

“WALKERS AWAY 2”

The adventures of John (Whiskey) and Julie Walker.

John served as a member of the 4th Contingent to Cyprus and retired as an Asst. Commissioner Queensland Police. They are currently touring Australia in their caravan for 12 months. This is their diary of their first three months 8 December 2010 – 8 March 2011

Having ‘bitten the bullet’ to do it now while we could, Julie and I decided to rent our house at Minyama on the Sunshine Coast for 12 months while we caravanned around Australia and handed the keys to our home to tenants (friends) on 10th December 2010.

Having owned a custom-built Coromal Caravan following my (Whiskey’s) retirement in 2000 and after some extensive travelling, we sold it in favour of staying in cabins in caravan parks when travelling. However, after getting the caravan bug again, we decided this time to buy a second hand van, not as big as the first one which was 23’6” and so searched Caravan dealers sites, the internet ‘Trading Post’ and private advertisements in the paper for a suitable van.

We travelled from Bundaberg to Brisbane and other places in between in search of the right caravan and ended up finding the ‘right one’ just down the road at Currimundi which had just come into the dealer that week – a 2006 21’6” Jayco Stirling (though Whiskey was originally led to believe it was 20ft, wanting no bigger than that and preferably smaller).

The boxes ticked off with the van which had separate shower, WC and vanity, washing machine, full oven and hotplates, rangehood, airconditioner, microwave oven, good size refrigerator, television, windup TV antenna, island bed, couch and dinette, plenty of cupboards, pole carrier, a deep cell battery for the odd roadside stop-over, along with awning and full sides for an annexe, and all at the ‘right price’. Whiskey later had installed a few additional features, including an extra deep cell battery, portable solar panels, an outside TV swivel bracket and TV connection, a rear caravan camera, a pole carrier for fishing gear etc, to make it even more comfortable and we were set.

We planned to make it a 12 months leisurely trip around Australia, with nothing really ‘set into concrete’ as to be where and when we would be at particular times, apart from spending Christmas/New Year 2010-11 at Yeppoon and to be in Darwin for the next UNPAA Reunion/Conference from 26-30 September 2011.

After leaving home on 8 December 2010, we spent a week at the local Alexandra Headlands Caravan Park enabling us to ‘tidy up last minute things’ and then set off to Elliott Heads (near Bundaberg) where we met up with John (former Queensland Police Officer and long time

friend) and Cheryl Richter for a few days. John and Cheryl, who own a Bushtracker Caravan, have been travelling for eight years and are still enjoying it. We had four enjoyable days and nights together at Elliott Heads, and we also caught up with an old mate, Kerry Devine and his wife Elaine, who have retired to Bundaberg.

Kerry and Whiskey go way back to his police days in Goondiwindi in 1966-67 where Kerry was a boot-maker and it was the beginning of a long time friendship between them. It was from there that Whiskey was selected to go to Cyprus with the 4th United Nations Peacekeeping Corps from 1967-68.

The night before leaving Elliott Heads the heavens opened up, it 'bucketed down' and we wondered if we would be able to make our departure. As it happened, this was not long before Bundaberg was cut off with floods in the coming week or so but, though we had to drive through water on more than one occasion on the back road via the Town of 1770 to Miriam Vale, we were able to travel to Yeppoon where we were booked at the Beachside Caravan Park, now managed by a retired Queensland Police Officer – Trevor Neilson. On the way to Yeppoon, we stopped to buy the MiriamVale famous crab sandwiches ready for our lunch along the way.

On the way to Yeppoon, we called also at Mount Larcom where Kev (Neddy) Kelly's son Danny has the local pub. Kev and Whiskey were young constables in Mount Isa in the early 1960's. Danny quickly called his Dad who drove up from Yarwun right away and a good old chat was had. Lunch was kindly offered but we had that already tucked away in the van.

We were travelling north, which seemed to some a bit strange being the hot and wet season in Queensland, to spend Christmas with Julie's son Jason and his wife Melissa and grandsons, Samuel & Thomas at Yeppoon. Whiskey also took the opportunity to catch up with his old Queensland Police mate Barry Self – now retired in Rockhampton.

Yeppoon is a lovely beachside spot which is a step off to the Capricorn group of Islands and a favourite holiday spot for people of Rockhampton. We had planned to welcome in the New Year with Jason and family at the Capricorn Resort with a pool-side dinner and fireworks. However, by New Year's Eve with the Fitzroy River in flood and still rising and with predictions that it would reach its peak by Sunday cutting off the Bruce Highway south of Rockhampton for about two weeks, we decided to 'hit the road' and head to Biloela and let the family enjoy the New Year's Eve dinner and fireworks without them.

