

MY TIME AND CHURCHILLS 8 WATCHES
Written by Hon. Col. J.L. McLachlan
Collated from Jimmy's notes by Jennifer-Anne – 2004

Introduction

It never crossed my mind, whilst building the nurses' home in Witbank in 1947, that I would one day be looking for the watches which Churchill had sent to some of the people who had helped a young Churchill escape from Witbank on 13th December 1899 during the Anglo-Boer War, through to Lorenzo Marques and safety.

I didn't realise that a certain Dr. Gillespie, the superintendent of the Witbank Hospital who watched the progress of this building - and with whom I engaged in conversation each day, was one of the recipients of these watches - and what a journey I would eventually lead in trying to trace these 8 watches.

At my age of 88, I not only feel blessed as to how full, yet diverse and interesting my life has been but also feel it might be a worthwhile exercise to write my story, a story which I have been recording on paper over many, many years. My dear wife Barbara, who last year left this world for a better place, always told me I should write a book. This book is for you Barbara with just a few words of the song I always sang or whistled to you during the 1939 – 1945 war when I was an S A A F Pilot: -

I NEVER SAID THANKS

I never said thanks for that lovely weekend
Those two days of heaven you helped me to spend
To mark the occasion we went out to dine
Remember the music, the laughter, the wine.
The ride in the taxi when midnight had flown
And breakfast next morning, just we two alone.
You had to go, the time was so short.
We both had so much to say
Your kit to be packed, the train to be caught
I'm sorry I cried but I just felt that way
And now that you've gone, dear, this letter I pen
My thoughts travel with you till we meet again.
Keep smiling my darling and some day we'll spend
A lifetime as sweet as that lovely weekend

The story of Churchill's 8 watches, which for a long time has given me much enjoyment and pleasure and some frustration is incorporated with an historical valuation by the late Dr Jan Ploeger (historical author) who shared my interest in tracing these watches and wrote a story for me, of South Africa as it was during the 19th century. He entitled this 'If the "Witklip" were able to tell'. We believe that both stories could be interesting to share with family, friends and future generations.

Early days – My grandparents

My name is James Leggat McLachlan, known as Jimmy and I was born on 8 November 1915 in the small village of Adendorp, a few miles from Graaff-Reinet.

My maternal grandmother was Catherine Bridget McQuirk, whose ancestors had immigrated to South Africa with the 1820 settlers. She was born in Graaff-Reinet on 10 June 1870 and as a young bride married James Caldwell Leggat on 10 October 1887 in the Roman Catholic Church in Graaff-Reinet. My maternal grandfather was born in Cork, Ireland. He and his parents later moved to Scotland before the Boer War started in South Africa.

Grandpa Leggat was a master stonemason and was recruited by President Paul Kruger to do the stonework to the historical Dutch Reformed Church in Graaff-Reinet when Dr Murray was the minister of religion at the time. He came out to South Africa with his friend John Kirkness, a builder, by ship and travelled by ox-wagon to Graaff-Reinet. The stone for the church was quarried at Adendorp – a small village south of Graaff-Reinet. There he met my granny McQuirk. The church was started on 12.04.1886, took 18 months to complete and was finished in 1887. The architect was J. Bisset of Cape Town, the superintendent, H. Reid of Port Elizabeth and the contractors, Grant and Downie. The stone craftsman was my grandfather J.C. Leggat. The church is now a national monument.

The McQuirks ran a shop in Church Street on the banks of the Sundays River where a bridge crosses the river in Adendorp. My grandfather had opened this shop after he had completed the stonework to the Dutch Reformed Church. I remember this well for Uncle Boetie McQuirk ran this shop. I still see in my mind when as a small boy I came to the shop, which was then being run by my mother, that it was a general dealers shop – for on the outside wall was written a sign: J C LEGGAT – GENERAL DEALER. My mother recalls how during the Anglo Boer War when she was a small girl of about 9 or 10 years she served tea and sandwiches to the British troops when they passed by on manoeuvre

This shop was situated on the intersection roads from Graaff-Reinet to Port Elizabeth and Kendrew on the road through OnderDorp. It was situated in MiddleErf while the northern portion was known as the BoDorp. The Sundays River is on the boundary of all these portions of the town and a canal passes through all these portions – supplying water to most of the erven – from the Sundays River.

My Uncle Boetie was the one who taught me, a very young boy, the art of selling – especially when most of the trade was to natives who usually wanted to buy on credit. We sold a variety of goods. I still remember selling mealie meal at 1/6d a bucket, Boeremeal at 2/6d a bucket, sugar at 4d a pound, coffee at 1/- per pound, Lotus cigarettes at 3d a packet of 10, Flag and Springbok cigarettes at 4d for 10, bread 6d per loaf, sardines at 6d per tin, bully beef at 1/-, sweets and jube jubes (London mixture) at 6d per pound and “Kaffir Blitz” at 4d per pound, etc.

To come back to my lesson in selling, we had ornamental rings for sale at 1/- each, so when the customer, who was usually a passing transport driver, had bought his 3d coffee, 1d sugar and 1d tobacco, he would be shown one of the rings. He'd say

he didn't have money – but on asking the price of the ring, Uncle Boetie would say 2/6d but he could have it on tick provided he paid a deposit of 1/-. This usually worked – he'd buy the ring, never to be seen again!!

A building, which had been an hotel sometime, came into the Leggat possession, probably bought by grandpa Leggat when he quarried the stone in Adendorp for the Dutch Reformed Church in Graaff-Reinet. It was a huge rambling single storied building with yellow wood 9" x 3" beams covered with reeds – upon which a clay layer was placed as roof covering. From time to time the mud roof had to be repaired by filling the rain-eroded patches with more clay. The building consisted of about 14 rooms with numerous outbuildings such as stables and stores. The toilet was situated in the back yard and whenever the E.C. filled, a new hole had to be dug. The water canal, from which water was skipped, ran alongside the boundary wall of the back yard. Water for domestic use was drawn from a hand dug well about 10 feet in diameter and 20 feet deep.

The kitchen floor was of earth and regularly had to be smeared with cow dung – it was quite an art to apply the dung. This I had to do quite often.

There was a cellar under one of the rooms, which must have been used to store the liquor.

I was born in Adendorp on 8 November 1915 in a room where, on the one door, was written “ PUBLIC BAR” and on the other, “LOUNGE.” When I left Adendorp on 1 January 1933 to become an apprentice builder to my Uncle Robert Leggat in Pretoria, the writings were still on the doors.

Grandpa Leggat, who married Catherine McQuirk, whose forebears were McQueen and Morrisie, had 10 children: Elton Morrisie Leggat, Catherine Bridget Elizabeth (my mother) Jimmy and Annie (these two died of the great flu in 1918 as well as granny - all are buried in Graaff-Reinet) Agnes, Robert, Lawrence, Margaret, Gerald and Veronica. The last remaining Leggat (Gerald) died at the age of 80 in June 1992 at Lyttelton, Pretoria.

After building the church in Graaff-Reinet I believe Grandpa Leggat moved to Pretoria where they lived at 186 Blood Street. He was the Chief Inspector of Works for the P.W.D. Amongst other things he was in charge of building the Raad Saal. The builder was his friend with whom he came out to South Africa, John Kirkness. Grandpa also made the owl which is on top of the Commerce Building in Church Square. It is thought that Anton van Wouw was the sculptor – this is not so. If the owl were to be removed, the initials J.C. Leggat would probably be found under the owl's 'foot' as Grandpa Leggat always marked his work.

Grandpa was also the building inspector of the Union Buildings on Meintjies Kop – this is where he became friendly with another stonemason – namely Neil McLachlan – my father. He helped found the Caledonian Society and recruited more than 100 Scotsmen as members.

Early days – My parents

Neil who was born 26 April 1879 was the first born of a family of 8 – 3 boys and 5 girls. He had come out to South Africa during the Anglo Boer War where he joined the Baden Powell Scouts being besieged in Mafekeng. One day he went scouting the Boer positions, he was ambushed and his horse was wounded. He made it back to the camp, covered in blood which spouted from the wounded horse. On reaching base the horse collapsed and those who witnessed the incident thought that he had been badly injured. However, he was not wounded, but his faithful horse died.

After serving the period of the Boer War he returned to Scotland but he decided to immigrate to South Africa as a stonemason. He worked on the Church Square stonework for the Master Builders, as well as the Pretoria Museum and the Union Buildings where he met grandpa Leggat and became a close friend of his. Grandpa later introduced him to his daughter, Catherine, whom Neil married in 1912 at the age of 33. She was 19 years of age.

Neil's father was Archibald McLachlan who married Agnes Calder in 1878 at Alderston. When his family was living in Renfrew the children were Neil 11, Mary 10, Agnes 8, Jeanie 6, William 4, Margaret 2 and Wilhelmina 6 months. Little Archibald was born in 1893. This youngest brother later immigrated to South Africa where he was a joiner who later worked as a foreman for Hunt, Leuchars and Hepburn in Durban. Archie joined the 4th Scottish Company and fought with the South African Forces in Delville Wood, France during the First World War. He received the MM. He was gassed and reported missing but luckily survived and returned to Durban. He too had a large family when he married Aunt Cathie Sprott. Their children were Archibald (also awarded the MM after service up north during World War 11), William, Mina, Margaret, Robert and Jimmy.

My father Neil and mother Catherine had 5 children; Archibald James 1913, James Leggat 1915, Catherine Prudence 1919, Patricia Agnes 1922 and Neil, my youngest sister who was born on 9 November 1925 after our father had died in June 1925 of pneumonia in Graaff-Reinet at the age of 45. This was a most difficult period with my mother being left with 4 young children and one yet to be born. Our youngest sister Neil was born on 9 November 1925. I remember she was supposed to be my birthday present on November 8th. Late on my birthday I had to fetch the maternity "mid-wife" a Mrs Outroom who lived about 2 miles from us in the BoDorp. We lived in the middle dorp. I walked across Bloubaasspruit where there were supposedly "spooks"! As I crossed the spruit I heard a loud sound "whoop whoop" and took off at a rate of knots and ran all the way to Mrs Outroom. After waking her I helped "inspan" the Cape Cart and we drove back, just in time for Neil to arrive on 9th, and just too late for her to be my birthday present.

Patricia Agnes Hall our 2nd sister, a lovely girl, was also born in Adendorp on 17.03.1922. She married Ray Hall on 3.04.1943. She was happily married for over 50 years and now lives on her own and has no children. Ray died 4.03.1995.

Catherine Prudence, our first sister was also born in Adendorp 26.03.1919. She was also a lovely girl. She and her sister Pat were the 1st and 2nd Jacaranda Princesses to Eileen Krause who was chosen the Jacaranda Queen when the first Jacaranda

Carnival was held in Pretoria just before the 2nd World War. Catherine married Dave Milford Cadle an air force wartime pilot, in 1941. They had a son Neil and two daughters Marilyn and Debra. Sadly Neil died at an early age. During World War 1, after my brother Archie was born in Pretoria, the family returned to Adendorp when my dad got a job in Claver, Western Cape, where he supervised the Western Cape Canal system.

When my grandmother Leggat and 2 of her children died during the flu epidemic, it was left to my mother to take care of her own 5 children as well as her younger brothers and sisters, namely Aggie, Robert, Lawrie, Maggie, Gerald and Veronica. As her siblings finished school they married or moved to Pretoria where they took up the building trade. Robert eventually became one of the leading builders – later Archie and I joined his building firm. Elton, Lawrie and Gerald took up the plaster trade.

Elton married Lizzie Brummer; Aggie married Lockie and had 2 girls. Robert married Alida van der Linde (4 children: 2 girls and 2 boys.) Lawrie married Muriel Brownie (4 children: 2 girls and 2 boys) Maggie married Snowy Barnard (2 girls). Gerald married Ina..... (3 girls). Veronica married Bully Browning but died in childbirth.

Humble beginnings

When my father died on 5 July 1924 I was at school at the Union High at Graaff-Reinet where we and the Leggats went to school, sometimes by horse drawn cart, or I would ride on the cross-bar of my brother Archie's bicycle, having to endure a few clouts for not sitting still enough. However most of the time we had to walk the three miles to school.

Later, due to circumstances, I went to the Adendorp Primary School up to Standard 4. This was about the time of the S.A.Flag issue by the politically minded. As I was the only English speaker at this Afrikaans school I had to run the gauntlet many a time when I was chased by the gang, led by Basie Hechter, until such time as I stood my ground and gave Basie a bloody nose. Thereafter we became good friends. At this school I learnt Geskiedenis, Aardrykskunde and Rekenkunde, Afrikaans and English. However, mum decided I should now go back to the Union High. As the junior school came out before the seniors I used to wait for the rest of the family by helping the local baker, a Mr Robertson, in making biscuits and bulls eye sweets.

Things were quite tough and there was very little income, so we planted vegetables and Lucerne on a small plot situate on the banks of the Sundays River. These we watered from the canal from the river, the leading periods being 6 a.m – 7 a.m. on Mondays and 6 p.m. - 7 p.m. on Wednesdays. Twice a week we would get up early, about 4 a.m., to cut the Lucerne with a sickle and tie it into bundles and load them onto the horse driven cart to the market. About 90 bundles would have to be loaded and delivered fresh to the market before school started. The Lucerne usually sold at 1d to 1 1/2d a bundle, so if we were lucky we made 10/- to 15/- out of Lucerne that day.

Other duties involved the milking of cows, feeding the horses, cleaning the stables, sweeping the back yard, collecting the eggs, hatching the chicks under the hens and plucking the geese to make feather pillows or eiderdowns.

I also used to buy skins in exchange for mealies at about 12 mealies for a skin. Mealies sold at 6d to 1/- per dozen as did eggs.

I remember well how we looked forward to receiving £10-0-0 a month from grandpa in the post – sometimes he sent stamps as well – which we used to sell in the shop.

During the great depression, which reared its ugly head from 1928 – 1933 the great drought and swarms of locusts devastated the Karoo. We also had a small butchery going at the time. Occasionally I went to the stock-fair in Graaf-Reinett where the auctioneers were either Phol Bros Watermeyer or Kingwell and Murray. There, Marino sheep could be bought for between 7/6d and 10/-. I would slaughter the sheep in the back yard and became famous with the customers for they only bought meat if I had slaughtered the animal. This I sold at 4d to 6d per pound, the offal at 1/6d and the skin at 1/6d, so if the sheep weighed about 30 to 40 pounds it was quite an income for we sold about 2 sheep a week as well as some chickens which I would sell for about 1/- to 1/6d.

I also slaughtered a pig from time to time by knocking it on the head with a hammer and piercing its heart via its neck with a long knife. Chickens were a rear delicacy and on a Sunday I had to decapitate the fowl having laid its neck on a block. I recall how it would run around headless for a while before dropping dead. It was then dipped in hot water and de-feathered. The pig was also scraped clean after it had been covered in sacks dipped in hot water.

The Decision: Student to Apprentice

After passing standard 8 with a first class pass I left school in 1933 to join my uncle Robert Leggat's building firm in Pretoria as a building apprentice. I had hoped to matriculate and become a doctor or an officer in the British Army. This was ruled out due to lack of funds. My uncle Robert had married Alida van der Linde and had come to Graaff-Reinet on his honeymoon. He persuaded me to leave school and come back to Pretoria with them and become an apprentice in his firm, which I did. During this time I became great friends with Flokie Basson and Francis Garret who would be instrumental in influencing me to join the Transvaal Air Training Scheme of the South African Air Force.

When I look back now I realise the decision to leave school and take up a new life was indeed a fortunate one. Early on 1 January 1933, I left the drought stricken Karoo with my uncle and his wife and found myself on my way to the Transvaal.

