

## **My Davidson Family**

### **From Horrie and Jess to James Cameron**

To paraphrase an old saying; you can take the boy out of Dandenong, but you can't take Dandenong out of the boy.

Hello!

My name is Geoffrey Ballantyne Davidson and I'm the oldest living descendant of the family begun by Horace George Davidson and Jessie Ellen Margaret Ballantyne. The descendants now number twenty-eight, of whom Dad knew ten, and Mum eighteen.

We lived in Dandenong at various homes ending up in 1939 at 161 Prince Highway.

The Family history that developed from there included many events. Of particular interest to me were the war years, when we became two families; worked for the war effort in raising money and providing services; making war equipment; supporting Australian espionage agencies etc.

We had our share of dramas and traumas, but everyone survived.

After the war, Dandenong returned to civilian life and involved themselves in Dandenong's various activities.

We witnessed the changes occurring in the town over the years, and its growth acceleration after the war.

It was a wonderful, safe and friendly time when everybody knew everybody else, and was a very supportive community.

Of necessity, this story has to be drawn from my own recollections.

Dad was born in 1901 to an impoverished family at Gunn's Plains, South of Ulverstone, in Tasmania.

He rarely spoke about his early years; I found out about some of them from his only confidant, my Mum.

His father was out of work most of the time, and probably because of that a drunk. The family lived in a hut with a dirt floor, probably then in Smithton. Food was very scarce, and my Grandmother resorted to all sorts of things to see that Dad and his three younger sisters had enough to eat.

One afternoon when he was about seven, he arrived home to find his father beating his mother. Without thinking, he grabbed a copper stick and hit his father about the head, knocking him unconscious. My Grandmother was immediately worried about Dad's wellbeing, and told him to disappear into the bush until she came for him.

She smuggled food and blankets to Dad for about three days, and at the same time got a court order prohibiting my Grandfather from contacting the family or visiting the family home. This he respected, and I don't think Dad ever saw him again.

Food was still short when Dad was about ten years old, so he left school and got a job with a fettler's gang for the Emu Bay Railway. Fortunately, his teacher convinced his mother that Dad needed to return to school to complete his education.

The First World War or the Great War had broken out and in 1918 Dad joined the 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion. They had completed their training and were preparing to embark for Europe when a major problem occurred. Dad had always thought he'd been born in 1900.

***1918 Dad.tif***

His Mother knew better, however, and she wrote a letter to the Officer in Charge saying that as a seventeen year old Dad couldn't join up.

So Dad was discharged at a time when the Army had a habit of accepting anybody.

The 40<sup>th</sup> sailed to Europe as the war ended. The Battalion was the show battalion that marched in the victory parades, visited the Capitols of Europe, and generally had a great paid holiday.

I don't think Dad ever forgave his mother.

Dad became apprenticed to Smithton builder Charlie Boote. It was work he would love for the rest of his life.

He met Mum while she was travelling by train with her sister Gwen. They got to talking, and Dad left with Mum's address. They corresponded for a while, and Dad visited Mum's home a few times. Then Mum lost all contact with him.

#### ***1925 Mum 21 .tif***

Her brother, my Uncle Charlie was once visiting Mum and asked, "What ever happened to that chap who used to visit you". Mum said that she had no idea. Uncle Charlie offered to track him down, and did. On a building site in Smithton.

After being badgered for a while, Dad said he'd stopped the contact because Mum's family was wealthy, had social standing and he couldn't see how he'd fit into it. He was told that he should let Mum decide that, as she was still very interested in him.

#### ***1927 Dad.tif***

Contact was remade and they were engaged a year or so later, and married in 1929. I'm rather pleased about that.

## *1929 Parents' Wedding .tif*

Dad first came to Dandenong from Tasmania in about 1926. Robert Boote had come earlier from Tasmania and established himself as a builder. He was in need of a partner.

He and Dad had both been apprenticed to his brother, Charlie Boote, and knew each other very well. So the partnership of Boote and Davidson was formed, and successfully continued for the next few decades.

They built homes all over Dandenong and its outskirts and, during the depression, much further afield. Small jobs occasionally came up for tender. For example, John Bellet won a contract to build the white fences around the palm trees and ornamental pines in Lonsdale Street and Melbourne Road.

