

Chapter 1

My Family and Some Early Memories

“Kindness is more important than wisdom and the recognition of this is the beginning of wisdom.” – Theodore Isaac Rubin

My childhood was a happy time and I grew up in a very caring and loving atmosphere.

My mother, Ruby Peterson, and my father, James Ormond Patterson, were both good and generous people and their values and the example they set for me in the way they lived their lives guide me in my life to this day.

My father was a very stern and quiet person. He did not speak to us much, but if he did, even when we were teenagers or much older, we would think “I’d better be careful.” He always said what he meant, so you knew that he was serious, and that you should listen to what he had to say.

My mother criticized my father one day for smoking a pipe. He was quite a heavy smoker. Mum said, “You are smoking too much.” Dad replied, “Well, if you don’t want me to smoke I won’t do it again.” He put the pipe down and that was it, he never picked it up again. Once he made a decision it was done and that was all there was to it.



Ron's father, Ormond Patterson

I wouldn't say that I felt particularly close to my father as a child, because he didn't talk to us much, but he was a very kind person. (I loved him and I knew that he loved me.) Like most men of his generation, my father went to work, and in the home environment he relied on his wife to engage with the children and manage family life. If we wanted to ask our father something, we tended to ask Mum to ask Dad on our behalf. Mum was the parent we came to first, if we had a problem or needed some help with anything.



Ron's mother, Ruby Patterson

My mother was quite a different personality to my father.

Mum was tremendous fun, always laughing and playful. When I was being tucked into bed at night she'd chase and tickle me; sometimes I'd raise my voice and she'd say, "Hush, your father will hear you. Be quiet." Then we'd settle down and read stories together. I was always a keen reader. We borrowed story books from the library and after reading them I'd talk

with her about the stories. She'd say, "Is that so?" and ask me questions about what I'd read. Mum was always interested in what I was doing and encouraged my imagination - that, to me, was a wonderful thing.

As a little boy, before I started school, I wanted to be a cowboy. I was given a toy gun for Christmas. I loved this gun and carried it with me everywhere, practising my quick draw and imagining that I was protecting the house from Indians. If Mum went out for a short time and I was left at home, I would say to her, "I hope someone comes. I'll pull my gun out."



Ron as a child

I recall, even as a small boy, imagining I was able to fly. Throughout my boyhood, one of my heroes was the great aviatrix, Amy Johnson, the first woman to fly solo from Britain to Australia. One day, I leapt off the roof, holding an umbrella above my head. Naturally, things didn't go quite as planned and I was left suspended from the clothes line. Mum came to the rescue, as usual, saying, "Good gracious!"

My mother was a very organised and practical person. She was a good manager of money and ran a very fine house. I can see my mother, to this day, dressed quite formally in her gloves and hat, travelling into town on a Friday to meet up with her mother to do the shopping. Shopping hours in those days were strictly from nine to five and there was no such thing as weekend trading. My mother often bought things for the house on lay-by, a new concept at that time, but she would never tell my father of this because she knew he wouldn't have approved of her purchasing things in such a way. Mum would bring her new purchase home, perhaps a little vase or something pretty, and Dad would ask, "Where did you get that?"

"I've been saving. I've been putting a shilling away each week."

That was fine, as she never brought the prized object home until she'd paid for it in full, using lay-by. This was a very good system, I think.

Fridays were special days for me and my mother as we regularly travelled into the city together to meet my grandmother. I have strong memories of this experience at the age of three or four.

My mother said, "I'm a little worried about losing you, Ron," because I wandered off on a couple of occasions in the Myer store.

Mum couldn't find me immediately, but she said, "I heard you. You were yelling and calling out."

I must have made a lot of noise and we were swiftly reunited, possibly after I was "rescued" by the floor walker, a very smartly dressed gentleman whose job it was to walk about the store assisting customers with directions and other enquiries.

We met a Chinese family on one of our family holidays and they invited us to dinner, which consisted of Chinese dishes of various kinds, some of which we had never seen or eaten before in our lives. My mother was both very

polite and quite a shy person, so she was too polite to refuse an offer at the table of dim-sums. On trying one, Mum found that she didn't like it so she very discreetly popped her partially eaten dim-sum into my coat pocket. I wasn't aware of what she'd done at the time. Sitting at the table, trying to be on my best behaviour, I reached into my pocket and felt something strange in there.

"What's in there?" I asked Mum in surprise.

She turned scarlet in the face – Mum was so embarrassed. I've never forgotten that incident, because it was so unlike my mother to do something like that, but she just reacted to the situation without thinking.

My family was friendly with the Chinese family for quite a long time. My mother's family was very large (Mum had ten brothers and sisters) so lots of time was spent visiting other family members and keeping up with their lives, but even so, my parents had quite a few friends. We used to go on picnics in the motor car down to Mentone on a regular basis to play on the beach. I remember lots of drives on the weekend and picnics in the country and at the beach with members of our extended family. At that time, I believe the speed limit within the metropolitan area was restricted to a mere 30 miles per hour.

