

## Peter Philferan - Rider Profile, May 2004

Julie and I went and visited Peter at his bed-sit in Camberwell and spoke with him for a couple of hours, one rainy and cold night. A week later we went back, armed with more questions, and a partial write-up for checking.

I had visited once before – possibly as far back as 20 years ago. Not much has changed in that time. Peter lives very modestly in a single room bungalow dominated by his bed. Peter leads a humble, uncomplicated life with very few changes. As an orphaned child he effectively has no family, and the support structure that would go with it. Bike clubs, St Vincent de Pauls and his church are his families.

Peter is not concerned with the acquisition of wealth or possessions – the sum of his worldly possessions is his car, bike, a small TV and a fridge. Peter is a quiet, unobtrusive person who has devoted his life to bikes, work and his church, possibly in that order. He causes you to reflect on your own value systems, the benefits and advantages we take for granted such as family, job, homes and lifestyle. Peter is inherently happy and enjoys life. He is sharp as tack, has all his faculties and is fit and well. He life is busy, each day filled with some activity. Life for him is about stability, reliability and, of course, riding bikes and visiting friends.

### **The Early Years**

*Where were you born, date of birth, how many brothers and sisters?*

I was born on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August, 1932, (*In the middle of the depression ...Ed*) at the Royal Womens Hospital in Carlton. The Royal Womens Hospital notified the *Births, Deaths and Marriages* of my birth, completing the paperwork as was customary in those times. To my knowledge I had no brothers or sisters. I was an orphan and eventually finished up in *The Institution* at South Melbourne, better known as *St Vincent de Paul's*. I was one of 350 kids, mainly from broken homes. I left the Institute at 18 years of age to start work.

St Vincent de Paul has been taken over by MacKillop Family Services. They provide a “Heritage and Information Service”. I was encouraged to list my name with them – they investigate kids’ histories and try to put them in touch with their biological mothers and families, if they desire. It really is a necessary social service – there are so many “lost” people looking for a connection to family and society. It took them a couple of years to trace my history and two years ago I was presented with a bundle of papers that I am still coming to grips with. Ben and Julie have studied this paperwork quite determinedly and together we note the following:

According to my rap sheet I was born on the 21<sup>st</sup> August 1932 and then admitted to the *St Josephs Foundling Hospital -Broadmeadows* 6 weeks later on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October. Presumably I was with my biological 29 year old mother, Dorothy Glenny, up until that time. It appears that she was unmarried and mentally unstable – we would probably say had post natal depression these days – and had no means to support me. I became a ward of the state. Just before I turned 5 years old I was moved to *St Anthony's Home for Little Children* in Wellington St Kew for 4 months before being placed in *Kew Cottages* for the next 6 years. I did not attend school during this period.

In January 1943 I moved to *St Vincents de Paul* (The Institution) as noted above and commenced schooling, learning the basics of reading and writing for the next five years. As you can imagine, the war years meant materials were scarce – even food was scarce. We even had ration tickets to get a pie. There were blackouts and curfews. The Institution was run by the Christian Brothers who had little teacher training by today’s standards. There were too many kids in each class and it was very hard to learn.

Back in those days you had to write with your right hand. I was a natural left hander and by the age of 12 or so it was very difficult to learn to write right handed. I did, but understandably neat writing is not my strong point.

Discipline was swift and harsh. We lived in fear of the big black strap. A typical punishment was to stand on a yard plate for a couple of hours with your hands on your head. A brother gave me a shiner once. If you attempted to “escape” and were later “captured” – boys would return after a few days – where could they go and who would want them? The punishment was having your head shaved. These days they would be up for assault. As with any school, there were some bad and some good teachers. It was only when I left school that I really learnt rudimentary maths.

We lived for sport: football, boxing, handball, and cricket. Some famous sportsmen and jockies spent their childhood in The Institution. I played a lot of football at centre half forward until I injured my knee when I was 14 years old. It was reconstructed – back in those days they just removed cartilage.

