This formal narrative ends with me facing the challenges of running my own software distributorship from 2001. It was energising. It was another change in the role I had to play. I learned to operate, and demonstrate if required, three sophisticated software packages, the discrete event-driven network modelling software from OPNET Technologies, the call-centre insurance sales software from Vulcan Solutions, and the basic accounting system I used to operate Alltech Communications.

It was a very different environment to working for an established multinational company. One early task was to establish a network of contacts to whom what I was doing might be of interest. In Canberra, this was not a problem. The government was keen to support small- and medium-sized businesses. Immediately available were Australian Business Limited, providing services to small- and medium-sized businesses; Austrade, promoting Australian export activities; the Australian Computer Society — I was an associate through membership of the British Computer Society; the Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association, where ex-defence senior officers seek white-collar jobs; the Simulation Industry Association of Australia; and the Australian Electrical and Electronic Manufacturers’ Association. The ACT Government also sponsored IT briefing sessions at the National Press Club, through which I established some good relationships.

I needed to employ two exceptional software systems engineers to provide high-level technical support. My first call was to the professor of systems engineering at The Australian National University. I couldn’t get the professor, but eventually I spoke to the acting dean of the systems engineering department, who advised me that postgraduate students were allowed to work one week in four, and earn $11,000 per annum without prejudicing ANU rules or any scholarships they might have been awarded. He asked me to put in writing Alltech’s requirements for part-
time systems engineers. My thinking was to employ two postgraduate students for one week per month as my technical support, so that I would have a technician with me for two weeks per month. When I put these thoughts into an email, the acting dean responded immediately by asking for a job and requesting an interview for himself. Joking aside, he told me that he would arrange for me to meet the two ‘brightest students ANU had ever had’. These two had won every undergraduate prize available in their final year and were embarking upon their doctoral studies and research. I employed them both after fun interviews.

Government contracts are usually big and there is a high probability that you will get paid. But government does not have the manpower to understand every product that manufacturers want to sell to it, so it issues tenders in order to be able to appoint from a panel of experts — in system integration, for example. We worked hard to get on the list of small- and medium-sized businesses capable of supporting the recognised systems integrators. In 2001, the biggest government contract was going to be for the Defence Messaging and Development Environment. Defence terminals could not readily talk to one another, as the Department of Defence had three different security levels and was using two different software packages in the network. By the end of the year, the shortlist had been cut to two suppliers: Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC), and Motorola. Alltech was a subcontractor to CSC of the United States — a big player — but the Motorola submission included Alltech software produced simulations, and I felt confident that Alltech would be a winner no matter who was appointed the prime contractor.

I was amazed and disappointed when the Computer Sciences project manager told me that there would be no business for Alltech. The contract CSC had signed was with ‘e-Defence’, as the project was now named. CSC had signed an additional time and materials contract with the Department of Defence for work not included in the prime contract, and CSC would make a lot more money by charging the Department of Defence to write the simulation and modelling software from scratch, rather than buying it from Alltech — guaranteed to work and with support. When I discussed this with colleagues in Canberra, they were not at all surprised. The big players had the reputation of using local small- and medium-sized business to win contracts as prime contractors and to meet government local content requirements. They would then renege on the agreements that did not serve their desire for profit.
Greed was the motivator in the early 2000s. The network modelling software was produced by OPNET and as OPNET’s distributor Alltech sold and supported the product in return for 50 per cent of the software price. Alltech was doing well; so well, in fact, that OPNET decided to replace Alltech with its own selling team in Australia. The businessman in me could understand the logic. The sums were easy. OPNET was a newly Nasdaq-listed company, and it needed the numbers. But they were not achievable by OPNET Australia, who failed catastrophically.

When working for oneself, any problems, however large or small, are yours to resolve. It was invigorating, but by 2005 I was ready to retire.

In discussing this decision with my wife, Audrey, she asked — sensibly as ever — what I thought retirement meant. We had kept our home in New Zealand when we moved to Australia, expecting to retire in New Zealand, and were favouring living on the Coromandel Peninsula on the North Island. My thinking had not progressed any further than living on a trout stream with access to the sea. Audrey, on the other hand, had given the subject some consideration. She presented to me a list of amenities that were her minimum requirements for retirement. It was a list that I immediately endorsed. Canberra was the city that met these criteria for us both.

Audrey’s list included, as number 12, ‘opportunities for personal development’. Audrey was working in the public service as a tour guide at Old Parliament House, and initially we were able to expand our interests through opportunities presented by government in the nation’s capital. Then we found the University of the Third Age (U3A) through which persons over 50 set out to educate and entertain one another through a university-style set of courses. U3A is very strong in Canberra, where a highly-educated, older population seems determined to make the most of living. We both took courses that suited us.

I had already written the draft of this book when I joined the ACT Writers Centre to investigate writing for public consumption. The centre had a scheme where sample chapters of a manuscript were reviewed by Aruna Press. My original draft had included a description of my passion for rugby and athletic activities, which was sustained in each place we lived. The Aruna Press evaluation of my work history was that it was probably commercial, but the sporting sections were ‘rubbish’. These sections were compiled into a small book I self-published as *Me and Rugby*
in 2007. What to do with the meat of the story? Aruna recommended a literary agent who was also positive about the text, although she did suggest a change in tense from passive to active. Fair enough, but could I take positive action?

After a serious look at The Australian National University curriculum, one discipline seemed to be a natural fit. I approached the science communication department. At my initial interview, the department indicated that my application to do a Master of Science Communication would be accepted, as I had a science degree and business experience. I completed a MSc, and then a PhD with a science communication study titled ‘The Representation of Science and Scientists on Postage Stamps’ and published a book with the same title via ANU Press in 2015. At the end of 2016, I am a Visiting Fellow of the Australian National Centre for the Public Awareness of Science at ANU.

I have made few changes to the text I had written prior to joining academia. I hope you have enjoyed the outcome.
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