

GLENN WALLER MEMORIAL SERVICE
REFLECTIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS, PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL
St Michael's Anglican Church, Vaucluse | Sydney | 23 December 2020

One hears the name “Glenn Waller” and immediately thinks - “Russia”.

That country -beguiling, perplexing, stimulating, and complex - was woven into more than half his - distressingly truncated - earthly life. And it was the focus for almost his entire professional career, both within and outside government service.

For more than 25 years, Moscow has been home to Glenn and Agnes. Their children, Catherine and Julien, were all but born - and were raised – there, harvesting the bounty of learning multiple languages from childhood; experiencing the world through the eyes of those whose system and culture and history differs from our own; and immersing themselves in the boisterous and kaleidoscopic life-scape of Moscow and Russia. The balanced perspective, tolerance, thoughtfulness, and discernment which marked their upbringing in the Waller home is evident in the fine young adults they have become.

Yet despite the prominence of that city, there was a life before Moscow. And there was a parallel life throughout the Moscow years - in their lovely home in the south of France, which was a sanctuary and a gathering place for family and friends, allowing the Wallers to become private citizens again, away from the eternal vigilance of Moscow. Here, Glenn savoured the Russian banya [sauna] he had installed - with adjoining hot tub and well-placed telescope. This allowed him to indulge many of his interests nigh simultaneously: a good steaming followed by a good cigar and good wine amongst the bubbling waters, while cocking an eye upon the universe, feeding his restless curiosity about everything.

Beyond this was their home in Sydney, a beachside apartment in Clovelly, with a terrace view to the ocean in which Glenn would swim daily. From there, I am certain he took comfort in reflecting upon a life lived fully, spent in the devoted company of a loving family and a seemingly ever widening circle of friends.

Glenn joined the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1985. One of his peers, Frances Adamson, recalls how each of the 26 newcomers had to deliver a short self-introduction on day one of the training course. Glenn was brief: “I have a Masters’ degree in Russian and a black belt in karate”. Frances said she felt “seriously intimidated”, being able to muster only an economics degree, matriculation-level French, and captaincy of the school rowing club. She clearly got over it, though: she’s now Secretary of the department.

Two years later, in 1987 – the year I joined the department (with an Honours degree in Russian and no black belt in karate) – Glenn, by now married to Agnes, embarked upon his first posting, as Third Secretary to Mexico City. With that came accreditation to an array of Central American countries. I confess to knowing little about that phase, other than that it gave Glenn fluency in Spanish and a taste for Cuban cigars.

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The latter became a recurrent theme between us and the basis for many of our congenial conversations and catch-up sessions during my posting as Ambassador to Russia from 2016 to 2019.

Glenn once described to me an early visit to Cuba. He was in mixed Cuban company, which included a seductively attractive young lady, who asked if he would join others in having a cigar. Glenn politely declined, saying he didn't smoke. There was a pause, a suggestive smile, and his interlocutor murmured: "Cuban women think that men who smoke cigars are very sexy". Glenn almost overturned the table, reaching for the box

Many years later, Glenn was well established as the president of ExxonMobil in Russia. He was on very close terms with Igor Sechin, the head of the Russian state oil company, *Rosneft*, with which ExxonMobil had clinched a major investment thanks to Glenn's skill, boldness and meticulous professionalism. Sechin travelled widely and often. He was a demanding boss; when Sechin worked, everyone at Rosneft worked, regardless of hour, timezone, or personal commitments. And Sechin worked a lot.

Just before departing on a business trip to Central America, Sechin had asked Glenn if he could bring anything back for him. Glenn casually answered "some cigars" and thought no more about it.

A couple of days later, at about two in the morning, Glenn was jolted out of a deep sleep by the trilling of his mobile phone. Answering groggily, he heard Sechin's voice peremptorily demanding: "Glyenn, Glyenn – what sort of cigars do you smoke?". Barely conscious, Glenn muttered "oh, Cohibas". Sechin barked "ok" and abruptly hung up.

Upon his return to Moscow, Sechin summoned Glenn and presented him with a magnificent, marquetry-adorned humidor full of choice cigars. He had decided at the last moment to drop in to Cuba on his business trip and, while sitting with President Raoul Castro, had sought advice about what cigars he should take back for his friend, Glenn. Castro asked what kind Glenn preferred, and Sechin pulled out his phone.

At that early hour, Glenn had no idea he was talking to someone who would then place an order for a supply of Cuba's finest from the personal stocks of the country's president, who was sitting a few feet away during the phone call.

