

THESE ARE MORNA'S OWN WORDS – an autobiography if you like.

My father, a keen yachtsman was out sailing when I was born on that December Saturday in 1936. The beautiful stately yacht Morna won the race that day so my parents called me Morna.

We lived in Chiswick, Sydney, which was like a small village where everybody knew everybody else. We had lots of bush land, unsealed roads, no sewerage and the milkman, the iceman and the baker all came by horse and cart.

Dad was an engineer, and just before the war started he designed his dream yacht, had the steel hull made in a foundry and had it transported to a paddock next door to our home so that he could spend all his spare time fitting out the interior.

In those days, family yachts were wooden and my fathers yacht "Trade Winds" was to be the first steel hulled yacht in the southern hemisphere. The interior fit out was timber. Yachts were like floating caravans, designed for both racing and family holidays and ours was no exception.

When war broke out dad was bitterly disappointed that, as he was colour blind, he could not join the Air Force and go off to war. He joined the Air Training Corps and trained young cadets in pulling engines apart and putting them back together.

My mother and her friends trained as ambulance drivers and paramedics. They pulled engines apart and put them back together, and practiced bandaging people up, quite often in our huge backyard, which was a lot of fun for us (their children).

In fact we did not suffer many deprivations during the war. I remember blackout curtains, growing vegetables in our "Victory" garden, gas producers on the back of cars and buses, (my dad had a gas producer on his car). Petrol was rationed and you needed coupons to buy it.

This lifestyle was interrupted when the Japanese submarines came into the harbour. The husbands packed their wives and children off to the safety of Springwood in the Blue Mountains.

It was quite an adventure, three mothers and seven children: three boys and four girls ranging in age from eight to three. We lived at the end of the street surrounded by bush and called ourselves the "Dead-end" kids.

I started my schooling, aged 5, at Springwood Public School. There were 2 teachers. One had years 4,5,and 6 while ours had kindergarten to year 3. The five of us, who were school age, were in that room. The two little ones stayed at home with the mothers.

Our mothers became very creative and produced interesting food from limited resources, gardening and bartering. We also had chickens for both eggs and meat.

This little adventure ended in December (1942) when we were surrounded by a bushfire. It was very scary. I think everyone decided we were safer in Sydney. While we had been away dad had been scrounging the items necessary to have Trade Winds ready for launching.

One of the items scrounged was an old jeep engine, which dad overhauled and installed in the boat. After the Japanese submarine scare a "boom" was erected across the harbour just inside the heads.

We had to pass through this boom gate, under power to go to Manly, Middle harbour or anywhere. Getting out was OK but our steel hull and jeep engine sounded just like a submarine and when we tried to get back in they invariably closed the boom and herded all the boats into Camp Cove until the perceived danger had passed.

Eventually the Maritime Services realised it was us and let everyone through. It took many repeats before somebody made a note of it. It became a standing joke amongst our friends.

Then it was 1945. Several things happened. The war ended; my parents started building our new house in Drummoyne; I turned 9 in December and the very first Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race started on Boxing Day, but that is another story.

In 1945 my sister and I went to PLC Croydon. The school was located at Strathfield during the war as the RAAF had taken over the Croydon site. There were boarders at PLC and as soon as I found out you could sleep at school that is what I wanted to do.

I finally wore my parents down and they decided it would be silly for me to be a boarder where my sister was a daygirl so, for my high school years I went to SCEGGS Moss Vale. I loved it. The friendships made during that time are still with me.

After completing the leaving certificate in 1953 I went to Sydney Kindergarten Teachers College and graduated in 1956. After 3 years at home I needed to escape again so in 1957 I went to Darwin as a pre-school teacher. In Darwin there was evidence of the war everywhere. I had no idea how close it had come to Australia.

The war cemetery at Adelaide River really blew me away. While in Darwin I met and married my first husband Bill Seears, who was a Northern Territory policeman. While the marriage itself did not survive, it did produce my two wonderful children – Joanne and Stephen.

When we returned to Sydney I needed to work. Luckily I had an occupation, which allowed me, not only to take my younger child to work with me, but to have school holidays as well.

In 1968 I left Pre-School school teaching and joined the NSW Department of Education as an Infants Teacher first at Five Dock School and then at Drummoyne where I completed a course which qualified me to teach English as a second language to the many migrant children in the infants department.

The wanderlust bug caught me again and I bought a Kombi Van. At the beginning of 1974 I loaded the children and the dog and off we went to Mareeba in Far North Queensland where I was to be Director of the Pre School.

There were major floods in Queensland that year so the trip up was quite an experience. We lived in a flat attached to the preschool and had a wonderfully adventurous year.

Every school holidays or long weekend we set off to see the sights. Cooktown, Chillagoe Caves, Daintree, Mossman Gorge and of course the beaches, the ocean and the reef.

When we returned to Sydney I became a Children's Services Adviser, supervising and licensing childcare centres, for the State Government Department now known as DoCS. I stayed in that position for 25 years until I retired in 2000.

In 1978 I met Bob Staunton, who would eventually become my second husband. We were both very busy people. I was undertaking postgraduate study and he was running Basketball in Australia.

He was always travelling interstate or overseas to meetings and tournaments. We had an 8-year courtship, allowing each other plenty of space but managing some wonderful quality time together both at home and in some very romantic destinations.

We were both born in 1936, albeit 11 months apart. I had teenaged children, but he was so engrossed with sport he had never married. Early in the relationship his friends were quick to tell me, "Bob's not the marrying kind you know" but what we had was ideal for both of us - at that time.

When we did finally marry Bob took great delight in telling people, especially friends in Europe that in 1986, he turned 50 in February, got married in March and became a new grandfather in April. Because we had been to so many exotic places during our courtship, the honeymoon had to be something really special.

We fitted it in around the Basketball World Championships in Spain, and then we went to Italy - Rome, Florence, and Venice and travelled from Venice to London on the Orient Express with a week stopover in Paris. In London we stayed at the Savoy.

Life was wonderful. Bob blossomed. Not long after we were married he was in Adelaide for a meeting and he bumped into an old friend. The friend said, "You look wonderful, what has happened?" Bob said, "I got married" to which the friend replied. "I've been married for 25 years and I don't look like that!"

The bubble finally burst. In 1990, Bob had an adverse reaction to a prescribed antibiotic. It attacked his liver and his kidneys. Because he was a very fit man he took 7 months to die.

Once again I was on my own, although this time I really was an "empty nester" as both children had married and there was no wonderful man in my life, with whom to have the "quality time."

To keep my sanity, I threw myself into work, joined committees and social clubs, enrolled in cooking courses, piano lessons and anything else that took my fancy.

Because I hired Jazz bands for both my 60th and 70th birthdays, I took Charleston lessons before my 60th and singing lessons for my 70th.

After I retired, I joined Sydney Wildlife and for a couple of years I rescued and rehabilitated sick and injured wildlife. Friends still talk about the times they invited me to dinner and I brought my baby possums, which were on 4 hourly feeds.

Also in 2000, I joined Club Turramurra, a social club for single people over 50. I became Vice President Programs and Newsletter editor almost as soon as I joined and was elected President in 2004, a position I held for 4 years while continuing as Newsletter Editor. I count many of the members as very dear friends.

Now I live at Ashburn House.

Morna chose this point to end her autobiography but, as we all know, it was not the end.

Despite her deteriorating condition over the years in Ashburn House, Morna maintained close links to family and friends using all available technologies. She also continued to be a prolific contributor to the Ashburn House community. I am sure that if there were such a thing as the Ashburn House Residents Action Group, Morna would have been its President.

This unique lady will be sadly missed.