Geoffrey Neil Boddy  8 July 1932 - 12 June 2020

My dear father, Geoffrey Neil Boddy, died at Northaven, Turramurra, on Friday 12 June 2020, after a protracted illness of the brain that sadly gave him a great deal of trouble and difficulty.

This year he’s been oblivious to Covid-19, or the summer bushfires, or the destructive floods and hailstorms. He’s been unaware of the cancellation of all sports, the economic shut down, JobKeeper, JobSeeker, the economic recession, I Can’t Breathe or the state of global politics. All the calamities with which we may have concerned ourselves have been irrelevant to his lived reality.

He was diagnosed with hydrocephalus at John Hunter Hospital in Newcastle in 2014. His condition gave him no pain, but it put pressure on his brain that caused him problems with his balance and walking. He had many falls at his home at 7 Prospero Street Maryland and I’m very grateful to his near neighbours who looked out for his welfare and helped out when he was in trouble. I was so relieved when he accepted that he couldn’t look after himself and that he wanted me to make arrangements for him to move.

Since 2015, he’s been very well looked after at aged care facilities run by Uniting: starting at Turramurra, then at St Ives for dementia care and later back at Turramurra for end of life care.

Over the past five years, he slipped incrementally from 70kg down to just 37kg as his body was gradually consumed by the random entropy that comes with old age and disease. Worst of all, his thinking became impaired. His alert, logical and resourceful mind became unplugged and dismantled. He still recognised me and JoJo, but he was lost for words and unable to engage.

His good humour stayed with him to the end. He smiled with his eyes even when he was totally incapacitated.

On our last good day together, he lay scrunched up in bed and we simply watched whatever was on TV; surfing the channels for any kind of motorsport or football without any luck. He seemed to enjoy the commercials more than the programming, staring at the big screen with the kind of intensity and pleasure that I’m sure he enjoyed as a boy, at the movie matinees on the Saturday afternoons of his childhood in the 1930s and 40s.

Geoffrey Neil Boddy was born in Newcastle on Friday 8 July 1932, in a private maternity hospital in Silsoe Street, Mayfield. This date was right in the middle of the worst economic depression Australians had ever seen, yet the hardships that many families experienced seemed to be barely felt by the Boddy family. Geoff’s 26 year old father Eric benefited from steady employment at his father Alfred Charles Boddy’s general store at 63 Lindsay Street, Hamilton.

A couple of years previously, Eric had been able to build a new home in which to start his married life at 4 Dorothy Street Hamilton. Eric’s wife Anne Hammon was able to give up her retail job at Scotts department store (on the corner of Hunter and Perkins Streets) to stay at home and look after her newborn son Geoff full-time. The family were seemingly never short of groceries or clothes. Geoff was lavished with attention and as he grew he regularly sat for his portrait to be taken at the Boddy family photographic studios, which were operated by his great aunties May and Ethel Boddy.

My dad told me he had very happy memories of his early childhood years. He had the run of the local neighbourhood, regularly going over to Lindsay Street to visit his father at work at the Boddy’s store, where there was an unlimited supply of Arnott’s biscuits on hand. Many people may not know that the Arnott’s factory originated in Newcastle and for my dad’s whole life, he was loyal to Arnott’s brand products.

The Dorothy Street house was adjacent to the main Northern Line and my dad used to enjoy playing on the railway tracks, much to his mother Anne’s consternation. He told me he wasn’t scared of trains because the rails would hum well before a steam engine would come thundering along. Apparently, he learned by experiment that a 200 tonne train could flatten a copper halfpenny really, really flat.

Eric and Anne delayed having a second child until they were financially ready, so there was a five year gap until Geoff’s brother Ken was born on Monday 15 November 1937. The whole family moved into a brand new house at 273 Beaumont Street Hamilton South (it’s the very last house in that street) and young Geoff started attending Merewether Public School, just up the hill in Henry Street. On his first day there, Geoff met boys his age who were to become life-long friends: in particular Colin Richardson and Owen Anderson. They bonded during their childhood and remained very close throughout their long lives.

