

# CHAPTER 3

(1965 – 1971)

## The Journey

I greeted 1965 with anticipation, at ease with myself and the life I was living. I did know it was going to be a tough road ahead and a constant struggle to achieve the goals I set myself. My tactic was to turn a blind eye to my problem and to refuse to accept anything other than living a normal life.

I was in the generation of early baby boomers who were now establishing their place in life. Anyone who wanted a job had one. Teenagers had money to spend, and that is exactly what we did. Commercial companies at that time estimated the teenage market to be worth one hundred million dollars a year to the Australian economy. We were a new breed, an affluent part of society that would change things forever. Most teenagers didn't have an idle moment; they worked hard and played hard. We were living in

carefree times. The attitude was, 'We're here for a good time, not a long time', and, 'She'll be right mate' was the outlook on life.

Johnny O'Keefe, known as 'The Wild One', was Australia's king of rock'n'roll. Many parents hated him and his influence on our changing culture. The Beatles were another major influence in our lives. Our parents considered them to be long-haired and loud, although when looking back through film clips, it's evident their hair was not long nor their music loud compared to the bands of the eighties and nineties. The Beatles toured Australia in 1964, introducing us to the world of pop music hysteria. Teenage girls went crazy, shouting and screaming as they gathered in the thousands to catch a glimpse of their English idols. In a television interview, John Lennon claimed the group was more popular than Jesus Christ, which outraged a large proportion of the population and did nothing for some already strained parent - child relationships. Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs, Normie Rowe, The Deltones, Little Pattie: we listened to and loved them all; great singers supported by great bands.

Unlike the war years, when anyone under the age of twenty was expected to be seen and not heard, the teenagers of the new generation were confidently airing their opinions. Teenagers had become more sophisticated and informed on political matters and current affairs. Demonstrations took place across the country for any and every perceived social or political injustice. It didn't matter if the protest involved religion, social reform, the environment, industrial disputes or Australia's role in the Vietnam War, the sixties teenager was there to make the government listen and be more accountable.

I was influenced by the fast changing times and the various

groups in society searching for their identity. The 'Rockers' and the 'Surfies' formed two of the more notable groups. The Rockers replaced the 'Bodgies and Widgies' from the fifties. They were identifiable by their association with motorbikes, tight denim jeans, leather jackets, rock 'n' roll music and tough talking. Friday and Saturday nights saw the gangs riding their motorbikes up and down the main streets of inner city suburbs. The impact of twenty to thirty bikes in one location and the loud vibrating noise of their motors and exhaust systems was enough to make most people feel threatened.

The Surfies wore loose, brightly coloured shirts with board shorts. They proudly displayed bleached blond hair that was supposedly caused by the natural consequences of being too long in the sun. Surfies were also identifiable by their surfboards hanging out the back of their station wagons or strapped to the roof racks of their panel vans. When they were not cruising the streets, they could be found lying around the beach listening to surf music belting out over the community loud speakers, or showing off riding the waves. It was a culture that could only be appreciated by those who experienced it.

Songs in the sixties conveyed the mood and attitudes of the times, encompassing political, spiritual, protest themes or simply leisure and love. Little Pattie, aged fourteen and still at school, released songs like 'Surfer Boy' and 'My Little Surfer's Turned Rocker'. Sounds silly? Well, maybe it was. To us it was a good, clean representation of life at the time.

I was neither a surfie nor a rocker; still I had a foot in each camp. I loved the surf and headed to North Wollongong beach on the New South Wales south coast every chance I got. No bleached blond hair for me. I paraded my tight peg-legged trousers, held up with a wide leather belt covered in

chrome plated studs and a genuine 'Ford V8' emblem for the buckle. My hot pink shirt and pointy-toed shoes were complemented by a pair of black-rimmed Buddy Holly style prescription glasses and brushed back hair held in place with a heavy dose of Brylcreem. I thought I was just wonderful.

'Those were the days my friend, we thought they'd never end .....

Within the confines of my understanding, my life was about as normal as those of my friends, except I had a problem, for which I continually created ways to compensate and overcome the day-to-day difficulties I experienced. It was to be two decades before I allowed myself to discover the real truth. Knowing exactly what my problem was may have helped me; on the other hand I subscribed to the theory that it was unlikely doctors could do anything for my eyes, and knowing the facts would only limit me in my activities. The power of positive thinking was more relevant to my life at the time. I refused to be left out of the exciting adventures which were available to me.

Australia was following in the footsteps of the United States, adopting their ideas and new technology. If it was in the United States, Australia was not far behind. Their television shows dominated our lounge rooms and we embraced their sporting culture. Many Saturday nights I attended the American Roller Game held in the Sydney Stadium at Rushcutters Bay. The Stadium was nothing more than an old tin shed with hard, circus-style seats. The Roller Game was a sport consisting of two teams of six males and six females. The idea was for the two teams to skate around the track and for one member of each team to break away, after which they had to speed skate to catch up to the back of the pack. Points were scored as the breakaway skater passed

members of the opposing team before the time limit for that jam was reached. Of course the opposing team's job was to prevent the skater passing. In the effort to stop them it was a case of anything goes: push, shove, hit, kick or toss them over the safety rail if necessary. It was a rough and brutal sport that didn't become any less brutal when the girls took to the track.

The American Championship Wrestling was also staged at The Stadium. While it was good fun, it cannot be compared with the World Championship extravaganza we're familiar with today. Such entertainment has evolved with modern technology and the demand for everything to be bigger and better. Seeing all the action was impossible for me but that didn't stop me from enjoying what I did see and I didn't need good eyes to appreciate the electrifying atmosphere. (An upside of being vision-impaired is that I am never aware of what I actually miss.)

