

LES THURGOOD: ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY RADIO OPERATOR, CHORISTER



My father was Garton Alfred Thurgood who was born in 1918 and came from Bishops Stortford in Herfordshire. He changed his name to Nevil for theatre purposes, so he's always been known in Australia as Nevil Thurgood. My mother was Eva Mary Hopper (but known as Mary) and came from Dorset; her mother was from Birmingham. I was born in Weymouth in 1943 and have three younger brothers: Peter, Derek, and Raymond. After the war dad decided he wanted to immigrate and he'd picked himself three places to consider: America, South Africa, and Australia. He took the third option of Australia, which for me was the best option. I don't think I could be an all-American boy and I would have been on the wrong side in South Africa, because I would have been on the side of Nelson Mandella.

Coming to St Albans



Dad came to Australia on his own in 1949 to find a place to settle and build a home. The problem with being an independent migrant was that he had to have suitable housing for the rest of the family before the Australian government would let them come over, because they were not eligible to be accommodated through the migrant hostels. Dad was at first boarding in St Kilda and working as a draftsman with John Thompson Australia, the boiler makers, and working as an actor with the National Theatre or the Union Theatre, which is now the Melbourne Theatre Company. He had his trade to earn a livelihood but he was also an actor for all of his life. He nearly bought a house in Fern Tree Gully, but it was too far from the school and the railway station. Then he found a block at North Balwyn, but it cost three hundred pounds and he would have had to build in brick, which he couldn't do himself and couldn't afford a builder. Then he heard about St Albans from a worker colleague and bought a block in Walmer Avenue for one hundred pounds. He liked the area because they had electrified the railway line from Sunshine, the land was cheap, and you could build a weatherboard house.



He obtained a loan from the Altona Co-operative Building Society and started building the house on the weekends, riding his bicycle from St Kilda. He mentioned that the road from Deer Park was very rough and often the wind would howl down making it a tough ride. But he was young and tough and if he had a performance scheduled he'd cycle back to South Yarra or wherever to put on the show. He's written about the ninety stump holes that had to be dug for foundations and eighty-nine of them had solid rocks that had to be extracted. I think Alan and Clarice Quinn who were across the road helped with that and there was another chap two doors up, Les Stewart, who also helped. Dad obviously became friends with the neighbours. His mates from the cricket club and the theatre helped with the framing and plastering. The window frames and some of the roofing was made from car cases that he got off the wharf. The house was built as a complete house so we didn't go the way of a lot of the refugees who came from

Europe who started off with a half house and then built the rest over time.

Mother

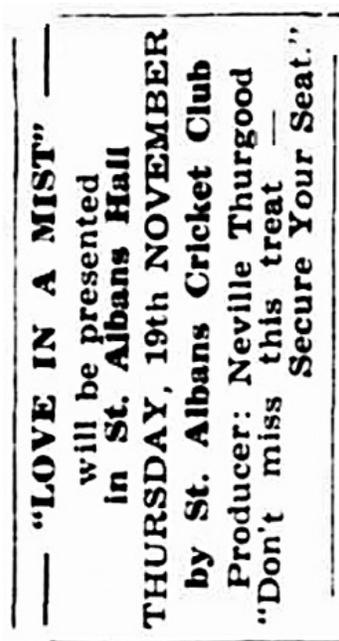


Mum came out with the children a couple of years after dad, when the home was ready for occupation. We left in November 1950 and arrived in January 1951 and moved into our new home on 2nd January 1951. Myself and my brothers were all born in England and I had my seventh birthday on the ship on the way out. We settled into 1 Walmer Avenue, which wasn't far from the primary school and just half a hop step and jump from the high school when it was built.

