

desk of the giant *Herald* newspaper complex four floors above him.

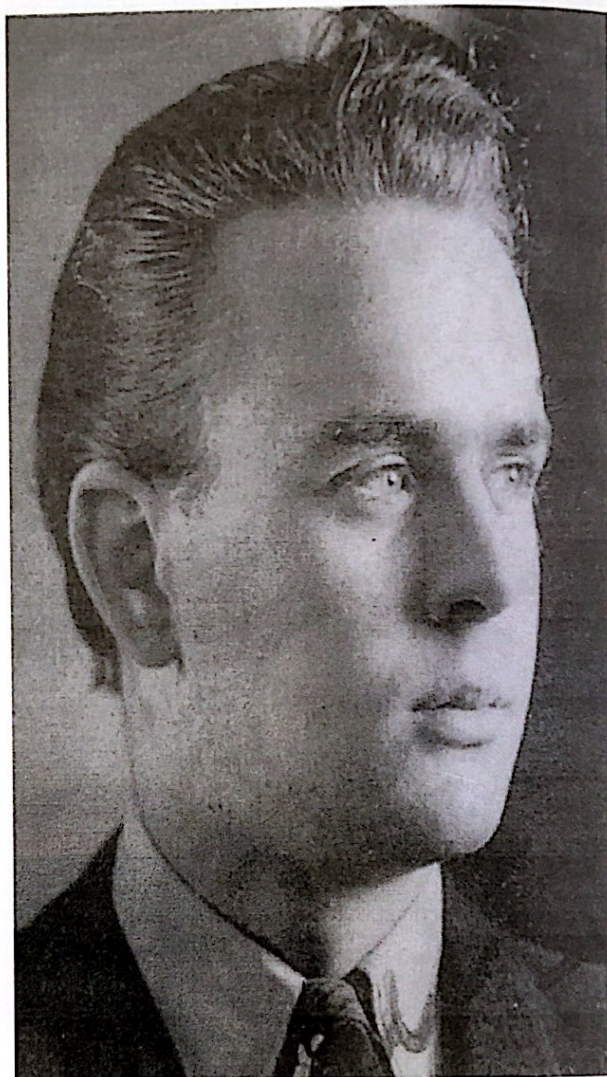
As I was driving home, his call had been verified and further details were immediately relayed to the *Herald's* chief of staff John Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald was attending a family Christmas gathering at his home nearby. Within minutes the veteran newspaper boss had placed the entire *Herald* organisation on full alert, calling in all staff and implementing the "who to tell" from a major newsbreak handbook he had refined after the assassination of US President Kennedy.

Across town at Sandown Park, ATV Channel 0 sporting commentator Phil Gibbs was wrapping up a sports segment from the location of the previous day's live racing. The live eye truck was still linked up to the control room at the studios in Nunawading. Responding to similar reports, senior cameraman Morrie Pilens immediately swung his team into action. He rang Gibbs and cleared the Outside Broadcast truck to be dispatched to Portsea. The station's chief of staff then called senior newsreader Barry McQueen who was confined to bed suffering a severe bout of flu.

