

# *My Cancer Highway*



A very personal look at how  
one man handled the sentence of  
cancer and ~~tried to get~~  
**GOT RID OF THE ENEMY**

*John Mead*

# *My Cancer Highway*

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## **MY FAMILY**

### **My wife**

Amazing Milica; we met in 1980 & married in 1982

### **My children**

Christopher, Joanna & Daniel

### **My Grandchildren**

Harriet, Anouk, Sam and Tessa

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

### **My GP**

**Dr Andrew Small, Waterloo, NSW**

My GP for over 25 years, and who responded with speed and concern

### **My Cancer Surgeon**

**Dr Chris Hughes, St Vincents Hospital, Darlinghurst, NSW**

Head & Neck Surgeon who saved my life

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**2006**

## **LEADING UP TO THE DAY WHEN MY WORLD STOPPED**

2006 looked like a good year, at the beginning!

Turning 60 – “the new 40”.

My youngest son planning a working holiday to Canada.

My business overcoming a major obstacle.

Milica & I planning GOTE2008 (Golden Oldies Trip Europe in 2008).

A new grand-child expected to my daughter and her husband Adam.

Milica & I were quite fit for a “couple of oldies”;

- Winning a tennis competition – on top after 10 rounds,
- Winning the semi-final and then,
- Winning the final,
- Some of the couples we played against were 30+ years younger than us, so to win was very satisfying.

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## 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday Party

Planning my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party took some months. Firstly selecting the venue, how many to invite, do we have a theme, the invitation, etc, etc. The night in late July was lots of fun for the 60 or so who attended to celebrate with my family and friends. Even my 2 granddaughters (11 & 5) were thrilled to be at an “adult party”, plus Sam, my new grandson (almost 3 months old) made an appearance. I too was thrilled. It was fun with lots of cocktails, wines, champagne plus the venue put on plenty of delicious food.



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**In 30 of the years that lead to the day when my world stopped,** actually up until 1995, I operated licensed premises; restaurants and especially hotels (pubs), where my best customers were heavy drinkers (which of course I actively encouraged), and heavy smokers. They would sit at the bar, in front of the beer taps, smoking, and of course blowing smoke over me all day.

Never did I fully appreciate the potential damage these scenarios may have caused. It never occurred to me either that I was surrounded by ill-health, with many of my customers experiencing a multitude of health issues; people got sick, many failing to heed the warnings of their doctors, preferring to take the advice of their drinking mates, which was to “**change doctors**”! No doubt over the years many died from various alcohol and smoking related issues. I never considered that I would get sick. I was active, never looked like the typical publican and I had not experienced any health issues.

I certainly had not confronted a major health issue, especially in one of the most vulnerable areas of my body, my neck. Cancer in my neck of course could never have been contemplated, and especially that in mid-2006 it may have already compromised my carotid artery, meaning the spores may already be moving around my body. That was a most disconcerting scenario.

## **The impact was massive:**

- Would I survive the surgery? I had to confront my mortality!
- Did I want to survive the surgery? The potential outcomes, as explained by the doctors offered poor prospects!
- Would I be disfigured?
- How would my life change?
- How would it effect Milica?
- How would it effect my children and grandchildren?

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**But, in late 2015**, as I finalise this book, I celebrate that I will soon be a nine (9) year cancer survivor. I have a saying when discussing my good fortune:

***"I'm still here to complain about my problems"***, pretty much sums up my feelings.

I still have issues, like:

- **Swallowing** is an ongoing issue, every meal, every snack, every drink, every cup of tea or coffee; **every day**. Unless I concentrate swallowing is difficult and sometimes results in uncontrolled coughing (and throat clearing) for minutes – quite disconcerting for those around me,
- **Excess saliva** accumulates in my throat requiring constant clearing and often "hawking" which is not pleasant for my wife especially, and anyone around me,
- **Neck cramps** occur regularly on the area around the scar, especially when looking to the left for even a short time. Like any cramp, it is sudden, hurts and still shocks me,
- **Protecting the eradicated skin** on my face & neck; I must say in OVER 8 years I have not been caught out, due to being very vigilant,
- **Publican's voice:** from once having a very loud Publican's voice, and being a professional speaker/trainer, I live with, on a multiple times a day basis, difficulty in speaking with people, being heard in crowds, being understood on the phone, ordering anything (food, drinks, tickets, etc) and the occasional speaking event.

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## LUMP

Only days after my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday I went to my GP (of 16 years) about a lump I thought was a swollen gland. My doctor noticed my tonsil on the left side was very swollen. Two courses of antibiotics later, but no change to my tonsils, or the lump, so off for an ultrasound, which reminds me that you **HAVE TO LAUGH**. I was mentioning this to a female colleague, but could not remember the word “ultrasound”, referring to it as “one of those things women have (meaning during pregnancy). But she interpreted it as a PAP smear! General laughter all round, and we still laugh about it.

The ultrasound indicated a large mass in my neck, basically under my left ear. With this news I started to realise that this was not the news I was seeking. My GP then referred me back to the imaging centre for a CT scan. Questions prior included:

- **Are you are smoker?** No, never have been, but I was a passive smoker for 34+ years’ operating restaurants and hotels before anti-smoking laws,
- **Do you drink alcohol?** Yes,
- **How much?** Honest answer – I try to have 2 alcohol free days a week and probably 4 standard drinks on the “drinking days”,
- **Other questions** about diet, sleep, work, exercise, etc, etc.

The results again looked bad, so another test was organised by my GP, a PET scan (Positron emission tomography) at RPA Hospital in Camperdown. Forty five minutes “strapped” to a slab, ears blocked and being slid into a marvelous machine that sounded like a jet engine warming up was tough, especially pumped full of “nuclear waste”, or a tracer to detect cancer cells. The 3 dimensional images give more definition of the mass, and as I started to understand later, the problems to be uncouncted by surgery during an operation to remove it and to minimize nerve damage. I counted, slowly, up to 1,000, then



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back to help distract what was going on. All I could see was a small mirror and looking at my eyes, which I preferred to keep shut.

My GP then referred me to Head & Neck Surgeon, Dr Chris Hughes, who examined the intelligence to date, thoroughly examined me, including fingers down my throat to “feel” the mass from the inside, and photos of my throat. He then proceeded with what he thought “it” was:

- 1 More than likely benign,
- 2 Probably been growing for some time, but just became aware of it,
- 3 Not helped to have been a passive smoker,
- 4 Surgery necessary.

If cancerous, an operation is even more important, especially to remove all the cells, and to rule 3-4 months out of my life, not only time in hospital, which could be 7-10 days, but time devoted to radiotherapy and possibly chemotherapy together with rehabilitation specialists for voice and swallowing.

The results to date were considered by a team of specialist doctors, at the Head & Neck Clinic which meets weekly at St Vincents Hospital. I actually did not actually meet any of the doctors, but was told they included a range of specialists which included my surgeon, radiographers, even a dentist.

I was invited into a room where all the specialists were gathered, some in suits, some clad in white surgical gear, and all proceeded to look, poke and probe my mouth, throat & neck. Later I was told that all agreed that a fine needle biopsy should occur as soon as possible to ascertain what the tumour was.

So this thoroughly unpleasant and painful procedure took place on a Thursday where the radiographer “took” 5 samples to be analysed by pathology. I was in shock afterwards, with a thoroughly bloodied back of my head, and a sore neck.

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## **THE “NEWS”**

Milica and I met Dr Hughes, the surgeon, the following Thursday, 1 week after the fine needle biopsy. To this point my wife was confident that it was not cancer, rather a benign growth. However from the start of the tests I was very pessimistic, which I guess I reflected on at the time, and especially later, kept me focused, working and completing a number of work projects, starting new staff to take over my role in my business. I had to take the surgeon’s advice “to rule 3-4 months out of my life”.

So when the news came...”I’m afraid to tell you that the tests have come back which indicate a fairly aggressive cancer which will require a radical neck dissection and possibly a mandible split and swing to allow greater access to the tumour site even possibly via the throat”.

At this point I was numb, and Milica nearly fainted and had to lay down on the surgery floor. The surgeon advised us, after getting her a glass of water, that it is not an uncommon reaction for a spouse or partner. For the next 30 minutes the realisation started to really sink in – 1<sup>st</sup> time in hospital, an operation that is considered a radical neck dissection, splitting my jaw (lip, etc), radiation after. Then there were lots of forms to fill in and sign as the “patient”, dates set, etc, etc.

After, we visited my daughter, her husband, Adam, and their baby son, Sam, and we all cried. It was very emotional and confronting for all of us. Later I dropped my wife off at her work and I drove to Penrith, about 1 hour from Sydney, for a business meeting. I was effectively able to block out the severity of my situation and discuss business with a clear head.

The weeks leading up to my operation really flew as I kept myself busy at work finalising projects, organizing replacement staff, etc, etc, aided by my very effective, efficient and caring secretary who would do all the little, and big things required to keep my office operating, especially

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responding appropriately to emails and advising clients of my situation. My secretary started with me 3 years prior and had developed into our Administration Officer – in reality my right hand person – and I planned for her to work with my wife, a financial controller, and to communicate as often as necessary to pay creditors and chase debtors, keep the business “ticking over”, etc. They did a fantastic job. I actually only told a few clients, not wanting to alarm the majority, or cause unnecessary concern. In other words it was business as usual.

