

## Eric Piper, Senior Plant Inspector – 47 Years of Service with the CRB and RCA

Eric Piper began his long career as an apprentice fitter and turner with the Country Roads Board (CRB) on 12 November 1940. He retired as Senior Plant Inspector on 4 July 1987 after 47 years of service from the CRB and its successor organisation, the Road Construction Authority (RCA).



1940-45 - Learning the trade – Eric is 2<sup>nd</sup> from left



4/7/1987 – Eric's retirement. L to R – Peter Robinson, General Manager Plant Branch; Eric Piper; Ian Stoney, RCA Chairman and Managing Director  
The road sign was a retirement present.



*4/7/1987 Eric (RHS) with RCA Chairman and Managing Director, Ian Stoney, at Eric's retirement*

### **Early Years – Apprenticeship and Wartime Service (1940–1949)**

Eric began his apprenticeship as a fitter and turner at the CRB Montague Street Depot in South Melbourne in November 1940. At the time, his pay as a first-year apprentice was the “princely” sum of 7 shillings and 6 pence per week.



*CRB Montague St, South Melbourne No. 2 workshop.*

*Faces include: Eric Piper (3<sup>rd</sup> row, 3<sup>rd</sup> from right next to chap in grey coat), Stan Ritchie (front right with the dust coat on), Tommy Sutton (back middle last row with glasses), Ted Wright (ex Stores far right with glasses) and Gordon David (3<sup>rd</sup> from left ex Stores) In the background is an Oliver FDE bulldozer.*

Most apprentice fitters at the time spent three months in the Stores before moving to the one of the two Workshops, but wartime needs soon sent Eric further afield.

In 1942–43, he worked repairing mechanical plant and helping reconstruct and seal the Sturt Highway in the Northern Territory. He also worked in the Licola, Traralgon, Mayfield, and Maffra districts. Life in the field was rugged. If lucky, one might have a hut with a wood stove and straw mattress. Travel was often by train, or in remote areas, by horse and pack-horse. In the immediate post-war years, Eric continued maintaining CRB plant across Victoria, with fond memories of Licola, the Reefton Spur Road beyond Warburton, Essendon and Laverton airfields, Point Cook, and the Big River near Eildon.



*Bulldozers clearing for roads. Eric and the CRB crews used CRB equipment to clear breaks during bushfires*



*Working conditions in the field*

### **Travelling Fitter and Turner - The 1950s**

Before there was a network of CRB workshops across Victoria, Eric served widely in the Benalla, Bairnsdale, Traralgon, Ballarat, and Horsham divisions. His reputation grew for “getting things done” and for always being there when help was needed. Known for his preparedness, he carried in his utility an axe, shovel, grease gun, set of spanners—and a rifle, the latter sometimes ensuring “the cooking pot was filled with good food.”

Accommodation in these remote areas was basic—tents or makeshift huts, sometimes fashioned from old bitumen drums. Time away from home often stretched to a month or more.

### **From Fitter to Inspector – Mid-1950s**

Eric eventually moved from fitting to inspecting, still based at Montague Street. As a Plant Inspector, he travelled extensively throughout Victoria. Working closely with Roy Wade, Supervising Mechanical Engineer, Eric helped develop the CRB’s plant service and preventative maintenance program. One of the first sites to use this system was Matlock on the Yarra Track Road.

Though officially an Inspector, Eric still stepped back into a fitter’s role when needed. During the mid-1950s construction of Avalon Airfield, he was in charge of plant repair and servicing. He played similar roles at Essendon Aerodrome, Point Cook, Mangalore, and Army Stores at Boronia. Many of the men he worked with on the Avalon project—such as Les Upton (Benalla), Alec Cannane (Warrnambool), Hayden Brayshaw (Traralgon), and Joe Connley—later became Senior Foremen in the CRB. Their teams became known for keeping plant breakdowns to an absolute minimum, a standard repeated at Koetong Creek in the Traralgon area.