My brother Archie had matriculated in 1930 at the Union High School where he had played rugby for the under 16's and later become captain of the high school rugby team. He also had a bash at cricket and tennis. He had moved to Pretoria where he

joined this budding firm Leggat-Leemhuis. At the time they were building tobacco-curing stones for farmers in Brits.

On this, my journey to join my brother at Leggat-Leemhuis, I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the green grass and growth of the Transvaal. There was no comparison of the arid Karoo to the lush Transvaal.

I was indentured to Leggat And Leemhuis as a carpenter apprentice at 10/- per week – rising by 10/- per week per year. However, my uncle undertook to pay my board of 4 pounds per month, when I stayed with the Macorkendales in Boom Street near the zoo. With my 10/- income I could go to bioscope at either the Plaza or Capitol cinemas for an entrance fee of 7d. I also opened an account at Holsers outfitters and McIntoshes' hardware store for carpentry tools which I paid off at 10/- to each a month. This was possible as a good pair of trousers cost about 15/- (R1, 50), shoes 10/- (R1, 00) shirts 7/6d (75c), socks 1/6d (15c) a crosscut saw 7/6d and chisels only a few shillings.

At the same time I attended the Technical College and studied Building Construction, Quantity Surveying and Architectural Drawings, receiving my A.T.C.11. I was taught Quantity Surveying by a recently qualified QS, one-armed Douglas MacIntosh. He had lost his arm when learning to fly and was struck by a propeller.

Later during my apprenticeship I went to many areas all over the Transvaal, building schools at such places as Wolmaranstad, Leeudoringstad, Rooiberg and Nylstroom. This I was happy to do as all travelling and living expenses were paid. My uncle's firm was building K.N.A.P. classrooms (the Knap Panel was a registered patent of his.) It was a concrete panel 3.ft x 1'6 x 4", hollow case, and once the foundation was complete the schoolroom walls could be erected in a day or two. My job was to set out the building and to complete the foundations and floor.

When Col. Stevenson was the chief warden at the Kruger National Park, many camps were being created at places such as Skukuza, Crocodile Bridge and all over the Kruger Park. I built bungalows utilising these Knap 4" hollow wall concrete panels.

It was in the game-reserve, at Crocodile Bridge Camp, on the day that the park was opened to visitors in April 1936, that I came down with a severe attack of malaria. On being taken to see a doctor at Komatiapoort, the malaria was so fierce that the doctor advised Mr Kruger, the foreman of Leggat-Leemhuis that it would be unwise to move me to Barberton Hospital, which was some distance away by car, so arrangements were made to accommodate me in an hotel in the town. A Mrs Green took great care of me. When I had sufficiently recovered I asked her if I could please see the Sunday Times. To my horror I couldn't read the print in the "Hairbreath Harry" comic strips. For a long time I suffered relapses of malaria and even to this day, round about April, I still have to take care.

After free living and loving care which Mrs Green gave me for a full month, I returned to Pretoria to stay with my uncle at 34 Market Street. I could again undertake my building training which entailed building hotels, churches, prisons,

schools in various places such as Twee Buffelskloof, Rooikraal, Heidelberg as well as in Pretoria, where Leggat-Leemhuis built most of the control boards such as the Mealie and Wheat control Board and even the Law Court at the corner of Schoeman and Visagie Streets. We also did most of the building in Roberts Heights including the SSB (Special Service Battalion), the Town Hall, together with additions to the hospital, hangers and offices at Swartkops. On qualifying as a builder the wage was £6-12-0 for a 44-hour week, which later increased to £7-14-0.

During the latter part of my apprenticeship I tried to join the Transvaal and Training Squadron (T.A.T.S.) but believed that as a carpenter apprentice I didn't stand much of a chance. During the interview by Col Pierre van Ryneveldt and Col 'Boetie' Venter, I told them that I was a building apprentice. I then did a silly thing to impress, as I told them I was at the moment building hangers and offices at Swartkops. They then suggested that I should complete the buildings as soon as possible as they were urgently needed. Today you can still see the paving slabs in the offices of the museum which clearly indicates that we built these places as the name "Leggat" is imprinted on the paving slabs.

During 1939 my brother Archie (who also worked for my uncle's firm) and I decided to start our own business as McLachlan Brothers Builders. We had invested all our savings to buy building equipment and some erven of ground in Capitol Park at £25-00 per erf, to do some speculation building.

This proved to be a disaster as the plots had large blue gum trees growing in turf. We managed however, to build two houses on two of these erven when the 1939 war started and overnight such building ventures came to a halt, as rationing was introduced and only established builders were allocated building contracts. We could not get permits to buy any building materials. This resulted in the McLachlan Bros rejoining their uncle's firm, R. Leggat (Pty) Ltd where we worked 10 hours a day 7 days a week. Archie was happy to take charge of the many building contracts our uncle had won.

When during my apprenticeship I had moved in with Robert and Alida who were living with his in-laws, Mrs van der Linde at 34 Market Street (later Paul Kruger Street) I never realised that just around the corner from where I was living, my brother Archie and I under McLachlan Bros (Pty) Ltd., would later build the Hotel Boulevard in Struben Street in the year 1954.

MCLACHLAN FAMILY – DATES AND INFORMATION

Neil Mclachlan: Born: - 26.04.1879

Died 5.06.1924 aged 45. Buried Presbyterian Graveyard, Graaff-Reinet
Fought in the Boer War – Baden Powel Scout. Returned to Scotland – later
immigrated to South Africa. A master Stonemason. Worked building Pretoria
Square, Pretoria museum in Market Street – later renamed Paul Kruger Street. Then
the Union buildings – met his future father-in-law, James Caldwell Leggat. Married
Leggat's daughter Catherine Bridget Elizabeth Leggat (aged 19) and whose family
lived in Blood Street, Pretoria, in 1912. They had 5 children: - Archibald James,
Born 1913. James Leggat 1915, Catherine Prudence 1919, Patricia Agnes 1922 and
Neil (named for her father) born 1924, after her father had passed away. C.B.E.
McLachlan (born Leggat) died in 1965.

Neil passed away 19.06.1997, Catherine 7.06.1996, and Archie on 7.02.2002.

Archibald James born: 7.06.1913 Died: 7.02.2002 married Jean Isabella Whyte,
(Jenny) who was his dancing partner and now captain in the SAAF, and secretary to
General Smuts in 1945. Jenny passed away in 1994. They have two sons, Bruce
Graeme: - 27.01.1947, He has two sons with his first wife Theresa, namely Alistair
James 22.01.1974 and Craig Bruce Egan 17.03.1976. Bruce later divorced. He
married Helen but they also divorced. The second son Grant James: - 1.02.1950,
was married to a divorcee Colleen and has a son Craig Peter 17.01.1974 from
Colleen's first marriage and a daughter with Colleen, Victoria May 22.02.1980.

Archie sent Bruce and Grant to W.H.I.P.S followed by Hilton. Bruce later went to
Potchefstroom Agricultural School and today is one of the champion sheep and
horse breeders. Grant went to University and qualified as an engineer and later
obtained his M.B.A. in Canada. Today he has taken over from his father as
chairman of the holding company.

James Leggat (Jimmy) born 8.11.1915 married Barbara Hamilton Kirk: Born
18.04.1919 on 22.06.1946. They have 3 daughters, Catherine Gail: - 24.04.1947,
married to Johan Loubser: - 22.02.1943. They have 3 sons Bradley James: -
18.04.1974, twins Gareth and Ryan: - 1.01.1977. Married Johan Matthys Loubser
who has a son from his first marriage: - Andre Jacques: - 16.06.1967.
Jennifer-Anne: - 11.11.1952 was married in 1975 to Werner Josef Dohmen: -
6.07.1947. Divorced 1993. They have two sons, Nicholas Werner Dohmen: -
3.09.1981 and Stephan Kirk: - 26.04.1985.
Marjorie Lynn: - 5.03.1955, married Paul Page a divorcee: - 7.07.1948, on
22.08.1981. They have two children Jared Lachlan 17.05.1984 and Sheri-Lee
2.01.1981. Paul has a daughter Amanda Jean 14.03.1978 from his first marriage.
Mandy also has a daughter, Ricky-Lee, born 20.05.2000

Catherine married Dave Milford Cadle 11.07.1917 on 23.08.1941 and had a son
Neil Milford 25.11.1942, daughters Marilyn Catherine 26.04.1947 and Debra Karen

18.10.1952. Neil married Denise Mostert on 16.10.1971 and has a son Rory 2.09.1975 and a daughter Bronwen 15.02.1973. Neil died at the early age of 30. Marilyn married John Cornell on 30.03.1977 and has two daughters Jacqueline Georgina Catherine 23.11.1971 and Stacey Elizabeth 14.1.1984. John Cornell passed away 29.08.1993 and Marilyn married John Gething on 25 04.1998. Debra married Charles Rich on 17.03.1973 and has 3 children, Caryn born 19.05.1977, Leigh born 6.02.1982 and Charles William born 15.11.1984. Divorced and married Andrew Schulze in 2000.

Patricia Agnes: - Born 17.03.1922 married Ray Hall born: - 12.06.1917 on 3.04.1943.

Ray passed away 4.03.1995 and they have no children.

Neil born 9.11.1924 married Theo Winters 18.10.1917 on 14.12.1946. They have two sons Gavin Theodore 12.02.1948 and Robert Patrick 1.09.1951. Gavin married Estelle van der Merwe 19.08.1952 on 12.02.1977 and they have a son, Brendon Theo 15.08.1978

Robert married Cherida born 8.01.1952 on 2.12.1972. They have no children.

LIFE IN THE AIRFORCE – 03.03.2003-12-08

How it started

It all began in 1931 when the Union High School Cadets had to attend a “Wapenskou” where they were supposed to prevent an attack on the van Ryneveldt Dam at Graaff-Reinet. They wore their cadet uniforms and were issued with ten rounds of blank cartridges for their 303 rifles. They went by lorry to the dam site where they were paraded and instructed as to what was expected of them. They were to hide behind rocks, in hollows or amongst the Karoo bushes or thorn trees to avert the expected attack and to open fire when the “enemy” was in range.

Suddenly an aeroplane appeared overhead. This was about the first time that any of us had seen one at close range. As I gazed in wonder at the plane, suddenly mounted horsemen appeared from nowhere, in front of us. We opened fire and they retreated. We were thrilled at what we had achieved but suddenly at our backs we heard “Hands Up!” and there were half a dozen horsemen pointing their rifles at us, telling us to hand over our ammunition. As we turned to face them I was tempted to “shoot” the one as I had my rifle pointed directly at him, but he in turn had his on me! I thought the better of it as I saw the same thing happening to the other cadets – needless to say we all handed over our rifles and ammunition. We were formed up and marched over to the site where the aeroplane had landed. We were lectured and told that we should have eyes in the back of our heads at all times!

Capt Miller offered the cadets a flight on his aeroplane for a small fee. I would have loved to go for a flip but did not have the small fee for it was during the height of the great 1928 – 1932 depression. My father, who had been in charge of the building of the van Ryneveldt dam at the time, had died and every cent counted to support the family. He used to ride a motorbike early each day from Adendorp to Graaff-Reinet in the cold or rain to oversee the building of the dam resulting in his catching pneumonia, which caused his death in 1925. He is buried in Graaff-Reinet and on his tombstone is inscribed the words “By his friends.....”

I have never forgotten that day and the little exercise, which taught me a good lesson. To watch your rear, even up to today when driving a car, flying an aeroplane or walking down a street in Pretoria. Nor would I forget how I longed to fly on that plane and to one day even be able to fly one of those machines.

Signing Up

After working seven years as a builder – working 44 hours a week - war broke out on 3 September 1939. Having tried to join the Transvaal Air Training Scheme, (T.A.T.S.) as a pilot, where Col. Pierre van Ryneveldt interviewed me, without success, I again applied to join the air force, but was told there were sufficient pilots but that I could apply to join as an air gunner or navigator at a later stage. I would have to appear before a selection board.

In the meantime, The Pretoria Highlanders was then being formed and I signed on, attending evening and Saturday parades at the race course (now the venue for the annual Pretoria show.) In February 1940 the Pretoria Highlanders went to Sonderwater at Cullinan for a month's training. It is here I learned how to drink, use a gun, machine gun, march up and down hills etc. We were accommodated in tents or in some buildings, which R Leggat had built.

At the time my uncle's firm was busy with military contracts in this area. Military contracts were allocated to recognised contractors of which Robert Leggat was one. His firm was involved in the building of Prisoner of War camps, military camps, W A A F camps, hospitals, hangers, showers, long drop toilets and the like.

In June 1940 the Highlanders were mobilised and were camped in tented areas at the Police College in Pretoria in amongst the rocks.

By then I was a drill sergeant and was called into the Officer Commandment's office to be told that I was to be released for 6 months to go back into the building industry as a Key man for my uncle's firm as my uncle was in charge of all these military contracts and needed my assistance. We had also not yet been issued with our Pretoria Highlander kilts.

Besides working 7 days of 10 hours a day my brother Archie and I joined the National Volunteer Brigade to do guard duty twice a week at the Union Buildings, Mint or at the Pretoria Power Station. We did guard duty from 18h00 to 6h00 for a period of 4 hours at a time, from 6 pm – 10 pm, 10 pm – 2 am or 2 am – 6 am, thereafter reporting for building work at 7h00 to 17h00, building the V building in Beatrix Street and doing additions to the hospital, W A A F camps, Prisoner of War camps etc.

When the German Prisoners of War were sent by sea on the Queen Mary to Canada Archie was one of the guards and recalls how they dodged the submarines. He was also able to visit his McLachlan grandparents in Scotland, when the Queen Mary returned from Canada (where the red-tabbed South Africans were thought to be Russians). While in Glasgow he had been given a breakfast of eggs and bacon and asked his grandmother how, with the rationing, she could serve such a good breakfast? She simply replied: "You have just eaten the month's rations."

A Pupil Pilot

Early in 1941 I was recalled to rejoin my unit of the Pretoria Highlanders who wanted me to return, but I asked my uncle's firm to apply for a further extension for me to stay on as a Key Man, as at the beginning of 1941 the S A A F was advertising for pilots. I was hoping and waiting to be called up and went for an interview. When asked what I worked at, to ensure my acceptance into the force, I told them that I was unemployed! If I had told the Air Force that I was a Key man I would not have been accepted.

So in February 1941 I was accepted and reported to Lyttelton Air School as an Air-Pupil. Here we studied M.D.C. (Military Discipline Code) drilling, exercise, cross-country, running etc. By then there were more Air-Pupils than there were Air Training facilities so a lot more time was spent on Parade Grounds and in Lecture rooms than was really necessary. Because of the lack of aircraft it took a full year before I qualified for my wings.

I was nominated the leading pupil with such duties as to see that the bungalows were kept neat and tidy and that all the pupils were in bed when the inspections were made. It was at such times, when Bobby Lock was out playing golf with some of the officers and had not yet returned, that I had to put some pillows under his blankets and ask the inspection sergeant not to disturb him as Bobby was tired and sleeping after playing golf all day with senior officers.

On passing out at Lyttelton I was declared the Stick Man of Flight 11. Bobby Locke was selected as an air pupil and started on Flight 10 at first and then to flight 11 and on to flight 12 when he was posted to Vereeniging. I would eventually be lucky enough to play a game of golf with him on my sojourn in Port Alfred. Bobby eventually joined 31 squadron and I saw him again in Italy just before R.T.U. (Return to Union)

In August 1941 I did my initial training on Tiger Moths at Benoni Air School. It took me a long time to go solo but eventually I made it and was posted to Standerton to do advanced training on Miles Masters.