In the week prior to the operation I met the anaesthetist who had lots of questions, weighed me, and went through his role during the whole procedure. Then I met the dentist who would try and save my teeth following radiation. He made moulds of both upper and lower sets of my teeth which I was to use several times each day, filled with an intensive fluoride treatment, in an attempt to get them as strong as possible.

We also met the reconstruction surgeon and later the vascular surgeon, who were both amazing. The reconstruction surgeon absolutely bombarded us with so much information and details of what he may be required to do. It was information overload with drawings of how he would reconnect/repair the nerves if they were compromised, a patch to the throat if necessary and the complications that may occur, and putting my jaw (after the mandibular split) back together. He was just so professional, knowledgeable and most important, so reassuring with comments like ***“this is not the first time we have done a procedure like this”, “you will be Ok, but it will take some time, so you will have to be patient”***.

By contrast, the vascular surgeon was like going from the sublime to the ridiculous. His attitude was ***“I don’t think any of that will be necessary, so there will not be much for me to do, so I will just be telling the team dirty jokes”***. ***“If I get involved it will be because the situation has become serious. I will then be replacing your***

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**carotid artery as it has been compromised by the tumour by taking an artery from your thigh. But from the x-rays that is unlikely.**” He was also very reassuring saying that the team has a lot of experience with highly successful outcomes, so **“you are in the best hands”**.

My final consultation with the surgeon occurred on the Monday morning prior to surgery. He again went over his operating options:

- Possibly 6 – 8 hours,
- The aim is for an 85% recovery and return to my former self,
- A surgical cut from under my chin, following an existing crease or line in my skin, then up and on either side of my left ear,
- Pulling the separation up and down to examine and locate “the enemy”,
- Once located, hopefully remove all the tumour in one mass,
- A vascular surgeon to attend if problems encountered with my carotid artery,
- Possibly a mandibular split and swing (this terrified me more than other aspects, and despite seeing photos of patients after recovery seemed positive, but this procedure seemed ghastly)
- A reconstruction surgeon to then put me back together.

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## SHAVING OFF THE 40 YEAR OLD BEARD

On the Monday evening prior to my surgery, my children joined us for dinner and to experience the moment my beard of 40 years was shaved off. They had never seen their father beardless.



After an enjoyable dinner and a few glasses of wine, my eldest son produced his head shears (he is often “cleaned domed”) and with much laughter and the clicking of cameras he very carefully trimmed down to #2, then #0. The appearance was pretty strange, not only the look but the feel to me. But my moustache still totally dominated my face, and so after dessert the “mo” was attacked. First one side came off. Lots of laughter followed. Then the other side was attacked. So finally clean shaven, after 40 years, I went off to my bathroom to “meet this stranger”, and have a full shave. Very clean shaven now, so the doctors will be happy. The funny thing though was that with the grey beard all gone, I looked younger!!!

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I actually started growing the beard and moustache when in London in 1966, then it remained unshaven while travelling through Europe during the first half of 1967. Arriving back in Australia mid-year in 1967 I trimmed it, and it looked OK, so it remained part of me for the next 40 years.

I was advised that the beard would not grow back on the areas suffering radiation therapy. We shall see....

The weird thing still to me is that I never felt sick, was not in any pain, and looking at the above photo, I look in good health. But I had been diagnosed with a cancer and advised without immediate and radical surgery it would kill me before Christmas.

The day before the operation was basically spent at home with Daniel, my soon to be international traveler son, and just preparing myself for the ordeal ahead. A nice dinner felt a bit like the last supper, a couple of glasses of wine, a bit of TV, but a very restless night with little sleep saw dawn break and a complete lifestyle change ahead.

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## **THE DAY OF THE OPERATION**

**Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> October 2006**

I was relatively calm on the morning of the operation. “Nil by mouth” from midnight were my directions, and I was still able to have a normal bowel motion that morning, usually only achieved after breakfast, so a good start. You may laugh about raising this issue, but let me tell you, this question is part of the nursing staff’s daily questions.

We picked up an old friend of Milica’s in the city at 7.30am, who was going to be moral support for Milica during the day, and we proceeded onto St Vincents Hospital Xavier Building for the required admission at 8.30am. We joined a room full of maybe 20 people there either for day surgery or friends/family there as moral support. I was called to a desk and asked did I know why I was there, were the following details correct and I was asked to sign on the appropriate lines, had a name tag placed on my wrist and asked to sit down. A short time later a nurse asked me to follow her into the change area and Milica accompanied me to take possession of my clothes. My wedding ring had come off for the first time in 24 years together with my long term neck chain and my watch and I was naked except for paper pants (bloomers – 1 size fits all!!!), paper shoes and a hospital gown which was very complicated to tie up and I appreciated Milica being the required extra pair of hands. I kissed and hugged Milica passionately, or as close to being passionate in a hospital pre-op room with another 6-8 patients all lying down and trying to relax. After Milica left, I too was trying to relax and I starting to feel scared and emotionally fragile. My previous brave front was proving not to be so brave at this stage. No one spoke.

Several of those waiting where wheeled off for their pre-op, and as you cannot stop the clock, my time finally arrived. This was not the anticipation of sitting on an international plane and waiting to take off, but rather the dread of the unknown. This was a feeling of inevitability, dread of not knowing what the results would be like, despite all the

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positives expressed. It was very definitely getting way outside my comfort zone. It was 10.45am. We were about to get rid of “it”, the “enemy”. We started calling “it” soon after the diagnosis.

I was wheeled backwards into a room with 2 anaesthetists talking to me and explaining what they would be doing and that operation would not be occurring for a little while yet, and only when I was fully relaxed and totally unconscious. The last I remember was a mask going over my nose and mouth and being told to count out loud to 10. I don't remember anything past 2.

At 4.30pm the surgeon phoned Milica to advise that all had gone very well, that he had removed 99.5% of the mass, and that the 0.5% would be destroyed by the radiation therapy. He advised that a mandibular split was not required, only one (1) nerve (the one partly controlling my tongue) had been devoured by the tumour, and that the tumour was about the size of a large hen's egg and that I would require some time for the other 10 nerves to be fully active again meaning I would have a slight palsy look to the left side of my face – a bit like I had suffered a stroke. That I was currently being stitched by another doctor, and that I could see visitors in the ICU soon.

My first recollection after the operation was that my bladder was full (not possible due to the inevitable catheter, but I found out later that it was probably the morphine making me hallucinate), and I did a brief examination of my body. This was difficult due to various tubes, and a myriad of drainage tubes, drips and other connections, etc, attached to my left forearm. But with great relief I found my chin and realised that no mandibular split had occurred. I also became aware of lots of beeps and lots of odd noises, plus that my 2 little fingers on my right hand were feeling very numb, almost pins and needles. I felt my face and realised that from my left ear I was covered in strips of tape or medical gauze. I was very woozy and drifted in and out of consciousness. I realised that the room was actually quite bright and there was a lot of



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activity with other patients also being attended to. I think around 6.30pm Milica and Daniel visited and we held hands and Milica spoke about her phone call from the surgeon. The “enemy was gone”. What we had hoped for had been achieved. Then, 2 at a time, I had my first visitors – my elder son and his wife and my daughter and her husband.

I was still drifting in and out of consciousness, almost like a dream, through most of the night, but feeling no pain, except my 2 little fingers on my right hand still felt numb. At 4.45am I recall a lot of activity around my bed. I was asked to roll onto my right side as my bed was changed, then I was sponge washed and offered a moist sponge square to chew on to get some moisture into my mouth and down my throat. A little later I was aware another bed was wheeled into and placed next to my bed and I was asked to assist the nursing staff by crawling across onto the new bed. Little did I know my bed for the next few weeks. We had been told to expect 3 days in the ICU, then another 7 in hospital, so the move to Level 10 of St Vincents Private Hospital, seemed a very positive move. So about 10am I was wheeled into my room, with room for 2 beds, but I was the only patient so far, still attached to my “friend” for the next few weeks – my “friend” being the wheelie device that holds the drips of water, morphine and other drugs.

## **POST OPERATIVE**

Two (2) days after my surgery was Milica’s birthday. Suspecting, correctly, that she would be at work before visiting me, I organised earlier in the week, to have the biggest bunch of flowers delivered to her work. She was surprised and thrilled.

Settling into a hospital routine was quite different to what I expected. It certainly was not a time for rest and relaxation as it seemed that patients were continually being “nursed”, with my “vitals” being taken every 2 hours for the first few days – blood pressure, temperature, oxygen levels and heart rate – so a good night’s sleep was not possible. But at that early stage I could not lie flat as I asphyxiated,

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meaning I was unable to swallow my saliva and it wanted to go down my wind pipe. I learnt that we all produce about 1½ litres of saliva each day which is swallowed as a reflex. It partly helps to keep us hydrated. In the early days I was not really aware of my inability to swallow.

## **HOW I LOOKED**

Good thing no photos were taken of me as I must have looked a fright with a neck covered in bandages and looking like I had a stroke with the left side of my face quite droopy. But I didn't care as I was alive.

## **PAIN RELIEF**

I was told by various friends to just push the morphine button whenever I was in pain which I did for the first few days. However I began to realise that I did not like the morphine. As mentioned earlier it caused me to hallucinate and I quickly weaned myself off it, and dealt with pain with Panadol via the intravenous drips which proved to be very quick and effective.

