**Interview with John Davidson Romeril, by Peter Simmenauer at Geelong, on 22 July 2018**

John was born in 1928, his parents came to Briar Hill in 1928. His grandfather, Edward Thomas Romeril, was a seaman in Jersey, he came out here in a ship, having a certificate as first mate, and jumped ship. Later, he was on a ship called the SS Richmond which used to sail around the coast from Melbourne to Sydney. On one trip, there was a fierce storm, the captain was washed overboard and was drowned, and he took over the boat, we're told that he lashed crew members to the mast so that they wouldn't be washed away, and he safely brought the ship into harbour in Sydney. [October 1881] He was then promoted to captain, and was a hero, because he had saved the ship. And the family have a treasure, a painting of the ship in the storm, and one of arriving at Sydney, painted by one of the seamen.

Edward married a Sydney girl and they had four children, John's father being the third, Robert William Edward, always called Bert. After the fourth child, his wife said that she didn't want him at sea any more, with four kids to look after, so he'd better get a job on land. He took a job as secretary of an organisation that took care of families of seamen lost at sea. Apparently he was a bit of a gambler, and with a partner took over the licence of a hotel. They weren't good businessmen, it went bad and he finished up owning it, having to sell off the accessories to pay off the debts. He was charged with misappropriation of something like £1/17/- from the seaman's organisation, which was enough to put him in jail, and after that he disappeared off the face of the earth. For many years, it was said that he had taken a job as harbourmaster in Queensland, travelling overland and intending to pick up his family afterwards. However that was not the story at all; he just changed his name and took off for Queensland and left his family for dead. So his wife was left with four children and had to move down to Melbourne to live with her unmarried brother in South Melbourne, and that's where John's mother grew up, she was a neighbour, nine years younger than Robert. Josephine Annie Brudus, daughter of a Swedish seaman who had also jumped ship, would be running around under the feet of the boys playing cricket. So then Robert's mother decided to re-marry and she married a plumber. He wanted to train the 11 year old boy as a plumber, but he didn't want to be a plumber and he didn't want to live with his stepfather, so he ran away.

For years he was a boundary rider, possibly as far north as Queensland. At the age of 23, he returned to Melbourne and joined the permanent army in a field artillery battalion based in the St Kilda Road barracks. Because he had been a horseman for many years, he was recruited as a member of a mounted brass band. In those days, the band used to travel around to various towns around to parade and play at their festivals and race meetings and such. Now on one of these trips, probably Warragul, Annie, as she preferred to be known, who had been his neighbour in South Melbourne, who had been passed around various members of her family, happened to be serving at the bar in the local hotel. It is said that Robert had a note passed to her saying "I know who you are" and they became friends. Then the first World War broke out, and because he was a trained soldier, he joined up in Melbourne on the first day, went away on the first ship from Sydney, served at Gallipoli and France and was away until 1919, being recognised as one of the longest serving servicemen in the first World War.

They wrote to each other while he was overseas, and when he got back they were married and decided to have a family. For a while they had a greengrocery shop in Westgarth, but never made any money because he used to give away fruit to the children. She had a foster father, John Davidson, who had taken her over from her mother when she remarried and brought her up for some years. He was a superintendent at major building sites in Melbourne, and agreed to put Robert on as a builders' labourer. The job lasted until the depression struck. Builders' labourers were the first to lose their jobs, as building projects ceased, and they nearly all went on the dole. Robert was forced out of Melbourne, to pick fruit, tobacco and other crops for up to 3 months at a time, sending money home. He felt that house payments were too expensive, and they should walk out; but Annie swore that she would never relinquish their home, for the childrens' sake. She succeeded, paying off the house, how, John did not know, and he felt that she shortened her life with the effort. He thinks that she was helped out while her husband was away by a Councillor Price who lived in Mountain View Road.

