# George Edward Hams AM (1928–2023)

## A leader amongst

## Australian telecommunications engineers

Steve Black
Former colleague and friend

**Abstract**: George Edward Hams AM (29 July 1928–2 February 2023) was a much respected engineer, international telecommunications adviser and leader in the field of telecommunications. In 1990 these achievements were acknowledged with the award of Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for public service "particularly in the field of telecommunications". George also had a significant presence in community activities and served on Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) Boards for 10 years. As a young man, George was a 1953 Premiership player in the Victorian Football League for the Collingwood Football Club, where he played 108 games. He was a devout man with a strong sense of fairness and Christian faith.

**Keywords**: George Hams, obituaries, history of Australian telecommunications, Collingwood Football Club, ITU

## Introduction

George Hams AM, one of Australia's most respected leaders in the field of telecommunications, died on 2 February 2023, leaving his wife Frances, children Marcus and Lisa, and grandchildren Alicia, Natasha and Alex. This obituary celebrates George's contribution to telecommunications in Australia and developing countries in the Indo-Pacific Region and the strategic and operational leadership strengths he brought to these countries.

Born on 29 July 1928, George had an elder brother, Ron, and a younger brother, Bruce. He spent his early life growing up in Ivanhoe in Melbourne, kicking a football, yabbying in the local creeks and exploring the paddocks in the then semi-rural area. George was born into a hard-working, middle-class family with a healthy love for Melbourne's great passion —

Australian Rules Football. George's potential for academic achievement was recognized early by his teachers and he was encouraged to set his sights on a university education after attending University High School in Parkville.

## Early Telecommunications Career

George's career in telecommunications commenced at Melbourne University, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science, majoring in Telecommunications Engineering.

George commenced as a Cadet Engineer with the Postmaster General's Department (PMG). After graduation, he began work with the Telephone Equipment Planning and Maintenance Group in the Victorian administration. In 1955, George retired from Australian Rules Football to focus more fully on his flourishing career in telecommunications.

George had joined the PMG at a time of great innovation and change and he became a key player in its visionary management team. In the mid- to late-1950s, new developments in network switching, transmission and telegraph technologies were in the process of implementation. Telecommunications research was producing further switching, transmission, telegraph and incipient data technologies that would drive industry growth and greater automation of subscriber trunk dialling over the decades to come. The following key fundamental innovations were all contributing:

1. Switching design was changing from traditional step-by-step technology to crossbar switching, with further migration to computer-controlled local exchanges in the 1970s;
2. Subscriber Trunk Dialling (STD) technology: by the late 1950s some 75% of the nation's calls were connected automatically; however, only 25% of country calls were connected automatically (in 1957);
3. Transmission design was moving to microwave technology and major inter-capital coaxial-cable-based transmission systems;
4. International connectivity expanded strongly, with the new COMPAC cable linking Australia to New Zealand and Canada and from there to Europe;
5. Telegraphy upgrades included the introduction of TRESS (Teleprinter Reperforator Exchange Switching System); and
6. Substantial capital investment in suburban and country networks to meet the growing demand.

There were also new federal government initiatives that required much greater focus on the PMG's commercial planning and the need for self-funding. The government moved in 1959 to a Single Line Trust Account based on Financial Budgets and introduced an interest component

on capital borrowings from the consolidated fund that was backdated to Federation (January 1901)!

Whilst the Single Line Trust Account allowed the PMG much greater flexibility in its tariff and pricing strategies, the interest requirement drove a self-funding imperative and a need to improve commercial planning. The imperative was to bring together staff with skills to develop financial budgets and plans that integrated engineering plans (for capital works, operations and service delivery, product deployment of new and existing products) with commercial targets, tariffs and prices, and population forecasts into a coherent self-funding financial budget, in an environment of major technology change that was unprecedented at that time.

To meet this need, PMG Headquarters brought together a multi-disciplined senior management team with a group of highly capable commercial and engineering managers to develop a Master Plan. It was a major step for an organization that had an image as "an engineering fraternity" (Moyal, 1984, p. 223) to bring together a team of visionary experts across several disciplines.

It was in this environment that George commenced to make his mark in the second half of the 1950s.

