

Geoff Wallbridge was made a Life Member at the RSAYS Inc General Meeting on 17 September. This article describes his early life, his racing and sailing experiences, and his involvement with the Squadron.



GEOFF, the youngest of three boys, was born in Kadina in 1947 to parents who were both primary school teachers. Their strong ambition for promotion within the schools system led them to always offer to go ‘anywhere for promotion’. The Education Department enthusiastically accepted their offers and posted these two quality teachers to some of the most remote country towns in SA and the NT.

Thus it was that Geoff grew up as a pretty self-reliant child in wild places such as Cook in the middle of the Nullarbor Plain, Hawker in the Flinders Ranges and eventually Alice Springs. Obviously sailing and other water-based pursuits were limited in these places but many adventures were undertaken with mates, such as hiking, cross-country bike riding, camping and climbing all available hills. At the age of 13 Geoff bought the first of a series of fairly decrepit motor cars and, despite the lack of a licence, was now able to travel away from Alice Springs and camp in the western MacDonnell Ranges. Geoff’s earliest attempt at sailing was at Cook by rigging his billy cart with a wheat bag sail and heading south across the Nullarbor before a hot northerly, returning with the ‘Fremantle Doctor’ in the afternoon. The distances travelled were doubtless quite small, but it was a big adventure for a 7-year-old boy.



Sailing billy cart at Cook

In 1968 Geoff met his future wife Jill, and during University holidays drove his faithful 1938 MG up to Port Pirie to visit her at home. While there, Jill took Geoff for a sail on the Pirie River in her father’s Heron dinghy and by the end of the day he was at the tiller, skippering for the first time under strong guidance from Jill. Whenever Geoff’s sailing exploits are raised Jill says, “Do you know I taught him to sail?”

Through the next few years Geoff owned a third-share in a supposedly lightweight Sharpie, was given a plywood Moth that Jill’s dad had won in a \$2 raffle, and crewed a couple of seasons on a 505 at Brighton Seacliff Yacht Club.

In 1979 Geoff started his own consulting engineering practice with Mark Gilbert. Over the years Wallbridge Gilbert Aztec developed into a successful civil, structural and industrial design practice with offices in SA, Victoria, WA, NT and recently NZ.

Through all this Geoff and Jill raised their daughter Tess and son Tom, and now have three grandchildren – Matilda, Jack and Harriet.

In about 1990 the romance of old planked timber boats saw Geoff buy a 16 ft McFarlane fishing boat at Black Point. Geoff and Jill eventually named her *R H Emery* after Jill’s father Dick, whom Geoff considered to be a surrogate father having lost his own father at the age of 18. Dick’s integrity, his love of sailing and ability to turn his hand to any practical task was a strong influence on Geoff.

The rough weather on the maiden voyage of the *R H Emery* to the North Arm nearly ended in disaster, with the long-dried-out topsides leaking prodigiously and requiring non-stop bailing and pumping. The necessary repairs introduced Geoff and friends to the joys of owning old timber boats.

Following the *R H Emery* came a chance in 1996 to own a ‘real’ boat, the elegant ketch *Solace*. After a few cruises to Kangaroo Island and across the gulf Geoff and friends commenced what eventually became a two-year refit. The refit commenced with the removal of a non-functional auxiliary motor, several compressors, massive fridges and freezer, and a mess of incomprehensible wiring. To defeat a mass of deck leaks, the original deck was re-sheeted with plywood and dynel-sheathed.

Having read all the usual books on cruising, Geoff had long harboured a desire for a ‘big cruise’. In March 2005 Geoff and a brave crew decided to ‘head south to the bottom of the gulf, turn right and see what happens’. Eventually *Solace* was greeted back into the RSAYS in January 2006, having completed a lap around the Australian continent. For this effort Geoff and *Solace* were awarded the RSAYS Yacht *Youth* Trophy.



Solace at anchor in the lagoon of Monte Bello Islands

During the circumnavigation *Solace*, while not keen to sail close to the wind, proved to be a great cruising boat. Her heavy and construction and long keel meant she would heave-to comfortably in a big blow. Geoff says that the circumnavigation was a huge event in his life and describes highlights like diving on the wreck of the *Batavia* in the Abrolhos Islands and sailing into Sydney Harbour as pure joy. Jill joined this epic voyage for the nice bits in the Kimberleys and the coast of north Queensland. For the rest of the trip *Solace* was crewed by a variety of friends, including Geoff’s son Tom.

Almost as soon as Geoff joined the Squadron he started assisting at the Works Committee Opening Day working bees and other projects around the Squadron like the new entrance gates. He was soon co-opted onto the Committee by Robert Henshall. After some time the Works Committee morphed into the Development



Solace under spinnaker approaching Esperance

Assessment Panel and Geoff was later convinced to take over as Chair. In addition, Geoff was elected to the Management Committee and served over many years under the stewardship of five successive Commodores. During his time as Chair of DAP Geoff helped promote the renovation of the Clubhouse and contributed to the management and engineering of the project.

In 2011, Geoff and *Solace* completed the full circumnavigation of Australia by sailing clockwise around Tasmania and attending the Wooden Boat Festival in Hobart on the way.

Geoff has recently handed over the control and ownership of the engineering business to younger staff and is looking forward to spending more time at the helm of his faithful *Solace*.



Low tide in Crocodile Creek, the Kimberley

VOLUNTEERS OF THE YEAR

David and Lorraine Borg



THE Commodore presented David and Lorraine Borg with the Volunteers of the Year Award on Opening Day, for their outstanding contribution to the Squadron over many years.

David has been a member for more than 60 years, and has been associated with the Club all his life as his grandfather was caretaker from 1929 to 1959. Lorraine has been a member since they met more than 50 years ago.

David said, “We have always been available to ‘help out’ with any projects or working bees right from the early days, but as we get older and supposedly have more time on our hands we seem to commit to more and more.”

The gardens in the Squadron have been a long-time focus. David commented, “With Robert Henshall and the Seaweed Gardening group we have endeavoured to keep the place looking good. Lorraine looks after the plants, while I look after the watering systems and act as general labourer.” The recent surge in new plantings has created a lot more work and they now find themselves needing more help, so they would be glad to hear from anyone interested.

David was a member of the House and Social Committee for more than 10 years in the 1980s and 90s, and was Chair through the upheavals of the late 90s. Dr Peter Last took David under his wing and involved him in the history of the Squadron, and this is ongoing as both David and Lorraine are members of the Archive and History group.

When the Clubhouse renovations were completed in 2014 David and Lorraine were both involved in the selection and hanging of photographs and burgees, and this continues with framing etc today. Lorraine recently designed and was instrumental in overseeing the installation of the new cabinetry in Jimmy’s Bar which was funded by the Foundation.

David has been a Trustee of the RSAYS Foundation since 2015 and has also been Secretary for the last three years. Lorraine has been a Trustee since 2017.

David was made a Life member in December 2010 for his contributions to the Squadron.

Their thoughts on volunteering are, “Being involved with projects is one sure way of getting to meet other members. You get to make friendships that will endure. It’s worked for us.”