

Don Di Fabrizio - A quiet achiever - Part 1

By Leo Billington

Don Di Fabrizio was born in a tent, a tent provided a home after he arrived in Geelong to work, and he lived for a short while in a tent after moving to Morwell.

In 1933, two months before he was born, his mountain side home town of Lama Dei Peligni in the Province of Chieti, in the Abruzzo region of Italy, was hit by an earthquake. Houses were destroyed, lives were lost and the government created a tent city. An emergency hospital was subsequently housed in one of these tents.

Lama Dei Peligni is about half way down "Italy's leg towards the boot", slightly towards the east coast. Situated on the border with the Province of L'Aquila, just below Mount Amaro, nowadays the town is a starting point for many beautiful trekking excursions, as well as horseback and biking itineraries.

Inhabited since the XII century, the town is situated on a foothill of the Maiella at an elevation of 2200 feet and its population currently numbers about 1500 inhabitants. The immediate area has various tourist attractions including the Church of San Nicola (XVI century), with Baroque furnishings, Grotta di Sant'Angelo, (which has been a religious destination for centuries), Grotta del Cavallone, famous for its beauty and the Maiella National Park.

Lama Dei Peligni takes its name from the Peligni, one of the Italic tribes that lived in this area. "Lama" means Sword of the Peligni, and the town unfortunately suffered significant bomb damage during WWII and in the earthquakes of 1915, 1933 and 1984.

So, this was Don's home backyard and his description is candid and sharp. "Above the town were huge rocky outcrops and very little vegetation. The vegetation started just above the town and continued to the valley below. This was about three kilometres down a winding, steep stony track to the Aventino River. This is where most of the farming and cultivating was done."

Born to Carmela and Antonio, both of whom grew up in Lama Dei Peligni, Don was their third child. Maria was the first child (who died at two years of age), followed by Giuseppe, Donato (Don), Giovanni, Maria (named in memory of the first Maria) and Miranda.

Carmela left school at an early age to care for her ailing mother and siblings following the death of her father. When construction started on a hydro-power station near the town, Carmela, then 15 years old, managed to obtain work on the pipeline for this new station. Men would dig out large rocks and the women would carry them away on their heads. It was all manual work because of the steep

mountainside.

Don remembers his mother as "having been quite well educated for those (tough) times. She excelled at her school work." Later on, when Maria was born, Don spent much of his time helping his mother "washing the dishes and while she cooked, I would look after the baby. I became very attached to housework because I could see my mother had more than she could cope with. Normally a boy in Italy didn't do any work in the house. It was strictly women's work."

Antonio came from a poor share farming family and very early on, he had to travel over much of Italy looking for work, sending money back to his family. At the age of 13, Antonio was fortunate to obtain a labouring job in road construction, eventually progressing to setting explosives for road tunnels through mountainous countryside. Just after Don was born, Antonio took on farming of crops and vegetables on a small property situated either side of the Aventino River.

As Don recalls those formative years, "the property consisted of small pieces of farmland on both sides of the river. The land near the farmhouse was fertile and good for growing vegetables. The land on the far side of the river was also good for growing crops. We also grew lentils and broad beans and had grapevines for making wine."

Due to the extensive damage to homes and property from the earthquake, Don's family lived with his paternal grandmother, Maria. At one stage, with 13 living in a small house, Don remembers it as "being very crowded. As well, my father contracted typhoid fever and he was very ill and was unable to work for quite some time."

"Another house close by in a smaller village called Purgatorio had a top floor which was used to store all sorts of dry crops, grains and hay for the animals. The kitchen and one bedroom were also on this top floor. On the ground floor, with its compacted hard earth floor, chickens, goats, rabbits, sheep, pigs, calves and donkeys were sheltered. (This house was to feature prominently in Don's life after the German occupation of his home town.)

"Most families had a mule or donkey to help with the transportation of crops and firewood. The farm land was divided into many small pieces. This was due to the fact that when the first owner died, the land was split up among his children. When these children died, the land was again divided and so it continued through the generations."

To provide for his family, Antonio found work in the tunnels, but he was weaker from his earlier bout of typhoid fever. Working in mines did not help his health either and he returned home after Don's paternal grandmother died.



Above: Giovanni, Maria, Mother, Miranda, Father and Don

Below: Don's parents - Antonio and Carmela



"Papa had saved enough to repair the kitchen and Mama could now cook for us all. Papa did some work in the fields but it was mostly left to Mama, Giuseppe and myself to look after the animals and cultivate the crops.

When Giovanni was school age, he was also able to help run the farm after school."

Antonio was also able to afford the purchase of a donkey, a few calves and some pigs. The calves and pigs would be fattened for sale to enable more to be bought. Pigs were slaughtered to make prosciutto, salami and sausages for the family. Any extra profit was used to buy clothes, shoes and school books.

At 7, Don started school at the local school, attending for about four years before the outbreak of the Second World War. He remembers "the school year starting October 1 and finishing about mid-June. The school day commenced at 9.00 am until noon for six days a week."

"I really enjoyed my time at school, learning about everything and did very well. When I returned home, we had some lunch and then it was off to the fields where I tended the animals. The end of the war also meant the end of my studies and at 12, I left school in June 1945 to work full-time on the farm."

Don and his family witnessed warfare first hand when it hit Lama Dei Peligni. He had just turned 10 and in his words, "I remember this time well because I experienced many things I will never forget as long as I live."

Before we close on this chapter of Don's life, there are fond memories of attending La Colonia during the school summer holidays. This was like a school camp, started by Mussolini and most of them were scattered around the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian coasts; built prior to the war to give the nation's young people, and particularly those from deprived parts of the cities and the country-side, a character-forming experience completely different from home.

Reminiscing, Don recalls "it was compulsory for all boys to attend. A typical day would start at 9.00 am through until 5.00

pm, all with a free lunch at noon and afternoon tea (generally bread and marmalade) at 3.00 pm. Some boys did not like the camp and would run away, only to be caught by the police and returned. For me, it was a chance to play competitive games – we made soccer balls from old clothes and rags tied in a tight ball – and the food was free."

"Our Christmas celebrations were a time for family fun. Unlike here in Australia, it was traditional to hang up our stockings on the night of January 6, known as Epifania when the fairy godmother comes in the middle of the night and leaves gifts. My excitement was finding an orange, a couple of dried figs, several walnuts, and if I was really lucky, there may be several lollies. There were never any toys. These days, Christmas in Italy is virtually like Australia's festival period with Santa Claus and all the trimmings."