I am reminded of one incident after going solo – each one of the students having to queue up for one Tiger Moth – taking over one from the other. I got my turn, taxied out, took off and made a circuit and landing. After taxiing in I handed over to pupil Blackbeard. He took off and made a wide circuit. In the meanwhile the wind had made a 180-degree turn. Blackbeard made a beautiful approach but did not notice or realise that he was landing down-wind. He just kept drifting. Not being able to stop when he touched down, he continued down-wind over the road and through the tree lined street, between two trees, stripping off both of the wings before the aircraft came to a stop. He climbed out of the aircraft unscathed – lucky him!

This reminds me of a similar event, when in Standerton, on my first night flight on a Miles Master with my instructor who told me to taxi out – turn into wind and take off! I did quite well and made a circuit! However, when I started to land the wind was stronger so I had to sideslip to remain over the runway, as this was my first attempt. I kept opening the throttle until I was running out of runway. The instructor took over and told me to go around again. This I did, but found the same difficulty on the approach. I think he was a bit outraged and exclaimed, “I’ve got it!” I was relieved but noticed that he also had the same difficulty in landing. As he throttled back, the aircraft dropped from a height causing the undercarriage to crash up into the plane and through the two wings and come to a sudden halt. We were both lucky to come away from that one – shaken but not stirred!

Wings to Fly

It was on Friday 13th March 1942 that I at last received my wings. Just the day before, I had received a letter from the Pretoria Highlanders wanting to know why I had not gone on active duty to Madagascar with my unit. I was terrified as by then I had learnt the MDC (Military Discipline Code) about being absent without leave, desertion etc. I realised that as a soldier one could not do as one pleased by going from one unit to another. One would be liable for prosecution, which could even include the death penalty. That day each of the pupils had to do a solo flight over the aerodrome to demonstrate their capabilities. I was very disturbed about the letter I had received, thinking about what would happen if I was found to be guilty of desertion and falsifying that I was unemployed when joining the S.A.A.F. It was on that day that I made one of the worst landings I had ever done, by doing a hard landing and bouncing up skywards. Luckily there was no damage to the aircraft and the next day on Friday 13th February 1942 I received my wings and was presented with a summary of flying and assessments for the T.A.T.S. course ending 14.03.1941 as an “above average” pupil pilot! As paper was scarce, I remember writing on the letter I had received from the Pretoria Highlanders “I am a fully qualified Pilot”. Fortunately I never heard from them again.

I was authorised to wear wings w.e.f. (with immediate effect) and given 2 weeks leave. Up to now I had 157.55 hours of flying of which 106.05 hours were on Miles Masters and the balance on Tiger Moths.

I was posted to ferry flights at Brooklyn in Cape Town, from where an assortment of aircraft such as Battles, Northrops, Oxfords and Ansons were ferried to various Air Schools situated at George, Port Elizabeth, Port Alfred, Durban, Kroonstad, Bloemfontein and Dunnottar. This is also where I met up with 3 of my fellow trainers, Lt.Warrick Wickner, Lt. Mossep and Jerry Steyn.

The officer in charge at the time was W/O Katzenstein. He was a pilot in the German Air force during the First World War, having flown in the Von Richthoven’s circus with the Red Devil von Richthoven. Later he immigrated to South Africa and joined the S A A F. When he told me to fly a Northrop I said, “I do not know how”! He said, “What have you got those for?” pointing to my wings and said “go and do your cockpit drill!” He took me on a quick 15 min circuit, landed, and got out, saying “now go and do some circuits and landings.”

It was winter in Cape Town. We were strangers with no transport, having to walk down a street where the houses were occupied by anti-war residents to get to a bus. No soldiers would venture to do it solo – they should also try to avoid District Six. Dances were organised when convoys arrived. We of course did not stand a chance to be invited, as only the people from the convoys would be asked to attend.

Request to go north

After 4 months the four of us asked for a posting up north. It did not take long before the Officer Commanding called us in saying that a posting had come through! “Mossep – you’re going to East London - Mclachlan, Port Alfred -

Wickner, Port Elizabeth and Steyn to George. That was it! My posting was to 43 Air School in Port Alfred where I stayed on and off for 2 years

The conditions were very much the same as they had been in Cape Town except that there were no convoys and in Cape Town one delivered various aircraft to all the training schools while in Port Alfred one flew various aircraft to train navigators, bomb aimers and air gunners day and night, never leaving Port Alfred.

After the year was over I once again asked for a posting up North but instead was posted to Swartkops to fly Fairie Battles to Kisumu at Lake Victoria in Kenya. There I once again met up with the same friends who had asked for a posting up north including a Peter Stofberg. All of us did 3 trips flying the Battles to Kisumu flying from Swartkops via Pietersburg, Bulawayo, Ndola, Tabora and Moshi. We had a night stop at Moshi and the next day flew to Kasuma De Doma where we also over-nighted. This dog's leg took us past the Tsetse Fly infested area of the Rhodesias. We all had an ice-cold swim in the waters of Kiliminjaro before returning to base via Moshi and Ndola.

We took 3 days and 2 nights to deliver the Battles to Kusuma. During our last trip a Lt. Kilian crashed his aircraft at 15h30 on 4 June 1943 at Bwana Makuba not far from Ndola. I circled for a while and saw that Kilian was OK, flew on to Ndola and reported the incident. He was later picked up by a JU52 and flown back to Ndola from where he caught a train to Pretoria. My flight was delayed until the 9 June and when we flew on to Kusuma we saw Kilian's crashed plane en route.

After this effort, to my horror I found myself again posted to Port Alfred having to take an armoured train of ammunition with guards to Port Alfred where I stayed for close on another year. I took a hand in the running of the Officers' Mess, which was in bad financial difficulty. I started a piggery and vegetable garden and took to checking all deliveries, soon being able to reduce the mess fees.

It was about then that the Air School was awarded an A.F.C. The Officer in Charge found it difficult to decide to whom he should award this honour. He eventually invited two long-serving members who had done good work to a game of squash, namely Avro Randall and McLachlan. Avro played a better game than I and he received the A.F.C!

During this period while flying out to sea in an Anson with some trainee navigators, one of the engines cut and I turned for base on full throttle yet losing height all the time. I was fortunate to just reach the boundary when the 2nd engine cut. We landed and had to be towed in. I also met up with Capt Flokie Basson who was one of my friends who had also applied at the same time to join the Transvaal Air Training Squadron (T.A.T.S.) at Kisumu where he was the Officer in Charge.

I remember the one night the two of us spent hunting wild pigs, which were a nuisance on the runway.

Northwards at last

In 1944 I again applied for a posting up North. This, at last, was approved and I was posted to Almaza, Cairo to join a Mosquito Squadron. However before this could happen I found myself with a sever dose of “Gyppo Guts” and landed in hospital. Whilst there the doctors took a keen interest in my snoring ability, for as a young boxer in my school years I had had my nose broken. They suggested that while I was in the hospital they might try to rectify this problem under local anaesthetic. This they did and I was given sick leave to recuperate at the Officers Mess on the Gezira Islands on the Nile. This resulted in my missing the parting to Mosquito Squadron.

When my health was restored I was posted to Aquir O.T.U in Palestine where I converted to flying Wellingtons. From Palestine I was posted back to Cairo, Egypt to convert onto B24 Liberators together with the same crew I had been allocated in Palestine after all the other pilots had made their selection. Only the remaining personnel had become my crew. My crew turned out tops.

We were then posted to 31 Squadron in Foggia, Italy as a replacement after the squadron had suffered many losses on supply dropping over Warsaw. 31 and 34 Squadrons were licking their wounds.

At the transit camp of Bari R.T.U. pilots were offering newcomers double the official rate of exchange of lire. A few suckers were caught for they soon found out that around the corner they could get, not the official rate of 400 lire, nor the 800 they had been offered, but anything from 2000 upwards for the pound.

Things moved fast and the Liberator crews were soon on their way to Celone Aerodrome, Foggia.

Camping in Italy!

Italy was cool and green, a delightful change from the desert. Little did the replacement crews, who arrived to see the fruit and grapes ripening, realise, when they moved into the tented camp area – the miserable conditions under which they would be living when the snows came – and still worse, when the snow melted and they had to wade through mud and slush up to their knees!

Pierced steel plate strips (P.S.P) were laid on top of some heaped earth to form a footpath from the tented area to the Mess – the “Pig and Whistle”, and along this the crews made their slippery journey. If they could not keep their balance they often landed in the muddy mess, more so on the return journey from the “Pig and Whistle!!” The South Africans found the extreme winter conditions trying and went around wrapped in all the woollies they could wear, in the tents or in the “Pig and Whistle”. This was built from butt-jointed slats through which the wintry winds howled! They sat freezing, trying to eat their food which consisted mainly of dehydrated potatoes, carrots, cabbage and powdered eggs, and which the cooks vainly tried to turn into something appetising.

What a treat it was to be invited over to the American Engineers' Camp where fresh meals were served, including roast chicken, beef, lamb, green peas, roast potatoes, ice cream, fruit salad etc. These engineers had built a landing strip in the swamplands by filling and laying interlocking P.S.P. to form a runway, taxing strips and parking bays and digging huge drainage trenches and building dykes for miles around to keep the place drained.

Besides 31 and 34 Squadron Liberators, American Squadrons flying B17 Flying Fortresses shared the aerodrome. These operated mostly by day, whereas the South Africans flew mainly by night. It was a sight to see at times, more than 500 aircraft of varying shapes and sizes circling overhead to gain height as they gathered from the surrounding aerodromes and then set off in a stream stretching over a wide area, all speech drowned out by the drone of the engines.

During such operations a fixed time was set to be over the target with a variance of only three minutes. The stream was there at night but seldom did one see any of one's own or other aircraft until one got over the target area and the air space was lit up by fires, search lights, target markers or flares. Even then it was difficult to see many of the aircraft, as different squadrons approached the target from different directions and heights, from 20000 ft. to 2000 ft., those above dropping their bombs through the stream of aircraft below. On one such raid, a bomb, which smashed out the aircraft's engines, hit one of our aircraft from above but luckily it failed to explode on contact. The aircraft returned to base and the crew lived to fly another day. This incident took place during a raid on Monfalcone on March 16th 1945.

When the new crews arrived Lt. Col. Dirkie Nel was O.C. 31 Squadron. The two Flight Commanders were Maj. Jack van Eyssen and Maj. Senn. All three had been over Warsaw. Maj. Van Eyssen had been badly shot and landed in Russian territory from where he eventually made his way back to the Squadron.

Soon afterwards Lt. Col. Chris Smuts was transferred to 31 Squadron from 34 Squadron. He remained until early 1945. How well the Christmas Dinner was remembered, when on a roneod menu it was stated "Eat Smuts's you like!". Then Maj. Gen. Robertson of 31 Squadron was promoted and became the third O.C. in as many months!

These rapid changes in Commanding Officers did not give them much time to get to know their officers and men, especially when the only time they really met was at briefing or in the mess, otherwise their men spent their time sleeping, or in the tents playing poker or trying to keep warm around a petrol stove. These were Heath Robinson contraptions, the favourite being a 44 gal. drum buried about 9/10 of its height below the ground and near the bottom of which a hole was cut and from the ground to the hole a flue was constructed down which a match was thrown to light the fuel, which was conveyed along a thin copper tube connected to a second 44 gal. drum containing fuel and situated outside the tent. A stopcock controlled this. The fuel was obtained from a huge stockpile of "contaminated" high octane in one of the bogged areas. In the buried drum, near the top, another hole was cut to form an outlet. Empty oil drums, with tops and bottoms removed, were connected to this outlet and to each other and laid underground to form a duct and an outside

chimney. To light the fire the stopcock was opened and petrol dripped into the buried drum. As a match was thrown down the flue the fuel ignited. Sometimes it happened that the copper tube seized up due to the heat – the flames would die down – then the fuel would again start running. If one was a bit slow in re-lighting, the fuel would vapourise and as a match was thrown down the flue, many a narrow escape was experienced when the resulting explosion caused the drum (if not buried securely) to take off, tent and all.

Another method of keeping warm was to heat the floor surrounding the drum. To do this, one gathered thousands of spent .5 ammunition shells by arranging with the ground crew to collect them from the various aircraft after their return from operations. These were stuck into the muddy ground around the drum and as the heat was radiated throughout the “mosaic” floor, it would help to dry out the mud, which caked hard around the immediate vicinity of the buried drum.

It amazed the squadron personnel that they could burn up high octane fuel to warm their tents. However, to try and get transport into Foggia or to scrounge the surrounding farming area for fresh farm produce, eggs or poultry was almost an impossibility – if one wanted a hot shower, which was only obtainable at a community ablution block in Foggia, the best way to get there was to navigate the surrounding dykes and swamps and hitch-hike into the bombed out town.

It was at this time that, as I sat huddled in my “centrally” heated tent frying some freshly bartered eggs (for which I had paid dearly with my issue cellophane wrapped Springbok cigarettes) – idling my time away playing poker – I decided to improve the existing facilities.

With the approval of Col. Robertson, a couple of bottles of “issue” brandy and a three-ton truck, I visited the surrounding American aerodromes and traded the brandy for a truck-load of 3 ply veneered long range lightning fuel tank crates. With these and the help of the squadron carpenters I lined the mess, medical room, navigation hut, etc. Some talented mechanics, air and ground crews set to and soon these places took on a bright view when painted figures of lovely ladies appeared on the three-ply panes lining these huts. With the help of the American engineers and some Italian labour, water was laid on to an ablution block which I had built from sand stone gathered from the surrounding bombed out barns and houses.

Much to my surprise later in April 1945 an article appeared in the Pretoria News about Capt. McLachlan's activities. It stated how he, as a builder in civilian life, was keeping his hand in with building operations during the day, while flying Liberators at night.

31 and 34 Squadrons were again up to strength – Tito's partisans were on the offensive and the Liberators were once more dropping explosives, arms, ammunition and supplies to them at places widely dispersed such as Sanski Most, Kladusa, Ohkanina etc. The Germans had occupied the village of Rogatica and for the first time, on November 6 1944, as an experiment, an S A A F Liberator Z166, flown by Capt. J.L. McLachlan, carried 12 x 1000 lb. G.P. bombs. The aircraft only just managed to take off, using the full runway and thus this experiment was not repeated having been considered too dangerous. I joined the stream of aircraft flying

towards the target and as they dropped their bombs on the red-roofed village below they were seen to disappear in a cloud of smoke and dust.

The Italian partisans were also active in the Po Valley and on November 12th supplies were dropped to them. The Liberator crews flying over the 8th Army battle line at night could see the whole front illuminated by gun flashes.

The enemy, in the meanwhile, was retreating from Rogatica and the Liberators were bombing their lines of communication and bridges which were heavily defended.

Anti-Allied guerrillas were attacking the Athens Aerodrome and on Friday, December 13th, doing my 13th operational flight, landed British troops, under fire, on the aerodrome, turned about and took off again. Most people dread anything to do with 13th, especially Friday 13th! However, this held no fear for me as I considered Friday 13th to be a lucky omen, for it was on Friday 13th March 1942 that I had received my wings. It would also be a lucky thirteen when I would leave Italy on 13th April 1945 to return to South Africa.

Before my return to South Africa, however, On November 19 1944, Liberator Z 166 (which was to be the only Liberator to complete 500 flying hours and to be sent back to Cairo on retirement and a major overhaul), scored direct hits on the Visegrad Bridge, being hit itself by flak in 4 places. However, on November 20th it was back again to bomb the pontoon bridge which the Germans had built alongside the damaged bridge, having been repaired by the hard-working ground crew who worked through the night. A relentless attack was maintained on the enemy troops and transport concentrations by the heavy bombers and the partisans who were kept supplied. On Christmas Day the Liberators dropped warm clothing and food to the Yugoslavs near Rogatica from where they had fled when the Germans occupied it.

