

John Nils Almgren (1930–2021)

An Outstanding Figure in Australian Telecommunications Manufacturing, and in Philanthropy



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Abstract: John Nils Almgren AM (20 June 1930 to 24 December 2021) was renowned in the Australian telecommunications industry for his success, together with his wife Yvonne, in building a major Australian manufacturing company, J. N. Almgren Pty Ltd, starting from scratch in 1960. JNA began as a custom-designer of small electromechanical subsystems for the PMG and State electricity utilities, but later developed successful electronic products for public and private data networks for large corporations. The company was floated on the ASX in 1992 as JNA Telecommunications Ltd. It operated internationally until bought by the US company Lucent Technologies in 1998. John and Yvonne became significant philanthropists, often declining any publicity for their generous donations.

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Early Life and Education

John Nils Almgren was born in Woollahra, NSW on 20 June 1930, to a Swedish father and an English mother. His father, Gustav Harald Almgren, born in Sundsvall, Sweden, arrived in Australia in 1918. His mother, Phyllis Muriel Panter, met Gustav in Sydney in the 1920s. Tragically, Gustav died at age 45, when John was only five.

John attended local primary schools and then North Sydney Boys High School until 1945, when he left, aged 15, with an Intermediate Certificate. He had gained high marks, but family circumstances did not permit him to continue his schooling. His first job after leaving school was working at a bakery.

In 1946, John joined the electronics company Communications Engineering Pty Ltd, later renamed T. S. Skillman Pty Ltd, as a junior. Over fourteen years, he worked his way up to becoming appointed as a design engineer and “all-round trouble shooter”. His skills led to him being sent to Hawaii by Skillman on more than one occasion to solve problems with equipment they had supplied there ([Williams, 2022](#)).

John’s colleague and friend Graeme Williams writes:

“This where the JNA story began. Having worked wholeheartedly for his employer, it came as a bit of shock to John when the company went broke (in 1960) and John became unemployed.

“John that day made a promise to himself that he would never work for anyone else, and that his future success or otherwise would be as a direct result of his own actions, not those of others.

“John, with his young wife Yvonne, whom he [had] married in 1953, started their own business employing some close family members and friends, five persons in all. Both John and Yvonne worked tirelessly in the business and there was a real family production line established” ([Williams, 2022](#)).

The company was named simply J. N. Almgren Pty Ltd, soon known across the industry as JNA.

The Growth of JNA

In 1986, John Almgren wrote of his company’s early history:

“When our company was formed in 1960, our aim was to provide our customers with a specialised service. This effectively boiled down to providing a ‘design and build’ answer to the customer’s problem of getting replacement equipment, usually in very small quantities,

to get telecommunications systems fully operational again. The customer's needs were often precise, unique and technically demanding.

“We had to be flexible in our planning to accommodate short term demands which cropped up without much notice. Designs had to be aimed at providing a first-class solution, whilst using only components and materials which were readily available.

“As our financial resources were very small, it was essential to make every pound (or dollar) count. In those days banks were not prepared to be entrepreneurial. Slowly, very slowly but surely, we were able to consolidate and develop” ([Almgren, 1986](#)).

Allan Horsley was a customer of J. N. Almgren during his time with Plessey in the 1960s and later with the State Electricity Commission of Victoria in the 1970s. He writes:

“John had a reputation as a high-quality manufacturer who delivered on time. John's business was very skilled in the manufacture of custom-designed electromechanical and electronic devices. For example, it made 'barrier relays' to enable PMG services to be connected into high voltage electrical locations, able to withstand 1,000 volts or more. It made small volume devices for both the telecoms sector and the electrical power sector.

“JNA fitted in at the volume levels below the 'big end of town' system suppliers, such as TEI, STC and Ericsson.”

Accommodation and Financial Challenges

The practical challenges John and Yvonne faced in establishing their company were considerable ([Almgren, 1986](#)):

“Our first 'factory' was in a one-time bakehouse in Mosman. We had about one hundred and fifty square feet [14 m²] of space, which was reasonably OK until the rains started. A leaky roof, made considerably (and intolerably) worse by two tradesmen in big boots clumping about to give a roof repairs quote, convinced us that we should move.

“We then moved to North Sydney, where we occupied the basement of a residential building. The local Council classified us as a 'service industry', because we were using less than 1,000 square feet [93 m²]. (We had about 300 square feet [28 m²] of workroom space.) I remember the Council's Form referred to a Service Industry as one which, for example, repaired pushbikes or umbrellas. Not really high technology by any stretch of the imagination.

“As time progressed, we found ourselves once again looking for some more space. This time we found about 1,200 square feet [111 m²] in Willoughby — a first-floor location, previously occupied by The Willoughby Pastime Club — which was the local S.P. Bookie!