Which reminds me; Princes Highway was rarely called that in pre-war years. Those living in Dandenong, called it Melbourne Road. Those living closer to Melbourne called it Dandenong Road.

Builders found that work of any kind was hard to come by then. Dad and Uncle Bob were totally out of work for twelve months. My parents were at that time living in Close Street (Before it became Close Avenue) in a house owned by a Mr Pianta.

Quite a few men in the street were out of work and Dad had the idea of building a Mini Golf course in his backyard. The wives thought it was a great idea, as the men were out of the house more often.

At times Dad and Uncle Bob accepted work a considerable distance from home. They left home on Sunday and arrived back on Friday night, camping in a tent on the building site. Homesteads and barns were still needed even during the depression.

Mum was born at Sulphur Creek in Tasmania in 1904. Her ancestors were Scottish/English and arrived in Tasmania in the late 1800's.

She was the second child of Edmund Shepherd Ballantyne and Margaret Eugenie (nee) Ellis.

Uncle Charley was their first child, followed by Mum, then Aunty Gwen and finally Uncle Andy.

### ***1906 Mum 2 Charlie 5.tif***

When she was six her Mother died of consumption; which I think we now call tuberculosis. But it could have been any one of a number of diseases.

My mother's aunts all stepped into the breach and the children then found themselves separated.

### ***1911 Mum, Andy, Charley, Gwen.tif***

Mum went to live with Aunt Mary Walmersley, her mum's sister, at her farm at Cuprona. She lived there until she and Dad were married.

Mum was an excellent farm manager, and became an extremely competent equestrienne and carriage driver.

I fact I believe my Aunt discouraged Mum's marriage to Dad, which is probably why there was a six year engagement. Aunt Mary didn't want to lose her favourite farm manager.

The wedding service was conducted at the Cuprona Methodist Church. Mum's sister Gwen was her bridesmaid, and her brother Uncle Charley was Dad's best man.

After a short honeymoon, they travelled back to Victoria, where Dad was staying at a boarding house in Thomas street run by the McClellan family. Mrs McClellan's daughter Rene was to become one of Mum's closest friends.

Their first home was in Ronald Street. I think it was number eleven.

We moved then to Close Street where my brother Peter was born in 1931, and I was born in 1934. We lived there until about 1937 when Dad built our next home at 80 Melbourne Road.

### ***1930 Mum Close St.tif***

Mum became involved in the Truby King centre – the precursor of the future Baby Health Centre. It was a small house in the park which would later be transferred by road to Springvale. It was replaced by a larger brick building.

Sister Williams was the first full time health care nurse, later to become a close family friend. She had previously cared for Sir Thomas Luxton's children at their home in Stud Road near Police Road. He had been Lord Mayor of Melbourne and a founder of McEwans Ltd.

Mum became one of the first committee secretaries – if not the first.

In 1939 Dad decided to build at 161 Princes Highway. The location had a lot against it. It was a mile out of town; it was in West Dandenong – not the better end of town - or so it was said. But we moved there and loved it. They would live there for the rest of their lives.

We travelled to Tasmania to visit Mum's family on a few occasions. I think Mum was a bit homesick.

In those days, ships were the only way go. My brother Peter and I got to know the S.S. Taroona and the S.S. Narana quite well. They were small trading ships regularly travelling between Melbourne, Burnie, Devonport and Launceston.

I got to know my Great Aunt Mary Wolmsley quite well, and visited the farm where Mum had grown up on several occasions.

I met Dad's mother only once. It was in January 1939. We travelled by train from Burnie to Launceston to see her. We met her unexpectedly in the street as she was walking to a Salvation Army Meeting. We all said hello and she was gone, leaving my parents standing there.

I remember Mum saying, "Well, that's that," and we turned and went back to the train.

Pre-war, Dandenong had Friday Night Shopping.

I vividly remember one Friday night when we had all piled into the business's car – a 1929 soft top Chevrolet – and went shopping.

After we had bought the necessities, a storm broke out and we had to drive home in it. A soft-top Chevrolet wasn't all that waterproof, and when the car stalled on the hill near the Scout hall, we were soon saturated.

Dad got out and tried to see what was wrong just as a car pulled up in front of us.