## Career Highlights

In 1957, the Director General, Assistant Director General and Deputy Directors (State Directors) appointed a small team of carefully chosen staff to form a committee (the Automatic Network and Switching Objectives Committee — ANSO) to prepare a National Telephone Plan that would bring about a totally integrated automatic (STD) dialling system in Australia. The key leaders of the Committee were Bill Pollock (later to become Telecom Australia's second Managing Director in 1981), overseeing the commercial and customer aspects, and Ron Turnbull for the engineering aspects.

This committee selected a small team of young, gifted leaders with an engineering background and operational experience to develop the national plan. The members selected were George E. Hams, B. F. (Barney) Marrows and the "young Turks", E. R. (Roger) Banks and I. A. (Tony) Newstead (Moyal, 1984, p. 224).

As a member of this small team, George was a key participant in the development of the Australian National Telephone Plan in 1958. This plan defined the forward plans for national telephone services in Australia. The Plan was ultimately presented to Parliament on 1 September 1959 and published by the Parliament as the Community Telephone Plan in 1960. The plan formed the foundation of the integrated automated telephone service in Australia and became the model for numbering plans in Britain and other countries (Moyal, 1984,

p. 225). The related decision taken by the PMG in 1959 to adopt crossbar telephony to operationalize the National Telephone Plan quickly proved influential in world telecommunications planning. The crossbar technology suited Australia's needs and had low maintenance costs. The decisions made at this time would strongly affect the telecommunications industry in Australia and abroad. Australia was not only a key market in itself, it was an influential proving ground for telecommunications technology from abroad (Moyal, 1984, pp. 226–227).

From 1968, George began a new aspect to his career when he took an important role in the development of telecommunications in Indonesia. Under the provisions of the Colombo Plan, George was appointed to provide strategic advice to the Indonesian Government on the development and modernization of its telecommunication network. This role also included the identification and oversight of potential major telecommunications projects that would be of high benefit to Indonesia and appropriate for funding through the Australian Aid program.

This role developed George's skills in developing and managing the complex business and management strategies needed to successfully work with management teams having quite different business cultures and government approaches to policy development and implementation.

When the Australian Government asked George to identify a high priority project to be funded through Australian Aid, he recognized the opportunity to radically improve the resiliency and reliability of the Indonesian telecommunications network. The project he identified was the development of major backbone capacity links between the Bandung and Jakarta main telecommunications centres.

George finalized the funding protocols with the Australian Government and called together the key strategic management teams that would operationally deliver the project. Recognizing that, in Indonesia, major projects were delivered through third-party contracting, rather than the traditional Australian "in-house" heavy engineering groups, George worked closely with the Indonesian strategic management teams to deliver the project within the tight timelines required for Aid projects. George completed this role in 1970 and returned to the PMG.

In 1973, George's international career continued when he was seconded to the World Bank. In this role he provided advice to governments in developing countries on the strategic development and forward planning needs for their telecommunications networks and identified projects that would be appropriate for funding by the World Bank. George worked with many Indo-Pacific countries, including India, Pakistan, Thailand, Korea, Kenya, Nepal, Burma and Papua New Guinea. Another gifted Australian telecommunications leader, Richard E (Dick) Butler, was the Deputy Secretary General of the International Telecommunications

Union (ITU) over that period from 1968 to 1982, and was driving recognition of the importance of telecommunications to developing countries (Gerrand, 2012; ITU, 2023).

ITU studies (ITU, 1985) of the time had established that telecommunications policy and capability were a major determinant of economic growth in the developing countries of the Indo-Pacific region. The governments of these countries were very much aware of these links and so the role that George undertook was recognized as exceedingly important for their countries' economic growth and the wellbeing of their peoples. In this role, George mused on the difference in environments between the World Bank and the developing countries. The World Bank was highly regimented with a very strict protocol for the passage of major policy papers, culminating in a final policy white paper. By contrast, when in the field, George would find himself as a lone voice advising Prime Ministers, senior Ministers and strategic management teams of the developing countries on wide-ranging forward planning issues in what was the fastest growing industry of that time.

