

## Bill Wilcox

I am descended from the original Wilcoxs who came to Oberon in 1840s. My great, great grandparents are buried at Nestlebrae. I was born in 1948 up at the Oberon Hospital. At the time we lived on Bathurst Road. Dad was a mailman. He used to deliver mail around Edith, Black Springs or around that area out there. As kids we used to go with him in the mail truck. It was a big experience to go out and jump out of the truck and put the mail in the mailboxes. That's how we spent most of our time as little fellas.



Then Dad got a house in town. We lived down near the showground, which was perfect for Dad because we had horses stabled there. It was just a matter of jumping over the back fence and we were in the showground. We grew up with horses.

Dad's name was Cecil Roy Wilcox. Everyone called him Botfly. That was his nickname because he was always hanging around horses.



Dad was one of the original starters of the Show and the Pony Club. I was four or five years old and we were on horses from then on.

When we were old enough to ride properly, my sister Evelyn and brother Errol were in the Pony Club. To start with, the Pony Club was in the Showground. We started getting extra people, so they moved it to Walker's property, halfway between Black Springs and Norway. We'd ride out there to go to the Pony Club. We'd ride over to

Rockley for the Show. We'd leave here on the Friday morning, ride across to the Nightingales, stay the night, head off early the next morning, ride the horses to the Rockley Showground.

My sister Evelyn got killed off a horse when she was 19 years old. It was in front of the house at Carrington Avenue where we lived. She was riding an ex-racehorse and leading a show pony called Tom Thumb, who may have nipped the racehorse causing him to buck. She landed on the footpath and never regained consciousness.

When Dad finally got a truck, we'd go to Bathurst, Lithgow, Rydal. In the end I rode in the Penrith Show and I rode in the Royal Sydney Show.

When Dad started, he was breaking horses. When I got old enough, he'd do the mouthing of the horse and I'd do the riding. I'm proud to say I didn't have any busters. He had them pretty well broken in by the time I had to ride them.

I was one of the original starters of the Oberon Rodeo, along with Lenny Bailey and Leon Harvey and the Colley boys. So we did rodeo and all that until I went to Vietnam.

Then football got into my head. I started playing football with the Oberon Central School. When I left school, we went into Under 18s football, then Reserve Grade, and I was lucky enough to play a few games in First Grade before I went away.

A mate of mine, Brian Sweeney and myself would go to Sydney. We were mad South Sydney supporters and we'd head off Saturday morning to the football. Sometimes we'd stay the night, other times come home and go straight through to Orange or Bathurst and play footy for Oberon. So, football was a big part of my life then. I actually got a call to try out for South Sydney but that was in the year I went into the army and I told them I couldn't keep going.

I left school early and took out an apprenticeship with Timber Industries as a saw doctor. After five years I got called up for National Service, just as I'd finished the apprenticeship. Reggie Clinton was my boss. He said, "We'll get you out of this because you're an apprentice." I said I didn't want to get out. My dad was an ex-serviceman. He was in Borneo, and the Middle East. He done his time there and I thought, "If it's good enough for him, it'll be good enough for me." So I said, "No, I want to go."

In August 1968 I went into the army at Kapooka for rookie training. That was a 6 week course. From there we came home at Christmas in 1968. In January 1969 I went to the military engineers training school at Moorbank in Sydney. We done our training and we were put into the reinforcement wing waiting to ship us across to Vietnam. I was only in Vietnam a short time when I got blown up. That ruined everything.



We had got a call that we were going into a place called the Light Greens where a 6RAR had walked into a minefield. We were getting lowered into the jungle by winch because they couldn't land the choppers and we had to get in there and clear the area for them to get the wounded out. We went straight into the job of clearing up the area. There was wounded lying everywhere. One guy, Peter Hines, was dead, and we had to clear around Frankie Hunt, the guy that's in the song "I was only 19". He was there laying with parts of his leg sort of all blown out. We got all of them out and cleared the area.

