

# Popular pair farewelled in fine style

TWO of CALM's most popular staff members, Per Christensen and Gerry Van Didden, were recipients of a cheerfully noisy and thoroughly entertaining retirement send-off recently at the Department's Como canteen.

Many good-natured 'insults' of the kind one reserves only for the closest of friends and colleagues were fired at the pair, and kept the audience that packed the canteen laughing uproariously.

Gerry was first in the firing line, fielding salvos from several speakers, including CALMfire manager Rick Sneeuwjagt, who was acting regional services director at the time, and spoke on behalf of Executive Director Dr Syd Shea, who was in the Kimberleys.

## Changing hats

Per was next to feel a few broadsides. They had been a long time coming, as it was way back in July last year that he had changed his hat from that of a senior principal research scientist responsible for forestry and plantation research within CALM, to that of a private consultant, advising the Department on *Project Eden* and forest ecology.

Tracking his movements and setting a date for his 'official farewell' (there had been 'unofficial' ones) proved considerably more difficult than eradicating the last cats from Peron Peninsula.

Grimly determined not to miss the event—"Wild horses wouldn't have stopped me seizing such a golden opportunity,"—principal research scientist John McGrath travelled from his Busselton work base to deliver the farewell speech.

Grinning wickedly, John assailed the audience with a humorous, potted history of Per's life, from his birth in Denmark (the European one) to boyhood and young adulthood in Kenya, then early days in Western Australia with the Forests Department and finally with CALM.

Readers will, no doubt, recall a more detailed, (not to mention more respectful) version of Per's history in the November-December 1996 issue of CALM NEWS.

An equally reverent account of Gerry's history with CALM is given below:

Gerard van Didden—one of the pioneers of aerial fire management techniques—retired in April after a 38-year career with CALM and the Forests Department.

The big group of workmates and colleagues from other agencies who met to farewell him at Como, was testimony to the esteem in which Gerry was held.

CALMfire Manager Rick Sneeuwjagt summed up his contribution when he said: "Gerry is nature's gentleman, a damn good forester and a fine contributor to the community."

Indeed, it largely was through Gerry's contribution in researching incendiary devices that CALM today has one of the best fire management systems anywhere in the world.

But before Gerry took to the skies, he had to earn his 'wings' like any other 17-year-old joining the Forests Department.

In February, 1959, Gerry began the induction camp at the Dwellingup cadet school.

During his forestry training, Gerry was based at Pemberton



Rick Sneeuwjagt: "I don't care how many people are watching, I want to give you a big hug." Gerry, looking none too sure of Rick's intentions: "That's all very well, but will you respect me in the morning?", and Roy Fieldgate applauds cautiously in the background. Photo by Verna Costello

and Dwellingup, with short stints at Grimwade and Wanneroo—to plant pines.

As with other trainees, Gerry learned from the ground up—bridge construction, nursery work, jarrah thinning, splitting fence posts, fire suppression, controlled burning and stretches as a towerman.

In January 1961, Gerry graduated, dux. He spent the

next few months working throughout the forest—invariably camped in the bush.

## Forest guard

In October that year, he became a forest guard at Mundaring, where he learned the ropes from soil and topographical surveys to road selection, pine thinning, tree marking, apiary site management,

and even relieving Wally Rhodes in the store.

It was while he was at Mundaring that the lure of the wings took hold. Gerry gained his student pilot's license in 1962.

In Dwellingup between 1964 and 1967 that Gerry had his first formal instruction in aerial fire management, when under Claude Herring from CSIRO, he trained as a bombardier for aerial burning.

It was a further step down the 'runway' that was to have a big impact on fire operations not only in WA, but also in the Northern Territory.

In 1967, Gerry became a technical assistant at the Fire Research Branch at Manjimup where he was part of the team studying fuel quantities for the forest fire behaviour tables—the Red Book.

He was also an incendiary machine operator in the leadup to the spring of '69 in the early days of aerial ignition. The previous year, Gerry had gained his wings—GVD private pilot.

## Promotion

Gerry's experience in Manjimup earned him a promotion to Como to look after the twin-engine aircraft operations in 1971.

Over the next 19 years, Gerry was part of the team that developed and refined the concept of aerial surveillance.

The fire spotters were first trialled in 1973 in the Blackwood Valley. A bigger trial was implemented the following season in the Pemberton district.

Gerry's involvement in aerial fire management grew deeper as he developed accredited aircrew training schools for navigators and bombardiers.

He also developed and designed the WAM 82 incendiary machine which is still in use with CALM and in the Northern Territory.

In the early 1980s, Gerry was appointed a consultant to the Bushfires Council of the

Northern Territory.

His brief was to design new incendiary equipment and train crews.

While in the Territory, he wrote aircraft operations manuals and developed further training courses for navigators and incendiary machine operators.

In 1987, Gerry was awarded the Lane Poole Fellowship under which he studied incendiary machine equipment and requirements around Australia.

While on his fellowship, he gained accreditation in operating a helitorch.