By this time, at about 12 years old, Don was living in a crowded house, sharing a bedroom with his two brothers, working on the farm and helping his mother with domestic chores. Ten years earlier, Giovanni (John) was born at home with Don's mother requiring urgent medical attention. There was no hospital in town and a local woman, known for her skills as a midwife attended all births. On doctor's advice, Maria was operated on and took several years to recover.

In 1941, Don's paternal grandmother died and it was time for his father to remain home. "His (Antonio) health had deteriorated from the many years he had worked in the construction of tunnels through mountainous areas. Prior to this, he worked away from home as a miner, returning home in December for about one month. He never missed coming home for Christmas and having him home for Christmas was a very special time."

Part 2 – Escaping danger during World War 11.



Don on the back of a motorcycle with his long standing friend
 Vincento who lives in New York

Don Di Fabrizio - Part 2

Don's father, Antonio made a conscious decision to remain home in 1941, following the death of Don's paternal grandmother (Maria). Antonio also realized that working on construction sites tunneling through mountains had impacted severely on his health.

Don and his family witnessed warfare first hand when it hit Lama Dei Peligni. He had just turned 10 and in his words, "I remember this time well because I experienced many things I will never forget as long as I live."

As Don was beginning to enjoy school, albeit still doing farm-work after lunch, war was raging close by in North Africa.

After the Allies fought the Germans in North Africa and won a victory there, they wanted to continue their advance against the German/Italian forces.

They were not ready to invade Germany or France that would be in June 1944 at Normandy. Therefore, in an effort to gain a strategic advantage into Europe (by going up "the boot" of Italy), they invaded Sicily, an island belonging to Italy, in July 1943.

This was captured in two months after which they invaded mainland Italy on September 8, 1943. Thus began the Italian Campaign to capture the German and Italian forces in Italy.

It was a long campaign, continuing until the end of the war. The German forces in Italy eventually surrendered on May 5, 1945.

[During this stage of the war, there were two major alliances: the Axis and the Allies. The three principal partners in the Axis alliance were Germany, Italy, and Japan. These three countries recognised German authority over most of continental Europe; Italian authority over the Mediterranean Sea; and Japanese authority over East Asia and the Pacific.]

The Italian Campaign was a long, protracted campaign, continuing until the end of the war. The German forces in Italy eventually surrendered on May 5, 1945.

Italy was the first Axis partner to surrender; it formally surrendered to the Allies on September 8, 1943, though areas of central and northern Italy remained in the hands of the Germans and of the fascist Salo Republic.

Anarchists immediately threw themselves into armed struggle, establishing where possible autonomous formations, or, as was the case in most instances, joining other formations such as the socialist 'Matteotti' brigades and the Communist 'Garibaldi' brigades.

Don recalls, "Childhood was hard and depressing. Clothes were made from discarded clothes; food was scarce and carefully rationed. Winters were cold and there were never enough blankets. I had started school when I was seven and only completed four years of formal education. Following the Nazi occupation and the cessation of the war, I was working full time growing crops and vegetables for our food. We had to survive."

It was also during this period that Don learned about German troops engaged in a demolition strategy – otherwise known as the scorched-earth policy. (The scorched earth policy is actually a classic military strategy: generals would instruct troops to burn any land/crops/trees as they retreated so there would be no supplies to refresh the advancing army. The practice is carried out by an army in enemy territory, or perhaps in its own home territory.)

Although the Italian government had issued an amnesty in September 1943, the German army continued northwards and in Don's words, "Everybody was happy where I lived because we thought the war was over."

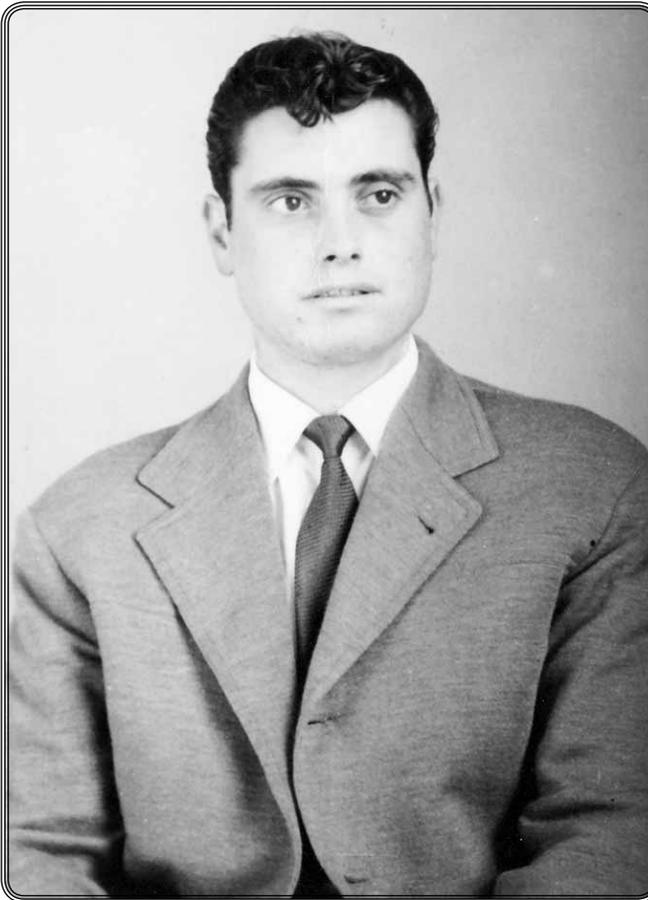
Residents of Lama Dei Peligni began to see German soldiers in about mid-October and it was then that Don's family moved out, relocating to a farmhouse at Purgatorio.

The house was formerly owned by elderly (very close) friends of Don's parents Giovanni and Brigida. This couple didn't have children, so gave the house to Don's father and his older brother on condition they would look after them in their old age.

The house basically consisted of a top floor where dry crops, hay and grain were stored.

On the ground floor chickens, goats, rabbits and sheep were housed.

"The first sign of war was when I saw about three or four small fighter planes shooting at each other over our Lama



Dei Peligni. They were very low and a couple were shot down – I couldn't tell if they were Germans or Americans," Don recalls.

"Everyone tried to have a look at the burning planes but I didn't because I was too young and my father told me not to go. The second indication of war was when the Germans took over our town.

My father believed we would be safer in Purgatorio because the Germans were marching up and down the streets of our Lama Dei Peligni and we would be in their line of fire. Many of our relatives joined us in that farmhouse."

However, sadness soon followed. The elderly couple chose to remain in Lama Dei Peligni at that time; they were both in their 80's with health problems.

Don looked on the elderly gentleman "as a grandfather – I always wanted to help him whenever he needed anything." Giovanni was later shot and his wife, Brigida taken away.

