A Remarkable Life

With the death of Dr Bruce Reid, AM, KNO, Hon.DSc Econ, on 12 March 2005, Australia lost one of its great men.

Few Australians could claim a life as successful as that of Dr Reid, entrepreneur, Captain of Commerce, devout churchman, unashamed Australian patriot, humble philanthropist, great visionary, brave adventurer and dedicated family man.

The son of humble parents he left school at age 14 to work as a telegraph boy and became one of Australia’s wealthiest businessmen. The hallmarks of his success were hard work, clever, creative thinking, courage, infectious enthusiasm and a willingness to take calculated risks.

Along with wealth he acquired the wisdom that with money comes social responsibility, the need to care for those in need, a mandate to preserve our heritage and enhance what is Australian. That realisation enriched his own life but also those of countless other Australians.

Born into a humble family in Sydney in 1922, Bruce knew what it was like to struggle. His father, formerly a Scottish sea captain, managed a quarry and his mother ran a corner store. So accustomed to seeing his mother carefully weigh the simple selection of produce in her stores, Bruce never became used to the variety of goods presented by the supermarket.

One of the schools he attended required a five-mile walk there and five miles back each day. By the time he was 14 Australia was in the grip of the depression and Bruce went to work as telegraph delivery boy. Diligent in this task, he had only a wheat bag to provide shelter from the cold Sydney rain.

At age 15 he secured a position as the office boy with the Sydney trading company, Nelson and Co. In 1941 he joined the AIF. While serving as a member of a tank battalion in Australia, he studied accountancy by correspondence and became the youngest CPA in Australia. As the war in the Pacific escalated, he was posted as part of the Naval Bombardment Group, to General Douglas Macarthur’s naval fleet that reclaimed the Philippines from the Japanese and was awarded the Philippines Liberation Medal.

Years later he reflected on the irony of his own gas tankers now loading propane in Kalimantan, when, in 1945, stationed on the HMAS Hobart, he had been ‘belting the hell out of the same refinery’.

After the war he returned to Nelson and Co. When the owner died in 1959 Bruce acquired half of the company and in 1964 he bought the rest. With his gift for business and the courage to pursue his vision, he turned it into a worldwide operation by expanding into manufacturing, distribution and merchandising. Other companies were added to form a group which was consolidated under a family name, Minnamurra Propriety Limited.
His trade influence, which covered a range of products and innovations such as the external frame tent, now universally used for family camping, was significant beyond Australia. Long before Australia recognised his contribution to business and the community by making him a member of the order of Australia in 1999, the King of Sweden had made him a Knight Commander of the Royal Order of the Polar Star, the highest honour the Swedes can bestow on a foreigner. That was in 1983 for his contribution in developing Australian/Swedish trade. For 50 yearsBruce was a member of the Swedish Chamber of Commerce and he served as its President for many years.

Bruce introduced Primus LPG gas products into Australia and thereby changed the camping, picnic and barbecue habits of all Australians. He was responsible for developing the gas barbecue and led the development of volcanic rock and kettle barbecues.

To service these required a decentralised filling network for cylinders throughout the country, and the shipment of gas to and around Australia. He moved into the transport business with Bruce Reid and Sons Pty Ltd and Oceangas Australia Pty Ltd, which operate LPG Gas tankers in the Pacific and Far East. Bruce made the first LPG shipment to Japan and wrote the first cheque to BHP's Oil and Gas Division.

When he sold the Nelson business in 1987, after 50 years, the two-man, one-girl, office boy show of 1937 had expanded to over 500 employees involved in manufacturing, product design, warehousing and selling.

And Bruce had been recognised as a powerful force in business. A world leader in the gas business, he served as a Councillor and President of the Liquefied Petroleum Gas Forum, and President of the Australian Liquefied Petroleum Gas Association, of which he was a life member. He was a founding member of the Pacific Basin Economic Council, President of the Australian Committee, and a member of the National Pacific Co-operation Committee. In 1985 he began a 10-year appointment as a director of the Westpac Bank and he also served on the board of Lloyds of London. In the process he travelled 5.5 million kilometres by air and visited Sweden 65 times.

For his work in developing trade opportunities for Australia and for his own contribution to the University of Sydney, where he founded the Research Institute for Asia and the Pacific, the university conferred on him honorary degree of Doctor of Science and Economics.

Ready now for a new challenge, Bruce established the Minnamurra Pastoral Company and the Cortina Poll Hereford Stud. Today his Mudgee-based properties produce some of Australia’s best stock. As usual, he immersed himself in the business, exploring all aspects of it and earning respect along the way. He rose to become a director of the Poll Hereford Society and a show judge.

His most recent venture was horseracing. Introduced to the business by his son-in-law, Bruce did not purchase his first interest in a horse until he was in his 70s. By 2005 he was part owner of 100 horses including Savabeel, winner of the Cox Plate and the Spring Champion Stakes, Bradbury’s Luck, the Magic Millions and Econsul, the Caulfield Guineas. If not winning on the course, his horses were making a name for themselves elsewhere. Loot the Boot, an elite eventing horse, has been chosen to represent Australia in Europe. Enthusiasm and entrepreneurial skills combined again in the partnership he formed with Dean Walt to establish Dynamic Syndications, now the most prominent syndicate of racehorses in Australia. Bruce just made it happen and others were the beneficiaries. It was typical of Bruce to promptly pass over $10,000 of his Cox Plate winnings to the RFDS.

