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Career man shows a firm commitment

BY CAMERON LUCADOU-WELLS

RETIREMENT is far from the mind of pattern-maker George Hellyer.

He has been working at Dandenong South metal parts supplier AW Bell virtually from the start of its 60-year history.

Mr Hellyer, 77, started as an apprentice at its former Huntingdale site. A keen woodworker, he *loved carving designs accurately from a drawing.*

In 1955, soon after he started, he was named the best overall trades craftsman in the state and won a five-year trade scholarship to work in the UK and Scotland.

He graduated to the role of general manager.

Patternmakers no longer carve their designs by hand. That job has become computerised.

The business used to provide tooling for up to four different car engines in the late 1970s.

With auto manufacturing on the slide, AW Bell has changed its focus to aerospace and defence technologies. "It's now done in shorter runs but there'll always be a need for patternmaking."

Mr Hellyer has remained an essential fixture at

the firm, where he continues to work part-time.

Last Monday he was "aghast" to be recognised by his workmates for 60 years' service.

Asked if it made him feel valued, he said: "I certainly do. They have treated me excellently.

"It has been that continuous relationship that has been great."

Pressed about retirement, Mr Hellyer said he would help at a Men's Shed — a manual workplace and hub for retired men.

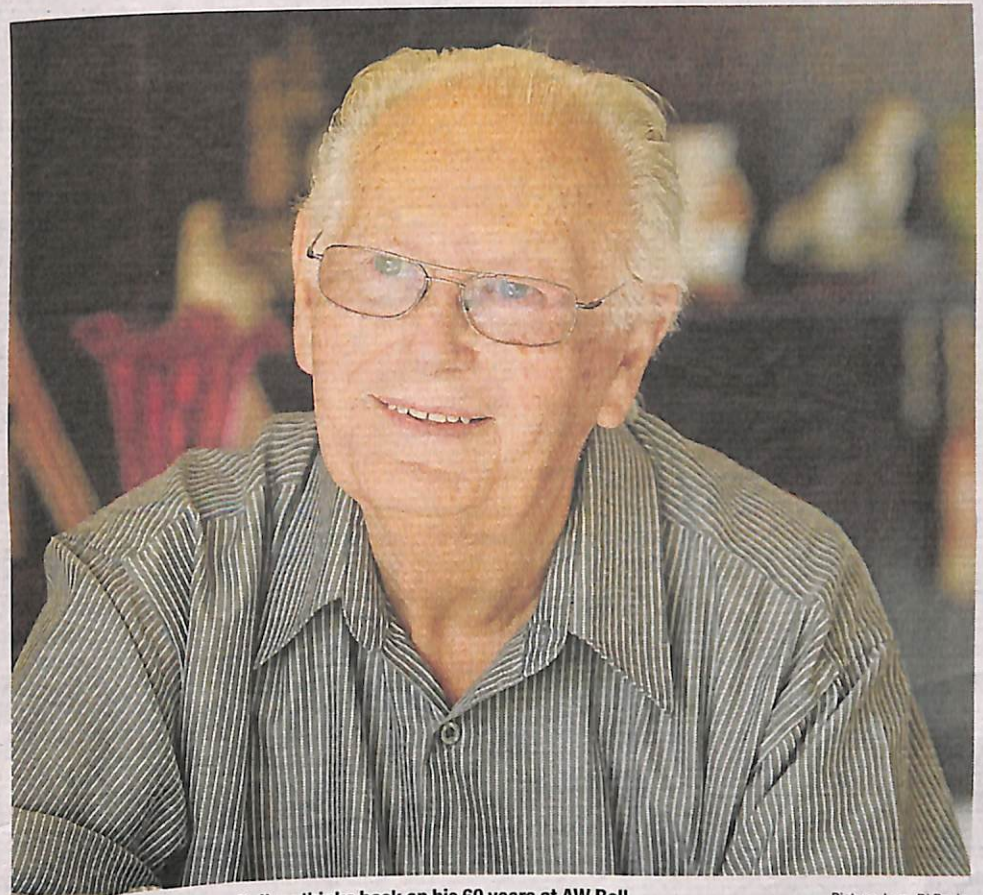
His boss Geoff Bell paid tribute to Mr Hellyer as one of the best patternmakers in Australia, who had trained more than 60 apprentices.