The next year, he developed and designed the aluminium helitorch that is currently used by CALM and in Victoria.

Gerry's aviation expertise was sought by other divisions within the Department.

Neil Burrows, now Director of Science and Information, turned to Gerry to help plan the aerial burning aspects of the *Desert Dreaming* nature conservation project in the Gibson.

From 1990, Gerry spent three years compiling information for the CALMfire's decision support computer systems. In mid-1993, he took on the administration desk at Fire Protection.

Gerry is a true gentleman, exceedingly polite and forever willing to help.

While he may have folded his CALM wings in the formal sense, he is continuing to be involved in CALM fire research.

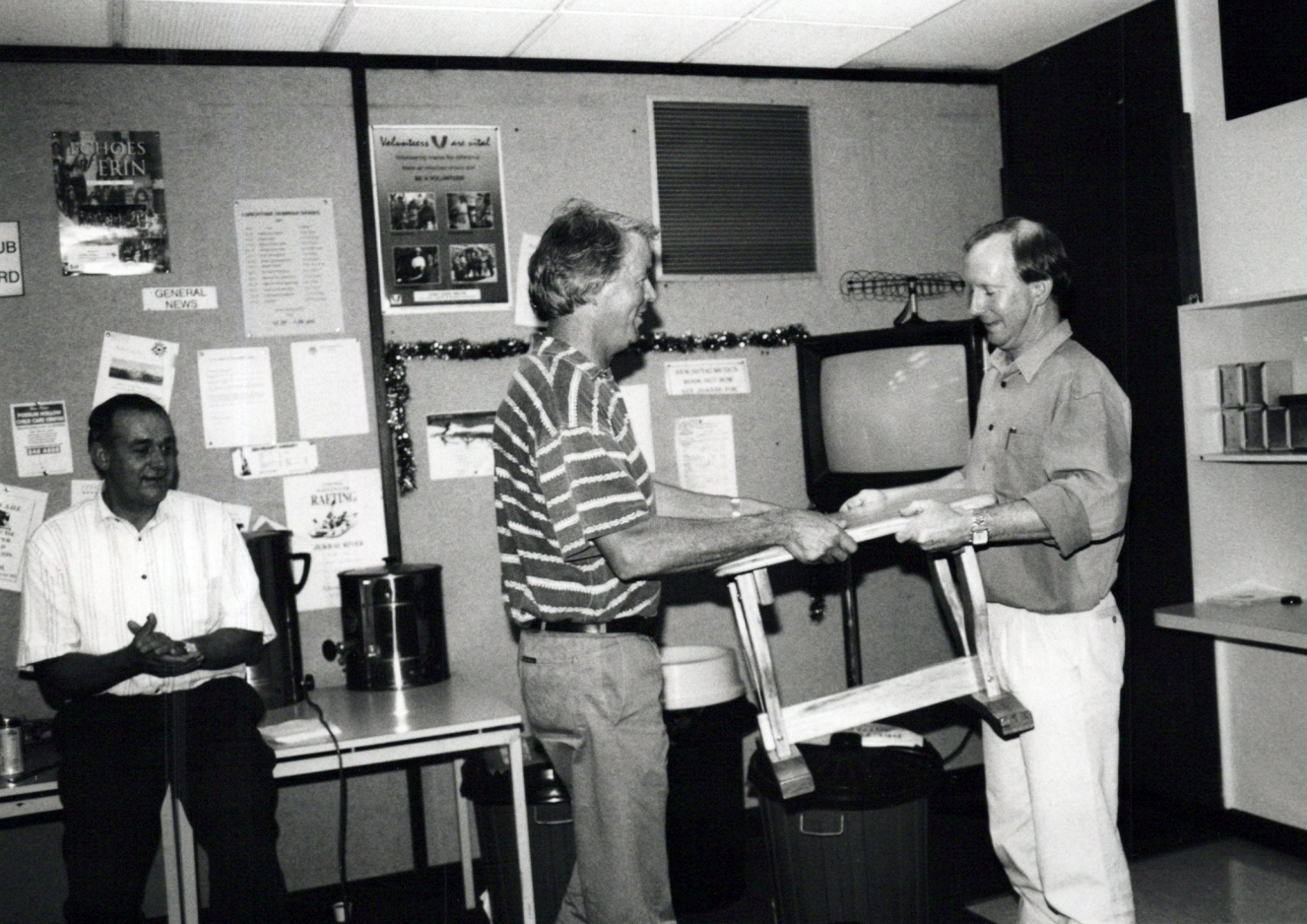
He also is devoting time to developing ways of global positioning systems for aerial reconnaissance during wild-fires as well as working with researchers such as Dave Ward on the grass tree fire history studies.

And, he has more time to spend on his block at Sawyers Valley, the little town in the hills east of Perth where as a 12 year old, recently immigrated from Holland with his family in 1954, he had his first contact with the forests to which he was to devote his career.



Table tug. John McGrath (right) addressing Per Christensen: Here's our farewell gift. It's yours if you can wrench it from me." Photo by Verna Costello





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