



## Donald Stewart Thomson

25 March 1942 – 2 July 2022

Don to many, and Thommo to just about everyone else, Don Thomson was a timber man, and a legendary forester's forester.

Thommo was born in Lilydale on 25 March 1942 and his earliest years were spent with his grandmother on a poultry farm in Bayswater, while his father Norm served in the RAAF.

When Norm returned from the war in 1946 the family returned to Lilydale for a while, but Norm worked for the National Bank, first as a bank clerk and later as Branch Manager, and they moved to Terang in about 1951.

It's often said Don had sawdust in his veins. His grandfather Bill Thompson was the skipper of the Paddle Steamer Adelaide from 1890 to 1912 which hauled red gum logs on the Murray River. He later became foreman of several sawmills at Echuca and Moama.

Don was a keen scout as a lad and enjoyed time in the bush where he always felt comfortable.

But in the late 1950s Don became increasingly disenchanted with the prospect of staying in the district and looked wider for an interesting outdoors job. Options included the defence force, surveying, agricultural science and forestry.

Forestry appealed, not only because it was outdoors, but it also offered a whiff of adventure. Besides, full scholarships were offered, plus the additional princely allowance of £2 per week while in residence.

His application was handwritten and supposedly fairly rough but was supported by a couple of solid references. During the

subsequent written exam in the Terang High School Principal's office, Don struggled through and thought there was no way he would be accepted. Notification of an interview came as a great surprise; followed by even more amazement at being accepted for the three-year course at the Victorian School of Forestry (VSF) at Creswick from the beginning of 1959, along with 11 others. Don was only 16.

It was while at Creswick that Don met his future wife, Jan, a Ballarat girl, at a Church picnic.

Upon his graduation from VSF at the end of 1961 with a Diploma of Forestry, a full career path with the Forests Commission Victoria (FCV), and its successors, followed...

In 1962, like so many other young VSF graduates before him, Don was posted to the forest assessment branch.

His first job was camping at Horseyard Flat near the Moroka Hut in Gippsland to assess Alpine Ash timber stands. The next two to three years included assessing Red Gum at Lindsay Island on the Murray River between Ned's Corner and Renmark. This was followed at Cann River and Errinundra Plateau to look for timber across large tracts of virgin forests. The bush was thick and full of snakes, scrub ticks, wild dogs, goannas and kangaroos. But the fishing in the wild and remote rivers was good.

In 1965, Don married Jan and secured a more stable job at Mansfield Forest District. This was followed with other FCV postings to Nowa Nowa between 1967 and 1971, then to Myrtleford as the Assistant District Forester between 1971 and 1977. It was here that Don completed his thesis on "*Low intensity prescribed burning in three Pinus radiata stand types at Myrtleford*", to gain a Diploma Of Forestry (Vic).



From 1978 to 1979 Don worked at Taggerty before being promoted in 1980 to Rennick on the South Australian border as District Forester. His last posting with the FCV was at Erica from 1983 to 1985.

From mid-1983, the Forests Commission was disrupted when the State Government announced the creation of an amalgamated Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands (CFL).

The Commission then relinquished its discrete identity when it merged into the newly formed department, along with the Crown Lands and Survey Department, National Park Service, Soil Conservation Authority and Fisheries and Wildlife.

After the amalgamation, and prolonged restructure process, the tempo of change accelerated with many more departmental reorganisations and name changes over the subsequent decades.

Rather than looking backwards, Don took the changes in his stride and from 1985 he was appointed the Assistant Regional Manager of Public Land Management at Warragul to 1986, and then later in Traralgon to 1988.

One of the many initiatives of the new state government was the Timber Industry Strategy (TIS) in 1987. The TIS was a very innovative policy which introduced 15-year sawlog licences, regional sustainable yield, Forest Management Area Plans, the Code of Forest Practice, Harvesting Prescriptions and Forest Operator Licencing.

In typical style, Don faced problems by wanting to fix them once and fix them properly. A disciplined and fastidious administrator, he could sometimes become impatient at the rate of progress. But his prodigious work ethic led to the development of comprehensive timber

harvesting prescriptions, which are still in use today.

Don also led a visionary project to calculate the long-term wood flows and define the new roading network to access stands of 1939 mountain ash regrowth across the Central Highlands.

Its centrepiece was building the South Face Road (SFR) which climbs steadily for 25 km, in an east-west direction, across the steep southern slopes of the Baw Baw Ranges in Central Gippsland.

The SFR was without doubt, the biggest and most complex road construction project that the Department had undertaken since the heady days in the late 1950s when the Forests Commission built the Tamboritha and Moroka Roads into the mountains beyond Licola. The SFR took 20 years to complete at a direct cost of \$25 M.

Meanwhile, the forest conservation movement arguably reached the zenith of its influence and power in Australian politics in the late 1980s. And like so many other staff, having his stewardship and care of the State forests he loved being challenged, together with the sight of what he considered slovenly protestors blockading logging coupes, never sat easily with Don.

Firefighting in Victoria's remote and rugged forests was an integral part of life for FCV foresters. It came with relentless toil, a sense of risk, achievement, comradeship, the smell of smoke, dirt and sweat, but with the tantalising prospect of a cold beer at the end of a very long day.

For his sustained firefighting service Don was awarded the National Medal, with a 40-year clasp in 1995, followed by the prestigious Australian Fire Services Medal (ASFM) in January 1999.



From 1997 to 2000 Don held the executive position of Manager of Commercial Forestry for Gippsland Region, where he became well known and respected in timber industry circles. His role also included statewide training, which he approached with his typical gusto and enthusiasm.

But like so many others, Don was eventually caught up in another of the relentless public service restructures and “downsizings” in mid-1999 and elected to retire in June 2000, aged 58, before he was really ready.

His premature departure left many saddened and loyal staff as well as a huge gap in the Departments shrinking pool of practical experience and corporate knowledge.

Rather than remain idle, Don took some consultancy work for a few years after retirement before moving to Inverloch in 2002, where he and Jan spent perhaps their happiest ten years before Jan died suddenly in 2012.

Don was always a volunteer, and in early years supported Scouts, then Lions, and Red Cross. He did countless trips from Inverloch to Melbourne hospitals transporting people to medical appointments for anyone who was willing to get into the car with him. His fondness for driving long distances at the drop of a hat was legendary.

A keen cyclist, Don was never deterred by a headwind or a long hill, but simply changed gears and peddled harder.

And as a devoted South Melbourne Football Club supporter his faith never wavered.

Don was an enthusiastic member of the Retired Forests Commission Personnel Association (FCRPA) in his later years and could always be relied upon for some interesting insights. And as anyone who ever met him can attest, Don undoubtedly held

strong views on many topics and was happy to share them.

In later years Don fought Parkinson’s Disease with his typical focus, grit and determination but it was a losing battle. He never wanted to leave Inverloch and the fantastic friends and neighbours he had.

Don Thomson died on 2 July 2022 at Doncaster in Melbourne surrounded by his loving family including his son Mathew and daughter Jo, and many grandchildren.

A man of boundless and infectious energy, Thommo left his mark wherever he went.

### **Is Don... Is Wood...**

*By: Peter McHugh - July 2022.*



*Graduating class taken at the VSF in December 1961:  
Back (l to r) Geoff Beilby , Brian Fry, Mike Gardiner,  
Peter Lawson, Brian Vernon, Bob McKimm - Front (l to  
r) Ian Smith, Roger Smith, Jim Blain, Garry Leitch, Don  
Thomson, Colin Tolsher.*



