees as signatories so that in any urgent cases it was not necessary to get the funds from Hobart. The Secretary noted all the reports in the minutes and these minutes were forwarded on to the Board. Likewise, the Treasurer gave a monthly report and when funds were starting to deplete, a re-imbursement was applied for.

In the early days, the Board of Management would visit us once a year which was appreciated as sometimes we had local problems to discuss and on which they could give their opinions and advice. The Board would then hold their usual Board Meeting on which we could “sit in”. The experience proved beneficial for both parties, and enabled us to get to know the Board Members.

We were told initially that raising money to support Legacy would not account for a great deal of our time. This proved to be so as the Certificate of Adoption Scheme, whereby individuals, companies and organisations pledged money on a regular basis to the work of Legacy, accounted for a large part of Legacy funds. However two members were appointed to see the Managing Director of ANM (Australian Newsprint Mills) each year (then domiciled in New Norfolk) and we were always rewarded with a substantial donation from that firm. In addition over the years of the New Norfolk Group, the local RSL Branch has supported us with a large annual donation, and, when approached by myself on

a few occasions for special help for a very worthy cause they have always supported us. It was also through the efforts of one of our members that the very substantial Besier Bequest was made available to Legacy. In recent years however it has been the Badge Day which has raised good sums to help off-set dwindling corporate donations. It is very gratifying to the Group that we have had such loyal support in this from our widows.

There have been some changes in the personnel of the Group over the years. During the very active years when we had many children to look after, Legatee Jack Warren who was stationed with the HEC at Tarraleah joined the Group and was a member until transferred to Devonport. Legatee Don Smith was appointed Headmaster of New Norfolk High School when there were many Junior Legatees attending and served for quite a few years until he transferred to Hobart. He was later to become President of Hobart Legacy in 1983-84. Legatee Doug Moore was a member for a while before retiring to Primrose Sands and became a Legatee for the Sorell Area. In more recent times, two Vietnam Veteran's in Legatees Allen Duggan and Harry Cowling have taken up the torch.

Of the five original members, Legatee Ron Williams died in 1977 and Legatee Eric Windsor died in 1986. Due to the effluxion of time, Legatees Angus Bethune and Joe Dixon both now in their 80's have retired from active participation (Joe remains a Country Member). Being the "boy" of the original team, at 73 years, I am still an active Legatee. (1996).

During more than four decades of the New Norfolk Group, we have had the care of many hundreds of widows and their children. Probably 90% of the cases have been straight forward where we have been able to assist with advice and support. Many times the widows have said to us that it is a great help to have someone outside their family and friends who can offer advice and support without being emotionally involved ourselves. The financial support too has been welcome, but to my mind only secondary. A large proportion of our time though has been spent on the 10% of cases which have been difficult. However, as is natural, it is these cases which have been the ones mostly in need of Legacy.

Consider the case of one “widow”. Two brothers ‘A’ and ‘B’ went to the First World War together. Towards the end of the war, ‘A’ went to London on leave and met a local girl who he “married” after a week’s acquaintance - all very well except that he gave his brother’s name and number to the marriage celebrant. After the war, the bride turned up in Australia to re-unite with her “husband” but he was already married to someone else. Brother ‘B’ who luckily was still single took pity on the abandoned bride and took up residence with her. Together they raised a loving and caring family who were very devoted to their parents but when ‘B’ died, one of our Legatees had a very difficult job sorting things out with the Repatriation Department.



Past President, Legatee Stephen Miller, presenting Legatee Ken O'Brien with a certificate recognizing his 60 years of service to Hobart Legacy

Personally I had two cases which required a lot of involvement over a long period and involved young children in each case. One veteran had gone to Hobart for treatment and was knocked down and killed. I received a phone call from Hobart asking me to go to Maydena to see his widow and family as they could be in urgent need of assistance. What I found at Maydena shocked me. The widow and four children under twelve years of age were living in a derelict old house, no facilities, very sparse furniture and very little food in the house. To complicate matters, the widow and three of the children were of a very low IQ. We immediately applied for a housing department house in New Norfolk but we knew it would take two years to have one allocated to the widow. Knowing that any money given to the family would probably be wasted, each



Legatee O'Brien, presenting a talk during a luncheon at Hobart Legacy. Ken, who was a businessman in New Norfolk and JP, was inducted into Hobart Legacy on 4 February 1953. He was also born the same year *The Hobart Remembrance Club* was established.

