



**On the release
of his memoirs,
Max Kirwan
spoke to *David
Dowsey* about his
many adventures
inside and outside
the automotive
industry**

Good one, Max

Your mother and father were hard workers. Was it they who gave you an early education in success?

Without a doubt. My mother was a person who had to succeed; my father likewise. They imbued me with a 'you have to get going, don't be part of the ruck, show them what you can do' attitude.

You hated school and conjured some pretty clever ways of playing truant. What was it that you disliked about formal education?

We had classes of 52 kids and the teachers couldn't give any special time or service to any one of us because of that. For some reason I flunked arithmetic in the early stages and there was no one there to go back over it and bring me forward again. So I went from grade to grade and used to fail arithmetic constantly. There were also three boys at Collingwood Technical College who waited for me on the stairs and pushed and shoved me around. I put up with that for a few days, but I decided I wouldn't attend school and went swimming (for seven months) at Melbourne City Baths with the fourpence lunch money mum used to give me. I would ride my bike there and it was threepence to get in and a penny to buy a stale Boston bun. But then one day my sister asked one of the teachers how I was going and he had never heard of me. So it blew up from there. I then went back to Fairfield State School but left the day before I turned 14 and got a job.

You were a bit of a lad in the early days. What mischief did you get up to?

There was a lack of surveillance, but I don't blame my parents for that. I used to run with a group of older guys and they used to bunk me up to places and then I would let them in, like the local library and local hardware store. I also used to be able to slip through the bars at the newsagent and I would go in there and read some books...

Smoking was an early habit, but it took a toll on you, didn't it?

I went to Thailand on a Mazda-organised trip (in the 1970s) and came home with the 'Australian rights' to a pinched lung. My local doctor didn't know what it was so he sent me to the government X-ray clinic in Collins Street. They were able to identify the pinched lung, but the doctor said, 'While you're here I want to show you something, your lungs are as black as the ace of spades. If you continue with this you aren't going to live very long. I was a very heavy smoker: a pipe during the day and cigarettes during the evening. But I thought, 'I can't keep doing this', so I reached into my pockets and pulled out a pipe and a packet of cigarettes and screwed them up in front of the doctor. I never smoked again. I am 88 and still alive.

Australian Paper Manufacturers was your first employer. I imagine your first job wasn't exactly a plum role.

I walked in and someone said, 'You look a pretty fit young fellow, I have just the job

for you.' So he took me down to Number Two cutting machine, which cut large blue sheets of paper to wrap around matchboxes. When I went home my mother nearly had a fit; I had fine blue particles in my hair, up my nose, everywhere. So my mother rang up the next day and asked that I be given another form of duty. They gave me a job sweeping the floors, which was more my line. Then the manager saw me and asked me if I was interested in doing 'sedentary duties' and if I owned a suit. I arrived the next morning in a short-pants suit, which wasn't what they were expecting.

Joining the army at 15 when the Japanese had invaded New Guinea may have been a brave move, but it didn't please you mother, did it?

When I volunteered for the army the recruiting sergeant in the Town Hall took one look at me and said, 'You're not going to tell me that you are 18, are you?' 'No Sir, I'm not, but I only want to join Home Defence, so yes I am 18.' I was transported to Royal Park and inducted into the Australian Army and was given a uniform and slouch hat. I put those on and went home on the train and my mother nearly had a fit. But my father argued that discipline might do me good and that I was only in home Defence so I should be let go. I went and joined the band at Royal Park; I could play most brass instruments and the drums. Then I heard that people were being called to join the 39th Battalion and that I could get in from Home Defence. I joined the 39th Battalion and loved it; I played in the band. When my mother heard that I was going to New Guinea she called the General at Southern Command headquarters and told him that her fifteen-and-a-half year old son was not going to New Guinea. A lieutenant came to see me and said that if I thought I could get my mother's permission I could go home and try. As soon as I arrived home my mother took one look at me and said 'No!' That was the end of that. The next day I went back to the barracks and the lieutenant asked if I had my mother's permission to go and I said 'Yes, Sir.' He then asked for the permission papers and I told him that I had lost them. I was left on the parade ground while all my mates were shipped off. I was very upset with my mother, until I understood what she saved me from. There were 1,000 men in 39th Battalion and 460 were killed.

You saw your first real business opportunity just after the war when the Australian Army wanted to off-load its surplus trucks. How did you turn this to your advantage?

