

Can you be a Christian and a cop? For those who have doubts, this interview with Ray Whitrod, former Commissioner of the Commonwealth Police, is food for thought. Caroline Jones interviewed Ray on ABC radio on 10 March 1987.

FORMER CRIME FIGHTER NOW LOOKS AFTER CRIME VICTIMS

Lord Casey, then Governor General of Australia, receives Ray Whitrod as Commissioner of the Commonwealth Police. A 1960 photo from Information Australia.



Caroline Jones: Ray Whitrod is one of Australia's top policemen, much decorated, Queen's Gold Medal, Order of Australia and many more. He's been described as a tough bloke, a man to take the hard decisions. He's the only Australian police officer to become Commissioner of three police forces. The most widely educated Commissioner too, Bachelor of Economics, Master of Arts, Diploma of Criminology from Cambridge. During the war he served as a navigator, flying in the Arctic with 202 and 621 Squadrons RAF. He was in at the start of ASIO and in charge of security for Royal tours.

He's been a pioneer of taking care of people when they come out of prison, a leader in the scouting movement, he loves to fish and has quite a passion for watching the wading birds which migrate here from Siberia. Ray Whitrod has always put the accent in police work on service, rather than on force, and that's brought him trouble. When he was appointed Chief of Queensland police, the response from the ranks was hostile and suspicious. Things didn't improve. He tried to upgrade training. Joh said the police didn't need to be Rhodes scholars. Well he stayed in the job for seven years. In 1976, unwilling to live any longer with Joh's interference, he resigned early. It looked like the end of a distinguished career. But, after 42 years of police work, putting away the criminals, Ray Whitrod became aware — quite accidentally, he says — of the anguish suffered by the victims of crime. The last seven years he's been intensely active on their behalf. He also decided he needed to lose some weight and, a couple of years ago, in his late sixties, won his age section of the Adelaide marathon.

Ray Whitrod was born in Adelaide in 1915. His first memory was the sound of the factory whistle calling his father to work.

Ray Whitrod: I think the most unselfish man I know was my father, so I really had a very happy, perhaps spoilt, childhood.

Were your mother and father demonstrative in their affection for you?

No, not really. We didn't hug and kiss and carry on like that at all, but they invariably managed to scrape things

together so that I could go off to a Boy Scout camp. Made sure that I learnt the violin, which was something that our street never heard of, and it meant a sacrifice on their part, so I really had a very nice childhood.

I suppose, when they heard you practising the violin, they felt they could have done without . . .

It was dreadful.

Was it?

Because I think, in order to learn the violin, you need a piano, because you need to check your notes. And we didn't have a piano or a gramophone, I just played from what I remembered from the notes, it was dreadful, really dreadful. And that's why I think they were very unselfish.

Do you still play the violin or another instrument?

No, I haven't played it for a long time. I got it out about two years ago and played it at a church anniversary, but they didn't ask me to come back again.

Apart from the fact that you say your parents were unselfish and they made opportunities for you, were there any ways in which you knew that you were loved and cared for?

Well I was never smacked and there was always food on the table. Clothes were a bit difficult, they were hand-me-downs and so on, but I was never growled at.

Did they say "I love you", either of them?

I don't think so. I don't remember them every saying that, but I felt secure and happy.

Ray, how did you come to join the police force, and how old were you then?

Well, I left high school, and not being able to get a job — I wanted to be a school teacher — but the teachers' college had closed down its intake and virtually closed it down for dull boys, and I wasn't in the top part of the class. I left home, was looking for work on the Murray, trying to pick fruit, but everywhere I went I was eighteenth or twentieth on the reserve list to come and pick fruit. Then, in early 1934, the SA Police Department decided to take on some cadets. They had a cadet scheme for boys with reasonable education, and I joined, and I was 18 then. So I've never really worked in industry, and I think, in a way, that's a bad thing. I think young policemen need to know what it's like to be civilians. And, in the old days, they did. In the old English system they were painters and bricklayers and teachers and nurses who'd worked in ordinary life. And then, when they joined the police force they had some understanding. I think, if you come into the police too soon, your ideas don't incorporate enough of what's going on in the big wide world. And that's been, I think, one of my handicaps.