“After cleaning the place up, adding extra amenities, removing the black sheeting from the windows, cutting through a strange array of very unofficial and unauthorised internal telephone wires, and washing the office partition glass to get rid of the skin of nicotine, we moved in.

“We also had to repair the front door, which was damaged when the establishment was raided by the local gendarmes.

“Over the next few months, from time to time, various quiet little men would appear on our doorstep and enquire if it was possible to ‘get a bet on’. It didn't take long for them to realise that things had changed — at which time they seemed to de-materialise in an instant.

“In 1977/78 we started looking for bigger, better premises. This time we wanted to get something of our own. (Some of the banking people thought we were being presumptuous but we didn't agree.) After a lot of effort we were able to buy the land at 16 Smith Street and have our factory built. On site work started late '78 and we moved in late May, 1979. The 7,500 square feet [700 m²] and parking would certainly last us for eight or ten years.”
([Almgren, 1986](#))

Business Development

Graeme Williams continues: “A fair chunk of JNA's early business was with the PMG Department (later Telecom Australia); and that indeed was where John first ran across a bright young engineer named Peter Davies, who would ultimately become John's long-term business partner and confidant” ([Williams, 2022](#)). Together, they grew the business into its pre-eminent position in the Australian telecommunications manufacturing industry.

In the 1970s, most of JNA's business lay in the design and supply of analogue equipment, with digital products accounting for only 5 to 10%. However, an opportunity arose in 1975 – when their prime customer, the PMG, had morphed into Telecom Australia – to design and supply some digital interface units. To cope with this requirement, they increased their engineering staff from three to five.

John Almgren ([1986](#)) continues:

“In the early 1970s we were able to tender successfully to the Maritime Services Board of NSW for the design and manufacture of speech and signalling equipment. The initial value of this job, comprising more than 20 racks of equipment, was about \$70,000 – our biggest job to date.

“At about the same time, we decided to enter the ‘Standard Products’ arena. Prior to this, we had effectively only produced equipment against customers’ orders. Now we were

prepared, at our commercial risk, to design, develop and build selected types of data communications 'building blocks' (or "black boxes") which we would offer to the marketplace.

"Many things were changing. Now we were involved not only with hardware, but also with software."

Managing the new digital technologies meant hiring more technical staff and more equipment for developing hardware and software. But Almgren and Davies were canny on managing their financial growth:

"The implementation of our internally managed JNA No.1 Superannuation Fund was an essential step in our progress. In mid-1977, we started this Fund with several objectives in mind, i.e.,

- the long-term benefit of employees;
- the acquisition of our own premises; and
- the development of our professional capability by the acquisition of more plant and stock.

"We were able, by controlled 'loan-back' to achieve these goals" ([Almgren, 1986](#)).

In his 1986 memoir, John expounded on his management philosophy:

"For all of the quarter of a century that we have been in business and, indeed, for our future, we have placed and will continue to place, highest emphasis on our operating as a first-rate team in which EVERYONE is important.

"We look to the future which will provide us with much interesting and exciting challenge. As a very skilled team we have a lot to offer, both to the Australian and overseas markets. We are capable of providing products and services second to none.

"Our aim is that we are all able to achieve our goals with a lifestyle both satisfying and dignified" ([Almgren, 1986](#)).

By the mid-1980s, JNA had built major private data networks for Australia's top four banks (ANZ, CBA, NAB and Westpac) as well as essential systems and components of Telecom Australia's first public packet switched network, Austpac, and multiplexers and matrix switches for Telecom's Digital Data Services network. JNA also identified the need by business users, both medium and large, for network management via Individual Circuit Monitoring systems, which JNA designed, built and installed.

By 1986 JNA had also installed packet switched networks for Australia's largest oil company, Esso, and largest mining company, BHP, and EFTPOS networks for some of the major banks.

To achieve this, by 1986 JNA's staff had grown to 126, consisting of seven in senior management, 38 in engineering, 18 in customer services, 20 in sales and marketing, 25 in manufacturing and 18 in administration ([Almgren, 1986](#)).

Floating the Company in 1992

To achieve the financial resources that would enable the company to expand into overseas markets, John transformed his private company in 1992 into JNA Telecommunications Ltd, which successfully floated on the Australian Stock Exchange in 1992. John remained Chairman and Peter Davies was Chief Executive Officer.

As a further indicator of John's character and reputation, he was able to recruit onto the Board of JNA Telecommunications the former Managing Directors of Telecom Australia (Mel Ward AO) and of the Commonwealth Bank (Len Spencer).

