

**SOME RECOLLECTIONS OF GM AUSTRALIA & GMH, AND THE BIRTH OF THE HOLDEN**

**BY A.W. JOBSON (Commenced 1926 Retired 1969 – Died 1996)**

**MEMOIRS OF ALWYN WILLIAM JOBSON (Employed 1926 – 1969)**

The loss of the British battleship, followed by the fall of Singapore, the bombing of Darwin, and the Japanese entry and attack on Sydney Harbour, placed Australia in a most vulnerable and precarious position, and with the minimum of help from our overseas allies, we had to work out our own salvation.

GMH was then engaged in the importation of the GM Corporation vehicles, mainly on assembly operation, with some local content and some body production.

At the outbreak of war, the facilities of the Company were immediately taken over by the Government. In a 'life or death' operation, the Company was plunged into war production – guns, bombs, shells, thousands of military vehicles, aircraft engines and assemblies, work boats, landing barges and Diesel marine units to power them.

Alongside this the staff (myself included) and the factory workers, under Army supervision, dug trenches and set up bomb shelters as fast as we could work, against the then expected Japanese attack.

We had in operation an organised evacuation and protective procedure .... at the sound of the alarm sirens, drop everything and run to your appointed trench area for cover.

With the vast number of people working 3 shifts at Fishermen's Bend, and similar numbers at Woodville, this has to be a well organised job. The Army then considered that Melbourne would be the next area to be attacked.

Vessels of all nationalities from the north Pacific, subject to Japanese attack, went south, and Port Phillip Bay was filled with a staggering number of ships.

An urgent meeting (which I attended) was convened at Fishermen's Bend with the top brass of the USA and Australian Armies where, without hesitation, it was decided to immediately divide the ships by nationality and the respective Army was to immediately take charge of their allotment; disregard the ship's manifest; stevedore the cargo at Port Melbourne Pier and transport it into the back of our Plants by using their troops, and assuming ownership.

Anything that was not required was bulldozed into the swamp.

The cargoes ranged from complete Cadillac, Buick, Oldsmobile, etc. cars, of course, in the USA allotted vessels. These vehicles were sand blasted, painted in camouflage, and driven away by the USA troops.

99% of the remaining cargo could not be used, so the cases were smashed open and pushed into the swamp, where it now lies as part of the filling for our Foundry and adjacent areas.

The whole of the exercise was to empty these hulls and get these vessels into useful war transportation work, before they became a target for Japanese bombing, sinking to the bottom of Port Phillip Bay, and cluttering the shipping channels.

We had achieved our war time production with some small imports of unavailable raw and manufactured items supplied by U.K. and USA. These were either airfreighted in or shipped in vessels surviving submarine attack. Many vessels were lost, with disastrous delays to war production pending procurement of replacements, frequently brought in by Army planes.

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It was from this background, and course of events, that Australian development and production of the Holden Car and Utilities was made possible, and came into being.

The war was over, peace prevailed, and all wartime production ceased immediately. Thousands of troops were returning, and with myriads of people, were seeking civilian work.

Fortunately we had men of vision - to name a few :-

|                      |                                      |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Ben Chifley          | - in Government,                     |
| Lawrence J. Hartnett | - GMH M.D. and                       |
| John Storey          | - GMH General Manufacturing Manager. |

Both Hartnett and Storey had been decorated for their outstanding performance through the war years.

John Storey was an intense Australian; later proprietor of National Motor Springs. Apart from his directorship, he was an outstanding businessman, and instigator of Industrial Management for Executives training. (In the course of 5 years hard work, I received from this Institute my Diploma of Supply Management, and then my Fellowship and letters – F.I.I.M).

These people saw the need for Australia to get into the field of manufacturing and stop relying on raw material export – “something grown or dug out of the ground” – wheat, wool, coal, gold and other minerals – to support the economy with our balance of trade badly weighted by heavy imports.

With Ben Chifley's blessing, Hartnett and Storey arrived in New York with the story of GMH's wartime manufacturing achievement, and the need to go ahead with our proposition for an Australian car.

With our small market, by world standards, the Corporation were not interested. After all, they had their export market of the Corporation cars and trucks, and would not invest.

However, with considerable pressure, strongly backed by the Australian Government, and with finance for the job covered by the Commonwealth Government, they (respectively Storey and Hartnett) received the Corporation's okay, with the strict arrangements that Australian development, from the clay model up, would be handled by Australian Engineers, and Design people .... but with the door left open to call, when required, for Corporation expertise and help.