In 1976, George returned from his secondment to the World Bank to a newly formed Telecom Australia[i] and took a major interest in the newly formed State Administration-based Operations Departments. The creation of Operations Departments, each with responsibility for all operational aspects of telecommunications in a regional "Operations District", was a major new initiative. It was introduced with the newly formed Telecom Australia from 1977 as an outcome of the Davidson Inquiry (Davidson, 1982), and was a highly successful innovation. George took on the role of Chief Operations Manager for Victoria. Bringing together Customer Service, Financial, Personnel, Telecoms Network and Exchange Maintenance, and Telephone Installation and field support functions required a new set of management skills. In 1977, the initial trial of 8 Telecommunications Districts was extended to 30; and, by March 1978, 74 Districts had been established across Australia.
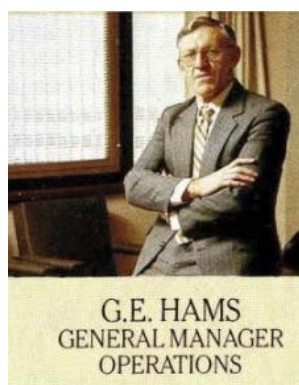


Figure 1. George Hams, 1984

In 1983, George was appointed to the Headquarters Group of Telecom Australia as the first General Manager Operations Department, with National Headquarters' responsibility for 49,926 Operations staff throughout Australia. The 84 Operations Districts nationally were staffed by Telecom's front-line customer-focused staff, who were instrumental in delivering and maintaining telecommunications services to all communities across Australia.

George was much respected at Headquarters for his calm matter-of-fact approach to life, his business judgement and his untiring efforts to mentor those who worked with him. His initiatives as General Manager Operations revitalized the

State-based Operations Departments through an Australia-wide consultative program that had an enduring positive influence on the leadership aspirations of the operations district management teams. This initiative led to a renewed focus on customers and service delivery throughout Australia.

George's guidance was instrumental in refocusing the 84 Operations Districts on commercial management rather than engineering-based performance measures. He championed the introduction of financial performance measures and their use. At the national level, he commenced innovative work on international comparative analysis, national performance measures and customer satisfaction reporting.

George was also instrumental in implementing a new, specialized and incentivized Business Sales Force and its integration into Telecom's customer-focused operational support activities.

George was much admired by professionals from all the disciplines within Telecom, from engineers to marketers, product development and customer service staff, and accounting and finance professionals.

It was common for professionals from other departments in Headquarters to approach George to seek his support for major new business initiatives, as his reputation for quickly grasping and progressing valuable new initiatives was recognized throughout the senior ranks of Telecom. He also had a great focus on the personal development of individuals. This attribute led to his recognition as a leader and a builder of energized and focused management and operational teams.

With the major reorganization of Telecom in 1987–1988 into national, customer-focused business divisions that subsumed the previous State-based organizations, George undertook the newly created role of Senior Executive General Manager of the Metropolitan Division. In this role he had the corporate responsibility for all Telecom's business and residential operations in the major cities and metropolitan areas of Australia. As the leader of the Metropolitan Operations Division, he continued to provide leadership and focus on the business activities of the Corporation. This was the continuation of a role that George particularly enjoyed. He continued to visit and motivate staff and teams throughout the administration and provide the guidance, encouragement and business support needed, overseeing customer service delivery activities across all Australian capital cities. George continued in this role until his retirement from Telecom in 1990-91.

## Community Activities

Throughout his working life, George used his business and personal skills to support community organizations and groups. He had a significant presence in community activities

and served on Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) Boards for 10 years. After his retirement, George continued to provide guidance to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) as the Australian representative of a 21-Nation Committee which examined the organization and working methods of the ITU. He also provided guidance to the industry as Executive Adviser to the Managing Director of NEC Australia.

In 1990, George was named in the Queen's Birthday Honours List, being appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for his significant contribution to telecommunications in Australia. This was a fitting acknowledgement of George's significant contribution to the wellbeing and development of the communities he served so diligently and well during his career in telecommunications.

