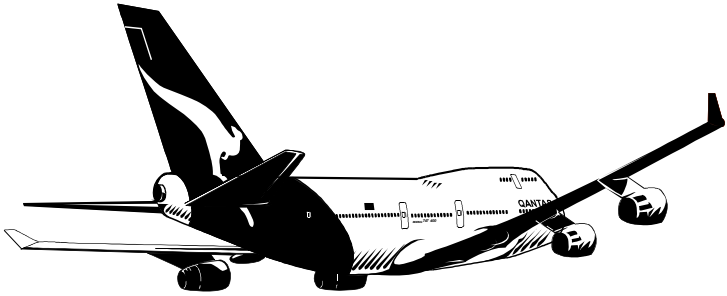

Service Tales and Other War Stories

By
John Clarkson

It is intended that limited copies of this book be printed and those copies be given or donated to the following:

- Immediate family members,
- A few close family friends,
- A few selected people with whom I have worked over the years, in particular those for whom I have had a great deal of respect, and
- Selected service organisations who may wish to read about, or reminisce over the type of service we had in the 1960's through to the 1980's.

Note: There has been no commercial gain by the author from this book, and its distribution has been controlled by the author.

LIST OF CHAPTERS

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Prologue

Who could have possibly have imagined it? That this young naive 16 year old apprentice studying to become an Armament Fitter and work on the weapons systems of several RAAF aircraft would one day end up writing Operations Manuals for Qantas Pilots?

Well in this article, I hope I can describe the wonderful path taken by this fellow and some of the interesting spots in between.

For many years, I had been reluctant to write such an article as this, as I always thought of myself as simply an 'average Armourer', and also thought I was indeed privileged to serve on some of the RAAF's finest squadrons. Later in my career, when I pursued a career in Qantas Airways Limited, once again I was privileged to be offered a path not expected of an average Armourer. However, as it has been revealed to me by some, I am possibly one of a few Armourers who has seen service on five or six different types of units and has been certified to carry out servicing on up to eight different aircraft types not including a couple of Qantas aircraft. Service as an Armourer has a price to pay at times, but it can give amazing rewards.

During the year of 2002, the initial version of this article was published in the "Australian Armourers' Association" newsletter, serialised over three issues. Soon after it was published, realising the published edition was somewhat abridged, a few people asked if they could read the 'unabridged' version. So, over a period of three or four years, I have been working on the expanded or more comprehensive version.

I hope to cover not only service and work related issues, but also a number of social and other entertaining events. A greater proportion of the events described were actually witnessed by myself, but there will be some within that were related to me by other Armourers, or events which occurred at a unit just prior to my arrival or just after my departure.

Above all, the article is meant to record a period of life and of service which we may not ever see again. Over the years, many things have changed; procedures have been improved, technology has improved, all of which are to the betterment of the service and the aviation industry in general. But there was a camaraderie in the 'old' service which when looking back had a certain attraction. As is usually the case with many of our servicemen, I did not take as many photographs as I should have at those overseas bases, as I simply thought my experience was no different to many others.

The difficult part of writing a book such as this, is when the manuscript is nearly completed, it seems to stay that way for some considerable time. The danger is that when one is wrapping up the script, one remembers yet another anecdote! So, another amendment is organised to include this recently remembered anecdote and fit in the correct place and order of events.

So, as we are now at March 2006, the aim now is to think of any notable events not yet mentioned, include them in the text and wrap up the book for final vetting and printing.

So I ask my readers to simply read on. I hope you find it as enjoyable as you do interesting and informative.

Pre Service

In August 1959, about 6 weeks after my 15th birthday, my mother was quite worried about my future. My academic achievements were at best barely reasonable, I had just finished the second term of my Junior Certificate, (Year 10), but she could definitely not afford to continue my schooling for the next year. My father had passed away from his second heart attack just four months earlier in April 1959. I had been attending a highly reputable Grammar School in Brisbane for the Sub-Junior and Junior school years, (now known as Year 9 and 10). The school Masters had reviewed all the current Junior students with recommendations for their future education. When my case was reviewed, the advice for me, given in a public forum, was not to bother with Sub-Senior, (Year 11), as I probably wouldn't do any good. There was no reference to the loss of my father, or any other related difficulties, just the observation that I probably would not succeed. I was very disappointed and thought my only future was that of an apprentice motor mechanic somewhere in Wynnum, a bayside suburb of Brisbane where I was raised. Then during a family conversation, a close family friend, who had seen WWII service with the RAAF, suggested I apply for the RAAF Apprenticeship scheme.

So, it began as simple as that. I filled out all the necessary paperwork, had it countersigned by my Mother in all the right places, and we waited. In October, I was called to do the medical and psych tests, and a few weeks later received a letter telling me I had been accepted. So at the tender age of 15 and a half years, in January 1960, I left Brisbane with a large number of other budding apprentices on the long rail journey to Wagga.

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Apprentice Days

Commencing Monday 18 January 1960, I was a RAAF Apprentice, one of the 14th intake. What a culture shock. Ushered to one of the many fibro huts, each of which contained 16 apprentices, separated in the middle, with 8 in each end, I suddenly learnt about how to get along with a group of wild ones. I can still remember my introduction with the "Hut NCO". This huge man, (remember, I was about 5 ft. 5 ins and about 6 to 7 stone), introduced himself as our Hut NCO. Yes, it was none other than the big Wally Crust. I think he was as big then as he always was, i.e., a huge front row forward!

Initial Administration

The first week was mainly spent with issue of our kit, allocating our accommodation, or bed space, bed linen and blankets, a smattering of drill just to let us know what was coming, and a brief description of the base and its facilities.

Medical Examination

One of the few things I remember about the first week at Wagga, was the day we all had our medical. Just after lunch, we were all asked to change into our sporting, or gym gear, i.e., pale blue tee shirt with dark blue shorts and white sand shoes. On entering the Gym, we were informed that we were all participating in a 'flow through' medical examination. We were asked to strip and stand in the queue waiting for the Medical Officer.

As we filed into the main area of the Gym, there were all the apprentices of our entire intake, all 150 of us, all as naked as the day we were born! We each had a small tag with our name and service number on it. We gradually filed past two Nursing Sisters who asked us some general medical history questions prior to standing in front of the Doctor himself.

Then the Doctor carried out his examination, including pulse, blood pressure, ear nose and throat, deep breathing and the usual holding the privates with one hand and saying "Cough"!

I can't remember anyone complaining about the conditions, several humorous comments, a few, including myself somewhat embarrassed, but I think we all just took it.

Division of Tasks in First Year

First Year was a mixture of Administration, Drill, basic fitting, lathe work in the machine shop, welding and blacksmiths, sheet metal work, carpentry, technical drawing, and a few lessons of Mathematics, English and Physics. Early in the year, they had selected some 20 to 25 apprentices who had excelled at their academic studies in their last years at school. These chaps were placed in the "Diploma Flight", where in addition to their normal studies, they undertook the Victorian Leaving Certificate in at least 4 subjects. I was certainly not amongst those chaps.

The tasks undertaken during our first year included:

- Basic Fitting: First task was to file a block of mild steel into an exact cube of 2 inches on each side. This was from a block which was issued approximately a 1/16th to an 1/8th oversize in each dimension. Many of the tasks after that initial one were related to projects carried out at other workshops.
- Machine Shop: These tasks included a Tap Wrench, a two spindle press, and a few other smaller projects. The filing and fitting of the components was carried out in the Basic Fitting workshop, and the lathe work was carried out in the Machine Shop. These included thread cutting on a long shaft for the spindle press, or a delicate small fine thread cutting task for the small tap wrench. I quite enjoyed the work at Machine Shop.
- Carpentry: We began by learning some of the better known timber joints, including the dove-tail, tongue and groove, etc. Although I enjoyed working with the timber, and seeing the results of the polished timber, I was never really good at it. My projects always seemed to have visible gaps in the joins, indicating that some of the timber cuts were too big! Beside the fact we were to construct some quite neat timber work items, the main attraction was the hangar vacuum cleaner installed. This vacuum cleaner would be switched on at the end of each morning and afternoon's work. Many an apprentice lost his cloth beret to a prankster who would quickly flick the beret from another fellow's head and throw it toward the opening of the Vacuum Cleaner. You could hear it being sucked through the tubing until it struck the huge fan at the entrance to the bin; "THOCK" would indicate the beret was now in many pieces.
- Sheet Metal shop: Some of these tasks were quite interesting. They included many different types of soldering on different thicknesses of Aluminium. It was here that we learnt about aluminium welding. Starting with a sheet of aluminium, and using a oxy-acetylene torch, we were shown how to create a run of weld along the sheet. For most of us, the first few attempts resulted in large holes appearing in the aluminium sheet. After several attempts, we managed to become reasonable welders of sheet aluminium. Other sheet metal projects included shaping and riveting of different thicknesses of sheet metal, making a sheet metal tool box and other minor projects.

- Welding and Blacksmiths: The main instructor was Sergeant "Big Jim" Lamington. We had many lessons on metallurgy, and different types of welding. One of his tricks with the new apprentices was to ask them to light their fires and stoke them but NOT to place any item in the fire. As sure as grass was green, at least one apprentice would place an old cold chisel into the fire. Big Jim would walk around reminding all that no item should be in the fire. Before too long, there would be the sound of molten metal dripping from the blacksmiths furnace. Some of the practical lessons of metallurgy were in the Blacksmiths Shop. After heating our sample pieces of steel to various degrees, we learnt to either harden or anneal the steel to the required degree. One memorable occasion with the very gruff 'Big Jim', was the time when the Officer in charge if the WRAAF asked Jim to repair a number of tubular steel chairs. Her instructions were to ensure each chair was capable of taking the weight of two people. Jim said, "You can't fit two people on this chair". To which Ma'am replied, "Sit down Sergeant", and promptly sat on his lap. We then saw that Big Jim was really just another softy at heart.
- Technical Drawing: Apart from learning the art of producing and interpreting engineering drawings, I also had an early lesson in discipline. I had been doodling with my pencil over a very worn drawing board whilst listening to the instructor. He saw me and demanded I pay for the drawing board as I had "destroyed" the board. After considerable objection, I took my mother's advice to "pay up and shut up!"

Rifle Range Practice

I distinctly remember the very first day our group spent at the 25 yard rifle range with the 303 rifle for our first live firing exercise. It was 27 April 1960, the first anniversary of Dad's passing. I got through the day OK, but it wasn't a good day.

First Flight in a RAAF Aircraft

The Administration Officer of we First Year apprentices, Flt Lt Burr, came to realise during his many conversations with us that very few of the apprentices had ever flown in an aircraft at all. So he set about giving every apprentice, yes some 360 of us, made up from 1st, 2nd and 3rd year apprentices, a flight in a RAAF Wingeel aircraft. For several months during 1960, two or three Wingeel aircraft would arrive from the Point Cook pilot training unit to give the apprentices a ride. The pilots were instructors from Point Cook who had been rostered to take their turn on this Apprentice flight experience. The whole programme was well organised and we were all told of the day and the time to report to the tarmac for our flight. Some of the flights were spectacular! Perhaps the pilot wanted to make the flight a bit more exciting. Some did simulated ground attack on the various hangars, whereas in my flight, we followed the local river at low level, (about 150 to 200 feet, yawing at each bend of the river. It was a real success and it may have been the key to some of the apprentices later applying for aircrew.

Academic Education

Such was the quality of instruction at Wagga, by June in my first year, about 6 or 8 apprentices, including myself, had achieved quite reasonable grades in the academic subjects and were asked if we would like to attempt the Leaving Certificate. This meant night classes for three nights per week. By the end of the year, about 5 out of the 8 had passed their subjects and went on to better things. (Eric Erhardt was one of those five, and after completing his Airframe Fitters trade, he applied for a Commission and became a Navigator. He later became the longest serving person out of our intake, 35 years). However, my fate was not as good. Try as I might, I didn't pass, and went back to normal studies. There was one distinct advantage of doing those studies, it was during this time that I was initially taught how to study! Over the next few years of doing various RAAF courses, I learnt more and more about study methods and which ones worked for me. The interesting thing was that it was the RAAF who taught me how to study and not at school.

It should be emphasised that our working day as First Year Apprentices was not that unlike a highly disciplined Boarding School, as most of us had just completed Year 10 at our local schools. However, the hours of instruction were quite different. There were eight periods of 55 minutes each. Morning parade was at 0730 hours and the first period started at 0750 hours. A short tea break was placed between the second and third period, and a fifty minute lunch was placed after the fourth period.

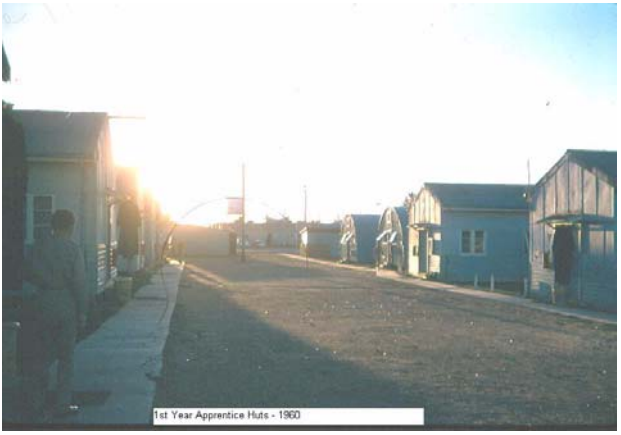
Another short tea break was placed between the sixth and seventh period, and the last period ended at 16.55 hours. We were then marched back to our barracks by 1700 hours.

Every Monday evening was a compulsory “Panic Night”, where the barracks and all the ablution blocks were cleaned to a spotless condition, including a mirror finish on the lino floors.

Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings were compulsory “Study Nights”, when we would either collectively or individually pour over our notes and attempt to take in the instructions of the day. To their credit, a scheme was introduced during our time which provided considerable help to our studies. Technical NCO instructors, as well as Education Officers, (qualified secondary school teachers) were rostered to patrol the apprentice barracks and supervise our studies. They also provided assistance to groups or individuals on request in any areas of their expertise.

Typical 1st Year Apprentice Hut

Typical Airmen's Bedspace



1st Year Apprentice Huts

John - in his first summer uniform

Community Service - Apprentice Style

During my first year of apprenticeship, an event took place which is not well known outside apprentice circles. This event, which apparently was repeated every two or three years was quietly sanctioned by the local Police. Yes, it was known as the Local Hood Clean Up night.

My recollection of this event is not good as I was one of the smaller chaps used as decoys. A few of we smaller apprentices, (remember during first year I was only about 5 ft 5 inches and about 6.5 stone (about 40kg) wringing wet), would be sent down one of the side streets of Wagga Wagga on a cold winter's Saturday evening to purchase a milkshake or something similar. As expected, some of the local hoods would soon surround us with the intention of giving us a hiding.

Suddenly, out of the dark night, literally dozens of larger first year apprentices, as well as many second and third year apprentices would then surround the hoods and begin to herd them toward the lagoon in the centre of town. Usually, more of the hoods would be attracted to defend their mates and a king size brawl would result.

The end result was always the same; the apprentices well and truly cleaned up the local hoods who were collectively belted up and thrown into the lagoon. In a Wagga winter, that would not be pleasant!

Introduction to our Chosen Trade and Second Year Apprenticeship

At the end of the year, we had to submit our vote on which trade we would like to enter. To help us, we were given the guided tour of each. I was one of the few who actually put Armament as the first choice. Why, you ask, well, of the entire tour they had the best whiz-bang toys, gadgets, flashing lights, etc of all. If ever there was any doubt when they started that flashing light sequence simulating a 30 rocket salvo firing from the Sabre, well that was it! Also, it was during our first year that the Sabre ejection seat trials were being conducted at Wagga. Some may remember the half fuselage of the Sabre being positioned out near the Stop Butts with a large net behind it to catch the dummy after each ejection.

2nd Year Apprentice Quarters - Brick at last

Armourers in the classroom

The 14th Apprentice Intake Armourers consisted of: Bill Chitty, myself, Wally Curtis, (an ex Frognall radio apprentice), Brian Dettmann (later to become an Accounting Officer), Denis (Selby) Evans, (Dux of the course), Pat Godman, Jeff Hatswell, Larry Hayne, Bob Hogg, Graeme Monkhouse, Greg Morrison, Barry Scott, John Seward, (from the RNZAF and to be our intake's Warrant Officer Apprentice), John Wattus, and Bob Wilson (also an ex Frognall Radio apprentice). Over the next two years we were under the leadership of a number of instructors, including Flt Lt Alec Mellville, WOFF Sammy Walker, FSGT Smoky Dawson, who took us on Lincoln Bombing systems, SGTs Bob Bennett, Trevor Macintosh, Peter Brown, CPLs 'Twisty' Highland and 'Doc' Livingstone. Just outside the Armament Section building was the Base Squadron Armoury, which was manned by CPL Gordon Nelson, with whom I was impressed as he had been several years in Korea, and his offsider, LAC Terry Flynn.

Highlights of Second and Third Year

There were a few memorable occasions which stick to mind. During explosives and demolition training, we all had to prepare our 1lb charge of Trinitrotoluene (TNT), complete with a primer and detonator, ready for inspection. Then the decision was to have morning smoko prior to detonating all our charges. As we were carefully placing our charges into the explosives cabinet, Pat Godman simply tossed his over the heads of everyone there and it landed on top of all the others in the box. A few nervous seconds were followed by Pat getting a bit of a brief. Another demonstration was the demolition of a 60lb high explosive rocket head, and when our instructor set the safety distance it turned out to be somewhat less than it should have been. When he pushed the plunger, we were all sitting behind the Armament Truck, and numerous pieces of steel shrapnel tore through the canvas of the truck.

Firing the Aden Gun at the Stop Butts

Introduction of Recruits to RAAF Base Wagga

During 1961, the RAAF in its wisdom decided to close the Recruit Training establishment at Rathmines, and take the whole unit to RAAF Base Wagga. The plan lasted less then two years. What a disaster! The brawls, fights, and sometimes real battle scenes between the Rookies and the Apprentices were something to behold. And that was just the 'on base' problems!

To give an example, even some of the instructors and staff from each of the units were joining the conflict. A typical incident happened one Monday evening in the queue outside the dry cleaners. It was the night before a full base Officer Commanding Parade and literally dozens of apprentices were queued up to get their freshly dry cleaned uniforms out ready for the big parade. Then a Corporal Drill Instructor from the Recruit Training Unit simply walked to the front of the queue. There were several calls from the apprentices like "Join the Queue Corporal", but he simply strode on up to the front. Then a very authoritative and deep voice commanded "Corporal, get to the back of the queue!" The Corporal looked around very indignantly expecting to tear some apprentice to pieces.

Then a Flight Lieutenant, who was then the Officer in charge of the Instrument Training Section, (and also an ex-apprentice), looked right at the Corporal saying, "Yes Corporal, I've got two stripes too, except mine are up here", pointing to his shoulder. The Corporal most reluctantly went to the back to the queue, complaining about these terrible apprentices.

The traditional Apprentice Bivouac, held toward the end of 3rd year, became a battle scene in 1961. It was planned that the recruit unit should attempt to invade the apprentice camp at Tumbarumba Forrest. Well, after a battle lasting some 3 to 4 days, the apprentices were declared outright Victorious, as the injuries amongst the Rookies were mounting at a horrendous rate. There were many "Prisoners of War" taken by the apprentices and some were strung up inside some very primitive enclosures until they revealed the plans of the imminent attack by the recruit unit on the apprentice camp. Yet in October 1962, for our Bivouac, they did it again! However, we did not have the open reign which the previous intake had. Whilst our intake were still victorious over the rookies, our exploits were tame compared to the previous intake.

A few of our tactics against the rookies were:

- We placed a few scouts at the entry to the camp site from the road so when the rookies arrived in RAAF trucks at night, a couple of accurate stabs with rifle butts knocked out the truck headlights causing the abandonment of the truck plus an extra mile or so further for them to walk;
- We had dammed the Tumbarumba Creek, which caused the creek to increase in width from about five feet to about fifty feet or so. We had inside knowledge that they intended to attack from across the creek. So, when they attempted to jump across the small creek in the middle of the night, they all splashed into a swollen creek some fifty feet wide and about six feet deep. It then became a simple exercise of rounding up the sodden attacking force and placing them in makeshift POW camps.

I believe the Recruit Training Unit was posted to Edinburgh in 1963, after learning an expensive lesson at Wagga.