Every Saturday night we would get to watch a movie for two hours in the hall, mainly westerns: John Wayne, Hop-along Cassidy, Randolph Scott. To maintain discipline, the brothers would come up behind you ...

I remember “Checker May” – the brother in charge of the food hall. He was a tough one. Once a month you were given a dose of Epsom Salts to keep your bowels regular. It was fowl stuff. We would line up and he would pour the concoction into a cup, half full. You had to drink it in front of him. One time I walked off without swallowing – but then couldn’t talk – and they soon twigged. I received a second dose for my troubles.

During the Christmas long break you either went to Shoreham Holiday Camp or were fostered out for the period. Luckily, I was fostered out to with the Macey family. They had 10 kids: 8 girls and 2 boys, but some were older and I didn’t get to meet them. To this day, one of the sisters is a Josephite nun running the Warburton Convent, and another couple of daughters live in Gippsland whom I regularly visit. I must have stayed with various cousins because sometimes I would have Christmas in Mansfield, and other years it would be Heyfield. They were good times.

The bundle of papers I was presented with also had a Birth Certificate extract and a Baptismal Certificate. According to the birth certificate, my name is Joseph PhElferan, not Philferan. My mother’s surname was Glenny but it appears that she was also adopted and her adoptive parents’ surname was Phelferan, and hence she gave that to me. I was baptised a day after birth in the Royal Womans and given the name Peter Francis Phelferan. Complicated isn’t it. It was a bit of a shock to learn my real name at the age of 69, but of course my real name is Peter Philferan, despite what any paper says.

The *Heritage and Information Service* recently contacted me to let me know “that the family of your sister (!) would like to get in touch with you.” After rereading this letter I am more inclined now to follow it up.

My biological mother is untraceable, probably marrying and changing surnames, and likely dead now.

In March of 1948 (aged 15) I was fostered out on probation to Mr and Mrs Le Fevre in Barrett St Cheltenham. Mr Le Fevre owned a shoe repair shop and I used to work there, for a period of 3 months, before going back to The Institution to complete my schooling. My last three week ‘school holidays’ were over Christmas 1948/49 at the Macey’s. I then moved to *St Vincent de Pauls Boys Hostel* (also known as St Vincents Place) in Albert Park on 31<sup>st</sup> January, 1949. This was a half way house, easing the boys back into the real world, in a staged fashion. I had obviously passed the probation period. Part of the deal was to find work, preferably an apprenticeship – it was important to have “a trade”. The Institution really was obligated to look after the welfare side of the boys’ lives, which they generally did. In the interim, I spent a year repairing shoes for the other boys in The Institution under the supervision of a tradesman.

Circa 1950 I started a four year boot maker apprenticeship at Collinwood Tech. and eventually got a job in 1955 at Bedgood Shoes in Jolimont working on the “finishing line”. They specialised in ladies footwear. Each shoe underwent about 40 different processes from trimming to painting to polishing. The

company produced a 1000 pairs of shoes a day. The work was dirty – dusty, toxic paint fumes – and “close” – which was very hard on your eyes.

During this period the Hostel organised private board at the back of 19 Aird St Camberwell. The owner took in about 12 boarders at the time and I am still there!

I used public transport for a couple of years to commute between Collingwood and home. Then I got interested in motorbikes and bought a 125 cc Lambretta Scooter (see magazine front cover) in 1956. At about the same time a Club was formed by Jack Murphy who lived in Box Hill. He worked at McEwans and was a square dance caller. The Club was named “The White Horse Scooter Club” after the white horse statue in Box Hill (*White Horse Rd etc ...Ed*) The Club had about 40 members and was offered the job of being couriers at the 1956 Melbourne Olympic games. Members would pick up negatives from the cameramen at the Olympic Games and take them to the Herald Office in Flinders St for processing, to then appear in the evening paper. The Club was paid giving it a big financial lift.

I was retrenched from the shoe trade in 1969 after 14 years. The factory was bought-out by an overseas company called Norvic.