It was on January 3rd that bombing became more strategic with the bombing of railroad bridges, marshalling yards and harbour installations at such places as Salcano, Udine, Verona, Trieste, Padus and Gras, where light and heavy flak was concentrated and enemy aircraft encountered and a number of aircraft were lost.

March 7th 1945

On March 7th 1945 the marshalling yards at Udine in Northern Italy were again the target of 6 x 31 Squadron Liberators. Bad weather was forecast but it was predicted that the target area would be clear and that the return flight base too would be clear.

Two of my crewmembers, W.O.P. (wireless operator) Air-gunner Abe Goldberg and navigator lieut. Jan Henning tell of their experiences that night along with mine. This is an amazing story related by 3 of us, on the same flight, same manoeuvre - yet with our own personal experience and from our own point of view:

Capt J.L. McLachlan states:

Soon after take-off we struck 10/10 cloud – engaged George at 10000 ft. and flew along merrily. On nearing the target found that No. 1 engine was windmilling and had lost its power; however, as we were near the target we continued on our

mission, still in cloud. We could not see the target so decided to reduce height and at about 7000 broke through the cloud and could clearly see the target markers dropped by the pathfinders.

Sgt. Ken Sawyer from Kent, England, the bomb aimer who was attached to our crew, in his calm voice said “target ahead – steady – steady”, then all hell broke loose and intense flak barked around us – we heard ourselves being hit. However, we continued for a while and released our 8 x 1000 lb. bombs on target, opened full throttle and turning to starboard, climbed back into the clouds and set course for base. By now the weather had deteriorated into rain, lightning and thunder and to make matters worse, after feathering No. 1 engine, I found the oil pressure dropping on No. 3, which I also feathered. Having engaged George, I kept a watchful eye on the instruments and the turn and bank indicator – the compass kept veering and I adjusted George to maintain course. The aircraft started losing height and appeared to be in a screaming dive to the left. It was then that I realised that by feathering No. 1 and No. 3 engines I had failed to switch the instrument pressure control over to No. 2 and by failing to do this, the instruments were not functioning. Our intercom had been damaged, a piece of shrapnel having damaged my left earphone, so I had to turn to my Wop/Air-gunner, Sgt. W.O. Goldberg and beckon him to switch over the controls which were situated above and behind him. This he did and I found, as the instruments again began to function, that I was flying on a reciprocal to our course to Foggia. By now we had dropped to 3000 ft. and the storm was worsening – it took full throttle on two engines to keep going. Lightning danced and flashed along the edges of our wings. As we reached the high ground north of the aerodrome the height indicator flashed dangerously red and we just managed to scrape over the escarpment into the plains surrounding Foggia, and we could see the welcome sight of the pyramid of light formed by the three searchlights on our aerodrome.

The two engines, still on full throttle, were showing the strain as we limped into the circuit area at about 800 ft. As communications were out we fired a Vary cartridge and turned into the downwind circuit. The undercarriage would not lower as the engine working the hydraulics was feathered, so we set to, lowering it manually. As we turned into wind to land, we were down to 500 ft. and the undercarriage was still not down! I then decided to re-start the feathered engines and as we skimmed over the dyke wall at the beginning of the runway, the under-carriage locked in the down position and we all breathed a sigh of relief! What a let down it was to be told, on reporting at de-briefing, that irreparable damage had most probably been done to the engines by re-starting them. I began to think that it might have been better to have crash-landed the aircraft! Up to this time I had been fortunate in that I had not damaged any of my aircraft at all during 1200 hours of flying. Of the 6 x 31 Squadron aircraft that took off that night, four failed to find the target, so returned to base. The other one, flown by Lt. Senior, unfortunately failed to return.

It was heartening to see however, whenever one took off on a mission, on our return, the ground crew were even more anxious about the mission and the safety of the aircrew than the aircrew themselves! These ground crews worked right through the night in rain or snow, exposed to all the elements, to keep our aircraft flying – without them 31 Squadron could have operated.

W.O.P. W/O A. Goldberg states:

Of all our bombing raids, the one that can never be forgotten took place on the night of March 7th, 1945.

Our briefing was to drop our bombs on Udine at a height of 15000. When we arrived near the target area, there was a heavy layer of thick dark cloud, which would have caused bombing to be inaccurate. Our skipper, Captain Jimmy McLachlan then decided to descend to 7000 ft. and drop the bombs from that height. All went off well until we left the target area, and then all hell broke loose. We were hit in many places by the ack ack, and unbeknown to me, as I was listening on the radio for weather reports, two of our four engines were damaged badly, and had to be feathered. This meant we were flying on two engines and losing height.

Skipper then called on the emergency intercom for the mid upper gunner, the tail gunner and the beam gunner to come to the flight deck with their parachutes fastened to the harness. The flight deck, where I sat, was not very big, so with the extra three and their parachutes on, there was very little room to move. As I was the only one on the intercom on the flight deck, I had to pass on all instructions to the other three. Jimmy was talking to Bill, the second pilot, saying that we had no compass, no artificial horizon and no altitude meter, as one of the feathered engines controlled the generator that controlled those instruments. As these switches for the generators were on the back panel of the flight deck, I shouted and indicated with my fingers to one of the gunners to switch off No. 2 generator and switch on No. 4. Unfortunately he did not understand and switched off the wrong switches. For a moment there was real panic, and in a second, I dived over the nearest gunner and managed to reach the switches and switch the correct ones on. I looked into the cockpit and was very, very relieved to see all the instruments working again.

However, I heard skipper saying our height was on 3500 and we couldn't increase our altitude and that there was a mountain of 4000 ft. between our base and us. He told me to call up base on the V.H.F. transmitter, which used very low power, and get a bearing to fly out to sea and avoid the mountain, and so get behind it. Base then gave us a bearing to fly straight to our runway. Now our troubles started all over again.

We could not lower our undercarriage, as this was controlled by one of the damaged engines. Skipper had to make a quick decision, either to belly flop (the time was 2 o'clock in the morning) or start up the damaged engine for a few seconds to lower the undercarriage. He wisely decided on the latter. He told Bill to drop the undercarriage as soon as he started up that engine. As we approached the runway, skipper said to Bill: "NOW!" There was a terrible grinding noise, as though the engine was being ripped apart, but the engine was feathered as soon as Bill gave the O.K. that the wheels were down.

Skipper made a perfect landing. As we taxied off the runway, we saw fire engines and an ambulance parked at the side of the runway – in case!

The next morning, after de-briefing, we inspected the damage to our aircraft. Besides the two engines badly shot up, there were six gaping holes in the fuselage, one of the holes about 18 inches from the oxygen bottles. That was a close call!

If it hadn't been for the level headedness and flying experience of our skipper, who knows how this might otherwise have ended.

Lieut. Jan Henning states:

Up early, beautiful day but weather bad towards North. On stand-by for flying. One letter from home – write home.

Bombing marshalling yards at Udine in evening. Go into solid mass of cloud soon after being airborne. Fly blind to target. From dead reckoning turning-in point we drop from 14000 ft to 7000 ft. in direction of target. Cloud base just above 7000 ft. Navigation was dead accurate as we broke cloud almost over target. Meet a very heavy barrage of flak. Flak train in marshalling yards puts up intense defence. As we are running in on the target, Lt. Senior of our Squadron goes down in flames – he was coned by searchlights. Bomb aimer warns of flak exploding nearer and nearer our aircraft. Just after releasing our bombs we get hit by six salvos of flak. No. 3 engine shot out – we climb almost vertically into the cloud. No. 1 engine which was also hit spluttered and also packed up, which left us with one live engine on each wing. No. 3 engine is the most important engine for it drives the hydraulic motor for lowering the undercarriage and also for supplying brake pressure. No. 1 engine supplies suction for flying instruments and acts alternatively with No. 2 engine to supply the de-icing boost.

We were in solid bank of cloud, the aircraft was gradually losing height on two engines, but a rough calculation showed we would reach base with just sufficient height for a circuit and landing. Just over 100 miles from base aircraft started icing up. The blind flying instruments had to be cut off so that No. 2 engine could supply de-icing boost. Pilot's lost sight of the fact of reviving the instruments after 10 minutes, so instruments went "dead". In a mad panic the Pilot told us to prepare to bale out – we clipped our parachutes on and prepared to go out. I heard the Pilot say "Oh God we're on our backs" and felt him trying to roll the aircraft, which would have been fatal. I shouted back, "We're not on our backs, check your suction" (remembering vital drill when I was still a pupil pilot). He made the gravest mistake taking George (automatic Pilot) out, because George would have kept the aircraft level, even though the instruments went dead.

The dense cloud was one reason why we could not ascertain the attitude of the aircraft in relation to the sky. Then only did he discover the reason for trying to follow a fading artificial horizon. Our sigh of relief was genuine!! We now received a message from base to come round the spur instead of straight home, which meant about 20 minutes extra, flying. Another calculation showed the alarming fact that we could not reach base going round the spur, so we immediately turned on a course straight for base. Base was in continuous R/T. communication with us giving us accurate course to steer and warning us of the 6000 ft. high mountain on our course. I was taking fixes of our position every minute and giving our distance to go to the crew. I think we must have just missed hitting the mountain as the altimeter was indicating a regular descent. The following illustrates the importance of always

keeping fresh the vital drills of emergency systems. About 40 miles from base the Captain issued instructions for an emergency landing. The second pilot was to lower the main under carriage manually – neither he nor the pilot knew how to do it, so I decided I would do it. The bomb aimer was to throw the nose-wheel out. He said O.K. but had not the faintest idea how to do it. So he crawled through to my compartment and asked me how it was done. I was obliged to crawl into the compartment and show him what to do, and then he said he could not do it.

Coming back in my compartment the Pilot said he could not see the aerodrome and that I had to “home” him in on Gee. I now explained to him it was unnecessary to use the manual operation for lowering the undercarriage – he refused to do as I suggested and I had to explain the emergency hydraulic system in detail when the Operational Training Unit lectures seem to come back to him and he realized I was right. I homed him over the aerodrome and pointed it out below us. It was pouring down – sleet and snow. Then in his panic he forgot which the aerodrome was that he should land on, after I had never seen the aerodrome from the air at nighttime, and he and the second pilot had landed there on over 30 occasions already and knew the layout and characteristics of the aerodrome lights. So I was compelled with the aid of radar instruments to point out the aerodrome once more. I had to crawl back and operate the emergency hydraulic system for lowering the undercarriage. We fired off a red Verey cartridge and came in on a priority landing with only sufficient height and power to reach the runway as another engine had also started to fail. Again we sighed – we were safe!!! I, who was at least concerned with emergency systems, was the only one who had remembered the lectures which were emphasised time and again to the pilots at training unit.

The raid was a failure. The photographs and subsequent recce photographs indicated the target markers were placed in the town and some churches were completely gutted, houses destroyed and the hospital which had red crosses on all four wings, was three quarters demolished by direct hits. After landing and inspecting the aircraft for flak damage I staggered backwards and clasped the pitot head. This was left switched on by the 2nd Pilot and was red-hot. My hand was badly burnt and first aid was immediately applied. The purple jelly worked wonders for two weeks later my hand was almost complete healed. To bed very late. Up after breakfast. To drome to inspect damage to aircraft. She would not fly for a very long time to come and this her first raid after a major inspection.

Back to Civilian Life

Having completed a very adventurous tour of 40 sorties I was posted R.T.U. (Return to Union) and released as a captain in 1945. I was in Cape Town on V.E. (Victory Europe) day and in Cairo on V.J. (Victory Japan) day. I had completed my adventurous 40 OPS (sorties) doing my 13th OP on a Friday 13th and was also posted back to South Africa on a Friday the 13th.

ELLISRAS

Getting started

Just before being released from the Air force I had to do 3 trips up to Cairo ferrying back troops in a Dakota. There were ferry breaks and I took this time to assist with building operations of 100 houses at Danville for which Archie had tendered, at a profit margin of £30-0-0 per house. After being released from the S A A F as captain I rejoined my brother who had restarted the firm of McLachlan Bros and assisted him in this project. I found, to my dismay, that a red-tabbed S A A F captain was not quite acceptable to most of the artisans in the building industry!

McLachlan Bros had also tendered and been accepted to build a school and hostel with various outbuildings for £125 000-0-0 at Ellis Ras.

Due to the terrific storms that had taken place at Ellis Ras, supplies had to be dropped by aircraft to the stranded populace because of the flooding. There were not many tenders and those that had tendered had come in at a higher price thus making their tenders unacceptable. After been awarded the contract I applied to the War Disposal Board for assistance to equip our building firm. This was refused as it was on record that at the time I joined the air force I was “unemployed.” I had to explain to the board that I had only been able to join the S A A F if I had not been employed at the time or did not belong to any other unit.

They maintained, however, that I was “unemployed” and that they could not assist me in any way whatsoever, but that as an ex-soldier I could buy from the surplus depot only, if I so desired. I told them exactly what I thought of them! They did say however, that I was entitled to £30-0-0 to buy some civilian clothes

Nevertheless, on arriving at the surplus depot, I saw equipment which I required to restart our building career. I approached the captain in charge of the disposal unit and after explaining who I was and what I required, the officer retorted, “ Oh you’re the one who told the War Disposal Board what you thought of them!” So he must have been briefed that I would be interested in acquiring some equipment!

I was quoted ridiculous prices for items I wanted which seemed to have been “plucked from the sky!” I wasn’t about to give up and told him I would have to see if I could raise the funds and would be back as I desperately wanted the stone crusher and some water pumps. I then went home to discuss the raising of some much-needed cash and was told by my mother that she had saved all the money I had allotted her during the war. This amounted to over £700-0-0 (R1 400,00). I had only held back £5-0-0 a month for my personal use with which I was able to buy the odds and ends as the Air Force took care of everything else.

The money was withdrawn from the Post Office a few days later and I went back to the disposal depot and found a lieutenant in charge, who offered to show me around. He had obviously not been briefed and was most helpful. Furthermore the prices he quoted were far lower than those quoted before, with the result that I was able to buy nearly all the equipment I required to restart our business firm with the money

my mother had saved together with the £3000-0-0 which Archie had received for the 100 houses we had built in Danville during 1945 for the municipality.

There and then Archie and I decided we would not do the same job but that he would do all the financing, tendering, ordering, wages, banking and investments and I would do most of the building in South Africa while he and John Rimple did some investments in South West Africa. For many years Archie was the president of the M.B.A. (Master Builders Association). He started the Thursday Golfing School with Oscar Galgut, Piet Jooste, Ronnie Stewart and himself. He also took part in the Mr South Africa Competition but when he lost to Eldrid Tidburg, who went on to become a film star – Archie just became a star!

Archie was a great family man and benefactor and did a fantastic job by caring and investing for family members (uncles, aunts, cousins and nephews too) by creating a pension fund and trust funds for them all. Archie passed away peacefully on 7 February 2002.

Off to Ellisras

After the war I went to Ellisras which is a story on its own. This is the little town where we were to build a school, hostel, principal's house, sewerage disposal and substitution reservoir. The previous week I had been out to have a look at the site and nearly got washed away on the causeway when I tried to cross the crocodile infested Magol River from the east. On arrival at Ellis Ras with the signs of devastation caused by the floods still evident, a road to the site had to be cleared of Hardekool, Tambotie and haak en steek Thorn trees and undergrowth. From this felled Hardekool and Tambotie some furniture was eventually made.