We arrived in Biloela where Whiskey's cousin Ivan and wife Merle own the big Simmons Bakery (across the road from and much favoured by the local Police Station) so it was dinner at the local RSL with them

and their friends for New Year and four days of very hot weather. Local knowledge came to the fore when Ivan and Merle drove us all around Biloela and surrounds, as well as visiting the Callide Dam at Biloela which was near its capacity, the first time in years the dam has been at that level.

With predictions of possible severe thunder storms and rain in the Toowoomba/Warwick area through which we planned to travel south, it was time to 'make a run for it' with a night at Bjelke Petersen Dam near Murgon. It would have been great to wet a line there as it looked great being at near 100% capacity, but we thought it best to 'get out of Queensland' while we could.

Heavy prior rainfall south of Biloela in the Monto and Gayndah areas resulted in the roads being severely potholed, so it was slow travelling trying to avoid these obstacles with the ever present threat of 'doing a tyre' each time we struck one.

We headed for Tenterfield (again the highway south of Yarraman through Toowoomba and Warwick was severely potholed – more slow travel) but, forgetting it was day-light saving in NSW and making better time than what we had thought, we decided it was too early to stop over when we reached Tenterfield early in the afternoon and continued on along the Bruxner Highway (what an ordeal that was towing the caravan through kilometres of very hilly and windy terrain during torrential rain) to Casino where we settled in for a few days at the Casino Village RV Resort, a 'purpose built Motor Homes and 5th Wheelers park'. This park is well worth visiting as it is a gated community with large 'drive-through' sites. The amenities include a bowls club, social club, golf course, pool etc and has homes of various sizes which can be bought, after which you can lock up and not worry while you go off travelling.

Julie was delighted to get a "Red Hat" fix by attending a morning tea with the local Red Hatters and through this we were invited to have a look at one of the homes which was certainly lovely and well laid out.

Next stop was Yamba, NSW (not to be confused with Yamba Qld) in the Beachside Caravan Park. It was packed to the brim with many families who have been making the annual Christmas Holidays trek to there for over 20 years. This was a 'purpose stop' as good friends Basil (ex-Queensland Police Officer) and Alma Glover retired here some years ago. It was intended only having four days here but this extended to eight days when the Clarence River flooded and the Pacific Highway was cut north and south as well as the road into Yamba itself. Julie didn't mind as a mutual friend had joined the local Yamba Red Hatters and a special morning tea was hastily organised for her visit – and now Alma is a Red Hatter too!!!

Sunday came with word that the Pacific Highway south could be reached via Maclean and then on a back road through sugar cane fields etc., so off we set. A fellow camper from Grafton had given us directions, but we missed the turn to the little bridge we were told to cross and we also missed the cane fields, but 'hey presto', all of a sudden we came out on the Pacific Highway south and we were on our way again. Fantastic.

South West Rocks has always had fond memories for us and we had hoped to have a few nights there but, due to a surf carnival, we could only get into the Big 4 at Trial Bay. What a trial it was – packed to the rafters and \$65 per night!!! Whiskey's heart had palpitations at the price and so next day we set off to Port Macquarie and Aquatic Caravan Park – a small family affair right on the Hastings River and only \$32 per night! (This is more like it!)

Unfortunately, we hadn't long set up for a few days stay when the Maroochydore Police contacted Julie to tell her that her older brother was seriously ill in Caboolture Hospital. Sadly he passed away the next night and so we had to leave the van on site while we returned to our home town Kilcoy for the funeral.

When we returned, we took a day's break and then set off to Lake Macquarie near Newcastle. A distant rellie of Julie was a relief manager at the Belmont Pines Caravan Park and we were delighted to secure a lake-side site next to the water at 'mates' rates' for five nights. During our stay, Julie's daughter Suzy and Granddaughter Kiara drove up from Sydney for the weekend and Julie's friend Annette (a lovely Red Hatter) called and took us out and about showing us what a wonderful area we had been bypassing all these years when we had travelled south to Sydney bypassing Newcastle. The main street of Newcastle is very run down and sad, but lunch at the boat club on the water and the lovely beaches were great.

Next, we travelled to Shell Harbour, just south of Wollongong and near Lake Illawarra where good friends John and Judith Crowley live. (John is a retired NSW Police Officer and was a member of the 12th contingent of the United Nations Peace Keepers in Cyprus). As John had served, amongst other places, at Wollongong, Warilla and Port Kembla, he knew the area well and so he and Judith made wonderful tour guides, making sure we saw all the places of particular interest, including Stanwell Park where Lawrence Hargrave assisted the world's first human flight from Bald Hills at Stanley Tops in the early 1900s, the iconic 665 metre Sea Cliff Bridge, spectacular scenery and beautiful beaches, as well as taking us to lunch at the Warilla Bowls Club. Whiskey was delighted to see the indoor bowls green which has featured on TV with bowling championships being played there.