As a family, we lived in several rented homes in those early years of my life. My earliest memories are of our house at 3 Rusden Street, Elsternwick, where I was born. My memories of this house are not clear but from photographs I know the house was a single-fronted brick house with two bedrooms, a kitchen and a little dining room.

My father worked in the motor industry and so our family always owned a motor car. Very few people owned their own vehicle at that time; it was simply beyond most families' means, so we were considered to be very fortunate in that way. Most people relied on trams or trains to get to work and the shops. If you had a motor car you were very privileged. Dad used to park our car down a lane at the rear of a little house we rented nearby.

One day, Dad went out to his shed in the back garden and noticed a hole in the floor where some rats had made a nest. Naturally, I was intrigued by this situation.

"What are you going to do, Dad?"



Our house at 3 Rusden Street, Elsternwick, as it is today in 2011

Dad said, “Oh, we’ll get them. Don’t you worry.”

He collected a couple of cans and buckets of boiling water and poured the hot water down the hole in the floor. As the rats ran out, Dad banged them on the head with a piece of wood. He knocked them all off. I was very impressed!

I can remember running out into Rusden Street to meet the ice man with his cart laden with blocks of ice. He would cut the blocks up so that they fitted the individual ice boxes in people’s homes. Chips of ice would splinter off the blocks as the iceman carved them and we would ask him for the chips. The iceman allowed us to sit on the back of the cart. We were only young kids then, and four or five of us would all sit at the back of the cart sucking away on these beautiful, cool chips of ice while the cart made its way slowly through the streets of Elsternwick. If we travelled too far we’d jump off with a wave and a “Thank you” and walk back home. I can remember some rather nasty tummy aches from eating lots of ice, and then maybe some fruit or cherries as well. Not a comfortable combination!

Sometimes, I was allowed to walk to the grocery shop; I think it was only a few hundred metres from home. Mum would occasionally ask me to run to the grocer's for her, to buy butter or cheese, things like that. There were no pre-packaged grocery items then; you would ask for some butter or cheese and the grocer would cut it off the block for you. If I was really lucky, the grocer would give me a handful of broken biscuits to eat on the way home. Those things were very important to me as a child.



Our house at 44 Hoddle Street, Elsternwick, as it is today in 2011

I have memories of the grocer calling by our house at 44 Hoddle Street early in the day to pick up an order, and then returning later with the groceries. Our grocer also happened to be an SP bookmaker. My mother would occasionally have a small bet on the horses; she seemed to be quite knowledgeable about such matters, but I don't think my father was aware of Mum's 'flutters'.

Sixpence was left inside a billy can on the front step of our house for the milkman. He travelled through the streets with his cart and filled up the

billies, taking payment from the billies as he went. An old Chinaman went from door to door with vegetables for sale and I recall the butcher occasionally delivering meat to the family home as well.

My sister Gwen and I enjoyed a lot of physical freedom as children; we spent most of our time during the day playing outside. We ran about in the street, playing with friends and just mucking about and when it was time for tea Mum would call out "It's time to come in!"

We ate simple, healthy food – all home cooked, of course. I think we enjoyed a very healthy life and things seemed much simpler. We only had one bath a week, on either a Friday or Saturday evening. I was never very impressed with these arrangements because I was always second in the bath. My sister went first and then I was allowed to hop in afterwards, probably because she was older and had to wash her long hair. When we moved to our house at 44 Hoddle Street, Gwen and I slept in a sleep-out together, in separate beds at the rear of the house.



Ron and Gwen at ages 6 and 8 years

I joined my local Cubs and Scouts groups, both of which ran from the Presbyterian Church. We learned all the usual things like how to tie various knots and bush and camping skills. Many years later, as a young pilot living in tents and occasionally in abandoned buildings during my war service, I was surprised to learn that many of my colleagues had no idea how to dig a trench around a tent to prevent it from flooding, or how to set and light a fire in the outdoors. The simple skills I developed as a boy Cub and Scout were of practical use.



Ron's Cub Certificate



Ron's Scout Certificate



Sub-Camp 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Australian Jamboree
Frankston

A.J.C.C.
J.O.S.
P.D.O.
FORM A.B.C.

1935

Dear ^{Father} ~~Mother~~ ~~Sister~~ ~~Brother~~ ~~Sweetheart } *Just to let you know that I am * { Well Fair ~~Bad~~ and am having a * { Marvellous Wonderful Fair ~~Awful~~ time. I have made pals with some [See Index] who are * { Good ~~Bad~~ chaps. The weather is * { Very Nice Hot Wet Horrible and the food * { ~~At (good)~~ ~~A (fair)~~ B (bad) }.~~

SPECIAL REQUESTS

Cross out which not needed. {
 A. ~~Please send me some more cash~~
 B. ~~Send me some cake~~
 C. ~~I want more clothes~~
 D. Come down and see me sometime

I am * { ~~sunburnt~~ Tanned and being a * { Good ~~Bad~~ boy.

