

Bill Bradley



Bill Bradley appears at the front right of this picture taken in 1953 at the Jervis Bay Rehabilitation Centre.

As usual, Bill is surrounded by a bevy of lovely ladies!

What follows is Bill's polio story – but it only covers the early years. Bill has had such a full life there is much more of his story still to come – after all, later this month he only turns a young 73!

Polio, I didn't know what polio was in the early 1950s. I was only interested in sport. My class mate, Betty Cuthbert, and I were thought to be the two fittest kids in the Ermington District. In those days young athletes didn't take vitamins as a replacement as they do today. After playing team sports in Parramatta, I would then run all the way home to Ermington just for practice. Later, it was realised that I was deprived of all resistance for what was to follow.

First term of school was commencing. Off to Eastwood Technical School I went to register, and then back to my old primary school to say good-day. Not feeling too good, I went on home as I thought I had the flu coming on. That night, the so-called flu got worse. Next morning Mum said "you better stay in bed and I will call the doctor". A day off school, that was great. That afternoon Dr Howe arrived and examined me. Not many words were spoken in my presence. That night, I had some tablets stuck down my throat that no doubt the doctor had prescribed. During the night as I was crawling across my bed after going to the toilet my right arm went from under me. Taking no notice I went off to sleep. Next morning Mum came in to see how I was. I said "my arm won't move". Mum grabbed the telephone, and twenty minutes later the doctor was sitting on my bed saying "you are going to hospital". His statement, made no impression. My only thought I had was "lattice biscuits". In the 1950s lattice biscuits were luxuries in our kitchen pantry. Mum sent my brother Noel off to the local shop to buy some. In the mean time the ambulance arrived. My body was becoming limp with weakness, as the ambo's gently placed me on their stretcher bed. They then proceeded to carry me to the ambulance, as a group of locals gathered to enquire what was happening. I was placed in the ambulance by myself. They closed the door and drove off to Prince Henry Hospital, as Noel rode home with biscuits I was to miss out on.

On arrival at Prince Henry I was stripped of all my clothes. My Mum was there to see me stretchered in, but wasn't allowed near me. Our next door neighbour, Ben Swane, used to drive Mum to the hospital each day, whilst I was in isolation. My muscles were rapidly deteriorating. A team of doctors and nurses rolled me on my side and held me there whilst a doctor administered a lumbar puncture. Hovering in back of the room were the physiotherapists with their plaster bandages ready to create plaster casts of my legs. Their ability to cut the tops out of the casts left a lot to be desired. Three hours after the lumbar puncture a doctor was poking tubes up my nostrils to administer oxygen. This was the last thing I remembered before lapsing into unconsciousness.

Days later when I came to and opened my eyes, I discovered, as I thought, I was in a coffin with

my head sticking out. The box was as hot as Hades, and I was lying there with just a sheet covering me. I looked up into the mirror above the coffin and there looking down at me was this beautiful angel, with these lovely shaped boobs. As my condition improved, and being an impressionable fourteen year old, I asked the nurse who sat by my iron lung during the night shift if she could take a photo of the angel. The night shift nurse had a box brownie camera and she took a whole reel of film. I still have a photo of my angel with those lovely shaped boobs. At the 50th reunion of the polio wards of Prince Henry Hospital, she was the only one I could remember by name. Mary Therese Davis, known as Terrie to all.



Bill's angel, Terrie, pictured in 1950

Terrie, who after watching me for days as I lay unconscious, was now sitting all day every day talking and reading to me. It was explained to me during my first conversation with her that I wasn't in a coffin but in an iron lung. The iron lung had a big bellows that pushed air into the box that I was in, which then forced the air out of my lungs. The bellows would then draw the air out and allow the air back into my lungs. Being in the box with air pressing down on your body wasn't so bad. It was the every three hour ritual when they unlocked the end of the box and dragged you out on the tray you were on and plunged a syringe into you. After you had had the needle the nurses would sponge you all over. Then gently they would push the tray you were lying on with your head hanging out of the end, back into the box.