When I got out of the army I used my deferred payment to buy an old Maple Leaf truck and got a job with the Forestry Commission carting firewood around Melbourne. The truck wasn't up to it so I applied for a loan and bought a new Ford truck. I then saw an opportunity to go up to the Matlock Forest and pull logs out of the mountain and bring them back to Melbourne. Then I saw a letter in the newspaper saying that army trucks would

be sold to the public at auction in Darwin. I talked five guys into going with me and they each paid me £50. At the first sale the first truck sold for £100, they all thought that they could buy the truck for £15, so they all flew home and left me there. I bought all I could with the money they gave me: two trucks and a car and headed off down the north-south road to Melbourne, collecting various bits at army dumps along the way. I doubled my money and went back to the next sale six weeks later. I bought three times the trucks I did the first time. I did this on five occasions.

Running car dealerships in Fairfield, and then Coburg, was your next move.

We had the biggest trucking sales business in Australia. We had over 100 trucks on the property. I then purchased a property on Sydney Road where all the trucks went past. It was there that I first created night car auctions. I went to 3UZ and asked John McMahon to auction cars over the radio. I set this up and went to the Red Cross because the Auctioneer's Act said that 'Any auctioneer that holds a licence shall not auction between the hours of sunset and sunrise unless it is for a church or charity.' In the end the police shut me down.

You once made the front page of the Herald after being booked for driving at 100mph (162km/h). Was there still a bit of the lad in you even after you became a 'respectable' businessman?

In those days, there were no cars on the road after 11 at night. It was one o'clock in the morning and I had just left a nightclub called Ciro's with my partner, Val Richardson; he had a Single Spinner Ford sedan. I said 'I'll give you a race.' I was in a very hot Riley. Off we went racing. We were doing over 100mph and I lost him. When I got to my street I turned the corner slowly, then suddenly a Ford Single Spinner came roaring around the corner and out got four coppers. I had been racing a police car; exactly the same make and model as Val's car. I became Frank Galbally's first case because his brother, John, couldn't service me. I had been in at Ciro's celebrating the sale of an expensive truck and had a large amount of cash in the glove box. I picked Frank up on my way to court that day and, through the cutting at East Ivanhoe, I could see this policeman who booked me driving this car that went past quickly. Frank asked me how fast he was going and I knew that he was doing at least 10mph faster than the speed limit. Frank said, 'Oh, that's okay.' So we got to court and Frank said, 'I don't like the guy on the bench, he's a hanging judge. Have you got two quid?' So he went out and bribed the clerk of the court with the two quid to have us heard by the magistrates at the back of the court. He said 'Stand there and look innocent.' 'Your honour, my client thought that he was being chased by thugs and he had a substantial amount of money hidden in his car. He thought they were going to take the money from him. He had no alternative but

to try to out-run them. So that's what he did'. Then the detective who booked me stood up in the dock and Frank asked him if he believed in breaking the speed limit. He said 'no.' Then why did I see you breaking the speed limit on the way to the court this morning; I timed you?' Frank made him look silly. He was furious. The magistrate then fined me two quid and I went away. It taught me a big lesson: I never broke the speed limit in the metro area again.

You opened a Ford dealership in 1956 with no capital. How did you achieve this?

Richardson and Kirwan had restarted interstate (truck) transport; there had been a shortage of petrol after the war. We generated £1 million; it was a lot of money. Then came the recession in 1952 and interstate transport came to a standstill; the drivers were leaving the trucks by the side of the road. The law was different back then; you could close a business down one day, walk away from it and start up a new business name the following morning. A lot of people were doing that. I made the decision because I didn't want to be seen to do that. I started to pay the money back (£1 million). I was broke and the trucks were second-hand older models. At the time we were acting as a sub dealer to Bayford Motors; we were selling more Ford trucks than they were. So I said to the Ford representative 'I want to be a full dealer'. I was told there was a small dealership in Essendon called Viscount Motors and that I could buy it for £15,000. I went to my bank manager and told him that I had no cash. I was told that the bank liked the business I was providing and that they would loan me the £15,000 to buy Viscount Motors. I bought the dealership, but that was stupid because I then had no cash. I decided to proceed because cash flow was pretty good. I grew that business from a 'C' dealership to an 'A' dealership inside 12 months. Falcon had just been released and I was selling every one I could get, so I was offered another franchise and Ford offered me three times the Falcons I was getting at Viscount Motors. It was a dream time. Then Harold Holt introduced the credit squeeze, which was the worst act, financially, that had

ever been introduced into Australia. More than half who had businesses went broke; I had 36 orders and overnight I had none; they were all cancelled. I was left with a huge mortgage and only a little amount of money and not much future with Ford; we just couldn't sell any more Falcons.

During a round-the-world trip that you won from Ford Australia, you met Henry Ford III, but the trip finished with some bad news, which led to the Ford Marketing Development Plan. Tell us about this.