After a month’s ‘rest’, I joined the Police Department as a full time driver, delivering stationery supplies, mainly A4 paper, all over Melbourne and rural Victoria. I had a “Class D – Light Transport licence”. Technically I was one of 4000 similarly employed clerical people working as a “Public Servant under the Chief Commissioner Office”. I was kitted out in a police uniform (blue shirt, tie and pants) and drove police trucks, first an International four ton truck and later an Isuzu diesel. Paper was delivered to the depot (Australian Government Stationery Stores) by the manufacturer and then we would distribute it. I would load and unload my own truck with a trolley. It was heavy work but I was fit and never got injured, even when I accidentally stepped off the back of the truck and landed on the concrete, and more than once.

Sometimes I would take damaged road signs into Pentridge (Jail) for repair sign-writing, usually shot gun damage. These were big, white country road signs such as “Drowsy Drivers Die” or “Speed Kills”, not your ordinary road signs. The security at Pentridge was unbelievably tight.

As a driver you get to see lots of things. Sometimes I couldn’t help speeding. One time I was pulled up by an unmarked TOGGY (*Traffic Operations Group – the one’s that live for the chase*). I flipped out my Truck licence and said I was from the “Old Depot”. He apologized for pulling me over and sent me on my way. Passengers in trams used to give me ‘the bird’ because I looked like a cop, driving in my uniform.

The only time I damaged the truck at work was at Hawthorn Police Station. There was a big tram pole and I couldn’t get a swing at the narrow driveway. I ended up scraping the truck all down one side. I had to make an official damage report, the only time of my career.

The best thing about the job was meeting lots of people from all walks of life. I used to get delayed by having a coffee at every port and often got “please explain” requests from the boss. I usually blamed the traffic or the truck.

After 24 years truck driving I retired from the Public Service a lump sum and part pension. That was 1992 and I was 60 years old.

## **Riding/Driving**

My first car in 1962 was a second hand 1953 FJ Holden sedan. I bought it from a car yard. Back in those days a road worthy certificate didn’t exist, let alone was required to complete a sale. I paid 200 pounds and it was a rust bucket.

In 1965 I bought a new HD Holden off the show room floor from Reg Hunt Motors in Elsternwick. After 33 years and 200,000 miles (320,000 km) I replaced the 179 (cubic inch) motor with a 186. The work was

done by RPM on Waterdale Road in West Heidelberg and cost \$1400. Six years ago it got a respray. I never clean it with detergents, just the rain and a chamois.

I do all my own basic servicing including setting the points statically and doing the timing with a strobe light. The points need changing every 1-2 years, though the last set lasted 3 years. She ran rough and they were completely burnt out at the end. I new it was time to do something about the 179 motor when going up hills people used to yell at me to “Get out of the road you silly old bugger”.

*Peter, in 1986 I generated a Club member survey and I have found the original one that you filled out. The object of the survey was to determine what sort of people the Club attracted, and to find out a little about them, including what bikes they had owned and what happened to them and their bikes. Only 15 people completed the survey. Even I didn't fill it out – it was too hard! They make interesting reading.*

*Below is a table listing your bikes as recalled in 1986. Given I know the history of your last two bikes I have added them to the list as well.*

Bike	Year bought	Make	Model	Sold/crashed	Period	miles
1st	1956	Lambretta	125	Traded	1 year	5000
2 <sup>nd</sup>	1957	Heinkel	175	Traded	2 years	10,000
3 <sup>rd</sup>	1959	Maico	250	Traded	5 years	70,000
4 <sup>th</sup>	1964	Honda	450	Traded	4 years	30,000
5 <sup>th</sup>	1968	Honda Dream	305	Traded	3 months	1,000
6 <sup>th</sup>	1970	Honda	500/4	Traded	4 years	40,000 [km]
7 <sup>th</sup>	1974	Honda	750/4	Sold in 2003	29 years	250,000 [km]
		BMW	R65	Traded	18 months	
8 <sup>th</sup>	1987	Kawasaki	GT750 P1	Crashed	12 years	140,000 [km]
9 <sup>th</sup>	1998	Yamaha	Majesty	Current	6 years	31,000 [km]