During his childhood in Briar Hill, although they didn't have much money and meals were simple because of it, John's mother used to say, you're very lucky children because we've got this lovely house and we're a lovely family, and even though "the bum was out of our pants", he felt that they were lucky. They lived in Williams Road, diagonally opposite of what was called the general store, diagonally, one block across. It was a real general store, it was the post office, the newsagent, the delicatessen, hardware, grocery and produce store - used to sell bags of wheat, chaff and so on. So the kids used to hang about the place, and as it changed owners, which happened quite often, mostly they had children and mostly there would be a boy John's age. He remembers Murray Raines, he had polio and had irons on both legs. Mostly they used horses for their transport, and the boys used to deliver the papers on horseback, they didn't get paid for it, just did it for fun. As well as that there was a riding school in Greensborough which used to keep their horses in the Lower Plenty area, on the river [now Glenauburn Park ?] and of a weekend, the boys used to go over on a Saturday and ride the horses up to Greensborough and on Sunday ride them back to their grazing area. And his middle brother, Ted, used to deliver the groceries in a spring cart with a hood over the top, John helping him. And it was funny, some of the horses, they had fluffy feet, they would sometimes tell them the way to go - like they would come to a street going up a hill and the horse would stop and make them go round instead of up the hill. And he would do this until he went to technical school in Collingwood at the age of 15.

They used to get most of the things they needed from the store, and eggs and vegies from their own quarter acre black, anything else from Greensborough, about 1 ½ kilometre walk. There was the barber for their haircuts, the doctor (the Cordners). John remembers a diphtheria epidemic, when the children were locked in their bedroom, with a sheet soaked in phenyle hanging over the doorway. John remembers Ted Cordner senior was their GP, burly sort of a guy, a bit pompous, played with the Melbourne Football Club, but John knew his sons better than him - there were four sons, Ted, Don (he won the Brownlow), Denis and the youngest, John. Ted senior was rather deaf, and when he sounded brusque it was probably because he didn't hear properly. They were the only ones in Greensborough with a two storey home. But not only were they there for medical help, but they provided other sorts of support and advice and were very active in the community.

John remembers the hall at the top of the hill in Main Street Greensborough where they went to the movies (sometimes one of their babies would cry and he would have to sit outside with it while his wife watched the movie). Down below the railway station (Poulter side), there was the deaf lady, deaf as a post, they used to have their market garden right around the bend of the Plenty River, and as kids, they used to swim in the swimming hole, swim across and steal the carrots from the garden and eat them. It was a central meeting place. And there were the Negris, across the hill, they lived on the other side in Sherbourne Road. Mr Negri was Italian, and he didn't mix much, but Mrs Negri was the live wire of the place. Once they were playing around and a black snake came out and they ran over to the Negris and Mrs Negri came down the hill in gum boots with her shotgun and blew its head off. They were a nice family, the Negris. They were surrounded by paddocks on the uphill side of Williams Road, two houses next door, more paddocks, the Rowans facing the state school, then paddocks, paddocks, paddocks, they used to play football there. There was a little house, where Mrs Humphries lived, in the middle of the paddocks, and she sold lollies to the school kids. She had a sister living with her. A different world. The Partingtons were famous, they had this huge hill where the kids would go mushrooming and bird nesting and fossicking about. One day about 1940 a group of kids were going down the hill and they heard a loud crack, looked up the hill and saw a man with a gun - he hadn't fired at them, but in the air. Frightened the hell out of them.

John followed his elder brother who had played football for Montmorency before the war. The club had been dissolved during the war and was reformed and registered with the Diamond Valley League by Toddy Kent and others after the war. The material for their gear was supplied by Mr Steventon, but he couldn't get supplies of the pre-war colours, so they became red white and blue. When he joined the club he played in the ruck, and remembers having clashed with Alan Partington who was ruck for Greensborough at a match at Montmorency Oval. The much older and more solid Partington said "I'll see you after the game" and John was petrified. He was much relieved when at the exit gate, Partington said "Forget about it mate" and slapped him on the shoulder. Other football memories included the ex-army P.E. instructor called Ron who rented a house on the hill above the Montmorency ground, who played second ruck to John, who John accidentally laid out while hitting the ball at a throw-in to his rover. There was no hot water at the ground, cold showers after the game. As his brother played with St Kilda, he signed up for their Under 19 3rds for a couple of seasons, but work and house building left not enough time for football. He did flirt with Footscray briefly, encouraged by a Footscray play named Rob Reid, but after being told by Reserves coach Joey Ryan that he lacked killer instinct, and that if he couldn't stand the sight of blood he should close his eyes, he thought that perhaps VFL football was not for him.

