

Memories of Stuart Robinson (affectionately known as Stewy)

At the time of Stewy's death (according to that revered I&WSC 'List' to which drafties always refer), Stewy was the oldest living of the 100 or so draftsmen who according to 'the List' were either around in I&WSC when he retired or would have known him through work. Draftsmen in Stewy's days were spread far and wide, none more so than those who worked in 'the bush' which from Stewy's perspective was probably where his heart lay – the bush being within existing or developing irrigation areas such as Mareeba; Mackay; Bundaberg; St George; Burdekin and Emerald. Stewy as Supervising Draftsman ran a well-oiled and disciplined office in Irrigation Branch by keeping 'the plates spinning' between head office and 'the bush' offices and in general, keeping everyone 'honest' as he would put it. He enjoyed visits to the troops in the bush and some of the ex-Irrigation Branch drafties recently recalled how Stewy always returned from these trips with an extra spring in his step. He was always fair and reasonable, and mentored the development of many draftsmen who went on to higher office, not just in the drafting ranks but in other disciplines as well.

Stewy instilled in others a healthy work ethic. He got on well with everyone but did not tolerate fools all that well or for that matter, anyone who tried to pull the wool over his eyes. He was always jovial and on for the occasional yarn about what you were up to and better still, always shared with you what he used to get up to when he was your age. He had a good sense of humour and coupled with a sharp eye for anything different, particularly by way of dress sense or hair-do in those fairly conservative days, nothing would suit Stewy and his deputy George Jordan to line up 'sparring partners' in the office with whom they would trade witty and good-hearted exchanges. If you were 'different', it was a good idea to leave your dignity behind when you walked past the two of them. Someone recently recalled the time that they nailed a young engineer in Irrigation Branch who was attempting with limited success to grow his first beard (you will know who you are) - they hit him with somewhat apt descriptions of his efforts ranging from 'bum fluff' to something a little bit more biblical along the lines of 'Creepin Jeezus' - both Stewy and George then walked off together like comrades in arms after this yet another successful encounter, and carried on chortling between themselves for a while after, like a pair of kookaburras preening themselves in the early morning sun.

By sheer coincidence, Ian Leadbeater recently ran into Stewy's son and caught up on where things were at with Stewy. Ian recalls the one and only time he ever saw Stewy stuck for words was when at one work Christmas Eve Party (in 'the annexe' behind Harris Court), Stewy was carrying a big tub of hot cheerios towards the hungry mob and in truly gallant form warned one of the office girls 'Pat, look out love - these are hot' to which Pat promptly replied as only Pat could - 'I'll bet they're not as hot as my pants'. This apparently left Stewy both speechless and nowhere to go, other than straight ahead (and fast). Ian somewhat with tongue-in-cheek also reckons that 'if Stu and George were any tougher, they'd rust' – these were the type of sayings which Stu seemed to have an endless supply of, and they have obviously been remembered through to this day.

Gary Corbett also recalls that in Stewy's eyes, the drafties in the bush could do no wrong but the general perception of some of the head office drafties at the time was that they (the head office drafties) did not fall into that same hallowed category. Some of them who may have reformed their ways since those days have recalled with many fond memories at this time, the odd occasion when Stewy (endeavouring to catch out those who he thought to be 'goofing off', as Vince Folkman puts it)

would covertly come up the staircase from the entrance to Harris Court (near Bill Morris's shop), and pause behind the closed door at the top of the staircase, with the full intention of entering unannounced with all guns blazing to catch the 'goofing-offers' off-guard. However, the goofing-offers hearing in those days was much better than it is these days, and more often than not they could pick up noises even through closed doors - noises such as the jingling of coins in pockets which Stewy was known to do on occasions - so this used to blow his cover. No-one ever let on and it was all in good fun which was Stewy's way.

Mick Garvey recalls at this time that the last time he saw Stewy was about five years ago and that he was hale and hearty and full of stirring – the same old Stewy we all knew and he was nearing ninety. Mick also recalls the time Stewy took him out to Emerald on one of his visits, in a new ute to be delivered there in an arrangement which Stewy had with Garney Johnson, the plan being to bring back the replaced ute. The replaced ute had been allocated to one of the water officers and used for inspecting meter wheels on the channels. In Mick's words, it had taken a fair bashing and one steering arm or whatever was so badly damaged that it could not be driven over 80 kph and so you had to continually steer against the vehicle's dramatic pull to one side, setting the scene for a rather eventful trip back to Brisbane. When they went to pick up the old ute, the Emerald workshop boys had taken the opportunity to load the tray up with all the unwanted rubbish from the workshop on the pretext rightly or wrongly, that Garney wouldn't let them throw anything out and that it all had to be returned to Brisbane for disposal. Apparently there was all sorts of rubbish including an old mower base that in Stewy's words (and you can just hear him saying them) he would be 'too ashamed to take to the dump'. With some well chosen words and emphasis, Stewy arranged for the items to be left at Emerald to at least give he and Mick some more room in the tray for their suitcases.