*I note that all your bikes were purchased new and the first six were traded. I see you only had the Honda Dream for three months – because the cam snapped! So you kept on riding the 450? It doesn't quite stack up. Further research required here to learn when bikes were released in Australia.*

*The survey also lists your accident history. It looks like you had a big one in 1986 riding your Honda 750/4 K2 on a dirt road somewhere. From your description and diagram it looks like the bike went into a tank slapper on a bumpy corrugated section causing you to crash. It looks like only the mirrors, instruments and cables were damaged. But you spent three days in hospital and were off work for three months. Where were you, what hospital, and what sort of injuries? Is that why you bought the BMW?*

I was a hundred miles west of Dubbo heading for Cobar on the Melbourne Cup long weekend. I had been up to Forbes and Parkes in a big loop and was heading home via Dubbo. I was riding on a dirt road, dead straight, probably too fast, when I got a puncture in the rear tyre which deflated instantly. I had tube tyres of course, not these modern day tubeless tyres that deflate slowly and give you plenty of warning. As usual, I was loaded up to the hilt with camping gear. Immediately the bike started to weave badly. I slowed from 100 to 80 but it just got worse until it spat me off. I snapped my elbow, amongst other things.

I was alone in the middle of nowhere. The front end of the bike was destroyed, the tank dented, but the motor was okay – all fixable. Eventually a lady in a car came along and took me to a local farm house in Tottenham. A couple of lads loaded me and the bike into a ute and drove me to Tottenham Hospital. The ambulance was a voluntary service out there – which meant “best effort”. No mobile phones in those days, let alone would they work out in the sticks.

By the time I got to Dubbo Hospital at 3am in the morning, 18 hours had passed and they were fearful of operating so they just put my elbow in a splint. I spent 4 days recovering in hospital, then caught public transport – a bus - back to Melbourne. The social worker had arranged a letter for my local GP who sent me off to the orthopaedic surgeon in Camberwell who later operated.

The MRA arranged for the bike to be transported back to Melbourne. It took six months! Not that I needed it – I was back on public transport for a long time. The bike was repaired at the local bike shop.

***Tell us about the second big crash.***

It was back in June 1994 and I was riding my GT750 shaft drive. Quite a few members had them back then including Ian Payne, Peter Dwyer and Ross King. The 750's were really taking off – reduced weight, more power. The GT was a detuned GPz750; a rocket ship for the times. The shaft drive was very appealing. I had leather saddle bags hung low. Everyone could see me coming from miles away because the bike looked so distinctive. I used to be the rear rider a lot in those days. Anyway, I had just come back from the Ulysses AGM in Alice Springs a week or so earlier. I was heading out the Western Highway on a Ulysses club event to Horsham. I had left late and was playing catch-up all day, eventually finding the main group of 30 near Darrehuit Bridge.

We were about 5 km out of Horsham, it was late afternoon and the sun glare was really bad. I was sitting on my normal road speed, 120-140 km/h. Radars and cameras were less prevalent back then. Next thing I know there is a car towing a 30 foot caravan turning right, right in front of me. I woke up five weeks later. You know the rest. You used to visit every couple of days.

*At this stage Peter hands me a copy of his TAC medical records from Bethesda Hospital where most of his recovery occurred.*

*Peter, I used to visit you after visiting my wife Vicki in the Frances Perry Unit of the Royal Womens Hospital after the delivery of our daughter Fiona, 4 days before your crash. Working up the road at the Uni I used to walk down to RWH, get thrown out of there at 10 pm and wander down to the Royal Melbourne Hospital and visit you in ICU where they had you on a life support system for a couple of weeks at least. Your mate Jack "Tiny" from the Four Owners Club was an orderly and used to let me in. It was dark, you were unconscious and I used to sit for a while watching all the machines and all the people in the ward struggling for life. If you weren't bothered by the gruesome nature of the machines beeping and huffing and puffing, it was quite peaceful and warm. Of course, I was pretty happy at the time, having just become a father. And there was no need to go home.*