Speedway at the old Sydney Showground was another favourite of mine on Saturday nights. The showground has since been relocated from Moore Park to Homebush Bay, where the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games were held. The property was purchased and redeveloped by Fox Studios. I remember the noise and speed of the cars in such a small arena creating an exciting atmosphere as they raced around the track tossing small clods of dirt at the spectators from their spinning wheels. The smell of high octane fuel filtering through my nostrils was fantastic.

I was blessed to have lived through a period during which we saw so much history being made, and I was very aware of being part of it. Australia at the time was an emerging country on the international stage. One significant event occurred when the government implemented a bold and independent decision on February 14, 1966 to change the

monetary system from pounds, shillings and pence to dollars and cents. There was also an entirely new metric system of weights and measures being introduced which had to be accommodated at the same time, although for most people the change in currency was more significant and challenging. The changeover from imperial to metric was a mammoth undertaking which demonstrated Australia's ability to forge ahead as a modern country. This was one time we were well ahead of the United States, and even now, forty years on, the United States has not converted from imperial to metric.

Such a major change caused an element of resistance. Members of the older generation worried they wouldn't be able to calculate the value of their money. Others felt they may be sold short at the butcher shop and motorists had to convert the cost of gallons of petrol to litres as well as making sure they did not exceed the speed limit with the change from miles per hour to kilometres per hour. Everything turned out fine. In my opinion, it was one of the most positive and successful initiatives the government has ever introduced.

My career as a plumber continued to advance; for the entire five years of my apprenticeship motivation was never a problem. A number of my friends tried to discourage me by reminding me that five years was a long time to be tied down. I saw it differently. My potential working life was fifty years, and this commitment only represented ten percent of that time - not long at all. I had seen unqualified men having to take any job they were offered. I observed the more favourable way professionally qualified people were treated; they were given respect. I was going to command that respect and be the master of my own destiny. I didn't want to be in a position where anyone could ever dictate how I would live my life or do my work.

My enthusiasm for learning was in complete contrast to my attitude during my school days. The hundreds of hours John and Garry studied to achieve their chosen careers influenced me and I became obsessed with achieving my own goals. It was important for me to be seen as their intellectual equal and as a successful person. The desire for studying hard was more about keeping the promise I had made to myself: 'To my own self be true'.

For my formal trade studies, I attended Liverpool Tertiary and Further Education College (TAFE), situated in an outer south-western suburb of Sydney. There were thirty students who started in my 1965 class and only three of us finished in 1969. This gave me a great sense of satisfaction; it was a sign that my school days were well and truly behind me. No longer did I have to feel guilty for stuffing up. I believed this was the end of my training years and didn't realise it was in fact only the beginning of a lifetime of learning that awaited me. The exciting times still lay ahead. If it were possible to tell the future I may have jumped some years, skipping the seventies and heading straight to the eighties, which were good years.

My mother was more than surprised at my good college results; she was actually bewildered. I must admit, as hard as I had worked, I too was surprised. A number of times my eyesight let me down during the practical exams but somehow I was guided. It was meant to be. If I had any doubt about my mother's theory that I was on this earth for something special, it was fast disappearing. I succeeded in my training where others failed, in spite of my eyes. There had to be a reason.

Not everything went smoothly. There were times when life sucked. I desired to be the best I possibly could, yet my eyes served as a constant reminder that I had limitations.

Despite the fact it should have been obvious to me that my eyes were a handicap, I preferred to think of them as only a distraction. Despite the many difficult moments I experienced on construction sites, I refused to allow them to rule my life. This allowed me to achieve things I would not have otherwise even attempted. I continually turned my back on adversity as if it did not exist. My apprenticeship was everything to me and I was not prepared to jeopardise it for any reason.

Vic Eddison employed me as his first plumbing apprentice, an undertaking he approached seriously and was very proud of. Vic was a dedicated Christian and family man, who would have been about twenty-eight years of age at the time. He lived with his wife, Maureen and son, Michael on a property on Razorback Mountain. They had a large modern brick home. Over the following years they had two more sons. His strong religious faith was compatible with my style of life and activities. Our relationship developed to be more than just that of employer/employee; we were friends. We would always help each other regardless of whether a situation was personal or work related.

Our working relationship was about as good as it gets. Vic was proud to be a master plumber, and as he was the leading plumbing contractor in the Camden district, we received all the best work. The large property owners, leading businesses and the builders constructing the most prestigious homes all used Vic's services. I loved meeting the leading business people; they treated me as an equal from the first introduction. I observed how they acted and learnt all I could about being professional. Vic took every opportunity to pass on his skills and tricks of the trade. Being his first apprentice placed an added responsibility on me to succeed. Camden was a small country town and most of our social activities centred around the Methodist



Church (it later became the Uniting Church), and I was always mindful of the reports and comments about me that found their way back to Vic. When people made complimentary comments, his shoulders would lift and his back straighten; he knew it was a reflection on his training shining through.

For me it was much more. I appreciated everything Vic did and I never took his regard for me for granted. I wanted to make him proud of me. I wanted him to one day stand in front of people and say, “I am honoured to have had Paul as my apprentice and I am proud of his achievements.” This was one dream that did come to pass.

Construction sites are notorious for dark areas, and for me it was particularly difficult to contend with crawling under buildings and in ceiling spaces. To overcome my difficulties, I had a powerful electric light available at all times to beam on the work area.

