

This was written in response to a request from Jacqui Sutherland, who was then manager of the PG (or had recently been).

I was PG Manager from Dec 1974 to Jun 1978. (I was also down there from Jul 71 to Aug 72 as Supervisor of Vehicle tests.) It's been a long time. It was way back in the days of no speed limits on the highway, when I could do the 45 miles from home to the PG in 45 minutes without breaking any speed limits. It's amazing how quickly all these little incidents came back. I hope some of them are the sort of thing you are looking for.

I think about 1974 GM was moving away from on site managers to having Security take the responsibility, and Jack was asked to vacate his house on the Proving Ground. I'm sure there were other factors: Jack's house needed work, and it probably cost less to use security than have capital tied up in a house. Reminds me that it was common knowledge that Jack Joyce was fond of a glass of red and maintained a good cellar. The story has it that after he left some of the crew went and checked out the cellar, which was under the floor, and found a couple of bottles tucked away in a corner. They thought they had one up on Jack, who must have missed them in the dark ... until they tasted them.

There were two major hazards when driving to the PG in the mornings.

One was the milk trucks, which used to appear from behind the bushes, out of farm gates and onto the highway when one least expected it. They provided a mobile chicane which could be quite challenging at high speed. Fortunately in those days the traffic on the highway was very light, so one survived incidents like these.

The other was John Spencer, then a mechanic in the Durability Garage. I was driving down one morning at the usual 100mph or so, when there was a knock on my window. There was John, sitting on his motor bike and waving to me. Having done that, he opened the throttle and sped off!

It was also the days of SLR 5000 Toranas and the A9X variant, the basis of the Bathurst winning car. Jim Allen and I audited the Normal Durability schedule for the A9X. I was driving, and he was reading the schedule and taking notes. The schedule required full throttle acceleration from the bottom of the 6% hill, then back to 30 mph (I think it was) for the gravel. We came over the top of the 6% at well over 100mph in 3rd gear, but still managed to get it back down to the gravel road speed while on the bitumen. Jim was impressed -- I didn't get a peep out of him for some time.

Peter Brock used to come and use the circular track for development work on the weekend. I went down one Sunday to be the PG representative, and Maintenance left the Fergusson tractor with the road sweeping brush attached so that we could get loose stones off the road if required -- even then racing tyres were a bit fragile. Maintenance hadn't told me how to start the tractor. Fortunately Peter, being a farm boy, was able to tell me that one had to hold the clutch down to complete the starter motor circuit. That preceded the USA's interlock by many years. I've forgotten what it is called -- BITS? Brake, transmission, spark interlock?

Peter won the Round Australia Rally just before we had some event/display at the Proving Ground. I've forgotten what it was and who was there, but he was taking passengers for a lap around the durability roads in the rally car. Quite a few Holden people were proud of their ability to (very unofficially) do quick laps of this circuit, but all who rode with Peter were amazed at how quick he was, and yet so smooth. I was lucky enough to have the last ride, when the tyres were baldest and the slip angles greatest -- quite an experience.

Relations with the trade unions were no problem at all. If our union rep (Mark Hart) got a whiff of anything going on which might disrupt our peace, he'd make sure he was out in a car and unavailable to take phone calls from the union.

We had a few people who were fitness fanatics. John Lyons used to go and walk up and down the test hills all lunch time to get fit for skiing. There was also a group competing for the fastest lap of the circular track -- but when I heard about it no-one mentioned running, and I went out there to investigate, expecting to find a car at high speed. All I found was Harry Walker just about to complete the lap running, and unfortunately I interrupted him and spoilt his record attempt.

John Mellor (motoring journalist) came down to write a feature article on the Proving Ground. I showed him around, including the brake wetting trough. This was pretty deep, but on previous excursions the door seals had done their job and kept the inside of the car dry. On this occasion, though, one leaked, and the right rear footwell filled with water. Unfortunately this was where John's very expensive professional tape recorder had been placed.

One of the notable free thinkers at the Proving Ground was Marcus White. I employed him almost straight out of University, where he had done Civil Engineering. He used to live in a ramshackle old caravan down at Lang Lang beach. You can imagine that the Maintenance team took a little while to get used to a wet behind the ears engineer coming in with new, revolutionary ideas.

One of the lines I liked to use on tours was that we had a Road Maintenance group to "keep the roads in an appropriate state of disrepair". Any self respecting council would seal a gravel road that took the amount of traffic we put over it because it would pay back quickly from saved maintenance cost. Marcus White applied his knowledge to the way we built and repaired our gravel roads. The result was they lasted much longer and provided a much more consistent surface. He was responsible for our justifying a large road roller and a new full sized grader to replace the little grader he inherited.

