

Kombi connection

FSGT to restore rare ex-Air Force 'Bubble Van' to its former glory

By LAC Aaron Curran

VOLKSWAGEN (VW) Kombis are generally remembered more for their association with the 1960s and the free spirits who drove them, not for the Air Force. But according to FSGT Bruce Walker, that is not entirely true.

FSGT Walker, who works for logistics at Fairbairn, is restoring a rare 1968 VW Kombi that was used as a mobile control tower at RAAF Base Pearce from 1969-91.

The VW enthusiast stumbled across the vehicle in the classifieds. It was headed for the scrap heap if nobody bought it.

"I received some photos and found out it looked like an ex-Air Force Kombi," FSGT Walker said. "I remember hearing early in my career that the Air Force had Kombis, but I had never seen them. I didn't think they were around very much, although I did hear one was restored in Adelaide a couple of years ago."

"I believe the one I have was converted at No.1 Air Depot in Melbourne and came into service in 1969. From there it went to RAAF Base Pearce, where it served out its days."

Disposed of in 1991, it was then bought and used as a Variety Bash Club car, sold again and left in a yard until FSGT Walker discovered it.



VW AT WORK: The 'Bubble Van' mobile control tower in front of a Macchi at RAAF Base Pearce in 1991.
Photo: RAAF Museum

He said the Air Force has had a few different models over the years. The Kombis were converted to mobile air traffic control towers so they could go and operate on remote airstrips or be used for training purposes at normal bases. The kinds of modifications were fairly in-depth, with radio systems placed inside to communicate with the tower and pilots.

Some even had an external air-conditioner attached to the back of the van to keep the operators cool.

Getting information on the topic has been difficult, but being on the committee of the local VW club in Canberra has helped him with the VW side of the restoration.

"I have made some inquiries on the Defence forums looking for people who have served with them," he said.

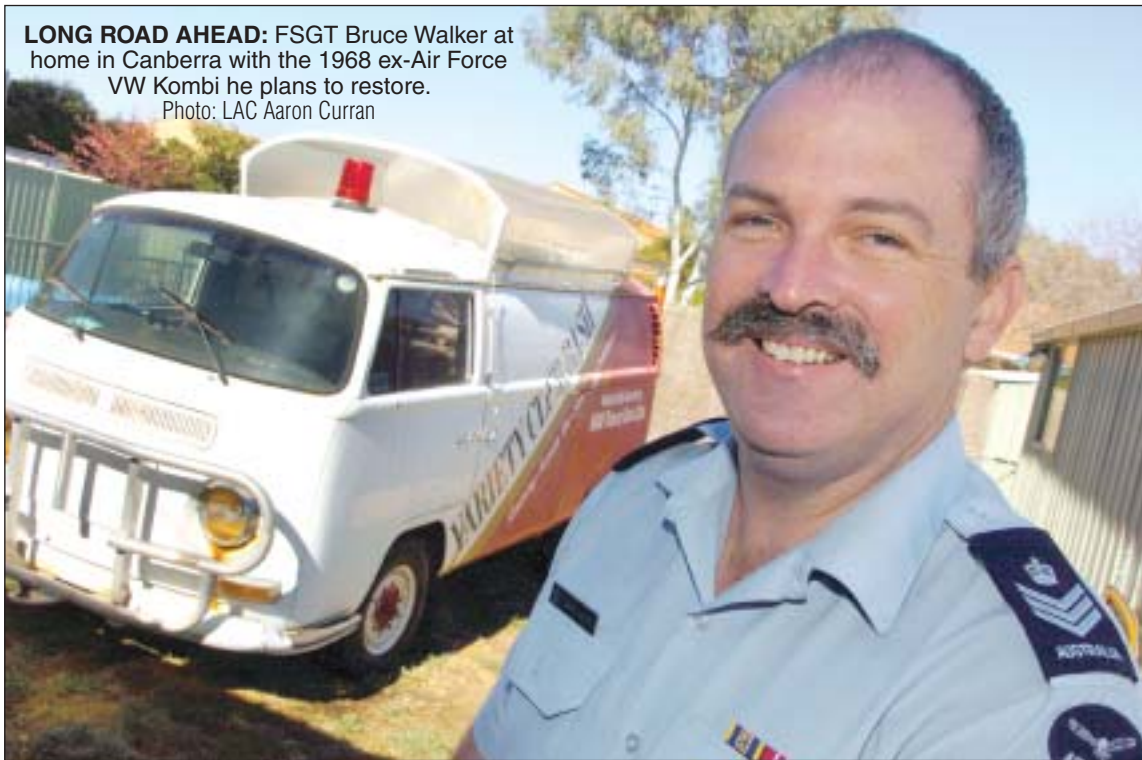
"I'm also getting some information about its life after the Air Force, but I need some more about its time in the Air Force; especially about when the Kombis were in service, what they did and what they had inside them."

The original bubble on the top was destroyed in an accident and a new rectangular plastic one was put in its place.



BASHER: The Kombi in Variety Club colours.
Photo: FSGT Walker

LONG ROAD AHEAD: FSGT Bruce Walker at home in Canberra with the 1968 ex-Air Force VW Kombi he plans to restore.
Photo: LAC Aaron Curran



"Replacement of the bubble is going to be a challenge, as will be getting it mechanically sound to drive on the road again," FSGT Walker said. "There is a lot of extra wiring to be sorted out and then I have to finally convert it back to its original candy stripe."

Along with three other VWs he has at his house, the Kombi is now sitting where his wife planned a vegetable garden.

"She will be very happy to see it progress and then move out of her garden," he said.

"I will accept any help with parts,

information, advice, photos and even sponsorship."

■ If you have any information on the former serving Air Force Kombis that could assist in the restoration project, contact FSGT Walker at email: raafkombi@dodo.com.au or call 0400 119220.

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