Another difficult time for me occurred during the third year of my apprenticeship, when Vic became ill. Vic would have been thirty-one and he was a tall strapping man, very fit from the physical tasks he carried out in his daily work. He generally enjoyed good health, so when he was diagnosed with cancer of the throat everyone was surprised. He was a non-smoker and this was the last thing he expected. Vic gave me the responsibility of running the jobs while he underwent treatment. He continued to quote the jobs, while my role was to organise the construction materials, coordinate the workers and guarantee we turned up to complete the work on time. He didn't see it as a big deal, which I took as him having confidence in my ability.

I treated my new management role seriously; it was an opportunity, and I was determined to do well. Most of our

work consisted of installing plumbing in new homes, which I enjoyed. I was able to move around the building site with little difficulty, and being thrown into such a role at eighteen allowed me to gain valuable experience for the years ahead.

Consumed as I was with my progressive approach to life, it never dawned on me I shouldn't hold a driver's licence. I understood I couldn't afford a motor car on my wage; still, finding a more efficient form of transport had become a priority. There were many mornings I was expected to ride my bike twelve kilometres to Razorback Mountain and be there before 7.00am to start work. On freezing, frosty mornings it was a horrible ride. Even though my father hated motorbikes it didn't stop me from purchasing a little Honda 90cc to ride to and from work. The day I brought it home, my father flipped and gave me a hard time. In retrospect, I realise his concerns were reasonable. During the next twelve months I did everything but kill myself, and it was more good luck than good management that it didn't happen.

I flirted with death on a regular basis. The scariest of all my experiences came while returning home from a Sunday ride. There was a group of guys from our church fellowship who had bikes ranging from little Hondas like mine, to 500cc bikes. A ride was organised to leave Camden, travel through Bowral, wind down the beautiful Kangaroo Valley and finish the first leg in Nowra on the south coast of New South Wales. The return trip was to take us up the coast to Wollongong, climbing the famous Mt Ousley, inland to Appin and home. It sounded good to me. The organiser gave me an assurance we would be home well before dark. That's all I needed: I was a starter.

The ride started out well. It was a beautiful sunny day, the

sky was a soft blue with scattered white clouds, the air clean and crisp, which was to my advantage; crisp air ensured objects appeared sharper and easier to see. The wind blew in my face as I lay my bike from side to side, sparks flying every time the steel footrest scraped on the bitumen surface. As we wound down Kangaroo Valley I sat at the back of the pack, following the bikes through every corner. Picking the right line through corners was important and I didn't want to end up running off the road.

After a late lunch in Nowra, the group headed for home. By the time we reached Wollongong it became obvious to me the light was fading. A problem had also arisen; two riders were not with us. We stopped at the foot of Mt Ousley and the leader announced there was going to be a delay while we waited. Somehow he had found out one bike had broken down. I couldn't afford such a delay; it would mean me riding in the dark for sure. In winter the darkness set in very early. I explained my need to keep going but the leader opposed my intention of setting out for home alone. The golden rule was, 'stay together'. I was about to bring one of my most traumatic events upon myself by breaking that rule.

Revvng the guts out of my little bike, I made my way to the top of the mountain. I raced the fading light like never before, but it was a race I couldn't win. Even when I completed the long uphill climb, I still had the journey inland to Appin, through to Campbelltown and over Kenny Hill to Camden. I reached the summit barely able to see and pulled my bike to the side of the road. My intention was to wait for the other guys. An hour passed and they hadn't shown. The next day I learnt they had taken an alternative route home.

What the hell was I going to do? Separated from the pack,

sitting alone, I had no way to call for help: mobile phones had not yet been invented; they were fifteen years away. Another hour passed as I considered my dilemma. I had to find some way to solve my problem before I started to panic. It seemed like I would be there until morning and I knew it got bloody cold on top of this mountain in mid July. A third hour went by. My parents would be arriving home from church shortly and would start to worry. I may have had my share of conflict with my father but I had no reason to deliberately cause him concern. Decision time arrived; this situation called for drastic action.

I hailed a car, which turned out to be the easy part. I explained to the driver I was having difficulty seeing. I didn't elaborate, as there was no point in worrying him. I asked if I could follow him, using his tail-lights as my guide. He was pleased to assist. As we started off, I fixed my eyes firmly on his red tail-lights, not looking away for a second. When his lights veered left, I lay the bike over to the left and when the lights moved right, so did I. A number of times I hit the gravel and reminded myself this was no time to fall off. Each time I straightened my bike and kept going. There were times I prayed I would see home. It was indeed a nightmare. Again, I was allowed to survive and enjoy another day. I realised things had to change. The little Honda had made its last run and was on borrowed time. Such a situation was never going to occur again.

My eyes continually limited my activities. Dad and Mum owned a beautiful caravan and took the family on holidays each Christmas. I usually tried to avoid going, using work as an excuse. I knew I missed some great adventures with my brothers and sisters but I had a real problem finding my way to the public amenities in caravan parks late at night. It was virtually impossible. I liked to keep control of situations and staying at home allowed me to do that.

Strange surroundings presented me with difficulties; it was common for me to trip on objects which people had left lying around, and not to see men at the urinal when I first walked into the toilets.

I did cover up my difficulties, particularly with my brothers and sisters, although it was in the form of compensating in different situations. I didn't want to limit other people's activities to those which I was capable of. I am not sure anyone around me realised what was happening.

My closest friends understood I had poor vision and that is where it ended. Wanting to maintain a leadership role placed me in a vulnerable position. I recall arriving home from work one afternoon in mid December, 1966. Regardless of the early hour, I showered and jumped into my PJs ready for an evening in front of the television. Around 6.00pm, John and his older brother, Robert, arrived in Robert's car. After talking at my front gate for what seemed a long time, John suggested we visit our friends Robyn and Kay who lived only a short drive up the road, opposite the Camden District Hospital. I was in my PJs, and I wasn't keen on the idea, but we did it anyway.