Valuable Lessons from an Old Armourer

During the phase of Aircraft handling in 3rd year, our instructor was an ex - RAF chap named Sergeant Brooks. At the time, he would have been in his mid to late forties, quite old to us! However, Sgt Brooks told us one day that one of his proudest moments as an Armourer was that he had cleaned the guns of a Spitfire during the Battle of Britain with his shirt. Well, 15 cheeky apprentices reacted with comments like “Big Deal”! It wasn't until some ten years later, after I had returned from my second overseas posting, that I really thought about his statement. Just what type of scenario would have led to the armourers cleaning the Browning machine guns during these rapid re-arms with their own shirts. My respect for these men grew even more.

Other Notable Events

During the second half of 1962, the RAAF in their wisdom decided to show several senior Indonesian military officers over the Training base at Wagga as well as a number of our operational bases. As apprentices, we didn’t see much of our guests, but there were numerous officers and Senior NCOs who openly expressed their disapproval at this gesture for the Indonesians. I can remember many of them saying that the RAAF and indeed the Australian Government may live to regret this display of hospitality to our Indonesian neighbours.

Firing the Bren Gun at the Range

Of really memorable note was our trade trip to Williamtown in October 1962. We were introduced to the base by the resident Base Armament Officer, SQNLDR Campbell-Burns, and then farmed out to various sections on the base. In the two weeks we were there, we participated in rocketry programmes with 76 SQN and practice bombing programmes with 75 SQN. Also, we spent some time at Salt Ash range marking the hits as the Sabres released their ordnance on to the target. As a bonus, we had a day at the Morna Point high explosive Bombing Range with SGT 'Gundy' Evans doing some demolition of exposed ordnance and fishing 'Gundy' style.

On a more sobering note, when Trevor Macintosh took us for Sabre Weapons systems and Ejection Seats, he graphically described the scene where his good friend Frank Schipp was killed whilst carrying out an Ejection Seat inspection on a Sabre at Williamtown during late 1959. (In fact, I was somewhat surprised later on to see his son John Schipp as an Armourer).

Ceremonial Duties

During 1961, it was agreed that the City of Wagga Wagga would grant the RAAF Base the privilege of "Freedom of the City". It was a highly formal and ceremonial event with a full strength armed Guard of Honour. The guard was selected from the Apprentice group and it was with some pride that I was selected to be part of the Guard of Honour. There were many practice sessions, and the day arrived when we marched through the streets of Wagga, stopped by the Mayor, and then proceeded to the Showgrounds for the formal proceedings.

John - Ready for his first Guard of Honour Parade

Then a few weeks after this parade, the same Guard of Honour was selected to fly to RAAF Base Fairbairn in Canberra for the welcome of the new Australian Governor General.

Apprentice Leave

As most of our domestic, educational, working and sporting needs were located on the base, apprentice leave was not a priority in the eyes of the RAAF. Weekend leave was allocated as follows:

- 1st Year Apprentices: One day per week allocated as follows:
  - The Saturday of each pay weekend from 0800 to 2359 hours; and
  - The Sunday of each off pay weekend, from 0800 to 2359 hours.
- 2nd Year Apprentices: Two days per week allocated as follows:
  - Saturday and Sunday of each weekend from 0800 to 2359 hours.
- 3rd Year Apprentices: Two and a half days per week allocated as follows:
  - Each Friday, from 1730 to 2359 hours; and
  - Each Saturday and Sunday from 0800 to 2359 hours.

Recreational Leave, sometimes known as Annual Leave was granted to all apprentices at the same time: four weeks at Christmas time and two weeks beginning the last week of June. During this leave, all apprentices were transported to their next of kin in their home town. If this involved more than two nights by train, then the apprentice would be flown. For me, the train trip from Wagga to Brisbane and return was the greatest incentive I had to buy my own motorcar. More about that in the chapter on Motorcars.

Apprentice Clothing - After Work

In our first year, as soon as we received our kit of service clothing, including overalls, summer and winter uniforms, sporting attire, various items of footwear, underwear, towels, jumpers and greatcoats, each of us had to bundle together all items of civilian clothing and send it back to our parents at home.

From that point onwards, no civilian clothes were to be worn by any apprentice unless he was on Recreation Leave at his home. We even had an outfit for social occasions; a white shirt and apprentice tie, grey slacks and a navy blue sports jacket with the apprentice crest on the pocket.

As a privilege, 3rd year apprentices in the last six months on their apprenticeship were permitted to wear civilian clothes whilst off base on weekend leave provided they were of an acceptable standard.

Social Outings

I can't remember many significant social occasions happening during our first year. There were a number of Apprentice dances held in the Apprentice Recreation Hall, but First Year apprentices were very low on that type of priority.

During second and third year, there were a number of Apprentice dances in the Apprentice hall, which apart from the social scene also revealed some real quality musicians. Some fellows went to the dances at the Teachers' College and the Agricultural College during their weekend leave. All in all, we made most of our own entertainment on base, be it through sport or some other activity.

I soon found out that after trialling for the Rugby Union team, I was not a good player. So, in order to stay with my mates, in second year and beyond, I became one of their drivers. I found following their team a most rewarding time.

The single most memorable social occasion outside our Graduation was our trip to Falls Creek in the snow season in August 1962. We obtained permission from the Adjutant to drive the distance to the Victorian snow fields, which then gave us permission to obtain some rations from the mess. It was planned like a military exercise. There were about four or five car loads of us. Realising that we couldn't afford to hire sets of skis or toboggans, we took several thick polyethylene jet engine covers, each measuring about 7 ft by 3 ft. Leaving early one Sunday morning, we drove steadily through Albury and down to Falls Creek without any mishaps. Considering the cars involved, we did quite well. These included:

- Dutchy in his 1949 Morris Ten;
- Blue in his 1951 Morris Oxford;
- Michael in his 1948 Ford Mercury;
- Bob in his 1957 Ford Zephyr Mk 2 (clearly the most modern and best car); and
- Myself in my 1951 Riley 1 1/2 Litre sedan.

Apprentices at Falls Creek

On arrival we tried out our engine cover sheets as if they were toboggans. By positioning ourselves at the top of a slope, lying on the polyethylene sheet with our hands tightly gripping the front edge of the sheet and someone hold us from slipping by holding our ankles, we were ready to take on the slope. On our shout, the fellow at the back would let go of our ankles and we would slide down the slope at alarming speed. It was outstanding! The only injury for the day happened when one chap, sliding on his polyethylene sheet, went over a previously hidden tree root. Apart from a bruised rib or two, he was fine!

After a well stocked barbecue, we started the long drive back to base.

Apprentice Barbecue coming home after Falls Creek

Graduation

The Apprentice Graduation Parade and Graduation Ball were events of the year at RAAF Base Wagga. Parents, girlfriends, and other close family members were invited to attend and travelled from all states of Australia. It was common to hear that all hotels and motels throughout the Wagga area were completely booked out.

Practice for the Graduation Parade was accomplished over several weeks, and although our practice parades were assisted by a number of our Drill Instructors, the Parade on the day (Friday 14th December 1962), was taken entirely by the graduating apprentice intake. It was a full formal parade with a slow march presentation of the Colours across the entire parade ground while marching abreast. When it's well done, it's spectacular!

Apprentice Graduation Parade

Apprentice Graduation Parade - March Past

The Graduation Ball was a formal Ball held in the unit Gymnasium, and it was mostly funded by the graduating apprentice intake. This funding comprised of a donation of Two Shillings per pay day per apprentice for the entire first and second years, and Ten Shillings per pay day per apprentice for the entire third year. I'm led to believe the Ball cost in the vicinity of Two Thousand Pounds. Consider for a moment that an average tradesman in 1962 would probably earn about 900 to 1100 Pounds per year.

Dress for the Ball was “Formal”, ie, serving Commissioned Officers, Warrant Officers and Senior NCOs were instructed to wear their “Mess Kits” as if it were a formal Dining in night in their own mess.

14th Apprentice Armourers

So, at the end of our apprenticeship in December 1962, we graduated from our course and were posted to either 2AD at Richmond or 3AD at Amberley. Being the only Queenslander in our group of Armourers, I was successful in landing the Amberley posting.

Amberley Experience

A Year at an Aircraft Depot - 1963

An Aircraft Depot was a highly structured unit whose primary role was to carry out heavy maintenance on selected aircraft and a large number of their main sub-assemblies and components. It was quite factory orientated and although depot life may not be the exciting place that some squadrons can be, the Aircraft Depot was an ideal place for the newly graduated apprentices to begin their "On the Job Training".

The 12 months at an Aircraft Depot was designed to be part of our extended apprentice training, and we were thereby rotated between all the different sections within the Depot. The enviable post was up at Aircraft Repair Section, the small section between the Canberra and Sabre igloo hangars where we as Armament Fitters (ex-apprentices) could experience the actual removal and refitting of Armament components to aircraft. Between Ejection Seats, Bomb Carriers, Cleaning bay and Aircraft Servicing, we worked for a number of well known identities. These included FLTLT Keith Schmirl, FSGT Brackenridge, SGTs John Howes, Lofty Boyd, CPLs Adrian Norris, Kay Heyer, Harry Hamer, Allan Jensen, and LACs Barry Hogdson, Allan (Punchy) Adams, Terry Flynn, and a number of others whose names escape me after these years.

A couple of memorable occasions were when SGT John 'JC' Howes became like one of the Black & White minstrels. Everybody knew the rules about not riding bicycles in the hangar, but when it was raining and the Armament section doors were only open about 4 feet, John was just about to walk out of the section and Barry Hogdson was riding toward the section flat out carrying a gallon tin of Graphite. Well, we know who came off second best out of that collision!

USAF Offers RAAF a Replacement Bomber

It was during this year that the Australian Government was discussing a possible replacement for the Canberra bomber. The Menzies government was promoting the new F111 “swing wing” bomber, yet to be built, and the Labor opposition were promoting the new British TSR2 bomber. I was later led to believe that one TSR2 was flown to Woomera in South Australia for flight trials conducted by the British Weapons Research Establishment (WRE) then based at RAAF Base Edinburgh. For many years after, if one mentioned the word “TSR2”, politicians, Australians and British alike, ducked for cover! However, as a carrot, the US offered to lease to the RAAF at a very low cost a squadron of B47 Bomber aircraft. These aircraft were a mid wing monoplane, with six engines, three mounted under each wing on engine pylons, not unlike the later Boeing aircraft. Their maximum bomb load was about 9,000 pounds, which was only a little more than the 8,000 pounds for the Canberra. So, around June or July 1963, three of these B47 bombers were flown to Amberley for trials. During the following three or four weeks, trials were flown in which the performance of the B47’s were compared with the RAAF Canberra aircraft. At the end of the trials, the B47 crews took their aircraft home with their proverbial tails between their legs! The Canberra had out performed the B47 in almost about every category, using about half the fuel.

Some Social Occasions

Another was the social education of young Dennis (Selby) Evans. Some may not know that young Dennis, as well as being dux of the course, was a talented organ player on Sundays, didn't drink, etc. Then he took a week’s leave with Harry Hamer. It was supposed to be a scenic drive up the Queensland coast. What an escort for young Dennis! With Harry, it became a pub crawl. In 7 days, they managed to get as far as Gympie and it was time to come home. There were just too many pubs in between. Poor Dennis was never the same after that trip!

Most people associate November 1963 with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. However, on that very weekend, Ian Johnstone, an Instrument Fitter from my apprentice intake, and I had decided to spend the entire weekend at the Gold Coast. Our initial goals were not particularly honourable, as we were on the search for female talent. Yet, it turned out we met two ladies from Brisbane who were also at the coast for the weekend. The four of us became good friends over a period of time, and Ian later married his good friend Leslie. Sadly, the friendship between myself and the other member of the foursome gradually waned and we went our separate ways.

Posted - To No 82 Wing

In January 1964, after having completed the mandatory 12 months at the Aircraft Depot, I was posted to 82 Wing, Amberley. On arrival at 482 SQN under the leadership of FLGOFF Barry Murphy, FSGT 'Flaps' Ratcliffe, SGT Allan Jensen, (ex CPL at 3AD), CPL Ralph Graddige, and LACs Ken Kane, Allan 'Grub' Whitchurch, Brian Raby, and a few others, I was part of a team doing Intermediate level maintenance on Canberra aircraft. What ever happened to the "Jeep Semi-trailer" used by 482 Armament Section? It was the most useful vehicle ever seen at an Armament section.

To give an idea of how snap defence exercises were viewed by the ordinary armourer, picture the following scene. I had only been in the Maintenance Squadron a few weeks when the FSGT called us together late one afternoon and asked for a volunteer to go to Darwin the following morning with one of the Squadrons. The squadron had been mobilized that day, and one of the LAC Armourers had suffered a minor accident that day and broken a bone in his foot. Well, nearly all the LAC's put their hands in the air waving eagerly, and when one of the volunteers was chosen, he was told to go home, pack a bag for about 12 to 14 days, and return in 3 hours. The squadron was to have a closed camp that night, and depart early in the morning. Apparently, he then went home and told his wife and children that "The rotten Air Force has sent me to Darwin again!". Such was the appeal of the operational exercise.

Operational at Last - Posted to No 1 (B) Squadron

Then in April 1964, I was posted to No 1 Squadron. Wow, this was exiting, going to a real squadron! So began my experience in an operational squadron. For memory, the section was FSGT Reg Cuff, CPLs Eddie Smith and George Priestly, and LACs Ken Kane, Allan 'Grub' Whitchurch, Brian Raby, Peter Shaw, and myself.

John Meets the Warrant Officer Engineer (WOE)

After a week or so, my FSGT informed me I was to be introduced to the squadron Warrant Officer Engineer. Yes, this was to be a formal introduction. I learnt during this brief conversation between WOFF Maclean, FSGT Reg Cuff and I that the WOFF had been a Warrant Officer for longer than I been alive! He had been promoted to WOFF in 1943 and I was born in 1944. He was then 53 years of age, and later that year, in October 1964, when he was 54, he was posted to a Caribou squadron in South Vietnam.

Squadron Flying - Practice Bombing and Heavy Bombing

Flying days were usually filled with practice bombing, Air Defence exercises between Amberley and Williamtown, and heavy bombing now and again. A normal day would commence with some doing preflight inspections on the aircraft involved in the practice bombing programme, and a few Armourers would be at the Ordnance Preparation area assembling the Practice Bombs and inserting the detonators. With heavy bombing programmes, usually a few Armourers were selected from the Maintenance Squadron to assist in the preparation and fusing of the 500 and 1000 pound bombs required for the programme.

In May of the same year, I had come down with a heavy bout of the flu, and as I was a single man living in the barracks, the Medical people placed me in the Base Hospital. During my few days in the hospital, No 1 Squadron received a rapid deployment alert and were suddenly off to Darwin within 24 hours. So I missed out on my first chance of a heavy bombing exercise with the squadron. When I came out of the hospital, I worked for No 6 Squadron for a few days until No 1 squadron returned home.

Unusual Events of Squadron Life

In squadron life, you see a real mixture between silly accidents, absolute disasters, humorous stuff-ups, and some magnificent feats of flying. During numerous operations, I saw electricians jettison aircraft canopies or hatches by firing the detonators, (not realising the detonators had not been removed from this aircraft when they did their continuity check!) I saw FLGOFF Ben Schiemer, one of our younger pilots, perform a beautiful landing after being told the camera bay door, situated on the underside of the empennage behind the bomb bay, had come open.

Other feats of flying included an occasion during a flight of six aircraft operating from Amberley to Darwin. One of the pilots noticed symptoms of hypoxia. Fortunately, he recognised the symptoms for what they were and he notified his wingman. Being a squadron deployment, each aircraft carried a Senior NCO fitter as the passenger. My Armament Flight Sergeant was the passenger in the wingman's aircraft. He later told the story. As the pilot in the lead aircraft began to notice the symptoms of Hypoxia, he told his Navigator and passenger, who was a Senior NCO Engine Fitter. Between the two remaining crew, they transmitted all engine and fuel gauge readings to the pilot of the wingman aircraft. Between all parties, they managed to instruct the lead pilot to carefully decrease his altitude to a safe level where personal oxygen would not be required. His condition improved and an uneventful landing was carried out at Darwin.

However, there were other occasions more suited to the tag of infamy than good flying. One example was a chap called "Speed Carr", probably because he used to taxi at the alarming rate of about six knots! However, one day when a squadron of six Canberra aircraft were about to depart Darwin for Amberley, they were each loaded with six 1000 pound bombs, unfused, to be taken back to the Amberley bomb storage. At the commencement of taxi, the navigator commenced his "Post Engine Start" checklist. One of the items on the list was to "Check the security of the Emergency Bomb Jettison Switch". This is a three pole switch with a black and yellow guard lockwired to the frame. The pilot's check is to ensure the switch is OFF and the guard is in place with the lockwire unbroken. Speed checked it; it worked like a charm; yes you guessed it, he broke the lockwire and pressed the switch. The bomb doors came open, six bombs rattled out on to the tarmac and the bomb doors closed. Perfect! He stopped the aircraft, wondering what all the commotion was and a Sergeant Electrician opened the aircraft door and simply called him "A Stupid Prick!". So the Hercules was unloaded to retrieve the bomb loading gear. We then re-loaded the six bombs, and with careful briefing, Speed was under way again.

Indonesian Confrontation - September 1964

In September 1964 the Indonesian Confrontation began. It didn't affect the bomber squadrons at Amberley a great deal, apart from cancelling all Annual Leave for some months. The Canberra aircraft had the fuel range to reach Darwin at a moment's notice so we were not deployed as were the Sabres from Williamtown. Defence analysts today should take note of the Fighter units achievements then. One Friday afternoon at about 1500 hours, during a normal day's flying activities, the Base Commander received an instruction from Headquarters Operational Command to deploy 8 aircraft to Darwin, arm them with HE ammunition and HE sidewinder missiles, and to commence coastal patrols at 1300 hours the following day from Darwin, emphasizing that this was NOT a practice. The first patrol with all 8 aircraft took off from Darwin on time the following day. I should add that although some very senior officers in the Command structure may have had some expectation of this alert, none of the men of the effected squadron, from the CO down had any prior warning. Yes, an entire detachment of both Air Crews and ground Crews was mobilized from Williamtown to Darwin using HE ordnance from the Darwin explosives area in less than 24 hours. It can be done!

Prior to their sudden deployment to Darwin, each member was told to pack enough clothing and effects to last approximately two weeks. Some time after their arrival the fighter squadron was to discover that this was no ordinary deployment. That initial crew stayed there for some eight weeks and were replaced with an equal number of men from the Williamtown Fighter base. That began a four year "Darwin" Roster which maintained fully armed aircraft at Darwin patrolling the northern coastline of Australia.

News later came filtering through to us at Amberley that on the night the confrontation began, a significant event took place over Malacca in Malaysia. An Indonesian C130 Transport aircraft, loaded with Indonesian Army Paratroops, was shot down after it crossed the coast of Malaysia. An RAF Javelin Fighter aircraft had acknowledged the radar alert and was scrambled to investigate. The crew found the Hercules over the Malacan coast with the rear doors open and about to launch its human cargo. The crew instructed the C130 crew several times to turn back to Indonesia, but in vain. Therefore, the RAF crew launched one of its Firestreak Air to Air missiles, hitting the C130 in No 3 engine and severing the wing. The aircraft broke up in mid air and crashed into the Malacan jungle. In order to prevent an international crisis, it was later agreed that the Indonesians release a statement that a C130 had crashed due to engine failure and the RAF stated that one of its aircraft had lost a missile in flight. We were that close to an all out bingle!

Squadron Deployments and Heavy Bombing

Squadron deployments usually came with about one day's warning and were about getting a maximum flying rate with heavy bombing on every mission. Not having enough men to have shift work, the whole squadron simply worked from about 0500 through to about 2100 or so, every day for about 10 to 15 days. During the day, ground crews grabbed a short rest between sorties on camp stretchers behind a flight line tent and worked like dogs when the aircraft returned for replenishment and bombing up again. In those days, re-fuelling, preflights, bombing up, etc, all happened at the same time. It was poetry in motion. The squadron deployments in my time included Darwin in May 1964, (the one I missed), August 1964, March 1965, and Port Moresby in July 1965 (Photo Recce only at Moresby).