Glenn's face split into a wide schoolboy smile as he recounted that tale to me. It was just part of the extraordinary world that he and the family inhabited throughout those years.

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Whenever we socialised, I was always struck by the equality evident in Glenn's marriage. Indeed, Frances Adamson's other abiding memory of her training course year was how quickly all the peers came to speak of "Glenn and Agnes". She said it was just a given; one didn't really need to mention the two by name because it was axiomatic that reference to one connoted both.

He and Agnes seemed to weave flawlessly into each other, whether it was jointly preparing an invariably delicious meal (both loved cooking), or seated at the dinner table, conversing and sharing jokes and anecdotes about the quiddities of life in Moscow – which, in Agnes' case, involved years at the Anglo-American School, teaching French and capably administering a very mixed bag of students from both expat and wealthy Russian families.

Agnes truly grounded and supported Glenn, even as she remained her own person. Others bolder than I have described her – admiringly and affectionately, I assure you – as "very ... French".

It has not surprised me that news of Glenn's death has flashed around the world, mostly taking people unawares – for he wore his illness lightly – and generating dismay, profound sorrow, and warm recollections of a man who touched many lives in many countries. Words that recur in these messages include:

'Generous', 'expert', 'kind', 'decent', 'loyal, gentleman' – the latter in a message I just received overnight from former US Ambassador to Russia, John Tefft, who sends his respects and grieves with the rest of us. To these I would add from personal experience: humour, judgement, discretion, and humility.

And while I agree with a mutual friend's, Bobo Lo's, admiration of Glenn's zest for life and readiness "to take a big, fat, swing at things", an abiding impression is that he never allowed himself to be fully lost in the moment, no matter how head-spinning it might have been. Glenn's acute powers of observation and steadiness of judgement meant he remained earthed, always having one foot outside the magic circle in which he found himself.

The numerous reflections that have flowed from colleagues and friends amply illustrate these qualities. I seek your indulgence to run a little long, because there are many who so wanted to be here and whose fondness and esteem for Glenn – the man and the professional - I simply must try to communicate, including to share with his family perceptions of Glenn that may be less well known to them.

Amongst them are a dozen or so former colleagues and friends unable to travel today from Canberra because of COVID restrictions, together with Australian Embassy Locally Engaged

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Staff, Stas Syomin, Maya Darkhovskay, Anna Slavina, and former Austrade Senior Trade Commissioner, Ted Lorenz.

Dr John Besemer, who for many years was the respected head of the Soviet and Eastern Europe branch in the Office of National Assessments, recruited Glenn to ONA and recalls:

“Glenn had an incredible capacity to relate to Russians of every conceivable stripe with skill and success and no trace of flattery, pressure or deception.

“I saw this many times, even though my time in Moscow was limited to occasional and usually brief visits. On one of these we'd been in the Duma [parliament] building. Emerging from a meeting, we were looking to leave the building and return to the embassy when we came upon a large crowd of people approaching us from the other end of a long corridor.

It soon became apparent that this was [the leader of the Communist Party of Russia, Gennadii] Zyuganov, with an entourage of staff members and journalists and photographers. Zyuganov had been delivering a 'we was robbed' speech outside the building denouncing Yeltsin for having stolen the presidential election. As the cavalcade approached us, we both felt the need to stay out of sight. I in particular, as an ONA officer, did not want to appear in a photograph with Zyuganov. We backed up against the wall and tried to look inconspicuous. But suddenly Zyuganov spotted Glenn, and exclaimed with delight “Glyenn, Glyenn!”, seized Glenn's hand and began to pump it vigorously. His next impulse proved to be to introduce Glyenn to everyone in his entourage: “Eto Glyenn Valer, poverenny v delakh Avstraliskovo Posolstva” [‘this is Glenn Waller, Charge d'affaires of the Australian Embassy’]. Glenn exchanged some tactful words with his admirer and some in the entourage and managed then to extricate himself with his usual dexterity.”

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REFLECTIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS, PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL
St Michael's Anglican Church, Vaucluse | Sydney | 23 December 2020

Ian Parmeter worked with Glenn in ONA in the late 1980s and also served with him in the embassy in Moscow for three years from early 1993.

“In addition to his remarkable affinity with Russians, Glenn won extraordinary respect from Australian ministers and politicians who met him. This was no mean feat, given that most members of Australia's political class regard public servants in general, and diplomats in particular, with a mix of suspicion, disdain and derision.

“While at ONA, one of Glenn's earliest calls was that the then-Soviet Union would not use force to quell the centrifugal pressures building among the Warsaw Pact states, as it had in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Making the call was one thing, but convincing Australian ministers was another.

