Profound contributor to ANU community

Ruth Strohahl was born in Cuxhaven (northwest Germany) on 20 March 1915. She enjoyed an active healthy childhood and early years in the busy fishing, naval and shipbuilding town at the mouth of the river Elbe where it meets the Baltic Sea. The time in Germany that was soon to feel the approach of Nazism.

On 30 January 1933, the Reichstag in Berlin was burned — probably intentionally by the Nazis themselves — and all hell was let loose as the Nazis turned to power. Even at this early age (she was then 17) Ruth demonstrated courage, independence of thought and boldness of action; she refused to give the Nazi salute at school and frequently found herself in conflict with the forceful attempts at brainwashing by the teachers.

Family and friends, as well as Ruth’s parents, knew she was in — and it was decided that she should leave for England.

She found a welcoming haven in the home of the Browns, who lived near Reading in Berkshire. They introduced her to the English way of life and to a fuller grasp of the language.

An examination she obtained a bursary to enter Edinburgh University. At this time. Ruth had been noticed as a brilliant student with great potential by Miss Phyllis Rackstraw, Warden of Masson Hall, a women’s hostel at Edinburgh University. Miss Rackstraw’s help and influence, Ruth soon found herself in possession of a scholarship to London University’s famous School of Economics (LSE). At LSE, Ruth studied sociology and obtained an Honours degree.

Again with the help of Miss Rackstraw, she obtained British citizenship. As a party in Gordon Square, Bloomsbury, she met Heinz Arndt, who was studying at Oxford but now had a postgraduate scholarship at LSE.

The exams over, Ruth left Cambridge and went to London to do some “hands-on” activity as a volunteer social worker in the city. There was great need for such trained people at the time. Thus she became a fully qualified social worker.

The Arndts were married on 12 July 1941. Ruth’s career as social worker had to go on temporary hold when they searched for a new accommodation and settled into married life.

They came to Australia in 1947 when he accepted a position as a senior lecturer in Sydney University’s Economics Department.

They spent four years in Sydney, then moved to Canberra where he became Professor “Joe” Burton, Principal of the Canberra University College, offering higher, honors, and postgraduate courses.

He was appointed (at the same time as Alec Hope to the Chair in English) on 1 January 1951.

It was in Canberra that Ruth was able to give real expression to her first-class skill and vocation for helping fellow human beings. This she managed to do despite her obligations as housewife and mother, domestic support for her academic and three healthy children. Her particular concern was to help “New Australians”, refugees and other immigrants from Europe.

She was a woman of boundless energy and she gave to Canberra and its people all she could spare — and more — right up to her death. Ruth knew the great value of having easily accessible, voluntary adult education organisations, like the WEA in England. In Canberra, the Arndts started a Department of Adult Education at ANU.

She taught German and Economics at the Boys’ and Girls’ Grammar Schools and was a research officer in the department of External Affairs.

She was on the Governing Board of the ANU’s new residential college, Bruce Hall. From 1969 until 1975 she was an elected member of the ANU’s Council. She was president of the “Ladies Drawing Room” in 1982, following her friend, Molly Hazley.

In a congratulatory letter, ANU Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ian Chubb, lists her significant contributions to the University.

“Her influence on the University was profound, not only as a result of her own direct participation in University affairs, but also through her role as the supportive spouse of a distinguished member of the academic staff and mother of three of our alumni and of a currently serving member of the University Council.

She was a prolific correspondent, cutting clippings from newspapers and sending them with letters, to recipients around the globe.

Ruth’s life was not all work. There was plenty of fun — it was a happy household, with a vigorous social life. She and Heinz raised three bright children who graduated with science degrees at the ANU. They all have had successful careers — and Ruth was proud of them.

The Arndts had a wide circle of friends and a particular interest in the Canberra Repertory Society. Finally I should mention the Ladies Dining Group, to which Ruth was passionately devoted in recent years.

She enjoyed reading, corresponded with authors, wrote book reviews, but probably just as much, she enjoyed the discussions with her friends.

Ruth died on 20 March, her 86th birthday. She is survived by Heinz (her husband of 60 years), children Chris, Nick and Bettina and nine grandchildren.

Marcus Faunce

Woo, well served for work in the field.

Motorbikes, abseiling and cafes are the norm in the life of the armed forces soldier — at least if you watch the ads.

We sleeping bags, cold mornings, blisters, cold food and the glares of “crusty” sergeants is a little closer to reality — well, at least for me.

A heavy pack, a rifle and a lot of walking was my lot following school and prior to university. Exercises — the fieldwork of the Army were a deprivation of fresh food, hot showers, beer and most things valued in the outside world.

However grim this may sound, the rewards — a sense of achievement found in overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles together with the lifelong bonds of mateship, made it worthwhile.

I had a great time in the Army, however I had mixed feelings about where such a career might take me. After seeing the light I left the ADF and aimed for a degree at the ANU. During the course of that degree and further study I have had the opportunity to participate in a lot of field work.

Let me share some anecdotes of my experiences and place those into the context of my time in the Army.

My first field trip. Leading up to the big day I had attended all lectures during which much time was focused on what to bring and what not to bring.

I was a little worried with what was suggested as necessary, was it the NSW South Coast or Antarctica?

I boarded a bus full of what I am sure my former sergeant would have described as a bunch of “drug smoking hippies” late on a Friday afternoon.

Our destination was the ANU Field Station Kioloa with a toilet stop in Braidwood. Braidwood, or to be exact the public bar of the Braidwood Hotel, was where my university fieldwork career very nearly ended.

Luckily a number of the lads and I were spotted chasing the bus down the main street. After such a poor start I thought things could only get better and they did.

Revelle 7.30pm, a lot of hours after first light, a jog on the beach and an early morning swim relaxed me enough to become suspicious of what was to follow.

Bacon and eggs, toast, a bowl of cereal all washed down by a couple of glasses of orange juice, a long peaceful vista across the open fields confirmed that Army standards I was in field work heaven!

It’s not all beer and skittles in the field as many of you may know. You down sides, sweaty, long and hot days digging holes whilst your of the field worries about her split fingernails and modelling career.

“Do you think I am the same size as when I left Canberra?”

There is the constant battle to be understood by old-fashioned farmers who didn’t have a geographic positioning system in“their day” and surely do not understand satellite imagery.

It’s hard work to not let your fear get in the way of good conversation when co-piloting a low flying Toyota commuter in the hands of a wise but lead-footed supervisor — much the same as the feeling of fear before your first day at the firing range.

In both situations — be it the Army or university, the lessons learnt along the way are the smaller part of the story. The interactions between researchers or soldiers — the personal relationships — are the lasting memories or the footnotes of fieldwork.

Lachlan Newham

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