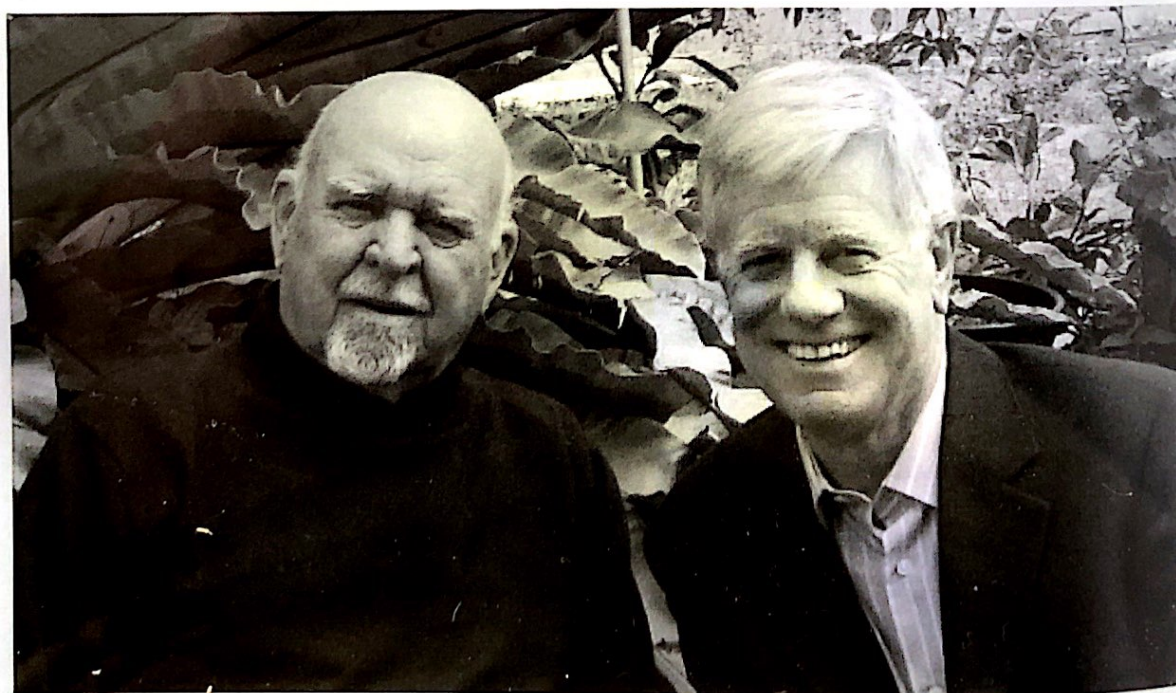
McQueen conceded 'there was no alternative' and agreed to be picked up on route to Portsea. It was now a race to be first with the news but at that stage the PM was only being reported as 'missing, feared drowned'. At GTV9 in Richmond, the early morning chief of staff had already chalked up Alec Rose as the lead story. The network's chief news coordinator journalist Michael Schildberger was attending a pre-Christmas cocktail party and being quite close to Nine was able to take control almost immediately. Channel Nine host and public affairs commentator Tony Charlton had already been assigned to cover the arrival of yachtsman Alec Rose at Williamstown. He was standing beneath the fluttering flags and banners of welcome at the Williamstown Yacht Club when Schildberger radioed him with the chilling news.



Signalman Hugh Lawrence Walden, 1943



Cameraman Morrie Pilens, 1945



Morrie Pilens and Mal Walden, 2015

less than two minutes to race out and retrieve the scripts from the holding box just outside the studio door and get back before my record finished. As I sat back behind the console and injected the news theme into the cartridge machine my phone suddenly flashed. The voice of cadet journalist Norm Beaman simply said, 'Sorry mate for the late delivery there has been a chopper crash ... it's your lead story.'

News Script: *Emergency teams are rushing to a Bass Strait oilrig following a fatal helicopter crash. It's believed up to a dozen press people have been injured or killed. Several have already been airlifted to hospital at Sale. Television cameraman Morrie Pilens who was on board the helicopter at the time of the crash, survived.*

Voice of Ten cameraman Morrie Pilens: *As we hit, the chopper twisted. Then, as it twisted, we veered sideways and started to bounce. My immediate thought was to just sit tight and wait for the bouncing to stop and I would get out. The pilot started screaming, 'Stay put, stay put! Don't move, there's a blade still spinning!' I was filming all this from inside. It was chaotic. There were bodies and blood flowing everywhere.*

It wasn't until an hour or so after the injured had been evacuated that the full impact of the incident emerged. Two journalists were dead and eight injured, three critically. Another would die from his injuries a short time later. But Morrie Pilens survived and the legend of the man who had appeared from the dark side of German history would continue to grow.

MONDAY, 24 MARCH 1968

The Bass Strait helicopter crash succeeded in raising the profile of ATV0's struggling news by little more than a blip on the ratings radar. By the end of the weekend the blip had plunged off the radar like the chopper itself. It reminded us all that one story was simply not enough to change viewers' habits. There had to be consistency. Seven had it. So too did Nine. The only constant at ATV0 appeared to be Pilens.