My angel explained to me that life may not be the same when I get out of hospital. She said I wouldn't be playing sport like I had. Now this didn't worry me, all it did was put my imagination into over drive. I was imagining myself with callipers on my legs, and riding a horse bareback across the paddocks. When it came to cricket I thought I could bat and have a mate run between wickets for me. What I couldn't imagine was how I was going to play football. With all my dreaming I never had a thought that my arms might never work. All the discussions with Terrie, and the things I was imagining I would do, certainly passed the time away. When I had visitors, because I was in an infectious room, they had to stay out side the door in the hallway. It never crossed my mind at that time that I could have been one of those six persons who were wheeled out feet first during my isolation period. The only other person down the hallway in an iron lung was Brad Norington, who later became a doctor. After a few weeks they started to leave me out of the iron lung for periods of time so I could breathe by myself. One week later the doctors decided my lungs were strong enough for me remain out permanently. Now that I was out of the iron lung there was no way they were going to get me back into that hot box. The only part of my body I could move was the big toe on my right foot. Being out of the iron lung was a relief to those who thought I wasn't going to live. Little did they know that He wouldn't take me up above, and "Old Nick" said I had too much stirring left in me to be taken below.

Three days later I was moved over to another hospital block. There I was in a huge ward with one other patient, and no angel. They explained that I had to remain calm, as too much excitement might not be good for me. It only took me four days to convince the nursing staff

that it would be more peaceful with me in the main male ward. The move was on condition that I didn't get too excited. How could anyone think that a young teenager like me would get too excited?



On entering the men's B2 ward I met Nurse Paddy Knight who became my replacement angel.

With the move complete, I discovered in the next bed to me was Brad the patient from down the hallway in other block. In our ward was an iron lung. At night Brad would go back into the box to rest. Not me, I was out and I was staying out. Someone with the latest technology had developed a chest fitting iron lung. One morning we were greeted by a delegation of doctors, high ranking nursing officials and those that would be if they could be. The delegation was accompanied by two unknown persons, with two chest machines, looking for two guinea pigs. Brad did oblige to test one, but the machine wasn't a success.

Just after 9 am each day our ward's atmosphere became tense, when a group of females dressed in white came through the doors. They were there to practice torture on us. They were known as physio's. When you are bandaged to a straight jacket for 23 hours a day, without any exercise, you become as stiff as a board. In one hour they would just twist and stretch you. Their intentions were to try to make you as flexible as a rag doll. Brad wasn't a person who enjoyed pain, and I wasn't far behind him. One day I pretended to be asleep all day so I could miss being worked over. That was a mistake, as when they caught up with me it was worse than ever. Brad was also trying ways to avoid being man-handled by the physio. As Brad was being stretched one day, the muscles around one of his knees were torn. All the pain we went through could have been avoided if only the Australian Medical Association (AMA) had been more knowledgeable in the treatment of polio victims. We could have been enjoying being massaged with hot towels, before being placed in the pool. During 1930s and 1940s Sister Elizabeth Kenny was an occasional visitor to Prince Henry Hospital, in an advisory capacity. Her visits were described in "A Coast Chronicle", the history of Prince Henry Hospital, by Dr CR Boughton, Director of Physicians, Infectious Diseases Division, in the 1960s. There are members of the AMA today, who are still not knowledgeable enough in treating post polio patients.

Brad and I, without the knowledge of others, regularly talked about suicide. Brad being of medical mind was able to explain the "hows" and "how nots" about the subject. During our conversations we came to a decision, if we were still on our backs at a set time in life, no doubt being a burden to others, it was decision time. For the both of us, in the long run it was all talk.

At night I would sweet talk the junior nurses into undoing the bandages that were used to tie us into our straight jackets. They would then roll me onto my side and gave me a back rub. Our beds was coved with a mosquito net. The nurses were able to kneel down under the mosquito net and talk until the Night Sister was about to do her rounds. Sister in charge was none the

wiser that I slept on my side for the night. Next morning before knock-off time, they rolled me back and strapped me into my straight jacket. At breakfast time, I became one of the lucky ones. The nurse had to feed me, as with all meals. After eating, the nurse would then push my bed out onto the veranda. It was a mad scramble to get the beds out before Sister Armstrong walked the length of the hospital, from the Nurses' Home. If there was one cloud in the sky, she would have us inside for the day. If we got out, we had to be back in for lunch.

Visiting time was the best hour of the day. You may not have had a visitor, but everyone shared. My school sports master used to bring a car load each weekend to see me. Brian Palmer, my representative football coach, was a regular visitor, as was Nick Shehadie, who later became Sir.

