

# the peter bevilacqua story

**TONY DE BOLFO** by TONY DE BOLFO IS A MELBOURNE SPORTSWRITER WITH MORE THAN 20 YEARS EXPERIENCE. HE IS ALSO THE AUTHOR OF *IN SEARCH OF KINGS* (HARPER COLLINS). IN THIS SUCCESSFUL BOOK, TONY TRACES THE LIFE AND EXPERIENCES OF 108 ITALIAN MIGRANTS WHO COMPLETED THE 46-DAY JOURNEY FROM ITALY TO AUSTRALIA IN NOVEMBER 1927 ON BOARD THE SHIP *RE D'ITALIA*. TONY'S GRANDFATHER AND TWO BROTHERS WERE AMONG THE PASSENGERS.

TONY IS A LIFELONG SUPPORTER OF THE CARLTON FOOTBALL CLUB. HE HAS ALSO CO-AUTHORED THE BIOGRAPHY OF ONE OF THE CLUB'S ALL-TIME GREAT FOOTBALLERS, STEPHEN SILVAGNI.

The Carlton Football Club has long been linked with Melbourne's vibrant Italian community. The old Princes Park ground flanks what was once a tight-knit enclave of Italian migrants, who lugged their suitcases from the weather-beaten wharfs of Victoria Dock and Station Pier to the old boarding houses dotted in and around Lygon Street.

Among the migrants was Giacomo 'Jack' Silvagni, who disembarked from the *Regina d'Italia* after seven weeks at sea in September 1924. Jack eventually settled in Canning Street, but not before he'd spent his first night in the new country sleeping beneath a pile of newspapers by a Moreton Bay fig tree in Melbourne's Exhibition Gardens. Back then, no-one had heard of the "Silvagni" surname. Today it's as much a part of the Carlton vernacular as the club's re-worked lyrics of *Lily of Laguna*.

Jack's son Sergio is a first generation Australian of Italian origin, as are Serge's League contemporaries like Albert Mantello. So too is Robert DiPierdomenico, Tony Liberatore and more recently Peter Riccardi, Saverio and Anthony Rocca and the Carlton captain Anthony Koutoufides, whose mother Anna was born in the Northern Italian town of Arcade. In fact, of the 113 senior VFL/AFL footballers known to have been born overseas in the 107 years since the competition's formation, none is listed as having been born in Italy.

But there is one, Peter Bevilacqua.

Peter's story, told for the first time, surfaced after the Carlton Football Club Historical Committee's statistician Stephen Williamson issued the challenge

to locate his whereabouts in early July. The breakthrough came a few days later, following a chance conversation with friend and fellow researcher Lorenzo Iozzi. Lorenzo just happened to ask what was currently occupying my curiosity and when I told him it involved a Carlton footballer named Peter Bevilacqua, Lorenzo's jaw dropped. 'Peter Bevilacqua? My brother married his sister,' he told me. By day's end and with Lorenzo's assistance, I had secured a telephone number for one P. Bevilacqua. I made the call, Peter answered and after hearing my reasons for making contact, made the following revelation. 'I always thought I was the first and only Italian-born League footballer ... in fact I've suspected it for some time,' Peter said. 'I've often mentioned it as a trivia question. 'Who is the only Italian born VFL, VFA and senior soccer player?' People haven't got the foggiest.'

Pietro Paolo Bevilacqua was born at San Marco in Lamis, in the province of Foggia, on the south-eastern side of Italy flanking the Adriatic Sea. He was so named because his birthday fell on the feast day of St Peter and St Paul – June 29, 1933. Curiously, Peter's date of birth was registered with the local municipality two days later on July 1 and is the date which has appeared on all his official papers in the seven decades since.

Peter's father, Raffaele, was one of thirteen children born to Angela and Antonio Bevilacqua in San Marco in Lamis in July 1897, the year the Victorian Football League was formed. In September 1922, Raffaele exchanged marriage vows with Carolina Villani at the local San Marco registry. Carolina presented Raffaele with their first child, Antonio (Anthony), in July the following year, and another son, Giuseppe (Joe), in February 1925.