“Remarkably, given that Glenn at the time was a middle-level official, he did that, along with his colleague and boss, John Besemeres, in personal meetings with then-Foreign Minister Gareth Evans and PM Bob Hawke. Both were initially sceptical. But they were able to follow and accept Glenn's logic based on the Soviet Union's military weakness in the aftermath of its Afghanistan war and - a big point with politicians - Glenn's analysis of the personality of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

“But, for my money, his most remarkable success was with the maverick MP for Kalgoorlie, Graeme Campbell, who led an Australian parliamentary delegation visit to Russia in 1995. Campbell was then with the ALP, but was expelled from the party later that year and subsequently joined One Nation.

“Campbell's reputation was for a quick temper and readiness to dispute briefings that ran counter to his pre-conceived views. Glenn was given the unenviable task of accompanying the delegation's visit to St Petersburg via the overnight, dreadfully uncomfortable, "Red Arrow" sleeper train. The auguries were not good. Campbell had had a vodka drinking competition with the Russian parliamentary minder assigned to the delegation. Campbell lost, and was hideously unwell when boarding the train.

“I don't know how Glenn did it, but on the delegation's return to Moscow a few days later, Campbell was eating out of Glenn's hand - smiling and nodding in agreement at all Glenn said.”

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REFLECTIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS, PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL
St Michael's Anglican Church, Vaucluse | Sydney | 23 December 2020

Duncan Allan, formerly of the Eastern Research Group in the UK FCO, was posted to the British Embassy in Moscow at the same time as Glenn.

“Glenn was a remarkable man. I’ve known outstanding Russianists during the last four decades ... but Glenn was among the most outstanding of all. During my years at the British Embassy in Moscow, Glenn was universally respected: no-one in the diplomatic community came close to him as an observer of the Russian scene.

“Yet as I’ve been thinking about Glenn during the last 24 hours or so, what stands out more than anything is the memory of his decency. I will always remember him smiling, gracious, modest, generous with his time, patient and able to lighten a serious conversation with some well-judged humour. He was a true gentleman.”

Harinder Sidhu – a peer of mine, who served in Moscow with Glenn - fondly recalls Glenn’s delight when, in the mid-1990s, he received his first mobile phone.

“Posing as an oligarch, he wandered around the office, phone to his ear, shouting “Pokupai! Prodavai! [Buy! Sell!]”, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.”

David Glass, who worked in ONA as well as DFAT, remembers his first formal meeting with some visiting senior US counterparts in late 1991.

“The Americans spoke first on Russia, and they set out what they thought would happen over the next 12 months, and it all sounded pretty sensible to me.

“But they then admitted that their analysis wasn’t actually their analysis, although they agreed with it entirely and it formed the basis for their own reports. The author of that analysis was Glenn.

“And they said the remarkable thing was that Glenn had actually penned it in 1989, and he had thought the problem set through so thoroughly, with such a deep understanding of the breakup of the USSR and the forces that would be unleashed, that the analysis – remarkably, incredibly - still stood up two years later.”

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REFLECTIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS, PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL
St Michael's Anglican Church, Vaucluse | Sydney | 23 December 2020

David Wall – who succeeded me as Third Secretary in Moscow in late 1991 and for years now has been the Russia analyst at ONA (now ONI), observed acutely:

“He had a titanic appetite for experiencing Russia, from the blasted wreckage of the post-Soviet industrial and rural landscapes to the sordidly magnificent palaces of the new elite He inhaled the country in all its misery and majesty into his lungs like a draft of icy air and then breathed it into his writings and talk. There was no part of the Russian political and economic elite that was inaccessible to him.”

Close friends of the Wallers, Edwin Hill and Christine Beal, are in COVID-induced lockdown in southern France and have written that they deeply regret that they can't be at Agnes, Julien and Catherine's side at the moment.

“Our sadness over Glenn's passing is as deep as for a close family member. We have known Glenn since his university days. We were there within days of when he first met Agnes and remember his excitement over this new, unique person in his life.

“We watched Glenn and Agnes take on all the challenges of diplomatic and corporate life. The honest truth is that Glenn, with his intelligence, bottomless curiosity and lust for life, went further than any of our other friends, seizing every opportunity, largely driven by his love and fascination with Russian culture. We also witnessed how the Luberon in the south of France slowly but surely wove its spell around Glenn and Agnes.

“Glenn was one of our closest friends. His generosity, warmth and wit will live on in our memories for many years to come.”