In those days mum was "just a housewife" ... but she was better than that because she ended up being part of St Albans Little Theatre, was President of the Church of England Ladies' Guild, was Secretary of the High School's Parents' and Friends' Association, helped out in the tuck shop, and was District Commissioner for the cubs in the Sunshine area. We all joined the scouting movement and I went straight into scouts because I was older. My younger brothers started with the cubs before progressing. I don't

remember much about the scouts, but I did learn Morse code and that probably sparked the interest in becoming a radio operator and therefore my joining the navy. My brothers joined the cubs and mum became an Akela with the cubs before becoming a District Commissioner for Sunshine.

Father



My father was a draftsman by trade for John Thompson Boilermakers; they were a British-based company and dad had applied for a job with them before he migrated. He initially worked as a draftsman but later became part of the management and was in charge of a department. He had good rapport with his boss whose daughter was also with the theatre. I'm not sure when he finished with them because he did private work in later life. He also worked on the stage as a writer, actor, producer and director and including some television work but I think the radio work was at the beginning before television came in. He also supported amateur theatre groups including Williamstown Little Theatre, St Albans Little Theatre, the Altona Players and the Castlemaine Musical Theatre. He was involved in the St Albans Little Theatre from the early fifties and the troupe performed as far afield as Williamstown, Melbourne and Frankston. Dorothy Baulch was another English immigrant who was involved in starting the St Albans group and she also had theatrical experience from overseas. Theatre shows were often used as fund-raisers for charities and local causes, such as establishing the local kindergarten.

Primary School

I went to the old primary school in West Esplanade and because we were quite close I would walk out the back fence and up the road and across the railway line to the school. It's a pity the original school building has been demolished because it had some good history to it. I was there from 1951 to the end of 1955. I enrolled in the St Albans High when it started in 1956 but at that

time it was held in the church hall in Sunshine, which was the first year of its operation before they built the classrooms in Main Road East just up the road from us.



Les Thurgood receiving award at scout group, 1956.

I did the local paper round for a few years. That was afternoon work on the bicycle along Millawa, Walmer, Oberon and Vincent streets. There was an English couple named Ilott who lived in one of those old bungalows; they had a couple of boys younger than me who went to the school. The family went back to England but the son Jim Ilott is now living in Perth. I've kept in touch with Jim and his parents all these years. I caught up with his brother when I was visiting relatives in Wales.

Secondary School



I've kept touch with only a handful of my high school colleagues, including Lana Bohudski, Vanda Viti, and Verners Pleiksna. We all went to the primary school and sang in the choir and became friends, then we did music and drama at the high school. Verners ended up in real estate in Perth and Vanda passed away a couple of years ago. Vambola Stanislavskis changed his name to Karl but I can't remember what happened to him. Andy Kratsis has retained a connection with the school for 60 years because of his involvement with the school council. Graham Stagg also lived in Walmer Avenue. I remember the Haynes' boys because their father was the caretaker at the high school but I've lost track of them.

I remember the school debutante ball in 1960 where I was Vejuna Kepalas's partner. The ball was held at the St Albans police youth club and everyone was formally attired: long white gowns and long white gloves for the girls, black bow ties and short white gloves for the boys, and Vejuna's gown was the fullest and fanciest and was made by

her mother. The youth club hall was a very basic venue with its unlined corrugated iron walls but

Lorna Cameron and her committee supported many clubs and activities. I must have liked Lorna because I used to talk to her a lot. She lived not far from us in Oberon Avenue and I would go past there on my newspaper round. I remember her two older sons were good footballers and became VFL players for North Melbourne.

I was made to play football at the high school though I was never a footballer – I used to be in the backline because I was never very good. I ended up playing tennis because I didn't like football or cricket. There were about seven of us in the boys' inter-school team and in my last year at the school we beat Drouin High School but lost all the other games. My only claim to sporting fame is that I was named as one of the best tennis players in the 1960 house sports competition (I was with Waratah) but all the other players in the inter-school competition team were also named as best players. The girls always played basketball before they split the game into basketball and netball. I remember Lana, Vanda and Vejuna were very good basketball players.