1SQN Tarmac - Darwin - 1964

1SQN Tarmac Huts - Darwin - 1964

Then in March 1965, I saw one of our own aircraft crash at the end of the strip at Darwin. This one, (A84-213), was No 6 of a flight of six aircraft all with a full fuel and a full bomb load doing formation takeoff at Darwin, ie, three pairs 15 seconds apart. (Flight Safety would be aghast today!) When he attained about 3 feet altitude, the Port engine suffered a compressor surge and he was forced to put the aircraft back down on the strip. (For any Flight Crew readers, the Canberra's minimum one engine flying speed was about V2 + 20 kts). The crew, FLTLT Peter Jones (later CO 2SQN) and FLGOFF Spike Tyrrell handled it really well. As it was jokingly said later, the only injury sustained was a Pilot's footprint in the Navigator's back as they both exited the aircraft though the Navigator's hatch! One may wonder how the Pilot's footprint became planted in the Navigator's back! Well, here's one for the Flight Standards people. As the Quail Island bombing range was only a few minutes flying from the Darwin airfield, some of the navigators became accustomed to performing their pre-takeoff and post takeoff checks from the aircraft jump seat, situated just below and beside the pilot. This allowed the navigator to move quickly from the jump seat to the prone Bomb Aimer's position ready for the bombing runs. However, when the Port Engine suffered a Compressor Surge at 3 feet altitude, the pilot instructed the navigator to "Get back there and get rid of that hatch!" So, Spike was kneeling on the navigator's ejection seat, facing rearwards, reaching for the Hatch Jettison Switch.

Things happened so quickly from then on, that Spike simply rode it out where he was! Hence, when the aircraft came to a stop, the first thing the pilot saw when he climbed out of his ejection seat was Spike's back. The aircraft landed in the mud with a broken back after losing its entire undercarriage crashing though an ILS tower.

Humorous Side of Squadron Life

In late 1964, there was an amusing incident which took place one weekend at Amberley. A small detachment of No 6 Squadron aircraft had been deployed to Darwin as a sudden exercise a few days earlier. However, on the Saturday, one of their aircraft had suffered an engine compressor failure and required an engine change. The maintenance people sent a signal asking Amberley to send a spare engine to Darwin.

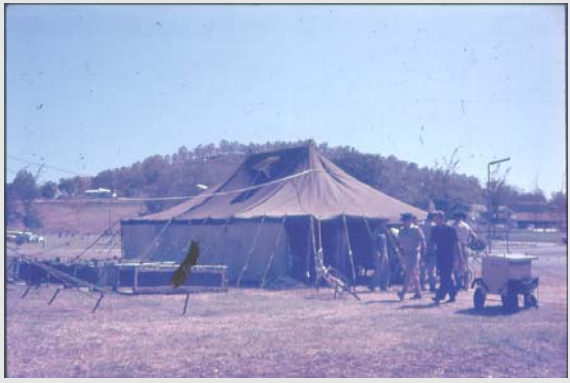
The detachment then continued their exercise with one aircraft less, realising that it could take a few days for an engine to be transported to Darwin by Hercules. But they had not accounted for a super efficient Orderly Officer at Amberley.

The same weekend, a young pilot was doing his first “Orderly Officer” at Amberley. He received the telex requesting a spare engine for the Squadron detachment. He thought, the priority of the detachment is just a little short of war, so he went into action. He located the duty storeman, established there was indeed a serviceable engine available in store and promptly instructed the duty driver to transport this engine, including all its log books, etc, to Brisbane Airport and register it as Air Freight to Darwin.

At about 0400 hours on the Sunday morning in Darwin, the No 6 Squadron Detachment Maintenance Commander was awakened to be informed his spare engine had arrived. His first comments were unprintable, let alone believable! None the less, the engine had arrived.

About four weeks later, the Senior Equipment Officer at Amberley received an invoice from the Air Freight company for the carriage of the engine. The rate was about a “Pound for a pound”. As a Rolls Royce Avon engine weighed about two and a half tons, the RAAF received an invoice for over 5,000 Pounds, a sum equal to just over four years wages for a tradesman. As it turned out, the young officer was counselled but not disciplined, for the Orderly Officer does act under the authority of the Base Commander.

In July 1965, our squadron went on another deployment, this time to Jackson Field at Port Moresby. This exercise was a Photo Recce one only and no bombing took place. Each flight was for about 4 to 5 hours duration, as sometimes the intended target was covered with cloud, and an alternate target was then chosen. Our accommodation as well as the flight line and kitchen was all in the old Olive Drab tents. Indigenous labourers from Port Moresby were assigned to us to help with fuelling, general aircraft handling etc. I can still remember one chap who was helping to refuel one aircraft after a very long flight. The fuel flow from the ground fuelling installation was fairly slow, and we noticed that after fuelling nearly all the tanks, the undercarriage struts had not yet compressed due to their fuelled weight. We warned the local fuellers that when the strut did give, the wing tip may fall some distance. Well, this chap was sitting astride on the wing tip tank whilst filling the tank, the last tank on his side. Then the starboard strut gave under the weight of the fuel. The tip tank simply dropped a couple of feet from under him, and he landed back on the tip tank in the same posture a second later. He received such a shock that he leapt from the tank, flinging the fuel hose to one side, and fled across the strip into the jungle. He never returned to collect his pay and was never seen again!



1SQN Flight Hut - Port Moresby - 1965

John's First Flight in a Canberra

In February 1965, I went on a small deployment to Williamtown as part of a three aircraft detachment. This meant I had my first flight in the Canberra! The flight plan said Amberley - Southport at 5,000 feet, turn at Southport, and fly 1500 feet coastal to Williamtown. This was fine until we reached Southport. As we descended, I saw the altimeter wind down far below 1500, and settled on 350 feet. I remember flying past a large lighthouse and asking the pilot, FLGOFF Ben Schiemer, if that was Cape Byron UP THERE? He replied that it was. It was nearly 100 feet above us! From then on, he asked if I could do his fuel selections for him at his instructions, while he concentrated on his formation flying down the coast. Then the three aircraft maintained 350 feet for the rest of the flight until reaching Williamtown approach, when we had to climb so we could be seen by their radar. We then had about 5 days of target flying for the 'new' Mirage, and returned home. On takeoff for the return flight, one of the aircraft suffered a compressor blade failure in the port engine at about 60 or 80 knots and aborted the takeoff. As the passenger in that aircraft was the NCO in charge of the deployment, I was asked to take his place and stay behind with the lame aircraft. I spent the weekend at Williamtown while an engine change was carried out, and we flew back on our own.

Eye Witness to a Fatal Aircraft Crash

On a sobering note, I saw another aircraft crash in early 1965 at Amberley. A crew from the Operational Conversion Unit was doing Asymmetric Training in a Canberra, (A84-206) including planned 'Go-Arounds'. I can remember talking with one of our older Engine Fitters at the mouth of the squadron hangar when he detected a change in engine note of the aircraft doing the Go-Around. I looked up and saw the aircraft revolving around its fuselage in a 45 degree dive toward the ground. It hit and burst into a fireball. Investigation revealed that just as the power was selected for the Go-Around, one engine accelerated and the other stalled. The pilot had little chance of recovery from just 200 feet. Sadly, instead of putting the cause to Technical Defect, ie, the engine stall, they called it Pilot Error, simply as he could not react to the asymmetric condition rapidly enough. I thought it was cowardly to do that when the crew were both killed in the crash.

Amberley Becomes a Staging Base for a NZ Air Display

During the early months of 1964, there was a rather significant air display held at a RNZAF Base near Auckland in New Zealand. The purpose of the air display now evades my memory. However, Amberley became a staging base for two of the contributing units. Considering the rather unique and brash sense of humour of the average Australian serviceman, many of the events over their stay at Amberley became most memorable.

One of the contributing units which came through Amberley were five F105 Thunderchief aircraft from the USAF, complete with their huge support aircraft entourage. This support aircraft consisted of at least three or four C124 Cargo aircraft for transporting all the required F105 aircraft support equipment and maintenance crews as well as at least three KB50 Air to air refuelling aircraft.

Amberley Tarmac During Exercise - 1964

Visiting F105 - Amberley - 1964

The other contributing unit was an RAF "V" Bomber unit, which supplied three Victor bomber aircraft. Each aircraft carried a cross trained fitter on board and each aircraft carried in its bomb bay pannier enough supplies for its aircraft support. So their three aircraft were completely self supporting.

RAF Victor at Amberley - 1964

The result was a most crowded Amberley tarmac. Many of our Canberra bomber aircraft were towed around behind the hangars to give our visiting aircraft more space. Remember, these were quite large aircraft. All in all, our visitors comprised of five F105 fighter aircraft, four C124 transport aircraft, four KB50 aerial refuelling aircraft, and three RAF Victor bomber aircraft.

Then to make matters even more crowded, during their stay, a detachment of RAAF Sabre fighter aircraft were staged through Amberley for a fuel stop enroute to Townsville for a defence exercise and deployment.

These differences alone became the first talking point between the Australians and their visitors; why does the USAF need all this enormous amount of support just to take five fighter aircraft to an air display? Look at the Poms - their aircraft are self supporting! Then we looked at the USAF fuel tankers and called them old B29's. Well, that didn't go down well at all! The tankers may have been modified from a B29 airframe and power plants, but we were assured this airplane was a very different airplane from an 'old B29'.

USAF KB-50 at Amberley - 1964

Then, after several social occasions on the base during their three or four day stay, where many a ribbing took place (all in good humour), they began to depart. One of the Australian ground crew members decided on a method to ensure the RAF really put on a good display for their takeoff. This chap quietly told the Flight Leader of the RAF contingent that some of the USAF crews had heard of the fuel load taken by the RAF Victor and expressed their surprise at such a load. The comment continued to the effect that they thought the RAF Victor would have some difficulty taking off from the Amberley 8,000 foot runway. All this was made up of course, just to stir the poms, and it worked!

Well, the RAF flight leader took the bait so well. He called his fellow pilots for a re-briefing and we then knew we would get a spectacular display from the RAF. Considering their intended flight was from Amberley to Auckland, their fuel load was not that large anyway. Their takeoff was performed separately and each of the three aircraft did a different style of takeoff, forming up for a loose formation later for their flight to NZ.

The first aircraft did a short takeoff roll, becoming airborne in about 3,000 to 4,000 feet of runway, yet levelled out at a low altitude. He maintained this height of about 300 to 400 feet above the runway whilst he flew a complete circle, all within the base perimeter, then as he came over the base again, he placed the aircraft into a steep climb and disappeared into the clouds. The second aircraft also did a short takeoff, and whilst still at a low altitude, flew around behind the base to the north some miles before performing a high speed run over the base. When right over the centre of the runway, he put the aircraft into a vertical climb and continued until he was out of sight, even though we could still hear him. The third aircraft did a slightly longer takeoff run, probably around 5,000 feet or so, then simply went into a vertical climb, yes, straight from the takeoff to a vertical climb, until he too was out of sight. In each case, the noise from their four Rolls Royce Turbo-jet engines was horrendous! During the vertical climb, the hangar and other nearby buildings were simply visibly vibrating!

So, the RAF really did themselves proud on that day. Our USAF visitors were very impressed indeed.

RAF Bomber Squadrons - Their Achievements

During 1964 and 1965, we received a number of visits from our RAF colleagues from the "V" Bomber Squadron units, mainly the Victor and Vulcan bomber aircraft crews. Each was a magnificent aircraft in its own right.

The Victor, the second of the three, had the highest bomb load capacity of any British Bomber in history. It could take 35 x 1,000 pound bombs loaded internally into the bomb bay. These were loaded on to bomb racks of seven bombs each, then the racks were loaded into the bomb bay by hydraulic winches. The Victor aircraft is still in service today, as an air to air refuelling tanker.

The Vulcan, the third of the three, may not have had as large a bomb load, (21 x 1,000 pound bombs loaded internally), but was far more sophisticated in its navigation, flight envelope, ceiling height and many other attributes.

The RAF "V" bomber aircraft were all painted with a special clear lacquer which actually absorbed radar. We found this out accidentally when we, as a night duty crew, painted the traditional red kangaroo high up on the fin of one of the visiting Vulcan Bombers. The crew were very upset as apparently this application of a different paint created a hole in the seal of the special lacquer. The crew's choice was to fly back to the U.K via an unclassified route and have the aircraft repainted on arrival; or ground the aircraft at Amberley and send out a paint crew to repaint it at Amberley. The crew chose the former of the two and flew home via an unclassified route.

This radar protection also created a famous precedent on one occasion. In late 1964, the USA loudly boasted that they had just completed a programme of installing early warning radar systems around the complete circumference of the USA. No aircraft from this point on could ever cross the American coastline without the USAF authorities' knowledge.

Well, all this was just too much temptation for the RAF Vulcan Bomber crews. One of the Vulcan crew members later related this to us at 1 Squadron at Amberley. The Squadron Commander of a Vulcan Bomber Squadron drew up a plan by which some 15 aircraft could photograph the entire United States of America! Flight plans were written, studied and briefed. Then on a selected day, some 15 Vulcan Bomber aircraft left their RAF airfield in England and headed for their respective targets within the USA. One of the crews had instructions to photograph the Pentagon, just on its own. As the Vulcan aircraft could cruise undetected at an amazing altitude, never disclosed, but over 90,000 feet, the squadron managed to achieve its goal of photographing the entire USA without ever being detected.

What happened then? We were informed by a very proud crew that all the photographs, complete with an imprint of the latitude/longitude and Zulu time printed in the lower frame of each print, were all sent by surface mail to the Secretary for Defence in the then US Government, with a hand written message, "We were there!"

Service Attitude in the Mid 1960's

It needs to be emphasised that the RAAF was a very different service in the early and mid 1960's than it became in the mid 1980's when I left the service. Most of the airmen and NCO's I worked with or was associated with were not career minded, they simply enjoyed being in the service, and providing a service. I certainly was not thinking about promotion at the time; I was still, justifiably so, considered a very junior LAC, even later in my Malaysian days.

Promotion

Promotion, particularly in the aircraft trades, was then quite a slow affair. One of the reasons that Warrant Officers were considered with such awe and respect was their enormous time in the trade. Until around the late 1970's, I can't remember meeting a Warrant Officer Engineer who had less than 26 years actually in the trade. There were a number of the aircraft trades whose promotion was usually expected at around the seven year mark. These trades included Engine Fitters, Armament Fitters, sometimes Airframe Fitters and Electrical Fitters.

I can vividly remember relating to one of my Warrant Officer Armourers during the late 1960's at ARDU that considering the average promotion times, I should be a Warrant Officer by about 1992 or 1995, ie, about 30 to 32 years AFTER gaining my trade. At the time, not many were surprised at my statement. Later on, the whole attitude of the service became more career orientated.

Experience in Operational Squadrons and Active Service

As I have stated previously, when I was posted to No 1 Squadron, I was in awe! Wow, this is an operational squadron! I actually get a chance to serve on one of Australia's finest squadrons. On arrival, I found that most of my NCO's, yes even the Corporals, had experienced active service somewhere. During the 1950's and early 1960's, the RAAF had a significant number of operational squadrons in an active service role in many parts of the world. The service experience of the NCO's I served under included:

- The BCOF in Japan, around the late 1940's;
- 77SQN, both in Japan with Mustang aircraft and later in Korea with Mustang and Meteor aircraft;
- 1SQN in Singapore, with the Lincoln bomber aircraft;
- 78 Wing in Malta, with the Vampire aircraft; and
- 3SQN and 77SQN fighter squadrons with the Sabre aircraft in the early days of Butterworth, when they were fully operational;
- 2SQN bomber aircraft with the Canberra aircraft in Butterworth doing live bombing against the Communist gorillas in Malaya.

Then a small percentage of the Corporals, nearly half of the senior NCO's and many of the Warrant Officers I was serving with at the time had second war service, either in the European theatre or in the Pacific theatre.

I was to learn that there is that intangible human quality a man acquires when he has experienced "Active Service". There is an interdependence between fellow servicemen and colleagues that is simply not found in civilian life, nor is it found in units where most have not experienced active service. One hears about it at RSL functions, etc, but I was to learn of it face to face when I first arrived at a squadron. Their experience tends to rub off on to their subordinates as they teach them the little tricks of their trade.

The Effect at a Home Squadron and on a Junior Airman

As most airmen in those days were not focused on some future promotion, but on the quality of their service, it was not unusual to see senior LAC's as married family men with school children, mortgages on houses, etc. It was a strange feeling; whilst life in general at Amberley seemed to continue peacefully, flying programmes continued, yet nearly all personnel were prepared for that unexpected defence exercise, or "mobilities" as they were called then. Now and again, the squadron would react to a telex from Operational Command to suddenly take its complete operation to Darwin with about one day's notice. We all did it, as when away on these exercises, this was the 'real' squadron. A day's work may vary between 12 to 16 hours, yet we revelled in it. Following a harrowing 14 hour day, after several bombing missions, most would end up in the Airmen's Club or occasionally in a Darwin pub for a good night, only to repeat the whole process the next day. Incredible!

So, needless to say, I was enjoying squadron life. We worked hard, drank well, and played hard! Life was good.

Effect of the Old DFRB Scheme on the Service

There were several reasons for the slow promotion of technical airmen in the RAAF in those days; one of course was that men were staying in the service for longer than later in the 1980's. Another was the rate of DFRB contributions paid by many senior NCO's, some were actually afraid of a promotion, as it would mean an increase of DFRB contributions to the extent that they would lose money in their promotion.

Another large factor of the length of service was the policy of paying service pensions from the DFRB. In those days, to receive a DFRB pension, one had to have completed twenty years service, AND to have been over the age of forty years. As many of the tradesmen were ex-apprentices, enlisting at the tender age of 15 or 16 years, and even many adult trainees enlisted at 17 years, these men would not be entitled to a DFRB pension until they had completed some 23 to perhaps 25 years of service. Many, at that stage, re-enlisted rather than leave the service after the age of 40 years.

Later, in the early to mid 1970's, a Royal Commission into the DFRB changed the policy so an airman could receive a DFRB pension after twenty years of service, even if he had not reached the age of forty years. This one change, let alone many others, seemed to change the service attitude totally. Suddenly, airmen were conscience of their opportunities outside of the service. The average service time for aircraft trades airmen dropped alarmingly, bringing with it a higher turnaround and a higher rate of promotion. In a matter of just a few years, the service changed completely. Just quietly, for some time, I wasn't sure it was a good thing. The RAAF was losing too much of its expertise.

I was pleased to see that long after I left the service, particularly in the 1990's, the average service time of airmen in aircraft trades increased to a very healthy level, so many were serving up to some 26 to 28 years.

Posted - End of Bombers - Start the Fighters

Then in June 1965, I received a posting to 78 (Fighter) Wing in Malaysia.

Butterworth - Malaysia - 1965

After getting married in August 1965, we flew to Butterworth in September 1965 in an Ansett DC6B aircraft with an Ansett Flight Crew and a Qantas Cabin Crew, (31 hours from Sydney to Butterworth via Adelaide, Perth and Cocas Island). My wife and I stayed at the RAAF Hostel for the first five weeks of our stay before getting a Married Quarter on Tanjon Bunghar Road, Hillside, a suburb of Penang.

Cocas Island Airport - SEP 1965

Our Married Quarter - Penang - 1965

Introduction to the Fighter Wing

I started work at 478 SQN Gun Bay doing overhauls on Aden guns. On arrival at the Gun bay, I was met by none other than SGT Trevor Macintosh and CPL Les Poustie. I was also placed on the Ubon roster with all the other Sabre people. As a part of his welcome to each new armourer to Butterworth, WOFF Roy Cosgrove introduced each armourer to the Ubon roster. The new armourer was then informed of the date of his first detachment to No 79 SQN in Ubon. (This was a SEATO detachment to 79 SQN at Ubon in far northeast Thailand).

One anecdote which did the rounds for a long time was Alan Johnson, the very tall young fellow. As Roy told him of his first Ubon trip, Alan exclaimed, “I can't go to Ubon at Christmas time, I'm just married!” Roy just laughed and said “Watch your fingers sonny when the Herc Door closes!”

Many may remember WOFF Roy Cosgrove as being one of the ‘old school’ conservative Warrant Officers. Well, there are a couple of interesting anecdotes in which Roy's conservative nature was truly challenged. The first which comes to mind is with big Wally Curtis and the tropical fish from the monsoon drain over at the Ordnance Preparation area. A directive had been given from the Base Armament officer, through the Line Armament Officer, the Warrant Officer, and Wally's Sergeant to the effect that he was there to prepare ordnance and not to catch and sell tropical fish! A mere 2 or 3 days later, early one morning, Roy was standing with the Squadron Leader, Flight Lieutenant and the Gun Bay Sergeant outside the Gun Bay when Wally drove around the corner in the ordnance prep truck, pulled up, and strode right up to Roy stating, “Here's the fish you ordered, Sir”. Well, Roy didn't know whether to drop the plastic bag or to take it!