We sat in the car outside Robyn's home, talking mostly about nothing. Robyn suggested we needed to have some fun. Each of us put our ideas forward but none of the suggestions appealed to us as a group. John and Robyn applied the pressure to me.

"Come on Joseph, give us a stir," John said.

(During my early teens I picked up the nickname Joseph, because Joseph in the Bible was a dreamer.)

"Think of something," Robyn kept at me.

It quickly became an obsession with them.

Desperate to think of an idea, I jokingly suggested, “We could stage a getaway patient scenario at the hospital.”

Much to my amazement they loved the idea. Fifteen minutes: that’s all the time we had to plan and put it into action. Visiting hours were coming to an end. As I was dressed for the occasion, I was the obvious choice for the patient waiting for an operation the following day. Darkness had set in and I don’t need to tell you how this affected me; I was more than a little nervous. Robyn played the role of my partner. This comforted me because I knew she would prevent me from falling down stairs or walking into people. She paraded me through the hospital wards and up and down the corridors discussing my ‘operation’. It was not long before the bell sounded, signalling the end of visiting hours. People exited the hospital from all directions. I happened to be at the end of the driveway adjacent to the ambulance entrance. On cue, I ran the length of the driveway shouting at the top of my voice, “I won’t have the operation! I’m out of here!”

Somehow I found my way down the main stairs, glad it was over. Robyn called for me to stop and not be scared. People stood and stared, trying to work out what was happening. Robert should have been waiting for me in his car. Oh no! He had decided on a double-cross to make the event more interesting. I was now really stranded. I guessed he might be at the entrance adjacent to the bus stop in full view of the largest crowd. The smallest change in plans can emotionally upset me, as it did this night. It was a disaster for me. I couldn’t find my way back up the stairs and had to be rescued by Robyn.

Just as I thought it was all over, I found out one of my so-called friends had phoned the hospital matron to report me for disorderly conduct, excessive noise and trying to escape from the hospital. My understanding is that the matron

phoned the police for assistance. Fortunately we were long gone and never found out if they actually arrived. To us it was good clean fun where no one got hurt, except when the matron asked who the 'patient' was, they took delight in giving my real name.

In February 1968, John commenced his own career journey, and a most successful career it turned out to be. He climbed the corporate ladder to heights some of us only dare to dream of. John was always ambitious, a very competitive person and a winner. In the February, 2000 edition of 'Business Review Weekly' an article entitled 'Australia's Power Pack' named John Stuckey in the list of 'The Top Fifty Most Influential And Powerful Business People In Australia'. That was a proud day for me. I sat in my office reading the article, reflecting on the important role he had played in my life. John earned the title Doctor Stuckey with a PhD in Business Economics from Harvard University. By 2002, he was the managing partner of Australia and New Zealand for the world leading management consulting firm, McKinsey & Company.

I often reminisce how, as a kid, John purchased an old clapped out unregistered 1936 Chevy Ute for around twelve quid, which we set about flogging the guts out of on his father's farm. In more recent times John raised a smile when I suggested we take his Series 5 BMW for a burn.

His journey started at the University of New England in Armidale, a north-eastern New South Wales regional city, where he studied Agricultural Economics. John's brother, Robert, drove him on the seven hour trip and I was privileged to go along for the ride. There was plenty of time for talking; surprisingly the conversation was not about girls, which was the topic that had dominated most of our teenage years. We had progressed to more important

things, and the favourite topic was cars.

John was of the opinion a Honda motorbike was not becoming to a potential businessman like me. I asked him which steering wheel he thought I would look good behind. Without hesitation he advised a Datsun 1600 was definitely my style. I had never heard of them. A reasonably new model on the Australian market, they had performed well in the Hardie Ferodo 500 at Mt Panorama in Bathurst. John informed me he would be my manager and advise me on the purchase. The task was to look for a Datsun dealership in each town we passed through on the New England Highway. It was not to be. John was more disappointed than I was.

Realistically, I didn't have the money and had no idea where I would find it. John was quick to give me a lesson on high finance, assuring me there would not be a problem. He was right; money was easy to borrow. At this point in my life I hadn't considered my position regarding the question, 'Should I drive a car?'

After a number of weeks thinking the situation through and not wishing to restrict my life, I let John know I was going for it. The next four months I worked especially hard, saving every dollar I could, working seven days a week, to earn the deposit I needed. In May 1968, I purchased my first car, a brand new Datsun 1600. It was royal blue with silver upholstery, and at a cost of two thousand four hundred and fifty dollars, it was a massive commitment on my wage of twenty-five dollars a week. This purchase epitomised the Australian way of life: you can achieve your dream if you work hard and make it happen.

Living in town with well lit streets helped me with the limited night driving I did. I regularly drove the short



distance from my home to the local hamburger shop where I would stand with my mates admiring our cars: the Holden Monaro, the GT Falcon, the hotted-up panel van, the Holden Kingswood and my royal blue Datsun 1600. I held my own and was proud of my achievement.

I never allow myself to think of what may happen as a result of my eyes, but I should have. In fact, I should have screamed at myself, 'YOU CAN'T DO THIS!' I enjoyed the feeling of liberation. I had never experienced such freedom. It was great. All I had to do was jump into my car, turn the key and I could go anywhere with the latest hits playing in the background. Again and again I pushed the difficulties with my vision into the background, and continued to focus on the positive aspects of my life. My life was all a teenager could ask for. It was a great time to be alive.