1960 tennis team: T Smith, V Bezborodoff, R Szczudlinski, V Chomotowski, G Szwadiak, E Lacinski, L Thurgood (at right), V Bobko, J Pay

Drama

Doc Walsh was one of the teachers at the high school. Everybody loved him and he was a great one for promoting drama, having been the producer of the Electra Dramatic Group which was active around Footscray and Williamstown. They often went on tours. I was interested in drama and went on one of Doc's trips around different parts of Australia: Adelaide, Alice, Darwin, Isa and Townsville. Doc did that tour three years in a row. Peter Plain and Jeff Barlow were on the trip that I joined in 1958. I think Peter was living in Macedon in his later years but I'm not sure – when we first moved to Macedon in 1970 someone remembered him as being there. Lana Bohudski married Henri Malakunas and is also living in Macedon and has been there for a while.

Les Thurgood standing behind Mr Walsh, Electra Dramatic Group, 1958.



Joining the Navy

I went through to year eleven at the high school, because the classes did not go through to year twelve at the time. After that I joined the navy. Even when I was at school I wanted to join the navy. I think it was because I knew my Morse code from being in the scouts and I decided I wanted to be a radio operator and the navy was a way of doing that. So I applied at the recruiting centre in St Kilda Road near the junction and, surprisingly, the navy said yes. Normally they asked what you wanted to be but you were put somewhere else, but I ended up doing what I wanted to do. I spent a year training at Cerberus and in June 1962 I was in the Far East on the old aircraft carrier Melbourne. It was my first trip away since arriving in the country.



I joined the navy in January 1961 and the process was going through the usual two-month recruit school, learning discipline and procedures in the forces. Then I had to work ship because there wasn't enough blokes to do a radio operator's course, so I had to work ship for three months until there was enough intake for us to do a communications course at Cerberus, which was for six months. In February 1962, I joined Melbourne down in Hobart and did that for two years. I volunteered to go to submarines when the navy decided we were going to have submarines. I went across to the UK in mid 1964 and was there for two and a half years. Then I decided I would drop back to the surface fleet ... if you are not suited for submarines for whatever reason or are having problems with some of your colleagues it is just as easy to walk and go to back to the surface fleet. For me that occurred in 1967 and I served on various ships, mostly sea-going: I was on the Lonsdale at Port Melbourne for 18 months

and had an 18 months posting in Singapore.

I was discharged in 1977 and got a job with the weather bureau. It was the same trade but not in Morse code as such. I was with the bureau until I took early retirement in 2004. I could retire early

because I was eligible for a war service pension from the time I was in Vietnam. I was on the Parramatta which was an escort ship for the Sydney which took the troops to Vietnam; that was in 1971. I was twelve months on the Parramatta then on a little survey vessel based in Cairns for a year, and then got posted up to Singapore. I took retirement in 1977 after sixteen years and a bit in the navy.



My brothers Ray and Peter followed me into the navy in the same trade although Ray was a signalman rather than a radio operator. Peter did about 22 years with the navy. My other brother Derek also went in to become a radio operator but was only in for about two years. So we all ended up in the navy, for a while at least, and it probably goes back to the male line of the family that goes back to Danish-Viking times in England. Dad's father was in the Army Service Corps in World War One and was in the first lot going into France. On the other side, my mum's father joined the Royal Flying Corps before it split into the Royal Naval Service and the Royal Air Force; his father was a gunner for thirty years in the Royal Navy, so obviously there is a bit of tradition there as well. Mum's grandfather was a gunner in the Royal Navy 1870-1901.

Music

I enjoyed taking music at the high school, and that's probably why I've continued my involvement because I joined a choir after I left the navy. I joined the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Choir in February 1978 after having a beer with a couple of acquaintances at the old pub where the Alfred Hospital is; I think it was called the Chevron on the corner of Commercial Road. My acquaintances were in dinner suits so I said "What are you blokes doing in penguin suits?" and they said "Oh, we've just sung The Messiah." That was an annual event so they asked me to join. So I auditioned and have been with the choir ever since. I don't sing regularly with them at present but I am a life member. I've sung with the company that does Opera in the Alps and Opera in the Market and I've done all of those except for the first Opera in the Alps.