I had 2 ½ years to do the job – finished in 1-½ years. I discovered that the quantities were based on a smaller hostel. After being hammered that we were losing on the job by Archie, I discovered that there was another £25 000-0-0 due. We then bought 2 erven opposite Les Marais Timber Hardware in Les Marais where we later built Brugail and Jennifer (shops and flats).

At Ellis Ras there was only Welpton's trading store and a few houses. No meat, milk or fresh vegetables could be bought. These all had to come from the nearest village of Vaalwater some 70 miles away, via a very bad road, or from Pretoria.

A start was soon made on a vegetable garden and with the purchase of some chickens and turkeys from the locals, although we were told by the school principle, who had a few existing classrooms on his farm, that "hier brand die wortels in die grond gaar". He apparently was very disappointed that his farm was not bought for the erection of the new school.

The stone crusher I had bought plus all the other equipment was soon put to good use by crushing concrete stone and carting river sand from the Magol River, firstly to build a reservoir and pump water from submersible pipes planted in the river beds and secondly to supply water to make the cement-sand bricks and irrigate the vegetable garden.

The place was overrun by game especially “spring-hares” which had taken over complete control of the farmers’ land, as they had been unable to eradicate them as they had been denied the possession of arms and ammunition during the war.

It was very hot in Ellirras and labour was very difficult to come by. This resulted in my having to recruit and train local farmers to do the building. It seems that in the cool of the night there were droves of people travelling by foot from Bechuanaland to Thabazimbi, weary and footsore: make or break they were endeavouring to reach the “Mountain of Iron”. During the day they would hide in the bushes. The thought then struck us as to how to recruit this labour force – even if for a short while.

The local farmers were only too keen when we offered to eradicate the “Spring-hares” so at night armed with spotlights, .22 rifles, sticks and heavy boots on our feet, the slaughter of menace was started. With this bait the lair was set, for by roasting the hares and a big pot of mealie meal over a fire just off the well-trodden paths, the temptation was too great to be avoided. With the offer of a free meal to the weary travellers and the promise of a job until they felt strong enough to proceed on their way, some were persuaded to stay for a while – say a month or two – a few for longer, or until the urge to reach their goal of Thabazimbi became too great.

Most of the recruits were employed to mix cement and sand to make the cement bricks with which to build the school and hostel. Others were used to gather stones for crushing, for the concrete foundations and floors. As the building progressed, so did the farming endeavours. Maize, Chinese peas, pumpkins were planted on the old abandoned lands on the banks of the Magol River. Later some wheat was planted. To irrigate all these crops an old petrol engine was converted to run on gas - which was made by burning charcoal that had been manufactured on the site. It was practically impossible to obtain petrol, as there still was severe rationing. With this beautiful stream of water pumped by the above means, mother earth responded most generously to our efforts. So did those who had been recruited, for they in turn persuaded more of the “travellers” to tarry for a while.

As these recruits recovered their strength so did their output of bricks. However, we still needed millions of bricks, so we decided to put the labourers on a piece work footing by saying that after a team of six men had completed their quota of 1000 bricks, they could stop work for the day. This worked like magic and soon some teams started work before sunrise finishing their quota by midday. Then they would squat under the shady trees and skoff at those who were so slow.

The quota system worked well, but there was no way they could they be persuaded to double their quota for double pay. As far as they were concerned their reward was to finish work and so have time off to rest and laugh at the others!

Soon all employees were being fed fresh vegetables and meat, milk or chicken from the ever-increasing livestock of cattle, pigs and goats.

Unfortunately after a few months the weary travellers became fit enough to continue on their travels so when they were paid at the end of the month, some again moved on, although some were happy to continue working for us. To stem our labour drain

we delayed payday by a week or so but still the magic call of Thabazimbi was too much for some who simply disappeared after they received their pay.

Who wants to be alone?

The building was now progressing well ahead of schedule, as was the farming undertaking. It was at this stage that the isolation and loneliness got the better of me, so I decided it was time to marry my wartime fiancé, Barbara Hamilton Kirk. I took a few days off work and got married on Saturday 22 June 1946 to my beautiful wife in Pretoria.

Our honeymoon night was spent at Hartbeespoort Dam. She must have loved me very much for on the Sunday I proceeded with my new bride in a 3/4-ton Chevrolet truck loaded with of all sorts of supplies— back to Ellis Ras.

On our journey back to Ellis Ras I spotted a black-maned jackal a small distance from the road and asked my bride if she would like a fox fur! Without much adieu I took out my .22 rifle and shot the jackal. Unfortunately the poor beast had been caught in a snare and the skin around its neck had festered. Barbara did not get her fur but at least the animal had been put out of its misery.

We arrived at the site office (a 10' x 10' corrugated iron shed) in Ellisras at about 10 o'clock in pitch darkness. By the light of a paraffin lamp, the shed had to be cleared of its building paraphernalia and mealie meal bags before the honeymoon bed could be unloaded and placed in the shed. The night was bitterly cold but I did not mind as my Barbara was there with me.

The very next day Barbara insisted on being taken to Welpton's Store where she bought some curtaining material and by evening the womanly touch had turned the corrugated iron shed into a reasonably cosy room.

The kitchen also consisted of a 10' x 10' shed with a coal stove, table, chairs and cooking utensils. The quality of the food continued to improve immensely with the use of fresh vegetables from the garden, such as peas, beans, lettuce, carrots, beetroot, cabbage and also eggs, chicken or the occasional guinea fowl or partridge which I may have shot, or the fish I occasionally caught in the river stream. Bread was baked in a hollowed-out ant heap in which a fire was made, the whole wheat bread being made from wheat grown on the lands and then milled at Vaalwater. Mrs Nel gave Barbara a recipe for this bread. Potato yeast was used to make this delicious bread. Barbara learnt fast and soon she was feeding all the white staff with wonderful meals.

There was an abundance of snakes, lions, leopards and other wild animals and in a similar way cattle roamed wild and had to be hunted just like the game. Cattle were used for ploughing the lands or to pull any vehicle stuck in the sand or mud.

Wagons were also still very much in use in the area. It then occurred to me that this was just how the Voortrekkers lived when they had trekked to the far corners of their country - in a slow, leisurely way establishing outspans approximately 30

miles apart. Here they settled for a while, thus establishing small towns. This line of thinking enabled me to enjoy the living conditions at Ellisras as I compared our lot with the conditions the Voortrekkers had endured or even enjoyed. Barbara felt a bit isolated however, as she was an English speaking girl from Durban, so one day I made arrangements to visit the MacDonalds who had invited us out to meet the Ellis's, Whelptons and MacSweenies etc. To her surprise she found out that English was not as universal as she had thought, as her English conversation was responded to in Afrikaans. We also learnt that some of the locals had never left the area nor had ever seen a train! A very pleasant evening, however, was spent with the "clans".

As the buildings were partially built and before being painted, we moved from the tin room into the principal's house taking along the mobile kitchen, for to her surprise, Barbara found herself pregnant. It was then decided that she should return to Pretoria where she could share a one-roomed flat with her mother opposite the Union Hotel for £10-0-0 per month and where she could receive proper medical attention.

On a bright sunny Saturday I carried out the packed suitcase, down the five verandah steps and packed them into a war disposal Chevrolet car. As I finished packing the car, I called to Barbara that I was ready. She came out of the house, turning to lock the door and I approached the verandah to assist my heavily pregnant wife down the steps – she was already moving pretty awkwardly - when I noticed a ten-foot Black Mamba lying at full stretch at angle between the step and the riser. To avoid a panic I said calmly, "Barbara, be careful! There is a snake lying on the steps!" But by this time she had already started descending when the message clicked in her head, and with one great leap she cleared the remainder of the steps, staggering into my arms. It took some time to calm her down, while the snake, having being aroused from its slumbers, slithered away into the bush.

Thomas, one of the Africans recruited from the Thabazimbi migrations, turned out to be quite a good cook after being taught by Barbara, so with Barbara now living in Pretoria, he continued to cater to the builders' needs. More about him later!

Impressions

As mentioned, the building contract was well ahead of schedule and the farming enterprise was yielding its rewards when, to my surprise, the Chief Provincial Inspector visited the site and produced a letter from some local personality stating, "Die bouers bemoei hulleself meer met boerdery as met die bouery en dit moet dadelik stopgesit word, want hulle gaan op groot skaal met tabak en mielies aan!" which translated means "The builders concern themselves more with farming than with building and we demand an immediate stop to this as they are cultivating tobacco and mealies on a huge scale!"

However, the inspector was more impressed with the building progress, which in the long run was finished a year before the contract period. He was served a lovely meal of roast chicken, baked potatoes, green peas, green mealies and fresh salads and he agreed that the well-kept garden and lands would be an asset when the farming school with its pig-sties, milking parlour and chicken houses was

completed. These facilities would supply the needs of the school hostel. I also told the inspector that the slow progress of the building project was due to the lack of cement with which to make the bricks. With a smile he said, “Stem Nasional – dan sal jy cement kry!” which means Vote for the Nationalists– then you’ll get your cement!”

I placed a big order and soon a truckload of cement arrived!!

The Auction

As the buildings were nearing completion it was decided to give a farewell party to all the builders. They were asked to invite their families to a braai and an auction sale as it was decided to sell all surplus materials instead of carting them all the way back to Pretoria. So with the help of Mrs Nel and Barbara who had by now returned from Pretoria, with our first-born daughter, Catherine Gail, a great feast was arranged. We slaughtered a young ox and a pig to make steaks and boerewors. There were also chickens and freshly baked bread from the ant heap ovens, fresh butter and milk, baked potatoes and Chinese peas, as well as salads. All this in preparation of the Saturday braai and dance, for which the painting contractors ‘The Wolfswinkels’ had volunteered to supply some “Boeremusiek” – concertina and all!

To our amazement, by Wednesday, some of the families started arriving in their wagonloads, pitching their tents and sails and making their campfires among the neatly stacked piles of building materials to be sold on the Saturday.

The Saturday sale was a huge success. I acted as auctioneer, taking about £700-0-0 in cash while the buyers packed their purchases onto their wagons.

Trenches had been dug for the braai and huge logs of Hardekool had been placed in the trenches. These were to be lit in time to allow this slow burning wood to form the ideal coals for the braai. The invited guests who had arrived early had not brought enough supplies - one could see that by then they were ravenous, so it was decided to start the braai soon after the auction.

It was then that the stampede took place, for as the bell was rung and the announcement made that the food was ready, a mad rush was made for the baths full of meat and boerewors. The youngsters were the first to start grabbing and even stuffed food down their shirtfronts. After a few harsh words they were told that there was plenty for all and they could come back as many times as they wished.

Archie, my brother and partner was to bring the liquor. He arrived a little later that evening to join in the braaivleis but by that time the dance had already started with the families sitting on benches against the walls of the hostel dining room. Some of the women were breast feeding their babies or wrapping them in blankets and putting them to sleep under the benches. The liquor was carried in and placed on a table in a small room adjoining the hall and it was announced that the bar was then open and the second stampede of the evening occurred. What a rush! Bottles of beer and hard liquor were grabbed from the table and those trying to get in to the room were pushed back by those trying to get out with their booty. With some effort

the barmen managed to get the door closed and locked, but the throng still tried to get in and the force behind this throng simply broke down the door. As most of the liquor had not yet been opened, the grabbing could not continue. The crowd was assured that there would be enough for all but if they did not all calm down the bar would be closed, thus calm was soon restored.

The “Wolfwinkels” were a talented band and kept the crowd on their feet until the early hours of the morning or as they say “Dagbreek toe!”

Fond farewells were said that Sunday as the ox-wagons and donkey carts were loaded with the purchases and “inspanned” with the surplus supplies of meat, bread etc handed out as “padkos”.

The next week was spent doing the final touches and cleaning up of the site, sanding and polishing of the used floors and cleaning of all windowpanes in preparation for the handing over to the authorities on Thursday. This went without a hitch and the buildings were accepted.

Packing Up

We then decided to visit some builder friends who were also building a school at Marken, some distance from Ellis Ras, so after attending to all the final packing, we left early on Saturday morning intending to return on Monday en route to Pretoria. We left Thomas the cook to take care of everything for on our return we would take him with us to Pretoria.

Whilst at Marken we noticed very threatening black clouds in the direction of Ellisras and could see lightening and hear the thunder from afar. That evening the storm hit Marken with a torrential downpour. On Sunday all was calm and fresh and we could depart as scheduled on Monday. The trip back to the school site was very hazardous owing to muddy roads and the many washaways. On arrival in Ellisras we could not believe our eyes - large hail stones lay feet deep against the southern side of all the buildings, deep furrows had been scoured out of all the newly covered sewerage drains, all the windows, including the mosquito screening on the southern side had been broken as well. In the roof valleys blocks of ice had frozen solid and the paint had been knocked off the doors, which had been pockmarked by the hail. Hail and icicles lay thick on the parquet floors, while water was dripping through the ceilings where the flow of water had been blocked on the roof by the ice. This storm had hit the buildings on the Saturday and the ice was still there on the Monday.

We phoned the Provincial Administration to inform them of the catastrophe, but as they had taken over the buildings on the previous Thursday, our offer to undertake any repairs was turned down, as it was now a departmental affair.

Once we had recovered from the shock, we decided that we should pack and leave for Pretoria as intended but by now Thomas was nowhere to be found and he had the key to the store where our belongings together with the £700-0-0 locked in a trunk had been left.

Fortunately I had a spare key to the door and started removing the suitcases, but when I got to the iron trunk I noticed that the lock had been broken and the bags of coins 3d 6d 1/- 2/- 2/6d 5/- pieces and notes were missing!

On further enquiries I found that Thomas had taken a bus to Vaalwater so I phoned through to the stationmaster there and he confirmed that there was a black man at the station who fitted my description and who had just bought two tickets to Johannesburg. I asked him to inform the police and to hold Thomas until we arrived from Ellisras, some 70 miles away. When we arrived in Vaalwater we found the bags of money in Thomas' suitcase and he was arrested and taken to Nylstroom. Some weeks later I had to attend the court case in Nylstroom together with the stationmaster as witness. Thomas was found guilty and remanded for sentence and the money was returned. I gave the stationmaster £100-0-0 in appreciation of his assistance and set off for Pretoria.

It was a sweltering day and I had worn a suit to attend court. I put the bags of coins into the pockets of my jacket. As I was driving, the heat and the weight of the heavy coins became too much. I stopped the car and removed my jacket. On arrival at Ockerse Street where McLachlan Bros had their joinery shop, I parked in front of the main sliding door of the workshop, which was open, got out and walked towards my brother who was sitting in the office. "Well," I said, "We at least got most of the money back!" I turned around to fetch my jacket, opening the car door and reaching for the jacket but the jacket and all the money had gone. Within the minute or so in which I had left the car, all had disappeared and yet there was no one in sight!!

From Ellisras to Pretoria

After our stay in Ellisras we moved to Pretoria and stayed next door to the house in Struben Street which I had bought from a Mr Blake for £1 250-0-0 when I had received an inheritance from my father's estate when I turned 21 years. This second house I bought for £5 000-0-0 although it was very similar in design to the original £1 250-0-0 house which was used as an annex for the one across the road at 185 Struben Street which Archie bought and which was used as a boarding house run by our mother, opposite where the hotel now stands. She had by now moved back from Adendorp to Pretoria as Archie has persuaded her to move from Adendorp with our 2nd and 3rd sisters to run 185 as a boarding house.

During our stay in Pretoria we continued our extension of the properties we had bought in Les Marais. We also expanded McLachlan Bros throughout the Transvaal and South West Africa eventually building an hotel in Pretoria.