## A Sport-filled Life

The two great loves of George's sporting life were Australian Rules Football and golf. Sport helped shape George's early life. It left him with a deep understanding of the benefits of encouragement and support in enabling individuals and teams to achieve their full potential. George would take this knowledge into his later business life with great success.

George's love of golf had many benefits for him. The Latrobe Golf Club, of which George was both a member and Captain, had a long-standing arrangement with the nursing staff at the Heidelberg Hospital that they would be regular attendees at the dances the nurses arranged. It was at one of these dances that George met Frances, his future wife. George continued with golfing in his later years, and was a regular at the golf club in Warburton where he had built his innovative mud-brick holiday home. George excelled at golf: he played with a very desirable handicap of three.

But it is in the annals of Australian Rules Football that George made the greatest impact. George commenced his football career with the Ivanhoe Amateurs but, at the age of 17 in 1946, George was offered the opportunity to play for the Collingwood Football Club. Football was a common topic in the Hams' household when the young George was growing up; players were, and still are, looked on with great affection throughout Melbourne. George accepted the offer with alacrity.

He played well in the Victorian Football League reserves during 1946, ranking second in the 'best and fairest' count; and in 1947, he ranked second in Collingwood reserves' best and fairest. In 1948, George made his debut in the Senior side in round six as a half-forward flank. He held his place in the senior side and, after his second game, he found his niche position in the back pocket where he excelled.

George was soon regarded as one of the best specialized back pocket players in the game, where he formed a wonderful understanding with Jack Hamilton at full back. George was effective at quelling the impact of resting rovers, being strong and close-checking; and he was not afraid to throw his weight around to unsettle an opponent. But he also loved to launch attacking forays down the ground and out of defence ('Vale George Hams', 2023).

He would finish third in Collingwood's Copeland trophy in 1950 and *The Argus* rated him the best back pocket in the League that same year. He was also wonderfully consistent, playing 57 consecutive games after his debut.

In 1951, *The Argus* wrote: "Hams is a back pocket player with pace, judgement and, above all, determination. He has settled down to being one of the best players in the league at a difficult position. He is intelligent and thoughtful, as master of a neat and well-judged defence. He is one of the most consistent players of his type in the game" (quoted in 'Vale George Hams', 2023).

In 1952, George suffered from some on-field injuries but became fit and played in the winning Collingwood 1953 Grand Final team. Overall, in his career George played 108 games for Collingwood, including 10 finals matches and two Grand Final matches, one of which was the 1953 Grand Final win.

In his business life, George was always described as both well-respected and very respectful. However, these terms were not always applicable to a resilient and reliable Collingwood back-pocket player during the rough and tumble of an Aussie rules football game. One senior executive at Telecom in the mid-1980s found an old newspaper article suggesting that George was somewhat ungentlemanly in his treatment of an opposing player in a particularly tough match. George recognized that this was very far from his current image and his colleagues were treated to a wry smile and an acknowledgement that the contest on a football field was played hard to win.

In those early times on the field, George learned that a football game was no place for the faint-hearted. When his nose was broken, George ran off the field and the coach reset the nose and then immediately sent him back to play on. The second time George's nose was broken, he reset it himself and played on. George never forgot his time at Collingwood and in later life recalled that, in his early football career, one of the highlights was the purchase of a set of brogue shoes in the club's colours, black and white, which he thought looked very smart at the time.

George finished his career with Collingwood in 1955 as Captain of the Reserves team. During this period, he developed many leadership skills, in terms of motivating individuals and teams,

setting challenging and seemingly unachievable objectives in new directions, and leading change. These leadership skills he later applied throughout his telecommunications career.

## Family and Friends

George met and married Frances on 4 November 1961 after a whirlwind romance. In 2021 George and Frances celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary and were honoured with congratulatory cards from the Queen, the Governor General and the Prime Minister. He is survived by his wife, Frances, his son, Marcus, his daughter, Lisa, and grandchildren Alisha, Natasha and Alex.

George had a wide circle of friends from all walks of life. He also had a lifelong love of music and was an avid attendee at symphony concerts, plays, musicals and operas.

## Acknowledgements

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## Endnote

i Telecom Australia came into being on 1 July 1975 as a Government Business Enterprise, 100% owned by the Australian Government.