Mr Bell agreed that patternmaking, as a "reserved occupation" during wartime, would always be needed.

"Defence contracts are an the upward trend for us. That's one thing that won't be sent to China and India."

When Mr Bell succeeded his father as company boss in 1982, he worked closely with Mr Hellyer.

"George has been my mentor and he still is. He'll tell me what he thinks and I know I'll get an honest answer."



Time for reflection: George Hellyer thinks back on his 60 years at AW Bell.

Picture: Lucy Di Paolo

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A. W. BELL

BUSINESS SOUTH-EAST

Striking lucky with defence win

By Casey Neill

A family business in Dandenong South is helping to build one of the world's most advanced fighter jets.

This project and other international achievements earned AW Bell the Manufacturing Award at the 37th Governor of Victoria Export Awards, presented on Thursday 6 October.

CEO Sam Bell's grandfather Alan William Bell started the business in Oakleigh in 1952.

"He was a pattern-maker by trade," he said.

"The company started off as a pattern shop and tool room.

"My father (Geoff) took over in 1983."

AW Bell moved to Dandenong South in 1997.

"My father has retired three times," Sam said.

"I took over in November 2014.

"Now he's as retired as I've ever seen him.

"Some weeks don't see him at all.

"I think he's happy with the way things are going.

"It's great to have that resource available to us. We still get him to come and look at jobs."

Sam explained that the company had two main business streams.

"One is producing investment and sand castings that we machine in-house," he said.

"That's probably about 80 per cent of our revenue."

In the investment arm, they make parts from wax, coat them in ceramics and resins, and melt the wax out to form a mould.

They pour liquid metal inside, break off the mould and clean up the finished part.

Sandcasting involves building a tool from wood and covering it in sand that sets hard to create a mould.

The other is AW Bell machinery, which is entirely export-based.

"We design and supply equipment to the investment casting and sandcasting industries



Sam Bell with AW Bell's latest award, and a photograph of his grandparents, who started the company.

worldwide," Sam said.

"Sixty per cent is North American. The rest spread between South America, Asia and Europe.

"In North America we are the name that comes to mind when you think of grinding equipment."

"This year, most likely 15 per cent of our money will come from exports to North America.

"Next year that's going to grow even further.

"In 2017-'18 we'll see about 40 to 50 per cent."

AW Bell has grown its name in the US by do-

ing the obvious - going to the US.

Sam even spent a year there.

"The only way we can break down those distance barriers is getting in their face and becoming another local supplier," he said.

He said the travel was also an opportunity to see what the industry was doing.

Geoff saw the writing on the wall for the auto industry in about 2006.

"We started actively chasing more work in the

defence industry," Sam said.

They eyed a more skilled and complex market. "The type of work that isn't going to go to China and India, or low-cost countries," he said.

"It was a lot longer road than what we expected to break into it.

"Normally we're producing parts within about 18 months.

"It was about seven years to break into the defence industry in the US."

AW Bell is now producing parts for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

"We are still more competitive than their local sources on the highly complex products," he said.

"We get face-to-face and help them to solve their problems.

"They don't see that collaboration with their local suppliers.

"That astounds me.

"To me, it's just good customer service."

The F-35 project has opened other opportunities in the defence supply chain.

"We've proven ourselves on this project," he said.

"Normally we come onto a project that's running behind schedule and with quality issues and turn it around.

"It's really exciting to see a company based in Melbourne doing what we're doing, providing high-quality, complex castings for the most technically-advanced fighter jet.

"That's going to be our platform to really grow the business now."

Commercial director Vinesh Karan said the company had a US-based broker.

"She's looking for new opportunities and doing a lot of follow-up correspondence," he said.

"They feel like they can deal with someone locally.

"In the next five years we'll need a full-time AW Bell sub-employee over there or a foundry, a replica of our business here."

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