

HARRY GORDON - 2002

By Ken Davis

Australian journalism has been the source of a remarkable array of legendary figures since the first colonial newspaper was printed in 1803.

However it is doubtful if any have covered the wide breadth of the craft as Harry Gordon.

For a crusading editor it is difficult to imagine a more successful campaign than '1034'. That figure represented the road toll in 1969 - before Gordon led *The Sun* in a vendetta against the carnage and slaughter on our roads.

The 1034 campaign helped influence the introduction of compulsory seatbelts by the Victorian government, which became the first in the world (in 1970) to introduce such radical legislation.

Today's annual road toll in Victoria is now about one third of that figure --- a stark indication that the newspaper contributed to the saving of many lives over many years.

As an editor Gordon became a mentor to many youngsters who went on to distinguished careers. He also backed his staff to the hilt, and even further.

He took an outlandish, characteristic punt when he selected an unknown 22-year-old, Laurie Oakes, to head the paper's Canberra bureau ahead of a number of better credentialed, more senior journalists.

"I wanted regular 700-word features explaining the political situation in an easy to read format. Oakes could distil the political situation and explain characters like Fraser and Whitlam like no one else," Gordon said recently.

"With Oakes covering Canberra, Doug Wilkie writing about international affairs and Keith Dunstan's whimsical column reflecting Melbourne, we had a great team," he said.

In fact he takes great pride in the fact that Douglas Wilkie and he were found guilty of breach of Parliamentary Privilege in 1969 for getting up the nose of Premier Sir Henry Bolte. The government apologised for its injudicious act 10 years later!

As a journalist there were few better when faced with looming deadlines and he won a Walkley and just about every other award around during his days on the road.

As a war correspondent --- he was one of the youngest in Korea --- his name is mentioned in the same breath as the legendary Charles Bean by war historian Les Carlyon, another outstanding wordsmith.

Harry Gordon was educated at Melbourne High School where he was the school's middleweight boxing champion. His pugnacious attitude was both a blessing and a burden for much of his professional life.

He joined the RAAF as an aircrew trainee in 1943 and after the war spent four years honing his journalistic skills at the Sydney *Telegraph*, Brisbane *Courier-Mail* and Singapore *Straits Times*.

Then he joined *The Sun* in Melbourne in 1949 where, in an outstanding career, he worked as a general reporter, sportswriter, columnist, foreign correspondent, and news executive until his appointment as editor on New Year's Day in 1968.

Under his guiding hand *The Sun* grew and prospered, becoming the largest selling newspaper in the southern hemisphere.

After five years he was appointed executive editor of the Herald and Weekly Times Group. Five years later he was appointed editor-in-chief of Queensland Newspapers, where he transformed *The Courier-Mail* and jostled vigorously with Premier Joh Bjelke Petersen.

He returned to Melbourne as editor-in-chief of The Herald and Weekly Times in 1984. For much of the 1980s he was also a director and then chairman of Australian Associated Press.

After 38 years he left the Herald and Weekly Times Group in 1987 and spent the next five years as contributing editor to *Time Australia*.

But all the time there was his passion for the Olympic Games. He covered 1952 in Helsinki for AAP and then the next string of Olympics for *The Sun*. In 1988 he covered Seoul for AAP and then the Barcelona, Atlanta and Sydney as senior Olympic correspondent for *The Australian*.

His ability to delicately paint the scene for his readers so poignantly that they believed that were an eyewitness to the event was never better illustrated than in his coverage of sport, especially the Olympics.

His day-to-day coverage was behind him in Athens and Beijing as official historian of the Australian Olympic Committee. Quirkily it was in that role that he discovered and then proved to the satisfaction of the International Olympic Committee that Australia had two more gold medalists than previously thought.

Crisp, clear, colourful writing is a skill that he has carried from newspapers into books.

He is the author of 15 books, one of which, *An Eyewitness History of Australia*, won both the National Book Council and Barbara Ramsden Awards for Australian literature. Books include *Australia and the Olympic Games*, *GOLD!*, *The Hard Way* (the history of the Hawthorn Football Club, of which he is a special patron) and Dawn Fraser's biography.

His personal awards are many and varied and reflect his myriad of interests ... which have included membership of the Australia-Japan Foundation (as deputy chairman), the Australia China Council and the Council of the Australian War Memorial.

In 1981 he was awarded CMG (Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George) for his services to journalism and then in 1991 an AM (Member of the Order of Australia). He received the Inaugural Lifetime Achievement in Sports Journalism award from Australian Sports Commission and National Press Club in 2002.

He was also awarded the Australian Olympic Committee's highest individual award, the Order of Merit (1999), and the International Olympic Committee's highest individual award, the Olympic Order (2001). In 2006 he became the second recipient ever of the Lifetime Achievement Award of the International Society of Olympic Historians.