Raffaele was a farmer by profession, whose life changed inexorably early in 1926. According to memoirs penned years later by his son Joe, Raffaele 'encountered three goat herders who, if no-one was about, would encourage their goats to feed from whoever's property they were passing'. 'They were not aware Raffaele was in the house,' Joe wrote. 'As the goats grazed on the food, Raffaele emerged and was involved in an altercation with one of the herders, leaving the latter slightly wounded. A few days later news was relayed to him that it would be in his interests to migrate. All agreed it was the only way out.'

Raffaele bade farewell to his pregnant

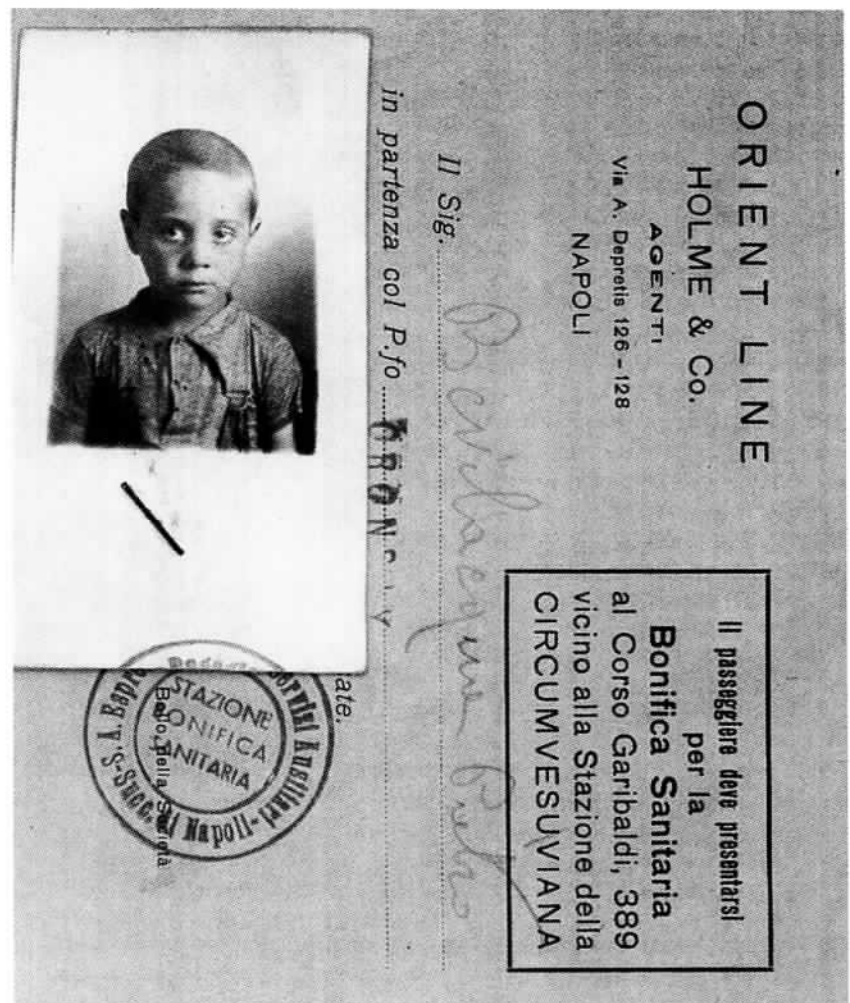
wife and two sons and trod the well-worn path to Foggia, boarding the passenger steamship *Palermo* at Naples in June 1926. He disembarked the vessel at Melbourne on August 4 that year, a little more than a month before his third son, Michele (Michael) was born.

Not long after his arrival, Raffaele obtained work in the various Gippsland locales of Maffra, Stratford, Sale, Lindenow and Bairnsdale where migrants from his old town - *Sammarchesi* as they were known - had earlier settled. Towards the end of 1928, Raffaele landed work on a property managed by an Australian of German descent. He worked the mixed farm - wheat, wool and an orchard - on his own, as attempts to send for his brother were in vain. Raffaele continued to work the property until January 1931, when word reached him of the death of his son, Joe, the previous December. He returned to Italy, reaching San Marco on the feast of San Giuseppe in March.