The other occasion concerned one of the Malaysian Air Force Armament mechanics we were training at Butterworth. One of these chaps, a large Sikh, was continually being counselled for his technical inaptitude and his lethargic attitude. *(These were difficult political times, as we were not permitted to fail any of these mechanics due to political pressure from both governments)*. This chap was in Roy's office once again to be briefed on his attitude. Roy was attempting to give him a fairly severe dressing down when the Malaysian chap interrupted and said, “I do not object to the fact that you are a prick, for it is your job!” Well, Roy nearly fell out of his chair! No one had spoken to a Warrant Officer like that before.

Some months later, I too had a frustrating experience with this particular Malaysian Armament Mechanic. At the end of a Gun Harmonisation procedure, we were re-tensioning all the gun and barrel mounts into their new positions. I explained to this chap how to use a tension wrench and the importance of not to over tension any of the mounting bolts. He watched me do one mount, and saw that I tightened the bolt by hand up to a reasonably low tension prior to fitting the tension wrench to the spanner. When it was his turn, he did likewise, but with his strength, his use of the spanner 'by hand' brought the bolt to well over 40 foot/pounds, way over the specified tension. When he applied the tension wrench, setting the wrench to the correct 38 foot/pounds, the wrench obviously went 'click'. He then said, "No problem, it clicked!" It then took me some three hours to explain how a tension wrench worked, and that there is really a problem if the bolt was already over tensioned and the wrench obviously goes 'click' when used. He still couldn't see the problem, so we annotated on his record sheet that he shouldn't be permitted to work on aircraft until he gained a better understanding of basic engineering skills.

As most Gun Plumbers would remember, Gun servicing means working in kerosene baths up to your elbows whilst cleaning the gun, then carefully re-assembling, lubricating, and doing an electrical functional check of the gun. With practice, we could overhaul a gun in just about a day. The ideal was to reach the stage where one could dismantle a gun and place all the major and minor components in the kerosene bath just prior to finish of work of that day. Therefore, on arrival at work the next day, all the parts had been thoroughly soaked and washed in kerosene and were ready for assembly and lubrication. One then had time to re-assemble the gun, carry out all the functional checks and certifications prior to starting on the next gun. The next gun could then be dismantled and placed into the kerosene bath just prior to the end of the working day. This was not always achievable, but was the ideal.

Squadron and Flight Line Familiarisation

During the next few months, I had quite a few shifts between squadrons, in order to gain flight line experience prior to going to Ubon. I think it's where I became addicted to front line or squadron activities. When 77SQN went to Labuan in Borneo to replace the grounded RAF Javelin aircraft, I worked in 3SQN, and then when 3SQN went to Labuan, I worked in 77 SQN. Whilst in 77 Squadron, there was an "Air Officer Commanding" (AOC) inspection. I had hoped that here supposedly at the front line, they would not go through the rigmarole of painting everything prior to the inspection. Well, my hopes were well founded. On the day, we were asked to simply parade in our working dress, in front of our aircraft. There we were, in our stubby shorts and work boots, looking like bronze Anzacs, standing ready to greet the AOC. In those days, the Malaysian bases were under the control of the Far East Air Force, and the AOC appointment was granted to

either an RAF, or an RAAF, or an RNZAF Air Vice Marshall on a rotation basis. Well, AVM Sir Foxley Norris, a very British RAF gentleman, inspected us. One of our armourers, Darkie Macleod, although a white caucasian male, tanned extremely well in the tropics. When the AVM came to Darkie he commented to the CO, "Isn't it wonderful that you've got your indigenous labourers on parade with you" Well, Darkie exploded, and responded immediately, "Corporal Macleod, Armament Fitter, Royal Australian Air Force, Sir!". Not to be outdone, the AVM responded, "Young man, you'll have a lot of trouble getting back into Australia won't you, with the White Australia Policy". Darkie began to respond, but we all hissed, "Shut up Darkie".

Whilst in the squadron, I heard of one of our ex 1SQN pilots, Flg Off Ben Schiemer, who had performed an amazing recovery flying a 2SQN Canberra back from Song Song bombing range after his aircraft experienced a birdstrike with a pelican! Apparently, flying at low level, the pelican impacted the Canberra aircraft right at the base of the Pilot's canopy, shattering it completely. The sudden decompression and rush of the slipstream immediately took the pilot's flying helmet straight off, so Ben was left flying the aircraft with no helmet, no visor and no communications. He tried to indicate to his navigator behind him with hand signals that he was OK, and could he take over communications. Fearing the worst, the navigator transmitted a "MAY DAY" and sought help from any other aircraft in the area.

Two 77 Squadron Sabres returning from the firing range heard the call and immediately went to the aid of the Canberra. By this time, Ben, a stocky build of a fellow, had lowered his ejection seat to the lowest adjustment so he could see his instrument panel, but not above the canopy frame. The two Sabre pilots then took up position, one at either side of the Canberra, so Ben could see each one. By giving radio communications to the navigator and then the Navigator giving Ben hand signals, Ben managed to fly his aircraft parallel with the Sabres, join the Butterworth circuit, lower the undercarriage and complete an approach until he was almost at landing height. Ben was then left to complete a nice landing while the sabres flew a "Go-Around" and then landed. All in all, it was a very professional piece of airmanship.

My first week in operational activities was during an Air to Ground (A/G) gunnery programme. I was told I would be partnered with an experienced Corporal so I could learn the ropes of Sabre gunnery. So, Jack Kupfer and I met. Jack was an old very experienced armourer, even then. Hands up those of you who have been "counselled" by Jack Kupfer. I watched Jack do a re-arm and then on the second aircraft re-arm I began to do it. After enthusiastically pulling the ammunition belt up the chute with the belt, Jack screamed "Too Much", and I saw out of the corner of my eye a blur coming toward me. It was Jack's backhander! Wack! Upon receiving a large bruise on the lower jaw and a thick lip, I was told to watch again and pay attention. He did the third re-arm and I the fourth. That time, I got it right.

More Highlights of Butterworth

Internal postings within the Sabre units centred on the Ubon roster and squadron requirements at Butterworth. After returning from my first eight week attachment to Ubon in March 1966, I went to 478 SQN hangar aircraft servicing. In this hangar, they carried out "D" and "E" servicing checks on the Sabre aircraft. This was the highest level of maintenance on the aircraft outside the factory. Whilst I found the experience rewarding, I ran foul of the good SGT Brian Wells and after a short time landed myself back in Gun Bay. For the next few months I ran the Barrel Servicing bay under SGT John Kemp.

During late 1966, just prior to the close of the establishment of the Far East Air force (FEAF), we had yet another Air Officer Commanding (AOC) inspection. The AOC at this time was AVM Eton from the RAAF. Sad to say, the 478 Squadron Gun Bay establishment gave in to tradition and were instructed to totally clean and repaint the section. On inspection day the AOC, accompanied by the Squadron CO, the Base Armament Officer, and the Line Armament Officer and the section Warrant Officer, walked into the Gun Bay and met Sergeant Tom Bourbon, who was one of the Senior NCOs in the Gun Bay at the time. The AVM, who had known Tom from years ago on previous units, said, "Well Tom, what a magnificently clean gun bay! How long did it take you to accomplish this?" Before the FLTLT could reply, Tom said, "Three weeks, Sir, and we haven't cleaned a gun in the last two weeks. We now have 15 serviceable guns and 65 unserviceable guns". The FLTLT (the well known Norm Russell) gave Tom the infamous glare!

Then in December 1966 I returned to Ubon for my second trip. (Descriptions of these deployments are in a separate chapter). On return to Butterworth in February 1967, I came back to 77 SQN, under the leadership of WOFF Des Elliott and SGT Toby Kells. I noted that while I was away 3SQN had left the country. During these times 77SQN would fly an ordnance programme every week rotating between weeks of Air-to-Air Gunnery, Rocketry, Practice Bombing, Air-to-Ground Gunnery, and Sidewinder missile tactics. During gunnery weeks, the squadron would fly 2 groups of four aircraft, each group flying about 5 operations in the day. That would mean 10 banners for Air to Air work with a target of 4800 rounds of 30mm ammunition per day. The high flying rate and the high rate of explosive ordnance usage were all part of the policy to ensure the squadron was at its peak of efficiency just in case it was deployed to an operational theatre.

During my days at 77 Squadron, I found life a mixture of emotions. I really enjoyed the adrenalin charged life of an operational squadron, but I was trying to also lead a highly active social life to keep up with my wife's wishes. *(As Australian wives had the service of an Amah, several of the younger wives found themselves tied up with the RAAF sporting activities at the Hostel)*. Therefore, I was also tied up with this highly active lifestyle and it started to pay havoc on me. Several times I was late for work and on at least two occasions, I was formally charged for being absent. All in all, although married less then two years I felt it was starting to crumble. I could easily see that domestically, things were not well.

On one of these occasions, being frustrated with the state of my domestic situation, as well as my desire to stay at the squadron, I exploded in front of the Armament Warrant Officer, not a good career move! Our WOFF, old Des Elliott, was one of the old school, which I didn't mind, but he also liked his beer, so much that he was often seen morning and afternoon to be quite shaky on his feet. To get the true situation, one needs to have a good picture of Des. Des was the ultimate grey haired gentleman, always immaculate in his dress and bearing, always polite and courteous, but usually drunk, yes even on the flight line. However, Des was NEVER late, drunk perhaps, but never late. So, on this occasion, when confronted by Des who was once again half drunk, I bluntly asked, "Which is the biggest sin Sir, arriving late, or arriving pissed?" Our working relationship was quite fragile for some time after that.

Aircrew Rescue Training - Nearly a Disaster

Late in 1966, the RAF helicopter Air Sea Rescue squadron suggested they attempt a rescue of a RAAF Sabre pilot from one of our Sabres at the end of the runway. So a scenario was set up, with our pilot taxiing a serviceable Sabre down almost to the end of the runway and turned into a little used taxiway prior to shutting down the engine. In order for the rescue helicopter and its crew to simulate a genuine situation, 77SQN ground crew were instructed to manually remove the canopy prior to the helicopter initiating the rescue.

The rescue crew's instructions were to lower a man down the hoist, insert the two primary safety pins into the ejection seat, unstrap the pilot and hoist him up into the helicopter. That was the plan.

On arrival, the helicopter crew came straight over the top of the Sabre and did not wait for the ground crew to completely remove the canopy. Their first mistake! This resulted in the canopy being picked up out of the hands of the ground crew by the down draft of the helicopter and it fell point first right on to the main spar of the port wing.

Then the crewman from the helicopter was lowered to fetch the Sabre pilot. The rescue crewman forgot about the ejection seat safety pins, unfastened the pilot's seat harness and attached him to the hoist strap. The pilot was then quickly lifted up from the Sabre into the helicopter.

It was sheer luck that no part of the pilot's clothing caught on the ejection seat firing handles, (The Sabre ejection seat was a North American seat with a firing handle on each arm rest).

After the botched rescue attempt, the Sabre was towed back to the maintenance hangar for repair. The squadron Commanding Officer was furious. This little exercise very nearly cost a pilot's life, plus the entire crew of the helicopter, if the ejection seat had fired. The Sabre aircraft now had a cracked main spar of the port wing, from the canopy falling on it. So the maintenance squadron were instructed to cost the entire project, for both parts and labour, for the repair of the aircraft. This cost was then forwarded to the RAF.

Gunnery Programmes

To give one an idea of how 10 banners could be achieved in a normal day's work, let us look at a typical day. With the local logistical restrictions, most of the married men lived on the island, and the single men lived on the base. Some pre-flight work commenced around 0720 hrs and all the married men arrived at about 0745 after an hour's journey by bus, then ferry, and bus again. After changing out of uniform and into stubby shorts and work boots, all were working by 0800.

77SQN Flight Line - 1966

Let's take it from there. Each re-arm team consisted of 2 Armourers per ammunition colour, (Black, Blue, Green, and Magenta) ie 8 armourers plus one Senior NCO armourer and one LAC armourer for delivery of the ordnance to each aircraft for every re-arm. Other trades consisted of Airframe Fitters, Engine Fitters, Instrument Fitters, Electrical Fitters, and Radio Technicians. The whole team was then supervised by an Airframes Senior NCO and the Warrant Officer Engineer.

A flight of 1 tug and 4 live firing aircraft would take about an hour, from taxi out to their arrival back at the flight line. Then the second flight of 1 tug and 4 live firing aircraft would takeoff about half way during the first flight's duration. When the first flight returned it would take about 20 to 25 minutes to re-arm, refuel and service the five aircraft, providing everything went smoothly. If there were gun stoppages the armourers would simply replace the gun with one of their serviceable spares and move on. The armourer rostered on ordnance delivery for the day would deliver gun stoppages to the Gun Bay and replace them with serviceable guns. This was in addition to his normal duties of delivering the required ordnance to each aircraft on time for each sortie during the day. On completion of each re-arm, the new batch of pilots would be waiting to sign for their armed aircraft. This meant that there was about 3 to 5 minute gap between the time when one flight departed and the returning flight taxied in.

In a usual day's gunnery, the armourer would be seen actually running between his aircraft and the flight hut to sign for his work, then once again running to his next aircraft re-arm. It was about the only unit where simply being at work was enough physical exercise to keep fit!

A good hot lunch was delivered to the rear room of the hangar, and was in two shifts; 1200 - 1225, and 1230 - 1255. It just meant that while one's partner was taking his lunch, the other team member simply carried out the re-arm, any other associated tasks including gun changes, etc, alone.

These were the times when I learnt how to remove and refit an Aden Gun from a Sabre on my own. The OH & S people would have a fit today if they saw it. Although the gun weighed about 180 pounds, there were methods of taking the weight of the rear end of the gun while also taking the main weight with the hoist and removing the last gun mounting pin. Also, there were methods of installing a full ammunition bin, about 175 pounds into the aircraft on one's own.

By about 1645, the 10th banner had been dropped for scoring, and aircraft after flight inspections, gun cleaning, and a general clean up was commenced. At about 1700 hours the chartered busses arrived to take the married men home, provided they weren't involved in rectification of unserviceabilities.

To maintain this sort of activity for five days flat out may have been exhilarating for we young chaps, but it did not do any good for my marriage. My wife simply could understand how I as a young man was so exhausted trying to lead two lives.

One scary event was when we discovered some faulty 30mm Aden gun ammunition. This batch was discovered to have a high probability of detonating when the primary rammer slammed home the round just before it was rotated to be in line with the firing pin. So, with no barrel in front of it, The premature detonation of the cartridge would propel the cartridge case along with the entire gun slide etc back at a great rate with an enormous explosion! On one occasion, the gun's return springs slammed into the mass of hydraulic lines running down the back of the gun bay wall. That made for some interesting flying back to base for the pilot! On another event, the detonation simply blew the gun bay door off! Considering the gun bays are right along each side of the cockpit, imagine the scare he got as he was trying to pull out of a ground attack dive! This door wrapped itself around the leading edge of the horizontal stabilizer for a few minutes, then fell off. When the aircraft landed we all said, "Who signed that Pre-flight?" After that, they "Black-listed" the batch of ammunition and it all settled down.

Banner Party Duties for the Armourers

Most armourers did their fair share of being rostered for Banner Party duties. This actually was a good day. The party consisted of one Corporal Armourer and three LAC Armourers. Air Traffic Control would notify the squadron of which runway would be in use, either "36" or "18". Prior to the first air-to-air sortie commencing, the Banner Party would lay out one banner cable, (the 1,000 foot steel cable use to connect the target banner with the tug aircraft), on the edge of the runway being used that morning, and usually about another 4 or 5 cables parallel to the runway some 30 feet to one side on the grass. The banners, (day-glow coloured netting of some 6 feet by 30 feet) connected to a steel spreader bar and then to some 100 feet of strong webbing, were laid out at the edge of the runway apron. Just before each mission, the party would connect the banner to the cable laying on the edge of the runway, wait for the tug aircraft to taxi into position, just near the 1,000 foot marker, and the cable would be connected to the aircraft. The aircraft would taxi forward slowly until the cable and banner were taught, (the other 2 members of the party were hanging on to the end of the banner). Then upon the signal being given to the pilot that all personnel had let go of the banner and the area was clear, the pilot applied takeoff power and commenced his takeoff. When all the remaining four live firing aircraft had taken off, the banner party would then move the next cable from the grass on to the edge of the runway, being careful not to entangle any of the runway lights.

On completion of each sortie, the tug aircraft would fly over the grass area between the runway and the taxiway at about 200 feet and drop the banner, hopefully on the grass between the runway and the taxiway. The banner would be removed by the Flight Crew support team and taken away for scoring. The cable would then be picked up by the Banner Party and laid out for another use.

It really made things interesting if the wind changed during the day and Air Traffic changed the active runway. The banner party had to tow each of the cables down to the other end of the runway with the utility vehicle supplied. On one such day, I was driving the vehicle down the grass about 60 feet from the runway to pick up another cable when ATC told us on the radio to be careful as four jets were landing. As we were driving down the grass, we saw one RAF Javelin delta wing fighter, then the second, then the third, then nothing for a few seconds. Then a loud scream from the back of the utility - "Get this f.....g truck moving!" The fourth Javelin had a collapsed undercarriage and it was now sliding down the grass on its belly towards our utility! I accelerated the utility as fast as I could, and the aircraft finally came to a stop less than 100 feet from the back of our utility!

However, before the aircraft stopped, the Flight Crew were already getting out of the aircraft, and one injured his ankle as he jumped off the wingtip. We asked him later if he feared the aircraft would burn. He replied he knew it wouldn't burn but he was frightened of those RAF firemen. Sure enough, the RAF fire truck arrived, and even though there were no flames, they sprayed the whole aircraft, including the cockpit, with a liberal dose of foam.

Arrival of the Mirages with 75 Squadron

In April/May 1967, we saw the arrival of 75 Squadron in their Mirage fighters. Under the leadership of Wing Commander Jim Fleming, their first year or so in Butterworth was marked with a number of inter unit clashes. Their unit had built up an outstanding level of morale and worked together extremely well. However, their CO stood up for them so well against all outsiders, that several cartoons began appearing on notice boards around the base and in the Hostel on the island. The most common was a spurious notice that all married members living on the island except those from 75 Squadron would need to board the ferry to travel to the base. However, members of 75 Squadron are to walk across Penang straight. The implications only got better!

Whilst we on the Sabre units had a good relationship with the RAF people on the Base, some of the younger members of the newly arrived 75SQN had a rather unpleasant introduction to the RAF "red cap" service police who were patrolling the base after hours. Early one evening, whilst 75SQN were having a squadron Bar-B-Que in their hangar, one of our larger than life Armourers decided to quietly relieve himself by simply going to a nearby tree outside the hangar near the monsoon drain. He was spotted by one of the RAF red caps and his dog.

The red cap asked our armourer what he was doing, to which he received a stern reply; "What does it look like, stupid?". Not impressed, the red cap let the dog go, instructing it to attack our offending armourer. The dog leapt over the monsoon drain and took aim at our armourer's leg. Our fellow took a swing at the dog with his boot, narrowly missing, but the red cap was horrified.

The red cap drew his pistol and shouted, “Stop, or I’ll shoot!” Our armourer, being a little more affected by the Tiger Beer and less with common sense, told the red cap to “Get Stuffed!”. The red cap promptly fired a shot with his pistol over our armourer’s head, who promptly froze to the spot. Of course, on hearing the pistol shot, there were suddenly dozens of officers and NCO’s now at the scene.

The outcome of the whole saga was one very changed armourer who now respected the role of the red caps on the base, and one red cap policeman who was charged with discharging a firearm without due authority.

In June 1967, when the Israel - Arab six day war was happening, we RAAF people took close interest as the Israel Air Force were operating a similar model Mirage to that used by the RAAF’s 75 Squadron. However, it was heavily emphasised that we were NOT to mention the 6 day war outside the base, as it was very sensitive with Malaysia. The interesting part was that when the war started, the French stopped all deliveries of Mirage spare parts to Israel. So, as if on cue, the Israel Air Force removed all the french Atar engines, and installed the equivalent Pratt and Witney TF30 engines. Likewise with the french DEFA ammunition; apparently the Israel Air Force had expected this so they had tooled up an ammunition manufacturing plant and began to manufacture the 30mm ammunition themselves. Never mind little details like patents!

75SQN Flight Line - 1967

Several of the defence exercises after that saw 77 SQN performing a ground attack role and 75 SQN performing air to air defence role. It was in one of these exercises that I received what was later to be assumed the occasion of my major hearing damage. A RAF squadron from Tengah, flying the English Electric Lightning, was flying an offensive role 'attacking' the base at Butterworth. 77SQN were a ground attack force attacking a target on the east coast of Malaysia and 75SQN were defending the base at Butterworth.