"After the war, we made a lot of enquiries as to what had happened to her but there was no trace. We assumed she had died," Don explained.

With relatives and friends included, the Purgatorio house accommodated about 22 people sharing two rooms.

As was to be expected in this time of uncertainty and danger, everyone looked after each other. Typical European style camaraderie was strong; it was necessary.

Food supplies were precious, drinking water was sourced from a nearby stream and hunger and fear permeated daily life.

Don's memory is about being careful and discreet – "our provisions were wrapped very well to keep them dry. We dug holes and buried whatever we could.

We even hid the rest so the Germans could not take it from us as we didn't know how long we would be living there (at Purgatorio) and we had so many mouths to feed.

Each day we would ration out

just enough food for our daily needs. So often I was hungry."

Invading soldiers would take animals, food (proscuitto, salami, corn oil, wine); anything they could find. Farm animals were instantly butchered to feed hungry ravenous troops. For those in hiding in a supposedly safe haven, complaining was useless; a gun pointed to one's head was sufficient deterrent for any further complaints.

However, as time went on, for Don and his family and others, "the taking of provisions was no indication of the frightening events that were in store for us."

Men (between the ages of 14 to 50) from Purgatorio went to hide in the mountains to escape being captured or shot. Some able bodied men were forcibly relocated to work in labour camps.

Don's father left the house due to this possibility albeit he was suffering from ill health. Refusal to accede to commands could very well result in being shot.

Two of Don's uncles stayed behind at the farmhouse with all the females and children as they were both elderly.

Don continues with his story. "Meanwhile the Americans were advancing and were only 18 kilometres away in Casoli. I found out this news from word of mouth. We didn't have a radio. I didn't know what one (a radio) looked like until after the war.

One day when four German soldiers came to the farmhouse, I was really frightened. All we children trembled with fear. We tried to be quiet and stayed upstairs. They took a quantity of food, including some animals. They helped themselves to our wine cellar and ordered my uncles to carry all this back to their camp.

Distressingly, my four young cousins – beautiful looking girls – were in immediate danger.

They were taken away, with my mother and the girl's mothers following, screaming to save them. They didn't care about being shot; they were deeply concerned about their daughters. I can still recall their screaming to this day.

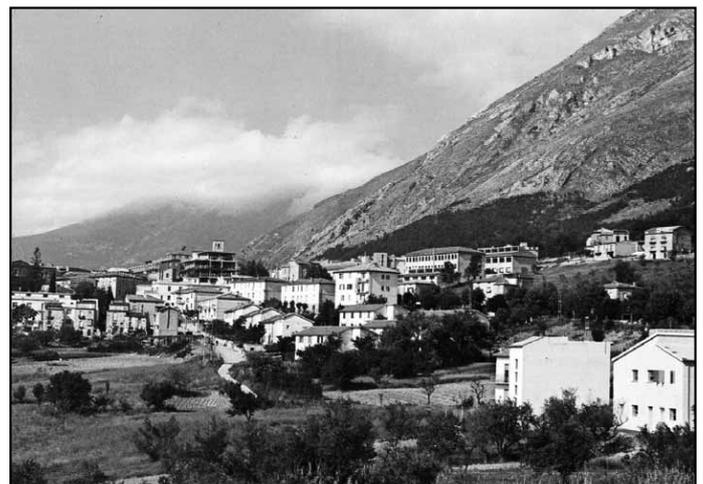
With about 50 soldiers in the camp it was obvious what the girls' fate was to be. They would be like slaves at the beck and call of the soldiers.

Eventually my uncles were able to bargain with the soldiers who then agreed to let the girls go home for the night but said they would return for them in the morning.

Back in the house, a decision to flee was made. Knowing the Americans were closing in, the destination was 'the American line'.

This was really our only chance for safety", Don recalls. "About 40 people – cousins, young and old, boyfriends, girlfriends, parents- crouched behind an oil lamp to plan their escape.

Don's home town of Lama Dei Peligni



Don Di Fabrizio - Part 2

"It was November 4, 1943," Don recalls. "It had to be the worst day of my life. It was dark early; about 5.00 pm. when we grabbed a few of our prized possessions and fled. We took a mountain route and moved quickly under the cover of darkness. The German patrols were everywhere."

Their escape was not without incident. Noise from German soldiers shooting at anything that moved was terrifying.

Tracks were followed in desperation to get to the American line. It was cold with pouring rain.

Don was only 10 and extremely frightened. They became stuck in quagmires.

His pregnant mother cut strips from a blanket to protect the children's feet.

They all held hands with a head count every so often. Some smaller children had to be carried.

It was a 20 kilometre trek fraught with danger, trepidation, fear, anxiety, bodily fear laced with inspiration as the adults guided the group through a highly torturous environment in total darkness.

"We managed to secure a few hours rest at a friendly farmhouse.

Due to the restrictions of the curfew on the town of Casoli we were not able to enter until 7am.

But we had to keep moving towards where the Americans were.

We soon learned that English soldiers were in charge of the town and they had heard about us coming and were anxious to interrogate us about the German's positions and strengths.

We went with them in their jeeps and a truck – it was the first time I had ever been in a motor vehicle.

They gave us hot drinks and again, it was the first time I tasted tea.

I didn't even know that tea existed.

We were soon reunited with my father and together with my mother and siblings we all went to a friend's house to stay in a room three metres by five metres.

Since we didn't have any spare clothes or blankets we all went to bed fully clothed.

Now we could eat a cooked meal and sit at a table with a couple of chairs.

My father obtained some work with the Americans but money was scarce – just enough to buy some beans. Sometimes I found chocolate.

Sometimes my brothers and I were lucky enough to wait outside the Allied headquarters for left-over food scraps. Porridge was popular. It was just like a scene from Oliver – "Please sir, may I have some more?"

Don remembers other horrifying moments from this time and they will always remain personal.

He certainly relates going to farms to gather chicory, small, young thistles and edible grasses. A resistance movement was formed largely of men between 18 and 40 to help with the war effort.

They were instructed by American and English soldiers on how to drive the German soldiers from the surrounding hills. Lives were lost and the food situation remained desperate.

Back in Lama Dei Peligni most of the houses were mined as the Germans retreated.

Cassino was the scene of a major battle but as Lama Dei Peligni was basically destroyed, Don's family returned to Purgatorio.

"We lived in primitive conditions," Don says. "There were two rooms, no electricity and water was collected from a nearby creek. There were two beds; one for my parents and another for three boys. My sister, Maria was born on April 21, 1944.