Bobo Lo is another close friend and former colleague and, with his wife, Siriol Hugh-Jones, has enjoyed an ever-deepening friendship with the Wallers. Locked down in the southern UK, they, too, cannot be here.

“Glenn helped me develop my knowledge and skills, to broaden my interest and deepen my understanding of Russia. ... If I am any kind of Russia specialist today, it is in very large part thanks to Glenn.

“People talk casually about a life well lived. But it always struck me that Glenn of all people knew how 'to live deep and suck all the marrow out of life', as Thoreau said. No less important, he helped make the lives of all who knew him a bit better, more enjoyable, more fulfilling.”

GLENN WALLER MEMORIAL SERVICE
REFLECTIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS, PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL
St Michael's Anglican Church, Vaucluse | Sydney | 23 December 2020

Yet, and in closing, as David Wall notes, extolling Glenn's considerable professional skills and achievements comes at risk of overlooking

“... his real life - a lovely, French, wife and bright beautiful children he always spoke of with immense pride and affection. Then there was ‘the house in Provence’ (what a phrase), the formula one car, the inexhaustible hunt for fineness, whether a sea-otter shapka or a good Calvados. To some, looking from the outside, Glenn seemed like someone determined to live a fairy tale. And there's nothing more Russian than that.”

Our mutual friend, former colleague and Russia specialist, and great admirer of Glenn's, Kyle Wilson, paraphrases one of Soviet Russia's most famous bards, Bulat Okudzhava, whom Kyle knew well from his own student days in Moscow in the 1970s:

Как умел, так и жил - но очень уж умел.
He lived as he was able. And he was very, very, able.

Kyle has drawn a parallel with a figure of almost mystical significance in Russian culture – the ‘sokol’, or falcon. This seems to me entirely appropriate, given the intensity of Russians' respect and love for their culture and its symbolism, which is immortalised in their complex and rich folk tales known as ‘skazki’, one of which is about “Finist the bright-eyed falcon”, who is marked by his devotion to Maryushka, his one true love.

Glenn indeed was a ‘sokol’ in the Russian sense, and not only because he was devoted to his one true love, Agnes, and to his children. Not content to cruise aloft like an eagle, Glenn roared through life at speed and with vigour, soaring to the heights, never lingering or just making do.

Glenn has meant so much not just to his family - with whom we mourn - but to people all around the world, of all ages, and from all walks of life. We all will miss him terribly. But we are also grateful – and much the better – for having had this ‘bright-eyed falcon’ sweep into our lives.

Пусть земля будет ему пухом
May he rest in peace

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REFLECTIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS, PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL
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The cutting room floor
(Bits that didn't make it or were cut on the run, for time.)

That self-control extended – fortunately – to his fondness for speed and fast cars. The Boxster was joined by a Ferrari, and something even more radical and rapid. His delight in these machines was evident to friends who regularly visited the Wallers in their house in Gordes in southern France. Bobo Lo:

“I remember when Glenn drove me in his first sports car in the early morning up to Mont Ventoux ... and how, in 2018, I almost barfed in his latest funky vehicle as he fanged around the corners of the Provencal countryside!

“So many memories come to mind: his wonderful hospitality in Moscow, this at a time when I was a struggling writer. The food was wonderful, and the wines!! I found it amazing that he brought out his best stuff for me to drink, assuming I would appreciate it. Well, my word, so I did!!”

John Besemeres:

He would put questions and comments to them totally unconfessionally, even when they were sensitive. They responded well and often frankly, and clearly confident that their interlocutor would not abuse that trust.

Glenn was a superb analyst and diplomat in matters Russian and much else besides. But he was also, of course, a wonderful person: kind, perceptive, empathetic and sympathetic, devoted to his family, and generous, hospitable and loyal to his friends.”

Another of his gifts which I saw much of on visits and highly valued was his capacity to introduce you to the interlocutor we were about to call on with brevity but telling detail. On one occasion we were calling on Dmitry Rogozin, whose anti-liberal Rodina party, initially strongly encouraged by the Kremlin, had started to do very well, to the point where the Putin establishment were starting to view him as a potential threat. Glenn quickly sketched this in a sentence or two and then said: ‘He’s been to Australia and liked it very much, which will probably show. He likes to make jokes and can smile pleasantly. But he’s a bit sinister.’ It was a perfect encapsulation.

