

Graham Middleton Ryburn - 1935-2009

By Roderick James Ryburn, Canberra, ACT, Australia

Graham Ryburn was my older brother, 7 years my superior, and he was my boyhood hero.

To me, as a boy, Graham was a cool guy. He was the one who knew everything, could make or fix anything, dressed in cool clothes, and got all the pretty girls – just look as his wife Mary Alice and daughter Rosalind.

He was probably the ringleader when my siblings put me in a cardboard box and lowered me via a rope over the first-floor banisters to the ground floor. The grooves in the banisters are still there for all to see, in the Ryburn Wing at Knox College, Dunedin, New Zealand.

Graham also left his mark on me, or rather on my left index finger, which was mangled in the hinge side of his bedroom door during some early high-jinx. I spent a few days in hospital, and subsequently changed from writing with my left hand to my right hand. Ever since, my handwriting has not been very good! Graham was cack-handed too.

He was the one who knew all about World War II planes and tanks, and could recognize them all. During the war we all had cardboard air-raid boxes containing chewing gum and ear plugs, amongst other things. We weren't supposed to chew the gum!

He was the one who dressed me up as a communications robot for a school fancy-dress party, complete with headphones and a microphone. That was very cool.

When he built valve radios and Hi-Fi systems from scratch, I wondered how I could ever attain the level of knowledge and hands-on ability he possessed in abundance (but I did).

He helped me build crystal-sets, and gave me a kitset to build a 'HikersOne" valve radio as a birthday or Christmas present. I learned about electronics and how to solder properly.

He helped me with the electrical stuff for my OO-gauge, model-railway layout. Since then I have adsorbed enough about electricity to do most of my own household electrical work, and have thereby saved a fortune over the years in electrician's bills.

He and our father Hubert were both good at woodwork (a Ryburn trait), and taught me too.

Graham was interested in communications in general, and at one stage he built a private telephone line across the veggie patch between the Knox College Lodge and a neighbor's house. Later on he experimented with talking via radio transceiver, and also a light beam, between Knox and a school-friend's house in Maori Hill, Dunedin.

While conducting illicit experiments in the science labs at John McGlashan College (secondary school), Graham managed to get a small lump of metallic sodium under his eyelid. I thought that was pretty cool – particularly the eye patch he had to wear for a while.

Graham was also quite badly injured while playing Rugby for John McGlashan College at Waimate. To me that was quite cool too – especially the crutches.

Uber-cool was an incident at John McGlashan College where Graham (and others, I think) were caught climbing back into the dormitory in the wee-small hours. He lost his prefect status for a while, but his father was definitely not amused!

Unlike me, Graham was called up for compulsory military service, and he joined the signals corps. I have a photo of him at Waiouru, with his head protruding from a tank or armored car, wearing a forage cap and earphones. He learnt Morse code and a lot about communications.

Graham was much more musical than me, and he taught himself to play the ukulele, bongos, and later the piano. His piano style could be described as “chord progression”. He acquired a great appreciation of modern jazz, some of which rubbed off on me (much to our fathers disgust).

Not long after joining Unilever in Lower Hutt, Graham was able to acquire a brand-new, bright-red Volkswagen Beetle, which he drove with pride and flair. Come summer, he took me and his VW on a camping expedition in the South Island. I distinctly remember coming round a bend at high speed on the dirt road up the Matukituki Valley. We were suddenly confronted by the river itself, that had decided to take a temporary meander across the road. We hit that river at some speed, such that a huge wall of water was forced up and over the car. Being a Beetle, however, it just aquaplaned and floated across the water, and we were able to drive sedately out the other side, our speed completely dissipated. Later, on that same trip we camped at Jackson Bay in pouring rain, and were forced to dig deep trenches around the tent to keep copious water out. The road up the West Coast was not then connected through.

We later saw a lot of Graham and his family at Howick, Auckland, when I was doing my PhD at Auckland University in 1974-5. Our eldest daughter Anna made good friends with his daughter Rosalind. I remember visiting them later at their subsequent house in Remuera, when Graham was the proud owner of a speedboat. We also visited Graham and Mary Alice at regular intervals when they moved to Warkworth, and they came to Canberra a few times.

It was a special privilege for me to attend Rosalind and Stacey Hunt’s wedding in Nelson, when I travelled by car south with Graham and Mary Alice from their house near Warkworth. I still have vivid memories of that wedding. After the wedding, Graham and I walked the spectacular Heaphy Track from Nelson to the West Coast. I thought I was doing Graham a favour by shouldering a greater portion of the food, but it was me whose knees wore out on the last day and I had trouble keeping up. I also suffered from hypothermia on the first evening. Graham’s son Ben, and Joanna, Ben’s wife-to-be, were at Karamea to meet us with the car. I remember Graham tried to befriend an Irishman working at the Karamea Motel, but the Irishman’s surly, taciturn manner made me think he was an IRA terrorist in hiding.

Graham and Mary Alice later attended our daughter Bridget’s wedding. I remember Graham admitting that he had driven straight through the toll gates on the M5 out of Sydney, but he appears to have gotten away with it. Cool.

Several years ago, it was with sadness I learnt from Mary Alice on the phone that Graham had had to abandon his attempts to put up some new shelves in the kitchen of their Warkworth home. Formerly, this would have been a breeze for Graham, and it brought it home to me that he was really suffering from a gradual deprivation of his previously great capabilities.

I last saw Graham in Dunedin in August this year, at the centenary of Knox College. Superficially, he seemed the same old Graham – still mildly acting the clown and cracking a few lame jokes. However, he was unable to contribute much, and was prone to wandering if unsupervised. I was shocked to learn from Mary Alice how quickly he had deteriorated since then, in just a couple of short months.

Graham was my hero. I miss him.

Rod Ryburn, Canberra, 24 Nov 2009