Soon after arriving we dug up the provisions we had buried four months earlier but most of it was inedible. Wine and oil stored in glass bottles and demijohns was alright. The land we had to cultivate was steep and rocky and the flat hoes, shovels, picks and two-pronged hoes were well used.

Eventually we were able to grow our food – tomatoes, zucchinis, cucumbers, wheat and grapes.

I was now 11 and working with my brothers in the fields. My father never worked away from home after the war.

He started buying and selling horses and donkeys; goats and cows were scarce due to large numbers being killed during the German

invasion.

Milk was therefore scarce although we managed to own two goats and five sheep.

If there was any spare cheese, we would sell it to make a few extra lire.

My brothers and I returned to school on October 1, 1944.

All students crowded into one big room to be taught by one teacher. I started at grade four having already completed grades one, two and three, years before.

We only went to school for three hours each day and after lunch it was back to work on the farm."

Don prides himself as being "the only son who helped my mother with the new-born Maria." He was quite handy in the kitchen washing dishes and cooking.

Don admits to becoming "quite attached to housework because I could see my mother had more than she could cope with.

Normally a boy in Italy didn't do any work in the house. It was strictly women's work."

Don reminisces about those vegetables and fruits so eagerly awaited by everyone after a torrid time in trying to feed everyone.

Cherries were the first fruits to ripen and it was a popular "sport" to see who could grab handfuls of those delicious cherries without being caught.

Broad beans and tomatoes soon followed plus wheat and cucumbers.

Apparently broad beans were so plentiful that Don admits "it would be many years before I would eat broad beans again."

Having escaped the "Nazi peril", life became more settled as the Allies moved further north.

Don's life centered on school, working in the fields and listening to adults at night tell stories, along with the occasional song or two after "they had a few drinks."

For Don, these were "happy evenings and they really lifted our spirits.

The post-war partying must have been great because my mother was soon pregnant again."

The end of warfare also meant the end of Don's studies.

He left school in June 1945 at age 12.

Money was not available to allow him to continue. He returned this time to full-time work on the farm. Don "did what had to be done."

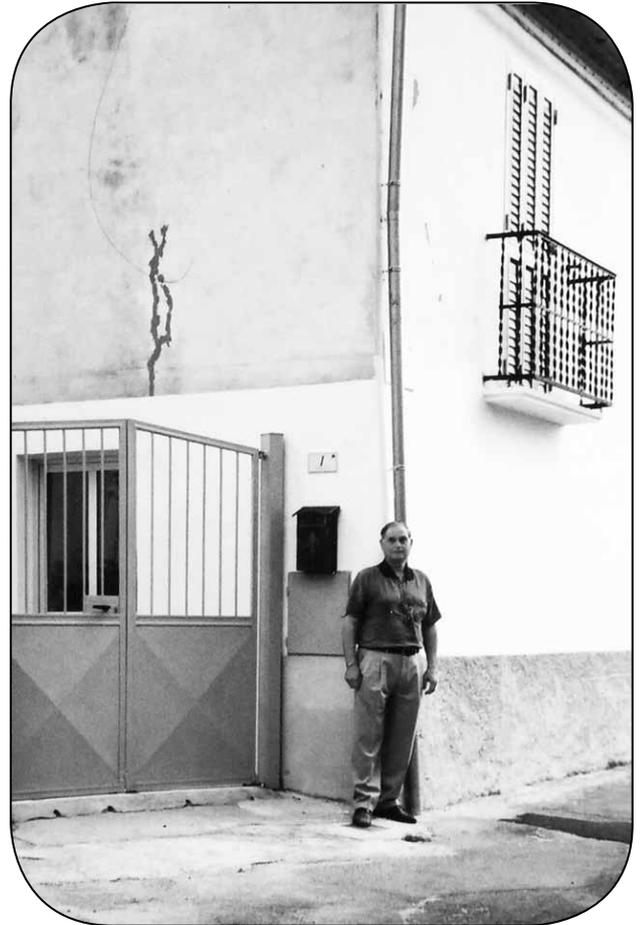
Postscript:

After the fall of Rome on June 4, 1944, almost one third of the Allied forces were pulled out of Italy and sent to southern France to assist the campaign to drive into Germany.

This reduced the forces such that the Allies had almost equal strength of the Axis forces.

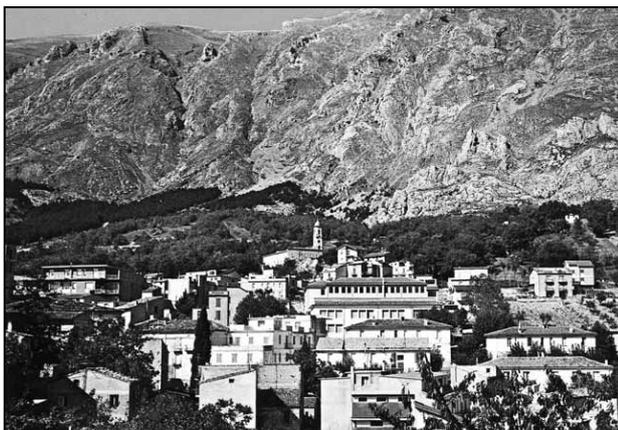
The campaign became called "the forgotten front" and some soldiers called themselves "the D-Day Dodgers", because they did not have to fight at Normandy.

Even today, most history books will hardly mention any battles fought in Italy from June 1944 until May 1945.



Above - The renovated house where Don grew up

Below - A house similar to where the family went at Purgatorio





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Looking Back...

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Don di Fabrizio - part 3 A New Horizon Beckons for Don

"I told him I was good at climbing trees."

By Leo Billington

The end of warfare also meant the end of Don's studies. He left school in June 1945 at age 12. Money was not available to allow him to continue. He returned at this time to full-time work on the farm. Don "did what had to be done."

Around this time, Don's brother, Giuseppe, working alongside their father, successfully built a new home. There was little cost involved with the family home, being built using stones and mortar. The stones and roofing tiles came from the rubble remaining after Don's grandmother's house was destroyed during the war. Interior stone walls were plastered; extra stones were placed as weights on the tiles to prevent them blowing off. While a small house, it was comfortable with a ground floor kitchen and storeroom and two bedrooms upstairs.

