

## Robyn Vincent

Before dawn on April 25th, 2015, lots of us stood on the cold sands of Main Beach commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli Landing. Not Robyn Vincent and James Taylor; they were in the A1 section at Anzac Cove, part of the 10,000 admitted to the ceremony, along with Princes Charles and Harry. And they were in the VIP section, because Robyn's father had been one of the very first Anzacs.



Way back in 1914 Thomas William Lewis left his country boyhood in Clunes, near Ballarat, to journey all the way to Rockhampton to enlist in the Ninth Battalion. In September he sailed with other young Aussies eager for adventure and to see the world; words like *trench foot* and *shell shock* not yet in their vocabularies. After training in Egypt and being wounded at Gallipoli, Thomas served in the Battle of the Somme, at Poiziers, surviving trench fever, dysentery, being gassed and shot a total of three times.

During the Second World War he played a less hazardous role, serving as a Recruitment Officer. Afterwards he met and married a marvellous nurse. Living at Clunes, they had two little girls, one of them being Robyn, who was just four and a half years old when her heroic father died.

Her immensely practical mother brought the girls up in the Sydney suburb of North Balgowlah, instilling in them the philosophy that they should not expect a white knight on a charger to roll up and whisk them away to a life of luxury; they would have to work hard for what they wanted in life. The lady did not, of course, know that one day James was going to whisk Robyn around to all sorts of places, but the work ethic certainly took hold.

After schooling at Manly Girls High (not realising the love of her life was pursuing his own work ethic at Manly Boys High) where she studied Latin and French, Robyn progressed to Sydney University, to study Indonesian, French, Psychology, Anthropology and Education, emerging as a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Education.

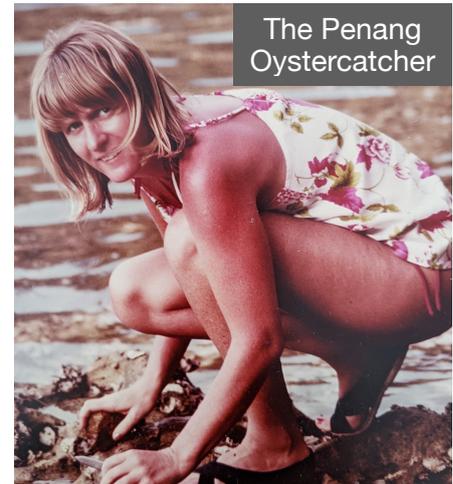


After completing a Diploma in Teaching at the Sydney Teachers College, she started life as a school teacher. The very first day, expecting to meet the principal and calmly tour the premises, she was whisked (mother was right) into a classroom and told to teach SIX subjects : Indonesian, French, Social Studies, English, PE and a “non-examinable” Art. Having never studied Art at all, our enterprising heroine gave the class a simply super time dripping wax over candles until another staffer noticed all the flames in the classroom, so she was never made to teach Art again.

Inevitably, Cupid interfered, not getting it right at all, and Robyn married a geophysicist, moving to Perth for a while, where she taught at Swanbourne Senior High School, situated close to the S.A.S. Barracks. Lessons were often enlivened by the sight of trainee commandos scaling helicopter ropes, with delighted pupils calling out “Hey, there goes Dad!”

Returning to Sydney Robyn spent six years teaching at Ku-ring-gai High School, frequently seconded onto committees setting curricula and examination material in Indonesian and sometimes in French. Cupid admitted he’d got it wrong, and the marriage ended but Robyn got it very right, winning a scholarship to study Indonesian for six weeks at Salatiga in central Java. On top of the intensive language course there were cultural visits to temples, some of them Hindu, dating back to the 15th and 16th centuries, burial sites on mountain tops, a whole new fascinating culture. Then as she and her fellow students gathered for breakfast one morning they were confronted by a very large sign, saying “*Darwin has been obliterated.*” It was of course December 1974.

A couple of years later she became one of 1500 applicants for just 20 positions at the RAAF School in Penang. Of course our extremely smart Ms Vincent was accepted and enjoyed an amazing three-year stint. For a start the poor creature had to slum it at the Eastern & Oriental Hotel, built in the 1860s by the Sarkies brothers who had helped establish Raffles. Robyn’s huge suite was next-door to the one used by Somerset Maugham when writing in Asia.



Travel throughout Asia was unlimited, no stone or country left unturned. Early on, Robyn and two colleagues decided to motor up to the Thai border. Suddenly their hired car was surrounded by heaps of gentlemen in military uniforms yelling in Malay (very similar to Indonesian) “GET OUT OF THE CAR”. They were questioned and returned to the school, where a few days later, the Air Force big brass marched in to stick a huge map of Malaysia up on the wall, coloured to indicate totally forbidden war zones due to the Communist insurgency.

One day an RAAF pilot arrived with a briefcase chained to his wrist. Therein lay a manual for Mirage Jets, in French of course. Somehow Robyn deciphered the incredibly technical information so the mechanics could know in which order to replace part of a dismantled engine.

