



Ken Newton,
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Under the Southern Cross

VASA celebrates its Eureka moment

Back in the late 1980s and into the early 1990s the vehicle air conditioning industry was coasting along quite well. The refrigerant R-12 (Freon) was doing its job well in the early climate control systems of those cars lucky enough to have air conditioning installed.

Remember that the mass installation of air conditioning at the factory was still a few years off, so in this part of the world, Australia and New Zealand, probably up to 75 per cent

of air conditioning in vehicles on the road in the 1980s and 1990s had been installed by aftermarket workshops who specialized in this work.

And they were good at it. Australian workshops had to be inventive because vehicles came here from around the world. While it's true that the Holden and Ford Falcon became Australian icons, we didn't all drive them. The aftermarket aircon specialists became recognized around the world as the only ones who could figure out and fashion an under-dash installation for any make of vehicle. These people were truly craftsmen.

And it was these workshops, about 100 of them here, which rallied to a call by a handful of industry leaders in 1993 to form the Vehicle Air Conditioning Specialists of Australia, VASA. New Zealand was added a few years later, to make it the Vehicle Air Conditioning Specialists of Australasia. The organisation was widened a few years ago to incorporate auto electricians and cooling technicians.

There was a very unsubtle barb in the name. The word 'specialists' was considered essential in the name, to separate the good guys from the backyard mob who knew little about air conditioning but thought it could be a good money spinner. As soon as R-134a appeared, the unprofessional workshops were gradually leading the country into a regime of multiple refrigerants, contamination and repair chaos.

These were some of the issues on the minds of the handful of men who reasoned that the time was right for an industry body to attack issues like poor work practices, (refrigerant) contamination of the growing

Australasian fleet and the dreaded disposable cylinders.

R-134a was around the corner and the workshops smelt the hot breath of overzealous government departments that were looking for ways to make an easy tax buck out of a burgeoning new industry.

Refrigerant top-ups were out of control – any refrigerant that is. As VASA Legend and co-founder Mark Mitchell recalls, "Work practices were disgusting. Customers were being ripped off because unskilled workshops and garages knew so little about air conditioning systems that they just kept replacing expensive parts, hoping the problems would go away. Very few people could properly diagnose a system."

So it was against this background that a group of men called a meeting at the Marriott Hotel in Surfers Paradise, on Queensland's Gold Coast, in late 1993.

They came from around the nation. One hundred of them. Most of them knew each other. It was already a very well established network of people who had formed a special unofficial skills bond.

And it wasn't just the workshops that responded. Some leading wholesalers and manufacturers turned up, and by doing so, helped fashion a representative industry body in which all sectors of the industry could be represented. The wholesalers instinctively knew that they had a vested interest in a professional industry group and they were prepared to throw their full resources and funding behind it.

The first meeting at the Marriott was a stirring affair. They were as one in their view that the industry needed a big shake-up, and they

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shared a perception that government intervention in matters like licensing, industry control, and phase out of R-12 were very real threats.

They wanted the vehicle air conditioning industry to have a champion, to take its concerns to government at the highest level and ensure that the industry's needs and aspirations were fully understood by the lawmakers, especially if licensing were to materialize – which it did some years later.

VASA was formed by unanimous vote, and it became probably one of the most powerful organizations for its size in the automotive sector.

VASA was this industry's Eureka Stockade.

The Eureka Stockade was this country's key event in the development of Australian democracy and identity. The Australian principles of mateship

were established on the gold fields of Victoria, in the bloody struggles which followed the government's introduction of licenses or taxes on the gold diggers.

The struggle came to a head when a mass burning of licenses was followed by the march to the Eureka diggings where 500 men constructed the famous Eureka Stockade, a wooden barricade around a section of the goldfields.

The diggers took an oath on the Southern Cross flag and vowed to defend their position. The authorities attacked the stockade, resulting in the deaths of 22 diggers and five troops.

The Commission which was subsequently appointed resulted in the demands of the diggers being met. The Eureka Stockade remains the only Australian example of armed rebellion leading to reform of unfair laws. The Southern Cross flag is seen as a symbol of protest by

organizations on both sides of the political spectrum.

Perhaps now MACS ACTION readers will understand why we adopted 'Under the Southern Cross' as the masthead of this column from Australasia.

VASA's Certificate of Registration as a company was issued on 21 March 1994. The first directors will be known to many MACS officials and members. They were Mark Mitchell (Gold Coast), Ralph Cadman (Sydney), Glen Watkinson (Adelaide), John Blanchard (Melbourne) and Paul Robinson (Perth).

These are the men who will be honoured when VASA has its celebration dinner as part of the annual Wire & Gas weekend this June. It will be held in the same room at the Marriott Hotel as the meeting of the 100-strong in 1993. ☼