My Dad’s other close friend was his cousin John Hawson, who was born just a couple of weeks after Geoff. He lived nearby with his parents Alf and Mary at 445 Glebe Road Merewether. As teenagers, Geoff and John would play soccer on opposing sides: Geoff for Merewether and John for Adamstown. They were hard fought matches, for no reward apart from the joy of exercise and the thrill of competition.

Geoff’s grandfather Alfred Charles Boddy owned a waterfront property on Lake Macquarie at Coal Point. Geoff and Ken frequently spent idyllic weekends and school holidays there, swimming and playing with their cousins.

Unfortunately, Geoff’s education was badly disrupted by World War Two. Geoff’s father Eric was a volunteer member of a Newcastle Light Horse cavalry regiment, which was mobilised on 28 April 1941. Eric’s storekeeping experience saw him appointed as a quartermaster. At age 35 Eric was posted to the Australian Supply Division at Werris Creek on 18 February 1942, three days after the Australians serving in Singapore were captured by the Japanese Army.

Anne and her sons Geoff and Ken joined Eric in Werris Creek. They rented a house at 115 Single Street and the family lived there for a little over two years, while Eric was promoted to Chief Stores Officer. My dad once told me that this time away from Newcastle felt like one long holiday to him, as he was given very little discipline and school seemed to be optional. Eric’s brother Geoffrey Alfred Boddy was also stationed at Werris Creek at the time, as was Anne’s brother Bill Hammon, so there was close family around. Dad told me that as a 10yo, he’d wander all over town, running errands for his mother or uncles and watching the trains transporting troops north to defend Australia from invasion. The family was at Werris Creek when Newcastle was directly attacked with shells from a Japanese submarine on 8 June 1942.

The Japanese threat to Australia was removed thanks to Allied victories in the Pacific, but this meant Eric’s Supply Depot needed to move further north, off-shore. In April 1944, Eric was promoted to Major and transferred to Command Headquarters in Port Moresby New Guinea, while Anne and her sons moved back into their home in Beaumont Street Hamilton. The family remained separated until after Japan surrendered. Eric finally returned home to Newcastle when Geoff was 13yo. Geoff had enjoyed considerable liberty up to that point in his life. He’d missed his father very much, but when they were finally reunited, Geoff found Eric to be rather gruff, irritable and bossy. Anne tried hard to keep the peace and she reminded Eric that wartime army discipline was not appropriate for the children.

My dad attended Central High School on Lambton Road Broadmeadow (now Hunter School of the Performing Arts). He later observed to me that all the good teachers had gone off to war and many had been killed. He felt that the people available to teach in 1945, 46 & 47 were incompetent or unfit. Geoff suffered many thrashings from frustrated teachers with canes, because he hadn't studied enough, didn't know every correct answer, or simply displayed levity. The only subjects Geoff liked were metalwork and woodwork, where he was skillful and creative.  He particularly didn’t enjoy subjects which required rote memorisation of texts. He quickly lost interest in high school and became determined to get out as soon as possible. It was a great pity that my dad did not benefit from better educational opportunities. He had great enthusiasm for complex technical subjects, but his curiosity about mechanical things was not encouraged, and his natural skills were not nurtured by his teachers.

On his 15th birthday, 8 July 1947, Geoff was finally free to leave high school. He had no idea what he wanted to do, so his father Eric took him into Hunter Street and the pair walked together down the main shopping strip, stopping at various businesses to ask about employment. Considering the Boddy family’s mercantile history, Eric may have envisioned a retail sales job for his son.

They got as far as the block between Perkins street and Brown street, where they stopped at Caldwells The Jewellers, who were looking for a trainee watchmaker. Geoff’s favourite hobby was hand-building models of WW2 aircraft. He was quite dexterous, with careful attention to detail. Caldwells tried him out on a few simple manual tasks and his natural aptitude for working at fine scales became evident. Geoff got the job and entered into a six-year apprenticeship under the elderly Mr Norris. This entailed a correspondence course to study the theory and history of timekeeping, plus on-the-job training in practical repairs and parts manufacturing using a lathe and hand tools.