## **NOISE**

There was so much noise and activity happening virtually 24 hours each day:

- New patients,
- Departing patients,
- Checking all patients regularly,
- Change over time for staff,
- Meal times/tea/coffee, menus,
- Taking showers,

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## OVER THE NEXT 10 DAYS

I was persuaded to get out of bed on about day 4. It was the last thing I really wanted to do. I was not thinking beyond the moment at that stage and everything was quite a blur. My “vitals” became less of a concern to the nursing staff so they were now only being taken about every 6 hours or so. And most likely I was starting to recover from some of the effects of the anesthetic. But I was still attached to the “central line” with 3 lines going off to my “friend”. I refer to it as my “friend” as it was so close to me for 10-12 days. It went everywhere with me, especially on that first walk. “**Walk**” I croaked not really comprehending that they, the nurses, had a plan for me. So with one on either side, still with a catheter attached, so no undies, the 3 lines to my “friend” still attached, I gingerly swung so my legs hung over the side of the bed. I needed to rest. That was hard work! I was also rather anxious. But they persisted, and the next thing I knew I was gently encouraged to stand up. WOW. Looking down at the world was an entirely new experience. “**Walk**” I again exclaimed as they encouraged me to lift one leg and so slowly I walked out into the corridor and down maybe 20m. Slowly we turned around, still with everything attached, including the 2 nurses.

## WALKING, WALKING, WALKING

I then started to walk at all times of the day, and night. At first just down the length of the corridor, passing sleeping patients, or visitors talking, but I gradually increased to one lap of the whole floor, probably 100m or so. Woohoo what an achievement! After a few days and into the next few weeks I increased to several laps at a time, then 4 or 5 laps with the nurses laughing saying I would wear the carpet out. The most I achieved was 7 laps. It became great physical therapy, and great mental stimulation.

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## “I’M STILL IN HERE”

### Margaret, my inspiration

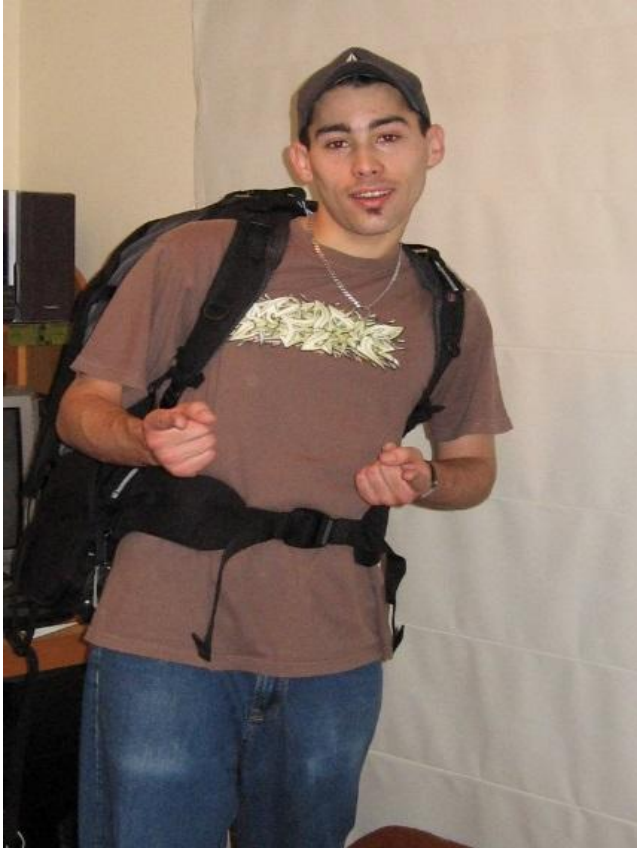
During my many walks I constantly passed a woman, who walked in the opposite direction, and who, like me, was constantly walking at all hours of the day, and especially nights. At first we just waved at each other as we passed like ships in the night. But one night I saw her seated, having a rest, and I sat down next to her and we started chatting. She must have had good hearing as she heard every word I said. We often chatted for 20 or 30 minutes. I learnt her name was Margaret and she was required to enter hospital regularly for treatment. The thing that stands out in my mind about Margaret was a story she told about what she often said to her friends who visited her, and it goes like this: “**Oh Margaret you are looking so tired/so pale**”, or any number of less than complimentary observations about her appearance. Her response was “**I’m still in here**”, and that to me at that time was very significant, very inspirational. Because like Margaret I probably looked quite unlike my normal self, but I was “**still in here**”. That has stayed with me to this day, and was so inspirational at the time, and still is.

## VISITORS

Visitors were always welcome and a pleasant diversion from the day to day life of being a hospital patient. Flowers, books, videos to watch later, even a huge box of fruit, which I looked at longingly wishing I could eat it. But with hardly any voice, just a whisper, it was extremely difficult to communicate. So with some I wrote my answers or questions down on a note book. That notebook, by the way, contained the early notes of this book.

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## **DANIEL LEAVING FOR CANADA Saying goodbye in hospital**



Daniel had planned a 1 year working holiday to Canada, and with his Mothers advice, and because he had been working in hospitality, decided rather than working outside in the ski fields, freezing his balls (!!), he should find a job in banqueting or functions in a large ski field hotel in Canada. Through one of my clients, an organisation that

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assists international students, both those travelling to Australia, and young Australians like Daniel, planning an overseas trip, he attended one of their open days for jobs in Canada, and signed, after discussing it with us, to work in Alberta's fabulous Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise. So while I was still in hospital, still connected to my "friend", Daniel called in with Milica in say "**goodbye**" on his way to the airport. Let me say how emotional that was. In fact we did discuss whether he should go prior to my surgery, and then after my surgery, understanding I was ok, we all agreed that nothing would be achieved if he stayed. So at the end of November, 2006, Daniel departed for his adventure in Canada.

## **LIFE IN HOSPITAL**

### **Eating & drinking**

I tried so hard to eat the meals I was provided, but it became very clear to me quite quickly, and the hospital staff, and doctors, that I was unable to swallow. Fortunately I was receiving some nutrition and hydration from the intravenous drips I was attached to, but they could not stay in much longer.

### **"FAT" INJECTION**

It was decided to take fat from my (rapidly shrinking) stomach and inject it into one of my vocal cords which was paralysed due to nerve damage from the surgery. It was felt it might make swallowing, and speaking better. So this procedure was carried out, but it did not help.

### **"PEG" tube**

By now it was becoming concerning that my ability to swallow was not going to improve. So it was discussed with me and decided that a semi-permanent "PEG" tube should be inserted to allow me to "feed myself". A PEG (Percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy) tube is an endoscopic medical procedure in which a tube (PEG tube) was passed into my stomach through the abdominal wall. I was told this required a fairly simple procedure to insert the tube into my stomach, with an end that, when required, attaches to a container filled with a special, highly

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nutritious liquid, that looks like a chocolate milkshake (but this one was NOT crunchy!), and that gravity allowed the liquid to enter my stomach. So the procedure was carried out and I was shown how to do it. For the next few months this was my very unsocial way of eating & drinking. But it kept me alive!

## I LOSE MY "FRIEND"

Following the insertion of the PEG tube I was ingesting a highly nutritious formula, together with as much water as I needed. It was then decided that the central line could be removed, and I lost my "friend" of several weeks. Unfortunately the nurse did not apply enough pressure to the wound, and I had a big bleed, with blood pouring out and soaking my bedding and clothes. Everyone moved very quickly & efficiently and they had me leak free very quickly. FREE at last, I walked and walked to celebrate.

## "IT'S TIME TO GO HOME"

One of the daily questions asked, as mentioned earlier, was "**have you moved your bowels today?**" Well with no ingestion of any solid food for several weeks, the answer of course was "**no**". But with the PEG tube and some good nutrition, things improved for my bowels, that together with various methods, or "encouragement" by the nurses (!!!), I was finally able to say "**yes**", and the final hurdle was overcome. So it was time to go home after nearly 4 weeks in hospital.

## EARLY DAYS AT HOME

I'll never forget that trip home. After being in hospital for several weeks the trip home was sensational – traffic, people, sunshine, blue sky, my front door, my bed.

But I soon realised all was not right with me. I had no energy, I could not walk to the letterbox, let alone to the corner – 25 meters!!! But the worst part was that sleeping was a disaster as I was used to a hospital bed that tilted, which enabled my head to be higher than my lungs, so my saliva (remember we produce 1½ litres a day) would not run down

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my esophagus and into my lungs, causing massive coughing. So on my second night at home I vacated to Daniel's bedroom and spent 30 minutes packing books under the bedhead to raise it off the floor. That problem solved....sleep was much improved.

## RADIOTHERAPY

I started radiotherapy at the Mater Hospital in Crows Nest about 4 weeks after surgery, when the skin had healed.

Day 1 consisted of the "**fitting of the mask**", running through what to expect at each session, energy levels, the burning of my skin, and then the first of 30 sessions, 5 sessions each week over the next 6 weeks.

The last one was due to finish on New Year's Eve.



**Bolted to the table; ready...waiting....**

After the first session, which was quite lengthy, each session lasted less than 5 minutes in total. It was accurately described to us as: "**you go in, you come out**".



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I must say each session was an ordeal, as I still had major issues with swallowing, which meant as the session progressed, even though it was less than 5 minutes, I was building up saliva in my throat, and it started to feel like I was drowning. However only once did I raise my hands calling for help, and the nursing assistants reacted very, very quickly, rushing in and unbolting me and helping me sit upright, to recover. Then back into the session.