John was their third son and there was a daughter, Dorothy. Although he described his father as a typical old soldier, grumpy and strict with them, he was a very honourable person and gave them standards to live by. But his mother, who had come from a broken family and had missed out on much affection, trained the children to be loving to each other, so they always hugged and kissed each other. At Briar Hill, it was a real little community. Robert did not get a full time job until 1938, in a factory. He said to the boys that they had to get a trade, because during the depression, the tradesmen did not lose their jobs. So the two older boys were put to apprenticeships, one cabinet making, the other carpentry, and John, age 15, with an interest in metal work was sent to Collingwood Technical School and was apprenticed to Victorian Railways at the Newport workshops as a fitter and turner. In those days, building and maintaining steam locomotives was a very romantic profession, because when they were fired up they were like a living thing. His ambition was to become a Senior Fitter, whose job when a locomotive was reassembled after maintenance was to set the timing - he was the top man. In his first year, he was given the job of maintaining the bogie, and he felt very responsible and loved the job. Not long afterward, he was nominated to work in the tool room, responsible for precision work in tool making which would continue after locomotives had passed into history. After a couple of years, he was asked to understudy the specialist in charge of welding and spray painting, who would retire shortly. As the only specialist in this area, he became basically his own boss and was very important!

But by that time he had met his future wife, and realised that he would need more money to marry and build a house. He found that his importance was a barrier to success in applying for higher level positions, and felt that he had no alternative to seek another job. Because he'd been maintaining the products supplied by CIG he quickly got a job with them as a Technical Representative. He spent the next 27 years with CIG, in 16 different jobs.

He married when he was 21, and as his wife didn't get on with his mother, moved to Adeline Street Greensborough where his older brother, the carpenter, lived and had bought an ex-army demountable building, and erected it in his back yard as a workshop, but let the newlyweds live in it instead. He also said, it's very hard to borrow money to build a house, so how about I build the house, and you be my labourer. So John said fine, got a plan drawn up, 3 bedroom 12 square house, weatherboard, but, being an engineer, said that he didn't want timber stumps which would have to be replaced one day, he wanted concrete stumps. So the timber and stumps were delivered onto the block, and, before they started the building his brother came over and said, sorry mate, but I'm moving to Sydney, and he left John for dead. So John's attitude, being a 22 or 23 year old was, well, I'll have to do it myself. He bought the demountable from his brother and moved it to the back yard of his block at 23 Santon Street where they lived until the house was finished. (It's still standing) It was primitive, especially with a young daughter. The road wasn't made, and the closest power was in the back yard of a nearby house. He obtained permission to connect from the house owner, obtained a power pole, installed it and had an electrician make the connection to the demountable. The only water came from one tap at the front of the block. Showering meant waiting until it was dark, putting on bathers and using the hose! Bathing a very young baby in a bowl wasn't easy either.

He bought two books, *The Australian Carpenter*, which was a handbook used by apprentices, and *Australian Roofing Tables*, which gave you all the angles for the different gables on the roof. He did everything except tiling the roof and the electrics, plumbing was no problem for a fitter and turner (a local plumber signed it off for him). There was a carpenter living in Santon Street, and if John had a problem, he would ring him, and he would help him lift the beams for the roof and things like that. Then came the plastering. Fibrous plaster was used in those days, heavy as lead. Half inch thick plaster sheet was nailed to the studs up to the picture rail, and lighter gauge from there to the ceiling. Even with the help of his brother-in-law and pregnant wife, the upper wall and ceiling defeated him, and a plasterer had to be called in. The house was built room by room, and became a very comfortable house to live in. They had four children, and lived there until December 1974.

Solidly built, with hardwood framing and every stud checked in to every plate, the structure was a contrast to the house built in Barwon Heads - he couldn't believe how slapdash it was. While he was at work, the building inspector would be round, and his wife would tell him that the inspector said that there was a piece of wood which had some bark on it, and it should be replaced, the most minor things! Nowadays, most things are not inspected at all.

He had lived in Greensborough from the mid-1950s to 1974, and quite enjoyed that - dealing with the locals was quite easy. But his marriage broke up and they had to separate; he wouldn't have moved otherwise. Then he moved to Highton, then back to Yallambie, Yallambie Road, then in 1985 sold up there and went to Barwon Heads, where he still lives at the age of 90.