

# A few remembered anecdotes of my motorbike days

*Kids in their teens don't think about mortality – they are bulletproof . . . or so their mind says! That is why they do some of the dangerous things they do . . . why they are willing to go to extremes and excitedly to war.*

During my teenage years in Goulburn, 4 of us got around together - most of the time. We varied in age by a couple of years, so the oldest were the first to get motorbikes. I was the youngest by a couple of years and, until old enough, I would ride on the pillion of the eldest, Jack Mitchell.

In telling these tales, it must be remembered that there was nowhere near the traffic on the roads that there is today. You could travel for miles and not see anyone else. Also, helmets were not yet invented and would have been disdained as for “pansies” only. The best – the only – protection we ever had was a leather jacket (or just a jumper as can be seen).

A few memories are of interest (to me, anyway):

As young teenagers went, we were not bad kids, but could be described as “mischievous”. Fun was where you found it - or made it. Before we were old enough for motorbikes we got around on bikes or just walked. Harry couldn't ride a bike because of his legs, so Jack was the one who usually “doubled” him everywhere we went on bikes.

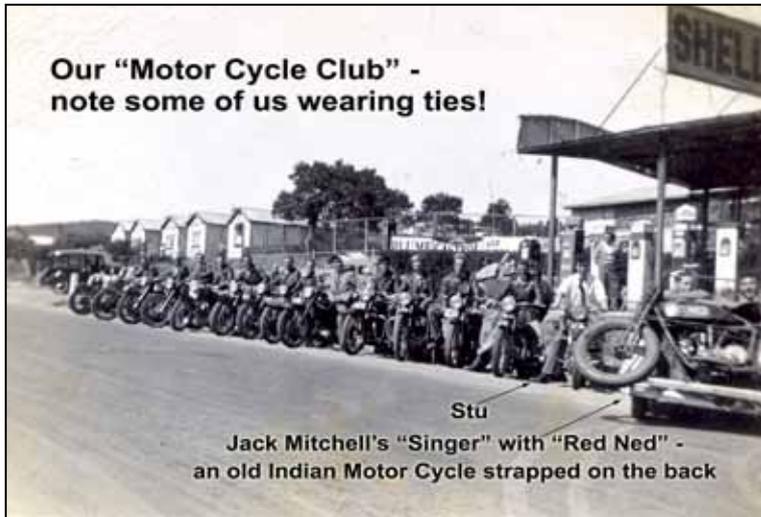
One of our common pranks was to stir up a market gardener whose property was out near the river where we swam. We would run through the outskirts of his fields helping ourselves to carrots and whatever was growing, stuff them down our shirts, and run for the river. He would always come out of his house yelling and firing off a shotgun in our general direction. We made sure we were out of range of this. I really don't think he minded, it was all for show, as he and his wife (they were Chinese) used to come down to the river weir to catch masses of the little “guppy” fish that teemed in the area. We would often help them, filling their open kerosene tins and carrying them back to their home. They used to dry these tiddlers in the sun and considered them a delicacy. We simply took their word for that!

## Back to the motorbikes tales.

Once, on the road to Canberra, Jack and I got the bright idea of locking the throttle (many bikes had a thumb screw you just tightened to lock the throttle) and standing up on the seats. First he stood up and then I stood behind him. There we were hurtling along the road at around 50-60 mph (80-100 kms),



*L to R: Keith Turton, Stuart Oliver, Harry Baxter (Jack Mitchell taking pic). Harry was crippled so needed a side-car outfit. However, that did not stop him joining in everything.*



*Goulburn's inaugural "Motor Cycle Club". "Red Ned" is the old Indian MC mentioned in the story below.*

hands out like we were flying, balancing the bike with slight body movement. Then we slowly changed places so he was standing on the pillion and I was on the driver's seat. While we were making this change, a car came towards us from Canberra so we stood there like we were dancing and waved to him. Totally astounded, he proceeded to run off the road into a slight ditch before recovering his equilibrium. We thought that hilarious and then slowly moved around each other again and back down onto the seats. Fun, fun, fun!!!!

We had a sort of disorganised motorbike club which held mud scrambles, hill

climbs and races. One day we were having a day in the hills doing climbs and scrambling in the mud (a mix due to the very wet weather). Jack, with me on the back, was barrelling down the side of a grassy hill when he lost it and we went down on the side – legs lifted clear to avoid damage – and the bike spinning in slow circles with us sort of sitting on top. Suddenly Jack gave a heave to the bars and we had the bike back on its wheels and kept on going. Astounded at what we had done, it quickly became another game for all to try in the muddy conditions. Put the bike down on its side and see how many times you could let it spin on the wet ground and then heave it back onto wheels and carry on. needless to say few, including us, succeeded!