Ian Parmeter

Another memory of our time with the Wallers in Moscow in the early 1990s involved my wife, Sharron. Sharron and Agnes were members of an expatriate group studying traditional Russian architecture. This field was widening in scope as Russia's centuries-old churches and other religious establishments were reopening and being restored following the collapse of the Soviet Union and disestablishment of communism. Sharron, Agnes and some other ladies

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REFLECTIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS, PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL
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in the group were visiting the historic Novospassky Monastery, mostly used as a prison during the Soviet era but given back to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1991, when they were approached by an angry-looking bearded cleric. Without query or apology, he fiercely ordered them to leave. Glenn was hugely amused by this incident, laughing about it for weeks afterwards. His reaction reflected his love of Russian idiosyncrasy but also a deeper insight. As he explained, what had happened demonstrated vividly the rapid recrudescence of Russian Orthodox Church power in the new Russia. As always, he was right, and the Orthodox Patriarch is these days effectively a member of Putin's cabinet.

David Wall

Glenn was the person in the Australian system who predicted with nerveless dash the failure of the 1991 KGB coup against Gorbachev and the 1993 red-brown (communist / ultranationalist) rebellion against Yeltsin, as well as the brevity of the 2008 Medvedev presidency. His reporting on some of these events was praised by allies. This sure-footedness stemmed from his intimate understanding of the code of omerta uniting and underpinning the Russian ruling elite under both Yeltsin and Putin (Glenn was the first person I met in post-Soviet Moscow to disassemble his mobile when sitting down for a business lunch).

Duncan Allan:

In addition to his mastery of the Russian language, he was an exceptional analyst who combined deep knowledge, intellectual incisiveness, empathy, and that elusive 'feel' that only the very best commentators have. He was also a careful listener, a quality that, in my view, is often under-rated. I, for one, owe a debt of gratitude for what I learned from him, then and later.

Peter Tesch

I had first met Glenn when he had a fly-by stint in our Moscow Embassy, where I was Third Secretary, in November 1989. He had finished his Mexico posting and was soon to start a new role as Soviet analyst in the Office of National Assessments in Canberra. A rare act of good sense saw government agree that he should spend some time in Moscow to refresh his knowledge ahead of the new role. We saw little of him in the office: he was out all the time, collecting and renewing contacts, harvesting insights that would infuse and inform the telling and authoritative judgements he would pen later for ONA – analyses that would be read closely in allied capitals and were seminal in shaping US and, more broadly, Western policies in response to the tumult and turbulence of 'perestroika' and 'glasnost'.

I saw a little of Glenn and Agnes socially following my own return from Moscow at the end of 1991. I remember visiting them at their place in Ainslie, in Canberra, for a meal. Glenn offered me a coffee and set about carefully grinding the beans and bringing the brew to the boil. When I said I took milk AND sugar he looked askance and muttered something about "why do people want to take a savoury drink and try to make it sweet?". I realised then both that he had developed a taste for coffee during his posting and that I ought to re-think my obviously errant approach to that drink. I have never taken sugar in coffee since.

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REFLECTIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS, PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL
St Michael's Anglican Church, Vaucluse | Sydney | 23 December 2020

Links

TASS report of ExxonMobil Russia's announcement

https://twitter.com/tass_agency/status/1339898218595946496?s=28

<https://t.co/SQK3gfvKul>

Russia Oil and Gas Technologies journal, reporting ExxonMobil's announcement

<https://rogtecmagazine.com/exxonmobil-in-memory-of-glenn-waller>

The DFAT 'Stud Book' (more formally: 'Statement of Service and Biographies')

WALLER

Glenn Robert

b Sydney 26.5.59; ed Uni of Sydney BA, Uni of NSW MA Qual (Russian), Moscow State Uni; m Agnes (nee Devenyi) 1986.

APS 4.2.85; Foreign Affairs Trainee 85; EEU 85-86; LAC 86; Third later Second Secty Mexico City 3.87-8.89; ASO 6 3.95; SOG C 5.95; First Secty Moscow 8.11.89; Soviet Analyst ONA 11.89-12.91; Russia Sect 12.91-5.92; A/g Dir Russia Sect 6.92-1.93; First Secty Moscow 2.12.93; SOG B 12.93; Counsellor Moscow 12.93-

Note: promotion dates listed, viz. "ASO 6 3.95; SOG C 5.95;" appear to be wrong. They clearly fell within the bracket of Glenn's Mexico posting, i.e. the period 1987-1989, given he was "Third later Second" Secretary, indicating he was promoted to ASO 6 (Administrative Service Officer 6) while serving there, and was First Secretary (SOG C, i.e. Senior Officer Grade C) while on a Short-Term Mission to Moscow in late 1989.