I didn't need an excuse to explore new places. Living in a small country town meant every trip was a long one. The beach was an hour to the south-east. The Blue Mountains were two hours to the north-west. Even a drive from Camden to Penrith to watch the Panthers rugby league team play was a forty-five minute drive. I fitted the Datsun with a set of bright jet landing lights for the times I got caught out after dark. Boy, didn't they make a difference! The road lit up like daylight for around five hundred metres.

My pride and joy was only eleven months old when I was driving home one day along the Cawdor Road near Camden, deep in thought and, as usual, with the latest hits playing on the radio. Without warning, I heard an almighty bang, and felt the car sliding sideways across the road. It came to rest fifty metres on. Everything happened so quickly it was a total blank to me. What had happened? I

had no idea, not a clue; from start to finish, it had only taken seconds. I realised I had to get out fast; there was no time to figure out what was going on. I climbed from the twisted wreck and walked clear without even a scratch. It took some time to comprehend the magnitude of my accident. A large twelve ton coal truck entering the intersection from my left had failed to slow down. The truck cleaned me up a beauty. On reflection it became obvious I had been within millimetres of death and was a very lucky boy to be alive.

For many years cars became less important to me. They were as many people describe them, a means for getting from one place to another. Within a short period, I purchased a 1968 Ford Falcon Utility, which helped me greatly in the private work I was doing on weekends. It provided the means to transport the building materials I needed for each project.

Being a teenager in the sixties had its difficult times, as it does for most generations. We had our share of high profile events; events that had devastating consequences for some of us. Lyndon B. Johnson, the thirty-sixth President of the United States, visited Australia in October, 1965. Most people were carried away with the slogan that swept the nation: 'All the way with LBJ'. Few of us realised his true mission was to gain further support from Australia for troops to fight against the North Vietnamese in the Vietnam War. Conscription for twenty year old males was introduced and our young men started losing their lives in a war we didn't even understand. The reality came home for me when I learnt of former school friends dying in the war. It is understandable that shortly after my nineteenth birthday I became increasingly concerned about conscription.

The catchcry to justify our involvement was, 'If we don't fight them in Vietnam, we will be fighting them on our own soil'. I remember our Uniting Church minister at the time telling us communism was wrong, and suggesting if we did not take action against them, the communists would one day rule Australia. This was enough to scare us into believing it was right to be involved.

I was extremely aware that conscription meant there was a high possibility that I would be called up for service. It was a continual source of worry; in fact it scared the hell out of me. Every day for about twelve months I thought about the possibility of my birth date coming up in the lottery draw that was conducted to determine each batch to be conscripted. 'Even if it did come up, I would never pass a medical,' I'd tell myself. 'But what if?' my little voice persisted. 'What if the doctor said, tough luck, you're in?'

Just the thought of such a possibility was unsettling, as I imagined what seemed to be a ridiculous situation. I made my thoughts the main topic for discussion at work, quizzing one of the guys who had experience in the armed services. He was a retired seaman, having served twelve years in the Royal Australian Navy. He was still shaken from his experience on the night he was on duty aboard HMAS Voyager, just off Jervis Bay on the far south coast of NSW, when the aircraft carrier HMAS Melbourne ploughed into the Voyager, cutting it clean in half. Eighty-two servicemen lost their lives that night in February, 1962. With Australia's biggest peacetime disaster still fresh in his mind, he was of little help to me.

To avoid being conscripted, I considered joining the Air Force, or the Navy; there was no way I wanted to end up in the Army. I knew once I was conscripted the choice was no longer mine. The fact was, I didn't like the thought of

any of the services. I organised a day off work and took the train to Sydney, where I picked up the papers to enlist in the Royal Australian Navy. Over the next few days I completed the forms and tossed them in my bottom drawer while I considered the consequences of my proposed action. The more I thought, the more I realised I had no hope of ever seeing what I was doing late at night on the deck of a big ship. Joining the Navy was a silly idea.

For me it was a difficult time. Garry was away studying at Wagga Wagga Teachers' College in the Riverina area of New South Wales, John was at the University of New England in Armidale and David was in Papua New Guinea on a two year contract with the Electricity Commission. There was no one I could share my dilemma with. The months passed and the conflict in Vietnam escalated. I prayed for a miracle that it might conclude overnight. Sadly, there was no indication of that happening.

One day in early October, 1969, I arrived home from work and my mother handed me an official government envelope as I passed through the kitchen on my way to my bedroom. I suspect she knew what it contained; having lived through World War II she had experience in these matters.

I sat on my bed and slowly opened the envelope. This was one time I needed my privacy. There was no mistaking the orders; my instructions were clear. I was to report for a medical examination on Friday October 24, 1969 at 1900 hours. Tears rolled down my face; I have never felt so alone. My worst nightmare became a reality. A fear engulfed me that I was unable to control. I pictured myself fumbling in the dark in the dense Vietnamese jungle. This was devastating; I couldn't cope. I became traumatised by the scenerios I was imagining.

After about twenty minutes had passed, Mum entered the room and placed her arms around me and held me tight. I think she sensed she could lose her son.

“If I go over there Mum, I won’t be coming back.”

“God looks after his own,” she replied.

‘We’ll see,’ I thought.

Only days later, I felt even worse when I heard my friend Brian Hansen, had been killed in action; he was about eighteen months older than me.

Before I arrived for the medical I had considered my options should I be told to report for training. I would either become a conscientious objector, or take my own life. I knew I would not be able to handle the enormous challenges presented by active service in the war and I most certainly would die if I were forced to go to Vietnam.