In January 1932, Carolina gave birth to another son, again named Giuseppe (Joe), after Carolina's father and their dead child. Eighteen months later, Pietro (Peter) was born. Not surprisingly, Peter's memories of San Marco in Lamis are few. 'I remember the dirt roads, running around outside of the house and the dirt floor in the house,' he said. 'I also remember my mother making my bed with a stick, where she used to wrap the blankets over a stick and flick them across the bed. And I remember running around with a split down the back of my pants, which was normal for we kids needing to use a toilet.'

These were hard times for the Bevilacquas, so much so that by 1935, Raffaele was confronted with yet another major decision. Mindful that the yield from his farm was struggling to meet the demands of his growing family, and aware of the growing talk of war, Raffaele again opted to turn to Australia as a future haven. In November of that year he bade farewell to Carolina and his four boys and boarded the steamship *Viminale*, disembarking at Port Melbourne in January 1936.

Upon his arrival, Raffaele took up temporary lodgings in North Melbourne's Italian enclave which surrounded the Queen Victoria Market, until he learned that work was available for a farmhand at Perricoota on the New South Wales side of the Murray River. Two years later, Raffaele managed to raise enough money to arrange for the passage to Australia of

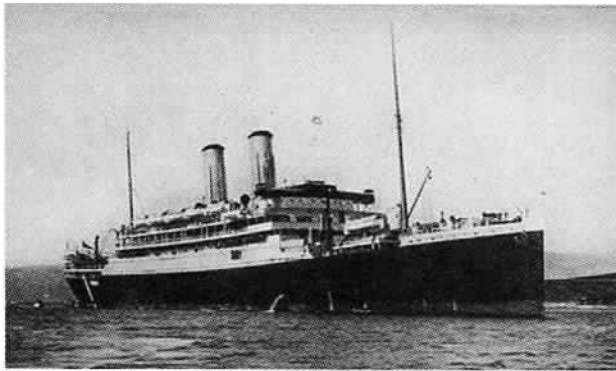


his wife and four sons. On Christmas Day, 1938, Carolina, Anthony, Michael, Joe and Peter bade farewell to San Marco in Lamis and boarded the P & O liner, *Oronsay*.

Peter again takes up the story; 'I remember leaving home with my mother and my brothers and boarding a minibus for the drive through the night to Naples,' he said. 'I remember a bit about the voyage. I befriended an English couple and by the time I got here I was speaking a reasonable amount of English. I also remember Christmas day with all the presents going out to the children, which was unexpected to say the least. The ship staff gave me a fire engine, which ended up over the side and they had to stop me jumping in after it.'

At Station Pier, Carolina and her four boys were greeted by Raffaele. Together the five family members loaded their belongings onto a family friend's Chevrolet truck and made the short trip to their temporary lodgings at 74 Docker Street, Richmond. About a week later, the Bevilacqua's boarded a train to Moama and took up residence in a rental home on the Murray. Michael, Joe and Peter were enrolled into

Peter Bevilacqua's official medical clearance form, issued prior to his departure from Naples to Melbourne aboard the SS *Oronsay* in 1938. This is the first photograph captured of Peter, aged five, as his family could not afford the luxury of a camera in the old homeland. *Image courtesy Joseph Bevilacqua.*



**TOP** The SS *Oronsay*, which ferried Peter Bevilacqua, his three brothers and his mother from Naples to Melbourne in December 1938.

**BOTTOM** The Bevilacqua family, circa 1940s. Standing from left to right: Antonio and his wife Porzia (nee Cotoggio, the aunt of former Carlton footballer Vin), Carolina and Michele. Seated: Giuseppe, Raffaele and Peter. Maria sits on her father's knee.