Later on (after I had got my own bike) a farmer set aside a large field on which, with the support of the local police sergeant (I often think he instigated it) we were given permission to build a race track (dirt of course). The farmer supplied the necessary grader and we supplied the labour.

By that time Jack was old enough to have a car licence and had bought a little Singer tourer (see pic).



*Jack's Singer Tourer at the track.*

As the track developed we would thrash this thing around the track at full throttle.

Its body would be so twisted that we had to hold the doors shut.

Every so often, as we worked on the track, the local police sergeant would put in an appearance. In those days, Police in country towns never had cars; they got around in a Harley Davidson with sidecar – sergeant sitting up like Jackie in the sidecar with a constable driving.

Anyway, when he arrived at the track, they would get off and the sergeant would turn his back to the track, ostensibly talking to the farmer, while we would take the Harley outfit and take turns to thrash it around the track. Not exactly a racing outfit, but a lot of fun with one driving and someone else hang

out off the sidecar to hold it down. Way to go! After what he considered a reasonable time (and we had discreetly [?] returned the outfit to where he was) he would turn around, climb into the sidecar and order his constable to head back to town. Never a word nor a smile to us. We all understood his motives. He always came across as a stern-faced, unsmiling police sergeant, but I'm sure he went away smiling knowing he had got us off the road – for a bit!

I found the track racing boring. Yes, it certainly could put your heart in your mouth, especially on a dirt track, but after a few times around the track it did nothing for me – same old same old. Much better the hill climbs. During these it was not unusual to have a bike come back over the top of you on a particularly steep and rocky section.

Remember, none of these bikes were designed for anything but good roads. Mine was a twin BSA 500 (see pic with girls on) – like most, too heavy and low slung - not enough clearance for what was asked of them. I finished up with a smashed sump and no money to fix it. Oh, well! Fun while it lasted.



*My BSA 500 Twin looking good!*

Another hilarious time (to us, anyway) was when Jack got hold of an old Indian motorbike, found in a backyard shed (like the one in the next pic – the Indian was another American brand in competition with Harley Davidson).

With a bit of fiddling around (we were all quite handy mechanics) we got it going. The engine was totally shot and blew out so much smoke that when we pulled up at an intersection we would be totally enveloped in the stuff, so I had to jump off the back and run forward to see if the way was clear and call Jack through, jumping on the back as he passed. (It

was OK when under way the smoke trailed behind like a war-time smoke-screen). Woe befall anyone with ideas of passing.

Anyway, one day we were tootling along a road beside the railway lines when we spotted a couple of girls walking along. As we reached them we planned to stop (naturally!), but Jack suddenly started kicking at the extra wide handlebars and next thing we were off the road, crashing into the railway fence and flying over it (minus the bike, of course). When I asked what that was about he said the throttle stuck and he was trying to kick it free. While we lay in a heap on the other side of the fence the girls walked on laughing their heads off. Oh, well! Win some, lose some.

Talking about that Singer Tourer, there is a little bit of a serious story that happened with that. Jack and another of the “fab 4”, Keith Turton, drove up to Sydney to pick me up and return to Goulburn the same day. On the way back I started having massive pains in the chest. Kept this to myself so not to disturb the others. It was the middle of the night with the three of us in the front seat. Keith, sitting in the middle, had fallen asleep and I was kept awake by the massive pains that kept spasming in my chest.

As we made our way down through the mountains around Braidwood Jack suddenly flopped asleep at the wheel. The car immediately headed for the sheer drop off the side of the road (roads in those days did not have safety barriers on the edges). Being awake I reached over and grabbed the wheel and shouted as I pulled us back the other way until he regrouped and took over.

They used to say that something good often comes from something bad. Well, there is no doubt the pain that kept me awake saved our lives as, if we had gone over, none of us would have survived the several hundred feet fall down the cliff side. Those pains were the beginning of my ordeal with polio. I was only 15, Keith 16 and Jack 17. (*The story of the polio is told in another paper.*)



*An Indian Motor Cycle similar to "Red Ned".*

Before Jack got the Singer he had his father's old 1930 model sedan. We used to pile into this with rifles and shotguns and, always on Sunday as it was (they said) illegal to go shooting on Sunday, we would go down and roar up and down the main street of Goulburn with rifles and shotguns sticking out of every window, yahoing as we went. We would do this just long enough for some good citizen to call the police and then we would head off out of town where they would not find us. (I'm sure they knew who it was but didn't consider it worth pursuing.)

One day we had a couple of girls in the car and they wanted to try shooting. We went out of town and pulled up on the side of the road so they could shoot at a tree (or something) in the field.

All went well until, unknown to me, one of the girls went around the other side of the car to lean the gun on the bonnet to steady her shot. I started to move and someone yelled out in time to stop me walking right into the bullet. It came close enough to clip my eyebrow and I have the scar to this day.

NEVER again did we take girls shooting!