I regularly sing with an overseas choir and that means traveling overseas. The choir is based in Norway and is basically a Scandinavian group that became an international choir through one of the United Nations' children's section and it's still going. They usually do one international concert a year and do their own choirs in Scandinavia as well. I quite enjoy going away on these trips. During the five years when they became an international choir they did their concerts with Pavarotti. So the attraction was "Do you want to sing with Pavarotti?" I couldn't go the first time when it was in Verona in Italy because I couldn't get leave from work. At that stage I had already left the navy and was working at the head office of the weather bureau. Fortunately for me the choir came out to Australia and performed three concerts with Pavarotti; that was in 1994. So I've been singing with the choir since 1994. I can't join them every year because it's a matter of taking

leave from work. I retired from work early in 2003 and I've been singing with them every year since 2004. It's great fun and gives you the opportunity to see places you might not ever get to, especially Europe. We did go the Egypt, and to Russia twice. We've been to Italy, Austria, Lithuania, and Latvia. Of course I take extra time off if I want to and go to neighbouring countries that I haven't been to.

I've just been to Hungary and took four days extra to go to the Netherlands. I went to Amsterdam for a revisit, because when I was training for submarines in England I took leave in Amsterdam and met up with a few service people: Americans, Canadian, Brits and another Aussie. So my recent trip has been the fiftieth anniversary, almost to the day, of my first trip. One of the American blokes came over and we made it a fiftieth reunion – just the two of us; we had a great time. I visited all the museums and whatnot, with all the Rembrandts, Vermeers, and a discreet tourist stroll through the red light district that Amsterdam is well known for. They still sell cannabis in some cafes and there is a marijuana museum, or herbal museum if you prefer to call it that: you can smell it wherever you walk in that part of Amsterdam. The Dutch are pretty tolerant about some things but have actually stamped down on the hard stuff.

It's probably surprising that I didn't take up acting after my father after I left high school when I joined the navy. I know a couple of my brothers might have done some TV work because of dad. That background must run in dad's family because his mother was an actress. We found out in recent years that one of our ancestors was at the court of Henry the Eighth as Master of the Revels, but we're not a hundred percent sure; possibly this is the source of our acting aspirations. My dad was a boy singer at St Paul's Cathedral in London, so the musical genes run along there somewhere and obviously I have inherited these.

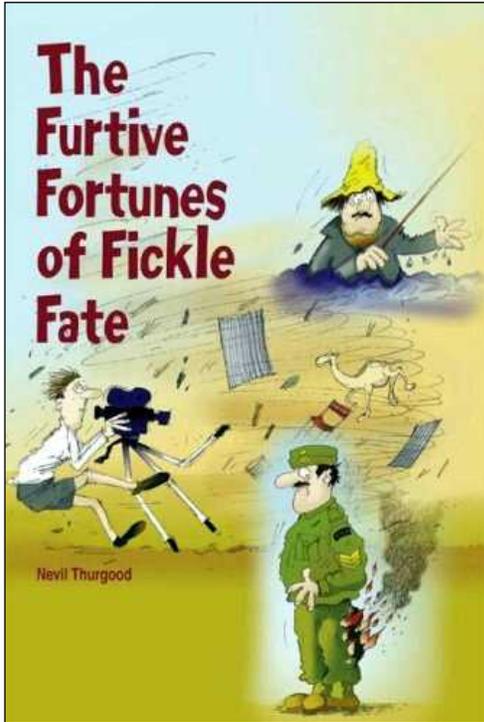


Thurgood home in Walmer Avenue, 1950s.