Four days later we moved a few kilometres down the road to Kendall's Beach at Kiama and John and Judith again showed us all around the area, including Saddleback Mountain lookout, Gerringong (and Mick Cronin's hotel) and Gerroa, with lunch at the Gerroa Fishing Club. The Crowleys certainly made our visit to Shell Harbour and Kiama most enjoyable and memorable.

During their outings with John and Judith, Julie discovered that John was friends with the father-in-law and husband of her niece Carol – daughter of the brother who had just passed away - and that the niece's husband, Phil O'Neil, is an Inspector of Police at Parramatta. So, with the help of John, they were able to contact Julie's niece (whom she hadn't seen for many years) and enjoyed a great family BBQ at Phil & Carol's home.

While at Kendall's Beach, we took a drive to Berrima where the 'after factory' turbo Whiskey had fitted to his Landcruiser last year was checked over by the experts and tinkered with so that it now performs much better when towing the van. He highly recommends this family outfit – Berrima Diesel.

The day before we left Shell Harbour the temperature got up to 40 degrees in the caravan park with the caravan airconditioner struggling to cool the van. The next day when we arrived at Kendall's Beach, a cool change developed in the afternoon and the temperature plummeted to 17 degrees – time to don the tracksuits!

From Kendall's Beach, it was off to Narooma to a great caravan park set in the middle of the golf course and overlooking the main surf beach. It had been recommended by a couple camping near us at Belmont Pines and we certainly were not disappointed. Not cramped or crowded (don't know why, as it is a top spot), we enjoyed a site on the hill which overlooks the ocean and a grassy headland. The golf course is pretty well known for its "Greg Norman" hole and for a TV advert some time back with 'Hoges' in a tinny at the bottom of the cliff saying "I think we will need a wedge here!" (I hope I have got that right!) Great seafood here, but a tip to the visitor – the seafood is cheaper and very good if you drive around to the Marina where you can enjoy fish and chips by the lake.

Next was Merimbula, where good friends Anna & Warren O'Meara (Warren is a former Northern Territory Police Officer) have retired, for five 'decadent' nights (fabulous oysters from Tathra) and many 'happy hours'. A good time was had by all. The van was left on the footpath as it was too hard to get through the gate, but we lived in 'luxury' in a self contained area on the lower level of this lovely home which backs onto and overlooks a lake. No, couldn't fish there as Warren feeds the fish - huge bream - along with ducks and a swan family – mum and dad and five cygnets.

Four nights at Lake Tyers was long enough before a really great week at Lakes Entrance. We had taken a drive over to there from Lake Tyers during the week and selected a site at the Recreation Area Caravan Park. It looked a bit run down but what a spot - could throw a line in from the annex! It is a very popular destination, within easy walking distance of the shops, which included Woolworths store and Liquor shop (most important!) and to the wharves where we bought the freshest prawns and bugs off the trawler – prawns for \$10 kg and bugs \$20 kg. Is it any wonder that this was a spot to visit more than once?

We were also very lucky to become friends with a couple from Goulburn who are regulars at this park and who kindly took us to surrounding spots including Metung, while we took in a drive to Bairnsdale, a really impressive town with lovely wide streets and centre gardens. The most impressive St Mary's Catholic Church was a special visit due to the fabulous murals and stained glass panels with even the ceiling covered in murals. We also took in Paynesville for lunch at Stanleys, where 'The best steak sandwich' was enjoyed - just across the road from the marina.

Leaving Lakes Entrance and Bairnsdale we had a night at another lovely town – not as big but very pretty – Yarram and the caravan park (Rosebud) gets a huge tick for its amenities and beautiful grounds – and of course mine hosts.

From Yarram it was not a big drive to Tidal River at Wilsons Promontory. Now this was a bit of a surprise as, according to the 'travel book', there was no power and we were expecting 'real wilderness camping' – in the well set up van of course!! When we arrived it was like Queen Street with people everywhere and hey, out of the 484 sites available there are 20 powered sites, so we managed to get the second last one. Still no need for us to bring out the solar panels and power the caravan on the deep cell batteries which cost so much extra - roughing it a bit will have to wait a bit longer! But no water was supplied and the powered sites are, by the way, \$51 per night – unpowered about \$23!

Today – Tuesday 8 March - we drove from Wilsons Promontory to Whitecliffs-Camersons Bight Foreshore Reserve at Rye where we will stay for two days prior to crossing by ferry from Sorrento to Queenscliff and then onto Melbourne. Our site is right by the beach and on the waters edge – another great spot indeed.

TO BE CONTINUED.

John – Whiskey – Walker
Retired Queensland Police Officer and
President UNPAA

Queensland Branch