Caldwell’s business relocated to the corner of Hunter and Wolfe Streets in the 1950’s and prospered in the post-war decades. Geoff stayed at Caldwells his entire 46 year career, becoming senior watchmaker and training six more apprentices over the course of four decades.

With his first pay packet, Geoff bought a pair of Beswick ceramic horse figurines as a gift for his mother Anne. They comprise a mare tending affectionately to her young foal, and they stood in each of Eric and Anne’s homes for the next 54 years.

With his subsequent savings, Geoff bought an ex-war surplus BSA M20 500cc motorcycle. This marked the beginning of a life-long involvement with motorcycling, in terms of both riding enjoyment and social activities.

Geoff gave the BSA a paint job, overhauled its engine and then rode it everywhere for four years. He told me the coal-powered steam trains on the Newcastle-Civic-Wickham railway line parallel to Hunter Street spewed copious volumes of smoke and soot, which forced him to squint to avoid crashing.

Aged 19 in 1951, Geoff sold the BSA and bought a brand new Norton Dominator 500, which was the top race-winning brand at the time. His mates Owen Anderson, Lons Anderson and John Hawson had each bought various motorcycles by now, so the group decided to ride to Coolangatta Queensland via the New England Highway in the summer of 1952. They slept under the stars, cooked over open fires and suffered mechanical breakdowns, but they arrived home knowing that they had shared a special experience they’d never forget.

Geoff’s close friend from primary school, Colin Richardson, was more into cars, so the pair drove in Colin’s convertible MG TC sports car all the way to Adelaide and back. After they were safely home in Hamilton, the boss at Caldwell’s offered to sell Geoff his near-new 1951 Hillman Minx. This was an attractive proposition, the main thing being that prospective girlfriends were far more likely to sit inside a nice comfortable car than on the back of an awkward, windswept motorcycle.

Geoff soon started to go to dances at Newcastle Town Hall. The popular musical style at the time was swing jazz and Geoff became quite a competent dancer. He went out with different girls from around the Newcastle district, but in 1954 he met a striking young woman named Marie Griffin, who had previously been living and working in Sydney. My dad told me she had the looks and figure of a movie star.

At the end of their first night out, Geoff drove Marie home to her parents’ place at Thornton, where the just-acquainted young couple were immediately steered towards a boozy party involving the nearby neighbours. Geoff was a tee-totaller but he was intrigued by Marie’s good looks and self-confidence. Marie told me decades later that she knew he was the one she was going to marry as soon as she saw him in the crowd at the dance.

Geoff proposed marriage to Marie at McPhillamy Park on top of Mount Panorama, during the Bathurst race meeting, Easter 1954. They were there with a bunch of their friends to see the car and motorcycle races, including stars such as Jack Brabham, Lex Davison and Stan Jones. Around 18,000 people were in attendance that weekend; sleeping in tents or in their cars and cooking around camp fires.

The wedding date was 4 August 1956 at St Peters Anglican Church, in Dennison Street Hamilton. Marie’s family were notionally Anglican, while Geoff had been raised Baptist, but he’d quit as a teenager because they forbid him from playing soccer on Sundays after church.

The wedding reception was at Ocean Street, Dixon Park. Geoff and Marie spent their honeymoon at Kirra Beach in Queensland, driving up and back in the Hillman. They had to stop at several river crossings and wait for motor ferries, so my dad took the opportunity to unbolt the Hillman's cylinder head and de-coke the side-valve engine's combustion chambers because he was hearing some pre-ignition under wide open throttle on long uphill climbs.

They arrived well after dark and had to wake the landlord to get into the apartment they'd rented. They stayed two weeks, taking pictures on Kodak Ektachrome colour slide film using Geoff’s new Braun 35mm camera.

They later drove back south all the way to Fennel Bay, where they moved into the vacated house in Lake Road belonging to the aunties May and Ethel (who had by now retired and were holidaying in England for a year).

