

July 2022

VicRoads Association

Newsletter No. 235



Painted by Claude Monet, Gare Saint-Lazare

Membership of the Association is available to all who have been members of VicRoads or forerunner organisations or the spouse of deceased members, and bestows on them all the rights of the Rules of Association. Cost of membership is a once only fee of \$50. Enquiries about membership or receipt of the Newsletter by e-mail should be directed to the Secretary, VicRoads Association, PO Box 80, Kew 3101 or by phone or e-mail as shown in the footer below. Visit our website at vicroadsassociation.org

Dear Members,

You will soon see that most of this newsletter is devoted to Latvia. You might well ask why?

When researching the stories of the CRB (VicRoads) servicemen for *Roads to War*, I found five of our colleagues who had connections to Latvia so I thought it would be appropriate to honour them. They are Edgar Kayak, Antons Pommers, Augustus (Gus) Veismanis, and Juris and Aivars Bruns.

Situated in north-eastern Europe with a coastline along the Baltic Sea, Latvia has borders with Estonia, Russia, Belarus and Lithuania. It has linguistic links with Lithuania to the south, and historical and religious ties with Estonia to the north. Not much more than a decade after it regained independence during the demise of the Soviet Union, Latvia was welcomed as a member of the European Union in May 2004. The move came a matter of weeks after it joined NATO.

For centuries Latvia was primarily an agricultural country, with seafaring, fishing and forestry as other important economic factors. Like its Baltic neighbours, Latvia has made a rapid transition to the free market since the early 1990s.

More than a quarter of the population is primarily Russian-speaking, and Russian propaganda efforts in this community are a cause of concern for the Latvian authorities – heightened by Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine.

It is a small country with a population of 1.9 million people.

Latvia is a developed country, with a high-income advanced economy; ranking very high in the Human Development Index. It performs favourably in measurements of civil liberties, press freedom, internet freedom, democratic governance, living standards, and peacefulness.

Riga, Latvia's capital, is set on the Baltic Sea at the mouth of the River Daugava. It's considered a cultural centre and is home to many museums and concert halls. The city is also known for its wooden buildings, art nouveau architecture and medieval Old Town.



Riga – population one million people.

I hope you enjoy their stories.

Were there any other Latvians in our midst? If you know of anyone, please let me know.

David Jellie,
Chairman and Editor

What's coming up

Occasional Lunches at Shoppingtown Hotel 12 noon

Our next lunch will be held on Monday 8 August 2022. There is no longer a requirement to contact Kelvin York – just turn up. Future lunches are 10 October, 7 November and 6 February 2023. We had a terrific response to our last lunch on 20 June – 22 people turned up.

Metro Rail Tunnel and Melbourne Airport Rail presentation

Tuesday 30 August at 10am or 2pm

Jim Webber has done a wonderful job in negotiating presentations by Rail Projects Victoria on the Metro Rail Tunnel (with a focus on the construction of the Parkville Station) and the Airport Rail Link (with a focus on the planning). They will be held at the Metro Tunnel Headquarters at 125-133 Swanston Street, City – near Little Collins Street opposite the Town Hall.

The date is Tuesday 30 August for 10am and 2pm. Each of these sessions are the same. There is a limit on numbers at each session (20 to 25 people) and this is the reason we have split into two sessions.

Bookings can be made with Jim Webber at jimwebber@optusnet.com.au or 0412 064 527. Places will be reserved on a first come first serve basis. When making your booking, please indicate which time slot you prefer or whether you have no preference. Also, if you can do one session but not the other. This will help us to fill the two sessions appropriately.

Attendees are required to be vaccinated. I think that it would also be appropriate to bring along a face mask in case it is needed.

Dinner at Glen Waverley RSL

Thursday 6 October at 6pm

We will provide details closer to the date.

Visit to North East Link Project

Monday 17 October at 10.30am

A briefing on the project will be held at the Watsonia Information Hub, 17 Watsonia Rd, Watsonia. The briefing (including questions and answers) is expected to last 90 minutes.

Please advise Jim Webber on 0412 064 527 or jimwebber@optusnet.com.au if you wish to attend. We will indicate a restaurant or hotel in the area for lunch afterwards.

Annual Golf Day

Unfortunately, we have had to defer this until later in the year owing to work being carried out at Green Acres Golf Club in Kew. The club is replacing many of the greens and enhancing its fairway sprinkling system. We expect to shift this day to November – depending on progress – or we may relocate to another course. We will keep you posted.

Benalla/ Shepparton Trip

Thursday 17 November – Friday 18 November

Our proposed itinerary is as follows:

Thursday 17 November: Drive to Benalla in the morning and have lunch there. At 2pm, tour of the LS Precast Concrete facility for 90 minutes. This is the largest factory of its type in Australia and it is currently supplying all the precast concrete bridge and tunnel components for the West Gate Tunnel.

In the evening, dinner in Benalla with past and present ex-CRB/VicRoads staff in the Region.

Friday 18 November: Breakfast in Benalla, and then drive to Shepparton. Visit Shepparton Art Museum (open 10am-4pm), 12 noon lunch at Museum Café, then free afternoon – possible visits to Shepparton Motor Museum, Shepparton Heritage Centre, Gallery Kaiela, Bangerang Cultural Centre – then make your own way home.

The tour of LS Precast will require all attendees to have steel capped boots or shoes. For those without boots/shoes, we will endeavour to borrow these from other members. If any members have steel capped footwear that we can borrow, please let Jim Webber know on 0412 064 527 or jimwebber@optusnet.com.au – as well as your intention to attend.

Christmas Lunch

This has been booked for Monday 12 December at Glen Waverley RSL.

Vale

Noel Anderson

It is with the deepest sadness that I inform you of the death of Peter Noel Anderson – always known to us as Noel.

I propose to write a tribute to Noel in the next newsletter. Noel was highly respected and much loved in the organisation. His kindness and humour delighted us. We extend our sympathies to his beloved wife of 72 years – Margaret – and his family.

Invitation for Divisional Representatives

We are keen to get more feedback from members who worked in one of the eight rural Divisional CRB offices. Feedback from each Division would be published in the Newsletters and placed on the VicRoads Association website www.vicroadsassociation.org

Feedback could include:

- historical articles (including significant projects, bridges, planning studies, etc)
- tourist-related events in their region,
- reunion lunches/dinners,
- Divisional 'characters' from the past,
- anything else of interest

We are looking for members who wish to nominate to undertake this task for a particular rural Region. If you are interested, could you please advise Jim Webber on 0412 064 527 or jimwebber@optusnet.com.au

On being Latvian in Australia

When I was researching Edgar Kayak's story, Ozzie – his son – made contact with the Latvian diaspora in Melbourne and discovered Juri Strante who wrote this touching story of being Latvian in Australia. I contacted Juri and he was flattered that I sought his permission to publish it in our newsletter. He commented to me that it is even more important to understand these feelings in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine – where similar stories will no doubt emerge.