When I arrived in America I was told that Henry Ford would not be available to meet me. I was angry, because that was the main reason I went: to see what he was going to do about the situation back home. I had words, and then I was told that the meeting was back on again. When I saw him he said, 'Yes Kirwan, now what's the problem?' I told him. So he brought in this guy who looked after Australia. He told me that because of the credit squeeze Ford could not go ahead with some of the things it wanted to do. Then I met Henry Ford again and told him that it was necessary he visit Australia to see the dire straits his Ford dealerships were in. I assured Henry Ford that if he didn't put in a dealership assistance program he would lose his dealers. When I got back home I went to my bank manager and said that I couldn't continue in the business conditions I was in. The bank manager gave me an assurance. 'If you are in trouble we will help you out,' he said. I told him that I had a plan that would work, but I needed £20,000 to make it work. I was confident the bank would help but when I got to work the next day ESANDA had put a receiver in. I was out of business with Ford that day. Henry Ford III came to Australia six weeks later and refinanced half of the dealerships.

It was you who approached Mazda in 1967 and became a Mazda dealer in 1968, when the Japanese company was not widely known in Australia. Why did you do this?

After I finished with Ford, I had been selling 'bombs' from, eventually, four sites, and I had a good name. So I had Datsun and Volvo approach me asking me to represent them as a dealer. But I eventually settled on Mazda. I went with them because I looked at their

products and they were building two beautiful cars: the 1500 and the 1800.

They were tight and gorgeous to drive and own. I was looking ahead and thought Mazda is for me. They appointed me and I told the others I wasn't interested. I later became a Nissan (Datsun) and Volvo dealer along with many other makes.



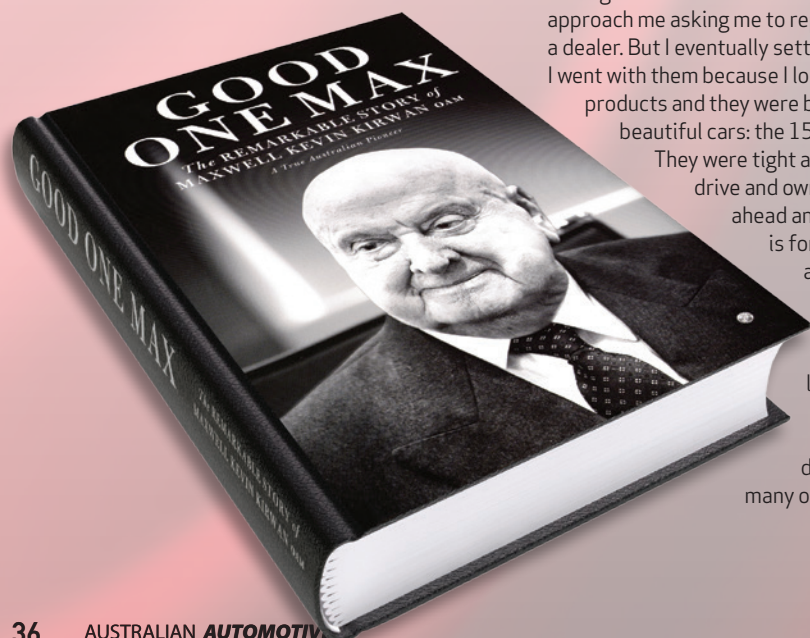
In addition to being a successful dealer, Kirwan's voice became well known to Victorians during his radio stint at 3AW that lasted over 20 years

You have been with Mazda through its whole Australian journey. How have you seen the company develop?

Mazda does particularly well in Australia. Early on it was a struggle to have the brand accepted with the public who saw it as just another bucket of bolts from Japan. But I knew. In those days, if you sold 30 cars a month you were a big time dealer for Mazda. I eventually became Australia's largest Mazda dealer in terms of volume, which I still am from a solo site. In one month we sold 367 Mazdas, and all to private people; none to fleet. That was a giant effort. I had a strong belief in Mazda. I was sent to Japan to inspect the factory in Hiroshima. I saw the future. In the meantime I had other franchises, but Mazda was always the number one in my eye. In the last eight years they have had the most phenomenal run in the history of Australian motoring. They have such fantastic product. The attitude from Mazda toward the dealers is fantastic too.

You helped form the Australian Mazda Dealer Association (AMDA). How did that change the way Mazda dealers related to Mazda Australia and with the factory in Japan?