Geoff selected a block of land to build a house in a new development in Merewether. The steep block, at 30 Kempster Road, was high on a ridge with spectacular views of the ocean and Newcastle’s beachside suburbs. Marie chose a ranch-style floor plan and selected the materials and colours. Eric helped Geoff excavate the foundations by hand, using picks and shovels.

The house was almost finished when I was born in 1958. My brother Greg arrived quite soon after in 1959. My dad found he had to quickly build some fences, to stop his pair of toddlers from escaping. He bought an FJ Holden in two-tone grey and the picture of a typical fifties baby-boom family was complete. I have great memories of growing up in that house.

My parents gave my brother and me comfortable, secure childhoods where we knew we were loved. My dad worked retail hours, which meant quite long days from Monday morning to Saturday afternoons, including Thursday nights. My mother Marie was at home with us each day, just as all the other young married mothers in our street were at home with their children, so my brother and I would roam between houses and play with the neighbours - feeling very safe because everyone knew everyone else. The baker would deliver bread in a horse-drawn cart and the green grocer would do the rounds in a covered lorry. We had a Pye television set, an HMV record player and a Frigidaire refrigerator, plus cats and goldfish to care for.

Our family would have two major driving holidays each year: one would always be to Sydney and one would be in the countryside. We’d pile into dad's Holden and visit somewhere different each time: Kings Cross, Katoomba, Coffs Harbour, Canberra, Kiama, Manly, Shoal Bay, and of course the big two: Mount Panorama and the Gold Coast.

In 1974, dad and mum sold the house on the hill and bought a large, newly-built, luxurious split-level townhouse at 5/7 Hall Street, close to Merewether Beach and The Junction shopping centre. This was their dream home for a decade and they relished its convenient location and stimulating design. However, in 1983 I moved to Sydney and in 1984 my brother got married, so mum and dad started planning for their retirement.

My mum now wanted a smaller home that was easier to maintain and my father wanted a much larger garage with a multifunction workshop. As they had done thirty years earlier, they bought an empty block of land in a new development, this time at 7 Prospero Street Maryland. Mum once again chose a suitable floor plan, then selected the materials and colours. Dad specified a garage that would give him enough space to work on cars, motorcycles, clocks, watches, model aircraft and aero instruments. They moved in 1985. They were 53yo. My dad cut back his working hours and they joined the National Trust and the Maryland Community Centre. They started visiting the Hunter Valley’s historic houses and they tried out new restaurants, vineyards and breweries. They often visited me in Sydney and explored the city’s historic sites.

My parents were overjoyed when my brother Greg and this wife Glen delivered two beautiful grandchildren; first Max in 1989 and then Jen in 1992. It was my parents' greatest pleasure to spend time with them.

My dad decided to retire completely after his 61st birthday in 1993. He wasn’t enjoying the work anymore and there were many adventures that he wanted to enjoy together with my mum. Watches and clocks had evolved into disposable electronic devices with no repairable mechanical parts and Caldwells’ watch department was struggling. Dad was given a warm send-off by all the staff at Caldwells and I helped him buy his first-ever new car: a VR Commodore sedan.

Sadly, my parents didn’t have much time together. Just six months after my dad’s retirement, my mother Marie was rushed to hospital. She died on 2 February 1994, of peritonitis due to diverticulitis.

My dad was devastated. His big plans for his retirement were void. He couldn’t imagine a future for himself without his wife. He was left with no goals and no motivation. He told me he cried a lot at home by himself. For about two years, he was depressed and inactive. But slowly, with the help of family and friends, his outlook picked up and he started to find things to do.

He joined the vintage motorcycle club and the historic aviation society. Each weekend he’d be at a motortcycle show, a car show, or an air show. He tried gliding at Jerrys Plains. Ted Clements got him started flying remote controlled model aircraft by gifting him a Cadet high-wing monoplane.

Dad became friends with Harry Woolford of the well-known Woolford watchmaking dynasty. Dad and Harry had shared many life-long interests and experiences, except that Harry (being older) had actually been to war as a young man. Harry was one of the last soldiers to enter Darwin before the Japanese ceased their attacks. Harry tells me that when he arrived, the Japanese retreated and that's absolutely not a co-incidence.