One day while fuelling one of our Sabres, I was standing on the port wing fuelling the rear fuselage tank. The tank was approaching full and I was listening for the fuel rushing up the pipe, with my earmuffs around my neck instead of over my ears. Without any warning a RAF Lightning flew at about 300 feet altitude south to north, about half way between our flight line and the runway, at a speed considered to be approaching Mach 0.9. As the aircraft reached the northern end of the tarmac, adjacent to 77SQN lines, the pilot selected full afterburner and pulled the aircraft into a vertical climb. Just as the shock wave went over our lines, a Mirage aircraft followed, chasing the Lightning and did the same thing. Well, the combined shock waves swept me from the port wing and my counterpart from the starboard wing and we both landed on the ground behind the aircraft, still with the fuel nozzles in our hands and with 140 gallons a minute of AVTUR pouring out over the tarmac.

Defence Exercises

77SQN RAAF Vs the HMS Ark Royal

During my early days with 77SQN, we were frequently tested for our readiness and our ability to scramble aircraft with the minimum of notice. One of these exercises was on the occasion of the Royal Navy's visit to Malaysia. The HMS Ark Royal, one the RN's then top aircraft carriers, was cruising the ocean just a small distance north of Penang Island. Their aircraft, consisting of Buccaneers, Sea Vixens, and a few others were tasked with flying attack sorties against RAAF Base Butterworth. 77SQN were then tasked with defending the base against the RN's attack.

The RAAF radar unit for the early defence of Butterworth were tasked with searching the skies for these 'attackers'. However, as the Buccaneers were flying down the Malaysian coastline at about 120 feet, the radar were not picking them up. Usually, the first we knew of the impending attack was when the Butterworth Control Tower saw them coming! So, the squadron CO authorised a single aircraft to be airborne from time to time as a scout looking for our British attackers. The scout pilot would then radio back information about his sightings.

Some of our scrambles during that exercise were outstanding, sometimes within 90 seconds from getting the bell. Even though our aircraft were not armed, they had the Sidewinder missile practice guidance units and gunnery cameras. So their evidence of success was then measured after each sortie.

Heavy Bombing at RAF Tengah

During 1967 - 68 there were numerous defence exercises where 77SQN were required to provide the Air-to Ground operations and 75SQN were required to provide the Air-to-Air operations. Early in my tour, 77 Squadron went to Tengah for a heavy bombing exercise and we had an unusual encounter with the RAF police patrol. On our first night when we were finishing up the after flight inspections, the RAF police and their guard dogs began their base security inspection. Apparently nobody had told them about our arrival. So one of these policemen and his dog baled up about 3 of we airmen asking for our ID cards. In each case, we answered they were in our uniforms, hanging up in the flight hut and we were willing to show them to this policeman. *(Australians were the only ones permitted to work in stubby shorts and boots without any other apparel)*. Then a very junior pilot became another victim of the RAF policeman and his ferocious dog. Suddenly, the squadron "A" flight Commander, dressed in his tropical uniform, came around the corner and spotted us and asked what all the commotion was. Sizing up the situation he ordered the junior pilot, still in his flying suit, May West, survival jacket, etc, to draw his 9mm weapon. He then ordered the pilot to cock the weapon and said, "If that dog moves, don't shoot the dog, shoot that prick!" The policeman quickly let us go.

Social and Domestic Life Whilst on Deployment at Tengah

RAF Tengah was one of the best laid out Air Force bases I had seen in my short period of service. There were some five operational RAF squadrons on the base, including two RAF fighter squadrons, one operating the Hunter aircraft, and the other operating the Javelin aircraft. There were also two RAF bomber squadrons, one operating the Vulcan 'V' bomber, and the other operating the Canberra aircraft, reasonably similar to the Australian Canberra. The fifth squadron was a RNZAF bomber squadron, operating the Canberra aircraft, the one with a fighter style canopy.

During our short visits to RAF Base Tengah, we always found the RAF a very professional outfit and good to deal with. Their operational and maintenance procedures were of a high standard and fitted very closely with those of the RAAF.

The Airmens' Mess was amazing, considering the large number of personnel it catered for. On arrival, one had a choice to go to either the Grill bar, the Curry bar, the Omelette bar, the Salad bar, plus a separate servery for sweets. This sort of organizational quality was reflected throughout the base. After all, this was the front line for the RAF in the far east.

Social life after hours at Tengah depended on whether there was enough time to go right into Singapore, or simply spend some time at the local entertainment outlets on the base or nearby.

The RAF Base Tengah had a very good supply of entertainment facilities. They had the N.A.A.F.I. (Navy, Army Air Force institution, which was the equivalent of the Airmen's bar), the Malcolm Club, which was attended by airmen but was of a higher standard of dress and entertainment, the Macgregor Club, which was the venue for all the top class concerts, etc.

Then off base, yet nearby, was the infamous "Tengah Club". Usually when one spent an evening at the Tengah Club, one shared the place with several dozen RAF airmen who simply wanted to drink a few pints and have a sing along. Some of those evenings were wild and some were simply an enjoyable sing-along.

On the domestic side, the domestic duties for cleaning the Airmens' Huts and general laundry, etc, was done by a group of Singaporean women, employed by the RAF civilian labour officer and did an outstanding job. Several of these women were well in their forties or better and had been working on the RAF base for many years. One in particular, who always very jovial we later found carried a most horrendous memory, yet she always tried to use her jovial manner to keep herself bright. After befriending her at a later stage, she told us that she had been brutally assaulted by the Japanese when they invaded the base in 1942.

On a brighter note, I remember one visit when one of the RAF fighter squadrons challenged No 77 Squadron to a game of Rugby League. So a team was drawn up from anyone who had even played any form of Rugby anywhere in their past and we agreed to meet their challenge. We were a bit sceptical as their side was probably in a local competition. Nonetheless, we agreed to meet the challenge with our scrap team. A ground was chosen near Singapore and we arrived. One could easily see at the start of the game that this pennant was going to bigger than any sheep station. This was serious stuff.

By half time we were some 14 points behind and way behind in the penalty count. Then one fellow came to us and said "You haven't worked out that Ref yet, have you?" Our response included several rather unpleasant grumps, and then he said, "He's the Principal Air Chaplain of the Far East Air Force, and he doesn't like swearing!" Well, our boys were very well behaved for the second half and ended up winning the game by just two points.

I did a couple of trips to RAF Base Tengah, flying each way from Butterworth in a RAF Argosy transport aircraft. I was a little surprised to learn that a large majority of our Senior NCOs had been to Tengah as young airmen with the RAAF No 1 Squadron when they were flying the Lincoln Bomber during the Malayan emergency against the communist gorillas. This gives one a bit of a perspective in the slow promotion rate of the RAAF at the time. Those men would have been fully qualified tradesmen on their operational posting in Tengah during the mid 1950's, yet in 1967/68 they were now Sergeants.

Base "Red Alert" Recall Exercises

On another occasion, 77SQN had just returned from a 12 day heavy bombing exercise at Tengah in Singapore. We arrived at Butterworth in a RAF Argosy transport aircraft at about 1400 hours Wednesday afternoon only to find the Base was on an 'Amber' alert.

So we were tasked with preparing the aircraft for a HE ordnance programme, 8 aircraft to carry 300 rounds of HE ammunition, 12 x 3 inch HE rockets, 2 live sidewinders and external 110 gallon external fuel tanks. (Yes, armourers did all the external tank installations and removals then!) The other 8 aircraft were to be loaded with 300 rounds of HE ammunition, 2 x 1000 lb bombs, 2 x HE sidewinders and external 110 gallon external fuel tanks. When all the aircraft had been prepared and we were just waiting for the alert to be increased we were allowed to go home, but to expect an alert during the night. So, we were taken home by truck at about 1830 to 1900 hours.

Then at around 2200 hours the same night a general Squadron recall was issued to comply with the "Red Alert" procedures, and the entire squadron was back at work by about midnight on Wednesday. During this recall, one Service Policeman knocked on the door of one Corporal Armourer, shouting "77 SQN Recall - Transport waiting at corner". Before the SP could walk away from the front door, there was this very loud female voice from the front room, "Don't .... call .... him ... yet!". So we all waited until Hank had completed his marital duties!

After pre-flighting all the aircraft, we retired to stretchers in all sorts of little convenient places around the hangar until about 0500 when the pilots arrived. Takeoff was just pre-dawn so that our pilots could do the dawn strike using 'camera' gunnery, rocketry or bombing. On return from their 'strike', all 16 aircraft were armed with HE ordnance as if they had just fired out all their loads. Numerous senior officers would have their stopwatches timing us, yet ensuring we followed the rearm procedures to the letter. All 16 aircraft were fully armed and fuelled in about 35 minutes.

It was a good test of us as a team as well as a test of the written procedures. Then all the ordnance would be removed, and another 'strike' would be flown. This was repeated numerous times during the next two days working from 0430 until all aircraft were serviceable again around 2200/2300 or so until the 'battle' was won. Sleep, or rest for the ground crew was on stretchers strategically placed around the perimeter of the hangar. Then late Friday afternoon, the 'battle' was won and we all went home.

Multi-Role Ordnance Delivery

During one of these exercises, the RAAF tried a very American thing and attempted to get our Pilots to fly 'Multi-Role' missions. Each Sabre had a set of 110 gallon Combat tanks, 2 Sidewinder missiles, 60 rounds of ammunition in each gun, 6 rockets on the Port side and 4 Practice Bombs on the Starboard side. The biggest problem for the pilots was really how to manage all the different types of ordnance firing with the small fuel range of the Sabre. It certainly took some skill on their part. However, one notable Airframe Fitter set up an "SP Bookies" table near the Flight Hut, quoting prices on which pilot would be the first to drop a set of tanks. As the pilot had to fire everything else and not jettison the tanks, who would really drop the tanks? Some of the younger ones were offended as they saw numbers like 2:1 ON, or even just a low 5:2. Experienced pilots like Denis Stenhouse and Lindsay Naylor, etc, were 50:1 and so on. Fortunately, all the pilots did themselves proud and no one dropped a set of tanks.

During one of these exercises, when the armourer was busily preparing the aircraft, the young pilot was commencing his cockpit checks. He asked the armourer, "Why is the rocketry switch set on Eights?" The armourer, not having the time to explain the rocketry system to the pilot, very quickly told the pilot, "Because the f___ing Sergeant said so!" Luckily, the pilot didn't take offence and saw the humorous side.

In one of these rocketry and gunnery programmes, A94-985 suffered a compressor stall just after takeoff at about 200 feet. The pilot immediately tried to climb for possible ejection height, but in vain. He then searched the immediate surrounding area for a landing field, and landed the aircraft in a rice paddy field, with no engine and using emergency alternate hydraulics. In hindsight, he did a magnificent job and just crawled out of the aircraft as it was burning. Many years later, in the late 1990s, I met the pilot once again. He was flying 747-400 aircraft for Qantas. He and I saw one another in the corridors at work from time to time and relate to old times.

RAF Golden Jubilee Celebrations at RAF Tengah

One of the more memorable trips to Tengah was in late March / early April 1968. The occasion was the 50th Anniversary of the RAF. 77 Squadron were requested to participate in the flypast, so some of the squadron were deployed to Tengah. At the same time, I was a member of a Softball representative group who had travelled to Singapore to play against their representative teams. Whilst the softball games were another story, the RAF celebrations were really something to behold. There was an all ranks 'Dining In' night at the Airmen's Mess at Tengah, followed by an outstanding concert at the Macgregor Club at Tengah. International artists had been flown in from Europe, Britain and Hong Kong for the concert. The RAF really did it well.

Junior Pilots Learn a Valuable Lesson

During the latter part of my tour of 77 SQN, many of the pilots being posted into the squadron were just off their fighter pilot's training course and therefore fairly junior. One of the problems with operating out of Butterworth was the frequency of water on the runway. Following the many sudden storms, there would be numerous wet patches or puddles on the runway, yet not enough to define the runway as "Wet". There were many occasions of puddles on the runway caused some of the junior pilots to experience temporary aquaplaning whilst one of the wheels went over a puddle during the braking run. This would result in a tyre blowout on many occasions.

So, after a few of these, the notable ace of Sabre flying, FLTLT Denis (Stinky) Stenhouse gave a demonstration of aerodynamic braking when landing on a wet or patchy runway. The junior pilots watched with some amazement Denis Stenhouse's Sabre touching down with a 'positive' landing, then saw that he held the nose of the Sabre in the air without power until the airspeed had diminished to the extent that the nose would gradually fall to the ground. By this stage, his ground speed was reduced to the point that still on a wet runway, he did not need to apply the aircraft brakes. The wheels were firmly on the ground and not aquaplaning, and the drag of the water on the wheels was enough deceleration to bring the aircraft to a suitable taxi speed.

So, from that point on, Aerodynamic braking became the standard procedure for all Sabre landings.

Prime Minister's Visit

During the early part of 1968, we at 77 Squadron were informed that the Australian Prime Minister, Hon. Mr John Gorton, was to pay a visit to RAAF Base Butterworth and that he would certainly pay a visit to 77 Squadron as he was part of 77 Squadron when he was shot down during World War II.

So, not long before the visit, our commanders were informed of the PM's itinerary. Apart from his official duties, the following was arranged:

- A somewhat informal parade on the tarmac, (in working dress), in front of our aircraft;
- A photographic session of the PM sitting in a 77SQN Sabre;
- An official briefing on the state of affairs of the squadron from the Commanding Officer; and
- His attendance at a squadron Bar-be-que for the entire afternoon.

Well, for the day he spent with 77 Squadron, the programme went very smoothly. There was a good PR session on the tarmac, including several photographs of John Gorton in the cockpit of the Sabre. Then later in the afternoon, came the squadron Bar-be-que. He must have spent several hours there chatting with pilots, Senior NCO's and yes, quite some time with the airmen. He was a most approachable man.

However, during the course of several conversations, particularly with the Senior NCO's and Airmen, he confessed a number of times that we had told him of numerous anecdotes and events, some humorous and some politically embarrassing, that he had never heard of. It was later revealed that the personnel within the "Ministry of Defence" strongly discouraged this sort of fraternization between a Prime Minister and Airmen. The reason became obvious, particularly with such a convivial and approachable chap as John Gorton, he would learn all sorts of information that the Ministry didn't want him to know.

The pilots would tell him, over a beer or two or three, of the things they saw when flying along the Indonesian border. The Senior NCO's would tell him of frustrating restriction on the supply of vital spare parts for aircraft servicings. Then the men would tell him of the general conditions of operations in the Malaysian climate. These little facets included a recent restriction of flying during the hours of 1200 to 1300 hours as a Mosque had been built within 1000 metres of the end of the runway and the aircraft taking off disturbed their lunchtime prayers. We had continually asked "Who gave permission for the Mosque to be built so close to the end of a runway of a highly sensitive operational base".

So, our friendly Prime Minister left Malaysia for Canberra with the intention to find some answers to many of the questions he had heard during the most informative Barbecue! On several other occasions later in my service, I was to see similar types of events, where the Ministry of Defence had tried valiantly to prevent a senior Member of Parliament from attending squadron social events.

Squadron Admin and Appraisals

These days we take "Performance Appraisals" quite seriously, but spare a thought for my friend SGT Toby Kells. In July of 1968 WOFF Des Elliott walked into a very busy flight hut and called out "SGT Kells, I have just marked the highest Form PP207 (Airman's Appraisal Form) in my life and it was yours". That's it, the interview was over. Toby just said, "Thank you, Sir". A few days later Toby was called up to see the CO. On his return we all asked what it was about. Toby simply said the CO had upgraded the appraisal by 5 points! I think it tells a story of why Armourers were a slow promotion mustering!

The Social Scene in Penang

On a lighter more social side, here is a good description of the culture of how some of the Australians entertained themselves. Firstly, some of the single men decided on a good scheme to entertain themselves on a bright Saturday morning. As many of the young married men would be coming into Penang with their young wives, these single men would gather in the upstairs rooms of the hotels and clubs. Whether they had been there from the night before, or had arrived early, I cannot speculate, but the fun began when they spotted one of their married mates walking up Penang Road with his wife. The single chap would then point out his married friend to one of the hotel girls, give his name, and stand back. This girl would then lean out the window with one or two more buttons undone, and loudly shout, "Hello Bill, when are you coming back to see me? You were very good, Bill". Well, one can imagine just what sort of domestic debates this would cause!

There was one memorable evening which occurred later in my tour of Penang. My wife had continually hounded me that I should take her for a "Night on the Town", for she had heard all sorts of stories from both single and some married men of some of the risque things which happened in the night clubs of Penang. Well, finally, I gave in. I had it all worked out. We would begin the evening with a dinner at the Town House hotel, (about a two star hotel), then over to the Sydney bar, then to the Tiger bar, where things are a little lively, but not too deviate. Then, hopefully, by this time it would be quite late and it would be time to go home. Well, the plan was fine up until we were at the Tiger bar and we saw a few of the single army fellows we knew from the Softball competition. They said, "Carol, what are you doing here?" To which she replied, "John said he would give me a night on the town!" Well, the army fellows took over and we saw sights I didn't even know existed. We also saw some pretty deviate acts in these night clubs which I had only heard rumour of, let alone seen. We eventually arrived home at our married quarter at around 7.00am Sunday morning, only to be at the Softball ground by 1.00pm for our game. By then, the word had been around that John Carol had done the town!

In hindsight, I somewhat regret not doing more touring than we did in our three years in the country. We were incredibly involved in the local sports scene, and most of our non-working lives revolved around sporting fixtures.

Single Life in Penang at Christmas Time

Whilst our single men had an enjoyable time on most occasions during the year, Christmas time was usually not one of these times. When they saw many Australian families enjoying a Christmas Barbecue, or a family Christmas lunch, or even when several families combined to make a larger Christmas party, some of the single men did feel a tinge of sadness of missing their own families at home.

However, credit must be given to a couple of young chaps for their innovative plan. They decided they must become involved in some of the family Barbecues. So, armed with a candle and a full bottle of beer each, these two stood at the gate of an Australian Married Quarter who was holding a family Barbecue and sang Christmas Carols until they were invited in!

After staying a hour or two at one place, they would graciously thank their host and move on to the next venue. Each time the quality of carol singing would deteriorate, so they would be invited in sooner!

Australian Army Arrives in Penang

Around 1967, the British Army unit, known as the "Green Jackets" were posted out of Malaysia to another base in Germany. They were replaced by an Australian Army unit, No 110 Battery, an Anti-Aircraft battery. However, it was not only their working professionalism which became well known, but some of their social practices.

There is an age old military tradition that says if one unit is replacing another, then the new unit can attempt to take over the old unit's drinking hole or traditional meeting place. One of the bars frequented by the British Army unit was on the first floor of this old colonial building on Penang Road. This Australian Army chap thought he would play a practical joke on his British comrades. He went into this bar, feining he was very much under the weather and carrying a very long length of strong rope. He went up to an old fashioned sold timber table where there were some 12 British Army fellows drinking and talking and asked if he could tie his dog up to the table, saying "He's a good dog, he won't give you any trouble!" The Brits thought the Australian was off his tree. So, they simply ignored him. The Australian then promptly securely tied his piece of rope to the leg of this solid oak table, spoke to this imaginary dog, then bought a drink at the bar and went to a seat near the window and sat down. He then leaned out the window and shouted to his mate, about to get into a taxi, "Right Fred, take it away!" The other end of this rope, spiralling down the stairs and out the door, was tied to the back of the taxi! Well, this solid table, at which a dozen Brits were drinking, very quickly crashed down the stairs out the door and along the street. The incident caused quite an inter unit disturbance for some time.

Another incident involved one Australian Army chap seeking a bit more excitement in his day time entertainment. On on of the corners of Penang Road, there was an old colonial building whose corner was not a right angle, but rather a round curve at the street corner. Underneath all the bay windows on the first floor, a number of three wheel trishaws and their riders gathered waiting for fares and chatted to one another. Then I saw this Australian chap actually standing on the window sill of one of the bay windows early one Saturday afternoon. Then, surprisingly, he jumped! Well, he landed on the front footrest of one of the trishaws, causing the rider to be propelled some twenty feet or so straight up in the air, eventually falling to the ground a short distance from his now overturned trishaw!

This army chap thought this was such good entertainment, he simply shook himself off, climbed the stairs, chose another window and did it all again.

There were numerous cases where Australians exercised their unique sense of humour at the expense of either the local Malay population or better still, our British cousins.

