

JOHN SORELL - 2001

By Ken Davis

John Sorell has written countless stories about the famous – and infamous – yet he makes a damn good yarn himself.

Hobart born and the great, great grandson of Lord Sorell, an early Tasmanian Governor, the young John Sorell joined *The Mercury* as a cadet in 1953.

Several years later, Sorell had flirtation with the provincial press in England and also the stepdaughter of legendary English actor Rex Harrison. This experience encouraged him to hurriedly join the merchant navy as a junior officer.

Assigned to the tramp ship, MV Silverstone, he travelled the world for the next two years loading and transporting cargo wherever and whenever his skipper could find a consignment.

While in Geelong to pick up some wheat, the 23 year old Sorell jumped ship, hitchhiked to Melbourne and knocked on the door of *The Age's* wily news editor, Harold Austin. A joint interview with chief of staff Ian Stewart followed and suddenly the morning broadsheet had a "life enriched" reporter.

A string of exciting and colorful yarns later, including being stranded in the Antarctica for 10 days on the *Nella Dan*, he was approached by the Herald and Weekly Times' Harry Gordon to see if he would join the Flinders Street rival.

It was an upgrade and salary increase so Sorell, now married and with four children to support, leapt at the opportunity to join *The Herald*.

In 1969 the newspaper's chief of staff, John Fitzgerald made a decision that effectively changed Sorell's life forever.

Fitzgerald decided to lift the often ignored page two by initiating a column that featured an interview with a prominent newsmaker of the day.

But this would be no pre-digested, leisurely paced piece written the previous day. It would be hard news. The newsmaker would be located, interviewed and copy filed by 9.30 am and always in time for the first edition.

Fitzgerald reviewed his options with management and his need for a reporter who could ask the hard questions yet write with a light human touch.

"On the Spot" was conceived and Sorell was awake at 4 am, in the office by 5 am and with decision made, personality located and interviewed found Sorell pounding the keys on his old Remington typewriter by 9am when many fellow journalists were just arriving for work.

During this period, Sorell was awarded two Walkley Awards. One for his exclusive interview with Prime Minister John Gorton after he had voted himself out of office. The other in 1968 for his interview with legendary oil rig fire fighter "Red" Adair who was flying to Australia to extinguish a massive oil gas leak fire at the ESSO BHP platform off Lakes Entrance.

After some quick detective work Sorell flew to Fiji and then booked himself back to Australia on Adair's Pan Am flight. A shuffle of seats and suddenly the world's most famous firefighter had the tenacious Sorell beside him for eight hours.

Leaping out of the plane at Tullamarine, Sorell also had diagrams Adair had drawn in the reporter's notebook of how the fire would be plugged. The diagrams were rushed to the office while Sorell started dictating down the phone to a copytaker.

Back in the office, cadets were lined up to run each paragraph to the sub-editors' desk. He filed his last words as the presses began rolling.

The following year the Red Adair story was committed to film in *The Hellfighters* starring John Wayne. Sadly, Sorell's role ended up on the cutting room floor.

Seeking a different challenge, when Maxwell Newton, the enfant terrible of Australian journalism, rang and offered him editorship of a weekend rag, the *Sunday Observer* he jumped at the opportunity.

For the next three years it was a roller coaster as Sorell – himself no shrinking violet - worked for a man described by his friends as “enthusiastic, dedicated, ambitious, driven, obsessive, unpredictable and manic”.

The *Sunday Observer* was cot case when Sorell took over but he introduced a raunchy style that saw circulation jump from 60,000 to more than 200,000.

Sunday morning joggers, cyclists and churchgoers in the early and conservative 70's were confronted by posters such as “My Billy's no Poofter- Sonia Tells” after Sorell had rung Lady McMahon to bounce a well circulated rumour off her.

So successful was the *Sunday Observer* that the *The Herald*, *The Sun* and *The Age* combined forces to produce the *Sunday Press*. It hardly dented the sales of the racy tabloid.

However the Australian Taxation Office was not impressed with the Maxwell Newton salary scheme that paid John Sorell with new suits or air conditioning instead of cash and Sorell was faced with a bill of \$25,000 – “a f.....g Kings's ransom” - from the ATO when Gerald Stone rang in 1975 about taking over the Nine news in Melbourne.

“I want \$500 a week clear,” replied the old-style journo who had yet to get his head around salary packaging.

“Get f.....d, that is more than I earn,” said the mastermind of *60 Minutes*.

A few weeks later the call came from Kerry Packer and the deal was done at Packer's personal suite at the old Hotel Australia in Collins Street.

The clincher was that Packer would advance Sorell the \$25,000 to pay off the ATO. Many years later the jubilant journalist rang Packer to thank him and said the debt had been repaid.

The multi millionaire had forgotten all about it.

At Nine, with ratings half of its rival at Seven, the arrival of Sorell heralded a whirlwind. Gone was News Centre Nine, which was a double handed operation between Sydney and Melbourne

Melbourne viewers didn't give a stuff about a crash on the Harbour Bridge restricting traffic and Sydney wasn't that fussed about Footscray's Brad Hardie winning the Brownlow.

Staff were frightened that the man they nicknamed "The Bear" because of his ferocity would turn the news into "Tabloid mayhem" highlighting raunchy pages of the *Sunday Observer*.

Eric Pearce, the 70 year old doyen of newsreaders was brought out of retirement and back to the screen, while Sorell spent two years stalking Brian Naylor and stealing him from Channel Seven.

Not long after, 16 year old Ruyton schoolgirl Kerry Armstrong became weathergirl. Sorell mischievously reveals it was his idea that she appear in a skimpy bikini during a sweltering summer. He is aware that Kerry has not forgiven him.

She went on to become a star of film and TV with credits such as *Lantana*, *Dynasty* *Sea Change* and *MDA* to her name.

Whatever it was, the Sorell magic worked.

"I based the Nine news on the Sun newspaper, the biggest selling in Australia. Not too much horror, war or bloodshed and plenty of sport and a pinch of happiness." he said.

Nine caught and passed Seven within two weeks and was rarely beaten for 25 years.

When Channel 10 challenged with their *News at Five* he pinched the newsreader/weatherman - wife/husband team of Jo Pearson and Rob Gell.

"That stuffed 'em", he said.

With Kerry Packer's support and deep pockets for winners he surrounded himself with professionals led by protege Michael Venus and whimsical producer Colin Paterson.

When Kerry Packer told Sorell he had the job at Channel 9 'for life', Sorell felt compelled to ask which of their two lives he was talking about. The question went unanswered.

But when Packer died Sorell retired and handed over the reins to Venus. He walked out and disappeared into retirement.