LOVE
GREETINGS
REGARDS
YOURS FAITHFULLY

* Cross out which not desired P. T. O. *R. Peters* Index Sig.

Letter Card written by Ron to his mother from Frankston Jamboree in 1935



Ron, as a Cub, aged 8



Ron with his pet galah

I was given a pet galah when I was a child. I liked to prove to everyone that the galah was friendly, so I'd stand him on my shoulder where he'd talk to me and I'd kiss him. Then one day he bit me. I had to give him away.

I always wanted to have a dog. I had a cobber down the street who I played with all the time. I made myself a billy cart with a canopy on top made from wood and we'd push the billy cart along Dandenong Road. We'd walk to Dandenong Road, the main highway for about five or six miles, pushing this billycart. At that time, the area was mainly paddocks with just the odd farm house dotted amongst them. We thought we were very adventurous. We were playing there one day and a car pulled up beside us.

"Good day kids".

"Hello."

"How would you like a dog?"

Of course, I said, "Oh, I'd love a dog."

The driver of the car said, "Here you are. You can have this one."

He handed over a nice young dog, like a cross between a border collie and a kelpie. I couldn't believe my luck. I had a dog. It was fantastic! I had no idea what my parents would say, because my mother was frightened of dogs, but I made my way home feeling excited and happy. I might get into trouble if I arrived home with a dog...but we'd have to find out! As I walked back along Dandenong Road the dog ran straight out into the road where it was run over by a passing car and killed.

I was broken-hearted. How could this happen?

I knocked on the door of the first house I came to and asked the owner, "Can I borrow a spade?"

"What do you want it for?" he asked me, quite naturally.

I explained, "I just lost my dog. He's been killed on the road and I want to bury him."

"Oh, here you are, sonny."

I took the spade, went back out into the street, dug a hole and buried my dog. I felt so sad and I never had another dog as a child.

We had a cat at home, but my mother was absolutely terrified of dogs.

I don't know whether a particular incident had made her frightened or whether she just had an innate fear of dogs, but she was genuinely scared and would go out of her way to avoid them. If a dog was in the street or barking at the fence, she could not just cross over to the other side of the street to walk past, she would make a detour and go around the block if necessary. It took my mother a long while to overcome this fear and when I was much older I did have dogs. But she was still nervous. She was even frightened of puppies; it was just one of those things.



Ron's sister Gwen as a young woman

Gwen – My Sister

Gwen and I didn't spend a huge amount of time together when we were young. We disliked each other intensely sometimes when we were children, but when I reached the age of about 15, I found out that she was great.

She taught me so many things, useful things to know as a young man. For example, Gwen taught me how to dance. She was a beautiful dancer. We became very close from our teenage years on, but as a youngster I couldn't stand her. She'd always complain about me to my parents.

"Ron punched me."

"Oh, I just touched you when I went by."

I remember lots of those niggly conversations that brothers and sisters have.

Our relationship could become quite physical at times. We'd be sitting at the table eating our lunch or evening meal and Gwen would say, "Look at Ron. Look at all the butter he's got. Look at that!"

My father would assess the situation and say, "Ron can have as much as he likes, Gwen, but he has to eat every bit."

If you took some food you ate it and finished everything on your plate. Dad didn't care whether you were choking. You must not be greedy!

I have not been able to eat cherries since I was a little boy, probably for two reasons. The first was that I ate lots of ice, followed by lots of cherries, which caused a terrible stomach ache – I can still remember that feeling!

The other reason was also quite dramatic! Gwen and I were playing around with some cherries. I suppose it began as a game, anyway. I would have been about four years old, and Gwen was six. She put a cherry pip up her nose, and then miraculously pulled it out of her ear.

Naturally, I thought, "If you can do that, so can I."

I put a cherry pip up my nose. Nothing happened immediately; no cherry reappeared from my ear so I kept forcing the cherry in. My mother saw what was happening and panicked. She picked me up and hung me upside down, belting me firmly on the back until the wayward cherry finally came out again.

Chapter 2

Some Life Lessons

“The man who makes no mistakes does not usually make anything.”

– Theodore Roosevelt

I learned some serious life lessons at this time in my life; two particular incidents stand out in my mind to this day. They had a profound effect on my sense of self and my values and I have never forgotten these events and the emotions that accompanied them.

As a youngster I was often left with my maternal grandmother at her house in Prahran. Grandmother Petersen was a strong, loving woman who worked hard all her life raising eleven children, the last after her husband died. She was kind, but could discipline us quite harshly if she felt we deserved it.