The Gradual Wind Up of the Sabre Squadron

During 1968, the numbers of Sabre trained ground crew were being diminished as individuals reached their 3 years in country. Only in cases where it was really necessary, men from the 75 (Mirage) squadron were sent over to help. In most cases, these men had previous Sabre experience but not always. The most affected mustering was Airframes. Therefore, in some of the real busy flying programmes, it was not unusual to see an armourer refuel the aircraft, do the Airframe "Between Flight" service, and re-arm the aircraft.

In mid to late 1968, as the Sabres were nearing the end of their days in Butterworth, each person's posting to Australia was only issued at their completion of three full years. So, in August I was notified that on 15 September 1968, I would depart Malaysia on a posting to Aircraft Research and Development Unit (ARDU) then based at RAAF Base Laverton.

As each of us left RAAF Base Butterworth right at the point of 3 years less one day since our arrival in Malaysia, we were flown home in a B707 from BOAC. We flew from Penang Airport to Singapore Airport in a Malaysian Airlines Focker Friendship, then boarded the B707 at Singapore for the flight to Brisbane via Darwin.

We arrived in Brisbane exactly 3 years to the day after we had flown out of Sydney. Much had changed in Australia during that three years and it seemed as if there was a time gap. It felt strange being on leave in Brisbane after such a long time in Penang.

Intentionally
Blank

Ubon - Thailand

Introduction and Description

At the request of the Thailand Government, the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) had approved the deployment of a RAAF Fighter squadron to an air base in the northeast corner of Thailand. The squadron arrived at Ubon in 1962 with eight Sabre fighter aircraft.

Domestic Facilities

Initially, everything, including working and living accommodation was done in tents. However, by the time I arrived on my first tour of Ubon in February 1966, a comprehensive base had been set up. Barracks were built from corrugated galvanized iron with wooden slatted floors and corrugated iron windows.

Operational and Maintenance Facilities

On the other side of the base, the operational and maintenance facilities were built by the RAAF Airfield Construction Squadron a few years before my arrival. A reasonable hangar, large enough to cater for one aircraft at a time, had been built. There were also various additional sections for the different trades.

A total of eight aircraft revetments were also built, one for each aircraft. These aircraft revetments were built in pairs in order to separate potential targets. It's ironic that it was the RAAF who began the use of aircraft revetments in South East Asian bases. After several years use the USAF began to build them for their aircraft. However, prior to their inception, the USAF lost numerous aircraft from sabotage in various SE Asian bases.

The end result was quite a magnificent place! This small unit contained all the adrenalin of a fully operational squadron, situated close to a friendly little town with good hotels, clubs, etc and plenty of beer.

Typical Airmen's Huts

Typical Airmen's Bedspace

Typical Airmen's Quarters

Operational and Flying Duties

Primarily, we were to provide air defence to the northeast of Thailand. In order to accomplish this, our eight aircraft were placed on various degrees of alert. Two aircraft were on five minutes alert from 0600 hours until 1800 hours each and every day. To accomplish this, the aircraft, their pilots and ground crews were situated at the end of the runway for the entire period of each day on a rostered basis. This can be interpreted as an obligation to have two armed aircraft airborne within five minutes of giving an alarm at any time during those hours. (It should be noted that even after the arrival of the USAF fighter wing with their 88 Phantom (F4) aircraft, they could not achieve a five minute alert). The alert status of the remaining aircraft was allocated as follows:

- Aircraft 1 and 2 - (Callsign Zulu 1 and Zulu 2) - Five Minutes;
- Aircraft 3 and 4 - 30 minutes;
- Aircraft 5 and 6 - 2 hours; and
- Aircraft 7 and 8 - 4 hours.

At the Operational Readiness Pad (ORP), the two high priority Sabres were positioned at a maximum of 5 minutes standby. That meant from when the USAF Radar station would ring the alarm at our steel hut where the pilots and ground crews were waiting, both aircraft had to be airborne in less than 5 minutes. Most scrambles, an average of one or two genuine scrambles per day, were accomplished in about 90 to 150 seconds. It was simply poetry in motion!

79SQN Maintenance Hangar

Flight Line - Pilot Strapping In

Armed Sabre on the ORP

Armed Sabres on ORP - Rear View

An ORP team consisted of two pilots, one Senior NCO of an aircraft trade, and one member of each aircraft trade, i.e., Airframes, Engines, Electrical, Instrument, Radio Technician and Armament. On the sound of an alert, each member had his prescribed duties in order to achieve the aircraft to be airborne in such a short time.

In the early morning, prior to 5.30am, each of the aircraft tradesmen would have completed his own pre-flight inspection on the two ORP aircraft plus one spare aircraft. Upon the SNCO certifying the Maintenance Release of the aircraft, the pilots carried out their own pre-flight inspection and walk-around prior to signing the Captain's Acceptance. Each of the two pilots then taxied his aircraft down toward the end of the runway, performing a high power preflight engine run at a designated safe place on the taxiway. On their arrival at the ORP end of the runway, the aircraft were positioned with their tail over the end of the concrete, which sloped away toward the rear and the aircraft were facing a heading about 15 degrees from the centreline of the runway. A single chock was placed at the rear of each main wheel preventing the aircraft from rolling any further rearward. The aircraft were then refuelled up to maximum, including the two "combat" 110 gallon tanks, and all cockpit switches were left in their "flight" position and aircraft power was selected OFF.

In the event of a scramble, the ground power units beside each aircraft were started and power was supplied to the aircraft. The pilots ran to their aircraft and began to strap in whilst the engine was being started and was running up to ground idle. Then within seconds of reaching ground idle, he would request the safety pins to be withdrawn from all missiles. The armourer would then perform a "Stray Voltage" check on each missile pod, to ensure there was no voltage leakage prior to removing the missile safety pins. After removing both missile safety pins and the fuel tank safety pins, the armourer would walk out from under the wing and give the pilot a clearance to taxi. All these tasks by the armourer would take about twenty to thirty seconds. On clearance from the Armourer, the aircraft would taxi the few yards to the centre of the runway and immediately commence their takeoff run. There was the odd occasion when the pilots were so eager to get airborne, the armourer had fortunately completed his checks but not emerged from under the aircraft. On such an occasion, the only choice was to ensure you were not in line with either of the main wheels and just lie face down and wait for the aircraft to taxi over you at nearly full power. Air Traffic Control would obviously be aware of the scramble alert and therefore grant the two Sabres clearance over any other aircraft movement.

All this would take about 90 to 140 seconds. In flight, the aircraft would change their heading to that given to them by the Radar station and begin to search for the "Unidentified Aircraft". Sometimes, it was another American aircraft whose crew forgot to transmit their identification to the base station, but usually, it was an intruder who tried to edge over the border. The Australians would escort the intruder back across the border and all was well.

Most scrambles were "Operational", but there were also a few "Practice" scrambles, just to keep us on our toes. An American aircraft would be selected as a 'target' and the Australians would be scrambled. Only when airborne would the pilots be informed that this flight was a practice scramble. All in all, one could expect at least one scramble every day, sometimes two.

Preparing the Aircraft for JP4 Fuel

Prior to each aircraft's arrival in Ubon, it had been operating at RAAF Base Butterworth, where the aircraft fuel was AVTUR. This was a good quality aviation kerosene. However, on arrival at Ubon all the aircraft fuel was the American Military JP4 fuel. This fuel was a low quality cheap aviation kerosene which had several side effects on finely tuned jet engines including the Rolls Royce as used by the CAC Sabre.

Initial Engine Runs

On its arrival, each aircraft would be refuelled with JP4 as supplied by the USAF, then released for a one hour flight in the local area. This was also useful to ensure the pilot be re-acquainted with local landmarks and general operational requirements of the area. On return, the aircraft would be refuelled again and then taken for a full power engine run.

The engine needed to be re-tuned as the JP4 fuel was a much hotter fuel than the previous AVTUR used elsewhere. Therefore, during the next 30 to 40 minutes, an engine fitter would run the engine through all power settings whilst another engine fitter was tuning the engine itself, to ensure an overspeed did not occur.

Fuel Components Life Adjustment

To understand the quality of the JP4 fuel, cast your memory back to some of the earlier American films where a jet was taking off from an airport and there were four black streams of smoke coming from the engines. That was caused by poor quality fuel and its impurities.

Therefore, the RAAF Engineering Branch, quite justifiably, decided to half the remaining life on all components touched or affected by fuel from the day the aircraft arrived in Ubon. To explain, if on an aircraft's arrival at Ubon, its engine fuel pump had 520 aircraft hours remaining, that life was then halved to 260 aircraft hours. This type of adjustment was then carried out by the maintenance records people on every fuel affected component within the aircraft.

Fuel Safety - Low Flash Point

Another hazard with the JP4 fuel was its low flash point, or the temperature at which the fuel would ignite without any outside ignition. Most people are aware that good kerosene will not ignite when a lighted match is held at the surface of kerosene. However, on a hot day, as most were in Ubon, JP4 would readily ignite with a simple match. Its flash point was not all that different to that of petrol! The real hazard was refuelling the aircraft if the brakes were a little over-heated. Being an over-wing type of refuelling, ie, each aircraft fuel tank was refuelled separately, in order, from over the wing. If a fuel spillage occurred during the fuelling, and some fuel spilt on to the brake units, then a brake or aircraft fuel fire was highly probable. So, extra precautions were established in the fuelling procedures.

Use of JP4 Today

Quite surprisingly, JP4 Aviation Fuel is still in use today at some US military bases. I'm not sure just how far the fuel has been improved, but I am aware that commercial aviation companies take extraordinary steps to avoid the fuel where ever possible.

Sabre Overwing Refuelling

Daily Flying Operations

General Patrol Duties

All flying was done with guns fully armed with HE ammunition. The only difference was that when aircraft not assigned to ORP duties were carrying out local and general patrol duties, the gun plugs were connected to an earthing socket. When the aircraft was on readiness, ie, at the Ordnance Readiness Pad (ORP) at the end of the runway, HE sidewinder missiles were fitted and the gun plugs were plugged into their active sockets.

From a ground crew perspective, most of the squadron flying was basically "Local and General Area Patrols", the pilots would not fire their ordnance as in Butterworth. 79 SQN did not perform practice ordnance firing flights. From the air crew's perspective, much of the flying was to perform frequent patrols around the north east Thailand area. As the base was only about 15 to 20 miles from the Laos border to the east, and some 40 miles or so from the Laos border to the north, our pilots had to be very careful not to cross the borders unintentionally, but to carry out frequent patrols of the Thai airspace.

We were later to discover that our pilots did in fact cross the border into Laos a number of times and report to base various military intelligence sightings.

For the Armourer, the daily work load was considerably easier than at Butterworth in Malaysia. Although all the Sabres contained a full load of HE ammunition at all times, all the patrol flying was done in accordance with official rules of engagement, ie, the pilot was to fire his ordnance only if fired upon first. So the only "Re-Arm" done by the Armourers would be replacing the ammunition in preparation for the ORP alert aircraft. Most of the flying was local patrols and intelligence gathering.

Use of Aircraft Revetments

Not long after the squadron had arrived in Ubon and established their presence on the base, it was wisely decided to build reinforced concrete revetments for each of the eight aircraft. These were located in pairs, in four different locations around the dispersal area. Each revetment was about five feet higher than the top of the vertical fin of the aircraft, about 15 feet wider than the aircraft's wingspan, in order to position ground handling equipment beside or behind the aircraft, and some 15 feet longer than the length of the aircraft.

The USAF often wondered about the Australian's use of revetments. I think they still believed that a show of force was seen in displaying large numbers of aircraft, eg, usually between 50 to 70, in either one or two neat rows. 'Right dressed' as it were. Whereas the RAAF's inventory of aircraft, a whole eight, were located in pairs of revetments in order to prevent secondary damage to other aircraft should a sabotage attempt succeed in severely damaging one aircraft.

Then, in the mid 1960's, at one of the USAF's largest air bases in Vietnam, I think it could have Long Bin, on a tarmac containing about 50 aircraft in perfect alignment, a Vietnamese Gorilla fighter one night placed a small explosive charge under the centre aircraft of those 50 aircraft. The resultant aircraft fire was not a huge one, but enough for it to spread to the adjacent aircraft. By the time the fire was brought under control, the USAF had lost some 23 aircraft from one small incendiary charge.

One would then believe the USAF had learnt an expensive lesson. Yes, they did build revetments for their very numerous aircraft, on some bases, but they were of aluminium pre-fab construction! The shrapnel, even from a small charge, would have been enough to penetrate the aluminium. It was several years before the USAF and other American squadrons copied the Australian lead and provided solid concrete revetments for each of their aircraft.

Significant Change of Role

From 1965 onwards, the role of No 79 Squadron in Ubon changed significantly. The USAF fighter wing stationed at Ubon was heavily engaged in the Vietnam war by carrying out numerous bombing and rocketry raids over North Vietnam. Our pilots were continually being asked to provide assistance in some form or another.

During my second tour, (28DEC66 to 22FEB67) and particularly during my third tour, (5OCT67 to 30NOV67), there were some significant changes to our working relationships with the USAF. The USAF Ordnance Officers and the USAF Aircrew Weapons Officers were continually asking the Australian pilots to fly reconnaissance missions behind their F4 Phantom aircraft. To this end, there were many occasions when the USAF would ask if certain pieces of their ordnance could be carried and operated by our Sabre aircraft. In most cases, we were able to find an efficient method of operating our own hardware to release or operate the selected piece of USAF ordnance. The obvious exception was any piece fitted with 30 inch suspension hooks, usually meaning the piece was very heavy. One example was the Vulcan Gun Pod, which weighed about 2400 pounds when loaded, and another was the Mk 84 - 2000 pound bomb. Both these items were obviously far too heavy for the Sabre. However, the many items which could be operated included their forward and aft camera pod, their 7.62mm Mini-gun pod, and their 7 tube rocket pod. The USAF tried on numerous occasions to seek approval for 79 Squadron to fly with USAF ordnance dispensers for them, but the Australian Department of Defence would not approve the fitment of USAF ordnance.

By this time, the USAF were well versed on the capabilities of the Australian Sabre aircraft and their Australian crews. A very healthy and mutual respect had grown between the men of the two squadrons. We were no longer seen as that little outfit with old aircraft. We were respected as highly professional people with a very capable fighter aircraft, albeit a little aged by this time.

Aircraft Crash Near Base Perimeter

On a sadder note, in January 1968, a few months after my last tour, one of our aircraft crashed just prior to landing. Apparently, the aircraft was turning on to a final approach and suddenly the engine failed and the aircraft crashed into the ground not far from the airfield and reasonably in line with the runway, killing the pilot instantly. The official decision of the inquiry was an "Engine Failure", and the case was closed. However, there has always been some speculation about the circumstances of the incident. Many who were there at Ubon at the time still believe the aircraft was hit by small arms ground fire. It was widely known that a group of communist sympathisers gathered a a few hundred metres outside the base to monitor the USAF aircraft returning from their mission. There were also times when USAF aircraft received hits from small arms fire in this area. Therefore, many people believed that the same group was responsible for the crashed Sabre. That would certainly account for a sudden engine failure, as it is very unlikely an engine would stall and fail when the throttle was set at Flight Idle. If a number of small arms rounds of ammunition were to enter the engine intake and collide with the compressor, then quite understandably, the engine would fail. Some alleged that the "Engine Failure" decision was officially handed down to quash any thoughts of having an aircraft being shot down. For this would have changed the whole status of the base into an "Active Service, or War Service" area. To this day, there are many proponents of the "Shot Down" theory who still speculate that this was the cause of the aircraft crash.

USAF Operations

While No 79 Squadron had 8 Sabres there on various stages of alert, the USAF had 88 Phantoms as part of their Fighter Wing. They would frequently fly over the North Vietnam and return to base with all sorts of aircraft damage, etc. I can remember the Phantom landing at about midnight only to have its nose wheel collapse, and the aircraft continued the landing run on the Vulcan Gun Pod under the belly of the aircraft. By the time the aircraft came to a stop, there was several hundred rounds of 20mm HE ammunition lying all over the runway!

Whilst on rostered duty at the Operational Readiness Pad (ORP) at the end of the strip, it was always entertaining to watch the USAF go about their pre-flight and after flight activities. Their ground crews were required to insert the landing gear safety pins, plus all other ordnance safety pins into the aircraft at the end of the strip prior to the aircraft taxiing back to the lines. On one occasion, we saw this ground crew fellow arguing and shouting with the F4 pilot, saying he was not going to put any pins into that wheel well! The pilot was in return threatening him with all sorts of disciplinary action if he didn't. This escalated for some time, until we just had to investigate. During the landing roll, the main wheel had picked up a sleeping King Cobra snake and threw it up into the wheel well. It wasn't very happy at all. So we simply directed our large CO2 Fire Extinguisher into the wheel well, froze the snake until it dropped out, then broke it into many pieces. Our USAF friends were very thankful.

The Australians accounted themselves extremely well there. After overcoming the initial obstacle the USAF placed on them by calling our aircraft old F86's, the Australians convinced the USAF that the only similarity between the Australian Sabre and the old USAF F86 aircraft was the basic shape. The Australian Sabre had the more powerful Rolls Royce Avon engine, improved airflow through the engine bay and improved avionics. In addition, the Australian pilots were far better trained than most of the USAF 'trained killers'. In the period 1965 - 68, RAAF pilots were frequently seen giving USAF pilots blackboard lessons on air to air tactics, as well as airborne tips in flight.

F4 Phantom on Display at Ubon

After some discussion between Commanders, it was finally agreed that RAAF pilots could make serious attempts to engage USAF aircraft in air to air combat using the gunsight camera, providing the USAF pilot had not declared an emergency. A few of our pilots began to use a somewhat unusual tactic. They would use well practiced one on one tactics to get the USAF aircraft right in his gunsight graticule, and at the same time as pressing the gunsight camera trigger, he would also press the "transmit" button and loudly shout "RAT - AT - AT - AT - AT - AT" Our American friends didn't like this at all, and the chase was continued without the use of a noisy burst on the radio.

On this same trip, I saw the now famous New Years' Eve Phantom Scramble. For those who have spent time in Ordnance Preparation, think of this exercise. Some 76 Phantom (F4) aircraft were prepared for an overnight flight armed as a ground attack force. Each aircraft was armed with a Vulcan 20mm Cannon on the centre station, 2 rocket pods of 14 rockets each, (one pod on each wing), and 24 x Mk 82 - 500 lb bombs. (That's 2 bomb racks on each wing with 6 x 500lb bombs per rack). At about 1600 hours in the afternoon, the Intelligence Officer warned their Commanding Officer that he could expect Mig company. So the CO ordered a change of role: From Ground Attack to Air - to - Air. By 1900 hours, all 76 aircraft had been re-armed with a Vulcan Gun on the centre station, 4 Sparrow Air to Air missiles, and 2 sidewinder racks on each wing, with each rack containing 4 Sidewinder Air to Air Missiles. Just imagine being in Ordnance Prep! The takeoff process began about 1930 hours with two aircraft every 2 minutes until all 76 had gone. After numerous mid-air re-fuels, they returned at about 0800 on 01 January 1967, achieving about 23 Mig kills and no losses.

During my second trip to Ubon, I arrived there in late December, just after Christmas, and heard that RAAF - USAF relations were not good. Apparently, a few Australian ground troops became sick of hearing the Americans whinge about not having a white Christmas. So on Christmas Eve, the Australians gave the USAF Officer's Mess a white Christmas, from the foam gun of the Rolls Royce Fire Tender. This was of course when foam was the real stuff, yes, blood and bone mixed into foam. I'm told there were a number of delicate diplomatic discussions between the two units over the next few weeks.

Interesting Aircraft Mishaps and Anecdotes

As in any flying squadron, there are always interesting stories of cases where the pressure of the day causes a slight mistake and events unfold from there. Fortunately, many of these did not result in injury to personnel, apart from severe embarrassment. Some of these are reflected below.

Canopy Jettison

Many would remember the morning when the Electrician "Scratch" fired the canopy jettison of the ORP aircraft at the bottom of the strip. In the pre-dawn darkness, Scratch was doing his cockpit checks on the ORP aircraft after it had arrived at the pad at the end of the strip. He was then asked to pull the handle to let down the landing gear flipper doors. Instead he pulled the other handle nearby, yes the one with a black and yellow lock-wired guard. Bang went the Canopy, smacked into the leading edge of the fin and bounced on to the ground upside down.

However, I was still up at the Flight Hut locking up after dispatching the aircraft from the dispersal area. Suddenly the Commanding Officer, SQNLDR Richardson came up in the Combi tarmac vehicle asking for another aircraft saying the canopy had come off his aircraft. Always willing to help and being the font of knowledge of all things Sabre, John said, "No sweat Sir, it's a piece of cake to put a Canopy back on these aircraft". Always the gentleman, our CO said, "John, you don't understand, this is different". Well even after this encounter stubborn John still thought it would be a simple exercise until we saw the aircraft and I humbly agreed, "Yes, this is different".