## **WALKING TO THE MATER HOSPITAL**

From the 2<sup>nd</sup> session I was determined to walk to the Mater Hospital for every session, normally a 20 minute walk. The first time took me at least 45 minutes each way, as I needed numerous rest stops. But I did it, and it became not only good physical exercise but important mental stimulation. It was only in the last 2 weeks when my energy levels fell to zero, due to the radiotherapy, Milica needed to drive me.

## **PEG tube**

The PEG tube was not working properly and the community nurse, who Milica had organised for some assistance, recognised that the “liquid food” was in fact dispersing into the lining of my stomach, not actually into my stomach. She was very assertive, phoned the hospital, spoke to the doctor who had inserted it, and I was back in hospital that afternoon to have the PEG tube removed, and for a nasal-gastro tube to be inserted. Yuk. For the next 10 days I had the feeding tube running down my nose, through my throat and into my stomach. It was well timed as I did not miss one radiotherapy session. My nose, with the feeding tube attached, was put through the nose hole (see photo) for the next 10 days.

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## VOICE THERAPY

Prior to surgery I had a very loud, “publican’s voice”, and speaking was my trade as a vocational trainer and motivational speaker. Following surgery my voice was basically non-existent, just a whisper, despite several further surgeries to improve it. However it was recommended that I attend a speech therapy clinic at St Vincents Hospital, where the amazing Speech Therapists helped me learn how to articulate words using what I had still had use of in my voice box. I think they called it vocalising, which I practiced all day long, especially whilst walking to radiotherapy. “Oh, ee, ah”, plus about another 6 sounds. It must have sounded pretty weird coming from a bloke walking with a tube coming out his nose and tucked behind his right ear. Plus they taught me a technique to enable me to swallow, which I still put to use with every swallow, every meal, every drink, every day.

## CHRISTMAS 2006



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There was one week of radiotherapy to go when Christmas 2006 rolled around. I was feeling very burnt, and still looking like I had had a stroke.

Christmas day saw a gathering of family and close friends with a table groaning under a selection of seafood, cold meats and salads followed by a huge Pavlova & Christmas Pudding.



## **LAST RADIOTHERAPY SESSION**

The last session was on New Year's Eve and I must say how relieved I was when it finished. OMG. It's over, what an ordeal. We were just hoping it had done its job.

I felt absolutely buggered with no energy, and was so glad that Milica was able to drive me. The nursing staff asked if I wanted to keep the mask, and to their surprise I said yes. It still sits on top of the bookshelves in our office at home.

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## NYE

Later, early evening, we watched the NYE fireworks, well the 9.30am ones, from the balcony of Jo & Adam's Surry Hills unit with great views over the Sydney Harbour Bridge. We went home after 9.30pm as I was feeling exhausted

## 2007

### DR GALLAGHER'S CONCERN

#### SAN hospital for a day procedure

During a consultation with Dr Gallagher early in 2007, he expressed grave concerns about the condition of the scar. He spoke to Dr Hughes who immediately booked me in for a day procedure at the SAN Hospital, Wahroonga. Fortunately the specimens he had analysed proved "**clean**"- free of cancer.

## SURGERY NO 8

### Dr Gallagher; to improve speech & swallowing

It's hard to relate that whilst I was in hospital, I had 7 medical procedures requiring a general anesthetic. So in March, 2007, I underwent surgery No 8 with Dr Gallagher in an attempt to further improve my speech and swallowing. After anaesthetising me, and making an incision in my neck, I was partly awakened to enable me to try to vocalise whilst Dr Gallagher inserted different minute silicon wedges into my voice box. I said prior to the procedure that a voice like Pavarotti would be good!!! I remember it all very clearly, with the drugs keeping any pain at bay, and any anxiety about what was actually happening. The procedure did result in some improvements as hoped.

### “MARGARET’S NOT WITH US ANYMORE”

Whilst in St Vincents overnight, following the most recent surgery I was on the same floor, different room, to my long stay of late 2006. I knew some of the nurses and asked if they had seen my friend Margaret recently and was told that Margaret was "**not with us anymore**". She had passed away recently. I was very emotional, actually I am to this

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day, as she inspired me in my hours/days of deep depression and loneliness in hospital.

## WRITING TO MARGARET'S HUSBAND

I actually wrote to her husband expressing my sadness and he responded saying "**thank you, we miss Margaret too**".

## CAPPUCCINO!

I was getting very brave with my swallowing, and when visiting close friends, Annette & Bob, early in 2007, I was offered, and accepted a homemade cappuccino, from a very smart espresso machine. Well, it had been quite some time since I had enjoyed a cappuccino, so of course I said "**yes please**". Big mistake!!! I'm sure I was concentrating, I savored the smell, the taste, but when attempting to swallow it came straight out my nose and all over my shirt; it's called nasal regurgitation. Lovely!!! NOT. So a rush to the bathroom to clean up, and a most embarrassing apology. But they were very understanding. It still occurs to this day if I don't concentrate, like talking when eating – proves we should remember what our Mother's taught us!

## ALCOHOL – 1<sup>st</sup> taste

Now please don't think that I was an alcoholic. I did hold 7 liquor licences over my 34 years in the hospitality industry, and no doubt I did like a drink, at times probably too much. By April of 2007, I had been "off the grog" for close to 6 months, and with my swallowing getting better, and relying less and less on feeding via the PEG tube, and with more and more liquid going down the "normal" way, via the mouth, I thought it was time to try some alcohol. In reality, the liquid was mostly small amounts of lemonade, small cups of tea, etc. So one evening I decided to try a Scotch with ice and a splash of water, just like I used to enjoy. Well, having poured it out carefully, I sat down to enjoy it. BUT the scotch was so raw on my almost "virgin throat", I could barely swallow it, despite being very careful. Another sip was out of the question! Or was it? I could not throw it out, could I? So considering all

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the options, I topped the glass up with, of all things, Coca Cola, and that made things work better, and ever so slowly I did drink it. I postponed further attempts to get "back on the grog" for some time.

## EATING

Despite the "set-back" with the alcohol experiment, my eating and drinking was occurring without too many problems. Having said that my diet consisted of foods that were easy to swallow. Initially mango and other fruits, and any meats or vegetables that were cut up very fine, and with lots of chewing, I got it down using the technique devised by the speech therapists. Milica was wonderful in the preparation of my meals, and as with all things to do with my recovery, she was so, so patient.

## PEG TUBE REMOVAL

Despite the advice of the speech therapists, and my GP, I felt the PEG tube was no longer necessary as I was eating reasonably well, I no longer needed the PEG tube. So my means of sustenance was removed in late April. And I have survived. There is a concern that I may need a PEG tube again, sometime in the future, but hopefully, that will be a long time away.

## MY PHYSICAL STATE

Prior to surgery I was about 105kg. When the PEG tube was removed I was 85kg. I had lost 20kg which for any middle aged man was a blessing. I'm sure my knees appreciated it. But I had become so unfit, I was hardly able to walk to the corner! It was then that Milica said the now famous words... "**Why don't you get a personal trainer**". Well I did and to date, I have not stopped. At first, and for the next 3 months, I did have a personal trainer twice a week. Little Dianne was wonderful and gradually got me running and doing lots and lots of exercises, stretches and boxing, or more accurately, boxercise which I still do weekly. After 3 months I progressed and joined several different group exercises. Some months later I got back into tennis and in July of 2007

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we commenced a night tennis comp. I also started walking more and more, and then some years later, after we moved to Normanhurst I found bushwalking, and constantly walk 3 to 4 hour sections of the wonderful Great North Walk.

## MY EMOTIONAL STATE

A very close friend, Sue, who was one of Milica's tennis team members, and who was **"a person who knew all the 'right' people to see"**; doctors, dentists, etc, recommended I see a psychologist in Neutral Bay. I took Sue's advice and saw the psychologist several times as she was wonderful, and through her advice, I was able to put and keep everything in perspective. She advised me to look at, visualise and recognise what I had been through; as though I had been hit by a freight train, sent tumbling into a huge washing machine and for some time I had been trying to climb out, but the sides were very slippery and I had not been successful. The point was to recognise that I had been through a pretty rough time, be patient, think positively and in time I would climb out of the mire, the hole, I had descended into. Fortunately I have always been a very positive person and so I did indeed, ascend from the pits.

## GETTING BACK TO WORK

My business had continued whilst I was off work, thanks to Milica and my team of employees. It appeared that the Federal Governments initiatives in the VET (vocational education & training) sector offered great opportunities for my business so, after a lot of discussions, I appointed a General Manager to take advantage of these opportunities. She and I had worked together over a number of years as trainers and furthermore she had a great understanding of the VET sector. So we opened a branch near Newcastle, engaged staff both there and in Sydney, to manage the Australian Skills Voucher Program. And it grew and grew which was quite exciting.

By mid-2007 I was attending the office reasonably regularly and taking some of the strain away from Milica.

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## **SYDNEY ROYAL EASTER SHOW**

I decided to exhibit on the stand of a colleague, with moderate results. My Western Sydney Regional Manager volunteered to assist, and looking back, began the pursuit of acquiring the business. More of that later.....

## **JUMP START – Outdoor Training**

Heidi & Diane helped enormously in restoring me to a reasonable level of fitness. They showed me the way in 2007, and quite literally, to this day in 2015, I have not stopped.

Diane realised at the first session that I was very unfit, so she started a regime that at the end of 3 months, I was reasonably fit, probably fitter than I had been in years!! And I still do weekly tennis, boxercise and bushwalking. So a huge "Thank you" to all at Jump Start in Cammeray.