Cameramen were described as the eyes of a generation, the driving force of visual news in the '50s and '60s and the most experienced cine cameramen had made the transition from the big screen of Movietone Newsreels to the small screens of television. Journalists, or TV news reporters, were adopting skills honed by these movie trained news gatherers who knew the power of pictures. Each network had its senior cameramen but none had anyone quite like Pilens. And judging from all reports, no one wanted him anyway. He was cantankerous, caustic and controversial, but all his colleagues reluctantly agreed he was "bloody good at what he did".

Reading the radio news story of the "Oilrig" tragedy was the first time I had been made aware of the man who many would later call "the great survivor". I was also reminded of the first time I had been made aware of his fledgling television station, ATV0, and the news department he had been personally charged with setting up.

1969

I watched in almost bemused indifference as ATV0 launched a bold bid to attract more viewers. To encourage Melbourne television

Willesee Crisis

The great expensive Willesee gamble has flopped. Mike Willesee, hailed as the 'messiah' by Channel 0, hasn't delivered the goods. His 7 p.m. – much ballyhooed '24 Hours' - is also being thrashed by its opposition. The station is in a state of shock and disbelief over his failure. 'We gave him the world,' lamented one executive.

1974

Willesee's demise was believed to have been sealed after an internal dispute involving senior cameraman Morrie Pilens.

Just one day after receiving his gold pen for ten years of loyal service, Willesee sacked Pilens. It was said to have been on the basis Pilens was too old, but regardless of the reason the decision sent shock waves through the newsroom and triggered threats of union intervention. It was Willesee who was terminated and Pilens was reinstated. Morrie Pilens had survived another battle.

1975

By the mid '70s Pilens had become somewhat of an industry icon. I had watched him operate during frequent encounters on the road as a reporter but continually found him slightly intimidating so kept my distance. However, his colleagues were quite open in their critique of his brittle nature but always quick to defend his professionalism and creativity. An example of his volatility followed an ongoing campaign against the use of radio microphone signs. They had proliferated to such point they were dominating camera

shots at all-in press conferences. Pilens obsession flared into an angry clash with 3AW reporter Les Morley. At one all-in press briefing he suddenly grabbed the radio mike, ripped the sign from its mount and smashed in on the ground. He inadvertently cut his hand in the process and then wiped the blood on Morley's shirt. This led to 3AW calling for an apology and threatening to take legal action for assault. Other networks joined in support of Pilens and the signs were subsequently removed or reduced in size.

On Sunday, 5 May 1975, I had my first encounter with this legendary figure. This was not just any Sunday – this was “May Day”.

On this day in 1856 stonemasons from Melbourne University marched on Parliament house to push for an eight-hour working day. Each year Unions put aside this day to commemorate workers rights. I had drawn the short straw at HSV7 to work the Sunday shift and it ended with blood on the streets of Carlton and blood on my hands through naïve stupidity. About a dozen young Jewish students had gathered at Melbourne airport to protest the arrival of two Arab students.

Eddie Zananiri and Samir Chiekh, both Palestinian, were invited to Melbourne by the Australian Union of Students to speak at their union headquarters in Carlton. It was the timing of their visit more than anything else that triggered hostilities. Tensions were still simmering from the Munich Games massacre of Israeli athletes by PLO terrorists in 1972. I arrived at Melbourne airport with a camera crew just as the protest was getting underway. We were met with sounds of chanting and yelling, ‘Go home! Go home!’

The Jewish students were swinging their anti PLO banners, not

only at the two student visitors but also the delegation of local left wing students who had invited them. It was a noisy protest but non-violent as the two Palestinians were quickly escorted past our cameras and out to a waiting Kombi van before being driven away. The Jewish students had made their point and had achieved their moment of glory, which would be replayed on prime time television that night.

As the van with the Palestinian visitors swept out of view, several Jewish students returned to ask if I knew their destination. In what was my most regretful breach of impartiality, I blurted out the address, 'The Union Student Offices in Carlton.' As they turned and ran to their cars, the van carrying the visiting Palestinian students was already driving out of the Melbourne Airport.

I arrived for the press conference that afternoon as the throng of media was being ushered upstairs. The small group of Jewish students stood outside with their placards. Several called out, 'Thanks, Mal!' As ATVO reporter Kay Stammers walked in with me she leant across and asked, 'What was all that about?'