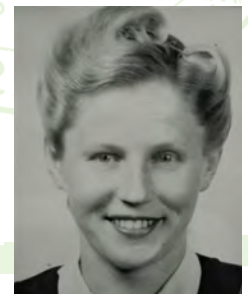
Juri Strante today.

This is Juri's story.

'As a six-year-old boy I hated being Latvian. With a strange name in a strange country, unable to speak English, and feeling desperately self-conscious about my differences with other children, my only salvation was my mother. She understood me, talked with me in Latvian, and gave me lots of hugs and cuddles.

My mother was a twenty-five year old widow when Father died in Germany in 1947. Now, in 1950, Mum and I were in Melbourne. Due to difficulty in finding accommodation Mum had to live in a tiny bedroom in a boarding house. I was placed in a children's home. I cried myself to sleep each night. On weekends she surreptitiously brought me to her room, for an overnight stay and to spend a day together, before returning me to the home, and she for another working week in a factory.

With no idea of who I was, where I was, or why people looked at me with their sad expressions speculating that I was mentally short, my lack of English placed me one year behind at primary school. No matter I was fluent in German and Latvian, and knew all the words of Christmas songs in two foreign languages, I had to sit in the back row of the class coping as best as I could.



Passport photograph of Daina, Juri's mother.

I wondered whether the people in Latvia knew about us. Did they know our difficulties starting a new life in a strange country? They certainly didn't know about me and my tears on a soaked pillow every night.

Quickly my English skills improved and I began to teach Mum. For her it was difficult. Even fifty years later before she died, her English was broken with her European accent and her verbal misconstructions.



Juri's passport photo.

Mum eventually found a larger boarding room where we could both live together. All our friends were Latvians and I was exposed to parties where memories of Latvia flowed freely. My young mind absorbed all I heard with wide-eyed wonderment. Tales of snow covered forests, frozen lakes where blocks of ice were transported to cellars to keep food edible throughout summer. Nights of dancing during

the mid-summer solstice when it never became dark. Consuming homemade brews and caraway cheeses. Oh it sounded so romantic.

Melbourne's Latvian community was very strong. Traditions were quickly resurrected. Never mind that the seasons were reversed. Every mid-June I attended the mid-summer *Janu Balle* in wintery St Kilda. In those formative years I was brainwashed about the beauty and wonder of Latvia. Our expatriate group of refugees started up a Latvian School as well as publishing an Australian-Latvian newspaper. It was not difficult now being a Latvian in Australia.

During the 1950s news from Latvia was negligible. The Russians had built an iron curtain around recently occupied Eastern European countries. During Melbourne's 1956 Olympic Games we read about Russia's invasion of Hungary. We shuddered at what the Russians were doing while the world's attention focused on the Olympics. Surely we had been correct in fleeing our homeland twelve years prior. Our convictions were reinforced when the Berlin Wall was erected five years later.

Latvians in Australia may have given up all hope of ever seeing Latvia again. I was a teenager now and I took up Australian citizenship thus acknowledging I was cutting ties with the motherland. Latvia still existed but it was unattainable, resting only in our memories.

Questions bothered me. Did the Latvians we left behind know of us or even remember us? Did they look upon us as deserters? Why did my parents flee Latvia in October 1944 yet my uncle and family stayed? Did we depart to save ourselves yet leave our friends and family to defend themselves from the advancing Russians and their crippling regime? Should we refugees now in our new homeland feel guilty?

The war was twenty years behind us when my mother received a letter from her sister in Latvia. Her husband had died, and she too was living in a room in Riga. From my mother's meagre wages we sent food and clothing parcels to her on a regular basis. It was a considerable sacrifice to fulfil my mother's sister's requests.

The Russian postal censors scrutinized our mail, and a fresh view of Latvia was being painted. I had been exposed to the "old Latvia" prior World War 2. My aunt sent us recent

publications with her letters, including post-war journals proclaiming how wonderful the new regime was under the Communist blanket. I was sufficiently astute to realise that the truth did not reside in this propaganda.

As a teenage Latvian it brought on significant problems. I placed my priority in learning English and studying, not dwelling on my ancestral roots. It was enough to exercise my background by joining a Latvian folk-dancing group. I never thought I would ever have any future contact with Latvia. It was a country now out of reach, like a wonderland in a fairy tale.

I became comfortable being different to the local teenagers. With the self-assurance of the local language, with my Latvian peer group we attended all the '*Kultura Dienas*' (Culture Days) held each summer performing our complex folk dancing and singing loudly our traditional songs in public venues. There were usually more of us than local Australians and we would delight in showing our ethnicity, perhaps our superiority, to the local spectators by dancing and singing more exuberantly. Our Latvian girlfriends were stunning, especially in their multi-coloured folk costumes while we young men were sufficiently big, strong and confident to avoid fights or brawls with the locals. Eventually I loved being a Latvian.

As our group left school and married, our bonds became stretched. We had responsibilities, jobs, and children taking up our time. However, the annual two *Balles*, the '*Janu Balle*' in June to celebrate the northern summer solstice, and the New Year *Balle*, were not to be missed. Here we caught up to share our common folklore. The little old Latvian ladies reminded us of our heritage. The lottery was a must - just to win a Latvian tapestry or a carved candlestick holder. The supper of hot sausages, *piragi*, sauerkraut, black rye bread, and other tasty morsels were superb as we allowed the familiar tastes dissolve once again on our tongues.

I wondered if the people back in Latvia knew we were living what we believed was the Latvian way? Were we representing them with respect? Would they be proud of us? Us, the turncoats who abandoned Latvia and did not stay on to live the harsh life they endured for half a century after we departed?

Contact with Latvia improved. The mid-1970s saw the occasional one "real" Latvian from Riga appear in our midst. A sight to behold! They actually existed! Just the one member of a family was permitted to leave Latvia as the Russians held the family hostage ensuring the visiting member's return. These real Latvian visitors were generally quiet, awed, and humble. We bigheartedly smothered our hospitality upon them by treating them with outings, dinners, and gifts. Unknowingly we "shot ourselves in the foot" because they returned home with tales of milk and honey, of our splendid homes, relative wealth and lifestyle.

