



DREAMS OF A MEDIA MAN

by Brian Minards

I'VE always considered myself a fairly mild, well-mannered individual, but I must confess, if Alexander Graham Bell were alive today I would be of a mind to seek him out and extract a degree of retribution.

Since joining the Australian Federal Police as Media Liaison Officer in 1984 his cursed invention has caused me a fair amount of heartburn.

One night recently, for instance, my son had to deal with an over-enthusiastic, objectionable Melbourne journalist at about 11 o'clock, who demanded to speak to me despite being told that I had gone to bed.

The suggestion by my son that it had better be urgent was greeted with the opinion that media liaison officers should be available any time of the day or night to speak to journalists.

Having taken my first business telephone call at home at about 6 a.m. that day the young man's attitude was akin to the effect of the potion on Dr Jekyll — I became something of a Mr Hyde.

With hair bristling and quietly cursing I grasped the telephone and told this journalist — and I must confess in not so diplomatic parlance — that I had news for him and it was not all necessarily good.

Such is the lot of a media liaison officer.

I got back into bed muttering about what dire consequences a meeting between Alexander Graham Bell and myself would present at that moment — not to mention the journalist.

So saying I adopted my customary foetal position and stated that I would seek peace in my sub-conscious, a de-

cision endorsed by my wife who suggested that it was a good idea because Alexander Graham Bell could not hear me anyway.

Sleep began to overtake me but not before I realised, somewhat surprisingly, that my wife's wisdom resembled that of Sybil Fawltly.

Actually my love-hate relationship with the telephone began long before I joined the staff of the AFP.

It was one of my tools of trade during my time as a broadcaster with two radio stations in Canberra — the ABC and 2CA.

Presenting a talk-back radio programme was, however, a far cry from my duties now. Although talk-back is telephone oriented my headphones were the ear-piece and the microphone was the

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mouthpiece. I never touched a telephone at any time for the hundreds of calls I received during my radio career.

In 1984 I came face to face with this Telecom monster which has dominated my life ever since.

In the AFP

The decision to leave radio was not taken lightly. After more than twenty years in the business it was pretty easy to go to work each day and automatically slip into gear and do what one had to do but the opportunity to serve the AFP as a media liaison officer presented itself, and I decided to apply.

As a consequence I arrived at AFP headquarters at NRMA House in Canberra on February 9, 1984, was shown to an office containing a desk, chair and telephone and told the job was all mine — simply answer any inquiries about AFP matters in Canberra, interstate and overseas.

Suddenly the ABC was starting to look good again . . .

I stared at the 'phone and quietly implored it not to ring and mercifully it did not. I found the following day that it was faulty! Telecom was called and it has not stopped ringing since.

I shall always remember my first eight weeks with the AFP:

- The Age tapes emerged;
- A foot and mouth disease extortion case emerged in Queensland and according to the media the disease was about to engulf the country;
- A suburban shopping centre in Canberra was destroyed by fire and;
- A man, a woman and two children were murdered in the outer Canberra suburb of Richardson.

Richardson case

This case, which on the surface seemed a clear cut triple murder-suicide, became the murder of four people by a so-called "friend of the family". The crime was to involve me in an equally demanding media liaison role when it was later revealed that the man convicted of the murder had on a previous occasion shot dead the two sisters of the woman he murdered at Richardson.

The first of two coronial inquiries had found the sisters had died after being incinerated in a car, which had allegedly run off a road, hit a tree and burst into flames. The investigation into the Richardson murders raised questions about the cause of death of the two young women in the car. Their bodies were exhumed and an autopsy found they had been shot before the car was engulfed in flames. The man responsible for the Richardson murders was charged with their murder as well.



Mr Brian Minards and friends. (Picture by Terry Browne)

I have always drawn some comfort from the fact that having survived answering, to the best of my ability, questions about those cases I faced early in my career, then I would probably survive altogether.

By the time Operation "Lavender" and Robert Trimbole came along my combat training had taught me to "dig in". I recall in the Trimbole case I informed the media briefly that "Robert Trimbole has been arrested in Ireland". I then ducked for cover, so to speak, and braced myself. The 'phone rang immediately and continued to do so constantly for 48 hours, day and night, and persistently thereafter for many weeks. Such was also the case in "Operation Lavender" in which a Sydney doctor, Nicholas Paltos, and nearly 40 others were convicted and jailed for importing a huge amount of cannabis into Australia.

Rumours

Rumours are the most difficult thing a media liaison officer has to deal with and quite often they come from "an impeccable source" or "on good authority". There was one occasion when I was glad I had remembered to take my blood pressure tablets before retiring. The 'phone woke me at about 12.15 a.m. and a journalist whom I knew to be more accurate than some put my medication to the test by simply asking whether I'd heard anything about Bob Hawke being assassinated. History has since shown otherwise, but suffice to say the rumour spread like wildfire throughout the media, even at that time of night. I spent the rest of those hours of darkness refuting it with great difficulty after going to extraordinary lengths to have it confirmed that the Prime Minister was indeed safe and sound, asleep in bed at the

Lodge. The only possible casualty of the night was a Melbourne journalist who was bordering on hysteria and would not take "no" for an answer. I thought at the time he was more than likely from the "Truth" and on being confronted with it became disoriented!

Odd cases

Of the many unusual inquiries I've received two come readily to mind. A reporter from a New South Wales South Coast newspaper rang to ask whether it were true that in certain circumstances the Federal Police were issued with a document permitting them to shoot criminals. Feeling more than a little confident that it was probably unnecessary to refer the question to a higher authority, I reassured the caller that the fate of any wrongdoer in our community was up to the courts and not in the hands of the AFP.

On another occasion a young, enthusiastic journalist from an Adelaide radio station asked me whether I had Yasser Arafat's telephone number. After composing myself I replied in the negative but said I was so impressed with his initiative that I would see what I could do. As it happened, one Federal police officer advised me Mr Arafat did have a representative in Melbourne. I conveyed this information to the young man in Adelaide — much to what I can only describe as his sheer delight.

To Sum Up

There are very few dull moments in the life of a media liaison officer with the AFP. "Challenging", "demanding" and "satisfying" are the words that come to mind to describe what has been my lot in nearly five years in the job. The assistance I've received from members and staff alike has been most gratifying and I believe I can look upon many, not only as colleagues but also as good friends. Such support makes the job so much easier. On reflection I suppose Alexander Graham Bell was not such a bad sort of a fellow either. Little did he know what impact his invention would have on the world when he spoke into that first telephone on that day in Boston in March, 1876. Ironically, this man who invented what is in part a listening device once told his family he would rather be remembered as a teacher of the deaf than as the inventor of the telephone. His invention has certainly played a major role in my working life, but more importantly he has taught me how to appreciate life's simple pleasures. For me there is no greater pleasure than to answer the telephone at home and be able to pass it to another member of the family and say . . . "It's for you."