Mount Macedon

We moved from St Albans to Mount Macedon in 1970. Dad was still involved in theatre work and there was an empty hall in Macedon so he started a theatre group and he started the Mountview Theatre that has been going for forty years. He started that company in 1972 with several other locals and they named themselves The Mount Players. Their first endeavour that year was to enter the One-Play festival at Kyneton and they've been performing ever since. They later gained

access to an old church at Macedon and converted that into a theatre. With a secure base for the group dad started writing plays and melodrama such as the Furtive Fortunes of Fickle Fate. Sadly, the theatre was destroyed in the Ash Wednesday bushfires of 1983. After years of hard work by members and lots of support from the community and the Gisborne Shire Council, the new Mountview Theatre opened its doors in 1990. Dad's photo is on the wall near the box office and mum's photo is next to him in costume because she did a couple of shows there as well.



We got burnt out in the bushfires of 1983. By the time we knew the fire was coming we couldn't get up or down the mountain to escape and ended up with a fire truck and a few other cars in the old Civil Defence College. We had no water so even if we'd stuck in the house there was no way we could have fought the fire. We were not directly in the fire front but all the smoldering aftermath and burning leaves were blowing about and that's what did it. Dad rebuilt. During this time we moved into the place next door, which used to be an old boarding house with two blokes living there. We ended up living in one of the rooms while the house was being rebuilt. Dad also had to rebuild the theatre down at Macedon, so it's been re-established. Dad's biography about his life in the theatre was published in 2006 as "The Furtive Fortunes of Fickle Fate, Being the Life's Journey of an Actor" which includes references to his appearance in local films and television series, but the story goes back to the seventies when he first wrote it up as a melodrama that has played over 500 performances. One of his earliest 'credits' was in the party scene of "On the Beach" by Nevil Shute. The film was shot locally in 1959/60 with international stars Ava

Gardner, Fred Astaire, Gregory Peck and Anthony Perkins. Unfortunately several of dad's scenes ended up on the cutting room floor. He was told to wear a "party" tie for the party scene, so he chose one painted with salmon leaping out of the water, which intrigued everyone. Fred Astaire wanted to buy it, Gregory Peck wanted to know where he got it, and Ava Gardner wanted to know who'd painted it.

I've had a long connection with the Macedon theatre and go to shows when I can, so a few people might still recognise me because I look like my father. I see Lana Bohudski-Malakunas down there sometimes because she attends performances.

Overseas Choirs

I like the theatre though most of my involvement has been in singing. I was on stage at the state theatre in an opera as a supernumerary with the Kirov from St Petersburg – and we got paid for that show, two nights in a row. That was an experience. We were only on stage for ten minutes at the end of the opera but of course everything had to be done properly. We had to be a certain size because all the costumes came out from St Petersburg and therefore the participants had to fit into the costume and shoe sizes that were available. The costumes were not plastic: it was full, proper armor with metal breastplate, metal helmet and great big metal pikes. It was great treading the boards at the state theatre, even if it was as a supernumerary.

I have sung in St Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh with a small choir from Melbourne, which was arranged through a friend of mine who is a solo singer. Every third or fourth year they tend to go overseas and join other choirs for a little festival. I've been overseas on two trips with CHIME, which is the Choral Institute of Melbourne, and we sang at the second festival at Montecatini

Terme near Florence in Italy. Last year I sang in Italy with a choir from Scandinavia and we sang in the sixth festival there. This time we went and saw Pavarotti's family tomb near Modena. I have Pavarotti's autograph: we did his concert in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, so I have his autograph three times. In 1985 for the 150th anniversary of Victoria there was a big sing at the Royal Exhibition Buildings and then in 1988 there was the bi-centenary year; that involved about a thousand musicians and singers. I sung the Mahler Eight in there a few years back. It is an incredible place acoustically. I've sung in some lovely places with the international festival for choirs: Graz in Austria, two concert halls in St Petersburg, the Tchaikovsky theatre in Moscow. It is good fun. I've been singing in the Festival of Voices in Hobart. I'm doing an event with the Melbourne Bach Choir in September then I'm going on a trip to the Galapagos Island and when I return I'm off to sing Messiah at the Manchester Cathedral. Plus I have a navy reunion in the meantime and an annual jazz convention. I like jazz and joined the Victorian Jazz Club through another navy friend whose parents were involved with the club.