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**The start of the GMHA Holden Car was the forerunner of change.**

No regulatory standards existed in Australia for materials.

For our gun production we had to supply BHP with the foundry formula for the metal pour, and check the chemical and physical properties of the metal supplied. Even Australian production of nuts, bolts, screws, and washers, without standards, were unusable on car production.

Our Metallurgical Dept. was kept very busy.

This forced the importation of very expensive automatic machines of various types, with vastly unused capacity.

Raw materials supplied had to be batch colour coded, with each batch segregated and quarantined, with a programme of continuous metallurgical checks to ensure that the required Standards as specified were reached, before releasing the material to the factory for production of the parts schedule.

The Australian Suppliers. for the first time, became aware of the need to use materials meeting the Standard required in their production and ours.

It was Ben Chifley and his Government plan that, having authorised the loan and Australian finance required to set up the Holden development and production facilities, 50% ownership would remain in Australian hands (and operating like Sweden with their Volvo), this part-owned Australian company could eventually progress to world export.

These were the views strongly supported by Sir Lawrence Hartnett and Sir John Storey.

Unfortunately, “silver tongued” Bob Menzies came into Government. With no knowledge of manufacture and its need and future possibilities for Australia, but with the philosophy of “free enterprise”, opened the gates.

The Corporation, knowing by then that the Holden car was a success (the prototypes had displayed their ability at the Proving Ground) promptly bought the Australian shares and, to say the least, dumped Sir Lawrence Hartnett,

This was done by Mr. Harold Bettle walking, unannounced, into the Executive Dining Room at Fishermen’s Bend where the Management group was having lunch, then walking down the corridor to the MD’s office and, sitting in Larry’s chair, presenting him with the Corporation letter relieving him of the job forthwith, with an immediate upstairs appointment in New York.

Both Larry Hartnett, and our Director of Sales – Vern Sunners, who had followed them into the office, resigned on the spot and walked out of the Company.

This was a crude and distressing act.

Sir John Storey, formerly Director of Manufacturing, appointed some time before by the Government to aircraft production was, of course, no longer with the Company.

Mr. Harold Bettle, as M.D., with Mr. B.W. Kuncle Vice President and Director of the Corporation, then handled the inauguration of the Holden on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1948. A distressing start for working “achievers”.

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Ford and other companies, using all the groundwork which we had developed and put into operation with the Australian steel, forging, and other suppliers, quickly and effectively reaped the benefit and moved in.

(An Aside)

Reverting back to the appalling times of the Great Depression when, well before the era of the Holden car, we closed City Road and other Plants and a small group operated from Ferrar Street South Melbourne – basically a panel beating repair centre, with a wood mill and forge shop.

When we got sufficient orders for cars or trucks, we got in the material including, of course, the Corporation CKD/XCO's; called labour in; opened the Plant; made a production run; and closed again.

There were no worthwhile facilities for the staff and at lunch we would sit, weather permitting, in the sun with our backs to the forge shop.

Well do I remember the people - George Meuleman, Ted Hackett (Finance); Jim Wood, Jack Willis (Manufacturing); Norm McArthur (Design). My group – Supply Material Control and Procurement and Scheduling – Bob Gillingham. Hugh Criddle, and frequently John Storey, Director of Manufacturing, in our midst.

John was a good judge of people with ability and never forgot.

As time passed, and GMH progressed, so did the group ...

- \* George Meuleman - appointed to Board of Directors in 1970.
- \* Ted Hackett - Comptroller Dandenong & Victorian Finance Manager reporting to George Meuleman.
- \* Jim Wood - Plant Manager, Pagewood
- \* Jim Willis - Plant Manager Melbourne
- \* Norm McArthur - designed the first Utility using the front end of the Holden Sedan. This model made history the way it took off in all car makes.
- \* Bob Gillingham - Supply Manager Perth, then Sydney, and on leaving GMH was Supply Director British Motor Corp.
- \* Hugh Criddle - following Bob, became the Supply Manager, Perth.
- Myself – Bill Jobson - Materials Manager, Central Supply Operations Inventory Control including all Imports and Exports.

We scheduled our Body requirements for vehicle production on Woodville, and under Lance Boland and his operations, the intake of their material requirements were handled and controlled.