## **BUSINESS EXPANSION**

With a General Manager now an employee we had plans to expand the business by increasing our Scope of Registration into other areas, other than Hospitality, plus we engaged Contracted Trainers, approved to conduct all the required courses in Western Sydney, the central west in Bathurst and southern NSW in Wollongong. We also expanded into vacant offices on the same floor, effectively trebling our Sydney City training facility. And growth was occurring in all those areas, without a lot of my involvement

**“OMG....you have a what?”**

## **MILICA'S BRAIN TUMOUR**

In June Milica noticed the eyesight in her left eye was not as it should have been. Thinking she needed new glasses she went to our eye doctor who detected something not right and sent her to have some tests. The results showed she had a brain tumor. FAAARK. Why is this happening to us? She underwent brain surgery a week before my birthday, and I must say that day was the worst day of my life. Dr Cook, the neurosurgeon, saw me when he had finished the 6 hour surgery



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and advised that he had removed 90% of the benign meningioma and she was in recovery. I won't go into the graphic details of the surgery, except to say Dr Cook did an amazing job. However with steroids and a number of other drugs it did take her 8 weeks to fully recover. Then she became unstoppable; back to work and back onto the tennis court.

## 25th WEDDING ANNIVERSARY



6 weeks after Milica's surgery, was our 25th Wedding Anniversary and I wanted to do something special. So through my General Manager we organised a booking for a lunch at the Crown Plaza Hotel in Terrigal and I secretly invited 25 family members and close friends to join us. Milica is normally so on the ball, but with the steroids, she was unaware of my maneuvering, resulting in a wonderful surprise lunch, thoroughly enjoyed by us all. I even conspired with our close friends, Joe & Alison, to buy 3 dozen of one of their wonderful Verdelhos, and label it with a special label which was a photo of us on our wedding day. Everyone received a bottle as a memento of the occasion. We then stayed at the hotel for the next 5 days, allowing Milica more time to recover.

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## **FEDERAL ELECTION NOVEMBER 2007**

History will tell us that the Kevin Rudd led Labor Party romped to power which I believed would be good for my business. Little did I know that in early 2008 they would change the rules!!!

After 12 years of the John Howard Liberals being in office, the Kevin07 campaign saw a Kevin Rudd & Julia Gillard led Labor Party win the Federal election. My belief was that traditionally Labor Governments supported the Vocational Education and Training sector, so I saw no danger from a change of Government, especially as in the election campaign, Julia Gillard advised there would be no changes to existing programs. Little did I foresee the changes ahead of my business?

## **BY THE END OF 2007**

It was now approaching 1 year since Daniel had left for Canada and he had met, fallen in love with and married Willow. Milica had said to Daniel, "***just live with her***", unlike most Mum's to say something like that, but for Dan & Willow, it was part of their plan to enable Daniel to stay in Canada. It obviously worked.

We started to plan a trip to Canada to visit Daniel, & of course seeing Vancouver, maybe other parts of Canada too, and we planned it for April & May 2008.

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## 2008

Over a year had passed from my cancer surgery and my 3 monthly visits to my cancer surgeon showed no evidence of cancer.

## SURGERY No 9

### Dr Gallagher to improve speech & swallowing

In an attempt to improve my voice & swallowing I underwent further corrective surgery. As with the previous attempt, the previous year, it was only marginally improved. But we tried.

## EXERCISE

Walking commences, and I mean long walks over an hour, and often up to 2 hours, and **I can run again** plus my now weekly boxing classes, which I thoroughly enjoyed, except the 6am starts, especially in winter.

## 1st TRIP TO CANADA



## My Cancer Highway

Wow. Seeing Daniel for the 1st time in 15 months, and of course meeting Willow, were our main reasons...the highlights. We also timed this trip to coincide with a business conference in Las Vegas, assessable via a 2 hour flight from Vancouver.

After a good deal of research, and being advised to avoid flights via Los Angeles, we booked with Air Canada's very recently commenced, direct non-stop service from Sydney to Vancouver, in their new Boeing 777 200ER, in the lead up to the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. However we both had some health issues; would the "metal" plate in Milica's forehead set off the airport alarms? Her surgeon advised her it would not, and he was right. How would I be on a 15 hour flight? Swallowing especially was one of the big concerns during the flight! But it did not cause any major issues.



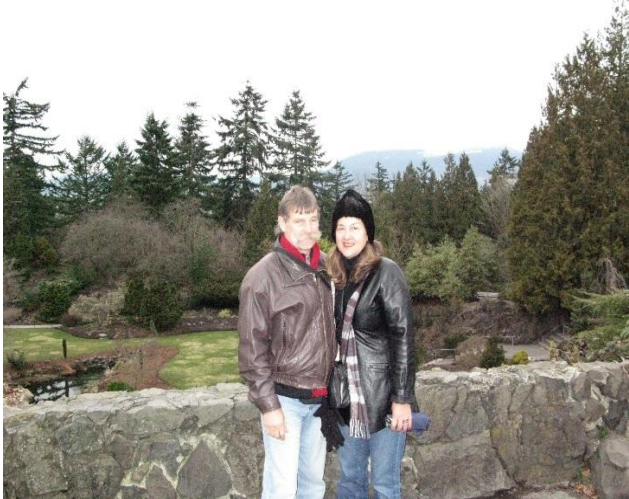
Vancouver's cold, and the rain, were hard, but not impossible to deal with. And, apart from the joy of seeing Daniel, and meeting Willow, we loved Vancouver and enjoyed many of its sights, tastes and scenery, including Whistler, Grouse Mountain, Capilano Gorge and Butchart Gardens as tourists. The conference in Las Vegas too, which was most enlightening.

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**Whistler.... WOW No wonder it is so popular.**

**Queen Elizabeth Park: Vancouver's horticultural jewel**  
A major draw for its gardens and floral displays.



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## **KEVIN007 & DEAR JULIA CHANGE THE RULES**

Another Federal Labor Government stuffs my business! Whilst in Las Vegas, our General Manager gave us some devastating news. Yes, 1983 revisited! 1983 was when our beloved ex-Prime Minister, when Federal Treasurer, changed the rules and made business lunches no longer tax deductible. The Sydney city restaurant we owned, and established by my parents in 1961, took 2 years to "**bleed to death**". Back in 1983, Milica & I had been married just one year and that change saw a successful business for over 20 years lose 40% of its business virtually overnight. However in 2008, to be advised that the new Federal Government had forthwith terminated the successful Australian Skills Voucher program was devastating. By successful, I mean the outcomes following training resulted in 85% of our graduates being placed in fulltime employment. That was not only a successful program, it was a wonderful result for my team of trainers, plus it was a good cash flow. We were told that a new program, the Productivity Places Program (PPP) would be implemented within 3 months! Wow, how exciting...NOT. And the payment structure for the PPP was based on post training payments, so nothing upfront. How do you manage that!! Well we found it impossible.

## **BACK TO COMPETITION TENNIS**

Yes, after an absence of almost 2 years, Milica & I started a night tennis comp, and I remembered the first time I walked out onto the court, I felt like Roger Federer must have felt when he returns to the Centre Court at Wimbledon. We lost quite badly to a couple we knew from previous comps, but we played the 10 rounds of the comp, and on to subsequent comps.

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2009

“SALE OF THE BUSINESS???”

Well that’s what we thought!

I was realising that I had totally misjudged my ability to make sensible decisions, mistakenly believing I was up to the task of performing as I did pre cancer. And I did not listen to Milica. **Big mistake.**

I thought I was handling everything well, but it was clear I was not. I was becoming anxious, especially with the changes initiated by the Federal Government which saw a massive downturn in revenue. Again we were slowly "**bleeding to death**". So, after being pursued for over 2 years, with many, many meetings, my Western Sydney Regional Manager and I agreed to a "sale" of the business. He and his business partner ran an engineering company and a labor hire business, so the merging of a training business, especially a Registered Training Organisation, with good Government contracts, and the ability to secure a range of ongoing Government training contracts in engineering, building, hospitality and aged care seemed to me to be a very good business mix. As he often told me, the RTO was his "**final piece of the jigsaw puzzle**". Although the business was, at that stage, not producing positive cash flow, a great business model was in place, with good staff including a General Manager who understood the VET sector, but which needed the introduction of some working capital. Both he and his wife being accountants carried out numerous due diligence checks of the business, the accounts, and contracts with suppliers till my staff were thoroughly sick of the invasion. When they were satisfied, I agreed to a "sale" of the business as by then I realised that it had all become too much for me. The "sale" was a substantial 6 figure amount with initial monthly payments stepping up substantially after 2 years, with the balance paid over a number of years. In retrospect it sounded too good to be true, and it was! One of the very fortunate aspects of the "sale" was that the new "owners" took over all responsibilities for financial commitments; office leases, equipment leases, etc, etc, and us standing down as Directors (very fortunate as it

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turned out). We did retain 50% equity reducing over time. All very complicated, but which I felt secured our future. Milica was never convinced of their sincerity, or ability, which proved to be correct.

## **KNEE**

### **Bugged my knee playing comp tennis!**

#### **Surgery No 10 – Dr Seeto fixed my knee**

Oh dear...playing a Saturday afternoon tennis comp, I stretched out wide for a backhand and felt a definite "snap", tearing a meniscus in my left knee. Bigger. After the x-rays and CT scan I underwent surgery No 10 to repair the damage. I recovered quickly and "gingerly" went back to tennis, social, rather than comp for the next 6 months, or so.