*Image courtesy Joseph Bevilacqua.*

the local Moama school. How well Peter remembered his first day at school. 'We stood out with the Italian shorts and braces over the shoulders ... there were a few taunts and life as a whole wasn't easy. It was the start of the war,' he said.

In December 1939 the Bevilacquas relocated to Perricoota. Raffaele and Carolina shared a cottage, while the boys slept in shearers sheds nearby. As rent was a little cheaper than at Moama, Raffaele put part of his earnings to a .22 rifle, which he used for hunting rabbits. Joe and Peter improvised, rabbiting with their bare hands. The boys would chase rabbits into hollow logs and Peter would frighten them out with a stick, into the grasping hands of his older brother.

Peter and Joe furthered their schooling by cycling five kilometres to Benarca primary – a one-teacher school - but not long after World War II began in Europe and the family opted to return to Melbourne to better their conditions. In the end, they moved into a rented premises at 125 Barry Street Carlton, opposite University Square. It was October 1940. 'When we came to Melbourne we were the only Italians really there. In fact the only Italians I can recall in the area at the time were the Borsaris, who had a bike shop on the corner of Lygon and Grattan Streets,' Peter said.

'People have said 'You were more Italian than Australian', but back then I didn't know any different. I probably had more fights than feeds in Carlton because you had to look after yourself and I let any racist taunt get to me. I was probably nine at the time when a young bloke a few doors down who was three years older and a few stone heavier had a go at me. I went inside, but my mother took me to task, took me outside and made me put my fists up and say to the kid, 'You whack me and you get one back'. He never troubled me again, but I think he was more scared of Mum than me.'

The Bevilacquas settled into their new surrounds. Carolina found solace in the company of Italian migrant families a short walk away in North Melbourne; families named Sfirro, Battista, Cristoferi and Tenace, from whom the promising Geelong footballer Kane Tenace is descended. It was amid this happy environment in September 1941 that Carolina gave birth to her last child and first daughter, Angela.

Meanwhile Raffaele, having completed an initial working stint in a Victoria Street foundry, landed a job as a gardener at a Kew monastery through the assistance of father Ugo Modotti and later tended to the gardens of the Convent of the Good Shepherd in Abbotsford. Oldest son Anthony gained employment as a window frame maker in Bentleigh; Michael, then 14, went peapicking with a number of Sammarchesi to Yarra Valley locales such as Croydon, Wandin and Seville; and Peter and Joe were enrolled into St George's Catholic Primary School in Drummond Street. There they pursued all manner of sports, not the least of which was an unusual game known as Australian Rules football – a personal favourite of Peter's.

'When we came to Melbourne they put us in grade two, a month later in grade three and the next year in grade four. As a natural progression of that I got through to grade eight and was fortunate enough to win a scholarship,' Peter said. The scholarship enabled Peter to further his studies at Parade College in East Melbourne, but after just two weeks he relocated to St Joseph's North Melbourne. By then he had already developed a healthy appreciation for footy. 'I just loved the game. So too did my brother Joe. We'd previously played together at St George's and we would play together again at Yarragon when I was coaching in 1958/59,' Peter said.

Peter and Joe were indeed gifted sportsmen, but the former had no idea

as to the origins of his sporting genes. Whatever the case, Peter excelled in swimming, badminton, table tennis, football and of course, soccer. 'Soccer only came about because Juventus, then in division one, introduced an under 19 side in 1950, which was the year I and a few other Italians in and around Lygon Street and St George's Carlton joined. I also managed to play two senior matches for Juventus that year,' Peter said.

'In 1951, having played for Juventus, someone from the University Soccer Club invited me to training, and I ended up playing in a match at Fawkner Park. That same day, Uni Blues took on Melbourne High School Old Boys in a practice match at the Melbourne High School ground and after I finished playing soccer I went over to have a look. 'Duncan Anderson, a future Rhodes scholar, and probably the best full-forward in the VAFA, was playing for University that day. Someone had told him I played footy at St Kevin's so at half-time he approached me asking if I wanted to play in the second half. I accepted the invitation and kicked four goals.' Peter ultimately represented University in finals in that pivotal year of 1951 and then a premiership in '52. By then he'd matriculated from St Joseph's (through its St Kevin's Campus) and embarked on medical studies at Melbourne University.