Poor old Scratch copped a terrible roasting for some weeks after that. The aircraft was AOG for a Canopy for about 3 to 4 weeks.

Guns/Camera Switch 'ON' - Oops!

Another near mishap with one of our own aircraft happened during my second trip to Ubon. One of the Sabres had been pre-flighted to do a reconnaissance and familiarization flight around the local area. The aircraft in question had been one of the ORP aircraft the previous day. As per local Standard Operating Procedures, all that was required on completion of ORP duties was to remove the live Sidewinder missiles from the aircraft, and disconnect the gun electrical plugs from their power sockets, and plug them into the ground earthing sockets. However, it turns out that the Armourer had other nocturnal things on his mind whilst doing his After Flight inspection.

The aircraft then flew the Recce flight, and during flight the pilot decided to do some air-to-ground camera shots for practice. Believing the guns were unplugged, the pilot simply selected Guns/Camera and pointed. His first 'target' was the USAF fuel depot, but he thought he shouldn't as this area was classified.

He then flew out into the countryside and chose as a target a prominent tree as a suitable practice A-to-G target. On pressing the trigger, several rounds of 30mm HE ammunition were fired from each gun until he released the trigger in shock! Just as well he didn't continue with his photographic exercise of the fuel depot!

Aircraft Towing - USAF Style

Another incident involved one of our Sabres which had suffered an inflight engine failure. Several attempts to re-light the engine were carried out, but in vain. Fortunately, the pilot was conducting some local flying as was very close to the airfield perimeter. He notified Air Traffic Control of his emergency informing them he was conducting a "Straight In" approach without an engine and using emergency hydraulics and would require assistance to be towed from the end of the runway to the squadron lines.

A successful landing was carried out and the USAF Crash Crew met the aircraft at the end of the runway. They connected a Sabre towbar to the aircraft, hooked it up to their towing vehicle and began to drive back to the Australian lines. As their towing vehicle was the same one used for both Phantom and Hercules aircraft, the driver probably didn't even feel the weight of the Sabre on the back. After a short trip to the squadron lines at about 25 miles per hour, our Pilot thought this was the scariest part of the whole incident!

Base Duty Rosters

Apart from our ORP aircraft roster which for the Armourer occurred every four to five days, there was a number of other base rostered duties to fulfill. All the pilots were added to the "Orderly Officer" roster as well as their aircraft ORP roster. All the Senior NCOs were added to the Orderly Sergeant's roster and the Guard Commander's roster as well as their aircraft ORP roster. We LACs were also added to the Guard Driver's roster as well. The guarding of the base as well as its perimeter was done by the Airfield Defence Guards (ADGs). The Guard Driver's duties involved driving an old rattling yellow VW Combi around all the positions where the Thai Air Force guards were situated to carry out their guard change. There were a couple of interesting events I experienced during these Guard Driver duties.

One occurred when I was delivering a fresh group of Thai guards to their respective posts and picking up the group finishing their shift to return them to their barracks. Just after midnight one night, when approaching one of their positions, there was a crack of a rifle shot and the sound of the bullet hitting the Anti Collision light on the top of my yellow Combi! I brought the vehicle to a stop immediately and asked who was there. This Thai guard appeared out of the night and said to me that he had shouted "STOP" and I did not stop. Remember, I was driving an rattling old yellow Combi! Well, after that little incident, I always used the anti-collision light and flashed the headlights when I was approaching any of their guard positions.

Another event occurred right outside the Guard Gate of the base late one night. I was about to walk across the bitumen road from the gate to the Guard building when I came across the biggest scorpion I had ever seen. It was at least as large as my black Air Force boot. A Thai guard told me to "Stand on it". "Not on your life" I said, as the sting in its tail could easily have reached over the top of my boot. So, without hesitation, the Thai guard shot it, yes, with his M16 rifle. His rifle was pointing down toward the ground, obviously, to hit the scorpion. The scorpion was hit and killed, but we had no idea where the bullet went after it bounced off the bitumen road. Of course, all the chiefs in the world were suddenly on the scene at the sound of a rifle shot and this fellow had some explaining why he fired his rifle. He simply thought he was doing his Australian friend a favour.

Main Gate at RAAF Ubon

Incidents of Sabotage

It was generally well known that a group of communist sympathisers gathered outside the Base perimeter, usually roughly in line with the runway. Their function, it was believed, was to report the number of aircraft landing on any day compared with the number of aircraft which had taken off that day. Other more direct functions were assigned to attempted sabotage exercises affected to the RAAF and/or the USAF Base on the other side of the runway.

In order to spoil the communist's aircraft counting tasks, the USAF introduced a very clever procedure. If one of the Ubon based F4 Phantoms had been shot down or otherwise unaccounted for during the mission, another F4 was immediately dispatched from one of the US Navy carriers in the nearby Pacific ocean. Therefore, the same number of aircraft could be seen to land as was to takeoff earlier in the day, or the previous night. The only difference between the lost aircraft and the replacement was that the lost aircraft would have had an appropriate set of ordnance racks and dispensers fitted, and the replacement aircraft would have had long range tanks under its fuselage. I am led to believe that these communist sympathisers even began to identify the replacement aircraft by their long range tanks.

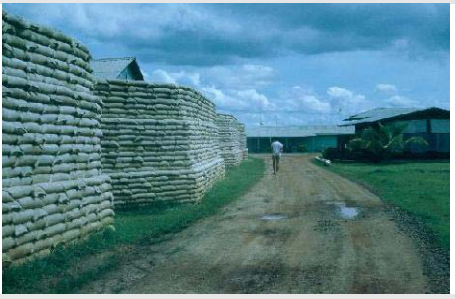
These same group also began a programme of firing small arms weapons toward aircraft carrying out their final approach. From their hastily organised positions just outside the base perimeter, they were certainly difficult to detect and apprehend. Our RAAF Airfield Defence Guards, (ADG's), were constantly out on patrol searching for this group, but often their efforts were in vain.

Regarding sabotage attempts on the RAAF base, it was found that the domestic side of the base received more hits of sabotage than the working side due to the domestic side's proximity to the adjacent roadway and the external perimeter fence.

There were a few rocket attacks on the USAF Base, which was simply on the other side of the runway. Also, a number of large explosions were experienced near our Communications Centre. This resulted in a large sandbagged wall being built around the centre.

In the period of my tours, I can remember at least two incidents of genuine Sabotage, ie, a large explosion caused by a grenade or other similar object, each of which were to the large power generators for use by the operations section, communications section, and all barracks and catering sections.

Sandbagged Wall Around Communications Centre



Location of Power Generators

There were three large diesel operated power generators, 30KVA each, if I can remember correctly, all positioned next to one another between the catering section and the perimeter fence. Whilst the location was handy for the distribution of their power, many people questioned the strategy behind the location. For they were a short stone's (grenade??) throw from the perimeter fence.

These generators, tested daily, were primarily for use if the externally delivered power supply from the town of Ubon actually failed for some reason, or if the tolerance of the power, eg, if voltage or frequency settings were unreliable, then two, or sometimes three diesel generators, depending on the demand, would automatically start up and then be hooked up to the base power supply.

Lobbing of Grenades into the Generators

As each of the generators had a large galvanized oil drip tray positioned under the generators, including its diesel engine power drive, it became rather a simple exercise for a communist sympathiser to lob a Chinese supplied hand grenade over the fence and into one of the generator's drip trays. As the grenade spent its next few seconds rolling around the drip tray, it usually detonated under the half way point between the generator and the diesel motor. Therefore extensive damage was done to both the engine and the generator.

Effect of the Sabotage

On each of the occasions when the generators were sabotaged, it had a severe effect on the base's ability to function should the external power supply become unreliable. Strangely enough, within a day or two or three after an attack, there would usually be a day or two where the supply was unreliable! On such a day, power was issued by which ever generator was serviceable to essential services on a priority basis.

Other Sabotage Attacks

There were other types of sabotage attacks, such as a mobile rocket attack to parts of the base. However, the USAF base were more affected by these than the RAAF part of the base, even though our side did receive the odd one or two rocket attacks. The difference with the rocket attacks compared with the grenade attacks, was that the rockets were more indiscriminate and less accurate than the grenades.

One other factor which worried many an airman was that one of the major USAF fuel depots was located right beside the fence of the Airmen's quarters of the RAAF base. Fortunately, to my knowledge, no grenade or rocket ever hit the USAF fuel depot, for if it did, half of the airmen's quarters would have gone with it.

Ground Defence Activities

Apart from a few base rosters, the ground defence of the base became the role of the Airfield Defence Guards, commonly known as the "ADG's". They performed many roles, including perimeter patrols, routing out possible insurgents, as well as undesirable persons too close to the base.

To keep us on our toes, there were 'practice' red alerts, affecting all personnel on the base. These were generated by the Base Commander, in conjunction with the Base Defence Officer at least every two months or so. In addition to ensuring all personnel were familiar with their role in such an alert, there were ramifications of laid down Queen's Regulations for actions to take on any base experiencing a red alert.

A “Red Alert” was the culmination of several stages of alert, including yellow, orange, amber, and then red. At stage “RED” this meant the angry hordes were within minutes of arriving at the Base Perimeter.

During various stages of the build up to the alert, all aircraft would be armed with live missiles, HE ammunition and prepared for takeoff with five minutes notice. A myriad of other activities would be accomplished at a very quick pace, preparing the base for an ‘imminent’ attack.

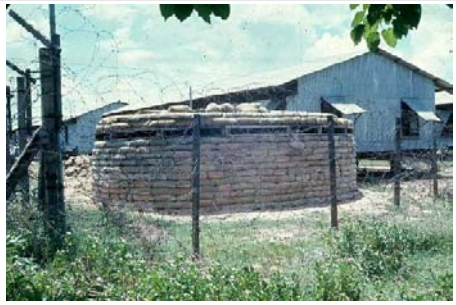
At a certain stage during the alert buildup phase, firearms and ammunition would be issued to all personnel according to their rank, ie, Officers and Warrant Officers would receive a 9mm Browning Pistol and ammunition; Sergeants and Flight Sergeants would be issued with an F1 Machine Gun and 9mm ammunition, and all other ranks would receive their L1A1 (SLR) Rifle and two magazines of 7.62mm ammunition.

Prior to entering the ‘Red’ phase, all civilian staff would be escorted off the base, with full pay of course, until the all clear was given. (This was in accordance with Queen’s Regulations to ensure no civilian staff were subjected to the ‘attack’. Also, the base was to be able to function, as far as essential services, with service personnel only). This is something which should be practiced on all operational bases today!

However, there were humorous sides to these alerts. There were sandbag bunkers of various sizes situated all over the base, outside workshops, beside aircraft revetments, in amongst the barracks huts, etc. When the final “RED” was called, we were all supposed to leap into the nearest bunker, arm our rifles and prepare for the ‘attack’. Well, for all but the new arrivals, it was well known the many of the bunkers also housed other residents, namely adult Cobra snakes! Try to imagine the sight, an airman running with his rifle to the four foot high bunker, (as seen on some of the photos), and after just one foot landed in the bunker, a magnificent leap was seen as this airman would leap like a gazelle straight out of it. Yes, basking in the warm sun within the bunker would be a Cobra snake. So, the ‘defence’ of the base was carried out from just outside of the offending bunker!

So, apart from the Cobra hazards, many lessons were learnt from each of the practice alerts.

One of the Heavier Ground Defence Bunkers



Needle Parade

One aspect of Ubon service which was unchanged from other overseas bases was the requirement to have the appropriate inoculations and vaccinations. Although we regularly received our vaccinations at the RAAF hospital in Butterworth, Malaysia when they were due, we also took our Passports and little yellow Needle Books to Ubon with us.

If any of our vaccinations fell due during our Ubon stay, they were done at the small Medical Centre at Ubon. The medical regulations in those days regarding vaccinations were very strict and if one was more than a week overdue, then the whole course would begin again! It certainly was an incentive to keep our needles up to date.

However, the myriad of vaccinations required for Ubon was outstanding. These included:

- TABT - Tetanus and other associated diseases - every 12 months;
- Smallpox - every 12 months;
- Typhoid - every 6 months;
- Typhus - every 6 months;
- Cholera - every 6 months; and
- Bubonic Plague - every 6 months.

In addition to these, the Medical Centre held a comprehensive supply of other vaccinations to be administered if and when required. These included Rabies, Dengue Fever, and of course a myriad of sexually transmitted diseases. I knew of one or two cases of Dengue Fever which were the result of an airman's night without a mosquito net after a good night's supply of Tiger!. I also knew of one or two cases of Rabies, the result of a bit from a rabid dog, of which there were quite a few. They say the treatment for Rabies was nearly as bad as the disease itself, except that not to treat it would have been fatal.

To help protect the men from risk of Rabies, some of the Airfield Defence Guards (ADG's) were assigned to finding rabid dogs and shooting them. It was not a pretty sight.

Aircraft Servicing and Maintenance

Levels of Maintenance Performed at Ubon

The eight aircraft chosen for service at Ubon were drawn from No 78 Wing at Butterworth. This wing contained, at the time, Nos 3 and 77 Squadrons, as well as No 478 Maintenance Squadron. The Maintenance squadron at Butterworth performed what we today call "Heavy Maintenance", ie, servicings which involve the aircraft being out of service for a week or more. Each of the Butterworth operational squadrons, ie, Nos 3 and 77, usually supplied four aircraft each out of their inventory for service in Ubon.

On arrival at Ubon, the aircraft maintenance was limited to, in today's terminology, Minor Maintenance, ie, the largest check would consume about a full day's work for a whole shift of men.

Unless there was a special inspection requiring urgent inspection, such procedures as leading edge wing removals, or wing spar inspections, or undercarriage inspections were not performed at Ubon. However, when such inspections were authorised, the men performed their additional role with limited resources with extreme dedication and professionalism.

Therefore, the daily maintenance routine would include pre-flight and afterflight checks; weekly, or minor maintenance checks; ordnance loading and ORP aircraft preparation; and of course, aircraft unserviceability diagnosis and rectifications. Considering the small numbers of men per each aircraft trade, the maintenance team at Ubon performed a valiant task.

Ordnance Preparation and Loading

In addition to providing sufficient ammunition and missiles for the two ORP aircraft each and every day, the Armourers also had to ensure there was sufficient serviceable ordnance to arm every aircraft in the squadron with just a few hours notice. As mentioned previously, all aircraft flew every day with a full load of 30mm HE ammunition. This ammunition was removed at each aircraft's fortnightly check and replaced whilst the removed ammunition was checked for corrosion, alignment and general serviceability.

Likewise, all Sidewinder missiles were serial numbered and placed on a servicing schedule. The Guidance Heads from the missiles received regular maintenance and functional checks whilst the remainder of the missile components were checked for corrosion and serviceability.

Aircraft Changeover for Heavy Maintenance at Butterworth

Aircraft changeovers became rather an event, partly due to the maintenance required and also due to the political nature of the unit. Aircraft changeovers were usually in pairs, ie, two aircraft were chosen to return to Butterworth at the same day and be replaced with two aircraft probably not long out of a major maintenance check.

When it became known which aircraft were to be returned, this was a chance for individual workshops to rid their shop of unserviceable aircraft components not required for a normal ferry flight. Therefore, such things as unserviceable gunsight radar sets, missile system avionics, etc, were installed into the aircraft about to be repatriated to Butterworth. All this preparation usually took a day or two.

Then the flight itself was quite a complicated affair. It was not well known outside RAAF circles that the Malaysian Prime Minister was not a fan of SEATO. The fact that aircraft from his beloved Butterworth base were supporting a SEATO task in Thailand was definitely not publicised very well at all.

Therefore, the flight paths of the two departing aircraft and the two arriving aircraft were designed to cross at or about the Thai border. For additional navigation support, a RAAF Canberra aircraft was sometimes used when possible to assist the Sabre pilots in long range navigation. When approaching the Thai border, the two arriving aircraft would fly as close as possible a formation to the Canberra, in order to give just one radar sighting to the USAF radar station in Thailand. In fact, on one occasion, when I was in fact a passenger in a returning C130 Hercules to Butterworth, I saw many thousands of feet above me, the two Sabres tucked right into and behind the wing of the Canberra.

On crossing the border, it could be seen on radar that two individual Sabres were ‘challenging’ this intruder from the south west. Then a ‘scuffle’ between this invading radar sighting an the two defenders would ensue. This resulted in the obscure radar sighting turning tail for the south west and the two ‘defenders’ returning triumphantly to Ubon.

Of course, we all knew that the two ‘defenders’ returning to Ubon were in fact our replacement aircraft. Such was the little drama which unfolded each time aircraft were replaced from Butterworth.

Social Life and Entertainment Scene

The social life both on and off the base at Ubon was fairly active. The films shown at the base cinema were reasonably current, except the sound track and the dialogue of the film was continually interrupted by USAF Phantoms taking off during the night.

Base Cinema - (Note Runway Behind)

The three messes, the Airmens Mess, the Sergeants Mess and the Officers Mess were always very lively places.

The township of Ubon was situated on the Moon River, a tributary of the larger Mekong river. One could frequently see the small boats delivering produce to people up and down the banks of the river. These small boats were about 20 to 25 feet in length, but only about 3 feet wide. They were powered by an inboard motor driving a single propeller through a very long driveshaft, most of which was exposed outside the rear of the boat.

Then there were the numerous clubs in the town. The Medical staff and the Security staff had made a list of establishments which were "Out of Bounds" to all Australians, either due to some risky terrorist activity or simply because many of the local ladies were carrying some sexually transmitted diseases! Either way, some thought this list was the best advertisement for a club and went there anyway. However, there were so many other good clubs and establishments that most of us didn't need to go into the "Out of Bounds" clubs.

The Hotel and Club Scene

There were numerous clubs and hotels in the town. Some of these were little more than disguised brothels, whereas some were more sophisticated nightclubs with quite reasonable bands and live entertainment. Although most clubs were patronized by a mixture of Australians and Americans, there were some clubs whose patronage seemed to be almost all Australian or others whose patronage seemed to be almost all American.

One particular scene on this topic stays in my mind. It was at the beginning of one of my tours of Ubon and we new arrivals were receiving our introduction from various people. One of the speakers was the Base Medical Officer. This chap not only told us of the number of tropical ailments which could befall us, but also informed us of all the evil things which could be transferred to us at some den of ill repute in town. We heard all the terrible symptoms of various venereal diseases and saw enough terrible photographs to put one off sex for at least 72 hours! However, the next speaker was the Base Commander. His address was purely legendary stuff. Part of his speech was:

- "Gentlemen, that small appendage at the lower end of your torso can be the source and the giver of much joy and happiness if it is used in the manner our Creator designed it. However, if this appendage is transplanted to the centre of your forehead, this same item will be the cause of much grief, illness and unhappiness.
- Gentlemen, this item I have here, *(Holding up a condom)*, will only marginally reduce your chances of contracting any of those terrible things the MO spoke of. Therefore, enjoy your social time here in Thailand, mix with the people, and leave that thing in your trousers."

Sadly, there were some who did not adhere to his advice. Some played a little and were lucky and some played around a lot and suffered immensely. On the positive side, there were a greater number who were able to do just as he advised. Many of us had a most enjoyable social life in Ubon.

During this tour, another social 'mishap' occurred in which we were very lucky to come away unscathed. A small band of we armourers had gone into one of the nightclubs for some entertainment one evening. After a short period we elected to leave this place and go to another club nearby. To shorten the walking distance, we decided to walk out of the rear entrance of the club. So, walking down a narrow corridor in single file past the toilets, with young Geoff in the lead, he collided with a very large American Negro coming the other way. (Actually, the lower end of the American's rib cage collided with Geoff's shoulder!) The American said, "Don't you Australians say 'Excuse me?'". Geoff simply replied, "I did, but you must have too much shit in your ear!". Well, this chap could have taken us all on if he chose, he was massive, but he looked at Geoff, who was only about 5 ft 4 ins, with a mouth 5 ft 9 ins, and shrugged his shoulders and walked off.

Shopping within Ubon Township

Although there was a wide variety of shopping in the township, the most sought after products were:

- Thai Silk - either sold in lengths of material, or made up into garments;
- Thai Silver - usually as cutlery. Thai Silver, contrary to the name, had the appearance of almost a bronze, and came in a wide variety of quality. Thai Silver cutlery sets, if they were of good quality, were very attractive and stylish.