In the early 1980s Russia's President Gorbachev introduced *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Western visitors, including me, entered the Baltic States in droves. To placate our guilty conscience I felt obliged to shower my long lost relatives with gifts of unattainable foods, electronics and cash. I even joined in their worldwide chorus to "Free Latvia! Free The Baltic States!" We never guessed as the 1980s ended, Russia would withdraw from the Baltics, and Latvia would return to being an independent country again, and member of the European Union.

She grew up in a magic part of Latvia, a Utopian place next to a large river in a town named Ogre. Her parents had a home, surrounded by a huge flowering garden with fruit trees... and where she fell in love with her prince, my father.

I was elated that now I had the opportunity to visit my mother's long lost homeland. Being in Latvia was different from the stories I'd been previously told. Visiting my uncle, and his family, I felt so much a part of their lives, yet ignorant of their past misery. During a visit out from Riga

to their farm I was indoctrinated to the horrors of those dark days in the early 1940s, that were still engraved upon their memories. Banned books and photos were retrieved from secret hiding places and revealed to me in frightened silence, punctuated occasionally with details as to who was a family member, and where their grave today was located. A sobering experience that left its effect on me as I finally realized I was still a true Latvian; I had a family other than my mother, a family in Latvia with the same blood in their veins as in mine.

Returning to Australia a different person I pondered how does a Latvian living in Australia resolve the predicament of having a heart in two places? How does one resolve the differences between the blood ties and love of a country that one has never lived in, with the love of a beautiful new land where one has grown up, been schooled, learned a new language, worked, married and brought up children?

Being a Latvian in Australia is unique. If I had not known of Australia, if we had remained in Latvia, and if I had not been exposed to this lovely sunburnt country that I've called home for well over half a century, would I have been contented? Is ignorance bliss? Having come to Australia all those years ago, my roots have now penetrated the hard dry soil and my lungs have filled with this antipodean air that I now breathe. In my remaining years the best I can pursue is to honour my mother's land, maintain the culture, heritage and art of that distant country, and ensure I visit regularly to maintain the bond of my friends and relatives that, like myself, are now invariably tied to their piece of earth.

How different is my new view of Latvia now when compared as to how my mother recalled it? There is one distinction. Whereas I was once eager to absorb all she and her friends told me, and me keen to visit her homeland, my mother was only interested in preserving her dreams and beautiful memories of "home". She never had a wish to return. Now I understand why. She grew up in a magic part of Latvia, a Utopian place next to a large river in a town named Ogre. Her parents had a home, surrounded by a huge flowering garden with fruit trees... and where she fell in love with her prince, my father.

Tragically politics overtook her country. Her father was murdered, her mother died, then her prince died. Now she was alone but for me in a strange new world, a hemisphere from home. Memories were now her company. My recent photos of her Ogre home that had been sub-divided into four apartments only caused her pain. The garden overgrown and unkempt. No, better to remember the beautiful dream.

Do the people in Latvia, know what it means to be a Latvian when you live anywhere else but in Latvia? I consider my thoughts confirm I have similar feelings as other migrants keeping their flame alive, honouring their parent's homeland, ensuring regular visits to maintain the bond with friends and relatives who, like ourselves, are also locked in their familiar homeland

My mother died not long ago. She died as she lived her last years, reflecting in her sleep. I carried her ashes to her faraway dream home with a two-line verse on her tombstone that today reads, in her old language: *"The fallen leaf, the extinguished candle. Silence is now my mother's tongue."*

So this was Juri's story. However, subsequent correspondence has revealed more details of Juri's story. He was held back at Surrey Hill Primary School and finished his primary education at Windsor Primary School. Later, he attended Melbourne High School for years 9 to 12 where he matriculated. He worked at Kodak for a number of years supervising processing of colour film and while there, he applied to the Department of Aviation to attend their Air Traffic Controller Training College. He was one of 18 chosen out of 1,000 applicants. The department was running out of former WW2 pilots who were providing air traffic control at Essendon Airport. As he said,

"I completed my training in 1968 at Sydney Airport and held a rating on the SYD-MEL-SYD air routes till 1971 when homesickness for Melbourne brought me back to work at the new Tullamarine Airport. My experience in Sydney gave me a rocket ride through the various grades of ATC, not only the MEL-SYD-MEL routes from the other end of the structure, but ratings at Essendon Control Tower, Moorabbin Tower, then becoming a check controller of the MEL-SYD sector.



Juri (right) with his colleague Bruce Dean at Melbourne Airport.

After more than thirty years, I retired from my favorite Melbourne Arrivals Sector position that was like choreographing a ballet of many aircraft into a sequence, like a string of pearls, to line up one behind other on the final approach to the runway. It was like playing chess on a radar screen rather than a 64-square cardboard playing field. Move the blips around but don't kill any blips. No checkmates allowed.

There has always been a shortage of air traffic controllers in Australia. On many occasions, airspace was closed due lack of controllers, many of whom had resigned to work overseas due to better pay and conditions. My retirement did not please the newly renamed Air Services Australia, and I was offered an instructor's position at the Brisbane Airport College. I accepted a contract and moved to the Gold Coast to commute daily to Brisbane Airport. The Mon-Fri trips in peak traffic killed any desire to re-new the 3 year contract."

Juri also said that his widowed mother married in 1959 to a Czech chemist. He died in 1969 and later, she married a Latvian cane cutter and they moved north to Burleigh Heads in Queensland.

News from Members

Bendigo Reunion

Every month a lunch is held for ex-Bendigo region people. Peter Lowe and I went up for the one held in May.



Standing Left to Right: Brian Hogan, Jim Forge, Lloyd Rowe, Jim Mensforth, Peter Lowe, John Esnouf, David Wallace
Seated Left to Right: Lloyd Davies, Bruce Phillips. (Apologies to Peter Mudge who is on the extreme left but out of shot. I took the photo. Ironically, Peter is the best looking one of the whole lot!)

Bruce Phillips – regarding Trevor Phillips

Bruce told me that Trevor had a fall. He was admitted to Royal Melbourne Hospital (ICU) and underwent surgery to remove blood accumulated on his brain. At the time Bruce wasn't able to communicate with Trevor because he'd been sedated and seemed to be lacking details of the fall he had prior to Easter – which is when he was likely to have suffered a blow to the head and loss of consciousness.

However, the surgery was successful although he has no movement of his fingers on both hands. Otherwise he is mobile and hopes to be back in Bendigo, at St John of God Hospital to undertake rehabilitation on his fingers.