## **ALMOST MADE A EUROPEAN RIVER CRUISE!**

Through my Godson's girlfriend, we booked a fabulous European River cruise, flights with Singapore Airlines on their new Airbus A380, with time to be spent in Serbia and Germany. But sadly, the day before we were due to fly out, my father-in-law became seriously ill, and was not expected to survive for more than a few days. He passed away days later. The trip was cancelled, Daniel flew out from Canada for his Grandfather's funeral, which was held a few days after his arrival. Absolute tragedy for Milica, as with all daughters, she and her father were very close. Sofija (Milica's Mum) had recently suffered a stroke, one of many, and sadly was not able to attend the funeral.

## **THE BUSINESS SAGA**

From a number of sources, I was told the new owners of the business were doing a lot of really stupid things:

- Ignoring the advice of their new CEO, my General Manager,
- Changing the name of the business which had been established for almost 10 years,
- Terminating long standing business arrangements with organisations who supplied hundreds of trainees, and
- Moving premises.



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Many of their changes, I was told, were to "**rid themselves of the John Mead influence**". The results were confirmed in a number of audits I conducted, that the business was continuing to bleed money. Our future payments did not look too secure.

## **CANADA December 2009** **Our 2<sup>nd</sup> visit, and a cold Christmas**

We flew out of Sydney a week before Christmas on a beautiful summer morning of 30c and arrived in Vancouver, some 15 hours later, again flying with the very efficient Air Canada. We arrived early on the same day we left (go figure) at around 0c. Chilly? Yes, actually decidedly cold. We caught the Skytrain (driverless & mainly elevated) into the downtown area, and with a very helpful Canadian, who actually departed the train one stop early to guide us, we arrived and checked into our hotel late morning. Later we discreetly arrived at the bar Daniel was working in, and gave him a big surprise. Lots of hugs & kisses, plus a few beers, had a nice meal, and we were feeling quite good, despite the lack of sleep. The following 5 days were a blur, before we flew to Edmonton to spend Christmas.



**Yum Cha with Sandra**

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From the air, everything was white. Edmonton on the ground was -15c. WOW! Christmas Eve it got down to -30c. Now that is seriously cold. Needless to say, our week stay included NO outdoor activities, except walking part of the way down Candy Cane Lane, which has for the last 40 years or so, had the most magnificent display of Christmas lights and displays of nativity scenes. Fantastic, like nothing we had seen before. Yes, we did walk, while the kids drove off to get coffees, and it was sooo cold, but we took lots of photos, before the kids thankfully arrived back 20 minutes later with very welcome coffee and Kahlua.



Christmas Day was spent with friends, opening presents, some all the way from Australia, then Christmas Dinner was an evening affair, a wonderful buffet in a city hotel with quite a few beers and some Canadian wines from the Okanagan Valley.

One of the stand-out things for me in Edmonton was the sound the car tyres crunching as they drove over frozen roads. We flew back to Vancouver for our last 6 days before departing Vancouver at 11.50pm on 30<sup>th</sup> December and arrived in Sydney at 10am on New Years Day, missing NYE altogether. I had expected the crew to serve champagne, and for a bit of a party, but everyone was asleep I guess and all we got

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was a brief message from the captain to advise, some hours later that it was midnight in Sydney, and “Happy New Year”. Very low key! And a bit disappointing.

## **DECISION TO SELL OUR HOME**

Due to the bad management of new owners, our “partners” and the seemingly (now) unviability of the business, we felt we could not rely for too much longer on future payments of the business, and sadly decided towards the end of 2009 to sell our home of 7 years. It actually sold easily, and we achieved a sale price higher than expected. Fortunately, after quite a deal of searching, we agreed to purchase a large garden unit in Normanhurst, a northern Sydney suburb, in the “Bushland Shire”, with a simultaneous settlement 10 days after arriving back from Canada.

## **2010**

### **Move to Normanhurst**

Our new home was a large 3 bedroom ground floor unit with a large, but seriously unkempt garden, which became a major work in progress over the next couple of years. We love it, and it has proved a great entertainer.

## **BUSHWALKING COMMENCES**

Yes, I discovered the Great North Walk and walk at least one section, a 2, 3 or a 4 hour walk at least once a week. The GNW actually goes from Sydney to Newcastle, however, I have not walked north of the Hawkesbury River, although I have walked to Brooklyn, on the banks of the Hawkesbury River, a number of times. I have broken the Sydney to Brooklyn walk into 9 sections, each between 2 and 4 hours, and over the last 5 years, I have walked each section many times. I just love it after rain as the terrain & creeks change so much.

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## **NEW GYM/BOXING IN HORNSBY**

I started boxing, well "boxercise", in Hornsby soon after our move, and despite a number of different trainers, I religiously attend at least one session a week. It is quite a hard work out which seems to agree with me, and I find it challenging, but enjoyable. I met an older guy, who like me, enjoys a good hard work out. He and I enjoy good timing, which is hard to find with other people and our punching power is well matched. He is currently travelling "The Cancer Highway", and in 2015, is trying to deal with the after effects of surgery.

## **TENNIS AT ASQUITH**

Not competition, but I discovered generally good social tennis on Wednesday nights and attend whenever I can, which is most Wednesday nights.

## **SOLD BUSINESS COLLAPSES**

### **We have been done!!!!**

So where I thought I had my superannuation, and our financial future sorted, it was all not as it seemed. Frankly I made a grave error in "selling" my business in a deal that did reduce all responsibilities, although retaining equity. But it meant I was dependent on others making the correct decisions. Another big mistake!! Bad decisions were made; a change of name after 10 years of building up good will, expanding into unknown fields, despite my former General Manager, the current CEO's advice, etc, etc, resulted in close to \$1 million being "tipped down the drain". Consequently no dividends from profits, business is placed into liquidation, no ongoing superannuation. Very fortunately we were not exposed to any financial losses, or other debts.

## **FOR OVER 30 YEARS**

Milica & I have rolled with the constant changes to our lives, and despite all external influences, we are very happy & content together, if not at our financial position. But when you consider the situations others find themselves in, we are doing ok, and still ticking.

# My Cancer Highway

**NO SURGERIES IN 2010...woohoo**

## **MILICA's 60th**

In October 2011 we enjoyed a 12 day Pacific Island Cruise on P&Os Pacific Pearl to celebrate Milica's 60th birthday. Now that was relaxing.



We met some lovely people who we spent quite a deal of time with; cocktails every night, dinner together most nights, a few shows, etc.

As we were sitting waiting for our tender boat for a shore excursion to take us to the Pacific island of Lifuo in the Loyalty Islands, I realised that today was the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my cancer surgery. Now during those few moments, as we sat waiting, I reflected back and recalled that one thought I had going into surgery was that I was convinced I would not survive the surgery, and if I did, I expected the worst case scenario, and I did not wish to wake up as I was expecting a terrible outcome. However, our turn came to board the tender, which quickly brought me back to the present, and I reflected that it was almost impossible to have contemplated, back then, my current circumstances of the Pacific Island awaiting us. Life is good.

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Then, a week after our return we had a good party at home to celebrate with family and friends.



**2011; 2<sup>nd</sup> YEAR WITH NO SURGERIES...woohoo**

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**2012**

## **Younger Meads move to Melbourne**

My elder son Chris was head hunted, and he and his family moved to Melbourne early in January 2012. Consequently we visited in March, actually with Daniel, who was on holidays from Canada, and had a lovely stay.



**Walking in Melbourne; Dan with Chris and Tessa**



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## **Joe sick**

We became aware around Christmas 2012 that our dear & very close friend Joe was becoming sick. It was later established that he had cancer of the esophagus and he commenced treatment that he hated. He & Alison stayed overnight at our place over the next 6 months prior to Joe's treatment at the SAN Hospital. It was so sad to watch our friend, and Alison, suffering so much. But he was determined to beat it.



**With Alison & Joe at Millfield in 2010**

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## **NO STOPPING THE BUSHWALKING**

### **At least twice a week now, and up to 4 hours**

I discovered the Great North Walk in 2010, but as with the finding the GNW, I ventured further afield and discovered many other similarly challenging tracks. It was heaven...

I discovered that I could break the 100KM of the GNW, from Sydney Cove to the banks of the Hawkesbury River at Brooklyn, into 9 different sections, each taking between 2 and 4 hours. My favourite is one of the most challenging, No 5, from Thornleigh to Hornsby, which takes about 2½ hours. The most challenging is to/from Berowra to Cowan whereas the longest is from Cowan to Brooklyn, which takes up to 4 hours.

Another favourite is from North Turramurra, down the Sphinx Trail to Bobbin Head, around to Apple Tree Bay, then along the waterway and up, up and up to Mt Ku-ring-gai Station. Or if I am feeling up to it, adding another hour, I continue around the waterways and then up, up, and up to Berowra for a train back to Normanhurst.

## **TOFS Inc**

Touring Old Farts; an organisation for retired & semi-retired men.

I was introduced to this group by close friend Bruce, and volunteered to be the Tour Organiser for the Ku-ring-gai Sub-branch

TOFS is a non-party political, non-sectarian and non-profit making, with a purpose to promote & advance health, wellbeing, intellectual and cultural interests among adult men, by holding regular activities to provide opportunities for fellowship, education, the development of acquaintance and social interaction.