In 1952, Peter completed his Military Service at Puckapunyal. On his return, he took up a teaching course after struggling with his medical studies. Then, towards the end of the year, he realises a childhood dream, accepting an invitation to train with the Carlton Football Club. 'I was always a Carlton supporter and memories of Carlton always come flooding back,' Peter said. 'As kids, me and a few mates used to go to watch Carlton play every week. In the outer there used to be a double gate on the boundary line at the north-east corner of the ground where a policeman used to sit on a horse. We'd open the gate for him to ride onto the ground at quarter time, three quarter time and at the end of the game. 'At three-quarter time we'd follow the horse out and hear Perc Bentley address the Carlton players because the cop knew that when the huddle broke up we'd race off and open the gate for him.

'I was there for 'The Bloodbath' Grand Final of '45 between Carlton and South Melbourne at Princes Park. The crowd tore down 100 metres of fence to get in that day because the gates were locked. Back then, on the southern side of the ground,



there was a stand and it had rafters, so on Grand Final day me and a few mates literally hung from the rafters and had a bird's eye view. I can still see the 'ray of sunshine' that took Ken Hands out and I remember seeing was one of my heroes Jimmy Mooring, the blond bombshell Ron Savage and Bert Deacon playing. Deacon was fabulous as was proven when he won the Brownlow Medal in 1947. 'When I joined Carlton, the club was first class compared with anywhere else ... back then it was a real community involving the spectators, the players and the parents.'

Peter's emergence as a Carlton footballer was recorded by *The Herald* in February 1953, which carried a photograph of the 20 year-old, sporting his Uni Blues guernsey, signing autographs for a couple of local Carlton kids. The caption read; 'Carlton recruit Peter Bevilacqua, a rover from the University Blues, caught the interest of these youngsters as they watch him write out his difficult name in their autograph books ...'.

Sporting the No.5 dark navy blue jumper, Peter turned out for the Carlton reserve grade team through season '53. He strung together a series of creditable performances and after nine rounds was on the verge of senior selection. 'I then played in a reserve grade match against Geelong and with 90 seconds to go, rolled an ankle,' Peter recalled. 'The next week I tried to disguise the injury by strapping it up and training through, but 'Mick' Price, the reserves coach, was awake to it and I wasn't considered for a call-up. In those days you were notified in writing if you were selected, but there was a note placed in my letterbox the following Friday morning saying I was unfit for selection. It took me a few more games in the reserves before I finally broke through to the seniors.'

Carlton's 1953 reserve grade premiership team, coached by 'Mick' Price. Peter Bevilacqua sits with his arms proudly folded across his guernsey in the front row, second from the right.  
*Image courtesy Joseph Bevilacqua.*

That came in the last week of August when the name 'Bevilacqua' was pencilled into Carlton's senior team sheet for the Round 18 match against North Melbourne at the old Arden Street ground. It was a momentous occasion for the boy from Foggia, named as 19th man for the final home and away fixture against the famous 'Shinboners'. So too for the Bevilacqua family, particularly Peter's siblings Giuseppe and Angela, who made their way to the old ground with plenty of time to spare.

While Joe had been a regular at Carlton fixtures, and was literally hanging from the rafters with Peter for "The Bloodbath", Angela had never before been to a game. Arriving at Arden Street early, Joe and Angela took their places next to the boundary fence on the eastern side of the ground. From that vantage point they saw their brother emerge from the bunker early in the third quarter – the first and last Italian-born senior League footballer known.

Peter lived the dream that day. He thought about those who had come before – men like Bob Chitty, Ern Henfry, Ken Baxter, Keith Warburton, Mooring, Savage, Hands and Deacon who all wore the Carlton guernsey with distinction. And he also wrestled with his butterflies. 'One of the difficulties in playing against North Melbourne was that the Shinboners, which included Ted Jarrard and Jock McCorkell (in their final senior appearances) and John Brady, were mostly ex-St Joseph's boys from the old school team with whom I occasionally played,' Peter said. 'As I ran out I remember Pat Kelly saying, 'Get over here you little squirt!'. It was a terrific experience and I think we actually won the game.'