We found a sign that the Vietnamese used. It was a broken forky stick in a tree and had three prongs on it. That meant there was three mines in the area. So, there was the one that went off, then we found one and secured it. We laid out our safe lanes to another section that we hadn't done. We were just up to that when the medical officer, Captain Anderson, walked into the area and stepped out of the safe lane straight onto a mine. I was about two metres away from him and I landed probably 10 to 15 metres away. I was still conscious and I looked up and all I could see was this red stump. It turned out to be this guy that stood on the mine. It just blew all his clothes off. He's still standing there, and he's still alive.

By that time, they had an area cut into the jungle where the choppers could land. And they were patching us up. I remember one of the medics saying, "This guy's too bad, we've got to get him

out now.” It was me. And according to the medical reports I was read the last rites in the jungle. They strapped me to the runners outside the helicopter, like you see in the movie MASH, and that's how I got back to the hospital.

They cut all my clothes off and got me inside. A nurse was trying to pull my watch off. My sister had given me the watch just before she died. It was one with a stretchy band, and the nurse is trying to pull it off over my hand, with all the bones sticking out. I just grabbed it and took it off for her. I was in the American hospital for nearly a week. Every time I woke up there was either a nurse or an orderly with me. I can remember the first time I woke up - I looked up on the wall and there was a little television, and they've got the moon landing on the TV. When I left the American hospital, they put me in an ambulance to go over to the Australian hospital, which was only a mile or so away. This little nurse came running back out with a bag and she said, “This is for you.” It was the watch and a Viet Cong army flag that I'd found in a tunnel system a couple of days before we got wounded. I had them in the pocket of my jeans. They were the only personal things I ever got back from Vietnam.

The Australian hospital loaded me up to send me home with a group of the guys in a big medivac plane. We got to Malaya to the army hospital and I took a bad turn there, and they kept me there for another few days. In the end it was over three weeks before I was able to tell my family that I was home.

I spent six months at a military hospital in Liverpool, where it was a training camp for the nurses. We had great fun with the young nurses. We were always having parties and you were allowed two beers a day and a lot of the boys didn't drink, so we'd have a little stash. They really looked after us. From there I went to Penrith, where I finished my rehabilitation

I was asked after I got out of hospital if I wanted to get out of the army or stay in. I said, “I'll stay in, and do me time.” So, I stayed and done the two years and got out of the army after that. I was posted to what they called ‘the old man's home’ at Penrith, 6ESR, an engineers’ depot. And I quite enjoyed it. It wasn't like being in an army camp.

Having a truck licence, I got the job of driving a truck delivering stores and different stuff. I done a couple of trips to Melbourne. It would take us three days to get to Melbourne. In them days you only did 30 to 40 miles an hour. I enjoyed the driving, it was just a matter of getting out of bed and going to work.

The RSM offered a me a stores depot job in Malaya. I was married at the time and we had a little daughter and I asked my now ex-wife if she was interested in doing it. “No way, I'm not going to go and live over there, so let's stop that.”

So, I got out of the army and came back to work in Oberon. I was made an apprentice fitter at Timber Industries. I finished the apprenticeship and I was put in charge of night shift maintenance. I couldn't settle down. We had a couple of children by then and you wouldn't see much of them at all. I'd come home from work and go to bed. I just couldn't handle it in the end.

I was talking to Doc Robey who asked how I was traveling. I said I wasn't real good. I spent an hour or so with him and he explained post-traumatic stress and he said, “Get a job, if you can, where you're on your own.” So that's when I started mainly interstate truck driving where I was on my own all the time. During that long process our marriage broke up.

I met up with my current wife Sue and everything just changed. She'd come with me in the truck and we'd go everywhere all over Australia. Sometimes we might be away a couple weeks at a time.