'No idea,' I replied and then asked where her cameraman was.

'Morrie Pilens,' she said with a laugh. 'He hates press conferences. We will get interviews later so he is staying in his car.'

As the two Palestinian students addressed the Melbourne media, sounds of a disturbance could be faintly heard. We assumed it was just the Jewish protest continuing.

Immediately following the press conference, we wandered casually down the stairs and out into the Drummond Street, Carlton. The horrifying scene that greeted us resembled a mini war zone.

Jewish students lay bleeding, ambulance and police lights were flashing and broken glass littered the road with remnants of May Day banners. Dozens of left wing Unionists from the traditional May Day March in Melbourne had broken ranks and converged

on the Jewish students totally outnumbering them and attacking without warning.

Standing there at the centre of the chaos was ATVO cameraman Morrie Pilens, nursing a bleeding head but grinning with pride. He had filmed the entire clash, exclusively. He called me aside and simply said, 'Thanks, Mal. I owe you one.' The following year Pilens won the Thorn Award for his scoop and became "Cameraman of the Year".

Sometimes being a novice reporter had its advantages, although rarely for me. Former colleague Bill Edmonds had only recently made his transition from radio 3DB to begin a television career at ATV Channel 0 Nunawading.

It was Fathers Day 1974 and PM Gough Whitlam was due to open a public library in suburban Collingwood. Unaware we were all about to witness the story of the day, I stood among a throng of journalists waiting at the door for a quick sound grab. I explained to Edmonds that Gough never gave curbside interviews. It was just an unwritten understanding.

As the limo arrived we watched from some distance as the towering figure of Gough Whitlam struggled to emerge. Suddenly, to our disbelief, Bill Edmonds ran forward, thrust a microphone in his face and wished the PM a happy Father's Day.

Before Gough could even respond to this breach of journalist protocol Edmonds then followed by asking his view on Queensland Premier Jo Bjelke Peterson's appointment of an anti Whitlam labor man Albert Field to the Senate. Gough immediately roared, 'That Bible Bashing Bastard.'

There was an immediate stampede as dozens of journalists rushed the PM in an attempt to get him to repeat the line but he just strode silently and purposefully into the building. An historic

observers watched in fascination as Channel Ten's coverage provided a legacy of becoming the most watched news service on Australian television. Then success simply bred more success.

The only yardstick for success is winning. However, being a winner in television news is, more often than not, the result of simply being at the right place at the right time and as I watched from my position at HSV7 all I could do was wince in frustration.

THURSDAY, 27 MARCH 1986

RUSSELL STREET MELBOURNE

Shortly before 1 p.m. on the day before Good Friday 1986, several news crews arrived at Channel Ten's city office – affectionately called the “Lodge”. It was purely coincidence that they all arrived around the same time.

The Lodge, run by Morrie Pilens, was part of a solid brick, double story building circa 1870 situated in McKenzie Street directly behind the Russell Street police complex. The annex adjoining the heritage horticulture building was used as a transfer centre for late breaking city stories and a base for reporters waiting to be helicoptered back to the studios at Nunawading after their assignments. The occasional live interview was also conducted from this venue.

The crews arrived in their news cars, drove to the rear of the building and parked in the small gravel enclosure next to the live-eye truck. Cameramen Barry Pullen, Peter Farragher and Mark Dickensen, together with live eye technician Richard Glenny and reporters Jennifer Hansen and Brian Shrowder, climbed the narrow wooden staircase winding up to the musty smelling first floor rooms, earmarked for studio, editing and general office use. Pullen began recharging batteries and cleaning tapes while Hansen

and Shrowder were preparing to grab some lunch from the nearby sandwich shop in McKenzie Street.

Suddenly, the large antiquated wall clock in the general office, which was just about to reach the top of the hour at 1 p.m., flew across the room and crashed to the floor. The huge blast that left the clock face frozen in time also blew in the main window shattering the glass in a sickening thump that shook the building to its very foundations. The force of the explosion was felt across the city. Those closer to the centre of the blast were slammed with a solid vortex of air, which caused momentary deafness, severe chest pains and sheer panic. Inside the Lodge loud screams and expletives were followed by sudden silence and distant sounds of sirens.