About 10 months had passed, and the wards were filling up with patients. Prince Henry Hospital had 250 polio cases in 1950 and 450 in 1951. November 1950 happened to be the worst month for admissions, between then and March 1951, with up to 40 patients a week. It was decided that I would be transferred to Ryde Hospital.

Ryde was the place for me, when I found out that I was the hospital's first polio case, I was able to stretch the truth with what I was able to do. Staying out of my straight jacket for a few hours a day was the first thing I convinced them to do. I was getting a little more exercise as the nurses were throwing my legs and arms about, also rolling me to and fro. Physio treatment wasn't as bad at Ryde as at Prince Henry. On the day that Dr Scougall was coming, I would rest up in the straight jacket. Some of the nurses used to wonder why I had all my splints on and strapped in. They accepted my answer, "*just resting*". As soon as the doctor had left the hospital, I became un-rested. It was about fifteen months from when I could move my big toe to when I sat up for the first time. Then two months later Dr Scougall said to my parents "*take him home, he's a hopeless case, and bring him back when he's about twenty one, and we will try transplanting muscles*".

My mother read an article in a newspaper about a Mr Featherstone, a quack, who had been run out of Victoria by the Medical Board. This so-called quack had been treating polio cases. Mum tracked him down, and had him treating me regularly with his style of treatment. His style was the same style as Sister Kenny. After a while with his treatment, I was on my feet. Dad put a length of water pipe from our fig tree to a post. As I could use my left hand, I would walk in a fashion along the pipe, and walk crab wise back. I never did count the number of times I went from the post to the fig tree and back. Then the Medical Board caught up with Mr Featherstone, and the Commonwealth Government caught up with me.

The Government sent me down to the Jervis Bay Rehabilitation Centre, to be educated back into the workforce. Going to Jervis Bay Rehab was the greatest thing the Commonwealth Government has ever done for me. Forget about educating us back into the workforce; we were educated back into society! There we were 52 of us, and a minimum of 200 and a maximum of 600 females each week throughout the village of Jervis Bay (*Ed. some of them feature in the group photo at the start of this polio story*). We had a rehab racket going. We knew when they arrived and where they were staying. We had our own weekly newspaper, the "Bay Breeze Brett". Outside the hours of 9 to 5, we had a well organized social calendar. We also had individual conducted night tours for young ladies to see the luminous ducks. These tours could only happen when the Naval fleet was in the bay. The ships were anchored 3 to 4 kilometres from the shore. During the evening, pilot boats travelled back and forth between the ships. On top of the pilot boats was a little clear light. This little light, in the still of the night and darkness, would float across the water and disappear behind a ship, only to reappear later. The little lights on the pilot boats were the so-called luminous ducks. Mornings were spent down at the pool, in the company of others. On our way up to the quarter deck for lunch, a group of girls would be spotted coming around the headland. First part of the plan was to take me out of my wheelchair and sit me on the road. Next they would take Neville Langford's crutches off him, and place them up the road. The girls would arrive, we would introduce ourselves, they would get the crutches and my wheelchair, put me in it, and then push us up to fellows at the top of the hill. What a wonderful year that was at Jervis Bay!

Getting back to the reason I was sent to rehab, I was getting stronger as the weeks went by. I used to walk around like a wound-up doll, hanging on to the back of a fellow who had had his skull smashed during a car racing accident at Parramatta speedway. He dragged me around for months. Then one day he walked me out on to the lawn. He said "*stand there*", and he walked away. Then he said "*walk*". I had two options, one I could have fallen A over T or, as I did, I took his advice. End of story.

At the other end of my Prince Henry ward was Doug Sutherland. In 1997 when I joined the Post-Polio Network, Doug announced that he thought I would have died when I went to Ryde.

Nurse Paddy Knight (now Marshall) also thought I may have died when I went to Ryde. Paddy made many enquiries of my whereabouts over the years with no answers. Nobody had heard about me because I hadn't joined the Network until the mid 1990s. Paddy noticed my name on the guest list of the 50-year reunion of Prince Henry Hospital's polio wards. Thinking it might be me, Paddy came from Ballarat to check if it was really me. After 50 years Paddy is now a part of our family.

I am still stirring and have had, and am still enjoying, a very full life.