

Lessons learned last a lifetime

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It's amazing when I look back after all these years. I spent three years at *The Argus*, but the experience and the business lessons I learned have lasted a lifetime.

Admittedly it was my first job, so I was impressionable (what else has changed?) as I joined *The Argus* straight from school in 1954. I went into the mail room on the 5th floor and delivered letters and parcels throughout the building, but the 3rd floor (editorial) held a special fascination.

The policy of moving office boys into other departments meant that I spent a period in Purchasing and gained an insight into the type of supplies needed by a newspaper, from pencils and notebooks, typewriter ribbons and the reels of newsprint that are vital for daily production.

After a few months I was transferred to the much coveted position of copyboy and spent time putting subbed copy in the chute to the Composing Room, running errands, and finding new ways to put additives in the sub's tea, which was fetched from the cafeteria on the 5th floor.

This appeared to be a slow introduction to a newspaper career for an ambitious 16-year-old, but lo and behold in mid-1955 the Chief-of-Staff told me I had been promoted to the lofty heights of a first year cadet journalist.

I was now expected to wear a suit, white shirt and tie and my pay from copyboy to cadet journalist was slashed by half, from £10/9/- per week to £5/4/6. But it didn't matter, I was a journalist and I was on my way.

The first day I was assigned to cover a media conference at Melbourne University. Normally this would have been part of Town Hall Round, but Eleanor Knox had two conferences at the same time so I was to deputise for her.

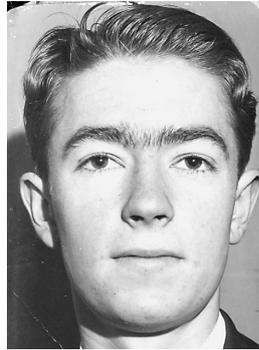
It was all about the discovery by a physicist researching the clouds above Mildura at 40,000 feet by releasing balloons with sensors, including photographic film.

My fellow journalists at the conference included some of the biggest by-line names in Melbourne including Claude Forell of *The Age*, Len Lukey of *The Sun* and Howard Palmer of *The Herald*. I sweated on their questions and wrote everything down. My sole question was to ask the physicist, whose name was Dr VD Hopper, what his initials stood for, which received a laugh, although I didn't know why.

Back at the office I tried to make sense of my notes and wrote a story which highlighted the fact that the research had shown there were radioactive clouds (it was in the period following the UK nuclear tests in Australia) and they were circulating the earth at about 40,000 feet.

My story made the Page 3 lead, while *The Age* and *Sun* stories were complicated and complex and were buried in the back of the paper.

I had learned an invaluable lesson on Day One. You are writing for a mental age of 12, so keep it simple. It is a rule



Dennis Rutzou, vintage 1955.



... and the 2007 version.

that has stayed with me for my entire career.

A great benefit of *The Argus* training was the mentoring (the term was not used in 1955) provided by senior journalists, like Brinsley Sheridan who played a special role in cadet education.

"Sherry" pointed out that there was an "encyclopaedia of information in a daily newspaper, but most don't know how to tap the source". Also if you don't know something, don't crack on that

you do. Just say that you don't understand and it's amazing how people will help you. As a result, I often came back to *The Argus* with more writing in other people's handwriting in my notebook than mine.

My final period at *The Argus* was spent in sporting preparing for the Olympic Games. I was one of two cadets (Alan Veitch was the other) who were seconded to sport for the Games. My time was spent covering the fencing at St Kilda Town Hall as well as assignments at the Olympic Village and the road cycling at Broadmeadows.

After *The Argus* closed and after the short stint at *The Warracknabeal Herald* and in advertising I moved into public relations with John and Esta Handfield and have worked in PR ever since. I travelled to London in the 1960s and on return opened Dennis Rutzou Public Relations in January 1970. I then entered a partnership with former *Argus* colleague John Sholl.

In the mid-1970s I moved to Sydney to operate the Sydney office which led to the re-establishment of Dennis Rutzou PR as a separate entity.

As well as my PR interests I have also branched out into radio in the past 15 years and produce and present a daily business segment on the community radio network as well as the Tuesday night edition of Jazz@5 on the North Shore community radio station FM99.3.

One final memorable moment. The night *The Argus* closed fellow cadet Ray Kennedy and myself about 4am became "emotionally disoriented" and couldn't remember how to make our way home to Camberwell and Surrey Hills. We decided to follow the Camberwell tram. All the way down Batman Ave and later Riversdale Rd. When the tram stopped we stopped behind it for fear of getting lost. This went on until it turned into the Hawthorn tram depot and we blindly followed it in. The driver and conductor got out to close the depot gate and found us there behind the tram. "What are you doing?" they asked. We broke down and sobbed, "our paper has just folded". They took us into the depot, plied us with coffee and at dawn directed us on the path to home. In return we gave them copies of the last edition of the paper. Which wasn't a bad exchange as they would be worth a fortune today to a collector in mint condition.