Being the free thinker that he was, he applied a few bush repairs the little grader so it could be used for light work like looking after the perimeter track. Unfortunately Finance had justified the new grader partly by writing off the little one, and it upset them no end when they found out it was still being used.

Marcus improved our water supply. Previously we had relied on a bore near the middle of the circular track, which provided pretty terrible water. It corroded everything. Marcus built the dam fed by the drainage channel, which provides sweet water (except for the fact it is drainage from cow paddocks). Before the dam was filled, someone had the bright idea of putting a Tonka Toy grader in the bottom of it. Hans Bauer took a photo of the dam and sent it up to Fishermans Bend to show the finished work before filling. I received a pretty interesting phone call from John Cohoon, who thought we'd dug a ridiculously deep dam and just about reached China.

There are a few wildlife stories too.

Henry Groen, a Dutchman, was the LH in Maintenance. Marcus had the drain cleaned out about the time the dam was dug, because it was choked with weed. We discovered that it was alive with eels, and Henry went home with a few barrow loads of eels, as he was very fond of them smoked.

For a while a very old kangaroo took refuge in the guardhouse. It was in a bad way, stunk to high heaven and was very bad tempered -- probably in pain -- and so was not a good house mate. Security took to camping outside until the poor old kangaroo died.

There was a family (sorry, these days they'd say there were a family ...) of grey kangaroos which lived near the skid pad. One day mum appeared with a young, inquisitive joey, which got closer and closer to the people on the skid pad. Mum kept a wary eye on it, and when she decided it was getting too close, she bounded over, cuffed its ears, stuffed it into her pouch and bounded off.

The kangaroo/wallaby population exploded at one time after a good season, and more of them were hit by cars or hit cars. (We had as many kangaroo dents in the sides of the cars as we did in the front -- they have absolutely no road sense.) The drivers complained of the hazard, so I went to great pains to explain our case to the DSE or whatever it was then, and finally won a permit to cull. Most of our drivers were off farms locally and used rifles for rabbits and other pests, so I asked for volunteers to come in and do the cull. They decided that the problem was not so bad after all, and no cull took place.

The skid pad must produce a good thermal, as the pelicans come in from Westernport and spiral up until they disappear. One of my most frightening experiences was being in a car at maximum speed, tucked up against the guardrail on the circular track, and have a pelican suddenly appear in the windscreen as it grazed the guardrail on its way into the skid pad. I'll bet it made some height very quickly after that!

Early in my stay I was trying to develop a master plan for development of the area, but was having difficulty getting a good layout of the building area. (Incidentally, the arrangement of buildings like the corrosion shed along the north side of the durability garage car park to provide a security screen is a legacy of that plan.) I bought an aerial photograph, but it did not provide enough detail. Then, some GM big wigs from the US arrived in a helicopter, and were to return to the PG the next day. I arranged to borrow the helicopter on the second day, and brought my camera so I could take some low altitude overhead photos. All was going well until I ran out of film and asked the pilot to hang about until I put a new one in. He did, but rather than just hovering, he flew the machine in tight circles, and there I was with my head down loading film. I got very woozy, and felt seasick for days.

This is a tale from the Jack Joyce era, probably mid 1971.

GM was not involved in racing, but we'd managed to win Bathurst in 68 (McPhee and Mulholland), 69 (Bond & Roberts) and the Australian Touring Car Championship in '70 (Beechey). The HG GTS 350 Monaro's little disk brakes found it hard to cope with Bathurst, and we were looking for some competitive advantage.

The GM buses in Detroit had been running for some time with wet disk brakes, virtually an auto transmission clutch pack mounted in the wheel, plus radiators to cool the fluid and a reservoir to provide some thermal mass. We had a set mounted in a car for testing.

As I recall, Bob Watson and John Finlayson did some early appraisal on the ride and handling loop. The car would get close to maximum speed on the high speed approach to the skid pad, and then have to come down to a very low speed to negotiate the narrow link road from the skid pad to the ride and handling track. They'd hit the brakes, the car would start to slow and then ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ, no brakes, the splines on the clutch pack had sheared. It fell to the VTS to do the development testing.

Alan George suffered a spectacular failure, going off the end of the skid pad at high speed, through the scrub and practically onto the circular track. He emerged, suitably white and shaken, to report that the problem was not fixed yet. This was a pretty gung-ho era, but typical of Alan, that was not the end of the matter. He ensured that there was a serious re-appraisal of the precautions we needed to take when testing high performance vehicles.