Carlton did indeed take the points, 15.15 (105) to North's 14.10 (94), with Peter savouring barely 40 minutes of game time. It would prove his first and last hurrah at the elite level, as Carlton ended the 18-game home and away season fifth - three wins shy of a berth in the final four as it was then.

That September, Peter lined up for the Carlton reserve grade team, under coach Mick Price, which boasted the likes of Gerald "The Turk" Burke and Dean Jones' father Barney – aptly named too according to Peter 'because he'd rather have a fight than a kick'. Peter featured in Carlton's best players in all three matches of its successful finals series campaign. 'I got a trophy for best first year player and a

trophy for best performed player in the finals series,' he explained.

'In the Preliminary Final, Col Austen lined up on a half-back flank for Richmond and I was one of three rovers changing off him. Between the three of us we managed nine goals which was enough to get the team over the line,' Peter recalled. 'After the game, Laurie Kerr, one of the great players of his time, a real team leader and in his own way as tough as Bob Chitty, came up to me and said, 'Son, you've just got us into the Grand Final'. And we ended up beating North in the Grand Final too ... it was our 15th win from the last 16 matches of that year.'

Peter had every reason to believe 1954 would be THE year as far as his senior football was concerned. But the Victorian Education Department intervened and the 20 year-old, who had not long graduated as a teacher, was relocated to Traralgon where he met a fellow teacher and future wife Christine Underwood - herself the classic 'ten pound Pom' having migrated to Australia from South End in Essex in 1951. Of the relocation to Traralgon, Peter conceded: 'I had no say it'. 'For the first half of '54, I caught the train up and back to play for Carlton and the club paid my fares, but after a while I was told that I couldn't play seniors unless I trained once a week,' Peter said. 'I couldn't fulfil that expectation and Carlton released me to Traralgon on the basis that if I ever returned to Melbourne I'd play for Carlton, which of course I was happy to do.'

Peter lined up for Traralgon for the last nine games of season '54, but made an immediate impact, finishing fourth in the competition's best and fairest award and helping Traralgon into the finals. The following year he was relocated to Moe where there was an influx of migrants precipitated by the expansion of the electricity generation industry. He took to the field for the Moe Football Club as assistant coach, representing the club in the finals series of 1955, the winning Grand Final of 1956 and the finals series of '57.

Peter and Christine had married in St John's East Melbourne in January 1957. Not long after, he took his bride to his new posting at a one-teacher school at Budgeree in the hills near Moe. There, in the residence provided, they began their new life and in November of that year, Christine gave birth to their first child, a daughter Robyn.

Peter furthered his football career by

coaching Yinnar in the mid-Gippsland League in 1957, then La Trobe Valley Football League outfit Yarragon in 1958 and 59. His prowess as a footballer was recognised in 1959 when he took out the Victor Trood Cup and Rodda Medal for the competition's best and fairest player.

In 1960, Peter successfully applied to join the newly-formed physical education sector of the Education Department, after returning to Melbourne University for his diploma in physical education. Peter and his family took up lodgings in a flat at Ascot Vale and, three years later, at a new house at Hadfield on land he had previously purchased. Peter also resumed his playing career with VFA club, Coburg.

By late 1961, in his capacity as Physical Education Advisor, Peter accepted the role at Essendon when the club's resident advisor left for the United States. For the next decade, Peter served under the tutelage of senior coaches John Coleman for six years, Jack Clarke (three) and John Birt (one), during which time Essendon competed in three Grand Finals (two of which involved his old team), for two premierships. 'John Coleman was a tremendous coach in that he had that uncanny ability to get the best out of a player. He got very emotional in matches and I had an excellent relationship with him,' Peter said.

