RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Shepparton – 14 April 2004

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Ms C. G. Marriott (sworn).
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CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

The CHAIR — Welcome. Under the powers confirmed on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise that any comments made by witnesses outside the precincts of this hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. For the purpose of the transcript would you give us your full name and address?

Ms MARRIOTT — My name is Catherine Georgina Marriott. I live at Yarallah, RMB 57176, Benalla.

The CHAIR — You are presenting here today as an individual. Would you like to give us some brief comments, and then we will ask questions.

Ms MARRIOTT — I suppose farm safety has been a very important part of my last 23 years since I started having children and became aware that having children carries with it a responsibility of care. Since I had the children we have spent all our lives on the farm. There were some things that came up as a mother and there were some things that have come up as a farmer. My husband died when the children were 5, 6, 7 and 9 years old. Before that I had been a wife looking after my children in the house and on the farm. Certainly from a very young age the children were all involved in all of the jobs that go with being a support to the farmer. They were not independent at that stage.

When John died we really had to make a decision about how we were going to maintain the farm as a viable business. At that stage we had an irrigation block separate to a dryland block due west of Benalla. At that age it was hard to discuss with the children the probability that the business would have to be sold if we could not pull together, so each of them was encouraged to take on roles that I believed at the time were appropriate for the age and the knowledge of the child. It meant that they grew up probably a bit quicker than other children. They were not protected from the fact that their father or mother would normally have done the job for them so they had to learn to be resourceful and competent. They took enormous pride in what they were able to achieve and they also learnt that if a job needs doing it does not matter whether you did it yesterday or you did it in the last three days — if it needs doing we still just go and do it.

I have four children, now 19, 20, 21 and 23. One has just finished her degree in rural science and is currently mustering on horseback 30 000 head of cattle with six other people north of Julia Creek. She is a very outgoing young lady who can kill and dress stock and is just capable and competent. I then have a daughter who is doing third-year rural science at Armidale university. She is also extremely competent, having built a tandem trailer by herself last year and now building some cattle yards with the youngest brother, Tom, who finished school last year and will be doing rural science next year. Charlie, who is not of an academic bent and is not interested in wasting his time, went to Longreach Pastoral College, learnt skills up there and has his diploma of Agriculture.

When they were on the farm they were expected to do things, based on the fact that I could also do them, except I would not kill sheep — I was really pussy about that! Charlie had always done it with his father so at the age of 6 or 7 he was able to slaughter a sheep. At that stage he did not know how to dress it. We had a meat saw — with no guards! — and I think probably by the age of 11 or 12 he was certainly killing and slaughtering the meat for the household. We had a cottage let to a butcher, who gave him information on how to do that. As I say — Hannah is a great welder — they are all-round really good kids. They contribute to the fire brigade; they contribute to all of the things that need to be done.

As far as issues when they were growing up, we had absolutely no money. We were living off the largesse of the business community, sometimes for three or four months until the wool cheque came in — not an uncommon event — which meant that we had to be able to do things ourselves to a very large extent. We relied on ourselves, so the skills that were learnt were skills that I felt at the time were appropriate. It did not mean that I did not have my fingers gnawed to the bone on instances. Horseriding was one: I was terrified they would get their feet caught in a stirrup. They then road bareback and were extremely competent riders. Motorbikes are an issue which I constantly have trouble with. If there was an issue that this panel could look at, I would have to stay it would be to make bike helmets compulsory in all situations when riding a bike. I could not press that enough. I think young people have absolutely no conception of how quickly an accident can happen and how disastrous that can be.

I was always there in the evening. We had amazing things happen. One year we got footrot. We had a fire burn 350 acres caused by the SEC line shorting out. We had a flood — lost 1250 sheep. We were swimming hoggets in
the water and there was a green patch always just in front of us, and Catherine, who at that stage was 12, turned to me and said, ‘Mum, I can’t make any of the sheep swim any more’, because it would have been 2 kilometres. I said, ‘No, sweetheart, some of those are just not going to survive’. Those sorts of lessons and opportunities enable children to appreciate that life is a special thing to hang on to, but not necessarily something that will always be there just because we want it to be. She also had a real awareness of death because of what happened when John died, so she is a child who has thought a lot about things. Awful pain, but never mind.

As far as the issues of safety go, I believed then and I still believe we are really lucky to be alive, and living means that you accept with it the responsibility of being alive. That means that you take some risks, which you hope are balanced risks, because if you do not then there is no opportunity to weigh up the negatives and the positives in that. If you do not make a mistake you cannot move forward, so we have been in a fortunate position where apart from probably a once-a-fortnight visit to casualty for one reason or another — we had a permanent booking there — none of them were involved in major accidents except one on a motorbike. It was the only time that a child actually did something that I had asked him not to. We had a tiny motorbike, and young Tom decided that he would go for a ride. He fell off it and the stick went into his leg and tipped all his muscle in under his fat. He had to be operated on to pull it all out again, so he has a hole in his leg. But on the whole things were really managed at a level that I believe they were capable of managing at. It did not mean they did not do some awful things. Thomas beat Charlie, who was older, up the pine tree one day. Charlie was so angry he cut all the branches off and left Thomas sitting like the Christmas fairy up on the top of the tree. He was screaming. That is all part of the role model and the playing and toing and froing of finding out what the strengths and weaknesses are.