Good old Paul wasted twelve months worrying and getting worked up over an event that was never going to happen. I was relieved when the doctor informed me I would not be proceeding further and recommended I be excused from service as I was found to be medically unfit. I figured it was not the time to be offended at not being good enough. I was actually grateful. The doctor went on to advise me to seek urgent attention from a specialist regarding my vision and my hearing, something I didn’t do for a number of years; the bad experiences of the medical examinations in my early teens were still fresh in my mind.

The Vietnam War continued until 1975. The United States and Australian troops were withdrawn in January, 1973 after United States President Nixon reluctantly signed a peace agreement Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had negotiated the previous October. Kissinger received the Nobel Peace Prize for his contribution to bringing the war

to a conclusion. The war had always been controversial and to a large extent the soldiers and their families were forgotten. On their return home they were not recognised by their fellow countrymen for their role in fighting communism and were denigrated by society. They were left to pick up the pieces for themselves.

George L. Skypeck summed up the Vietnam War this way:

*Soldier*

*I was that which others did not want to be.*

*I went where others feared to go, and did what others failed to do.*

*I asked nothing from those who gave nothing. And reluctantly accepted the thought of eternal loneliness ... should I fail.*

*I have seen the face of terror; felt the stinging cold of fear; and enjoyed the sweet taste of a moment's love.*

*I have cried, pained and hoped ... but most of all, I have lived times others would say were best forgotten.*

*At least someday, I will be able to say that I was proud of what I was ... a soldier.*

It had been a constant drain of energy to stay one step ahead of the daily challenges; it was like working with a blindfold on. The final year of my apprenticeship was 1969. The hard slog was behind me. In those days our technical training consisted of three years compulsory daytime study one day a week, with a further two years of three nights a week. The final two years proved to be very tough. I drew my strength from my earlier years listening to Billy Graham, reminding myself to take my worst subject and study it until it became my best. I also reminded myself that my hard work was taking me closer to realising my dream, and I knew if I could complete the gruelling workload there would be nothing in life I couldn't achieve.

There was no doubt I wanted to be a winner. I had learnt rewards came to those who put in the work. But it went much further for me; my apprenticeship was not just a job, it was a passion: I enjoyed learning the technical information, the calculations, the rules and regulations that were involved. There were always new challenges and new experiences and something to learn. This was not about pleasing others; it was about having a dream, believing in it and making it happen.

My desire to achieve exposed me to opportunities I may not have normally stumbled across. Most opportunities I created myself from pieces of information I picked up at industry functions I attended. On many occasions my plumbing associates thought I was silly for attending. I always arrived early and chose a seat close to the door; if it turned out I was not gaining good information from the speaker or it was not relevant to me, I left early. Of course, by attending industry functions I actually gained a wealth of knowledge over the years.

One night a guest speaker visited our class at Liverpool Technical College to explain the design and approval process for building plans. This interested me because it was a potential area for advancement in my plumbing career. The lecturer explained the process whereby property developers selected their consulting team and the methods for sizing pipes, pumps, hot water systems and other important services in our trade. I remember being captivated by the process of pumping water to a storage tank at the top of a high-rise building, then distributing the water to the various locations where it would be required within the building. The trick was to get the quantities correct and to maintain the correct water pressures. It sounded like a real challenge to me. I marvelled at the complex calculations, methods and procedures which

needed to be followed to achieve accurate results. This was a new and exciting world for me and an area of expertise I wanted to pursue.

Imagine, if on that night, I had known that I would be the person who would one day write a book detailing more accurate and efficient methods of achieving such design outcomes. I would not have believed myself capable of such a feat.

A special evening was to be held in Sydney for plumbers to learn more about hydraulic services consultants, also known as plumbing design engineers. I heard my classmates voicing reasons why they should not attend and how it was more suitable for others. I found their negative attitude difficult to understand. On my way home that night I kept asking myself, 'Why not? Why not me?'

I knew it was going to be difficult to attend the lecture, driving in the city with cars everywhere; flickering lights and glare was a big problem. Still, I wanted to be there. The difficulties I encountered with my eyes were again pushed aside. I jumped on a train and found my way to the event. I imagine for most, attending this lecture was just another night out. For me it was to be a life-changing experience. A gentleman named Don Ledingham spoke at length about the new industry of plumbing design. He explained the design process, confirming what we had been told a few weeks earlier. I was overcome with excitement, sitting and taking in every word. I am sure there were others in the audience who took it for granted, while I appreciated how lucky I was to be in the room with the leaders of our industry.

We were left with a challenge to consider a career in design engineering. I hid my inner feelings which I was finding



difficult to control. I didn't want to stand out in the group. One of my tactics in life is to assume I belong and blend in. This was the career I wanted and I was going to achieve it. That night Don Ledingham had a monumental impact on shaping the future of my life. I made my decision; I was going to be a hydraulic services consultant. I wanted to be a decision maker and I particularly wanted to make a difference by influencing the plumbing industry. Years later in 1981, I met Don personally for the first time at a conference in Canberra and had the opportunity to relay my story to him. Now twenty-five years on, I am proud to call Don my friend.

The dawning of a new day brings such a decision to a reality check. Sadly, we live in a society of knockers, who enjoy cutting dreamers and achievers down to size. Heaven help the people who want to be the best at a particular task. Instead of encouraging our children to be the best they can be, many parents discourage them with negative comments, leading them to believe they won't get hurt if they don't try. Many people have the audacity to claim victory and feel smug when the person they are knocking, does in fact fail. My experience in life has taught me, 'It is better to have a go and fail, than never to have tried at all'.