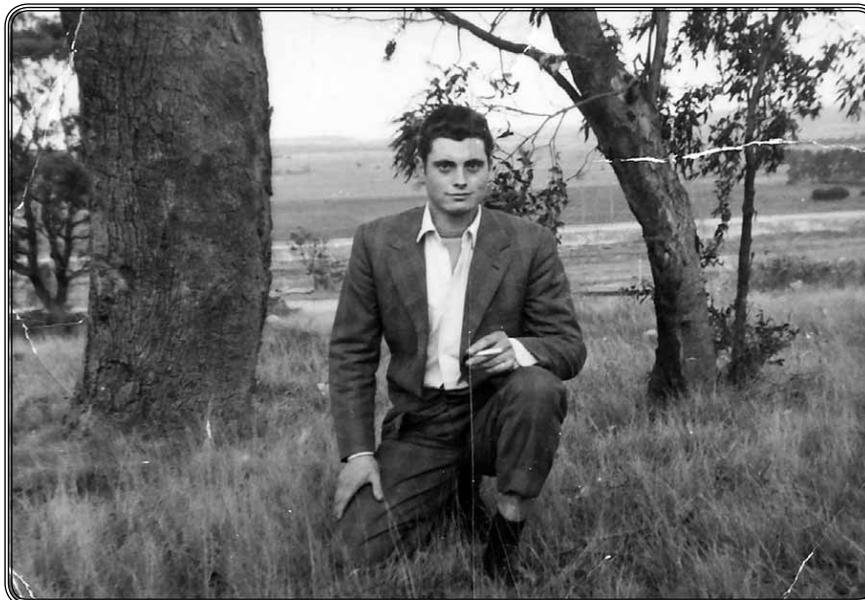
Don recalls the new house was completed and ready for occupancy one month before his new sister, Miranda was born – on April 21, 1946, exactly two years after his other sister, Maria.

"As the house was being built, Mama could not do much due to her advancing pregnancy and looking after Maria. Nevertheless, our new house was a bright light in our lives. We had a kitchen with an open fire for cooking. There was electricity but unfortunately no running water, toilet or bathroom. Water for bathing was heated in a large cauldron hanging over the fire, then put into a tin bathtub in front of the fire where we would have our bath one after the other.

Mother went to a local fountain each day to draw water for drinking and cooking. She carried the water in a large copper container with its two handles, which she would carry home on her head. While sometimes us kids would go instead of Mamma, it was usually me as I wasn't quick enough to keep out of her way when we knew water was required."

Clothes were hand washed (in cold water) at a communal fountain using a washing board. These were social occasions, being very special for everyone. As families battled to establish themselves after the war, camaraderie underpinned everyone's spirits.

After leaving school the following eight years reflected many changes in Don's thinking about his future. In the short term, he worked on the land tending to animals and ploughing fields while working long hours. There were occasions when he would pause, reflect and think about what was his destiny. He used to hope that "all the hard work on the farm would stop one day." Don was intuitive enough



to believe there was more to life than subsistence farming.

"In summer, I worked hard because we had to grow lots of vegetables. They required constant watering, so I was up at 3.00 am to do the watering. Then I had to weed, fertilise, and stake the taller plants. It was constant work besides feeding our animals. Lunch was always welcomed – generally frittata with onions, goat's cheese and bread. After a rest, we would be back at work by 3.00 pm finishing perhaps four hours later.

There were plenty of community activities at weekends. Dancing was popular with someone playing a piano accordion, or records played on an old gramophone. When the music finished, the girls would sit on one side of the room, the boys on the other side. The parents were always present as chaperones.

Sunday was special as we always attended Mass after doing our early morning chores. Mama was very strict in ensuring we all went to Mass.

In summer after attending Mass, my friends and I would go walking up in the mountains. We would follow the shepherd's tracks to various vantage points to admire the surrounding scenery.

On a clear day, using good binoculars, we could see Rome to the north and the Adriatic Sea to the south. A picnic lunch sitting and chatting with friends punctuated these precious times in my teenage years."

Don recalls commemorating the anniversary of Gesu Bambino (Baby Jesus), the patron saint of Lama Dei Peligini. Townsfolk from neighbouring areas would converge on the town to partake in the festivities.

"The town square was decorated with flowers, plants and banners. There were plenty of food and drink stalls as well as an ice-cream stall (very, very popular). Loud music from bands accompanying lots of dancing made these festivals most memorable. It was always an excellent opportunity to meet others, including the girls. Festivals always concluded with a wonderful fireworks display. This festival is still held today in honour of Gesu Bambino."

The changing seasons meant changes in Don's farm work routine. Autumn required less watering of vegetables albeit ploughing was important for late autumn sowing of wheat. Walnuts were plentiful and wood had to be cut and stored in readiness for winter.

The winter days were short and

snow-covered ground meant animals were fed indoors. Cleaning and maintenance were ever present. At night, card playing and weekend dancing remained popular. Don regrets not being able to have proper skis, although home made skis using plain wood sufficed, and ensured hours and hours of extended fun in the snow.

At 16, Don yearned to become an apprentice but as money was tight, young tradespeople were considered to be just labourers. However, his father required Don to remain on the land. With assistance from a local bricklayer with whom Don did some work experience, he managed "a crash – course in bricklaying."

"I basically carried stones and mixed mortar. I didn't receive any money and I soon realised my father was correct – an apprentice was only a labourer. At another attempt

to learn bricklaying from some-one else, I lasted a week because I fell off a ladder breaking my left wrist, which meant the end of that job for me."

Don smiles as he recounts another attempt to learn about a wider world of working for someone else. A 14 hour effort toiling and sweating under a very hot sun cutting 20 centimetre high wheat stalks with a hand scythe, apparently did not encourage Don and a friend to hang around that farm. On another occasion, three months of building stonewalls did at least pay some money; enough for him to buy his first suit.

However, Don's family was still struggling to make ends meet. At 18, Don now realised "the farm gave us enough to eat but we couldn't make any progress. We were not going backwards but we were not going forwards either. It was stalemate, so my brothers and I decided to look elsewhere."

Giuseppe (Joseph) was earning a meagre income and now at 20 years of age, lodged an application to emigrate. In December 1951, he was accepted as an assisted emigrant by the Australian government.

In 1952, he and 12 other local young men from Lama Dei Peligini left town via bus, boarded the ship Castel Felice (the same day) and spent 40 days en route to Australia. On arrival, Joseph travelled by train to a migrant camp at Bonegilla, where he remained for about three months, attending English classes and learning about his newly adopted home.

Don was also "looking further afield" and maintained contact with Joseph who had managed to secure work in New South Wales with the company, Electric Power Transmission (EPT). Joseph started work as a scaffolding rigger with EPT who had a contract to build a power station at Wangi Wangi near Newcastle.

Joseph lived in a camp where the main language was Italian; about 95% of the workforce was in fact Italian.

After his elder brother, Joseph, successfully moved to Australia, Don gave serious consideration to his future.