But this story ends very happily. Bruce has just sent the following message.

'Spoke with Trevor this afternoon. He's done a Lazarus!!!! His speech is back to normal, he's done a walk around the shopping mall and can manage all his buttons. It's all come together beautifully and rapidly. He can't wait to see his specialist, stop taking his tablets, have a glass of wine and resume driving his car.'

Well done Trevor!

LEST WE FORGET



I know of at least four CRB colleagues with connections to Latvia and these are their stories.

Edgar Bernard Kaijak (Kayak)



A studio portrait of Edgar Kayak taken in Riga in 1938.

The information for this entry was mainly obtained from Edgar's son, Horst, who has been always referred to as Ozzie. Ozzie also worked for the CRB/RCA/VicRoads as a civil engineer.

Edgar worked in the Materials Research Division at the CRB as an Experimental Officer. He worked there for nine years before retiring at 65 years. He was born in 1914 in Bolderāja – a suburb of Riga, the capital city of Latvia. Edgar's mother was Danish and spoke German which was the main language in their household.

In addition to German, Edgar was also fluent in Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, and Russian – and he also topped up his English skills after his arrival in Australia.

From 1933 to 1935 Edgar undertook compulsory National Service with the Latvian Army. On completion of this service, he started studying at Riga University but the political instability at that time prevented him from continuing. So, in 1936, he commenced training to qualify as a Station Master with the Latvian Railways Board. This board was established in 1919 – taking over the earlier private rail network. During the Second World War, the Latvian railway network was severely damaged: most railway bridges and many station buildings were destroyed, and irreversible damage was caused to the tracks, as well as to the communications and signalling facilities.



Station Master Edgar Kayak – circa 1938.

In 1938, he married Sigrid Anita Ploegert in Riga. Sigrid's family lived in Fruenburg - now shown on maps as Saldus - outside Riga, and according to Ozzie, her family was comfortably off. Despite her genteel upbringing in Latvia, she became an excellent gardener and cook in Australia.

Even before the outbreak of war, Latvia, like its sister Baltic states of Estonia and Lithuania, was easy prey for the European super powers of Russia and Germany. Latvia became an independent state in 1919 following the First World War. At the outbreak of the Second World War, Latvia was annexed by Russia, followed by the invasion by Germany, after which Russia took over again until the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991 leading to the restoration of independence. Over the relatively short span of the Second World War, Latvia came under the control of four separate governments.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) between Russia and Germany was a non-aggression pact that enabled the two powers to partition Poland between them. It also contained a secret protocol which defined the borders of the Russian and German spheres of influence across Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland. So, even before the Second World War had started, Germany and Russia were surreptitiously dividing up the spoils of the Baltic region states. Both countries invaded Poland in September 1939. In 1940, Russia annexed parts of Finland and a short while later, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

After the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, most of the Baltic Germans left Latvia by agreement between the Latvian Government and Nazi Germany. In total 50,000 Baltic Germans left by the deadline of December 1939, with about 15,000 choosing to remain in Latvia. Most of those who remained left for Germany in the summer of 1940, when a second resettlement scheme was agreed. They were resettled - mainly in Poland - and given land and businesses in exchange for the money they had received from the sale of their previous assets. Sigrid's family property and businesses were traded in this way during the second resettlement.

In 1940, Edgar and Sigrid were transported to Buk (formerly Buchenstadt) in central Poland but they refused to leave the train believing that settling on land that had been taken from somebody else would have made them third rate citizens. Instead, they went to Germany and were resettled in the town of Verden-an-der Aller – a small town between Bremen and Hanover in Lower Saxony. Here, Edgar gained employment as a draughtsman and in 1942 their only child, Ozzie, was born. After Ozzie's birth, Edgar and Sigrid became naturalised German citizens in order to be eligible to receive government rations – otherwise, they would have starved. They were tattooed under their armpits to prove their citizenship, including their blood group.



LEST WE FORGET



In 1943, Edgar was drafted into the Wehrmacht. He was stationed in the industrial city of Bremen in an anti-aircraft defensive battery. He served there until the end of the war in 1945. Bremen and its nearby sister city of Bremerhaven were important to the German war effort because of their manufacturing facilities, port and railway hubs, the shipping industry, and the large sub-marine pens and shelters. Consequently they came under constant bombardment by Allied air forces. On 25 April 1944 they surrendered. Edgar said that they simply ran out of ammunition and they laid down their arms to the British 3rd Infantry Division that overran them. A few weeks later, on 7 May 1945, Germany unconditionally surrendered to the Allies in Reims, France – thus bringing an end to the Second World War.

Bremen and Bremerhaven surrendered about eight days after Verden-an-der Aller and Edgar and his comrades were loaded into a truck for transportation to a Prisoner of War camp in Belgium. Edgar was able to write a secret note to Sigrid which he wrapped around a stone and as they drove through Verden-an-der Aller he was able to throw it on to the footpath outside his house to let Sigrid know he was still alive. Edgar remained in captivity in Belgium until his release in 1946. It took all this time for the Allied forces to sift through all the prisoners, mainly to establish whether Nazis or communists were within their midst.

In 1948, Edgar graduated as *Hoch* and *Tiefbau* (structural and civil engineer) from the Bremen Freistadt Technische Hochschule under a British retraining scheme for demobilised German soldiers. As is the entry requirement of many universities in Europe, students were required to develop skills in an apprenticeship or another field of enterprise (such as languages) and Edgar chose bricklaying – which was to become very important for him later in life. Ozzie told me that Erwin Matzner – whose experience is



A photograph taken near Ozzie's home in Verden-an-der Aller of Allied soldiers with German POWs – 1945.

described later in this chapter - chose book-binding as his additional skill.

More than 200,000 Latvian citizens died during the Second World War, including approximately 75,000 Latvian Jews murdered during the Nazi occupation. Latvian soldiers fought on both sides of the conflict, mainly on the German side, with 140,000 men in the Latvian Legion of the Waffen-SS. The Red Army formed a Latvian Rifle Division in 1944, and on some occasions opposing Latvian troops faced each other in battle.

Although he was only three when the war ended, Ozzie has some memories of the war – of hiding in the basement during the aerial bombing and catching the fear of the women comforting him. His house was hit twice. He said he waved to the Allied planes flying overhead but stopped after his house was hit for the second time. He also vaguely remembered the Allied occupation of his town, and the white sheets draped out of the windows to signify Verden-an-der Aller's surrender – although he admits that this may be a false memory.