We also bought and built 1 house on each of the 10 Waterkloof properties we had bought for £3 300-0-0 i.e. £330 a plot. These we sold for approx £3500 to £4000. How we determined such prices was to build a house for not more than 10 times the price we had paid for the ground.

THE BOULEVARD HOTEL

From beginning to end

About this time in 1953 McLachlan Bros. was approached by the architect Oscar Hurwitz to build a 100-roomed boarding house for a lady who was running a boarding house, The Blackwood Villa on municipal property which was about to be demolished to make way for the new municipal offices on the corner of Vermeulen and van der Walt Streets. Oscar had designed most of the houses we had built – he convinced us that at £5.00 per room per month it would be a good proposition.

We built the boarding house as was customary at the time, with the bathrooms, showers and toilets at the end of the passage with only basins in the rooms. There was also no air conditioning. When we had nearly completed the building, which was to be known as “Whitehall” by the new tenant, and had finished the top floor of the 4-storied building, we told her that if she wished she could start moving in as we moved out. Sadly she then told us she had lost all her money and was incapable of furnishing the hotel or paying the rent of £500-0-0 per month but that she would like to manage it for us.

Archie seemed satisfied with her suggestion – but this is where I differed with him. I told him that with our mother’s knowledge, we could advertise and sell or employ a competent manager. This we did and got plenty of enquiries when we advertised it for sale or to let, such as – too big – too small – wrong position – too expensive. We then instructed the newspaper to advertise again, but this time over 3 days. They mistakenly inserted the advert in the ‘situations vacant’ column. We got some applications for the job. One reply we received read: -

Dear Sir

On reading your advert it is apparent that you do not know your ass from your elbow. If it is a manager that you require you can do no better than appoint me and my mother who has vast experience. I shall be at the corner of Commissioner and Eloff Street from 10 – 11 am on Saturday. I’ll be dressed in a white suit and easily recognizable if you wish to meet me.

How sorry I am that I destroyed the letter and did not go for the interview.

So after many thoughts it was decided to form a company named Hotel Boulevard after Struben Street was supposedly to be developed as “The Boulevard” up to the Union Buildings with the High Court and Government Buildings on either side of the Boulevard. This however did not materialize.

This resulted in our running the Hotel ourselves. Archie took over Les Marais Timber Hardware and I ran the Boulevard Hotels and as a property developer I developed a farm from nothing to a well stocked game reserve with pecan trees, pigs, chicken and cattle-mixed farm. We made most of the furniture and supplying material from our Les Marais Timber and Hardware firm which we had established to supply material to McLachlan Bros. and the Hotel Boulevard.

The Boulevard Hotel, Pretoria was opened 8-11-1954 by our mother C.B.E. McLachlan. However Herman and Carla Figge applied for the position but did not

have money to buy or rent but would very much appreciate an appointment. They became our first wonderful and talented manager and manageress.

Since then we've never looked back, only improving and expanding The Happy Hotel. The Boulevard was the first hotel in South Africa to be graded a three star International Hotel.

In 1995 the hotel was awarded R10 000,00 as the most improved hotel in the Protea group from Cape Town to Cairo. This amount was divided equally amongst all the staff.

Due now to circumstances beyond our control the Boulevard Hotel has been let to the Correctional Services. The man in charge is Brig Gen W. Nkonyeni and it was a privilege for me to be invited to the Inauguration Parade of the S A National War College (The Old Boulevard Hotel) on 30 January 2004. Here I realised that my wish and ambitions that all humans and especially South Africans be rated as equal and that at the age of 88 years I now see a great future for our country. When I witnessed the Presidential Guard Parade I suggested to Brig Gen Nkonyeni that the Defence force be trained to form the best and strongest army in South Africa to encourage peace – not war.

Eric Bolsmann has written a beautiful booklet called Hotel Boulevard “The Happy Hotel”. I won't go into too much on the life history of the Boulevard as the story is related in a wonderful way by the author. However, when this book was launched on 8 November 2003 (my 88 birthday) we had a large get together at the Capitol Hotel to which all the old managers and patrons of the Boulevard during its 50-year history were invited. Every guest was touched by the wonderful speech written and narrated by Arthur Honey, our 2nd competent and well-respected manager.

INCLUDE ARTHUR HONEY'S SPEECH (ATTACHED HERETO)

Louis Leggat our 3rd and Don Hamilton our 4th also had wonderful memories to share with us during their successful years as excellent managers of the hotel.

Whilst running hotels in Pretoria, Witbank and Phalaborwa, the hardware and joinery shops, property development and farming I still kept many outside interests. My hobby was to collect many and varied gold coins over many years. During the war I had attended staff courses as a reserve officer at Waterkloof and was generously awarded the title of Honorary Colonel in the S A A F in 1990, received a certificate of Good Comradeship from the M.O.T.H.S and the Paul Harris Award from Rotary International.

Witbank/Pretoria

After we had left Ellis Ras and our sojourn in Pretoria we moved to Witbank when we won the contract to build the Witbank Hospital Nurses Home.

Whilst living there we also won numerous contracts to build two flats and some houses – which we occupied – laid out a beautiful garden by Barbara, then selling and building and moving into another house.

Our second daughter Jennifer-Anne was born in Witbank in 1952.

By this time I was tired of commuting to Pretoria during the week from Witbank – so decided to move back to Pretoria where we were building the Meat Board (and later the Hotel Boulevard.) We then bought a plot in Lawley Street, Waterkloof and built a lovely home. This house was at the end of Lawley Street on the boundary fence of the corner of the Country Club golf course and many a golfer lost a golf ball when it landed on our property. When Barbara's mother died we sold the house and moved from there to Mackenzie Street – then hired a house in Charles Street. In 1957 we went overseas for 3 months leaving our 3rd daughter and last addition to our family, Marjorie Lynn born in 1955 in care of Aunty Vi as I was recovering from severe peritonitis. By the time we got back Lynn was calling Aunty Vi 'mommy!' She didn't remember Barbara as her mom but she remembered me her dad!

After we returned from overseas we bought a Dutch-Gable house in Milner Street, Waterkloof to which we moved at the end of 1957. Our daughters all grew up in this home and attended the Diocesan School for Girls before Jennifer and Lynn joined the Girls Collegiate in Pietermaritzburg where they matriculated. Gail went onto Rhodes University, Lynn to Art College and Jennifer to Commercial College. They have moved on to their grown-up lives having worked, married, looked after children and running their businesses.

KLIPDRIFT FARM

Getting started through default

Just after the 2nd World War, Lawrie Leggat, one of the McLachlan uncles had bought Portion 13 and 14, each approximately 325 morgen, on one of which he had the mineral rights. The farm is +- 8 km from Hammanskraal on the tarred road to Rus der Winter on the Pienaars River, just passed the Klipdrift School

After a long search to find the owner of the other mineral rights, the search was given up. It is believed that he was somewhere in Australia.

Lawrie was a great bird lover and from time to time an ornithologist would come out and eventually when McLachlan Bros became the new owners I was told that 153 species had already been identified.

Lawrie was a master plasterer and did most of the plastering when we built houses etc. He was a horse fancier and would go to most of the races.

Archie had lent him some money to help pay for the farm. Lawrie had also bonded the farm to the bank and we had guaranteed the bond. To our surprise the bank phoned one day to say they were selling the farm and wanted to know if we were interested. That's how we were forced to become the new owners after the bank had decided to foreclose.

Lawrie stayed on the farm and helped wherever he could. The only improvements were two small rooms and a rondavel on the site of the present thatch guesthouse and a small cottage, which is now the manager's house at the chicken houses. They were all in a state of disrepair. We added onto the manager's house with Lawrie doing the plaster. (Note the plaster work of art in the dining room).

The lean-to corrugated iron roof from the two rooms extended to form a verandah and the roof and door to the rondaval were thatched.

There was a small wall to the present day at the guest cottage to store the water from a canal which we were entitled to every second Sunday – there was a canal which started somewhere at Kualata joining the spruit crossing the farm, a tributary to the Pienaars river – this furrow was usually overgrown with weeds – so if we wanted water we had to keep it clean – even then we were lucky if we got the water. Therefore we had to check the sluice gates of all those entitled to water.

During the alterations to the cottage I found boxes of dynamite stored above the ceilings. It was rumoured that it had been stored there during the last war by the Ossewa Brandwag. I had removed these boxes and stored them in the big store which I had built – then forgot about them, even though the store was used daily. Years later when we were living in a hired house in Charles Street, Pretoria, we met a mining engineer, our next-door neighbour, a Mr Vos. One day I took him out to the farm and showed him around. I happened to mention the dynamite. He was shocked when he saw the leaking gelignite and told me how extremely dangerous it was and that I could be prosecuted. I should get rid of it immediately and he would help.

He asked for bags on which he gently placed the dynamite, we then loaded it all gently onto a bakkie, driving slowly to the other side of the road. We deposited it on some rocks in the spruit. The explosion was heard as far as Hammanskraal causing many enquiries as to where and what had happened. We knew nothing about it even though the stone was shattered. The mystery of the big explosion is still talked about!

Developments

When I talk about their being nothing on the farm – I mean nothing - except the few buildings and a dilapidated rusted bit of boundary fence here and there. No water except for a brick well in the riverbed, a tributary through the farm to the Pienaars River on the boundary.

To get to the water, a bucket tied to a rope was lowered down to fill and then pulled up and carried to the house. (This pit can still be seen in the spruit amongst the Poplar trees below the cottage dam wall.)

After some years when I was back in Pretoria, we started developing the farm. The first thing we did was to look for underground water. What a racket this was – borehole after borehole! Eventually we found water in the borehole near the manager's house. That is the first one to have a windmill erected by Stewart & Lloyds. It is the painted one in the windmill camp – with water still available now. From then on we started expanding. We started making cement bricks and erecting stores, chicken houses, pig sties, clearing lands. Fencing and boring for water - many – many boreholes of which 6 are in working order, 3 with windmills and 3 electrified.

Most of the buildings erected contained items which were recovered by McLachlan Bros. from bits of broken down existing buildings or from alterations e.g. the house that was demolished when the Boulevard was built on the site. Sheds were removed in Potchefstroom to be replaced – thus windows, roofing, baths, basins, sinks, stoves, electric fittings, geysers etc., some of which can still be seen in the stores or are utilised on the farm.

Bruce had been educated at Potchefstroom where he took up agriculture. On qualifying, he took over the farming enterprise with his wife Theresa. He also turned the 2-rooms and the rondavel into a house by adding a kitchen and dining room, with a staircase to a mezzanine loft, which is a big bedroom. He added 5 stables for his horses, a garage, and workers' quarters. Later Bruce would move on for a while to other enterprises.

The house then became a guesthouse to which in 1990, additions of 2 bedrooms and a small lounge from which there is a staircase to a sleeping loft, which accommodates 8-10 guests, was undertaken by McLachlan Bros. I did most of the building work during weekends while a manager did the farming as during the week I was always away as far a field as Ellisras, Nylstroom, Witbank, Barberton and Potchefstroom attending to building in those towns.

The beautiful thatched cottage now sleeps 20 people with 14 single beds and 3 double and is situate overlooking a fish stocked dam.

The cottage is let at R300, 00 per day for a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 20 guests at R30, 00 per person per day. There are also facilities for casual day or camping guests for those who prefer to be near nature and peaceful surroundings. Guests bring their own food, towels, soap and toilet paper. Campers bring all they require. However there are toilet and shower facilities available by arrangement with the manager and domestic help at R50, 00 per day, firewood at R20, 00 and a wheelbarrow. One can walk or drive through a 300-hectare game fenced farm with a perimeter of +- 10 km where one can relax on the banks of another big dam and watch the game drinking and a variety of birds of which 153 have now been identified by ornithologists.

At the guest and managers cottages another 100 hectares of grazing can be explored, also a viable portion of 50 hectares where the 1300 pecan trees, grapes, apricots, vegetables, pig sties, chicken houses and abattoirs and cattle feed kraals may be seen. In season produce can also be bought.

(Note: Attach a map of the farm clearly mark the game area as such, also grazing and guest cottage.)

In the early days we continued farming with pedigree Brahman and Afrikaner cattle and with Large White and Landras pigs. Alas when I was rushed off to hospital with an emergency appendix it turned into peritonitis. The doctor said I would have died if it were not for penicillin. After recovering Barbara and I decided to take the aforementioned sea trip on the Union Castle and tour Europe. At the same time we visited travel agents, promoting the Boulevard and over 100 hotels, which had formed a company named "Hotel Tours". This was to promote South African hotels. On this tour we met our cousin Nancy Henderson who designed a brochure for the "Hotel Tours". naming it 'South to the Sun.' This was shown to Sol Kerzner when I later asked him to join. This did not interest him as he said he was about to start his own group starting with The Beverly Hills in Umhlanga. Hence 'Southern Sun!!'

When I returned to the farm and I saw the many piglets, which seemed to be in good health, I was told that the Landrace boar was put with the Large White sow and the Large White with the Landrace sows. This was the end of my pedigree enterprise as there was no record anymore, so I sent them to the market!

Salient Points

- 1 Most of the planning and ground work was done and then handed over to subcontractors – e.g.
- 2 Archie planned the silos, the subdivision of the farm into plots, the selling of the plots to family members etc. where each individual could develop their +-1 21-hectare plot if so desired.

The Oosthuizens did the fencing on the farm. On most of the other building, sub contracts such as Quinn-Electrical, Dawson & Fraser the plumbing, ceilings – Bischoff, Glazing – Sterna, Tractor and Motor Repair – Erma Trekker, Ray Motors, Sheds & feed kraal, spray rack by specialists, laying cages and chicken equipment, poultry abattoir, fittings and numerous advice by others such as Dept. of Agriculture, Water Affairs, Onderstepoort pecans as to the varieties. Also for grapes and apricots (ad infinitum).

Before we were allocated canal water, we pumped water from the sand beds in the Pienaars River. (The pipes are still there).

Diesel pumps to irrigate the vegetable patch also pumped water from the cottage dam – and pipes laid to the Lucerne lands to the east of the managers house. These lands had been cleared of dense bush and trees.

Sub contractors had built the first reservoir and had been paid. When we laid on a water pipe to fill the dam a beautiful supply of water started filling the dam. Then disaster! The clear water appeared muddy. The reservoir was not filling. On examination we found that the water was soaking away as the floor was only made of sand with a thin layer of cement covering. After some use a new concrete floor was laid. When we were allocated 30 hectares of water, a pipe was laid from the canal to the reservoir which was fill to overflowing. The walls disintegrated. After repairing the reservoir, Archie arranged for a bigger and deeper reservoir to be built, which was filled by a pipe from the existing reservoirs. From this reservoir we could divert water and a lower furrow to irrigate the lands on the riverbank where pecan trees had been planted.

- 3 Now that we had canal water we could divert water to the dam and could pump water up to 4 miles to all parts of the farm. We now also had electricity – removed the fuel pumps replacing them with electric engines.
- 4 All the plots had been fenced with access gates to each around the perimeter

Two new reservoirs were built so we could gravitate to all the drinking troughs, which were fitted with ball valves – and the cattle could be grazed so as to prevent soil erosion and over grazing.

This was very convenient when you wanted to check the cattle as they came up to drink and stay the night – as the drinking troughs were close to the road. One simply drove along the main road – got onto the back of the bakkie and counted them.

This proved disastrous however, as we only had a 4-foot perimeter fence. Anyone with a bakkie could simply reverse to the fence – shoot the selected animal – cut off its head, slit it open, remove the innards and load the carcass onto the bakkie and drive off. This happened a few times resulting in our having to raise the fence to 6-foot.