He contacted Joseph asking if someone would sponsor him to come to Australia. A month later EPT agreed to sponsor him but Don "had to be patient because it took up to four months for applications to be approved."

For almost nine years, until he was 20 years old, Don had worked to help his family survive; at 18, he was working in tunnels (being carved out for road and rail networks) learning bricklaying along with a range of other jobs.

Photos:

Top centre. Don when he first arrived in Morwell
Bottom left. Don's trunk still in use, brought with him from Italy





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Don Di Fabrizio - Continued

Meanwhile, work still had to be found, even to help his family survive. Don (against his father's wishes) with three friends, Giovanni, Francesco and Porfirio, travelled to Naples in search of employment. Staying with relatives, their search for work was unsuccessful. It was suggested they travel further south to Rutino.

Don takes up the story of this period in his young life as he begins his life journey away from home, taking with him all its' memories of family, fun, friends, playing practical jokes, walking across the fields, all combined with long working hours on the land.

"On arrival in Rutino, we went to the main office on a railway construction site. We said we were bricklayers or labourers. We just wanted work – a big man looked at me. He knew my father; luck was eventually on our side and he gave us work as bricklayers for a short time to see how good we were. If we proved to be satisfactory, he would give us accommodation in the company camp and we could then eat in the company mess room. We were told to start at 7.00 pm the following night for the night shift.

We were very happy to have a job. The foreman watched us work through the night and he was surprised how much work we did. He told us to report to the main office; there we filled in some forms and were told to go to the (company) camp and find a bed. We had made it – we had jobs. We continued with night shifts, working in a tunnel being built, for about a month.

In the tunnel, the brickwork was at least one metre thick forming an arch. Scaffolding and heavy wooden beams were required and my main job was to close the top of the tunnel. This required working in a difficult, cramped position with about one metre square of space for an entire 10 – hour shift. I was the smallest and skinniest of all the bricklayers, hence I was quickly selected to do this job. If anybody complained about the working conditions, they were sacked on the spot.

After several months I was transferred to another job to repair broken brickwork in another tunnel – while the trains were still running. At least I had more space but the trains did present an element of danger. Here I worked 10 hours a day and was only paid for eight hours.

Early in April 1954, I received a telegram from my mother saying that I had to go for a medical check-up in Bologna, northern Italy. This was the result of my application to emigrate to Australia. I also had to attend an interview with the parent company of EPT. I took leave to return home."

Once at the company office in Bologna, Don was told that he had to pay the ship's passage but he would be sponsored if he passed the medical. It was explained he would be required to work in power line construction and steel erection – at times working at heights. If he was unable to cope, the company would not guarantee further work. Don told them he was "good at climbing tall trees and not afraid of heights."

Notwithstanding some minor hurdles, the medical examination was successfully passed, money to pay the ship's passage (361,000 lire) was borrowed, a passport was obtained and on June 8, 1954, Don left Italy aboard the Oceania bound for Melbourne.

Before leaving Don did return to Rutino only to find he had been sacked; he had been away from work longer than the two weeks leave previously granted. He collected his back pay and packed his few belongings.

As this was the last time he would spend with his good friends, Giovanni, Francesco and Porfirio, they decided to hire a row boat and spent the whole day fishing, rowing and just talking. They were "young men together just starting their independent lives with no idea where their destinies would lead them."



Don still maintains contact with Giovanni. He was happy to spend time with Francesco while they were both in Italy on holiday one year, but he has never seen Porfirio since.

"As sad as I was, to be leaving my family behind and having no idea of when I would see my parents, brother and sisters again, I knew a better life beckoned me. Starting a new life in a new country with the hope of building a better, more secure future for myself was my dream," Don recalled.

Don boarded the Oceania on June 8, 1954 in Genoa bound for Sydney; or so he thought.

"As I stepped on board, I felt alone even though there were about 1500 other passengers going my way under the Australian government assistance program. These included about 600 women from Trieste, aged between 18 and 30 going to Australia – or Down Under – as we come to know it, to find a husband because there was a shortage of Italian born men in Italy."

Don soon made friends with others during his journey, enjoying learning to dance and some English. There was a swimming pool onboard, a picture theatre and plenty of games to wile away the long hours at sea. Their first port of call in Australia was Fremantle and some passengers disembarked here. As the ship began its departure, Don received a message from his sponsor, EPT.

"EPT did not have any work for me in Sydney but if I wanted to stop at Melbourne, there was work for me. Late in the evening of Thursday, July 8, 1954, we docked at Melbourne's Station Pier. We had been at sea for exactly one month. With a friend, I headed straight to a kiosk and enjoyed my first milkshake. We cleared customs the following morning," Don recounts.

"We were met by EPT's General Manager, who had an ex-army jeep, telling us there was labouring work immediately available in Geelong. The pay was 13 pounds a week but if we were not up to standard, we would last only two weeks. On Friday afternoon, at a temporary construction campsite on the north shore of Geelong, we were introduced to the EPT project manager, Mr Linossi. We were to report for work on Monday and were reminded about our two weeks probation."

There were about 100 workers on-site, mostly Italians also staying in the camp. The food was good and plentiful although Don's tent was only 1.5 metres high.

The Oceania also carried freight being tonnes of steel, manufactured in Naples, for us to construct a large wheat silo and storage facilities for the Port of Geelong.

As Don recalls his early days in Geelong, where he first arrived as a 20 year old eager to work, he remembers, with clarity, the cold tent from which condensation dripped making him feel colder.

"Geelong was home for about six months and that first winter was cold. I could just stand up in my tent and there was just enough space for a small bed, two blankets, my trunk and other personal belongings," Don said.

After three months, Don had saved enough to repay debts back home and was able to open his own personal bank account. Dancing was becoming his passion, with him being a regular at Geelong's Crystal Palace nightspot. In November, Don's brother, Joseph, was transferred by EPT to their Geelong construction site. The brothers were re-united.

Don's employer, Electric Power Transmission (EPT) was then successful in winning a large contract to erect and fix steel for the new Morwell power station and briquette factory. It was a four year contract therefore giving Don the break he so dearly craved. With an offer of more work, he arrived in Morwell on January 10, 1955.

"I lived in another tent only for a few weeks before moving into a purpose built camp accommodating about 100 men. I worked as a riveter, rigger and boiler maker, quickly earning a reputation as a good worker. Joseph was also in Morwell and I began attending English classes at night. I loved to go to the local cinema as well as to the RSL dances each Saturday night," Don says as he smiles.





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Looking Back...