Dad started building up a collection of motorcycles, starting with John Hawson’s Norton 750 Commando. Dad also liked Triumphs. He had a classic Thunderbird 650, a modern Sprint 955 and later a new Street Triple 675.

For my dad’s 70th birthday in 2002, my brother Greg and I hired the restaurant at Noahs on Newcastle Beach. Around 70 friends and family celebrated his life and he was most touched and gratified.

Dad never stopped going up to Mount Panorama. In retirement, he went to the motorcycle rally there every Easter. One year, Greg and Max and I joined him and he was so proud of us all being together.

Dad was a member of Newcastle Aero Club and a regular visitor to Rutherford Aerodrome. He contributed to several warbird restorations belonging to Col Pay, undertaking flying instrument repairs such as altimeters and air speed indicators. It was great pleasure for him to be involved with famous aircraft such as the Spitfire and the Kittyhawk that had enchanted him as a child.

Growing up during the Second World War had an huge influence on my dad's values and opinions. He supported the armed forces but had no time for politicians. He had simple solutions for complex problems: occasionally saying that any stalemate can be easily resolved with a carefully-aimed nuclear bomb.

My first wife Anna died on 27 December 2011 after a six-year illness involving early-onset Alzheimers dementia. My dad was a wonderful support to me and he helped me to deal with my grief and to overcome my depression, drawing on his experiences of recovery after losing Marie.

However. a huge blow hit us both just eight months later on 3 August 2012. Greg was killed in a traffic accident on his Harley-Davidson in Queensland. Dad had introduced Greg and me to joy of riding motorcycles back when we were teenagers and he now felt terribly complicit in Greg’s death at the age of 52. My dad never recovered from the shock of losing a son in such circumstances. He was 80 years old and I don’t think he enjoyed much about his life after that loss.

My dad and I each decided to sell all our motorcycles after that. We had seven in total between us and they all went to good homes via friends of friends without any need to advertise.

My dad’s eyesight wasn’t so sharp in his 80’s, so he stopped building planes and fixing clocks. He returned to woodwork and made some interesting stuff. His workshop, which had previously been spotlessly clean to facilitate watchmaking, became coated in a thick layer of sawdust.

My dad said he never wanted to end up in a nursing home, but Hydrocephalus snuck up on him slowly. He understood the grim prognosis quite clearly. It was inoperable at his age and he had to accept that his own demise would be a drawn-out slow-motion decline towards inevitable death.

In my wife Anna’s case of dementia, she felt fine even when she was quite debilitated. As for my dad, he was totally aware of his disabilities as they gradually overwhelmed him.

My dad was the last one of his old kindergarten classmates to pass away, with Owen Anderson having only recently gone in February this year after a long illness.

Dad would have turned 88 on 8 July.

I’d like to thank many people for helping out my dad in his final years:

- my dad’s neighbours in Maryland (Herb and Dave and Barbara), for often checking in on my dad and rushing to help him when he fell and couldn’t get up.

- Harry Woolford and his daughter Mary, who were always there for dad with friendship and support.

- Lisa and Rod Morrison and Lisa’s father Ted Clements for helping with the transition to Aged Care in Sydney. JoJo and I greatly appreciate their kindness and thoughtful advice.

- Uniting staff Belle, Claire and Jenny for years of exhausting work managing my dad’s care. They gave my dad attention when I couldn’t, 24/7.

- Glen Newman and Max and Jen Boddy, for untiring emotional support, plus their practical efforts during 2016 to clean and renovate my dad’s house for sale.

- My friend and best man Chris Wood, who was around when my parents first moved into their new home at Maryland in 1985 and who helped me move my dad out again in 2015.

… and I’d like to thank my wife JoJo for her love, kindness and patience over the past seven years. Problems shared became problems halved.

And finally, I’m very grateful to you for being here today to share this commemoration with me. Thank you from my heart.

Anthony Boddy

24 June 2020