I have always been an ambitious dreamer, and at the age of nineteen I asked myself, 'What gives me the right to think I can achieve such dreams and succeed with high goals?' I may not have been able to see the stars; still, I dared to reach for them, and dream my own dreams. The real questions for me were never, 'Could I?' or 'Would I dare?' They were, 'How do I make it happen?' and 'What do I have to do?'

I settled into my daily work life, my dream lingering at the back of my mind. It was to lie dormant for a few years. I

was trying to discover where my boundaries in life were and what it was possible for me to achieve. I gained encouragement and motivation from events occurring around me, events which were making history. The world didn't seem to know such boundaries, which impressed me. New technology was continually being introduced, allowing the great scientists to explore new frontiers. Sometimes it was difficult to comprehend, the world was advancing so quickly. One of those events that taught me that 'we have no limitations' happened on the afternoon of July 20, 1969.

One of the most momentous events the world had ever experienced started to unfold when the US space program, on the morning of July 16, 1969, launched Apollo 11 to begin its trip to Earth's only natural satellite, the moon. Apollo 11 was a mighty Saturn V Rocket; the most powerful of its type constructed to date. The rocket had three astronauts on board: Neil Armstrong, Edwin Aldrin Jr and Michael Collins, who were making their way into the history books. I watched the coverage beamed into our lounge room daily. Then finally, after three days in space, astronauts Armstrong and Aldrin landed their lunar module, the Eagle, on the lunar surface. Armstrong confirmed the successful landing, with the famous words, "Houston, Tranquillity Base here. The Eagle has landed."

I imagined myself being a part of history: how, when, where and why, I didn't have a clue, but it didn't stop me from dreaming.

Another reason 1969 was a special year, was that I married Keryn Anne Hatherly on October 25, at the tender age of twenty. Keryn was an apprentice hairdresser, a beautiful girl one year my junior. She had lovely blue eyes and was a person with a caring nature. We both attended Camden High School during the same period. While we knew each

other at that time, we had little contact and hadn't seen each other in the four years since leaving school.

There have been many occasions I wanted things to go right, and dating Keryn was certainly one of them. I wanted to impress her and it was important to me that she saw me as a nice guy. Of course my eyes were always there to remind me nothing was going to be easy. I have never forgotten the humiliating incident which occurred on the day after meeting Keryn at a local dance. It was rare for me to attend disco style dances; the very low level of light was not favourable to my situation. This particular Friday evening, at the persistence of a mate, I drove my car to the Picton Golf Club, a twenty kilometre trip. It wasn't far and my friend Graham said I could follow him. He had a little Mini Cooper S, which was a popular car in those days.

We hadn't been at the dance long when Graham spotted his girlfriend, Wendy, and took off. To free up Wendy, I was allocated her sister Keryn. She seemed to know what she was doing and had much more experience than I did. Keryn was a close dancer and her body felt nice against mine. The dim disco lighting provided its share of problems for me; I simply couldn't see her and relied on touch to know where she was on the dance floor. Flashes of bright lights did reveal a beautiful young lady with a modern sixties mini dress with a plunging neckline. She later informed me, it was her 'attention getter' dress. It was definitely successful. That night I drove her home and along the way we parked for a while. The problem was, I hadn't seen her in a clear light and really didn't know what she looked like. I did observe a prominent feature in her teased hair. Girls in those days teased their hair into 'beehives', giving the impression they had long hair.

I arranged to meet Keryn the next day at the local

swimming pool. Naturally, I assumed I was meeting a girl with long hair. It didn't take long for me to make a fool of myself. I didn't recognise her. A girl ran up to greet me and said "hi", obviously wanting to talk. Realising I was there to meet only one girl, and not wanting to be seen as a womaniser, I continued on my way, passing another group of girls and finding a spot, spreading my towel and lying down to wait. Three girls quickly came and sat beside me, one being the girl I had just spoken with. Hell, which one was Keryn? I didn't have a clue. I played it cool all afternoon. After I had left the pool, I was still not sure.

Keryn was on the phone to me that night and asked what was going on. Did I realise the embarrassment I had caused her, and that she had been bragging to her friends about this nice guy she had met? I had little to say; I knew only too well what the truth was. I suggested we meet the following Saturday after work and take a drive to the beach. At least this way I only had one girl to choose from and figured I would get it right! It was not easy telling someone you wanted to date what was really happening. In my case I didn't actually know what to tell her. We managed to get past the false start and had many nice outings. I know she thought I was a bit tight with my money. I arranged to meet her at the dances, rather than pay her way in. I knew she was not impressed and I eventually stopped the practice.

Keryn and I had only been dating eight weeks when we were invited to a Christmas party at Robyn's home. It was an extremely hot December evening. I had arranged to pick Keryn up at 7.00pm. The problem was, I did my usual trick and had a sleep after arriving home from work. The loud ringing of the telephone woke me. It was John wanting to know if I was on my way. The fact was I didn't want to go. After some discussion and now an hour late for Keryn, I dressed and got a wriggle on.

The party was in full swing when we arrived. I had not fully woken from my earlier rest and was a little groggy. There was no time wasted getting onto the dance floor. Dancing was an activity I did enjoy; I had been a student at the local Latin American Dance Studio for the past three years. Considering the disciplined way I ran my life and the self-control I displayed, it is difficult to admit I had no idea what was about to unfold. Keryn's hints came thick and fast. While never actually using the 'marry' word, she thought it would be a good idea for us to make a commitment. The pressure was on. I put my case for buying her a friendship ring, but that clearly was not what she had in mind. Keryn never let up the whole night. She was a lady on a mission.