Going on all this time, behind the scenes, was Bruce’s philanthropic work. Giving and sharing what he had did not begin once he was a wealthy businessman. Bruce was a faithful member of the
Presbyterian Church and later the Uniting Church. He served the congregation of St Stephens, in Sydney, as an elder. But well before that time he and his first wife, Joy, were inspired by a challenging sermon from Gordon Powell, delivered at St Stephens’s. Their first contribution led to clearing a debt connected with what was then the Northbridge Presbyterian Church. This generosity continued in increasing sums over the years in support of many charities and projects.

In 1983, after 36 years of a wonderful marriage, Joy passed away. Days before her death the Bruce and Joy Reid Foundation was established and for more than 20 years now it has made substantial contributions to causes such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service, Guide Dogs for the Blind, Uniting Church Homes for the Elderly, the Naval Air Museum at Nowra and St Philip’s College in Alice Springs.

He lent his financial support, his skills and wonderful expertise to many projects, spurred on by a belief in the community, an excitement about the future and the knowledge that his vast contacts could be used for good. Knowing this, but mindful of how busy he was, Fred McKay asked him to become National Chairman of the St Philip’s Outback Achievers Appeal. He not only donated great amounts to the College but also became an integral part of the College community.

More than a benefactor, he was a wonderful friend to the College, and indeed to me. He religiously read our weekly Newsletter, ringing me on occasions to express congratulations or sympathy depending on the issue. I wish all our parents would! He made the journey out to Alice whenever possible and was always wonderfully interested in the College and the students. Conscious of the need for students to aspire for excellence and aware of the importance of example, Bruce lent the College a 2 metre painting of a resolute Bradman and a framed Olympic flag signed by the gold medal winners. He would ring, ‘Chris, I have this picture of Bradman – do you think the students…..’

Often his trips to Alice were after a bout of illness or a gruelling journey overseas – dedicated to duty and never wanting to disappoint, he came. He shared with me his love of history. In a journey out bush we talked about the war and the wonderful books on Stalingrad and Berlin produced by Antony Beevor. I felt compelled to buy the books and read them. He had this capacity to enthuse and to excite.

‘So good to see the students doing well in the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Scheme. I am trying to get Prince Edward to come and visit the College.’ I then found out that he had been a long term member and President of the Friends of the Duke of Edinburgh’s World Fellowship and had just had dinner with Prince Edward at Buckingham Palace. What an incentive – for us as a College to perform.

Driving him to the airport on one occasion he explained to me excitedly about his acquisition of the Corsali document which had the first European sighting of the Southern Cross noted and drawn. We shared an interest in preserving history and I became amazed at how much history he acquired, preserved, donated or lent to museums, art galleries and universities. His development of the modern sculpture of the Southern Cross in the foyer of the Mitchell Library was so indicative of his drive and attitude. He saw a space there which needed filling, he then developed a way of making it useful – what a magnificent sculpture, what an interface of the old with the new and what a commemoration of a great mariner.

One wonderful occasion he took me sailing on the Bounty. On board the ship, 15 minutes out of the harbour, Bruce, with his characteristic sense of humour said to me, ‘The Captain’s weary, take the wheel.’ For me to stand behind the wheel of an old windjammer was the thrill of a lifetime and he knew it. He showed me every inch of the ship which was immaculate. Though South Pacific
exploration, art, antique books and maps were keen interests of his – he was dedicated to sharing these with the world.

Honest and principled, Bruce never used political influence to his advantage. A politician visited Bruce’s office seeking money. Bruce replied, ‘I don’t support you boys, I support those who you don’t support.’

Bruce never took holidays. He loved work and 365 days a year were never enough. Despite the daily whirlpool of business activity, he had time for his four children, Diane, Nigel, David and Carol, and later 10 grandchildren. His sons, David and Nigel, recall trips to the Sydney Show with their father, when he would visit the dressing rooms to talk to the axemen about the merits of his Swedish axes. The smell of sweat and liniment still lingers in their minds. Work, yes but the kids were there too.

Bruce met his second wife, Helen, over the sale of a bull and their first date was an invitation to a performance of *The Merry Widow*, testimony to his great deep-seated sense of humour. They were married in 1990 and the honeymoon began with an excursion to view the offloading of a tanker. As a Valentine’s Day gift some years later he bought her a new tanker named the *Helen*. Bruce played a father role for Helen’s three daughters, Anna, Robyn and George and their husbands.

And so the life of this great Australian has come to an end. But not really. Bruce Reid will go on as his story will be told and retold. This nation has so much to thank Bruce for. To me he will remain endlessly on the mast of the Bounty –

Gazing from the masthead  
At the Harbour’s fine surrounds  
With eyes to plot a vision  
Chart new waters, plough new ground.

To him the dawn was endless  
But was grasped with his fine hands  
To seek the new, protect the old  
Inspire a nation with his plans.

So Australia’s lost a champion  
But his story will live on  
As a beacon for our future…  
Thank you Bruce for all you’ve done.

*Chris Tudor*

From the late Dr Bruce Reid’s eulogy given by Headmaster, Mr Chris Tudor AM