Out stepped a man, wearing jodhpurs, who approached Dad and said, "You can't stop here on this hill. It's far too dangerous."

Dad said, "I had to."

The man said, "If you don't move immediately, I'll book you."

Dad said, "If you can start the car, I'll move immediately."

So the man, who we now realised was a traffic policeman, tried to help Dad start the car, unsuccessfully. He then contacted Market Motors who sent their Tow Truck,

and we found ourselves standing around while mechanics tried to find the car's problem.

Somebody from the manager's office called all the men to his office.

Dad soon came back and said to Mum, "The Germans have attacked Poland".

Mum asked if we were at war, to which Dad replied, "I think we soon will be."

The car was soon fixed, but nothing was quite the same afterwards.

The following Sunday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1939, we were at war.

Mum's sister Gwen and her family lived in New Guinea, where her husband Jack was a Patrol Officer with the New Guinea Administration. They had three months leave every two years, and arrived in 1940 to holiday with us.

Uncle Jack as soon to take up a new appointment as Assistant District Officer for the Northern Bougainville - Buka Island area. An area just north of the Solomon Islands.

It seems that everyone was expecting the Japanese to start a war in the Pacific, but no-one knew when or where it would begin.

So it was decided that my Aunt and cousin Judy would be safer if they stayed with us, and my Uncle travelled to New Guinea to take up his new post.

After much discussion with mum and his business partner, dad joined the RAAF in June 1941.

Uncle Jack arrived at Bougainville in late 1941, and within three weeks the Japanese had attacked Asian ports and Pearl Harbour in Hawaii.

So we became a two family home for the duration of the war. My Mother, my Aunt, my brother Peter, my cousin Judith Eugenie Read, and me.

### ***1940 Peter & Geoff.tif***

It was different immediately. All street signs were removed and a brownout enforced. Manpower came into being and people found themselves directed to jobs that the war effort required. The ARP was set up, as was the Air Observers Group. And the Volunteer Defence Corps was formed.

Up on the high fire brigade tower at the junction of Robinson and Mason Streets Women and boys could be seen with binoculars scanning the skies and recording any aircraft of any origin.

Miss Thomson, commercial teacher at the High School, was often seen up there always wearing that long grey skirt. No-one ever saw her climb up or down the ladder! Eventually, overalls were issued.

Organisations like the Red Cross, Australian Comforts Fund, Busy Bees, The War Savings Group and many others were highly active needing both volunteers and money.

Everybody did something. Mum and Aunty Gwen made camouflage netting and collected donations on their allocated collection rounds. Everybody was asked to donate so much a week to the various war effort funds. My brother was an Air Raid Warden's messenger; I was a patient for the ARP training exercises.

But there was a chronic shortage of labour. It was decided between Mum and Auntie Gwen that one of them should get a job. So Auntie Gwen became a bullet inspector

at the Maribyrnong Munitions Factory, and Mum kept the family running.

My Aunt left home on her bike at around 5:00 am and arrived home at about 7:00 pm, until one black foggy winter's morning at the intersection of Birdwood Avenue and Potter Street a horse-drawn milk float ran through her.

She was in a grave state with a fractured skull among other things. The doctors felt she might not survive her injuries, but she did.

Once out of danger, she was transferred to Bethesda hospital for several months for rehabilitation.

We couldn't let Uncle Jack know as he was busy spying on the Japanese Army, Navy and Air forces on Bougainville and therefore uncontactable. Sometimes for months at a time.

Aunty Gwen came home, but was unfit for work. So she joined the Australia Comforts fund, or ACF. This was an association that provided additional comforts to servicemen overseas like socks, balaclavas, sweaters etc..

The ACF provided a hot three course lunch on Tuesdays for only two shillings. It was very popular with the community!

Fund raising was continuous. If you could raise 50 pounds you had every reason to be proud of yourself.

Army and Navy intelligence used to contact Aunty Gwen on occasion to help with code words. She was sworn to secrecy, but told Mum.

It seems that the code Uncle Jack was using could be cracked by the enemy within two to seven days, so there was a need for fresh new code words.

The information only needed to be secure for about a day.

Each word had to be around eight letters long, and contain the letter W, X, Y or Z. Preferably more than one letter.