As Tour Organiser we have visited:

Nan Tien Buddhist Temple in Wollongong, Centennial Park in Sydney, walked 2 short (easy) sections of the Great North Walk, visited the Jewish Museum and Great Synagogue, Mary McKillop Museum in North Sydney, Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour, Lavender Bay & Wendy Whitely's Magic Garden, the James Craig, Maritime Museum, Narrabeen Lagoon Walk, a Mosque, Railcorp Control Room, Coal Loader in Waverton. Walked from Manly to North Head (with a bit of

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help with a bus!), Garvan Institute in Darlinghurst, and Young Henrys Boutique Brewery in Newtown.

I have met some really good men and I thoroughly enjoy the outings, especially a beer or three with lunch in a pub after.

## **2013**

### **I discovered the joys of an anal fistula**

Oh yes. What fun!!!! **NOT** a pleasant discovery. There are no joys with an anal fistula. Over the next 18 months I had 5 surgeries (No 11, 12, 13, 14 & 15) with 3 colorectal surgeons all attempting to resolve the problem!!!! A real pain in the butt....**and finally joy**, some 18 months later.

### **QR CODES DISCOVERED**

#### **The start of a new business idea**

Indeed, early in 2013, I discovered QR codes, and 2 years after gaining that understanding, we launched Intelligent Compliance.

### **DANIEL VISITS AGAIN**

Daniel visited again in April and May for a 3 week holiday and how wonderful to see him again. He was very busy; firstly catching up with Jo, Adam and Sam with a lovely seafood feast at Brooklyn, on the banks of the Hawkesbury River, then with lots of friends, and of course he partied quite hard, so nothing has changed.

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**Seafood lunch at Brooklyn with Adam & Sam**

## *My Cancer Highway*



**At home with June, our next door neighbor  
& Christine (with her arm in a sling)**

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## **SAMS's 7<sup>th</sup> BIRTHDAY**

The day before Daniel was due to fly back to Canada was Sam's 7<sup>th</sup> birthday party, up at Carey Bay. A pirate's party was the theme and was enjoyed by all – kids, friends & parents and Grandparents.



**Sam's 7<sup>th</sup> Birthday party-PIRATES**



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## **MOTHERS DAY**

Daniel was due to fly back to Canada on Mother's Day, so another tearful goodbye and we headed off to have a Mother's day lunch. But due to heavy fog at Sydney Airport, his Air Canada flight was delayed 24 hours and he, and all the other Air Canada passenger were put up in nearby airport hotels. What a bugger for him as it delayed his time preparing for his 2<sup>nd</sup> season on the Rocky Mountaineer. Anyway we had a nice dinner together, again said our goodbyes, the flight took off as planned, 2 hours behind the regular flight, and he made the Rocky Mountaineer, but was a "bit" tired.

## **MY MOTHER-IN-LAW PASSES AWAY**

Sadly in August, Sofija, my mother-in-law's time had come, and at 93 she passed away – a very sad time for Milica.

## **RAW Challenge**



OMG – what have I agreed to do? Well, I agreed to compete in the RAW Challenge, a shorter version of Tough Mudder. I joined my daughter's gym team which consisted of 20 or so of us, and we set off in Doyalson, mid-morning on a Sunday morning, together with 100s of

# My Cancer Highway

other competitors, and we completed the 6KM with 30 obstacles in around 3 hours. Tough, but a lot of fun. We walked, splashed and climbed our way through more mud than I have ever seen before.

## JOE LEAVES US

Sadly when I arrived back at my daughter's home after the RAW Challenge, I received a message that our close friend Joe had passed away that morning. His suffering had ended. Why do the good people go too soon? We miss Joe greatly, and try to see Alison as often as we can.

## SAM'S STROKE - OCTOBER 2013

Unbelievably in late October our gorgeous little grandson, Sam, who was then 7½ years old suffered a stroke caused by an AVM (Arteriovenous malformation). An AVM is an abnormal connection between arteries and veins in the brain. It is usually congenital, meaning he was born with it. After major surgery and heaps of rehabilitation, as of July 2015, he is doing fine. One tough kid that one....



**Sam recovering after his stroke**



# My Cancer Highway

**2014**

## **AUSTRALIAN OPEN TENNIS - MELBOURNE**

For about the 20<sup>th</sup> time, we drove down to Melbourne for the tennis, and spent 5 consecutive days at the tennis, plus visited Chris and family, and lots of friends. I think we must be addicted to the tennis; we just love it, and the atmosphere.

## **VISITING THE YOUNGER MEADS IN MELBOURNE**

What a joy to catch up with Chris and his girls. A fun dinner in Lygon Street, pizzas at home, and lots of news of their lives.

## **DANIEL VISITS AGAIN**

Another visit, this time for the wedding of a good mate. Again we had a wonderful 3 weeks, lots of long chats, lots of home cooked meals and, yes, quite a few beers!

Prior to Daniel's visit I had booked for him & I to do an early morning abseil down West Head, organised by an old mate. But my back was a problem, and I was suffering severe pain, so I asked Joanna to do it with Dan. And she did, both expressing how nice it was to spend so much time together.



**Dan & Jo about to abseil down West Head**

# *My Cancer Highway*



**Almost back up, 3 hours later.**



**"Shorty" with Dan & Dave Tucker**

# My Cancer Highway

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH MY BACK!!!!

### Microdiscectomy – surgery No 16

One morning in early February I woke and could hardly get out of bed; my back felt really "out". It was probably as bad as any back pain I have ever experienced. Over the next few days every aspect of my life was difficult, and I was in constant pain. After several visits to my Osteopath of 20+ years with no relief, I attended a Chiropractor in Hornsby, but again, no relief. Now, being quiet desperate, I sought advice from my wonderful GP, who advised X-rays which revealed nothing was amiss. Finally he recommended an MRI which revealed I had suffered a bilateral herniated disc at L5. He referred me to Milica's neurosurgeon who very fortunately saw me quickly (school holidays). His advice was that it was quite serious, he had space in his schedule, and he could "**do me**" 2 days later. So the next day I entered hospital and a microdiscectomy sorted my back problem.

## RECOVERY

Very fortunately, and being quite fit, my recovery was quick and I returned to my bushwalking, boxing and tennis progressively after 6 weeks.

## BOYS' WEEKENDS

In mid-2013, 2 mates and I started our now famous (well for us anyway) Boys' Weekends. These occur about 4 times a year. We always leave on a Friday afternoon and we spend 2 nights at each destination, which have included Patonga, Morriset (on Lake Macquarie) – the first time we used Brett's boat, Bar Point, on the Hawkesbury River, upriver from Brooklyn - Brett's boat again, Carcoar (on a mate's property), Bar Point again, Rylestone (near Mudgee), Coalcliff, just south of Sydney and Oberon. Bruce cooks dinner on Friday night, I do breakfasts and Brett, the chef extraordinaire, does a magnificent dinner on Saturday evening, generally spends all afternoon preparing and we wash all those meals down with some excellent beers, wine and even the occasional cocktail.

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## 3<sup>rd</sup> TRIP TO CANADA & DANIEL'S 30<sup>th</sup> BIRTHDAY

Our first 2 trips to Canada were both in winter; February 2008 and December 2009, and for Aussies it was bloody cold. Vancouver, at around 0c, was OK, but when we arrived in Edmonton it was -15c, and got down to -30c on Christmas Eve!!!! WOW, now that is seriously cold.

However, in August 2014, we travelled to Canada again, primarily to celebrate Dan's 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. This time we flew with Qantas via Los Angeles, on an A380, which was a great experience, especially when I found some likeminded Aussie guys who asked me to join them in a lounge area drinking "some Johnnie Walker Black' from 1<sup>st</sup> class. "Oh OK, thanks. That's great. Just a little ice & water". Well, we had a lot of fun until told several hours later by fellow passengers trying to sleep to "**Shut up and sit down**". Opps...but it certainly helped pass the time!!

The only bummer was transiting through Los Angeles airport, which leaves a lot to be desired!!! However we arrived safely in Vancouver later the same day and as Daniel was working, we had 2 days to explore this beautiful city again, this time in summer, so different to our previous 2 cold visits.

We met up with Daniel following his arrival back on his latest trip on the Rocky Mountaineer, and after lots of hugs and kisses, we enjoyed a wonderful Korean BBQ dinner, plus a few beers, we parted early as he was tired after 4 hectic days as a "host" on the Rocky Mountaineer. We agreed to meet the next day and catch the "Seabus" from downtown Vancouver across to North Vancouver and visit Capilano Gorge, Daniel's first visit in 8 years in Vancouver.

As this was Daniel's 3<sup>rd</sup> season as a "host" on the fabulous Rocky Mountaineer, he was eligible to invite his parent's for a "freebie". And it did not disappoint. Working as a "Host", Daniel is on the microphone constantly, together with his 2 co-hosts, and they totally entertained the 30 guests on one of the new Silver Service carriages, regaling all guests with the history of the area, the building of the

# My Cancer Highway

railways, wildlife and the magnificent scenery, together with serving great food and wine, snacks, tea and coffee. It was truly a wonderful 2 day experience.



**At Capilano Gorge, North Vancouver – magnificent**



# *My Cancer Highway*

**About to start our 2 day adventure**



**The end of the line for us in Jasper.**



# My Cancer Highway

After departing the train we spent 2 days exploring Jasper and surrounds, before heading to Edmonton to catch up with Sandra.



Milica & Sandra sitting on a Melbourne tram, yes a Melbourne tram in Edmonton. They call it a street car; it's a tourist trip in summer, and a gift from Melbourne City Council.