You've had an extraordinary career in the police. You've been Commissioner of no fewer than three police forces, and I think you've been, I think you still are probably the most highly qualified academically . . .

Well there are some with PhDs now.

Are there?

Yes, which is a good thing.

But there seems to have been a sense of mission, in a way, in your career. I don't know if that is a good description or not. But I'm trying to say to you, what drove you on or drew you on through your career?

Caroline, I think it was because I always think everything can be done better. It's a sort of slogan I've got engraved on my heart and every time I do something I have a post-mortem on it. I have a post-mortem as to how I can improve it.

Have you been idealistic in your approach to your work, do you think?

Oh yes, I think it is part of it. I think someone said, "Be ye perfect", and I know it's unattainable but that's the sort of ideal I've set up myself to try and achieve.

And your ideals, were they based on Christianity?

Yes, Caroline. I've always been brought up in some way associated with the Baptist Church. But I met a Gilbert and Sullivan actor, Ivan Menzies, quite early and he was a strong supporter of a religious movement called the Oxford Group, and they had four principles by which one attempted to guide one's life; of honesty, unselfishness and purity and so on, and I've thought they were useful guides for practical living. And my home life's been the support base really. And I've been lucky, I've had a very understanding wife and understanding kids and home's been the reinforcement and a replenishment place to go out and do what I thought was my main purpose, and that's happened.

And policemen need understanding families, don't they?

Well yes, very much so. There are long hours and one gets depressed and irritated and disappointed, particularly when

you move from Adelaide to the eastern States. And I think an honest policeman has a sense of gloom coming over him.

What, for you, would be the purpose of taking a deeper interest in, or practice of, meditation, Ray?

I think I need a calming influence still at my advanced age. I think meditation would give me a more balanced approach to good things and bad things. And I would like to be able to take these things more easily in my stride than I do now. I still tend to get upset, I think, too much, or perhaps over-related at times. But I thought meditation would enable me to have a more balanced approach to this.

During your years as Queensland Police Commissioner, what was the nature of your conflict with Mr Bjelke-Petersen. I mean, he, we understand, is a man of Christian principle and you have said you've tried to live by Christian principle.

Yes, I know. I think the term 'Christian' covers a wide variety of behaviours. And Caroline, I'm not saying that in any derogatory way, but 'Christian' is a fairly vague term. Between blows, as it were, we got on reasonably well together actually, but I think we were opposed, in principle, on a number of points. And, of course, the Premier is a very strong supporter of the Police Union and of policemen generally. He provides them with lots of excellent conditions, and whenever the Police Union felt in need of support they would bypass the Police Minister and go to the Premier, and that tended to undermine the authority of Max Hodges and me, of course. But the Premier likes to be available for access to people like the Police Union. And, so, there was a, sort of, power play of the Premier and the Police Union against the Police Minister and me, and so we were greatly out-gunned of course.

You ended up resigning in '76.

Yes.

Was that difficult, I mean, was that heartbreak in any sense?

In a way it was, but I was getting fairly sick actually — physically I mean. I developed a number of complaints, which were stress-induced, and I think they were seven lean years, perhaps the seven fat years came after me, by all accounts they did!

Well the man who replaced you went on to be knighted. I wonder if you thought you'd made a mistake in getting out.

No, I don't think so.

So, was there any value for you, in the sense of your own personal development, in the challenge and in the conflict of those Queensland years?

Yes. Looking back, I think life is a series of steps, of progressive steps if you face the conflict that comes along, I think conflict is opportunity, opportunity for growth, and if you walk away from that conflict I don't think one grows. And I think that's really our purpose in life, to develop, and without growth you can't develop, and without conflict you can't grow. So I was grateful for the seven years in Queensland. It was very tough on my wife. She had a fairly difficult time, because we used to get lots of inconveniences

caused to us, you know, loads of gravel dumped on the footpath, the ambulances would turn up at two in the morning, a doctor would call me, would call with his bag at three o'clock because the Commissioner had had a heart attack and so on. We had lots of difficult times. Somebody got a great deal of fun by making these plans for us. So she really had a tough time. But, by and large, you know, I think I grew out of it, and the better for the experience.

And have there been in your life, as well, sad times, perhaps through which you've grown in understanding of yourself or compassion for others?