I remember travelling home with Mum on the train from Melbourne – usually standing – Mum with a notebook counting letters with her fingers and she searched for a word.

For instance, if the question, “Where was your wife’s first teaching position?” The answer which Uncle Jack would know immediately know was “Deloraine”. Not to many W’s, X’s, Y’s OR Z’s, but they and dozens of others worked.

Another was, “What was the name of your sister’s racehorse.” The answer; “Rainbird.”

And they had the added bonus of letting Uncle Jack know that the intelligence people had contacted home.

Having lived in the tropics for about ten years, my Aunt used to get Malaria. It was bad. She would be delirious and perspiring for about three days, and the only available drugs were not terribly effective.

On one of these occasions, at about 8:00 pm in mid winter our door bell rang. This was 1943. Totally black and raining outside; no exterior lighting permitted. Mum told me to come with her to the front door.

Outside stood a man in a very wet coat and a felt hat. Beyond him I could see a car on our nature strip with a soldier standing near it.

The man said, “I’m Colonel somethingorother, and I’ve come to speak to Mrs Read.”

Mum replied, “I’m sorry, you can’t.”

He said, ”This is official government business, and it’s imperative that I do.”

Mum explained about the Malaria, and the delirium, and Colonel replied that he had secret information that could only be passed on to Mrs Read.

So Mum took him to see Aunty Gwen, and he realised the difficulty of the situation. He said that he'd have to give Aunty Gwen the information without Mum in the room. So as Mum left the room the Colonel said, "Leave the door opened a bit."

Mum stood outside the door while the Colonel told Aunty Gwen that they hadn't heard a word from Uncle Jack for several months, but that the day before a message had been received from him. He was well, safe and still sending his reports. Radio reliability was his problem.

They're not built to stand constant bombing, shelling and strafing.

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Dad began his RAAF service as an aerodrome guard. After training, he was posted to Port Moresby, and was flying there from Townsville when Darwin was bombed. He said that up until that moment it was a very relaxing flight, but after the announcement every man on board had their eyes glued to the window looking for Zeros.

Port Moresby was bombed every night and most days for some time. He used to say that when the air raid siren went off, he could be anywhere, including the shower, and would have to run barefoot to the trenches. He said that that trip took about half a second – the return trip took half an hour picking his way over the sharp stones.

He would support terrified eighteen-year-olds through the ordeal.

After a while the RAAF authorities found that Dad was a builder. So they stripped him of his Corporal's

stripes and he became a Leading Aircraftsman for the rest of the war.

From then on he built hospitals, latrines, kitchens, Radar installations; anything that was needed, often near the Kokoda battles.

It came to his notice that the USAAF forces were asking for help in training their soldiers in Gas Defence.

Dad applied, took a training course and began instructing in Gas Defence. He used to say that the biggest advantage in teaching the Americans was the superior standard of food.

After fifteen months, he was transferred home.

*1943 Family WJR.tif*

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At about the same time, my Uncle was reaching the end of his effectiveness in Bougainville. Specific enemy forces were sent to track him and his commandos down, and if caught he had no doubt as to what his fate would be.

The Japanese had already caught and beheaded several Coastwatchers. The fact that they were all Army or Navy officers didn't matter.

So he contacted the RAN who couldn't spare a submarine to take him off. After contacting the Americans, they asked how many submarines did he need and immediately arranged for a one to be sent to rescue him and his party.

This didn't happen without a spot of bother. His party was hidden on a ledge behind below the edge of a cliff.

His hand was resting on the edge of the cliff when he felt a foot standing on it. He had no idea as to whether it was a friendly foot or not. It could have been a Bougainville

native – friendly or unfriendly – or Japanese. It remained there for sometime.

So a decision had to be made because they had to move on to the rendezvous point.

Uncle Jack grabbed the foot. It's owner screamed and galloped for the bush. They climbed up and there was no one in sight.

The recovery went well. My Uncle and his fellow Coastwatcher Paul Mason, with several commandos and native policemen were evacuated to New Caledonia.

There they met US Admiral Halsey.

They were sitting in his office at the Naval Base at New Caledonia when the Admiral arrived.

They immediately stood and the Admiral said, "No gentlemen. When we're in a room together, I'm the one who stands."