Cameraman Barry Pullen's first thought was the live eye truck parked outside had been blown up. Seconds later they all recovered from the initial shock and reacted instinctively. Morrie Pilens attempted to ring the studio and newsroom at Nunawading but the lines were down. Each cameraman grabbed his gear while one of the reporters raced to the car and radioed the newsroom. The rest bolted from the building and ran in the direction of a large black plume of smoke that was now billowing above the police complex. Rounding the corner of McKenzie Street into Russell Street they were confronted by a scenelolly of burning chaos. Just as Pullen hoisted his camera to his shoulder, he was hit by a second blast. As he continued to move forward, he suddenly realised he was deaf. He described it as 'if an audio operator had turned down the sound'. His other faculties appeared intact so he continued moving forward. 'The only thing I could hear was a feeble alarm from a nearby building ... To my right I could see a woman crying hysterically while being comforted by several people, but I couldn't hear.' Pullen moved slowly through the scattered debris and thick smoke until he spotted a number of men working on another victim lying on the other side of a

it back to Kerry Packer for just \$200 million. According to Packer, "You only get one Alan Bond in your lifetime, and I've had mine."

The story continued...

In cost cutting measures Packer has announced a series of axings including Nine's 11.30 a.m. news.

I never heard back from Sorell and continued reading at weekends on Ten and producing segments for Mal's Melbourne.

1990

One year later in September, having endured 12 months of budget restraints under Broadcom, I received my first overseas assignment at Ten.

I was sent to cover the Melbourne Olympic bid in Tokyo, which ended not only in disappointment for Melbourne but for hundreds of staff at Network Ten around Australia.

On the night of the announcement, as I was live on-air, our small team scooped all our competitors as PM Bob Hawke and the entire Olympic Bid Committee walked into our Tokyo studio. It was only hours from the announcement and they all conveyed overwhelming confidence that Melbourne would win the bid.

Several hours later the name "Atlanta" dashed all our hopes, but not as much as the following morning in the form of a fax from our Melbourne newsroom, which simply read: *Network Ten in receivership, find your own way home.* It was a sad attempt at humour and within two months there was even less to smile about.

Morrie Pilens was among the first to surrender to the administrators of Network Ten and on his final day muttered how the battles in television paled against his wartime experience under Hitler's notorious SS. He accepted a redundancy and finally

retired with his wry sense of humour intact and a set of standards in news coverage that continue to this day.

MONDAY, 26 NOVEMBER 1990

Network Ten announced the sacking of more than a quarter of its staff, over 700 people in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. The measures were aimed at cutting costs in excess of \$100 million over 12 months. It came just one week after Broadcom Chief Steve Cosser was removed and replaced by former GTV9 boss Gary Rice. That same week the Seven Network, also in receivership, announced the sacking of another 100 of their employees and a freezing of all salaries. The television industry was in total turmoil.

On the Monday morning as I drove the 30 minute journey to work, I began planning a life outside of television. I felt I could not endure another moment of insecurity caused by events totally out of my control. Not even during the Fairfax fiasco at Seven had I felt so completely bereft of morale. Fearing administrators would seize all assets including vehicles. I decided to park my car at the nearby carpark at the Kegg restaurant. Every executive within the network appeared to be driving BMWs but no one could explain how they had been acquired. The receivers would soon discover an entire fleet of missing BMWs, which would never be accounted for. While my vehicle was a recently updated Mazda RX7, I was not prepared to risk having it impounded even though I was paying for it.

On arrival in the newsroom, I was met by that familiar sinister sound of silence. It followed an announcement that our new chief executive Gary Rice would be making a video statement from Sydney headquarters to all staff at around 2 p.m. I couldn't wait until 2 p.m. so I approached our news editor Neil Miller to ask, 'How safe am I?'

The last time I saw Case (as we affectionately called him) was at our luncheon together in October 1999. He died on 19 June the following year.