According to TAC records you had:

- A compound fracture of the left femur (top leg bone)
- A broken left knee cap requiring reconstruction
- A fractured right femur – rod and cross bolt
- A fractured right humerus (top arm bone) – nail and cross bolt
- A left ankle fracture – pinned
- Fractured left ribs
- Complicated by "pseudomonas abscess"

*You are lucky to be alive.*

Yes, that's right. It took me four years to recover including 2 years in and out of Bethesda. I was left with my left leg shorter than the right, with rods down both legs. In 1996 I had another operation to shorten my good leg by one inch. In my prime I was 6 foot one inch. The doctors were going to do some work on my shoulder but I had regained most of the movement and it didn't bother me so they decided to leave it.

I had stomach problems which resulted in severe vomiting. I ended up in hospital every 6-12 months over a three year period. They did a colonoscopy removing polyps which helped. Finally they diagnosed as a twisted bowel, the result of an earlier TAC operation. A simple operation cured that and I have been feeling great ever since.

During this rehabilitation period I decided to rebuild the K2 as a form of therapy. The GT was not salvageable. I figured that I would ride the K2 again in time and decided to really fix it up. For those who can remember, I bought it from John Burroughs (*Metzeler tyre rep, famous off road racer*) in partnership with Keith Stacker (*off road racer, suspension guru, still going, Bell St opposite old Red Wing shop*) from Malvern Motorcycles. (*I used to get my GPz550 shims done there!*)

I bought a new battery, headlight shell and seat. The tank was stripped back to bare metal and repainted with the bubbles removed, all of which cost \$450. I got Neil Mann, the auto electrician in Little Lonsdale St, to rewire the bike. (*You know he used to live three doors up from Mums? Wasn't his brother the Collingwood coach for many years? Yep.*) I put on a new set of Michelin tyres. I put a new Koni shock in – one off a 500/4 – lowered as it was now difficult to climb aboard a bike.

Jon Riddett came around when I had finished restoring it, for a test ride and pronounced it “quite good”. It sat in the garage for another 12 months until a Ulysses Club member, Stumpy from Avoca, who was just getting back into bikes, eventually bought it for \$4000. I gave him all the spares as well. He's still riding it – I saw it at the Ulysses AGM at Geelong.

### ***Tell us about some of the scooter days.***

One time we had a weekend ride to Wangaratta. It took all day to get there, on mainly dirt roads. We each crashed 9 or 10 times. That was normal, particularly as we had only eight inch wheels. We had countless crashes, and rode with open face helmets with goggles. Of course we weren't going very fast but it sure was a hell of a way to spend a weekend.

Where did “Big Daddy” come from?

I picked up the nickname of “Big Daddy” in the seventies because I had done a lot of rides, had been the President of the Club for 12 years and before that club captain for a while. Les Bennet, now an ex-member of the Club, worked at the Kodak Factory in Coburg. It is still there. He decided to inscribe my name on a special disc made out of a piece of circuit board and attach it on a cam chain from his 450 Honda so that I could wear it around my neck. It was presented to me and I still think it is quite neat.

### ***Tell us about some of your best trips and times in the Club.***

In the 12 months after the 1956 Olympic Games the Motor Scooter Association of Victoria (MSCAV) conducted approximately 30 official functions including weekend rides and day trips. There was a 4 day camp at Easter. The Club had a meeting on the first Friday of each month at the MULOOF Hall in Canterbury Road, Surrey Hills. Later we moved to the Rifle Club in Fairfield, and then to a dance hall above the shops in Station St. Later still we moved to the Fishing Club around the corner on the railway line and then to Jika Jika Hall and finally to Camberwell Theatrette where we are now.

