

## Australia's Legacy

I am an original baby boomer. I was born in September 1946, within a year of the end of the second world war. My Dad was 40 when I was born, but it was only when I was 30-something that I realised just how old he was. He had joined the army at 35, after threatening to resign from the bank that did not want him to enlist. We think of soldiers like the 18-year-olds in *Gallipoli*, but he was about old enough to be their father. I have no doubt that he was indeed a father figure to many of those boys.

I had an idyllic childhood. Coogee was fun in the 1950s. There were a few obligations – jobs at home and visiting grandparents – but mostly it was just sun and surf. We were pretty well off, with a fabulous house on the hill, but my mates were a true cross-section of post-war suburbia, including some new “reffos” from Europe. I recall it as a wonderful, egalitarian society – multicultural, perhaps.

I saved half the price of a new bike in my bank account – then it miraculously appeared. Then I started to save for a silver concert flute, collecting bottles on the beach that Dad helped me cart home, wash, and take to the shop for the deposits.

Every Saturday he would drive me to the city for my flute lesson – bankers worked on Saturday mornings then. Paradoxically, this frugal man would always slip me two bob for a milkshake after the lesson. Then I would catch the 399 bus home.

One Saturday, as I walked up the steps, I knew something was wrong. He was dead.

Having not taken a sickie in 20 years before the war, his third heart attack in the 12 years since he returned proved fatal. They drove him home from the office, while I was drinking my milkshake, and he died in my mother's arms.

My world collapsed. I was just 11. My innocence dissipated. I had to grow up.

Friends, neighbours and relatives were wonderful. Coogee was like a village then. Everyone knew; and they all cared. Then, from the midst of my memory, another important figure emerged – an officer from my father's former regiment. He suggested the Legacy Club of Sydney might help us. It certainly did.

Legatee Fred MacAlister became part of our family, and we part of his. He helped my mother with family matters; took an interest in our school results; he even brought us presents from overseas – striped toothpaste from America, no less! Later he taught me to reverse park, made sure I got a cadetship (with his company), and that they sent me to an Outward Bound course – my fervent desire – at 18. Legacy was influential.

Other Legatees had helped this skinny little boy to stand up and make a presentation to the Governor-General when he visited. Some of them fixed our teeth; others helped with bursaries and career advice; some organised great outings and holidays.

None of them ever tried to be my surrogate father, and I know of no-one who ever abused his position of trust. They just quietly eased our path through adolescence.

Legacy was established after World War 1 to look after widows and children of men who died in the war, or who had since died from any cause. It grew into a national institution, unique in the world, and a favourite charity among Australians.

It was, essentially, a club of ex-army officers dedicated to the welfare of the families of their departed comrades-in-arms. As I later realised, it was quite an exclusive club. It is now more egalitarian, with many former “junior legatees” and others as members.

Legacy proved to be more influential in my life than school, music, scouts, church or sport, though I enjoyed them all. In the 1960s I went to Legacy House in the city each Monday night. The gymnasium instructor was the kindest disciplinarian I ever met. The woodwork teacher took me home in the bus, and helped me to make a desk that I still treasure. The librarian carefully chose books to expand my horizons, and sent me home with others to wean my little sister off Enid Blyton.

Some weekends I went to “camp” at Legacy’s cottage in the bush at Narrabeen. I was scared at first and, as someone reminded me recently, a bit of a wimp. In later years a group of us – led by some inspirational, older Legacy boys – ran annual camps for younger kids, styled on the Outward Bound model, with obstacle courses, abseiling and bushwalking in the Blue Mountains. You wouldn’t be allowed to do that today.

In later years we built canoes and paddled down swollen rivers when I should have been studying. Then we raced back to Sydney for Sunday night’s practice with the debutantes we presented to Sir Roden and Lady Cutler at the annual Legacy Ball at the Trocadero in George Street.

We had it all – and lived in the luckiest, richest, country in the world.

Legacy transformed my life, and the lives of thousands like me. My Dad was a good man and a pillar of society but, like many fathers today, had little time in his busy life for his young son. After Dad’s death our family was well served by public and private forms of social security that are a redeeming feature of our nation.

Legacy was the human side of a community that cared. It transformed this skinny, scared little boy into a confident, competent young man.

Mateship is a popular element of Australian culture. War remains in vogue with politicians and some radio listeners, though not with me. How nice it is, then, that one of their joint products – Legacy – became a national institution, uniquely Australian, that surely embodied the Australian ethos. And still does.

And how nice to recall what those magnificent guys did for us, lest we forget.