Peter remembered Essendon ruckman Geoff Leek suffering an ankle injury on the Thursday night before the '62 Grand Final. 'From that moment on he had to run every four hours, including through the night, to prove his fitness. He was given an injection and managed to counter John Nicholls and Graham Donaldson, who were two great ruckmen for Carlton,' Peter said.

'Going into the Grand Final in '68, we lost Ken Fraser at full-forward and Greg Brown at full-back. We were on top in the first half, but Ron Barassi changed it all around, probably out of desperation, and it worked. 'The '62 and '68 Grand Finals were bitter sweet for me ... and today, whenever Carlton meets Essendon, I still tell people I can't lose.'

In late 1972, after completing a bachelor of arts degree and lecturing at the Coburg and Burwood Teachers Colleges, Peter was offered a teaching role at Marist Regional College just outside of Burnie, Tasmania. The offer was warmly received by Peter's wife Christine, whose family had settled in that area, and Peter was again on the move

– this time with his wife, daughter and three new additions – sons David (born 1962), Simon (1964) and Timothy (1966). The family settled in Somerset and in early 1973 Peter commenced duties with the college for what would be a five and a half-year tenure.

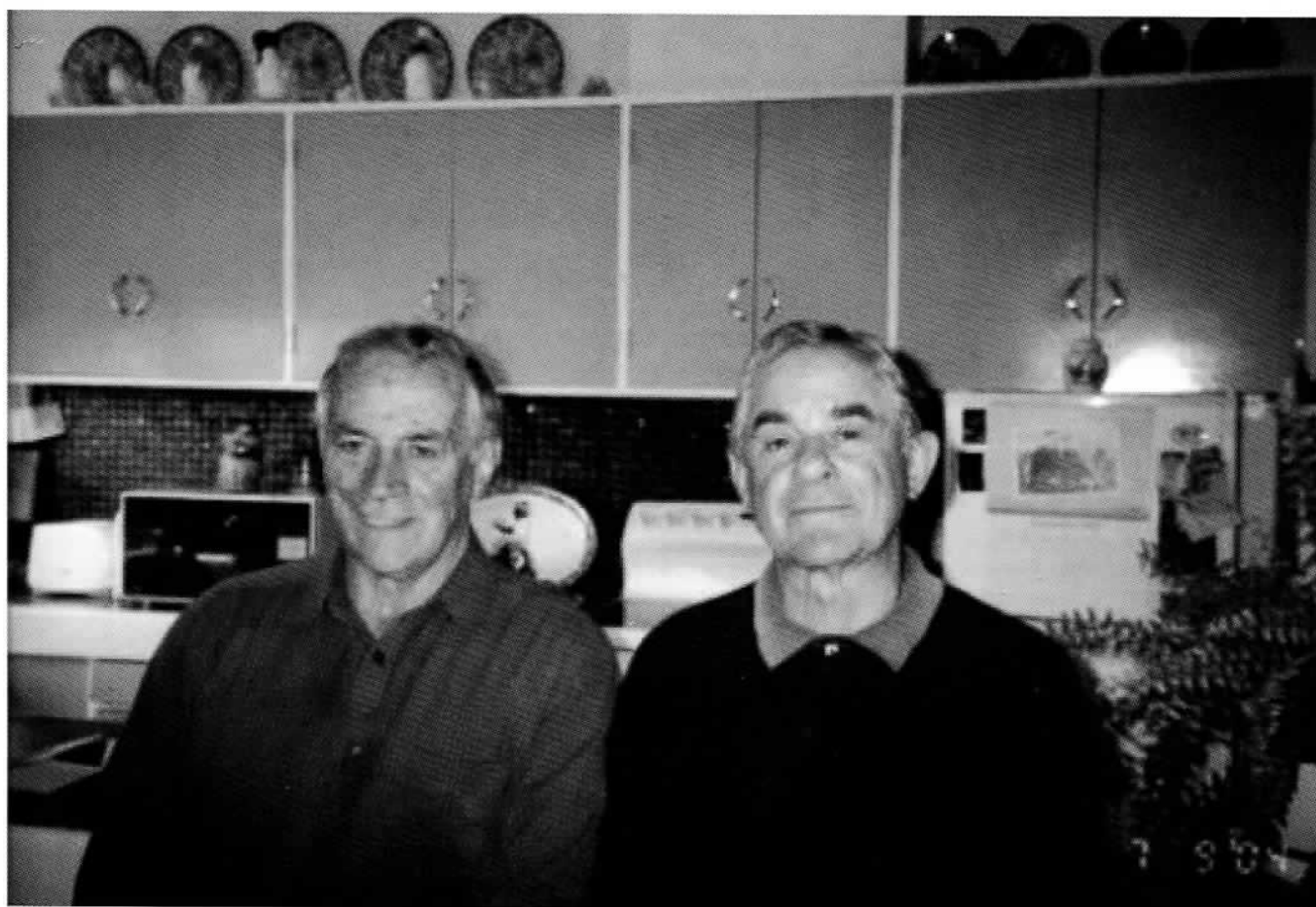
All the while, Peter maintained his involvement with football. In his first four years as coach, Marist Regional College won four consecutive Northern titles and two consecutive state titles in independent schools competitions. In 1977 Peter was appointed senior coach of North Western Football Union club, Wynyard, taking the team to ten and a half wins for the season (after just two wins the previous year) and imparting his wisdom on its players, including Colin Robertson, who would later win the 1983 Norm Smith Medal in Hawthorn's Grand Final triumph over Essendon. The following year he was named Director of Coaching in Tasmania for the Australian National League.

It irks Peter no end that as of 2004, no Tasmanian team is represented in the Australian Football League. 'It's most disturbing as I firmly believe a national team should be based out of Tasmania and would be capable of fielding a competitive team in the national competition,' Peter said. 'Melbourne can't field more than eight teams. They [the AFL] should relocate a team to Tasmania, introduce a semi-moratorium on the recruitment of Tasmanian players and foster that interstate jealousy. After all, there's something like 40 Tasmanian players currently involved in AFL competition.'

In 1981, the family again relocated to Burnie, after Peter accepted the role of Deputy Principal at Marist College. Six years later, he returned to Hobart, where he fulfilled duties as Secretary of the Tasmanian Catholic Education Employees Association.

The following year, Peter's daughter Robyn made the pilgrimage to San Marco in Lamis – 44 years after Peter bade farewell to the old home town.

Today, some 66 years after he grasped his mother's hand and strode down the well-worn gangway onto Station Pier, Peter Bevilacqua's few memories of San Marco in Lamis are revived by videotaped images he has in his keep from his older brothers. 'Unfortunately I've never been back,' he said. 'My wife and I put family before everything and there's virtually no-one left in the old town now.'



Former teammates and long-time neighbours, Peter Bevilacqua and John Chick, pictured recently in the latter's kitchen in Howrah, Tasmania. Image courtesy Peter Bevilacqua.

Peter's mother, Carolina, died in Melbourne in April 1987 and his father Raffaele passed away nearly three years later. Both are buried at the Melbourne General Cemetery in Carlton. Though Peter and his family have spent more than 30 years in Tasmania, his brothers Anthony, Michael and Joe, and sister Angela, together with their families, all remain in Melbourne.

Now in retirement, Peter Bevilacqua lives a full life (he still loves to swing a tennis racquet) and together with his wife Christine, panders to his four grandsons and watches them pursue their sporting activities including football, swimming and almost anything else. Peter and Christine live in the Hobart suburb of Howrah, two doors down the road from John Chick, the former Carlton vice-captain and an old teammate of Peter's from the days of '53.

It's more than half a century now since Peter completed his 40-minute cameo for Carlton ... and yet his place in football history is assured. But did he harbour any regrets with what might have been?

a better life for my wife and my family,' Peter said. 'In the back of my mind I always believed I was good enough to make it, but I was never really able to show it ... in any event, football hasn't been good to me – it's been fantastic to me.'

'I was sorry in a way, but I've helped make