Mick Garvey also recalls Stewy coming to work one Monday morning with a 'bloody good shiner'. Stewy's story was that he got off the tram to visit somebody in the Royal Brisbane Hospital and some complete stranger just punched him in the eye for no apparent reason and then took off into the park across the road from the hospital. The rest of the week Irrigation Branch HO drafties (particularly Clarky [John Clark]) got a good rise out of Stewy by suggesting that in fact the black eye came from "going a little too far stirring some poor bloke in the pub". Stewy took the ribbing in good spirit, the eye healed and Stewy stuck with his story.

Stewy was also not averse to having the odd cold beer with his staff on a hot day, and there used to be a few hot days in Irrigation Branch around the time of the Christmas Eve break-up. Stewy had a tradition on Christmas Eve of taking his staff over to somewhere close like the Cecil Hotel for a quick ale. John Amprimo recalls the odd occasion that Stewy would sit on a 5oz beer while all the younger sprinters would go for 10's, with the obvious consequences providing Stewy with even further fodder to support his view (rightly or wrongly) that the drafties 'weren't able to party like they used to in my day'.

Phil Sternes recalls how he first met Stewy at St George on one of his trips to check how things designed in Brisbane panned-out in the irrigation area, and Phil has a couple of memories of Stewy to share. The first was on the night of Harry Wright's send-off at the Public Service Club in Elizabeth Street, where on leaving Phil watched a tall Stewy and the diminutive Eric "Robby" Robinson heading home down the street chatting away and back-slapping like a couple of boys. The second was at the work Christmas party one year, when Phil asked Stewy what he was doing in his retirement, to which Stewy replied "playing golf eight days a week" - how true has this statement been.

Bob McDonald recalls how he was very happy to be able to have an hour and a half with Stewy at Greenslopes on 22nd May this year. Stewy stated at the time that he was glad to have a visitor and reflected that he thought he might have been forgotten by everyone. Hardly the case. Although he was flat out walking two steps, the conversation was more from him than Bob apparently. Bob says they went down a hundred 'memory lanes', half of them that Bob couldn't remember himself.

Bob says that he first met Stewy when being discharged from National Service in December 1968. Bob recalls Stewy having his foot in plaster at the time and having to be driven out to Enoggera by Neil Whittaker in order to pick him up. In 1970 Bob had to appear in Brisbane for an interview for Senior Draftsman Emerald. Apparently Stewy stopped the Sunlander at Zillmere to extract Bob for breakfast at his place before taking him into work for the interview. Bob says Stewy did all the talking at the interview and Bob was the successful applicant. Bob recalls that because he was only 24yo, the Public Service Commissioner came out to the Emerald Office to check him out. If it wasn't for Stewy, Bob says he definitely wouldn't have got the job.

Bob says that Stewy's support at work kept him going on the straight and narrow. He says that he knows that Stewy had a lot to put up with in keeping control of the mostly younger draftsmen in Irrigation Branch and around the state, but everyone will say that after you were 'carpeted', no grudges were ever held. How true.

Eric Davis recalls that he first came into contact with Stewy when he was appointed Cadet Draftsman in January 1954, and that he got to know Stewy in 1959 when he was transferred into Irrigation Branch. Eric recalls that he thoroughly enjoyed his time in Irrigation Branch working under Stewy because not only was the work interesting but also Stewy was a good bloke who always took a personal interest in all his staff. Often on Mondays, Eric recalls how Stewy would enquire about your weekend sport, and always enquired about family members. If any of the young cadets were struggling with the four nights a week college as well as full time work, Stewy would console them with a story about his early days that would render the cadets situation as nothing to complain about by comparison.

Eric recalls that Stewy took his job very seriously and made it clear what he expected from all his staff, and if he felt you were not achieving that standard, he did not hesitate to let you know. Eric is not alone in saying that all who worked for Stewy or knew him well will feel that they have lost a good mate.

Collectively, the drafties who worked with and knew Stewy would like to pass on deepest sympathies to Stewy's wife Doris and their sons and families.