The big thing in new car business in those days was discounting. I could see Mazda heading down that path. I had learned from my experiences with Ford that a lot of things could be achieved at dealer level by negotiating with the factory. I started out by persuading the Mazda dealers in Victoria that we should have a Mazda dealer council. We started to put together a plan that is still there today. The people who want a discount will ring you and ask how much you will sell the car to them for. Then they will ring the next dealer and the next dealer until they get the best possible price. (Other dealers) are still doing it today. They are fools to let that happen. I then started the Australian Mazda Dealer Association.



I spent a lot of time in Canberra fighting for our rights. AMDA is, I believe, the best dealer council in Australia, possibly the world.

Where did the well-known slogan 'Good One, Max', come from?

I had a lot of success with that. We were trying to come up with a slogan that would distance ourselves from the rest of the industry. We were working with a young advertising agency and they came up with it. When I heard it I liked it straight away, and have used it ever since.

You approached radio station, 3AW, in 1970, which led to you hosting your own show that lasted 23 years. How did you make that happen?

It started off as a valuation show on Friday nights. It became very popular; my ratings were good. In that 23 years I became quite good at what I was doing. Valuing cars didn't grab me so Muriel Cooper suggested that I should do an interview show with prominent people. I got the racing car drivers, like Alan Jones; Peter Brock was a regular and so was Dick Johnson. I was talking to the prime minister's office one minute and the transport minister the other. I would also interview Bob Davison from the VACC regularly. I recorded interviews and put them to air. I would put in two days work to produce a one-hour radio program and was not being paid; it was terrible but I was enjoying the popularity and people were buying cars from me because of it.

You became VACC President in 1985 at a difficult time for VACC and its recently departed dealer group AADA (Vic). What did you do to repair the rift?

I could see that there was a personality problem with VACC CEO, John Collins, and AADA (Vic) president, Graham Holmes. Graham objected strongly about what the CEO was doing to the dealers. He said, 'We are going to leave the VACC because of the lack of assistance and the CEO's attitude towards

the dealers.' So AADA (Vic) left and moved down the road. Then Graham Holmes resigned and I stepped up and started to have a good look at the situation. We had no funds, so Warren Smith and I worked out that we had to come inside the VACC where we belonged. I then started the negotiations with Dennis Dean, who was the AADA (Vic) president then, and told him that it was a personality conflict. So I started negotiations with, Bob Davison, the stand-in CEO of VACC, that still stand today. That gave us the rights that the previous CEO had been trying to take away from us. It was a good agreement. We didn't get everything that we wanted but we could work with it. We then got the resignation from John Collins. Bob Davison took over; we came back inside the Chamber and have been there happily ever since.

At a dinner held by the controlling Dutch company, AMEV, you did the unthinkable and told them that you would consider its offer to buy VACC's shares in VACC Insurance Company Ltd. Why?

VACC was getting \$1 million in insurance commissions and no one wanted to upset that; we couldn't operate without it. So it was felt that we couldn't say anything except, 'Let's keep the association and keep the one million going.' So each past president gave the same reply: 'No thank you.' But what I said to John van Herwerden was: 'give us an offer for our shares (49 per cent), then. Make it a non-back

and fill offer. I want it to be your best offer. If it is all right I will give it my best consideration and refer it back to the Board. They were a bit shocked but I got an offer from them fairly quickly for \$58 million, which surprised me; I thought it might be about \$40 million. I quickly I did an exercise on that and, compared with the \$1 million we were getting I could see that we could get \$7 million at bank rates. In the meantime, the president at the time attended all VACC Insurance Company Board meetings. I could see that the insurance company was going nowhere interstate. It was almost impossible for VACC Insurance Company to go forward. But what could we do with \$58 million? Well, properly invested by a committee and with very good advice we should be able to get up to 12 per cent on our money. I then had to convince the Executive Board and the Board of Management. And boy did that take some doing! I worked very hard on it. One guy rang me and told me that he was going to kill me. Another guy said that he was going to beat me up badly. I didn't tell anybody because I didn't want to upset things, but I acted very carefully. I finally got Board approval. We sold the shares and we got our \$58 million and VACC Insurance left the country. If we hadn't done that we would be broke like the rest of the (motoring) associations across the country. Instead, we have \$150 million.

You have received an OAM, carried Commonwealth and Olympic Games torches; you are celebrated; not bad for a cheeky kid who couldn't do his maths at school. What do you attribute to your success?

I have always been a community-minded person and have always contributed whatever I could from my income to community projects. I felt that if things needed doing, I would do them. I have always liked helping people and I have done that my whole life, as my history of awards will show. ⚙️

Kirwan's tenure at the helm of VACC saw the organisation achieve a considerable financial windfall, vital to its future