...through the eyes of local residents



Don Di Fabrizio - Part Four

By Leo Billington

The Commonwealth Government, led by Robert Menzies, was re-elected in April 1951. The August 1951 Commonwealth Budget aimed to correct the "boom" time of rising inflation attributed to increased spending on post-war redevelopment. Severe restrictions on public borrowing were imposed. The State Electricity Commission (SEC) had plans to raise 52 million pounds in public borrowing in 1951 - 1952 to expand its program of works throughout Victoria. This was restricted by the Commonwealth to 44 million pounds.

At the SEC Morwell works site - development of the open cut, railway infrastructure and workshops for instance - plans were revised to fit budgets. Fortunately, the "progressive wind - down" of the Morwell project also afforded time for a re-assessment of forecasts for electricity and fuel demands from a rapidly developing Victorian economy.

In May 1954, based on encouraging signs from the national economy, the Victorian state government approved resumption of work on the Morwell project according to an approved modified plan.

Stage 1 of the plan incorporated 50 MW of generating power to be in service by 1958. Stages 2 and 3 included the first two briquette factories plus additional power generating plants to be in service by 1959 and 1960.

Don's employer, Electric Power Transmission (EPT) was successful in winning a large contract to erect and fix steel for the new Morwell power station and briquette factory, including a conveyer system from the Morwell open cut and a raw coal bunker.

It was a four year contract therefore giving Don the break he so dearly craved. With an offer of more work, he arrived in Morwell on January 10, 1955. He arrived with others at a camp-site "on top of a hill" a short distance eastwards from Morwell's fledgling town centre. The eagerly awaited first shipment of steel from Germany was behind schedule so the new workers spent about a month building the huts where the on-site workforce of approximately 100 was to live.

[Today, we know this general area as The Ridge and the excavated flat area immediately behind, and a fraction up the hill from the old dredger on display is where the huts were located. To many Morwell residents, it was known as the Ridge Hostel.]

With a friendly smile, Don recalls "the first few nights in Morwell were spent in tents but as the huts were progressively finished, we moved into them. It was about late February we started the proper work of erecting steel and I started work here in Morwell as a riveter."

He worked in a forge "cooking" the rivets. This was the first stage in the riveting process involving a team of three - the "cook", the boiler maker and his workmate. Don soon progressed from the forge to helping the boilermaker prepare the steel for riveting. Don had received his first ever promotion - and in Australia as well. And he was, at last, not living in a tent.

Don's remarkable story culminated in eventually joining with his brother Giovanni (John) to establish D & G Di Fabrizio - Steel Fabrication and Erection. Later this company grew into the DIFABRO Group of companies which was closely associated with many major Victorian construction projects supplying, fabricating and erecting steel.

"I worked as a riveter, rigger and boiler maker, quickly earning a reputation as a good worker, Joseph was also in Morwell and I began attending English classes at night. It was important for me to learn English as quickly as possible. I also loved to go to the local cinema as well to the local RSL dances



The first workshop



The DIFABRO truck moving a structure to Loy Yang Power Station



These are the three Di Fabrizio Brothers who formed the DIFABRO Company

each Saturday night," Don says as he smiles.

[There were two picture theatres in Morwell during the fifties, both in Buckley Street. Mr Bruce Vary constructed the Paramount "from odds and ends of discarded war salvage building material" which later took the Karma name. Across the street, the Maya Theatre was opened up by Mr Rex Hamilton on April 6, 1956. Additional to this was the Morwell Town Hall in which "flicks" were shown throughout a five night per week program. In 1956, the Morwell Panoramic drive-in opened in Latrobe Road with its 400 car capacity. In Hazelwood Road, the RSL Memorial Hall, built on land donated by the Billingsley family, was opened on September 20, 1953.]

Morwell was an entertainment Mecca for Don. Being at the picture theatre at least two or three nights a week assisted Don in his quest to learn English. Another venue for this was at the RSL hall - at this stage fast becoming a local popular social venue capable of holding a huge crowd.

"I met Maureen at one of these dances and a love match blossomed. We have recently celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary with a large family celebration, which included our three children and 17 grandchildren.

I now realize my dream was achieved."

Meanwhile, each month Joseph and Don continued to send some money from their savings back home. Their parents were then able to buy a small apartment in the centre of the village. When John arrived in Australia the three brothers continued to assist their parents and then their mother, until her passing in 1996.

Don's younger brother, John arrived in Morwell in 1956. Recalling those formative years, Don makes reference to their combined efforts supporting each other to achieve a goal.

"We saved our money and purchased a block of land in Morwell subsequently over three years, building a large house using concrete bricks which we made on-site; all this without obtaining a loan.

The whole area was booming with many large projects in progress, largely financed by the Victorian Government. I could see a land of opportunity here and late in 1961, John and I saw a likely business opportunity. After work each night, we started manufacturing wrought iron in a shed in our backyard, for the many new homes being built in Morwell to accommodate new residents. This backyard enterprise was initially a part-time enterprise but it soon expanded and significant business decisions had to be made.

Following complaints from the neighbours about the noise at night, increasing demand for our steel products and being time poor, we moved to share a small block at the corner of Holmes

Road and Latrobe Road. We expanded even more and then we bought and moved into a very small old shed in Madden Street (our first workshop). As our business continued to grow we soon needed more space, so land was acquired next door and later we also bought another two blocks of land directly behind our workshop.

By 1970, we were employing 50 full time workers as we were successfully tendering for contracts, mainly for heavier steel construction projects. A new company was registered - D & G Di Fabrizio Steel Fabrication and Erection Pty Ltd. A larger (30 acres) site in Tramway Road Morwell was purchased, and the DIFABRO Group of companies was incorporated, of which I was the Managing Director from 1963 to 1993. Joseph joined the partnership in 1969 after running his own business."

The family company expanded quickly, largely from work associated with all the major power stations in Victoria. "We fabricated, erected

and commissioned in excess of 150,000 tonnes of steel over about 29 years for power station construction related projects," Don explained. "We were competitive, we invested in new technology and we concentrated only on fabrication. We were highly focused and we did our best. We could always boast of a 90 per cent success rate on jobs we priced."

There were other memorable projects. Steel was supplied, erected and fixed for The Great Southern Stand at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Loy Yang "B" station was built in a joint venture with Lewis Constructions. Large prefabricated steel work was supplied for Esso's offshore oil rigs. High Pressure Vessel Fabrication was undertaken and plenty of steel was fabricated for many bridges and large multi-level buildings in Melbourne.

The DIFABRO Group of companies worked in close cooperation with many high profile companies at the time, including Civil and Civic, John Holland and Leighton.



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...through the eyes of local residents



Don di Fabrizio - part 4

Don's 30 years at the top guiding his family company represented a pinnacle of success, a long way from the earlier days of trying out as a bricklayer, labourer and learning to cook rivets.