Ozzie can also remember scavenging with his mother for coal along the railway lines and potatoes from the fields after the guards disappeared. The cold and starvation is etched deep in his memory. His mother did not want him to attend school in Verden-an-der Aller, so she and Ozzie shifted to Offenbach, now a suburb of Frankfurt to join Sigrid's sister.



Ozzie at his school in Frankfurt – 1949.

1950, Ozzie's family began their journey to migrate from Germany to Australia. Their fares had been paid by Sigrid's sister and brother-in-law (living at the time in the Bonegilla camp in Northern Victoria), who had arrived in Australia in 1948 as Latvian displaced persons. Edgar and his family sailed to Australia aboard the *SS Sebastiano Caboto* - departing from Genoa in Italy. When they first touched land in Australia at Fremantle, they walked ashore to the nearest hotel to celebrate. They arrived in Melbourne on 6 February 1951 and were immediately driven to their first residence in Hughesdale.

Ozzie was mocked on his first day at Hughesdale Primary School. He was dressed as any German schoolboy was dressed – lederhosen, shorts, long white socks and sandals. He could not speak a word of English. However he soon learnt to cope. Scouts played an important role. It

introduced him to the outdoor life of Australia and skiing was another activity which he took up with a passion.

In 1958, Edgar changed his name by deed poll from Kaijak, to Kayak. There is no letter 'y' in the Latvian language but the 'ij' in his name was pronounced 'y'.

Edgar's engineering qualifications were not recognised in Australia so he called upon his bricklaying skills. He built houses for the Victorian Housing Commission as an independent contractor but when he was about 55, osteoarthritis set in and he had to seek less strenuous work. This was when he joined the Materials Research Laboratory in the CRB Headquarters at Kew. He retired in 1975 and died in the Kiandra Aged Care Home in December 1996 at 82 years of age.

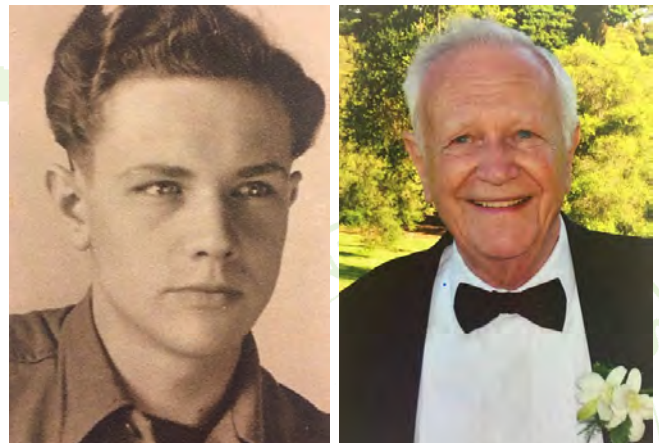
In 1960, at McKinnon High School, Ozzie was awarded a cadetship by the CRB and, after graduation from the University of Melbourne, he worked as a bridge design engineer for about 20 years culminating in his appointment as the Senior Design Engineer for the elevated section of the West Gate Freeway, South Melbourne. He then transferred to Advance Planning Division for four years before joining the Victorian Railways on the High Speed Rail Project. In 1991 he joined the Victorian Strategic Transport Study at Melbourne University and he remained with that group when it was transferred to RMIT University.



Ozzie and Edgar Kayak at Ozzie's graduation in 1965.

Antons (Anton) Pommers

Anton was born in Riga, Latvia in 1927. During his childhood and youth the Republic of Latvia went through troubled times. Latvia had declared independence from Russia in the aftermath of World War 1. However, by the 1930s, the country became increasingly autocratic after a coup in 1934 which established an authoritarian regime under the leadership of Kārlis Ulmanis. The country's *de facto* independence was interrupted at the outset of World War II, beginning with Latvia's forcible incorporation into the Soviet Union, followed by the invasion and occupation by Nazi Germany in 1941, and the re-occupation by the Soviets in 1944 to form the Latvian SSR for the next fifty years.



Anton as a young man and as we remembered him.

Although Anton was reluctant to talk about his experiences during the war, he did describe his dilemma when he had to choose between joining the Hitler Youth or likely death at the hands of the Russian army advancing on Latvia. He chose to join Hitler Youth to escape the Red Army. He was sent to Czechoslovakia and from there, he and others escaped and made their way across Europe towards the west where they were hoping to meet the advancing Allied forces. This must have been a harrowing experience – avoiding capture and fossicking for food. Anton once described killing a deer and hiding it in an outhouse so that they could retrieve it after dark. They were successful in being captured by the British and American forces. Anton was very emotionally affected in recalling these times and his relief and gratitude to be in Australia to enjoy peace and freedom and a way of life so different to his earlier experience was palpable.

The last time he saw his mother, she had pleaded with him to get as far away as possible from Europe and he took this advice by migrating to Australia in 1948 – at the age of 21. He never saw his family again.



LEST WE FORGET



He was initially posted to Bonegilla camp and later enrolled at RMIT to study part time for a Diploma in Civil Engineering. He so excelled in maths that RMIT invited him to stay on as a tutor/lecturer. He also had time to fall in love and marry Irena Wenclawowicz in 1950.

He later joined the CRB and became involved in the development of the Mechanical Sub-branch depot in Glen Waverley. In March 1960, he joined a small task force established under the guidance of Neil Guerin to form the 'Location' element of the Traffic and Location section. Their task was to identify and locate future freeway alignments outside the inner metropolitan area which was then controlled by the MMBW. Its mandate was to plan for at least 30 years ahead and to consider the following 20 years. It would be difficult to find a freeway in Victoria where Anton had not had some influence.

Anton was co-opted into the Ministry of Transport in the 1980s to work on the METRAS study – the Arterial Road Strategy for Melbourne. He retired from there when he turned 65. He died on 10 September at the age of 90. Anton was a quiet, refined man with impeccable manners and a quiet confidence in his perception and understanding of road planning and traffic engineering. He loved music and he played the cello. He was also an accomplished artist.

Augustus (Gus) Veismanis

Gus was born in Latvia in 1913. As a young man he lived with his mother while he attended university studying mathematics. To support himself he worked part-time in the laboratory of a brandy factory.

Gus was still studying when Latvia was occupied by Russia in June 1940. One day, Gus was with a group of young men near a national monument when they were arrested by Russian soldiers and they were marched off to a nearby police station. As they were being taken down a corridor, Gus noticed an open door, and quickly stepped through it. He was not noticed and, after hiding for a short time, he made his way out of the police station without being challenged. Nothing was ever heard of the other young men who accompanied him.