## *My Cancer Highway*

Edmonton in summer was delightful, with the temperature most days being over 20c, and the city looks wonderful, full of flowers; in window sills, in hanging baskets and communal and city gardens were breathtaking. So hard to comprehend that in winter it is so cold.

We then hired a car in Edmonton and spent a week driving back to Vancouver, via Banff, Lake Louise, Revelstoke and marveled at the spiral railway tunnels of Kicking Horse Pass, and were just in awe of this truly magnificent country with wonderful glacial feed lakes with the amazing colour, and multiple glaciers high up in the mountains. No bears were spotted, but we did see plenty of long horned sheep.



**The magnificent Banff Springs Hotel behind us.  
WOW. It truly is magnificent.**



# My Cancer Highway



**Lake Louise - where it started for Daniel in 2006**



## My Cancer Highway

The evening we arrived back in Vancouver Daniel had a 30<sup>th</sup> birthday party/BBQ at his home with a number of his friends. Being an Aussie, I could not resist cooking the BBQ, much to the appreciation, or was that amusement, of Dan's friends.

A couple of days later we visited Butchart Gardens on Vancouver Island with Dan, and marveled how magnificent it was in summer.



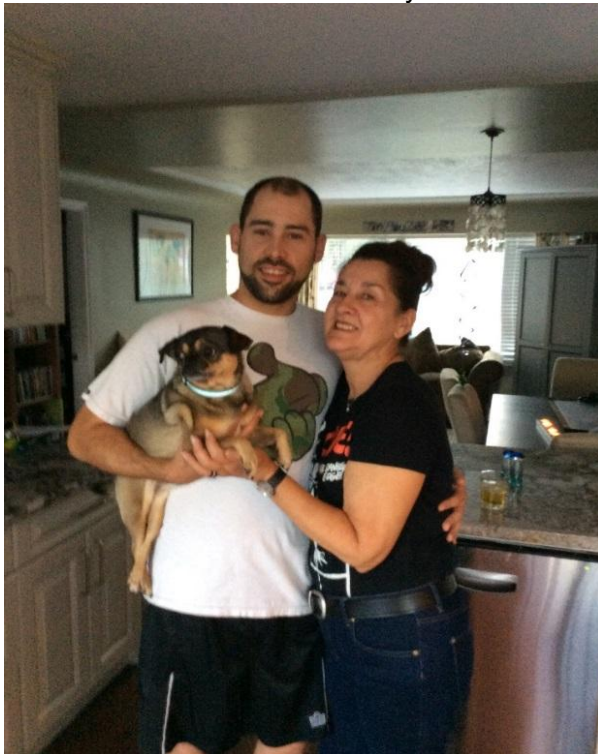
# *My Cancer Highway*

## **GOODBYE CANADA**

### **Until we visit again...**

We thoroughly enjoyed our last week in Vancouver, and agreed it was not enough time.

As we knew Dan would be away on the Rocky Mountaineer when it was our time to depart, we had a lovely meal, home delivered Chinese, at his home with all his house mates, all who work on the Rocky Mountaineer. House dog Marley was thoroughly spoiled by Milica who almost made it out the front door with Marley!!!



**House dog Marley**

# My Cancer Highway

The flights home were incident free, with Air Canada from Vancouver to LA, then a 4 hour wait from the big Qantas A380 back to Sydney. As good as the QANTAS A380 and crew were, next time we will definitely go with the Air Canada direct non-stop flight.

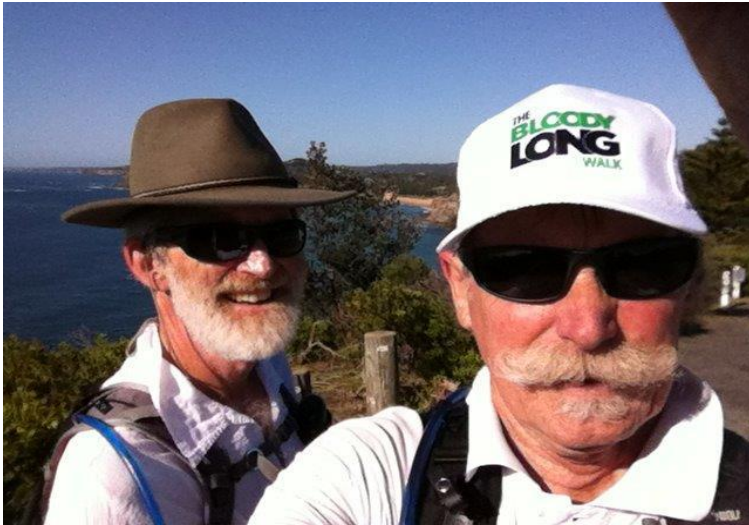
## MITO'S BLW

Midway through October 2014, I participated in The Bloody Long Walk, a 35km walk from Palm Beach to Manly's North Head to raise money for the Australian Mitochondrial Disease Foundation. I walked with an old friend, Barry.



**Start: 7am and we are 2 of 1,154 starters  
35KMs ahead of us all....**

# My Cancer Highway



Halfway, and going strong....



Finish: 2.21pm – 7 hours 21 minutes

## *My Cancer Highway*

As a 68 year old, walking 35kms seemed quite a challenge. And it was, with Barry & I taking 7 hours 21 minutes. But I managed remarkably well with no real after effects, other than being weary. Barry too survived with no long term ill effects, just his knees being much more uncomfortable for a few weeks. Not bad for a couple of oldies. Fortunately, it was a beautiful Sydney spring morning with a clear blue sky and reached about 23c by the time we finished. The walk followed the coast so magnificent views of beaches, great cliffs and the ever present Pacific Ocean on our left.

We raised a total of \$3,700 being part of \$282,000 raised in Sydney, and contributing to \$750,000 raised between Melbourne, Sydney & Brisbane for the AMDF – Mito Foundation.

I plan on doing the BLW again in 2015.

# *My Cancer Highway*

**VALE: Anthony Edgar Mead (Tony)**



**Tony with Daniel in 2008**

Sadly in March 2015 we lost my elder brother Tony. Although I was his younger brother, it seems that for the last 20 or so years, I was more like Tony's older brother.

He had been sick for some years but never really accepted the gravity of his health issues.

He will be missed by all who knew & loved him.

# *My Cancer Highway*

**My 69th Birthday - July 2015**





# *My Cancer Highway*

## **REGULAR CHECK-UPS**

The regular check-ups with my cancer surgeon have been annual for the last 5 years, and it is wonderful to now be on his list of longest surviving patients, although he is quite guarded about that.

## **STILL TICKING**

I am lucky that I have always been physically active, having been good at athletics, cricket, football & squash at school, with squash and especially tennis, being enjoyed over the years. Tennis especially, being very social, has seen us not only playing regularly, but competitively at times too. However the social side of tennis has bought us many friends, and regular travelling companions too; Melbourne for the Australian Open every January for the best part of 20 years, then in 2005, a fabulous 6 weeks trip in the UK and western Europe which included the French Open tennis in Paris & 4 weeks travelling down through France, Spain with 2 weeks in Lisbon. Financially however, it has been quite devastating, especially as I misjudged my ability to make sensible decisions, mistakenly believing I was up to the task of performing as I did pre cancer, and of course being too trusting. That has bought me unstuck on a number of occasions.

## **ON THE POSITIVE SIDE**

I have an amazing wife, Milica, who has been and is still so supportive, encouraging and loving.

I have three wonderful children, four amazing grandchildren, ranging in ages from 20 down to 4, with my 9 year old grandson, Sam, another survivor; he suffered a stroke in October 2013, causing great concern for the entire family. But after major brain surgery, 1 month in hospital, a huge amount of rehabilitation, he got back to school before the end of the school term in December 2013, and has been improving throughout 2014 and into 2015. One tough kid that one...just like his Grandpa I reckon.

# My Cancer Highway

## REFLECTING BACK

As I commented at the start of this story, I have a saying when discussing my almost 9 years as a cancer survivor:

***"I'm still here to complain about my problems"***, pretty much sums up my feelings.

The last 9 years were extremely difficult at times, especially in the first months, as I was adjusting to a number of significant changes to my life.

Undeniably I am blessed having a wonderful, caring and supporting wife. Without Milica being who she is, things would have been so much harder.

Over these last 9 years, we have travelled to Canada 3 times to visit Daniel, and in August 2014, we were very spoilt on the Rocky Mountaineer. Those 2 days on the Rocky Mountaineer were fabulous. Totally spoilt with good food & wine, together with the amazing scenery, well explained by our hosts. We enjoyed 3 weeks in western Canada, which in summer may well be one of the reasons to spend 2 to 3 months in Canada sometime in the future. God willing, and the finances being available.

# My Cancer Highway

## My Cancer Highway

This has been a very personal look at how I handled the sentence of cancer and ~~tried to GET~~ **GET RID OF THE ENEMY.**

I hope you have enjoyed my story.

I hope too that my story may provide some inspiration to you or someone close to you

With best wishes,

**John Mead**



July, 2015

# *My Cancer Highway*

## **SPECIAL THANKS TO;**

### **Milica**

How could I have ever survived without my wonderful wife Milica?  
I love you more than words can convey.

### **My family**

Thank you for your support and love over many, many years,  
especially the last 9 years.

### **My friends**

Too many to mention, but many thanks for your support and  
encouragement, and for just being there when I needed a chat

### **My medical marvels**

Dr Andrew Small, my GP

Dr Chris Hughes, my Cancer Surgeon