I've been very fortunate, Caroline. None of my immediate family have died until recently. My mother died just recently, my father not so long ago, they were both long-living. My brother's alive, my wife's alive, her family is still alive. It's only recently, when I spent some time with the next of kin of murdered people, that I've begun to understand how much misery and pain there is in this world. You know, as a policeman, when I was a young detective, I investigated murder charges and various other crimes of that sort and I never really gave much time to the state of the victim. My purpose was to find the offender, get enough evidence to charge him, charge him, and the victim would come along as a witness and that was the end of the witness's involvement, purely as a witness. It's only this last seven or eight years, since I've been here and have been friendly with a number of victims' parents, that I've begun to appreciate how long-lasting that tragedy is too. You know, I know some who've still got their daughter's bedrooms intact after seven years.

When one child is murdered, there's a great deal of care then taken of the remaining child, a great deal of care. And people tend to become over-protective and that child suffers. As well as losing a brother or sister, they also have this problem of home life which is a bit oppressive in a way. So victims suffer a great deal in a way I didn't understand.

What, among the many things that you have done, I wonder would be a proudest achievement, something you feel especially good about?

Caroline, somebody asked me that the other day and, when I got my AM recently, and I thought back and, really, it's a bit corny I know, but you've asked me an honest question. I think my proudest moment was getting married. I've thought about it since I said that and I still think that's right. Because I've been very lucky. I've got strong family support.

And limitations still to overcome?

Very much Caroline. This question of weight dulls me down, I love chocolates, And also, I'm a lazy person, I should do more work.

Are you frightened of death?

Oh no, not at all. I don't mean I'm frightened of dying, I'm frightened of pain but I don't mind dying.

Have you done all your reconciling? Is there any making peace with events or people in the past that you haven't done and you need to do?

Well I was very lucky. Because of this early association here with the Oxford Group, I'd already done that with some people I owed some things to, some money I had to return

and some goods, and so I left here with a fairly clear conscience. When I went to Queensland, the opposition up there had set one of their friends down here to see if they could find anything in my cupboard which was a skeleton which they could use as a bit of blackmail, and it's a fairly common practice. Luckily I'd cleared all my debts before I left here. Otherwise I was going to be like Reagan, I think, a lame duck commissioner. And that's a standard practice in many places by opposition if they can find some skeleton in your cupboard, and most of us have skeletons.

Sure.

So I was very fortunate that way. Since then, of course, I tend not to do bad things because I hate having to apologise for them afterwards. That's a very good motive.

Well that's one motive, but, I mean, do you think it's important to be at peace with those with whom you've had some old enmity? I mean, do you think it's important for yourself?

Yes, I think so. I've been doing some work on stress and the sort of physical consequences that come from stress, and I'm quite clear that stress is a factor in our life, the lifestyle we haven't really given sufficient regard to, and unresolved relationships tend to be the cause of stress. And I really can't think of anybody that I feel that I need to take the olive branch to now and say, look, I'm sorry for what I did last week, last year, I think, on the whole, those relationships are either healed or acknowledged. I think there are some people you may never be friends with, Caroline, but at least you feel yourself that you've done your share in either standing up for a principle or apologising if you've been too hasty in your judgment.

Of course, sometimes people carry round that load of old guilt and hurt and anger and hate and . . .

Sure, sure, I think it's disastrous. I think it's very true that people do have a load of guilt. Victims tend to develop guilt; they blame themselves. I know some of the mothers who said, look, if only I'd told my daughter to catch the 9.30 bus instead of the 11, she'd still be here. They look for some reason for what happened. They tend to blame themselves and then, if they don't blame themselves, they blame somebody else. If only the landlord had put a different lock on my door the rapist would never have got in. There's a lot of shifting responsibility onto somebody else. And there's a lot of blame floating around and that's one of the disturbing factors we have in our life. And you're quite right, you have to get over that blame relationship in order to be happy with yourself.

I have a wonderful feeling, in talking to you, that I'm talking with a happy man.

Well, it's reciprocal, I get that feeling from you too.

That's good, I'm glad. I've enjoyed it so much. Thank you.

Thank you Caroline.

Ray Whitrod, national spokesman for the Australian Victims of Crime Association. And to hear a man, who's done so much, say that his greatest achievement was getting married certainly helps to put what matters in perspective, doesn't it? ●