"All this would have been impossible if I remained in Italy," Don says. "Because we (the three brothers) were here in Australia, we could help our parents far more effectively this way by sending back money to help them lead a more comfortable life."

Don modestly side-steps a question about whether or not he was ambitious. "Remember, I could have gone to America; and I always wondered how my parents must have felt knowing their three sons were so far away on the other side of the world. Yes, our company was successful and at our peak, we employed up to 300 people.

Trust and confidence is important in business and we had a good track record. You should only do the job properly once, and on time. That's my mantra."

But Don's community involvement must not pass by unnoticed. For 23 years, he was President of the Morwell Falcons Soccer Club, guiding the club from being a small country club to the Victorian Provincial League, then on to a Metropolitan Division to State League, to the Australian National League. He served as a Commissioner for the Australian Soccer Federation between 1997 and 2007.

"In 1969, my brother John was elected president of the Italian Australian Social Club of Gippsland. The club was founded in 1960 and soon acquired land in Morwell upon which two bocce courts were constructed. In 1961, some club members formed a soccer team and affiliated with the Latrobe Valley Soccer Federation. The team was a hobby for Italian-born migrants on a Sunday. A year later, the club adopted a new name - Morwell Falcons".

Don has written a detailed account about his 30 year involvement in soccer. Published in 2011, "My Years With The Falcons - Memories of a Morwell Soccer Supporter", provides an accurate account of trials and tribulations over this period. It is a compelling read, hard to put down and makes an invaluable contribution to Morwell's social and cultural history.

Taking up his story on how it all began, Don relates how his young son Steven was playing soccer in the Under 10's team at that time, so as a parent he was invited to the club's general meeting, "The next thing I knew, I was voted into the job of President," says Don. His predecessor had decided to return to Italy and the club was looking for a new President.

"I was President of a nine-person committee which included my brother, John. It was my first experience in running a club, our secretarial duties were shared by two 20 year old players - being the only two who could write English - and team discipline had to be improved to win games.

Over the following year, we started to win games, found new players and sponsors. At the end of my first year, we finished third and our turnover was \$5000. Our assets included two sets of cheap T-shirts.

I agreed to remain as President on the condition that we focused on building a winning team. From there, and with an enormous commitment from everyone (and long hours after work), we made our debut in the Provisional League at home to South Dandenong on Sunday, April 6, 1974. Unfortunately, we lost by a single goal".

The club was on its way upward and a new home ground was required. Following an approach in 1975 to the then Morwell Shire Council, and provided with three optional sites, a 10 acre site was selected at North Crinigan Road. In October 1981, the new clubrooms were complete and "the Morwell Falcons had by far the finest sporting complex in the Latrobe Valley. As for soccer clubs, our facilities were close to being the best in Victoria."

Don recalls the official opening where 600 people turned up and acknowledges the challenges encountered in balancing the club's attention to a large building program and the team's on-field performances. But it wasn't bad news because the Victorian Soccer federation invited the club to join the State League for the 1982 season.

Prior to this elevation, Morwell Falcons had made a successful bid to enter the Metropolitan League in 1976. Don describes this time as "it was all happening". Membership was 250, the team was winning games and a new ground was in its early stages of development.



Don in front of the stadium at Falcon's Park, which he organised to build

"Between 1988 and 1992, while balancing work in the family business and attending to my soccer commitments, our bid to join the National Soccer League had to be supported by improvements to our home facilities - new lighting, improved amenities, extra land and the list went on. Early in June 1992, a vacancy in the NSL was announced by the Australian Soccer Federation.

Our application was successful with a public media announcement made on June 25. Our soccer world was lit up; we were moving on to a national stage. One very important priority was to complete the grandstand to accommodate 2000 spectators. Over \$50,000 had been spent on the piling of the foundations. A State government grant of \$240,000 in May of that year was most welcome.

I was always very fortunate in my time at the club to have so many good people working with me as most of the work in building the club rooms, change rooms and the grandstand was done by volunteers."

The new grandstand was officially opened on January 28, 1995 and was named 'The Don DiFabrizio Stand'. "It was a

proud day for me and all members of the Morwell Falcons Soccer Club."

The attendance of about 5000 people at the opening ceremony was wonderful to see. While widely acknowledged as a fine tribute to Don's untiring efforts, all was not well in Don's life. Following a heart attack, Don chaired his last club meeting on August 29, 1994. For those who know Don intimately, he had given "his all" as he always does. But he remained driven.

"I joined the Australian Soccer Federation early in 1995 and was elected by the stake holders as a Commissioner / Director. I attended my first meeting in this capacity on March 2, 1995. One of my main portfolios was the amalgamation of (soccer) referee organisations Australia wide. Another responsibility centred on the integration of Women's Soccer to unify all players at national and state levels under the banner of Soccer Australia."

Don announced his retirement from Soccer Australia on February 28, 1999 and was asked to continue his connection as chairman of the Soccer Australia Honours Committee, a position he held until 2007.

Don's book describes his involvement in soccer telling all about the politics, lobbying and games that people played behind the scenes. The details underscore just what was involved as well as being taxing on Don's stamina and patience. He deserves every accolade possible.

Don's list of awards recognizing his achievements is extensive. Notable awards include appointment as a Life Member of the Victorian Soccer Federation, being awarded Cavaliere Ufficiale Officer of the Italian republic of Italy (by the Italian government), being inducted into the Hall of Fame by Football federation Australia and being awarded The Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM).

Currently he is heavily involved in lobbying and driving public support for the Gippsland Heritage Walk at Kernot Hall Lake in Morwell. His vision here will complement the Gippsland Immigration Wall of recognition for which he is extremely proud of having been the Project Manager.

While Don acknowledges "a very fortunate life in my adopted homeland", it's his vegetable garden to which he turns for solace. "I grow nearly all our vegetables." This is his comfort zone.

He shows me the framed picture of his "big toy". Depicted is a DIFABRO truck carrying a huge piece of fabricated steel construction starting its slow journey from Tramway Road to Loy Yang. The blue and white Kenworth has 132 wheels to carry the 10 metre wide, 8 metre high, 43 metre long construction "piece" which weighed approximately 270 tonnes.

One then acknowledges the soil around Lama Dei Peligni must have been fertile enough when it produced a fine citizen and successful business person known to all as Don Di Fabrizio.

Postscript - the author wishes to thank Maureen and Don for allowing access to a huge variety of personal material. It's been an honour to be allowed to enter your life for a moment in time.



Don and Maureen's 50th wedding anniversary