If there was a wish list that I had, one would be this: to go to preschool you have to go in and out of town and sit for 2 hours because it is too far to go in and not do anything. You have to do something while you are there because you could not come home, so if there were an opportunity to fund some sort of preschool operation where you went for one day or you had a funded opportunity for a play group, I think those are issues which are very needed. Certainly in the Goulburn Valley at the moment if 10 per cent of the industry has gone out in the dairy industry, there is a further 10 to 15 per cent who are very wobbly, and those children are having enormous difficulty even getting to school, paying the fares and things like that.

The other wish list that I would have is that men need to talk to men, because blokes are very special to be with blokes, but in some of that talking if there could be encouragement to actually discuss issues of the responsibility that they have also in children’s care at a level that they do not normally understand just because it has not normally been their role, and that is something I believe that could be looked at.

Another one is the helmets for bikes. But the other major one — and I was really wanting to do some work with the VFF a number of years ago — was that we run programs which tell parents about the responsibility of raising children in potentially dangerous situations. I believe that children also need to share in that responsibility from a very young age — not as a fear thing but as an understanding — because I believe the children have the capacity to understand absolutely that you do not go near the water because this is what can happen; where death is something they do not understand, nevertheless there are issues where children understand that you do not do that. I was terrified of water. We have a very large dam at home. It is absolutely dark brown. If a child sank in it, you would never find them in time. So I took my children to a swimming club for one three-month period, and they swam laps and laps and learned to be strong swimmers. At that stage I was perfectly happy because at any stage they would not get in a panic; they knew how to swim distance. That was one of the issues. I also did a first aid course because I thought, ‘If something goes wrong, I have no idea what to do’. I think a first aid course is certainly to also be encouraged because it gives you at least some confidence to know the basics if something goes wrong.

I think that is all that I really have to say, except I would like to say that the opportunity that my children have had to be a part of a team has meant that they have been very overworked. They come home for preference every holiday because they know they are going to work some more. When I said, ‘Would you ever want to sell out?’, they said, ‘No. What would we do?’. We have had the opportunity on the farm to make a team of people that are absolutely committed but are also resourceful, independent and strong, and they will stand up and be counted if things need to be said. My fear is that the world has become so legislated that the opportunity for resourcefulness is being taken away and that the world will suffer as a result of that. I think we need strong people and to make strong people you have to give them the strength, the space and the confidence to know that they can tackle problems and not be mollycoddled, so that is about it, I think.

Mr MITCHELL — Do you have an ATV on your property?

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Ms MARRIOTT — Yes, we do. I hate the bloody thing.

Mr MITCHELL — Do you have any comments on that?

Ms MARRIOTT — I make the comment, ‘We wear helmets, boys’. They say, We’re only mustering sheep’. I mean, they are now 19 and 20. You might only be mustering sheep, but you have to get to the paddock, too, and not at 100 kilometres an hour. Until that becomes law, and when I think of the issue of the pushbikes and the drama and the, ‘Oh, I couldn’t’, and all this stuff that went on, and now everybody happily does that. I think if you ride a bike, you wear a helmet. Whether there could be some more funding put into helmets that are not the big heavy bike helmets that are currently required that would obviously be commonsense. Charlie was at Longreach. He is a man who has tested himself, and his mother I have to say, every inch of the way, and he at one stage I know was riding on the Longreach common at 120 kilometres an hour on a mono — monoing. The policewoman stepped out from the gate and said, ‘Do you have a death wish?’. He said, no, he was just enjoying himself. To have had that thing of knowing that you put a helmet on is something — that he would at least have that on. I know some of the stations up there require that. I would be concerned that if they do not wear helmets I could be seen to be liable by WorkCover. That is a real OHS issue. We actually built a new woolshed because of OHS issues.

Mr McQUILTEN — How did you lose John, Cath?

Ms MARRIOTT — Cancer.

The CHAIR — As to the woolshed that you built for OHS issues, would you just expand on the kinds of things you did there? What were the things you put in place to make it an OHS — —

Ms MARRIOTT — I had a young student working through a VET program at home, and one of the days I spent at Dookie with him was — one of the few days, I have to say — on OHS issues, I looked through this list of things, and I thought there were so few of them that I could say were right. We have a raised board. We have rails up the stairs, up the board. It obviously would not be perfect, but certainly we have made as many provisions as we can to have it operating. In the old woolshed we had masonite boards over the floor, because you used to fall through the floor all the time, which gets a bit tedious.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Cath. You will receive a copy of the transcript and will be able to correct matters of fact or grammar.

Ms MARRIOTT — I hope it has been helpful.

The CHAIR — We are up to the time at this hearing where we invite comments from the floor and I am wondering if anybody is interested in making a comment from the floor on farm safety. No. Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned.