

## Characters of Tomaree

Tomaree Headland stands as the southern sentinel of Port Stephens, overlooking Shoal Bay and guarding the entrance to the port located approximately three hours drive north of Sydney. The conical headland rises approximately 160 metres above sea level whilst its northern shore counterpart, Yacaaba Headland, rises an impressive 50 metres more. Both headlands are heavily wooded and the thin soils overlie a bedrock of andesite at sea level and toscanite at higher elevations. Both types of rock bear testament to Tomaree's volcanic origins. Whilst the rocks themselves display no 'magnetism', the headland itself proves to be very 'magnetic' to both local and tourist alike. People are drawn to Tomaree and for the astute observer, there are characters to be seen and stories to be told by those ascending and descending the kilometre long track and 160 metres of elevation.

Click, click, click. The sound of metal on metal. The man ascending Tomaree and making the transition from the metal stairs to the hand-crafted stone and rock steps appears to be elderly, perhaps 70 or more, but his pace, his sense of urgency, seems to belong to a much younger man. Nodding his head in acknowledgement as he swiftly passes by, the ever-present smile and neatly trimmed beard belong to the familiar face of Bill. The click of his walking pole is the metronome of his stride. Every day, rain, hail or shine Bill ascends and descends Tomaree for two and a half hours, his only concession is to divert to the 'Torpedo Tubes' track on wet days to avoid the slippery brick surface on the descent to the car park.

*'Can't stop now – must do it every day or I may give it away entirely'* he laughs. Although Bill is a large man, currently just under 100kgs, his obsession, his commitment to Tomaree has reduced his weight by over 64kgs. He walks at speed – walking away from a life of obesity, a

life he could no longer lead. His titanium knees and walking pole drive him on into a future in which Bill is fit enough to play with his grandchildren and enjoy the benefits of his new found life.

Bill nods his head once more as a wiry man in his early sixties passes by on his third descent of the headland that morning. Despite the ever-present north-east wind and threatening clouds, he wears brief blue running shorts, (*the style popular in the 1970's*), an athletic singlet and jogging shoes. The wiry man does not walk, he runs. His name is Alan.

*"What's your record number of times?"* I inquire as he passes me yet again.

*"Seven"* he replies. *"Good on ya"* is all I can think to say. *"See you on the next lap"* I add, but he is already gone.

It is only after several weeks of nods and brief exchanges that Bill confides in me and tells me that Alan has had cancer – twice. *"It's in remission, but you never know with these things"*.

Alan continues to run and eat only organic produce. It is his way to fight and beat his disease. Whilst I admire his fitness, it is his determination and his will that I admire even more.

A third man is on Tomaree this day. He neither walks nor runs to the summit. He *has* been to the summit, but it was just part of a much larger journey. He mostly sits – sits and looks out over the rugged coastline, across the azure waters and focuses on some dolphins surfing small swells into the bay. As he sits, he thinks of the past and wonders. *"I bet this looks just as beautiful as when dad was here"*. This third man is American. His name is Charles Jnr.

(Chuck to his friends back home) and during World War 2 Charles Snr. was a marine

sergeant, initially posted to Fort Tomaree and then later transferred to active duty in the Pacific Theatre of War as General Douglas MacArthur fought his way back to the Philippines. Charles Snr. died on the shores of Iwo Jima, and Charles Jnr. never had the opportunity to meet his father. A yellowing bundle of letters, kept as treasures by Chuck's mother had been bequeathed to him once she passed away. The letters spoke of his father's love for his mother and their new born son, and also told of the beautiful clear waters, bays and beaches that surrounded his post at Fort Tomaree.

I reflect on these characters of Tomaree and how the headland meets the needs of these very different men in very different ways.

Click, click, click. Bill is walking towards his future, a future with his grandchildren, each kilogram of weight lost one step closer to that goal.

Alan is running - running away from a disease, leaving illness far behind in the past and moving forward to good health. The faster and greater distance he runs, the further that illness and fears are left behind.

Chuck is also, in a very special way, moving forward, resolving his feeling of regret in never having met his father. By linking with the past he is linking with his father and Tomaree provides that link through time as the beauty of its scenery is unchanging. Chuck sees what his father saw. Tomaree is the bridge across time – the bridge between father and son.

Next time you ascend Tomaree Headland, perhaps with visitors or relatives in tow, be aware that for some it is more than just a walk. Look into the faces of those who pass. Amongst the tourists and day trippers you may be able to discern someone who is different – someone who may well be 'a character of Tomaree'.