Later Halsey was to say, "The Coastwatchers won the battle of Guadalcanal, and Guadalcanal won the war in the Pacific."

My Uncle, Paul mason and two other Coastwatchers were awarded the US Distinguished Service Cross – one level lower than the Congressional Medal of Honour – for their services.

The Australian Government didn't seem to notice what the Coastwatchers had done.

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Both Dad and Uncle Jack arrived home in 1943.

Peter and I were attending Dandenong West Primary School one morning when a message was sent to our classrooms tell us to go home. This was unheard of!

We had no idea why.

We arrived home and from our driveway we could see onto the dining room.

And there was Dad moving to hide behind the dining room door.

### ***1943 Peter.tif***

We found him in no time. It was a wonderful surprise.

It was a great time, but he had trouble fitting back into home life

He had a months leave and seemed to be at a bit of a loss. Each day he'd put on his uniform and pace up and down the kitchen, while Mum quietly worked away.

Eventually he went to work at Lanes Motors which was at that time taken over by the RAAF.

He spent the rest of the war building and fitting out Radio Vans for the Air Force.

There was a health problem but nobody could work out what it was.

After the war ended, Dad couldn't wait to get out of the RAAF. So he had his building partner, Bob Boote write to the RAAF requesting his discharge as soon as possible.

This was soon granted, and Dad was back doing what he loved best; building.

He had joined up out of a sense of loyalty to his country; at 39 years of age he was not obligated to go. As a businessman and a family man, nobody could conscript him, but he felt the need to be involved. He had overseas

service in war conditions and was discharged honourably at the age of 46. Something to be admired.

Dad very quickly adapted himself to civilian life. He and Bob Boote built homes all over Dandenong. Indeed it was one of the best building times for them in spite of the shortage of materials. They had to be less critical of deliveries than they had been, and in effect accept whatever was supplied. I think this period sorted out the good builders from the ordinary ones.

In the early fifties, Dandenong West was in dire need of a Kindergarten. Dad found himself to be the first President, and saw it through all its stages of development – from fundraising to its opening.

#### ***1952 Dad's Cartoon.tif***

And I'm pretty sure he built the Kindergarten building and that of the nearby Baby Health Centre.

#### ***1957 Dad.tif***

During the sixties he was asked to stand for council. This he very reluctantly accepted. He was very pleased to hear therefore that Winston Sutton, one of the founders of the Apex Club was also interested in standing. Dad immediately withdrew his candidacy, and vigorously supported Winston.

He had close friends all over the own, and he took great pride in introducing Peter and me to them. Although I was always introduced as his baby. Something I didn't appreciate at the time.

During 1950's, after over thirty years of working with Bob Boote, they decided to go their separate ways. Dad continued to build homes. He never built 'Spec' houses – they were always built to order – for people like Allan and Lois Williams, Steve Clucas, the Caithness family and of course Peter and myself.

But eventually he was offered a position with the Dandenong council and happily saw out his working life there.

### ***1969 40th with family.tif***

In 1969, Mum and Dad celebrated their Fortieth Wedding anniversary. Family and friends attended from near and far. Among these friends were Bill and Eve Greenland with whom the travelled all over Australia, and also Bob Boote's younger daughter Ettie and her husband Bob Berry. Dad began an interest in gemstones and we still have a number of polished rocks on show.

During the mid-sixties he noticed that his left eye was continuously weeping, and it was found that he had developed a cancer in his antrums; eventually moving to his brain. It turned out after much examination that nothing could be done.

He died at home on Good Friday 1972.

Mum continued on doing what she had always done – helping her church, Trewint nursing home and visiting people in hospital.

### ***1975 Mum .tif***

Aunty Gwen and Uncle Jack Read retired from their jobs in PNG and came to live with mum. This was a most satisfactory arrangement for the three of them.

Aunty Gwen died in 1980 and this left Mum with Uncle Jack. They were opposites and loved to debate politics. Through all this they were as close as any couple.

In 1983, Mum was hit by a car while crossing Princes Highway. She had multiple injuries and was in intensive care for six weeks. She lost her left leg as a result.

From there, she went to her beloved Trewint where she died in 1986, not as a result of the accident, but from cancer.