The thought of marriage was daunting: please, I was only nineteen and I hadn't come to grips with my eyes and whether I should even consider getting married. I had special needs and it was not reasonable to expect a lady to take on my problems without an in-depth discussion. Up till now I appreciated that my situation may mean I would never marry. I was not sure.

My thoughts started to turn to building a future, building a business and a dream home. I did like Keryn, so why not start and build that dream early in life? Later that evening we drove to our favourite parking spot, the local 'go cart track'. I explained to Keryn the difficulties with my eyes, the uncertainty in my life, the fact I didn't really know what was happening. I thought it was fair she had a chance to understand my dreams, and for me to listen to hers. Mine were about wanting to be a design engineer, a businessman and a success in my career; possibly moving from Camden to Western Australia or Queensland to build a new life. Keryn's were much simpler and easy to follow: the marriage, the children and the home with a white picket fence.

Keryn accepted my situation, she pledged her support and in the back of my Datsun 1600 at a most unromantic location, I asked her to marry me. She said yes. The day after making a major decision is a good time to know if it is right or not. If your gut feeling tells you it was wrong, it will be wrong. In this case, my gut feeling said it should be fine and everything looked good for us.

The following ten months passed quickly. We had a beautiful wedding at St Pauls Anglican Church at Cobbitty. The church symbolises everything the district is about and most of what I had experienced in my life. A stately, traditional sandstone church, it is situated on a quiet country road in a small one-shop village some seven kilometres from Camden, surrounded by farms and vineyards.

Following the service there was one unexpected emotional moment for me when Keryn and I made our way to the bridal car, my uncle's black Mercedes Benz. The path passed beside the historic cemetery within the church grounds. I paused for a moment, looked across the graves and remembered the last time I was there as a boy of about eleven. I took a moment to reflect how my father, his brothers and sisters laid my grandmother to rest. It was as if she had been with us and experienced our joy. I am sure my grandmother would have been happy with Keryn's choice of churches.

After Keryn and I returned from a beautiful two week honeymoon on Queensland's Gold Coast, we moved into our home in Macarthur Road, Elderslie, which I had purchased a few weeks earlier. Things were looking good for us; everything was positive and going our way. Then overnight everything changed: within a forty-eight hour period Keryn advised me she was giving up work. She told me wives did

not work, they looked after the home, played tennis and spent time with other wives. This came as a shock, and was contrary to our earlier discussions. The next day was the last day of my five year apprenticeship, a time when I should have been celebrating. Instead it became a black point of my life. I lost my job.

My life was certainly presenting some challenges. Vic's decision to terminate my employment was based on a childish disagreement we had. I felt my point was valid but he disagreed and showed me the door. I think he wanted to lay-off staff and I provided him with the opportunity. Considering our friendship and the loyalty I had given him over the years, particularly when he was sick, we should both have been sent to the headmaster's office, given a lecture and sent back to work. Instead I found myself looking for a job. It was to be fifteen years before I spoke to Vic again.

Not being one to dwell on the negatives, I had no desire to work for another company, and having seen many of my relatives with their own businesses, it seemed a natural progression for me to do the same. There were only three plumbers in Camden and one of those was close to retiring. Running my own business in Camden didn't actually fit my plans at that stage of my life. I was more interested in moving to Queensland. I had fallen in love with Queensland's great weather and lifestyle during our honeymoon. However I was out of a job and I needed to find a solution, fast.

The design engineer plans were temporarily shelved and I headed to my bank manager to arrange a five hundred dollar loan for my first business. The bank manager gave me good advice, which sadly I didn't understand at the time. I am sure you have heard it before. "Paul, you can be

the best tradesman in the world but it does not make you a businessman,” he told me. I was going to be different, so I thought.

It took less than twelve months for me to realise the bank manager was spot on with his advice; I turned out to be a terrible business manager. Many people didn't pay their accounts for my services and I was unwilling to charge the higher prices I needed to stay in business. I did too many 'love jobs' for friends of my mother, and I didn't know when builders were taking advantage of me. Keryn had made her mind up; finishing her hairdressing apprenticeship was not on the agenda. Life was extremely difficult and it was hard to meet my financial commitments.

John was visiting our home one afternoon when I confided in him that things were not going well and it was not easy. His confidence-building, positive attitude surfaced yet again. He said, “Joseph, the one thing you are good at and know well, is how to make money. You are good at it and will do well. You need to learn the art of keeping it and making it work for you.” The conversation moved on but his advice has never left me and the first part of his statement has helped me through many tough times.

By late October, 1971, I was sick of business life and I had had enough. The bank manager was right, being a tradesman was one thing, running a business was something I had no training for. One evening Keryn and I sat eating our meal, neither of us talking much. When Keryn raised the subject of starting a family, I told her that I wanted to wait a few years while we got on our feet financially. The pressure she was applying was unbearable and we were at each other again.

“I just want us to sell up and move to Queensland like we've been talking about,” I explained. “I want to get away and



start a new life where we are free to work toward our dreams and without the pressures of our families.”

Keryn snapped at me, “Stop talking about it and do it! Do it or shut up!”

I sat silently looking at her for a minute.

“Are you okay with such a move?”

“Yes, but don’t talk about it, do it,” she repeated.

This stage of my life closed extremely quickly, making way for a new beginning. We had closed the business, sold the house and were living in a home unit in Bay Street, Tweed Heads by Christmas, 1971. This was the most positive step I had made toward accomplishing my dreams. At twenty-two years of age I broke the chains and placed myself in a position to build the life I wanted; no one to compete with, no one to criticise me. It was up to me to make of life what I believed I could. There would be no excuses and no turning back.

‘If it is to be, it is up to me.’



*Paul and John Stuckey*