Expanding its sales into the Asia-Pacific (most notably to China, Thailand and Vietnam), the Middle East (Egypt and Syria) and South America, the company achieved peak revenue of \$73.6 million in 1995. In 1997, it expended \$9.1 million on research & development; and earned export revenues of \$14.6 million. Meanwhile, its Australian customer base remained strong, including Australia Post, Australian Customs, Woolworths, QBE Insurance, Metway Bank, SA Tab, CSIRO and the Department of Defence, in addition to its traditional customers Telstra and the larger banks. At the time of JNA's sale to Lucent, JNA's R&D team alone amounted to more than eighty staff ([Budde, 1998](#)).

Lucent Technologies bought JNA Telecommunications in July 1998 for \$114 million. The purchase was a testimony to JNA's engineering expertise, sales channels, industry reputation, intellectual property and financial record.

Leadership in Industry

Former Managing Director of the industry business lobby group ATUG (the Australian Telecommunications Industry Group), Allan Horsley, writes of John Almgren that: "He was revered in the industry as somewhat of a doyen, a successful Australian manufacturer, of which there were few".

At different times in his career, John took on the positions of a Board member and later President of the Australian Electrical & Electronic Manufacturers Association. He was also an active member of the Australian Electronics Industry Association and the Australian Telecommunications Industry Association. At one time, he was Chairman of the NSW Government's Schools' Visit to Industry program (['New Fellows', 1996](#)).

John was a key member of the Advisory Committee to the Australian Electronic Development Corporation (AEDC), from 1989 to 1992, when Trevor Barr (now an Emeritus Professor) was its Director. The AEDC was set up in 1989 with five years' sponsorship from the Federal Government, Ericsson Australia, Siemens, NEC, Hewlett Packard, IBM and Telstra. Its purpose was to provide training courses and shared infrastructure services to the staff of small and medium electronic design companies in Australia, to make them internationally competitive.

Trevor Barr mentions that John, whose own company had already achieved what the AEDC was trying to provide to its client companies, was always full of valuable ideas in the Advisory Committee. He recalls John's mantra: "offer short, practical advisory capsules" in areas of need. "He was always popular with Centre staff, ready to help anyone. John was a first-rate human being."

JOHN N. ALMGREN, AM.



Figure 1. John Almgren, on left, being awarded his certificate as a Fellow of the Telecommunications Society of Australia by its then Chairman, Professor Peter Gerrand (['New Fellows', 1996](#))

John's extensive contributions to the telecommunications industry were recognised in his being awarded the prestigious Charles Todd Medal by the Australian Telecommunications Users Group in 1994, Membership in the General Division of the Order of Australia (AM) by the Australian Government in 1995, and a Fellow of the Telecommunication Society of Australia in 1996.

Philanthropy

“John's integrity, generosity, humility and sincerity have always been on display throughout his working life. The staff at JNA would receive gifts of appreciation from John on a regular basis, especially at Easter and Christmas. John was always up for a chat and was a beloved father figure to the staff at JNA.

“I have had people relay to me that, beyond their parents, John had the greatest impact on their lives. He was an exceptional person – a gentleman and a friend – and he touched the lives of so many people. Such was the stature of the man” ([Williams, 2022](#)).

After the sale of JNA in 1998 to Lucent, John and Yvonne were able to greatly increase their philanthropy. They made generous donations to the former Port Stevens Branch of the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol (now the Marine Rescue), the Australian Flying Doctor Service, Care Flight, Dunmore Lang College, the Sir David Martin Foundation, and the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra. In the case of the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol, John and Yvonne provided cheques for not only a new rescue vessel in 1999, but also for “two members of the Coastal Patrol to fly to England to inspect and test the vessel for sale, and to cover any spare parts needed for the vessel if they purchased it” ([Reeson, 2022](#)).

Within the telecommunications industry, John Almgren sponsored two of the annual Charles Todd Orations in Sydney, hosted by TelSoc's predecessor, the Telecommunication Society of Australia (TSA), in the early 2000s.

After the TSA re-established itself as the Telecommunications Association Inc. (TelSoc) in 2007, John Almgren made generous donations over four years to keep the new society financially afloat, but he insisted that his donations be kept anonymous. He was a popular figure at the annual Charles Todd Oration lunches in Sydney.

The Australian telecommunications industry owes John Almgren a lot.

Conclusion

John Almgren was as renowned as much for his character – his integrity, generosity, humility and sincerity – as for his major achievements as a business entrepreneur. Together with his wife Yvonne, he built a major Australian manufacturing company, J. N. Almgren Pty Ltd, from

scratch in 1960 to become the publicly listed JNA Telecommunications (1992–98), eventually bought out and absorbed by the giant US company Lucent Technologies in 1998. In retirement, John and Yvonne became significant philanthropists. John's role as an anonymous donor to the newly created Telecommunications Association Inc. (TelSoc) from 2013 to 2017 was crucial to its survival and growth.

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