SIX DEGREES OF NEWS

The theory of “Six Degrees” or the “Human Webb” is that anyone on the planet can be connected to any other person through a chain of acquaintances involving no more than five intermediaries. Today, due to the technical advances in communication and travel, our friendship networks have grown larger and span greater distances than ever before. The modern world is “shrinking” as the social distance becomes smaller making the hypothesis of Six Degrees even more exciting. While a series of scientific and mathematical applications have failed to prove the theory of Six Degrees, this personal experience is difficult to ignore.

WEDNESDAY, 3 MARCH 2004

There was a quiet knock on my office door. For many of my 53 years in media I had worked against and alongside the man who had just walked into my office – cameraman Morrie Pilens.

It was a social visit by the retired Pilins and not totally unexpected as I had conveyed an open invitation to call any time he was in town. I was continually adding details to my memoirs and had requested an interview with the veteran cameraman who had contributed so much of his own life covering news. He entered with a slight limp (assisted by a walking stick) but apart from that he looked great. His blue eyes sparkled and his head literally shone reflecting a healthy tan from a recent holiday with his wife.

‘Good to see you again,’ he said in his familiar clipped accent as he pulled out a seat to sit on the opposite side of my desk. He had mellowed since his retirement in 1990. There was no sign of his caustic wit that we all attributed to his wartime legacy from the dark side. There was still the raised skin blemish that protruded from his head, which he wore as a sort of badge of honour having never made any effort to have it surgically removed. I grabbed a tape recorder and with his permission switched it on and left it running. Like Ron Casey and many others I had worked alongside, Pilens contributions were also part of our television history and a small part of my life.

Modrus ‘Morrie’ Pilens had just turned 14 when German forces invaded his homeland of Latvia driving out the Bolsheviks who had ruled in brutal fashion for over a year.

That hot summer Sunday in 1941 thousands of his countrymen stood on the streets of the capitol Riga tossing flowers as a welcome to the forces of the Third Reich. Sadly it didn’t take long before they realised the victors would become as brutal as the vanquished. Within three years, one in ten Latvians would be killed while others, were conscripted into the German Army to fight the Russians. Pilens may have been too young to realise the significance of the German invasion but not young enough to avoid its consequence. He was one of those conscripted, although his weapon would become a camera rather than a gun.

Within a year of the invasion young Pilens was enlisted into the German SS and then placed under Dr Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s minister of propaganda, to be trained as a newsreel cameraman. His only credential was having worked at the office of Riga Films as an assistant.

'It was a simple case of logistics,' he said. 'We were losing so many cameramen at the fronts they needed to turn us over fast.'

After his initial intensive training course in Berlin he was attached to the 6th Latvian War Correspondent Corp where over the next four years Pilens says he saw more 'life and death' than most veteran soldiers serving a lifetime in wars. He not only survived the German invasion of his homeland but the most appalling conditions on the Polish and Russian fronts. In 1945, he was determined to survive the fall of Berlin. Defeated and in total despair Berliners were sheltering – not so much from the allied planes above – but from the sheer terror on the streets around them. In those last few days many described lying in bombed out buildings listening in fear as savage street-to-street and house-to-house fighting raged around the outskirts of the city. They described night time as the worst, with the guttural screams of looting Russians. It was a drunken violent killing spree of revenge for Stalingrad. Mornings revealed the carnage and not just from the allied bombing or advancing Russians; bodies also hung from trees and lamp posts as a warning from remnants of the notorious SS, rounding up German soldiers in hiding and executing them as traitors.

Finally, still wearing the tattered uniform of the SS, Pilens fled the besieged city escaping to a town he fondly remembers for a 'stockpiled cellar full of plundered wine', which he shared with other similar survivors. The wine, he said, became a bargaining tool for the advancing troops of the US 9th division who had surrounded the town and sent in an advance patrol to scout for any opposition. There was none – just a group of desperate souls eager to survive the war and prepared to exchange their cellar full of wine for their lives. Pilens remembers being escorted through advancing Soviet lines by those American forces but – perhaps because of that wine – he was a little vague as to how he was

finally handed over to the British. The British soon determined that Pilens fell into the category of many Latvian and other Baltic prisoners who had been conscripted into the SS and as such were not party to the criminal SS, which saved him from almost certain execution.