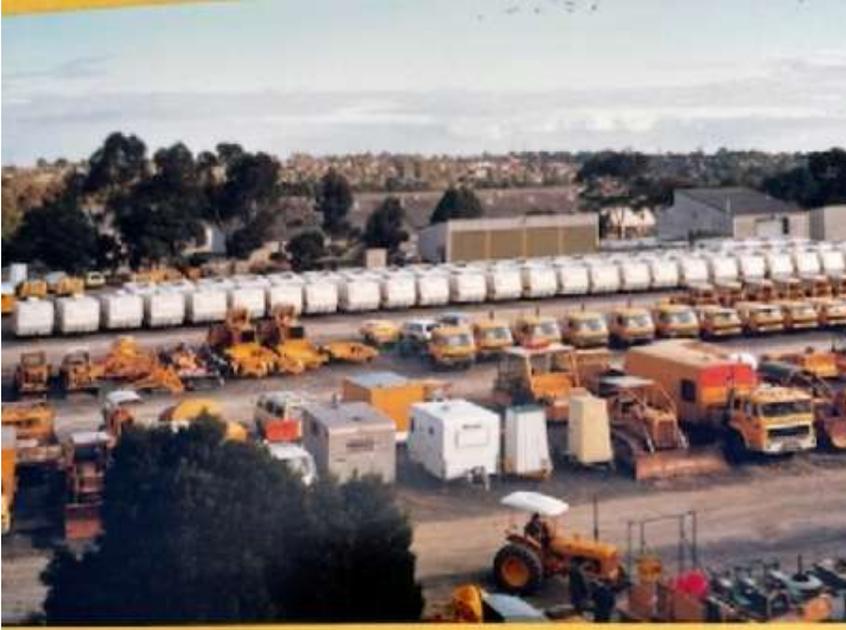
### **Senior Plant Inspector – Syndal Depot (1959–1987)**

In 1959–60, Eric joined the Inspection team based at Coleman Parade, Syndal, as Senior Plant Inspector under Assistant Chief Mechanical Engineer Thurston Ashcroft and Mechanical Engineer Jim McConachie. The team included 11 Plant Inspectors, 2 Plant Testers, and Instructor Drivers. Their role was to ensure all new and repaired plant was tested and approved before being sent to the field. The Syndal Depot also supported community works, such as building school grounds at Ferntree Gully, Waverley, Box Hill, Bentleigh, and Brighton. Once-a-year activities included setting up items of plant on the topside of Coleman Pde for children to look at and play on during the annual Christmas Party.

The Syndal site included:

- Workshops for welding, small plant, heavy plant, steel fabrication, carpentry, hydraulics, and painting/signage
- Dynometers
- Inside and outside wash areas
- Electrical workshop
- Overhead cranes
- Inspection area
- Plant storage, with all equipment fuelled and ready for allocation, as well as plant under repair

In a new Depot and with new arrangements, new ideas were forthcoming, and the preventative maintenance and inspection systems were developed along the principles which remain valid decades later. Whilst so much was achieved, it took 15 years to get an Inspection Pit established.



*Photo 1 – Plant and machinery at Coleman Parade, Syndal*



*Photo 2 – Graders lined up ready for action at Coleman Parade, Syndal*

### **Army Reserve Service (1959–1967)**

Parallel to his CRB career, Eric served in the Army Reserve with *the 104th Squadron of the 22nd Construction Regiment* from 3 September 1959 to 7 June 1969. Rising from Sapper to Warrant Officer Class 2, he participated in camps at Site 17, Puckapunyal; Casula, NSW; and at Weewak, New Guinea, where the Regiment built a bridge. Other camps included building a 180 foot two span bailey bridge in ten hours to allow access over the Campaspe River near Axedale while the main bridge was being redecked.



*Warrant Officer Eric Piper instructing a sapper from the 104 Construction Squadron*

One of Eric's Army colleagues, Major Bob Addis, was the Assistant Chief Bridge Engineer, CRB's Bridge Branch.

### **Life Beyond Work**

Eric was an active skier during the 1950s at Rocky Valley, Mount Hotham, and Lake Mountain. In summer, he was deeply involved with life saving. At Brighton Life Saving Club, he served as Captain for about ten years, later becoming Vice-President. He was also a Foundation Member of the Anglesea Life Saving Club in its early days, when surfboards were 16 feet long and required strength and determination to ride; and Life Member of both clubs.

### **Legacy**

Eric Piper's 47-year career—spanning the CRB and RCA—was marked by loyalty, skill, and a readiness to serve both his organisation and the broader community. From the tough conditions of wartime road building to the structured systems of modern plant inspection; his work helped shape the standards of road construction and maintenance in Victoria for nearly half a century.



1987 - Eric Piper and Bruce Grayling, Syndal

*In 2025, and 38 years post Eric's retirement, his then colleagues (via CRB/RCA/VicRoads history Facebook page) continue to remember Eric as "a ripper bloke, an absolute gentleman, well known and respected" whose frequent phrase was "an inspection cannot be rushed".*

**The above was provided by his daughter and son, Tracee and Greg Piper.**