Later in 1940, the Russians were driven out of Latvia by the Germans. By this time, Gus had completed his studies except for the submission of a thesis. Latvian men were being conscripted by the Germans for military service, but students were exempted. Gus continued to work on his thesis, but he made sure that there was still some work to be done to complete it and, in this way, he was able to stave off conscription. However, in 1944, the Germans were becoming desperate and the exemption was scrapped. Gus was conscripted into a labour battalion which was engaged in digging trenches behind the German lines. These were to be used as part of the strategy for the retreat of the Germans from the advancing Russian army.

As the end of the war approached, Gus decided he would rather be captured by the Americans than the Russians, so he set out alone towards the Western front. He did not know what had happened to his mother and it was many years later that he learnt that she was still alive. He wrote to her regularly but they were never to meet again.

After spending time in a refugee camp in Germany, Gus came to Melbourne in 1947 aboard the *SS General Stuart Heinzelman* which embarked from Bremerhaven in Germany. He spoke good English and, after spending a few months in Bonegilla, he got a job as a labourer at the Northcote brickworks. It was hard work. He had to stack freshly moulded bricks in the kilns before firing. Gus said it was the best job he ever had.

Gus wanted to obtain a university degree. Because of Cold War restrictions on contact with countries in the Soviet Union, he was unable to provide evidence of the studies he had completed in Latvia. He studied Science at the University of Melbourne by working night shifts at the brickworks. He completed his degree majoring in physics and mathematics.

He started work at the CRB as a Scientific Officer and pioneered work in triaxial shear testing relating to the stability of bridge embankments and foundations. He also introduced new methods for consolidation testing of soils. He continued to study all his life and sent many of Austroads and VicRoads technical publications which he bought from the bookshop and mailed them to authorities in Latvia.

Gus died in 2003.

Sapper Juris Oskars Bruns 3796361

Juris was an Engineer in Metropolitan Region and Bridge Division from 1970 to 1976. He was born of Latvian parents in Germany in 1945 and his family's story is worth telling.

The following family information was gathered from stories and notes of his brother, Aivars Aldis Bruns, and his sister, Rasma Eimanis (nee Bruns). They left Latvia in 1944. Their father, Martins Bruns, was a senior officer in the Latvian Army and he had managed to secure a place for his family on the last army ship leaving Riga. They only got as far as Northern Germany - to a small farming community in Pokrent, which today, has a population of 700 people. It was here that Juris was born. When the American Army arrived in Germany, the family was moved to a displaced persons camp in Lubeck on the German Baltic coast. They spent five years there and then shifted to another camp at Fallingsbostel in North Central Germany. They were one of the last families to leave this camp. A month before Christmas in 1950, they were put on a plane for Australia. The name of the plane was 'The Flying Tiger'. It carried mainly pregnant women and young families. It flew out of Bremen Airport in Germany and eventually landed in Sydney.

They caught a train from Sydney to the migrant camp at Bonegilla near Wodonga in northern Victoria. A few months later, Juris' mother and the two younger children were sent to the Benalla Migrant Camp while his father was sent to a job, digging trenches for the Sydney Metropolitan Sewerage and Drainage Board.

60	Serial No.	
Surname	BRUNS	
Christian Names	Juris	
Nationality	Latv.	Age 20.4.45
Date of Arrival	26 NOV 1950	Sex M
Ex Ship	AUS 178/A.Lf1	Marital State S
Date of Departure	12/1/51	Religion prot.
Destination	DEPT. OF IMMIGRATION	Description
HOLDING CENTRE BENALLA	VIC. TL 2687	Weight
Trade		Hair
Standard of Education		Eyes
Address of Next of Kin (if known)		Complexion
Father: Martina		Scars
		General

Specimen of Signature: *Aivars Bruns*

4p Boneg. Hosp. 7.1.51 - 10.1.51

202 51/488

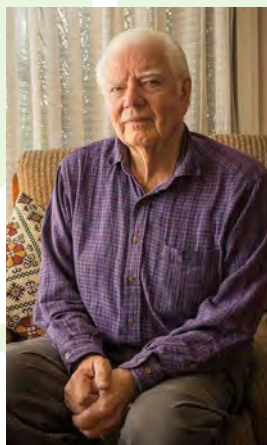
Juris' registration card at Bonegilla Migrant Camp.

Aivars was 16 years old and was considered an adult and so had to complete a two year Australian Government contract. He was assigned work with the Army Canteen Services in Benalla. In his free time he earned extra money picking pears and peaches for local fruit growers. Juris' mother secured a job at the Italian clothing factory in Benalla. She did piece work, sewing pyjamas for Coles stores.

Juris attended kindergarten at Benalla migrant camp. His sister was 13 years old at the time, and she enrolled in Year 1 at Benalla High. She recalls having to catch a bus to high school and finding it very hard to fit in. The European migrants were called "Balts" by the other students. She couldn't speak English and struggled with the text books and history exams. On the other hand, she did quite enjoy the practical classes such as cooking and needle work. She said that the practical classes got her through high school.

After working a couple of years in the canteen, Aivars was allowed to go back to Benalla High School from which he matriculated in 1954. A year later, the Bruns family left Benalla and shifted to Fawkner on the northern outskirts of Melbourne. Aivars started working with the Country Roads Board as a draughtsman whilst studying subjects towards a Civil Engineering Diploma in the evenings. In 1972 the family was living in Surrey Hills.

Aivars died in Surrey Hills in October 2018.



Aivars Bruns - circa 2015.

So this was the Bruns' family introduction to Australia. It is somewhat ironic to think that Juris and his family escaped war-torn Europe only for him to be conscripted for another war in his new home some 20 years later.

Juris completed a Diploma of Civil Engineering at Swinburne Institute of Technology and subsequently gained a Bachelor of Civil Engineering at Monash University. He was only too aware that there was a strong protest movement at Monash University against the Vietnam War and conscription in general – mainly by the students and lecturers in the faculty of the Arts. It was while he was studying at Monash that he received his National Service registration papers.

His basic training commenced in April 1969 at Puckapunyal Army Base Victoria, lasting 10 weeks. Juris was then assigned to the Royal Australian Engineers Corps and transferred to their base at Liverpool, NSW. Training consisted of the regular drill rehearsals, attending military lectures, weapon instructions and PT exercises. On one occasion, an accidental fall from a suspended rope crossing resulted in a serious leg injury which required extensive physiotherapy treatment and crutches for several weeks.