Improvements

Grant McLachlan decided to introduce a variety of game. We already had kodus, which jumped into the camps over the 6-foot fence and stayed there. Also bush buck, duikers, wild pigs, porcupines, ostriches, pythons, jackals, snakes, a variety of duck and birds. He brought in Zebras, Blesbok, Waterbuck and Impala. As most animals are ‘ethnic’ loose together but could not be kept together in the smaller camps so the fences were removed. The game seldom walk around the perimeter of the game section and are found mainly along the spruit and dams for safety’s sake, as they have been snared, shot at and killed, then left to rot.

Bruce has now arranged for a permanent patrol of the area – he removes any snakes he finds.

Where to from here?

Due to a bad fall I had in the L.C.M. Hospital during November 2001, knocking my head, tearing a tendon in my right shoulder, leaving me in constant pain in my shoulder, back, hip and neck and living on pain pills, I have been unable to travel to the farm as my memory has also been affected.

I was due to leave for home the next day when unfortunately the afternoon before, I got up to have a wash in the corner basin where one of the nurses had been doing some washing. As she moved away I stood up and moved towards the basin – slipped on the wet floor – knocking my head against the wall and waking up in bed the next morning, aching all over and seeing double. I was sent to have x –rays. They appeared o.k. until I told the doctor that I could not lift my right arm and was seeing double. They sent me for a sonar and the results showed that I should have an operation the next morning as I had torn and broken some tendons.

I said I wanted a second opinion, firstly with my doctor and then a specialist. Both said that at my age they did not recommend such an op but that the pain could be eased with pain pills and cortisone.

Because of this accident I was no longer able to attend to the farm affairs but my motto in life has always been “never see a problem as a problem, it is only a challenge!” Nevertheless I became very concerned about the farm as our manager Sarel Venter had decided to leave the farm, which I had decided was now a very viable concern as we had made a crop of more than R200 000,00 on the pecans which we had spent more than 2 years in trying to recover as they had been sadly neglected by the previous managers.

We also spent a lot of money building fences to camp off certain areas for grazing and security around the houses, pigsties, chicken houses, abattoirs and grapes. This was necessary to control the haphazard movement throughout the farm. We fitted gates to all the fenced-off areas, which could be locked.

We built water canals and installed sprinkler systems thus enabling the farm to be well irrigated. We could now supply 4” irrigation pipes along the whole distance of the road through the plots on the other side of the farm for a distance of more than 4 kilometres to fill the reservoir and drinking troughs.

The farm was planted to mealies, grapes, apricots and vegetables as well as the pecans. All that was needed was to continue to weed, water and spray as we had discontinued the chickens, pigs and cattle, even though the facilities available for these purposes were all in good repair. A retirement house had been built by Bradley Loubser and fully furnished from the surplus furniture from the Hotel Boulevard when it was closed and leased to the Correctional Services.

We considered selling the farm and advertised it as “farm for sale” when Archie’s son Bruce said he would like to take over and manage the farm as he had done many years previously.

Handing over responsibility

- 5 The farm has facilities for various undertakings which can be used separately or collectively, depending of course whether they are let or managed e.g.
 - (1) We have 42 farrowing pens for sows and free range when the piglets have been weaned. We got rid of the pigs when our pedigree Landrace and Large White pigs got mixed up. We let the sties to a rabbit breeder (Now vacant)
 - (2) Chicken runs – where we had over 20,000 chickens – cages for 10,000 laying hens – their eggs exported in 30 dog boxes by the egg board, the rest being for the chickens, broilers and free range. There is also an abattoir where up to 500 broilers can be slaughtered each day
 - (3) Cattle feed kraal with 100 hectare camps for grazing
 - (4) 300 hectares game farming
 - (5) up to more than 15 hectare of arable land that can be sprayed or flood irrigated for vegetables, Lucerne, hay, mealies, oats grass etc
 - (6) There are over 1300 fully-grown pecan trees, which even after neglect recovered when watered, fertilised, pruned and sprayed. I had planted 300 pecans in 1977 i.e. 100 Barton, 100 Bester and 100 Choctaw in lines from east to west in Pecan Land No. 1. In 1978 I planted another 200 pecans in lines Barton - Bester – Barton – Bester from east to west. We placed shade netting under the trees. Upon shaking the trees the ripe pecans would fall onto the netting thus avoiding having to pick them up individually. The staff would be made aware of the urgency of gathering the pecans and were given an incentive to do this.
Another 300 pecans were planted in 1978 from north to south, a variety consisting of Baron Desirable.
In 1990 I planted another 500 pecan trees in line on Pecan Land No. 3
 - (7) There is also approx one hectare of grapes and a lot of Bulida apricots.
 - (8) There are 3 x 4 roomed workers quarters with 2 bathrooms and toilets, water and electricity that are used as accommodation for workers each having a dining room/kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. 2 electric boreholes.
 - (9) There are two fully equipped flats each with a kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, lounge/dining room and garage with garden. Tenants used these when they hired the pigsties, chicken houses and abattoir. Previous to these flats were 5-roomed staff quarters. But after they asked to have the quarters elsewhere, these 5 rooms were turned into the two flats – each with a garage and verandah and security fenced.

Over the periods since we took over the farm we have tried to do many things e.g. we had chickens, geese, Muscovites and at some time or the other, peacocks.

Chickens were free ranged. At the dam there were ducklings born then eaten when they swam on the bay, by either barbell, otters, lecuvaan or pythons. The peacocks disappeared and were later seen wild on the other side of the dam by the foreman, manager's, tenants, of which there were many from time to time.

Once I visited the farm to say hullo and found one of them fast asleep around midday, even when there had been a storm the previous day and the roof of a chicken house blown off and drowned fowls lying around in the rain water. Another one said he was going on leave. I told him he first had to take stock and that I would be out the next day. I returned to find a note that there were 5400 chicks and that had already left. I took stock again and found that there were only 3500 chickens. I spoke to some of the workers who told me he took chickens to sell in Warmbaths.

On his return after 3 weeks (I had stayed on the farm for that period) I told him that there were nearly 900 chickens short. He replied, "You were here while I've been on holiday – you should know where they are!"

I used to buy vegetables and plants from a grower who sold them on the road at Bon Accord. One day he asked me to take him to the farm. He said he'd like to farm vegetables and work for me. To make things easier he could buy seedlings at Brits as he was thinking in thousands, but I had to give a deposit before the grower could accept that we would take the seedlings. The seedlings arrived after he went to Brits to pick them up – after a few months he again asked for a further deposit. On checking the seedling trays there were only half the amount of seedlings for which we had paid. It turned out that he had been selling seedlings at his stall at Bon Accord. (A long story – this caused a lot of trouble!)

There is so much more that can be said about the farm which is now in Bruce's capable hands. His goal is to turn this farm into an even more desirable place – especially when in the future it may become the focal point when Debokeng becomes the nearest and most attractive tourist game park.

SIR WINSTON LEONARD SPENCER CHURCHILL (1874 – 1965)
And THE EIGHT WATCHES

Whilst building the nurses' home in 1947 a certain Dr. Gillespie who was the medical superintendent at the Witbank Hospital showed a great interest in the progress of the building, which had been designed by the firm of architects Corriegail, Cricknay and Everest, the contractors being McLachlan Bros. During all that time he never made mention of a watch he had received from Winston Churchill. He told me how pleased he was about the progress of the nurses' home and how happy the nurses would be when they were able to move in

During my stay in Witbank, the owner of the Witbank Brickworks, Mr Moser and I, had bought a hectare of ground on the corner of Jellicoe and Streets from the Methodist Church. We had intended building flats but this property had been zoned for residential purposes. Unfortunately Mr Moser and his wife died and their only daughter, who inherited her father's share in the property, had moved to Germany. Years later she wrote offering me her share for sale, which I bought and enquired about the possibility of having the ground rezoned so as to build an hotel. The council granted this.

We had already built the Hotel Boulevard in Pretoria in 1954, which had become a leading 3-star hotel with international status, which meant we could accommodate all nationalities. This had its pros and cons during the apartheid era as we were closely monitored. We were criticised, sometimes for the high standards we maintained, but we attracted tourists and became a conference and function centre for the CBD once we expanded and built more facilities.

By now I had approached more than 100 other hoteliers to form a company of individuals to cater for tourists. This venture came to be known as Hotel Tours. I decided the time was right to build another hotel and the Boulevard Hotel Witbank opened in 1968.

The search for the 8 watches is hatched.

We were looking for an historical name for the bar in the Witbank Hotel, having called the pub at the Boulevard in Pretoria "Dromedarus". We advertised and offered R100, 00 to any one who would come up with an appropriate name. We received suggestions such as "Utopia" and "Leisure Island" but at that time in 1968 I happened to read an article in the newspaper about the Staats Model School in Pretoria being declared a national monument.

I went along to the Staats Model School and there I found that a Mr Lewis Howard had presented the school with a letter written by Winston Churchill to Howard's father, Mr John Howard. Mr John Howard was the manager at the Transvaal and Delagoa Bay Coal Mine at the time Churchill had escaped from the Staats Model School where he had been held as a prisoner of War. The letter stated that Churchill was sending Howard eight watches to the Standard Bank, Cape Town in acknowledgment and gratitude to the men who had helped him. (Publish this letter)

He could not send the watches to the Transvaal due to the war still raging there. He requested that Mr Howard collect them and hand them to the men who had assisted him in escaping from Witbank to Delagoa Bay.

This letter motivated me to write and request from Lady Clementine Spencer Churchill that we call the pub “Churchill’s” for which I received her blessing. It also piqued my interest to find out more about these watches. Thus started my search by writing to dozens of people and trying to find some of the recipients. I had articles published in The Witbank News and The Pretoria News. Because the book I would eventually write would have to be historically accurate, and to ensure this, I enlisted the help of two great historians: Dr Jan Ploeger and Prof. W. Punt

After reading this letter I traced Mr Howard’s son to an old age home and told him that I intended naming the pub “Churchill’s”. He told me that after the war, in 1907, his mother, Mrs Howard and he, were invited by Captain Haldane, now a colonel, to visit him in Scotland. Captain Haldane was the officer in charge of the armoured train, which was used to carry troops to investigate the rumours that Boer Commandos were in the area. On November 15 1899 The Boers put stones on the railway line – de-railed the train and took Captain Haldane and Winston Churchill (who was in South Africa as a war correspondent) and a number of soldiers as prisoners of war. They were housed in one of the 12 rooms at the Staats Model School. This will be discussed in greater detail in Dr Jan Ploeger’s story.

On 18 November and again on 22 November 1899 Churchill wrote a letter to Commandant-General, Mr. L.F. de Souza requesting his release from the Staats Model School. On 26 November he wrote to the Secretary of State for War. (These letters are to be found in the Transvaal archives) Upon getting no response to his letters Churchill informed Capt Haldane that he had abandoned all hope of release and began hatching plans to escape, along with Captain Haldane and Lieut. Brockie. Churchill managed to escape by walking outside and jumping over a corrugated iron fence but Captain Haldane was spotted. He made the excuse that he was going to the toilet but was ordered back inside. A few weeks later he also managed to escape. The irony was that on December 14, 2 days after Churchill’s escape from Pretoria, Secretary de Souza advised Capt. Haldane that Churchill’s release had been approved.

Churchill wrote a book about his escape but did not mention the names of any one who had assisted him.

The day he escaped from The Staats Model School Churchill manoeuvred his way to Derdepoort where he jumped on a moving goods train and later that night jumped off the still moving train just outside Witbank while the frantic search continued for him in Pretoria. As he reached Witbank, Churchill saw lights in the distance and when he knocked on a door, not knowing if this could be the enemy, he was fortunate the door was opened to him by a Mr Howard.

On reading Captain Aylmer Haldane’s D.S.O. book – how Churchill had escaped from Pretoria via Witbank to Lorenzo Marques - he refrained from writing about the derailment of the armoured train by the Boers as it had already been covered in Churchill’s book “London to Ladysmith” written in 1900. However in his book

Capt. Haldane complimented the people who had helped him escape and mentioned the following names: -

Pg 202 Burnham

Pg 205 Howard

Pg 200 Gillespie

Pg 210 Adams

I traced the following recipients: -

- 1) Mr John George Howard (mine manager)
- 2) Mr Daniel Dewsnap (mine engineer)
- 3) Mr Joe McKenna (mine captain)
- 4) Mr Charles Burnham (storekeeper and shipping agent)
- 5) Dr James Gillespie (mine doctor)
- 6) Mr John McHenry (miner)
- 7) Mr Adams (mine secretary)

- 1) Mr John George Howard (mine manager)

I could find no more information on Howard except from his son Lewis Howard who told me that his father had never received a watch for when the parcel was collected there was no watch for his father as far as Mr Adams was concerned. Adams stated that there were only 7 and not 8 watches. All I discovered was that when the Boers became aware of the names of the men who had assisted Churchill during his escape, Field Cornet Pretorius was sent to arrest Howard, but as Howard was a good friend of Pretorius, they landed up sharing a bottle of whiskey. Pretorius drank more than his share and this gave Mr Howard time to pack his suitcase and disappear. The rest of those who had assisted Churchill also disappeared

- 2) Mr John Daniel Dewsnap (mine engineer))

His grandson Errol inherited the watch. I met Errol Dewsnap, the grandson of Dewsnap the mining engineer who had taken Churchill down the mine where he was hidden and now have a good photo of Errol Dewsnap, Dr Jim Ploeger (historian) and myself examining the watch, as well as a very good photo of Mr Dewsnap and his father's watch. (Print photo).

Dewsnap's watch was the first watch I saw in possession of his grandson Errol. This led me to increase my efforts and it was then that I contacted Dr. Jan Ploeger a military author who offered to write a story of the conditions of the Transvaal about the time of the derailed train, after I had introduced him to Errol, and once Dr. Ploeger had seen the Dewsnap watch. This story titled "If the "Witklip" were able to tell" is of such historical value and in memory of Dr Ploeger, who has also passed away, will be printed at the end of my story relating to the 8 Churchill watches.

I also received a letter from Errol Dewsnap on 3 August 2003, which reads as follows:

Dear Jimmy,

I was sorry to hear about your wife. Here is a short story about the watch.

My grandfather John Daniel Dewsnap was the Mine Engineer at the Transvaal and Delagoa Bay Colliery during the South African Boer War. As a boy I used to visit my grandfather regularly and would always hear the story of “the man I hid down the Mine”. And to see his gold watch.

Being a young boy I did not appreciate the importance of the man himself, but the story really gripped my imagination.

It was a dark night and Winston Churchill who was desperate and exhausted, knocked on the door of a silent house, belonging to John Howard and was told on entering, that it was the only safe house within 20 miles, and that the Boers were camped around the mine.

Mr Howard and my grandfather later took him down the mineshaft. The lamps reflected the watchful eyes of dozens of rats.

I could visualise Winston Churchill sitting alone in the mine with only the rats to keep him company, the Boers camped around the mine and the comforting thought that his new found friends would slip down at night and would bring him food, whisky and much needed company.

On his return to London, Winston Churchill sent out 8 gold watches to South Africa, to those who had assisted him in his escape.

Due to unforeseen circumstances the watch left to me by my grandfather in his will, was recently auctioned in London at Christies, and was bought by a South African buyer, who remains anonymous.

Regards Jimmy and I wish you lots of success with your book.
Errol Dewsnap.

- 3) Mr Joe McKenna (mine captain)
His watch was traced to his son whom I met in the Hotel Boulevard in Witbank when I already had many articles about the recipient on display in the Churchill pub. Mr McKenna said that his sister in Zimbabwe had the watch but had moved to England, so no more information was available, but I have a photo of his father with his watch. There is also a good photo of himself and his watch.