Another life member, Ken Brown, joined the Club in 1960, when the Club had an overnight stay at the Buxton Pub.

I remember one time when the Club had a ride to Powelltown, all dirt of course. The local forest officer didn't take kindly to so many bikes stopping in town and asked us to move on or he would get the police. One of the boys cheekily told him not to bother as one of the police force was travelling with us ie me!

One day I was coming back from a Club ride to the Marysville area on my 450 Honda. Just before the end of the Black Spur I went through a right hand corner pretty hard and the under carriage hit the ground pretty hard. Luckily I didn't fall off.

In 1972 I went on a big trip with Darren Room and Howard Higham to Darwin. That was a very long way on bikes in those days. I was on my 500/4 and Darren and Howard on 750/fours. On the way to Adelaide I rounded a sharp left hand bend, the road suddenly heading down a steep decline. I got a tank slapper but managed to pull it up at the bottom. I thought I had a puncture, but no. We put it down to having too

much weight on the rear end which seemed plausible given we were carrying all our camping gear. When we got to Port Augusta we loaded our bikes on to the Ghan and took it easy for the rest of the trip.

The Four Owners Club started up in 1973 and I was a member till it folded in 1983. In fact, the Touring Club nearly folded in the sixties. We managed to survive by having a membership drive where the members went into town for the day, handing out itineraries to likely types, putting them on bike seats and placing them in trade houses. It worked and we survived.

When I got the 750/4 I toured quite extensively. I have been to Queensland a few times including up to Lightning Ride, the Back of Bourke, and Broken Hill. In 1994 I went to Alice Springs on my Kawasaki GT750.

*Peter, how do you fill in your days now?*

Well, I am still riding my scooter. I have gone the full circle returning to my first bike, a scooter. It requires regular maintenance as does the car, all of which I do. Of course I attend my local church, Our Lady of Victories, Camberwell every Saturday night. It has been classified as a “minor basilica”, one of only few in Australia. In the Ulysses Club I am known as “Father Peter” because of my religious convictions. The church has supported me throughout my life.

I do a half hour walk everyday to keep fit. After the various crashes the body needs to get mobile to ward off the onset of arthritis. I am in no pain but don't ask me to bend down on one knee. Meals-on-Wheels is visit every lunchtime since 1994.

I visit St Josephs Hostel Hawthorn that has about 50 aged residents suffering from dementia. The doctors and nurses look forward to seeing me as I am relatively sane and it makes a change for them. Every couple of weeks I visit Nazareth House and once a month I visit the Mary MacKillop Aged Care facility. Of course if I hear about a motorcyclist in hospital via the Ulysses or the MSTCV then I go and visit them regularly. This takes me to Bethesda, the TAC facility on Springvale Road and wherever else riders end up. I have a program of visiting.

Every Saturday morning I meet with the Melbourne Ulysses branch in Elizabeth St between 9.30am and 1.30pm outside the Yamaha City. It is called a “Coffee Sip”. We get lunch across the road – usually a toasted bacon and tomato sandwich. There is a special menu for Ulysses Club members since we are so regular. I always park on the scooter outside St Francis church in Lonsdale St. I know the bike will be “looked after” there. Of course there are Coffee Sips at different times and places for the various Ulysses Branches. A group meets at the Fairfield Pub on the corner of Station and Heidelberg Roads the first Friday of every month – the night after the MSTCV Social Sip. There are also Coffee Sips at Yarra Glen (Yarra Branch) and the Mornington Peninsula.

Two or three times a year there is a reunion for the Old Boys from The Institution. About 150 of us meet back in the original dining hall. We wear coloured ribbons to indicate the particular time period we were there. There are about 30 in my red group.

*Summing up.*

Like many motorcyclists I've had my share of falls. But the riding pleasure and wonderful people you meet along the way has always outweighed the occasional pain and suffering. Being involved in the Olympic games as a club, and as an individual contributor, was one of the highlights of my life. I look forward to a long riding future.

**Peter Philferan**