Friday I would buy supplies of food and fresh fruit and send them on the bus to the family. Eventually, a house was made available in New Norfolk but after about two years a neighbour rang me one morning to say that the widow had suddenly died. I rang the Legatee President to ask what I would do about the funeral as the family had no funds whatsoever. He replied to go ahead with the arrangements and we would work out about payment later on. By this time, the eldest child (a girl) had been confined to Mt St Canice as being uncontrollable so it was necessary to find a place for the three younger ones, with the Retarded Children's Welfare Association and a relative eventually coming to the rescue.

In the second case a mother had deserted her family of four young children (about two years previously) when the father had a heart attack and died immediately. The eldest child, a girl aged 16, took over her siblings and for the next decade, she was mother and father to her three younger brothers and sister. This was a difficult case as the mother was still alive and could come home at any time and claim the house and contents which were happily debt free. After many applications to Veteran's Affairs, we finally were able to have the children declared double orphans and their allowance was paid into an account of which I was trustee. This arrangement extended over a period of about fifteen years until the youngest child eventually married.

There were some very sad cases too. One veteran who had treated his family very poorly died leaving his partner with many children to raise on an impoverished farm at Mt Lloyd. Every time we wanted to apply for a pension for her the question arose about the marriage certificate which was never forthcoming and it became obvious that she had spent all those years in a de facto relationship but as the law was at that time we could not help her.

Another widow approached me one day about help from Legacy - her husband had died eleven years previously. Although the family were known to me quite well I did not realise that the husband had been on active service as he had not been in any way connected with ex-service organisations. In the years since

her husband's death, the widow had reared eight children, the youngest at the time she approached me, was sixteen. When we received the veteran's record of service to apply for her pension we realised that the reason he was shy of any ex-service organisations was that, of his five years Army service, he had spent about 80% of the time in Gaol. That poor widow had had a very hard time and died within a few months of being taken on strength. It was sad that she battled on all those years when a lot of help was close at hand.

Another case gave me a lot of satisfaction. "Doreen" was aged about 73 when her husband of about 10 years died - he was an alcoholic who had received a "troubler" (Services no longer required) discharge from the Army. Doreen's Mother had died in childbirth and they lived in a tent at Zeehan until the father deserted his children when Doreen was aged 9. She was then put into a children's home and released to go into service when she was 16. All her life Doreen was abused by many men and not the least, by her last husband. Legacy asked me to apply for a War Widow's pension for her. I well remember filling out the forms and thinking that if she received a War Widow's pension then I would be Prime Minister! I did not though, count on the skill of the Legacy pension team and several months after the husband died, Doreen received notice that the pension had been granted and \$3000 back pay as well. I was delighted for the poor old soul - for the very first time in her life she had a regular income, money in the bank and no man to filch it off her.

I mentioned previously that being self-employed had advantages in doing Legacy Work. First of all it was very convenient to take time off and use the telephone etc. at practically any time, but the biggest help was that being in the retail trade with a long established business, most of the people in the district would call in on a regular basis. I knew who were relatives, friends, neighbours of the Legacy widows and would casually ask "How is your Sister? etc." They would often tell me of some minor problem which the widow was having (e.g. "the fence blew down last week!") which

the widow would probably not come to me about. Having been alerted, I could then make a call and offer assistance - it was almost always the ones who needed assistance the most who were reluctant about asking for it. I had a good relationship with the manager of the Gaol Farm at Hayes and he was permitted to send some of the prisoners occasionally to do community work. I was able to use these services to clean up the gardens of some of the Legacy widows. This was appreciated by all the parties concerned.

The expansion of Social Security benefits and less rigid qualifications for War Widows Pensions have been of great benefit to our Legacy Widows over the past few decades. However the need for Legacy exists - small kindnesses, like a phone call from the Duty Legatee on their birthday is a great booster for their morale, likewise the knowledge that even forty or fifty years after their death, a veteran's companions in war, are still willing to give assistance and compassion to his dependents.





**Front Cover: L/Ken O'Brien during the New Norfolk ANZAC Day March 2010.
Thanks to photographer, Damian Webster, and News Ltd (The Gazette)**

**Back Cover: L/Ken O'Brien (centre) with fellow Legatees from New Norfolk, (L to R)
Greg Batchelor, Allan Duggan, Roger Green and Wayne Marshall.
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