At Liverpool, he qualified for a Grade 1 Military Surveying Certificate. He later gained a Grade 2 Certificate in Vietnam. Towards the end of 1969, Juris was notified that he was to be deployed to South Vietnam for a 12 month Tour of Duty. This required the completion of an intensive 4-week long jungle training course at Canungra, Qld, simulating expected conditions in Vietnam.

He left for Vietnam in early January 1970 – departing from Sydney Airport at the somewhat clandestine hour of midnight. The reason for this was to avoid anti-Vietnam protestors interrupting the farewells of departing recruits with their families and friends. He was assigned to a specialised engineering unit - 198 Works Section - based at the Australian Defence Force (ADF) combat base at Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy Province. This was Australia's tactical area of responsibility in South Vietnam.

The base comprised tents accommodating about 5,000 military personnel from various corps. The tents were erected on raised wooden platforms to prevent flooding from the torrential monsoon rainfall and were enclosed with sandbag walls to provide protection from any incoming Viet Cong mortar fire.

Rostered duties in Nui Dat included nightly sentry observation from watchtowers and day patrolling outside the wire fence perimeter. Personnel at Nui Dat were generally well catered for with good meals. The men could meet other recruits in the evening at the 'boozer' canteen and there was an outdoor cinema when the opportunity arose. All the while, artillery shelling and U.S. B52 bomber strikes could be heard in the distance.



LEST WE FORGET



Above: Juris (back row on the right) and fellow 198 Work Section recruits outside their tent in Nui Dat Combat Base.

Centre: Juris on a reconnaissance mission with an APC convoy.

Below: Juris and South Vietnamese children outside a country village.



This continued almost every night while Juris was stationed at the base.



The 198 Works Section had a small number of 'Nasho' recruits with specific engineering skills who reported directly to a Captain or Major as their commanding officers. The recruits' responsibilities were to carry out military reconnaissance and topographical surveying within Phuoc Tuy Province and record any information which was considered to be of military importance. Travel for these operations was by military jeep, Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC) convoy or helicopter - depending on the accessibility of the terrain.

The relative safety or danger of the various areas was designated by a colour coding system using green, amber and red to specify the risk of each zone. The red zones indicated the likely presence of Viet Cong and North Vietnam Army (NVA) combatants, land mines, booby traps and other destructive incendiary devices. The field information used to identify the zoning areas was provided and updated regularly by the ADF's intelligence sources in Phuoc Tuy Province. This was then forwarded to Nui Dat's HQ and subsequently conveyed to 198 Works Section.

During the ADF's presence in South Vietnam a considerable number of civil aid projects involving 198 Works Section were completed - including reconstruction of roads, bridges and culvert crossings and schools and houses and other buildings for the Vietnamese civilian communities. Based on topographical survey data collected during reconnaissance, the suitability of various locations for proposed projects could be assessed. Once a site had been selected, ground investigations, detailed site survey and other required preliminary information was obtained. Appropriate design for a particular project could then be completed and construction drawings prepared for implementation by the Royal Australian Engineers' 17 Construction Squadron based at Nui Dat.

Juris also witnessed the dreadful aftermath of aerial spraying of the Vietnam countryside with Agent Orange defoliant. This product decimated vast areas of the dense rain forests, lush green jungle and other vegetation. Many Vietnamese civilians and military personnel on both sides - including those at Nui Dat - were exposed to this, resulting in serious debilitating effects. The Government of Vietnam alleges that up to four million people were exposed to it, three quarters of whom suffered illness as a consequence. Agent Orange also caused enormous environmental damage in Vietnam. Over 3,100,000 hectares of forest were defoliated and eroded tree cover and seedling forest stock making reforestation more difficult. Animal species diversity was also sharply reduced.

The controversy about the alleged adverse effects of Agent Orange on ADF personnel in Vietnam has proved peculiarly resistant to resolution. As far as I could research, not one case has ever been presented in Australia in favour



of veterans' claims for compensation. Tim Fisher, a widely respected former Deputy Prime Minister – also a Vietnam veteran – died in 2019 claiming that there was a possible link between his exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam and his various cancers

After nine months of service in Nui Dat, Juris took his rest and recreation (R and R) leave with two of his mates, in Hong Kong. There were other designated overseas locations for R and R including Sydney (very popular with American servicemen), Bangkok (Thailand) and Taipei (Taiwan). Another R and R destination was the city of Vung Tau – in Vietnam – situated on the foreshore of the South China Sea. The ADF's logistics HQ, their second base in Phuoc Tuy Province, was located on the outskirts of this city. It was widely known that the Viet Cong militia also frequented Vung Tau for their recreational leave and leisure. Dressed in their customary Vietnamese civilian attire, they were able to effectively blend in with the local residents thus drawing no attention to themselves. This was an unusual situation where the military personnel of two opposing forces co-existed peacefully in the same city while the war continued in the rest of the country.

After completing his 12 month tour of duty in Vietnam, Juris returned to Australia. It was evident to him that there was still considerable anti-Vietnam War sentiment in Australia. The remaining few months of his service was spent at the Watsonia Army Barracks in Melbourne.

In April 1970, Juris commenced employment with the CRB at its Head Office in Kew. He was assigned to Metropolitan Division where he worked as a site engineer on various projects including the reconstruction of Elgar Road at the road/rail underpass and associated intersection works at Maroondah Highway in Box Hill, the Banksia Street duplication in Heidelberg, and the widening of the Nepean Highway between Elsternwick and Moorabbin. All of these projects required close coordination with various service authorities in relocating their assets to fit in with the new roadworks. He was also seconded for 12 months to Bridge Division.

After six years with the CRB, Juris resigned, seeking further opportunities and challenges in his career as a civil engineer. He worked for a few national companies specialising in the innovative and highly specialised field of pavement recycling and soil stabilisation. His first position with one of these was as construction engineer but it eventually led to a managerial role. He managed a number of contracts where VicRoads was a client. Juris then established two companies of his own – one specialising in investigation and design of recycled pavements and the other a general construction company carrying out roadwork contracts for Municipal Councils and Regional Shires in Victoria.

He retired in 2015 and resettled in the rural town of Euroa in north east Victoria. He joined the local fishing club and

was elected vice president, and he also joined the local RSL subbranch.

It was only after many years since returning from Vietnam, with considerable contemplation and hesitation, that Juris decided to participate in an Anzac Day parade march knowing that there was now acceptance by the community of returned Vietnam veterans. He did so with pride wearing his service medals and marched accompanied by his son, a commissioned Naval Officer with special forces training and who also saw active service in the Middle East during the period 2000 to 2002.