## **An Incident of Survival**

There is one incident that I am a little reluctant to write about as it brings back some weird memories; however it points up the dangers you face on the road.

One day, returning to Sydney from Goulburn, I was coming up what was then known as Governor's Hill, a long uphill section of the highway coming into Sydney.

It was late enough that all was dark and all you could really see were headlights. I was in the lane near the centre with another lane of cars on my left. Coming the other way were two lanes of cars. The speed limit (to which everyone was driving) was 50 mph (80 kph).

Strangely enough, I had an unusual gap of about 200m or so in front of me - clear to the top of the hill. Suddenly, as it crested the top of the hill coming the other way, a set of lights switched from the oncoming lane to my lane. Some idiot trying to overtake traffic that was already one behind the other.

The combined speed would have been around 130 mph (210 kph) with only seconds to the collision. I couldn't change lanes as I was surrounded by cars to left and behind, as well as oncoming. Left with no where to go I accepted the fact that I was going to die. There was no way I would survive a head-on collision between a motorbike and a car at those speeds.

They say that when you are going to die that your life flashes in front of you. I can somewhat attest to this, although only small flashes. Everything seems to go quiet and into slow motion, even though only seconds are involved. A number of little things flashed through mind (after all, I was only 17).

I did not attempt to slow down as that would have had me run into by the car coming behind and simply thrown me off under other traffic. No hope of survival. I just kept going at 50 mph straight at him.

A weird reaction? Maybe. However, I had been through enough in my life to have become something of a fatalist. What was meant to be would be.

The next thing I found myself pressed hard against the car, grinding along the side of it, and then riding free again. Once I got over the top of the hill, I pulled out of the traffic and tried to figure out what had happened...even wondered if I was still alive.

I found a heap of cream coloured paint flakes on my kickstarter. As the edge of the kickstarter is probably about 250mm inside the width of the handlebars, this meant I must have been at about a 45 degree angle to the car when pressed against it.

How did this happen?

I can only surmise that the other oncoming cars saw what was happening and were able to slow down enough and move over sufficient for him to partially move back to his side of the road. As he didn't hit the car behind me, he must have got all the way back in time to miss them but not entirely miss me.

I deduced that the car had to be a new 1950 or 1951 Ford Custom as that was the only car at that stage to have a smooth side all the way back and usually had cover that fitted into the back wheel arch. All other models had a mudguard protruding out that would have caught the kickstarted (or my handlebars) and thrown me off under the other traffic.

In analysing what happened to save me, I came to the conclusion that, as the car started to move back to his lane, the large air bubble that is pushed ahead and around the front edge of a vehicle must have pushed me over sideways enough that I was at a sufficient angle that, before I could right the bike, it hit the car and became pressed against the side of it, scraping along the side until free. There is no other way I could have finished with cream paint piled up on the kickstarter.

The moral of this story is to always treat everyone on the road as an idiot - including yourself - as, although we are not all idiots like the guy mentioned above, we are all capable of making mistakes... getting distracted. I have made my share. Always try and be aware of what is happening around you.

You may think that this story is a little over dramatized, but it is not. The part about things appearing to slow down and everything going quiet occurred again in an accident I had in the mid 1980's.

For many years I raced yachts in which most of my crew were boys between around 10 and 16 whom I taught to sail and work as a team. (I always had one other adult crewman as a safety factor.)

One day we tied the yacht up along side the Jetty at my club, Royal Perth Yacht Club, as we had about an hour to start time.

It was a small jetty that, at some time, one of the posts had been broken and cut off about 20 cms above the decking.

I went to jump over the yacht safety rails onto the jetty. Unfortunately, I caught my foot on the top rail and was sent sprawling onto the jetty, landing with my full weight on top of the cut off post. This caught me in the chest right on the heart.

I lay on the jetty realizing my heart and breathing had stopped. Like in the previous story, everything seemed to go quiet and slow down and I wondered if this was it.

One of the boys who sailed with me was a 16 named Lee. He had trained as a junior surf lifesaver before coming to sail with me.

Lee jumped off the yacht, rolled me onto my back, picked up my legs under his arms and started pumping them. With every pump I could feel a little air surge through my throat.

I tried to indicate to him to keep going, but could not speak or move, so just kept blinking my eyes.

While everyone else on the jetty just looked on, Lee kept pumping until I started breathing on my own again and the heart started working.

The others then stepped in and helped me up to the club rooms. 45 mins later we headed for the start line.

I finished with a very sore chest with a large black and blue bruise. However, without Lee's knowledge, I probably would not be here to tell this story.

An addendum to that story is that in 2016, when I was being tested for heart problems (that required a triple by-pass), they found that one side of the heart had quite extensive muscle damage. This, I believe, was from that fall.

The point of adding this story is the reference to things appearing to slow down and all going quiet. Happening once, you could say the mind was making it up; happening twice indicates that it does actually happen.