After a brief period of internment, described as a period of “de Nazification”, he was seconded to the British Control Commission Film Unit based in the historic German town of Blomberg. Occasionally, I had to interrupt Pilens as details blurred or I simply lost my way trying to keep up with his incredible tales of survival. However, something he said about Blomberg triggered a distant personal memory, but as he was on a roll I let him continue talking.

That night, after reading the news, I drove down to my mother’s nursing home in the outer Melbourne suburb of Carrum Downs where she was living out her final years. My father Hugh, her lifetime soulmate, had died from cancer some 20 years earlier.

On the top shelf of a single wardrobe, too high for her to reach in her frail condition, lay a large cardboard box. Inside it contained her most treasured possessions, pictures of children, grandchildren even great-grandchildren. But in a separate package worn with age to sepia brown, along with a collection of wartime medals, were several beautiful hand-written letters.

It was not the first time I had read them, but it was the first time with the knowledge I now held. They reflected the love and loneliness of a serving soldier. I was already familiar with his post-war task of forcing shell-shocked Germans to view atrocities committed in their name through a series of films – films shot by a German cameraman who was part of their team. The letters were marked “Blomberg 1945”...

It was the early morning of 7 May 1945 when my father the British signalman intercepted a cable from Field Marshal Keitel ordering all German units of the Army, Navy, Air Force and the SS to cease-fire.

The surrender had not been unexpected but the rush of adrenalin on actually seeing it in reality had more of an effect on Hughie than he ever expected. Heart pounding with emotion he ripped the cable from the teleprinter and ran from inside the converted military van and across the car park to his commanding officer being billeted in the adjoining hotel. He thought of his wife and me his baby son and the reunion that awaited his discharge.

However, Hughie's role in post-war Germany was far from over. His background in British teleprinters set him apart from his colleagues and particularly the Americans who lacked that communication expertise which was about to become invaluable. Shattered that his discharge had been revoked, he was ordered to proceed to the British controlled sector of Berlin to help establish a communication centre in the historic German town of Blomberg.

While judicial efforts were handed over to local authorities to restore a semblance of order, the US and British military launched a program to de Nazify the entire German population through control of local media. Their aim was to prove beyond any possible doubt or challenge, that crimes against humanity had been committed and that the German people, not just the Nazis and SS, bore responsibility.

In order to implement that charter, a number of films were quickly produced with much of the material acquired from captured German newsreel cameramen now under the directions of the Allied Control Council.

Morrie Pilens was one of those cameramen who would become involved in a number of award winning 35mm documentaries such as *War in Europe*, *March of Time* and *Displaced Persons*.

Meanwhile, Hughie's task was not only to establish a broad based

communication link with the international sectors surrounding Soviet controlled Berlin but also to organise the screenings of those films being produced at Blomberg. Neither Pilens nor Hughie would ever realise the synchronicity of their joint tasks or how they, directly and indirectly, would eventually influence television news in Australia.

Six months later Hughie received his long awaited discharged. He was demobbed and returned home to an emotional reunion with his family living in Stockport, Cheshire. In 1948 Pilens migrated to Australia. After several years of frustration, he finally picked up a camera and made a new start freelancing for Channel Seven in Melbourne, working under the station's news director, John Maher.

In 1952 our family migrated to Melbourne where coincidentally Dad also picked up a camera – the revolutionary Polaroid that developed its own picture. Within eight years of arriving in Australia he became a TV household name – Roly Poly – taking happy audience snaps on Channel Seven's *Happy Show* with his Polaroid camera.

In 1964 Pilens was hired to establish a television news department for the impending launch of Melbourne's third commercial television station ATV0 (Channel Ten) where he stayed as senior news cameraman for almost 30 years.

And so it evolves that 70 years after WWII, those two adversaries, a former SS cameraman and a British signalman who both worked on the same project in the post-war German town of Blomberg, were my respected colleague and my father.

In 2013 as I stepped down from Network Ten, 89-year-old Morrie Pilens was living in retirement with his wife Ruth in one of the leafy suburbs of Melbourne. Like my father, he never hid his past

nor ever had any reason to. Neither man to my knowledge was personally aware of the other – either in post-war Berlin or in Australian television. It was just another example of the many unexplained moments of serendipity that formed a familiar pattern throughout my life as a newsman.