Juris found it a gratifying and rewarding experience to include his story in this book to provide an insight to others of military service life with the ADF in South Vietnam.



And now for something beautiful

I thought this month that I would include a few paintings that I have loved ever since I first viewed them.

They are of the Gare Saint-Lazare – a railway station in Paris – painted by Claude Monet. My art teacher at Colac High School held a print of it up in front of the class and I was immediately transfixed. I had never seen a depiction of light, atmosphere and colour such as this and I have been in love with impressionist painting ever since. Monet painted a dozen views of the station and I don't know which one was shown, but the impression has lived with me forever. When I see any of them, I can smell the coal and feel the steam and hear the hissing and clanking of the carriages moving.

Monet's painting overwhelms the viewer not through its scale (a modest 29 ½ by 41 inches), but through the deep sea of steam and smoke that envelops the canvas. Indeed, as a contemporary reviewer remarked somewhat sarcastically, "Unfortunately thick smoke escaping from the canvas prevented our seeing the six paintings dedicated to this study."

The painting depicts one of the passenger platforms of the Gare Saint-Lazare, one of Paris's largest and busiest train terminals. The painting is not so much a single view of a train platform, it is rather a component in a larger project of a dozen canvases which attempts to portray all facets of the Gare Saint-Lazare. The paintings all have similar themes – including the play of light filtered through the smoke of the train shed, the billowing clouds of steam, and the locomotives that dominate the site. Of these twelve linked paintings, Monet exhibited between six and eight of them at the third Impressionist exhibition of 1877, where they were among the most discussed paintings exhibited by any of the artists.

The light in this first painting is the dominant element. Here, as in many his paintings, Monet shows a bright day and strives to reproduce the closely observed effects of pure sunlight. The billowing clouds of steam add to the effect, creating layers of light that fill the canvas. However this picture is an exception within the full group—it is one of only two paintings of the train station shown on a bright, sunny, day. In contrast, the other ten paintings show dark, hazy views of the Gare Saint-Lazare.

Against the bright background, Monet represents the station's vast iron roof in copper and tan tones that stand out against the low key palette, with its swirling blue, gray and purple background. The trains—here represented by no less than three locomotives and a large box car—are shown as both the source of the steam and distinct from it. Gorges Maillard, in 1877, made just this point, describing the paintings as *"the rails, lanterns, switches, wagons, above all, always these flakes, these mists, clouds of white steam, are so thick they sometimes hide everything else."*

In this second picture, Monet renders the steam with a range of blues, pinks, violets, tans, grays, whites, blacks, and yellows. He depicts not just the steam and light – which fill the canvas – but also their effect on the site – the large distant apartments, and the many locomotives – all of which peek through, and dematerialize into a thick industrial haze. The last one, below, shows is in the Art Institute of Chicago, USA.

I hope you enjoy them as I do.

"the rails, lanterns, switches, wagons, above all, always these flakes, these mists, clouds of white steam, are so thick they sometimes hide everything else."



Painting in the Musée d'Orsay – Paris.



Painting in the Harvard Art Museum – USA

Trivia and didactic whimsies

The power of prayer

A woman hurried to the pharmacy to get medication for her husband and when she got back to her car she realised that she had locked her keys inside. She found an old coat hanger by the roadside and she fashioned it to fit in the lock but it was useless. She bowed her head and asked God to send her some help.

Immediately a beat-up old motorcycle pulled up, driven by a bearded man wearing an old bikie skull rag. He got off of his cycle and asked if he could help.

She said: *"Yes, my husband is sick. I've locked my keys in my car. I must get home. Please, can you use this hanger to unlock my car?"*

He said, *"Sure."* He walked over to the car, and in less than a minute the car was open.

She hugged the man and through tears said, *"Thank You so much! You are a very nice man."*

The man replied, *"Lady, I am not a nice man. I just got out of prison yesterday after serving two years for car theft."*

The woman hugged the man again sobbing, *"Oh, thank you, God! You even sent me a professional!"*

Fond farewell

Al was a singer who sang at many funerals. He was recently asked by a funeral director to play and sing at a graveside service for a homeless man. As the man had no family or friends, the service was to be held at a pauper's cemetery out in the country.

Al was not familiar with the area and got lost. He finally arrived about an hour late and saw that the funeral had evidently been conducted and the hearse was nowhere in sight.

There were only the diggers and crew left and they were eating lunch. Al felt bad that he turned up too late and he apologized to the men. He went to the side of the grave and looked down and saw that the vault lid was already in place.

He didn't know what else to do, so he started to sing. The workers put down their lunches and began to gather around. Al sang from his heart and soul for this man with no family and friends. As he sang "Amazing Grace", the workers began to weep. They wept, Al wept, they all wept together.

When Al finished, he packed up his keyboard and started for his car. Though his head hung low, his heart was full. As he opened the door to his car, he heard one of the workers

say, "I've never seen anything like that before and I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years."

Just desserts

The jockey was riding the favourite at a race meeting, and was well ahead of the field. His horse rounded the final corner, when suddenly the jockey was hit on the head by a turkey and a string of sausages.

He managed to keep control of his mount and pulled back into the lead, only to be struck by a box of Christmas crackers and a dozen mince pies as he went over the last fence.

With great skill he managed to steer the horse to the front of the field once more when, on the run in, he was struck on the head by a bottle of sherry and a Christmas pudding. Thus distracted, he succeeded in coming only second.

He immediately went to the race stewards to complain that he had been seriously hampered.

The jackass

A Catholic priest from the city was transferred to a country parish. He rose from his bed one morning. It was a fine spring day in his new mission parish. He walked to the window of his bedroom to get a deep breath of the beautiful day outside.

He then noticed there was a kookaburra lying dead in the middle of his front lawn. He promptly called the local police station.

"Good morning. This is Sergeant Jones. How might I help you?"

"This is Father O'Malley at St. Ann's Catholic Church. There's a kookaburra lying dead on my front lawn and I wondered if you'd be so kind as to send someone over to take care of the matter."

Sergeant Jones, considering himself to be quite a wit, thought he would have a little fun with the good father. He replied, *"Well now Father, it was always my impression that you people took care of the last rites."*

There was dead silence on the line for a long moment.

Then, Father O'Malley replied, *"Aye, 'tis certainly true; but we are also obliged to notify the next of kin first, which is the reason for my call."*

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