Les Thurgood with Melbourne Bach Choir at the New Century Xuzhou Grand Hotel, Xuzhou, China 2014.

Royal Connections

It's interesting when you are travelling how you can bump into the most interesting people. When I was doing my submarine training in England we went on the ship canal to Manchester. One of the actresses in Coronation Street was the pin-up on the boat and we got an invite to the studios, so we had Eileen Derbyshire who played Emily Bishop and Sandra Gough who played Irma Barlow showing us around the studio. Coronation Street was and still is a very popular show in England and Canada.

After I left the navy and was doing shift work with the weather bureau in Melbourne, the train service on this Bendigo line was not compatible and I don't drive so I had a flat in Queens Road. I had joined the RSL and was connected to the Melbourne and Footscray branches. The president there was with the arctic convoys and had become friends with Vera Lynn. One time when she was in Australia she came to the club on a Friday night. So we all mustered up and she sang us a

few numbers and I was lucky enough to get her autograph. I was at the Cilla Black concert at Dallas Brooks Hall and was one of three people that she chose from the audience and met her after the show - autograph included. R.I.P. Cilla. I've met Spike Milligan in the city quite unexpectedly. I must have been on watch on Australia Day and he was in Federation Square handing out saplings, so I thought I'd plant one of them at Mt Macedon. He scribbled his autograph for me which I appreciated because I always was a Goons fan.

I have never met the Queen but I've met Charlie three times and the Duke once. I was based at Singapore and one day I was coming down the stairs out of barracks and there was Prince Charles going to get his hair cut and looking for the barber's shop, so I showed him where our Chinese barber was. He does remember you, because I was in New Zealand on holidays and Charles and Diana were in Dunedin that day. I wanted to get a photograph of Diana but I was on the wrong side so I spoke to Prince Charles and he remembered me. Then I ran into him in Wellington a few days later and he said "Are you following me?" I met the Duke in 1997 just as I was getting out of the navy and was at Hobart when the Queen and Duke were there. I had taken a distant snapshot of the Duke and then put my camera down as they came nearer, as it's rude pointing a camera at them when they are close. The Duke came up and asked me about my camera so we had a nice chat.

So I've met the royalty of opera and popular song, a queen of soap opera, a comedian royale, and the royals themselves. What more can one say?

Update

My brother Ray died in a road accident 15 May 1988. Mum died on 5 October 2000 in Royal Melbourne Hospital just after having a pace maker fitted – very sudden and not expected. Peter died of cancer on 12 January 2002. Dad died in 2009 and it took me a while to sell his house, so I moved to Woodend and have been living here since May 2012. It's a nice setting and close to the railway station.

I'm still involved with the naval network in a way but it is an honorary position. I am the President of Melbourne subsection of the Naval Association and I'm also with the Submariners Association. My branch is the Communications Branch and we have the biggest membership of the various naval associations. We have regular reunions in different states and every third year there is a big reunion somewhere in Australia. I'm also an Association Member for the ships on which I've served. There's a naval reunion down in Frankston during September 2015 and I am going on a cruise to New Zealand in January 2016 with the Communications Branch, Victoria. That's how we keep in touch with one another. I'm singing "Messiah" in Manchester on 29 November 2015 and then I'm singing at Opera in the Alps in January 2016 and Opera in the Market in February, both with Greta Bradman and Teddy Tahu-Rhodes. Life is good.



Les Thurgood, 2015



Les Thurgood at St Albans High 40th anniversary, 1996.



Les Thurgood at St Albans High 50th anniversary, 2006.



Les Thurgood and classmates, 60th anniversary celebrations, 2016.

Family photos supplied by and copyright Les Thurgood
School photograph reproduction courtesy of Nick Szwed.