She delightedly attended a Chinese, a Malay and an Indian wedding and was a family guest at Chinese New Year celebrations. She also witnessed an extraordinary kavadi ceremony, where after a week’s fasting a Hindu devotee pierces face and body to tow a heavy structure attached to him in a trance-like state to prove his faith. This particular event was even more remarkable for Robyn

as the devotee in question was the helpful hotel staffer who looked after her beloved MG (red, of course).

As school hours ran from 8.30 to 2.30, long afternoons could be spent in the hotel pool or on its tennis courts. They also played at the Penang Sports Club, complete with ball boys, and when they felt like a spot of snorkelling could just mosey up to the soft corals of southern Thailand. The RAAF provided two Singapore R&R holidays each year, and when Robyn needed a quick trip home to see family, she with another teacher, five crew and five enormous aircraft engines flew back by Hercules.



After the three years in Penang she returned to Manly Girls High School to become Language Mistress and gain the qualifications to be Deputy Principal — and took up sailing on Sydney Harbour. Now, here's the bit you've been waiting for. Where's James all this time ... ?? Cupid finally got his act together and it was a Lady Skippers sailing day and Robyn was of course Skipper



and they were short one crewman so ... along came James Taylor, and it was love at first sight, even though the Skipper had him changing spinnakers all day long.

An insurance broker, he soon transferred to Darwin to manage the NT branch of Marsh & McLean's, a business they ended up buying, which kept them in Darwin for 28 years. In the NT initially Robyn continued teaching, and naturally swished up the academic ladder to take on a role travelling all over the Territory and adjacent islands helping young teachers to access Commonwealth grants to develop their schools. (To make school more appealing to children on Groote Eylandt, for instance, she helped the teacher attune the maths curriculum to fishing — how to measure, weigh, etc., finally giving the children a culturally practical reason to attend.)



James stuck his very helpful oar into the process, stipulating that Robyn never travel by single-engined aircraft. The authorities complied, but then there was the flight en route Numbulwar when one of the engines became overheated and smoke started billowing out of it — not just ordinary smoke, this was GREEN smoke. They ended up flying with a medical services 'plane above them, diverting to Gove (now Nhulunbuy), where the airstrip was lined with flashing lights and

emergency vehicles and the 'plane hosed down upon landing. Returning on a TAA jet, the understanding air hostess welcomed her with a double scotch.

Then there was the visiting Victorian education inspector, who thought he knew something about remote schools. Robyn escorted him to one of the outstation schools of Maningrida, where the classroom had a roof, and a waist high brick wall and nothing much else. The hapless Melbournian then eyed the students, who were not wearing a uniform. In fact they weren't wearing anything at all. Poor chap ended up shaking his head, muttering "We have no remote schools in Victoria."

When they bought the insurance broking firm Robyn decided to work there with James. She took a course in business management and of course ended up teaching the industry how to efficiently brief and educate young recruits.

She started teaching at TAFE, then joined its Board, was appointed to the NT Australian Insurance Institute, and became its first female State President, eventually working with Deakin University. There is no stopping the lady. Send her to Canberra, and she'd be in the Lodge in no time.



Recreation was great fun; they would dash down to Alice Springs or up to Bali for golf tournaments and just adored sailing. First up they bought a 22-foot yacht, then graduated to a 42-foot Catalina which they sailed in the Darwin-Ambon race. More than the race itself, they loved the homeward voyage, alongside other sailing mates, investigating islands along the way. Robyn's favourite was Banda with its massive volcano, coral reefs, Dutch and Portuguese buildings and forts. Back to golf, Robyn of course became President of Women's Golf in the Northern Territory and oversaw its amalgamation with the opposite gender to become Golf NT.

Retirement became a discussion point and the ever meticulous James made a list of the essential attributes of various destinations. Of course Noosa won hands down, and they bought a place at Noosa Waters. Their Darwin crabbing boat and 42-foot Catalina seemed a bit *de trop* for Noosaville, so they purchased a somewhat more sedate pontoon boat, which sits demurely at their waterfront, with a stone owl on the jetty to deter incontinent birdlife. The owl, in fact, has gained regular visitors in a pair of herons standing guard beside it.

The lady joined our Coast Guard as Radio Operator for a few years before Covid started annoying everyone and then there was of course the Bridge Club. They had both played social bridge in the early 90s, discovered our Club's lessons about three years ago and now make a regular appearance amongst the points on Club result sheets.



Robyn lists some of her most memorable experiences as watching Nureyev dance in *Sleeping Beauty* and Joan Sutherland perform the *Bell Song* and the *Flower Duet* in *Lakme*, and seeing sunset over Mount Everest and a dolphin leaping beside their boat in the middle of the night, all lit up with phosphorescence.

The combination of Thomas Lewis's extraordinary genes and perseverance and her mother's supreme common sense created a super-achiever. Thank goodness James arrived on Lady Skippers' Day and they found Noosa for the next few chapters of her amazing life.

by Susie Osmaston