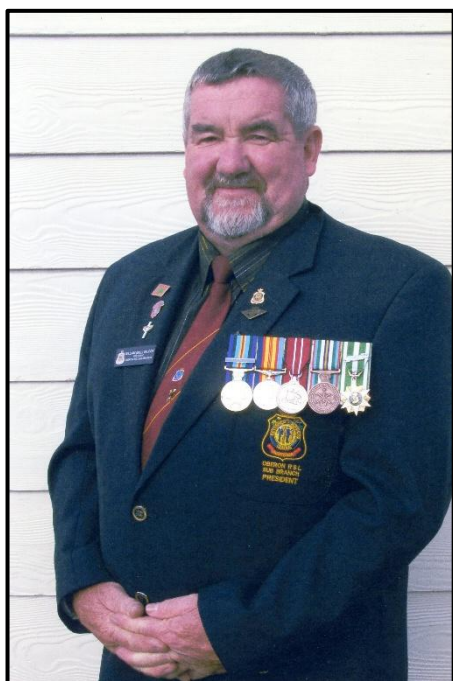
I got custody of the three children and they were only young, ten to twelve, and it was too much for Sue to look after them. So, I gave that job away and got a few other small jobs around.

I worked at Jenolan Caves for two years as a maintenance man. We've done a fair bit of work down there, building holiday cottages and what not. Peter Sheppard come to see me and said, "There's a job going on Council as a truck driver. Would you be interested?" I put in for the Council truck driving job and bang, I got it. In the end I was the team leader of the trucks. I was there for 22 years.

In the meantime, I've been a member of the RSL. I have now been on the board of the RSL for 55 years. I was President when we sold off the Club. When we sold the Club, I couldn't be President of both the Club and the RSL. I've been President of the RSL for 25 years.

After we sold the Club, the RSL owned this block of ground opposite the Club between the Main Road and Dart Street. Around 2005-06 we decided to build. We built the RSL office, built the RSL memorial and built the four units we've got down the bottom for war widows. Three war widows and our Treasurer live in them now.

We were getting war items brought into the RSL Office, mainly all local stuff, so I brought it up at a meeting one day. I said, "We've either gotta get out of this setup as a museum or really get into it." So we applied for a grant and got the money to build the big museum that's there today. Probably 70% of the stuff in there is owned by local people so that's where I spend all my time now. I'm probably five, sometimes six, days a week mowing grass. I do all the maintenance myself and all the maintenance around the units. I enjoy it and it keeps me going.



I retired from the Council job in 2008 just before I went to Gallipoli for the service over there with our Twin City, Ajabut, in Turkey. That's where I got a lot of the ideas for the museum. Things in our park, like the Ataturk stone, that's all from my trip away.

I've also been back to Vietnam twice since I got wounded. Some of the guys that I was with, found the exact spot in the jungle in Vietnam where we'd got wounded and they asked if I'd like to go back. And I said, "Yeah, I will, I'll go back." I wasn't sure about it at first, but they reckoned it'd help a bit. It was very hard to go back the first time. My wife Sue came with me the first time, I'm glad she was with me then. I went back again in 2019, exactly 50 years from the day I got wounded.

A while back we used to do ANZAC Day on the steps of the old RSL. There wasn't a real lot of people around. But now it's really a big thing. The school kids, everyone joins in.

This year, I reckon we had over 400 or 500 people there. There's a lot of good kids learning about it and we've got a monstrous library here. And they like to have a look around.



Bill with Dame Marie Bashir, 2013

My kids are all pretty well set up. My son's a glazier and my daughter travels around doing blood tests and different things at factories, truck yards, things like that. She followed in my footsteps as far as the horses went. She's still a mad horse person. Her and her husband Darren go to all them big horse events up in Tamworth and Gunnedah and all those places. I let them find their own way like I did.

National Service was good for me and I think it should still be ongoing. From 19 years on, young fellas should do two years military training to teach them responsibility.

(November 2025)