- 4) Mr Charles Burnham (store keeper and shipping agent)
I found this watch in the Kitty Campbell Museum in Durban after exclusive advertising and articles, which appeared in many newspapers. I don't think the museum realised the historical value of this watch as it was placed in a drawer under a sheet of glass. (They have since placed this watch in a safe place.)
This watch was sent to Charles Burnham "in recognition of timely help afforded Churchill in his escape from Pretoria, December 13, 1899".

An article in a news cutting of 6.07.1955 reads that the man who smuggled Winston Churchill in a truckload of wool from Witbank to Lourenço Marques gave the gold watch to the Campbell Collection for the city of Durban in 1955. Mr Burnham also helped Capt. Aylmer Haldane (later Major-General Haldane) and a Lieut. Le Mesurier to escape in the same way.

Burnham had organised the trainload of wool in which Churchill had hidden during the trip to Lorenzo Marques. He had to bribe railway officials to rush the trucks at once to Lourenço Marques. He showed Churchill how to creep in among the wool bales, for if he tried to come out the wrong way his coat would catch, pull over his ears and trap him. Churchill slit a tarpaulin to get some air. Mr Burnham travelled in the guard's van and at Middelburg he bribed the shunter to hitch his wagons to the next train out to the coast.

He also gave the guards whisky which helped.

At Kaapmuiden a burgher with a rifle leaned against the truck in which Churchill was hiding. Horrified, Mr Burnham persuaded him to go for a cup of coffee until the train pulled out. He became separated from his wool trucks in Portuguese territory and had to wait for Churchill in Lourenço Marques, where he was nearly arrested for prowling around the yards.

When he saw his seven trucks of wool clank into the yard he rushed over as Churchill, black as a sweep from the coal dust on the floor of the truck and damp with sweat, jumped out. They crept out of the yard and went to the British Consulate for a bath.

In the docks there was a ship. She sailed for Durban – with a happy Churchill – within two hours.

The Boers and Railway Authorities suspected Mr Burnham and questioned him but he denied any knowledge of any one who had hidden in his trucks.

Later Capt. Haldane and Lt le Mesurier of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers also got away from Pretoria on a goods train but were spotted by the bridge guard at the Wilge River.

They had to run down the bank and hide in the riverbed. Capt. Haldane hurt his ankle in the process.

When they met up with Mr Burnham upon reaching Witbank, Mr Burnham assisted them onto the trucks and got them out to Lourenzo Marques in the same way he had assisted Churchill. Capt. Haldane sent Mr Burnham a silver cigarette case, which is also displayed in the Kitty Campbell Museum in Durban.

5) Dr James Gillespie (mine doctor)

Dr Gillespie was the only one I met when I was building the nurses' home in Witbank and he was a doctor at the hospital but that was early in 1947 and unfortunately long before I ever thought of or knew about the eight Churchill watches. His watch was traced to Dr Elizabeth McMullen and she in turn had given it to General Urquhart her nephew in Scotland. I then travelled to Drymen Scotland where I met Gen. Urquhart. I also appeared on Scottish television in an endeavour to find out more about the remaining watches but unfortunately without any success. Gen Urquhart had been the leader of the parachute attack on the Germans who had retreated that day to Arnham when the paratroopers were dropped. I managed to get a good photo of the watch.

6) John McHenry (miner)

I have no photos of McHenry's watch. McHenry made the box under the bales of wool in which Churchill hid. It is thought that Mr McHenry always wore his watch as a good luck charm but as a pilot of the 1st World War in 17th Squadron he was shot down and killed

7) Mr Adams (secretary)

Nothing is known about Adams

Sir Winston Churchill's granddaughter

Sir Winston Churchill's granddaughter, Celia Sandys visited me in 1995. She was in South Africa doing research for her book "Churchill - Dead or Alive" and to find out more about her grandfather's past in the Boer War. In Durban she heard about me from a friend of mine – a Mr Dave Blem, who had from time to time had corresponded with her grandfather. He told her to contact a Mr Jimmy McLachlan who had written various articles in his own search for the eight watches. At that time I hadn't been able to find any more names of the recipients until I met Celia Sandys. She discussed with me the possibility that her grandfather might have sent two watches to two women who were the housekeeper and cook for the mine hostel. That is as far as it got until she again visited South Africa to launch her book "Churchill Dead or Alive" at the 100 year party at the Staats Model School from which he had escaped.

She presented her facts to me in a letter as follows: -

My grandfather, Sir Winston Churchill, having returned to England, intended to send nine watches to the following recipients:

John Howard, mine manager (did not receive a watch)

John Adams, mine secretary

Dr James Gillespie, mine doctor

Daniel Dewsnap, mine engineer

Joe McKenna, mine captain

Joe McHenry, miner

Chas A Burnham, storekeeper and shipping agent

Ada Blunden, housekeeper at workers' hostel

Ellen David, cook at hostel

1. In a note to a secretary, Churchill gave eight names to be engraved. All the above except Howard's
2. The watches were consigned care of the Standard Bank, Cape Town, the manager of which said he would "pack the five watches for onward transmission".
3. Adams collected the package and when opened by Howard was found to contain seven watches, according to a written statement in 1970 by his son Lewis who also said that there was no watch engraved for his father.
4. We know that Adams watch was destroyed in a fire and the watches of the remaining men have all been traced.

The unresolved questions are:

1. Was a watch ever sent to Howard? If so it must have gone astray en route.
2. Was Lewis right in reporting that seven watches arrived?
3. More likely only six arrived because the two women's watches have never been traced and the figures add up if they, like Howard's, had not been sent. So, what happened to the women's watches?

**LIST OF ITEMS AND ARTICLES GATHERED BY JIMMY MCLACHLAN
IN HIS SEARCH FOR CHURCHILLS EIGHT WATCHES**

1. A LETTER FROM Churchill saying he is sending eight watches to Howard to the Standard Bank in Cape Town (publish letter)
2. A letter from Lady Churchill agreeing to Mr McLachlan naming the bar in the Hotel Boulevard in Witbank “CHURCHILL”(publish letter)
3. A LETTER FROM lady Churchill thanking me for article written by me about the Eight Watches – but regretting she is unable to write a forward for the article.

13th of May 1970

Dear Mr McLachlan

Thank you so much for letting me read “The Eight Watches”. I hope however you will forgive me if I do not write a Foreword. I am sure you will understand that I get other requests to write Forewords and I am afraid that I cannot give in to every case.

May I congratulate you on all the hard work and research you must have done to complete “The Eight Watches”.

Yours sincerely,

Clementine Spencer-Churchill

4. A suggested foreword written by Dr Jan Ploeger for Lady Churchill

FOREWORD

By

LADY CLEMENTINE SPENCER CHURCHILL

By giving my blessing on October 3, 1966, to Mr. J.L. McLachlan’s proposal to name a tavern in the “Hotel Boulevard”, Witbank, Transvaal, “Churchill’s”, I have after having read this narrative, no objection that it should in future be known as “The Eight Watches”.

I wish to thank Mr. McLachlan, as well as the author of this publication, Dr. Jan Ploeger, for their efforts in recording this historic episode in the life of one whose name is particularly linked with South Africa and with towns, villages and hamlets, such as Escourt, Chieveley, Frere, Pretoria, Witbank and Durban.

It is my wish that this little work, which is written entertainingly, and well documented, should enjoy a wide circle of readership.

May it be an incentive of all readers and visitors to “The Eight Watches” at Witbank to reconnoitre those parts of South Africa which still bear living testimony to the memory of my departed husband.

Besides the two gentlemen mentioned, my grateful thanks too, to all of those whose names have not been mentioned but who have made a material contribution towards the publication of this booklet.

Flat 26,
7, Prince’s Gate
LONDON SW7

5. A story by Col Klopper and myself about the watches
6. A book by Churchill “From London to Ladysmith” – concerning his escape but no mention of names of those who helped him
7. A book by Capt. Aylmer Haldane of his escape and names of those that assisted him
8. A book by McKenna’s nephew, Alexander J.F. Graham correcting incorrect status about those who had helped Churchill escape
9. The names of those likely to have received watches. John Howard (no watch)(manager) Dewsnap (engineer) McKenna (miner) Gillespie (doctor) Burnham (organiser of the wool train) Adams (secretary) McHenry (carpenter). Two more names could not be traced and Celia Sandys stays with the idea that there were two ladies namely Ada Blunden and Hilda David who were the Housekeeper and Cook in the TDO Mine hostel who through Dr Gillespie supplied food to Churchill
10. According to Lewis Howard his father’s watch was missing when the parcel was collected in Cape Town
11. I now have photos of four watches and photos of two of the recipients namely Dewsnap and McKenna with their watches and photos of the watches of Gillespie and Burnham
12. A photo of Dr Ploeger, Errol Dewsnap and myself with Errol’s Grandfathers watch

Other items include: -

a) Capt Haldane's cane and a multipurpose knife which he gave to Lewis Howard in 1907

b) A trenching tool and Boer Commando hat received from Mrs Hardenberg the Granddaughter of Burger the president of the Orange Free State

c) Kotze's Mauser found in the Battlefield after the capture of Churchill

13. A list of the P.O.W's in the Staats Model School just before Churchill's escape
14. A photo of Churchill standing to one side of the P.O.W's on his arrival in Pretoria
15. A photo of POWS arriving in Pretoria

CHURCHILLS MEMORIBILIA

1. CAPTAIN HALDANE'S CANE AND MULTI-PURPOSE KNIFE

During 1907 the wife and son who was named Lewis Howard of the then Mine Manager visited Captain Haldane (now a Colonel). Captain Haldane was in charge of the armoured train when it was de-railed by the Boers in 1900. He then gave Mrs Howard his Malacca cane and his multipurpose knife, suitably engraved "from Colonel Haldane to Lewis Howard". I was fortunate enough to obtain both these articles from Lewis Howard.

2. BOER WAR SOLDIER W KOTZE'S MAUSER RIFLE

A British soldier picked up a rifle following the battle, which ensued during the derailment of the armoured train on which Churchill was being transported. Later the soldier and a Mr Klopper, both train drivers at Uitenhage were discussing the Anglo Boer war. The British soldier told Mr Klopper that he had been on the armoured car when it was derailed. Mr Klopper mentioned that he had had a cousin who had been shot when the Boers attacked the train. When the Tommy asked what the name of his cousin was he said 'Kotze'. The soldier then told Mr Klopper that he had this W. Kotze's rifle. After some bargaining Klopper bought this rifle from the soldier for 3 pound. Mr Klopper gave this rifle to his son, who later was to become SADF General Klopper who was taken prisoner of war at Tobruk.

During 1972 I was talking to Gen Klopper about the Churchill watches I was trying to trace for the purpose of displaying them in the Churchill bar in Witbank. Lady Clementine Spencer Churchill had given me permission to name it Churchill's. General Klopper said he had something very interesting to show me, if he could still find it!

This turned out to be a special issue Boer War Mauser engraved W. KOTZWE. General Klopper said that in 1940 the Government had decreed that all privately owned arms had to be handed in. He however had not done so and had hidden the rifle in the ceiling of his house in Valhalla and had forgotten all about it until our discussion of the Churchill watches. He was happy for this rifle to form part of the display.

3. TRENCHING TOOL AND BOER COMMANDER'S HAT BELONGING TO THE SON OF PRESIDENT BURGER OF THE FREE STATES SON'S

Whilst telling Fransie Hardenberg (President Burger's granddaughter) about the Churchill watches, she told me that her mother had been a nurse at the Red Cross Hospital situated next to the "Staats Model School" in Pretoria and that she had attended to some of the wounded British soldiers. She gave me a small Red Cross flag which had belonged to her mother, a trenching tool which she believed had been used by her uncle at Magersfontein and his Boer Commando hat saying that she would be happy to have these items on display at Churchill's bar in Witbank.

Celia revisits South Africa

Celia Sandys again visited South Africa in 1999 for the Centenary Celebration of the Anglo Boer War, which also marked the 100th year celebration of Churchill's escape. She was still intrigued with my research of the Churchill watches and came to see me. She invited me to a party at the Staats Model School along with descendants of the recipients of the watches together with some American tourists who had visited the sites of Churchill's escape route, and seated me next to her aunt, Lady Soames.

I decided to take along some interesting items gathered from various people I had met and tell them how I was trying to trace the watches. Amongst the guests I met up with an old friend, a Mrs Hardenberg, the granddaughter of President Burger of the Free State whose son (her uncle) had given her his Boer Commando Hat and trenching tool. I also met up with Gen Klopper from whom I received the Boer War soldier's rifle, which also forms part of the collection.

Whilst relating my story to Lady Soames I mentioned that during refurbishment of the Hotel Boulevard in Witbank, Churchill's pub had been demolished and rebuilt and that the memorabilia, which had been removed, would soon be replaced. Celia then asked why specifically they were displayed in Witbank and I replied that he had escaped from Witbank. Celia Sandys thought it would be more appropriate to relocate the display to the Hotel Boulevard in Pretoria as Churchill had originally escaped from the Staats Model School in Pretoria.

The display was relocated to the Boulevard Hotel at 186 Struben Street Pretoria with far more memorabilia than ever before. The War Council now occupies the Hotel Boulevard. It is anticipated that as soon as a space is made available all memorabilia will be displayed in the foyer of the Capitol Protea Hotel in van der Walt Street as this hotel is within a stones throw from the Staats Model School, from which Churchill escaped. At the Staats Model School a sign will be erected for any visitors to the school, directing them just up the road to see this displayed memorabilia.

IF THE 'WITKLIP' WERE ABLE TO TELL

Print Author's Preface (2 pages) followed by his story (21 pages) attached hereto. Where should this full story be printed to tie in with Jimmy's story? Please ask Eric Bolsmann to look at this for us.

OUR LAST WEDDING ANNIVERSARY – 19.06.2003

We were going to have a party just including the families and children. We decided to invite some of our old friends along as well. Barbara had just turned 83 on 18 April 2003 but had not been well for a long time. She was in and out of hospital for monitoring and had become very frail, with her memory failing rapidly.

We weren't going to make speeches, but on that day I thought about it and knew that I would have to say how proud of her and all my family I am. I reflected on the years Barbara and I spent together, from the days when I dated her as a beautiful young W A A F stationed in Pretoria, through the days of the 2nd World War, Ellis Ras, Witbank, the Hammanskraal farm and Pretoria, through the birth of our children, the building assignments I often had to tend to a long way from home and through a lot of time spent researching the story behind Churchill's watches. Time she always gave me freely and with encouragement. Time to pursue all my work and endeavours. I turned to her and thanked her for all the love and the incredible support over 57 years of our wonderful marriage and for the 3 lovely daughters she had blessed me with. I told her that she had taken such good care of me and now it was my opportunity to take good care of her. Through her tired, old eyes she glanced up at me with a smile - and there it was – that familiar, humorous sparkle.

My loving wife passed away after 10 days spent in a coma in the Little Company of Mary in the early hours of 14th August 2003. Adieu Barbara (and until then.....

There you'll be

When I think back on these times
And the dreams we left behind
I'll be glad 'cause I was blessed
To get to have you in my life
When I look back on these days
I'll look and see your face
You were right there for me

In my dreams I'll always see you
Soar above the sky
In my heart there'll always be
A place for you, for all my life
I'll keep a part of you with me
And everywhere I am, there you'll be
And everywhere I am, there you'll be

Well you show me how it feels
To feel the sky within my reach
And I always will remember
All the strength you gave to me
Your love made me make it through
I owe so much to you
You were right there for me

Cause I always saw in you
My light, my strength
And I want to thank you now for all the ways
You were right there for me
You were right there for me always

There you'll be

(Song written by _____ and sung by)