I stole sixpence from my grandmother’s small dish of coins, ran around the corner to the local milk bar and bought myself some lollies. I hid under the bed because I knew what I had done was wrong, but I just couldn’t resist the temptation. Of course, my grandmother realised that money was missing, that I was the culprit and she gave me a stern lecture. To this day, I have never forgotten that terrible feeling of shame and of letting down someone I loved as my grandmother chastised me for taking something that did not belong to me.



Ron, Gwen and Grandmother Peterson

I used to go to the flicks occasionally with my older cousin, Wally, who dared me to show him what I was made of and urged me to steal some apples from the Elsternwick greengrocer.

He said, “Take an apple. Don’t be a sook. Get in and take an apple.”

I succumbed to the pressure and, of course, I was caught red-handed by the greengrocer. He walked me around to the passenger side of his old truck and said, “Okay, get up sonny. You’re going to the police station. You’re in big trouble.” I felt as though it was the end of the world. Would I ever see my mother and father again? Would I end up in gaol? Would my parents disown me? All these horrible thoughts flashed through my mind as I sat in the truck. I was ordered down off the truck and onto the footpath outside the police station. After what seemed like an eternity the greengrocer shook his head, looked at the police station doorway and said, “I’ll let you off this time. Go to your flicks. I know where you’re going. Never do that again, because next time I will march you into the station.” I was left standing there in my shame and embarrassment. I have never forgotten that feeling.

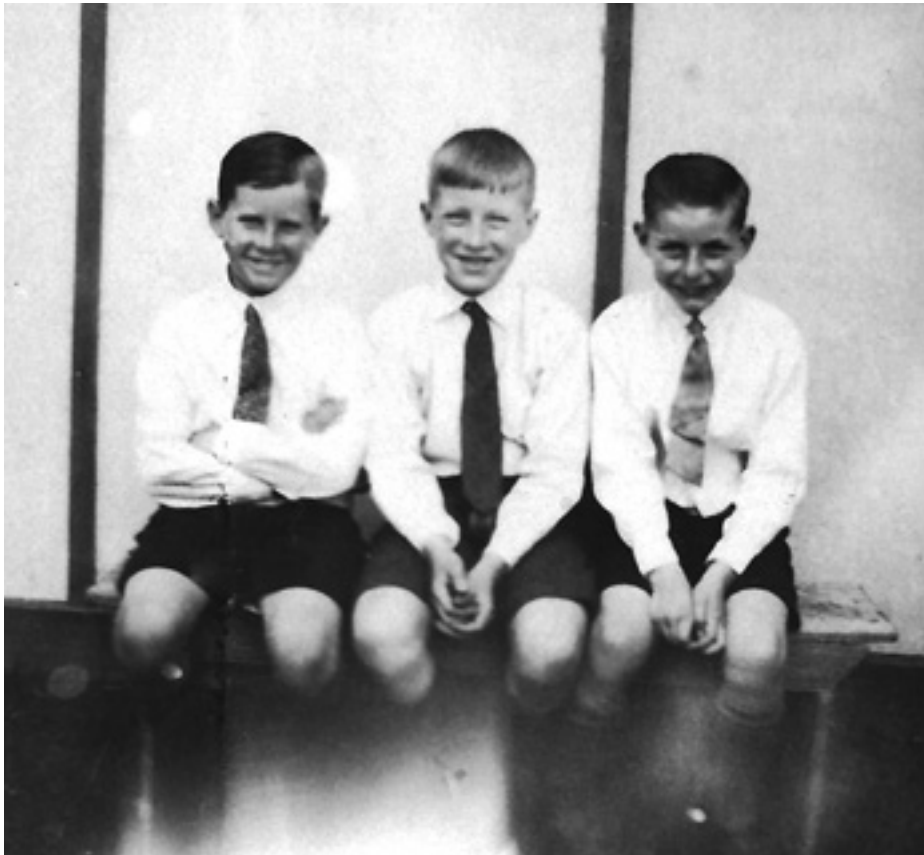
When you consider that kind of situation today it’s hard to imagine it being handled in such a way. If you bailed up a kid today over something like

that, he'd probably just laugh at you and say 'You can't touch me!' or simply run away. I just stood there, frozen in the face of this man from whom I'd stolen. He handled the situation very cleverly when I reflect on it; he got the message across to me, loud and clear, and I was frightened out of my wits.

He taught me a wonderful lesson.

As a child I had to go to hospital to have my tonsils removed. I don't recall feeling terribly ill with tonsillitis, but they must have been a problem for me.

This was a very big and quite serious operation in those days and I can certainly remember feeling sore and uncomfortable afterwards. The ice cream that you were allowed to eat afterwards was some consolation though.



L to R Wally Peterson, Ron and Bruce Tuff