- Jewelry Shops - Some of the jewelry was of good quality and reasonably priced.
- Men's tailor shops - Some of these tailors produced some fine trousers and shirts, but one had to be careful when the tailor did the initial measurements. Most of them would make the garment so tight that there was no room for movement at all.

During my shopping excursions, I learnt a valuable lesson about when to shop and what to do if there were USAF people in the shop. I was in a good jewelry shop waiting to be served and there were several Americans ahead of me. So, I waited patiently until I thought it would be my turn. However, prior to the last American being served, more of them came into the shop. I saw that all of the Americans were being served before me. *(Be aware that it was always easy to tell the Australian apart from the American due to the standards of dress, The Australian serviceman in the 1960's would be in a neat shirt, tailored shorts, long socks and leather shoes when walking off base during the day)*. Finally, all the Americans had left the shop and I was the only customer remaining. The shopkeeper came to me with profuse apologies and said he was very sorry he did not serve me in order, but he had to serve all the Americans first. When I asked why, he simply replied, "Different price, Australian's price is much cheaper!".

Jewelry Shop in Ubon

He also advised me to shop later in the month. He knew that we Australians were paid in local currency every fortnight, whereas the Americans were paid in US Dollars on the first day of each calendar month.

Another interesting event took place when I was window shopping in one of the smaller Men's clothing shops toward the end of my first tour. It was the very Saturday prior to the now famous "Currency Day" in Australia. We had heard that Australia was to transfer from Pounds to Dollars on the 14th February 1966, although the event would not play a big part for us in Thailand.

I was browsing amongst the shirts in a very small shop in one of the side streets when the shopkeeper persistently asked me if I wanted to buy one of his shirts. I replied that I was just looking and I was going 'home' next week. As quick as a flash, he produced a huge wad of Australian Dollars of various denominations and asked, "Do you want to buy Australian Dollar?" I was amazed! I had never seen an Australian Dollar at that stage, but was surprised that a little shopkeeper would have such a huge supply several days *before* the Currency Day.

The Black Market of the US Dollar

It has been previously mentioned that the US forces were paid on the first day of each calender month, and paid in US Dollars. This had been the US Defence policy for some years, as they refused to allow their servicemen to use the local currency of their host country. The mighty US dollar reigned supreme, or so they thought!

This practice soon created a significant black market of the US dollar. There were several reasonably large retail establishments in the town whose external shop front, eg, a fine jewelry shop, became a mask for its real identity.

Now and again, if one was making a considerable purchase, and had the appearance of having a few bob, the shopkeeper would quietly offer, "Want to buy US dollar?" Of course he would be offering a very attractive exchange rate, unattainable elsewhere. It was highly probable that he acquired the currency from a US serviceman at an obscenely low rate when the poor fellow was down on his luck or deeply in debt.

However, now and again, there were stories of shopkeepers whose black market practices were exposed and they mysteriously disappeared!

Tour of the Mekong Whisky Factory

During part of my second tour, a few of us were offered a tour of the nearby Mekong Whisky factory. Whilst Mekong Whisky is sold nearly everywhere in Thailand, one has to be careful as it is brewed at different factories around the country with various degrees of quality. Basically, Mekong Whisky is a fermented whisky from the rice stalk base.

We were to find the brewing and fermenting procedures at this factory very different from anything we had ever seen!

On arrival, it was explained to us that we would be shown the process from bottle washing right through until the new bottle came though Quality Control and was placed into cartons for sale. Some of the departments are described below.

Bottle Washing

The first area in the tour was the bottle washing section. This was a huge wooden square container whose sides were about 20 feet each and were about 3 feet 6 inches high This container was about 90% full of water and some form of detergent. Several women were standing in the vat whilst cartons of empty bottles were emptied into the vat. Each of the women would reach down and pick up a bottle, hold it in her hand while cleaning it with a bottle brush. This practice continued for some time while the women were laughing and talking while they were working cleaning the bottles. Suddenly, a whistle blew and all the women stepped out of the vat and sat down at a nearby seat. "Smoko" was the explanation. Then a few minutes later, another whistle blew and all the women stepped back into the vat and proceeded to wash bottles again. The manager was beaming, "See how thoroughly we wash the bottles".

Preparation of the Rice Stalk for Soaking

We were shown a room with a large wooden bench on which was a large quantity of rice stalk. It had been beaten to almost a mash and according to the guide, was almost ready for mixing with the water and other liquids and the fermenting process. This was quite OK except for the initial sight. On entering the room, we saw at least two dogs walking up and down the wooden bench licking the rice stalk. The guide tried to chase the dogs away before we saw them but was too late!

Mekong Whisky Factory - Ubon

Rice Stalk base for Mekong Whisky
(*Dogs chased away just before photo***)**

Filter for Whisky Mixture

During the mixing and fermenting process, the guide explained that the fluid was passed through an "In Line" filter. He actually removed this filter momentarily and showed it to us. It was one layer of Cheese Cloth. He proudly announced that the filter was changed every week without fail!

Final Quality Control

Although we were shown many other aspects of the factory, this one is the best one to sum up the overall quality of the whisky. As each bottle passed under the filling machine and was sealed with its top, it was then passed along a steel runner and made to pause in front of a steel half drum. A light bulb, of about 100 watts, was positioned in the back of this steel half drum. One lady, seated in front of this drum, inspected each bottle as it passed in front of the strong light bulb. Our guide explained that she was inspecting the whisky for any impurities.

Free Samples

Just prior to our departure from the factory, our beaming guide told us how pleased he was to have Australians inspect the factory. He then gave each one of us a free "hip flask" of whisky (about 5 ounces in the old scale). So we thanked him for the tour and walked back to the base, taking about 40 minutes to walk the distance. On arrival, I decided to take a shower before dinner, so I took the small sealed flask out of my hip pocket and placed it upon the small locker. Upon undressing, I found a large red chemical burn on my thigh under where the hip pocket would have been. I checked the bottle for leaks, and yes the bottle was still sealed. That is how potent this local blend of Mekong Whisky was. In the Airmen's Club that evening, one of us opened a flask and poured some of it into a saucer and put a match to it. The whisky burned with a very clear blue flame, almost as clear as would Metho. Yes, and some of our fellows actually drank this stuff!

Withdrawl of the Squadron

Although my last tour had ended on 30 November 1967, news continually filtered down to us at RAAF Base Butterworth of various Ubon happenings. In mid 1968, the Australian Government decided that No 79 Squadron had served its purpose in defending the north east area of Thailand and the squadron was withdrawn. The technical staff of the squadron were returned to Butterworth, and the Base personnel were returned to Australia.

However, an interesting story evolved some time after the withdrawl. In late 1969, I was serving at the Aircraft Research and Development Unit (ARDU) at Laverton in Victoria. The Australian Government had decided to donate a number of fully reconditioned Sabre aircraft to the Malaysian Air Force as well as to the Indonesian Air Force. The latter decision being later ridiculed as a waste of resources and time.

However, when one of the test pilots, well known to us from Ubon days, was finishing a test flight of yet another fully reconditioned Sabre from Avalon in Victoria, he commented that No 79 Squadron was so very close to going into active service at the USAF Base at Da-Nang in late 1968. We then commented that base was really in the thick of it in 1968! It was revealed that the only reason the squadron was not sent was due to a probability factor of the rate of attrition. Yes, as there were no more Australian CAC Sabre aircraft available to replace those should they have been shot down or destroyed, they would eventually would have been replaced with one of the RAAF's Mirage squadrons.

It was then revealed that prior to sending a Mirage squadron into an "Active Service" area, the RAAF was legally required to obtain the permission of the French Government. It was highly probable that the French would not have given their approval for RAAF Mirages to go into Active Service in Vietnam. So, the posting of No 79 Squadron to Vietnam did not proceed.

79 Squadron Group Photograph
(*Photo taken in late 1966*)

Intentionally
Blank

ARDU - Aircraft Research at Laverton

Arrival and Introduction - October 1968

Following three weeks leave in Brisbane, I travelled alone to Laverton, a RAAF Base about 15 miles south west of Melbourne on the Geelong freeway. After living in the single mens' quarters on the base for about 5 weeks, we were allotted a Married Quarter in the old part of the Laverton township. My wife then flew down from Brisbane and joined me at our Married Quarter. This was to be our first house and posting as a married couple within Australia.

Married Quarters

We were to find that the size and quality of the Married Quarters for the Laverton personnel ranged from comfortable brick homes of about 12 to 14 squares (112 - 130 square metres) in size, down to very small solid slab concrete houses of four rooms whose total size was just over 6 squares (55 square metres). Yes, as we were still defined as newly married and had no children, we were allocated one of the smallest quarters in their stock.

One of the more disappointing features of being posted to Laverton was the terrible Housing Commission Married Quarters there. My wife and I were allocated a small, (about 6 - 7 square), concrete house. It had a small lounge, small kitchen, two small bedrooms, and a bathroom. The hot water was supplied from a "Briquette" heater which one had to clean out and light every day. The walls were solid concrete, and during winter, being very cold outside and an electric heater inside, there was condensation running down all the inside walls.

One of our Armourers, Bill Rogers, had a similar Married Quarter in Werribee. In their case, the little concrete house was to contain 2 adults and 2 small children. However, his wife Doris wrote in to the State Minister of Health complaining that the condensation and cracks in the concrete rendered the house a health risk for the children, but she didn't tell Bill that she had written the letter. *(Consider that in those days, members of the Defence Forces were not permitted to write to Members of Parliament)*.

About 3 weeks after writing the letter, on a dismal drizzly day, Doris received a visitor, none other than the State Minister of Health accompanied by several of his ministerial team. The day could not have better. Stagnant water in the back yard, mosquitoes breeding in the back yard, condensation running down the inside walls, light visible between the kitchen wall and the floor and both kids with running noses. The Minister simply announced the house as "Condemned"! Doris asked if she could have this in writing and the Minister wrote the letter there and then. When Bill arrived home from work, he was given this letter by Doris in complete surprise. He photocopied it many times and ensured both the Base Housing Section and the Commissioner of Housing in Victoria received copies. The final response was simply a statement that the Housing Commission now had 49 condemned houses instead of 48.

Introduction to ARDU

Laverton was very difficult to take after leaving a highly operational unit such as 77SQN. Bureaucracy was rife, Support Command at St Kilda Road was only a local phone call away and it was often difficult to obtain a constructive decision Our leaders varied in quality from outstanding through to timid, as the people of "Support Command" were just 20 minutes away. Also, the atmosphere of Laverton and the work attitude at Laverton was reflected in the fact that it was such a long way from other operational bases in the RAAF. Some of the leaders there were FLTLT Roger Killeen, (an outstanding administrator), WOFFs Bert Elgey and Don McKell, FSGT Tom Bourbon, SGTs Toby Kells (both of whom I had known in Butterworth), Alan Ely, CPL Brian Raby, and numerous others.

From an Armament perspective, our work areas were divided into Flight Line, Workshop, Major Projects, and Aircraft Intermediate Servicing. I was to learn that major aircraft modification trials took contained about 85 to 90% research and about 10 to 15% flight trials. Much of the research was done either in our own workshop or in specially constructed jigs in the hangar or nearby sites.

Many of the personnel at ARDU had been there for quite a long time, so a culture of "This is the way we've done it for years" was very evident. Even normal aircraft tarmac servicing became difficult to relate to an operational theatre. Those of us who had recently arrived from Malaysia were accustomed to meeting deadlines, but the long term locals were not interested in how long the task took, just the accuracy of the technical content.

We few maintained that whilst the accuracy was indeed important, one also has to assume, particularly in a fighter squadron atmosphere, that any revised procedure we were to recommend would be tested at the front line against a deadline of severe time constraints. I am led to believe that over the years, ARDU has progressed a long way and is contributing a great deal to the improved procedures throughout the RAAF.

Notable Aircraft Modification Projects

Of the many aircraft modification projects in progress during my time at the unit, some had major involvement with the Armament trade, and some very little. To give some idea of the work in progress at the time, here are a few I can remember:

- Macchi Aircraft - Measurement of Control Column deflection Vs amount of roll or bank or lift. Quite a simple idea - two small tape measures, sometimes seen used on the bowling green, about 9mm wide each, were used to measure the amount the Control Column had been moved to achieve a predetermined flight path. One tape was fastened to the Instrument panel immediately in front of the column, and another fastened to the RH console exactly at right angles to the column when in a neutral position. The head of a large "Pop" rivet was fastened to the top of the control column and the tip of each tape measure was simply clipped on to the rivet.
- Macchi Aircraft - Development of the use of the Minigun Pod and other Ordnance systems for Pilot Training. Various ordnance systems, including rocket pods, minigun pods, practice bomb carriers, etc, were trialled on the Macchi with some surprising results. Eventually, the Minigun was approved for use by the Macchi to give pilots some preparation of Air to Ground Gunnery prior to their endorsement to a fighter aircraft.
- Mirage Aircraft - Introduction and development of the Bomb carrying Fuel tank, carried on each wing of the Mirage aircraft. This fuel tank, capable of carrying about 110 gallons of fuel, could also carry four 500lb bombs for release over an intended target. As the unit was designed by Dasault in France, our unit simply had to trial it and adapt it to Australian use. One of the humourous sides of this trial was the statement that if a Mirage was fully loaded with bombs and fuel at Williamtown, it could probably successfully bomb Raymond Terrace, a small town about 10 miles away!
- Caribou Aircraft - One of the caribous was reported as not being able to fly in a straight line! Perhaps the result of an incident in Vietnam, I'm not sure. However, the entire aircraft skin was covered in squares of one inch masking tape, each square being about one foot square. A cotton ball, about 1 to 2 inches in diameter with a small cotton streamer some three inches long, was attached to the skin exactly in the centre of each square. Then as the aircraft was flown in a variety of flight patterns and manoeuvres, a photographer flying in the back seat of a Macchi took numerous photographs of the aircraft in flight. From the patterns of the cotton, they were able to determine where the aircraft had been twisted and damaged, so a repair could be effected.
- Canberra Aircraft - Development of a Target Towing device for Air to Air Gunnery by Mirage aircraft. For Sabre gunnery, the "Tug" aircraft was always another Sabre, but the Mirage was never authorised to tow an A-A gunnery target. As the Sabre was about to be withdrawn from service, the RAAF had to find a means of towing A-A targets. More on this topic later.

- Numerous avionics projects, including the major TACAN update for all RAAF Bases. The faithful old Dakota was extensively modified and used throughout Australia to update the TACAN installations at all bases.

One of Bert Elgey's pet projects was the "Monster on the Moors" at the far end of the tarmac. This was an immense structure about 20 feet high to which one could bolt the Mirage centre bomb beam, or if necessary, other types of bomb carrying systems. The RPK10 Bomb/rocket/tank for the Mirage was also developed on this structure. It was unique as it was made from large timber logs. Bert believed there was nothing as strong as hardwood. Many of us often chided Bert that one could hang the Queen Mary from his 'structure'.

Macchi Weapons Platform Project

My first observation of this trial happened on the flight line when a Senior Test Pilot was commissioned to test fly a Macchi aircraft with a Practice Bomb and Rocket dispenser loaded under each wing. *The RAAF had been informed that the Italian Air Force had been using a Macchi aircraft similar to ours as genuine ground attack aircraft, in training as well as in operations.* This dispenser was commonly used on the Mirage aircraft to carry and release practice bombs at high speed as a part of pilot training. No ordnance was fitted to the dispensers, as this was simply a flight trial for the dispenser under the Macchi. The test flight was to include a number of 'dummy' passes in a ground attack style over the local practice bombing range.

On his return from the test flight, the pilot angrily stormed from the aircraft complaining about the piddling little engine in the Macchi. During this flight, he had placed the aircraft into a 45 degree dive with full power from about 12000 feet. He then pulled out of the dive at about 2500 feet at the remarkable speed of just 275 knots. Apparently the drag of the dispensers was simply too much for the little Rolls Royce Viper engine.

During subsequent investigation, the RAAF was to discover that on initial purchase of the aircraft, three different size engines were offered. The Department of Defence members of the purchasing team had decided to only purchase the smallest engine - "because it was only a trainer, and we don't want our pilots to get into difficulty with a powerful engine". Such was the mentality of some of the government teams. We were also to learn that the Government had chosen the Macchi Aircraft over its competitors to satisfy a wheat debt Italy had with Australia at the time.

Nevertheless, the project continued with an emphasis on the use of the Minigun Pod. This gun pod used the 7.62mm electrically driven machine gun with a rotating group of six barrels. The ammunition was held in container within the rear of the pod. We ground tested the gun pod for accuracy at the nearby small arms range, and soon flight trials were approved.

Following some carriage trials, evaluating the aircraft performance just carrying the two gun pods, live firing flight trials were then approved and flown. The end result was a successful platform by which junior pilots could experience live gunnery from a training aircraft prior to advancement on to a larger fighter aircraft.

Canberra Target Towing Trials

I became part of a team requested to develop a target towing method for the Canberra aircraft. This small team developed an efficient assembly which would tow the banner cable from a release mechanism created from a reliable Bomb Carrier attached to the Bomb Beam. This was not only the strongest part of the airframe but also the point at which both the aircraft lateral and longitudinal axis intersected. We developed methods of normal release, a jettison method and an emergency jettison. It was ground tested, stress tested and after several months work we were ready for our first test flight. It was then that we received an instruction from Support Command just 15 miles away that the device was to use explosive bolts and was not to employ any part of the standard bombing equipment. So after wasting all that work, we then developed the well known system later used for many years.

That is why many of the Canberra aircraft later developed cracking around the empennage behind the bomb bay. The aircraft used a weak point of the airframe to tow a 1400 pound stress factor cable instead of from the strongest part of the airframe, i.e., the bomb beam. Even the Project Pilot, FLTLT Dick Whitman, was behind our original concept.

During the flight testing of this project, Dick received a posting to 5 Squadron, in preparation for a posting to 9 Squadron in Vietnam. The project flying was then taken over by WGCDR Graff, one of our Academy Graduate Test Pilots.

During one of the flights, we were out near the end of the runway waiting for the banner to be released on to the drop zone. As the Canberra tug aircraft was approaching the runway from the southeast in level flight, we noticed he was incredibly low and slow. Then we saw the banner being dragged along the ground behind the aircraft, across the four lanes of the Geelong freeway just between a few cars, then bouncing across the Geelong Railway line just in front of a rail motor, and through the perimeter fence to the drop zone. The pilot then selected the release and the banner cable separated and the Canberra flew away for a circuit and landing. It was then we seriously inspected the integrity of the sheer link given to us by Support Command. We were extremely fortunate that this banner, being dragged behind the Canberra, did not strike any trains or motor traffic or people.

The trial continued over several more weeks. At the end, our unit had successfully developed an approved flight envelope for target towing from the Canberra aircraft, a set of servicing procedures and the entire project was then completed and handed over to operational squadrons for their use.

Other Technical Duties

During this posting, I did a period of time in Maintenance Control Section (MCS). It wasn't until many years later that I would appreciate the value of this experience. This was my first experience at the administration side of aircraft maintenance. In this section, aircraft log books were kept up to date with flight and maintenance details, as well as forecasting the intervals for when the aircraft would need to undergo heavy maintenance.

The rapport developed between the ground crew and the flight crews in squadron days became an enormous benefit in later postings such as at ARDU. Most of the pilots were qualified test pilots, graduating from the Empire Test Pilots College in the UK. All were brilliant in their field of expertise and were good pilots. However, just a few were simply outstanding. One who fitted this description was FLTLT Dick Whitman, DFC and bar, AFC and bar, Empire Test Pilot, veteran of WWII, Japan, Korea, and Malaya. Apparently Dick had been a Squadron Leader twice in his career but didn't like it. So, he came back to being a FLTLT so he could do more flying.

I also found during this posting, whilst we could develop a close rapport with the test pilots, it was very difficult to do likewise with the defence scientists and engineers who were to design new systems and new components to assist aircraft operation. Whilst being brilliant engineers, these people had considerable difficulty trying to appreciate the culture of an operational squadron and the incredible pace of an operational aircraft turnaround and aircraft re-arm in what could have been a hostile environment.

Introduction of New Technical Supervision Regulations

During the mid to late 1960's, the whole concept of levels of responsibility for the different levels of aircraft maintenance were re-written. Basically, the final concept was a three tiered system of maintenance. These were the tradesman, the supervisor and the independent inspector. These can be described thus:

- Tradesman - qualified in one of the aircraft trades or musterings to perform the level of maintenance conducted at that unit on the type of aircraft operated by that unit. In civilian aviation terminology, he would have been endorsed on the aircraft type to sign up to an appropriate level of maintenance. He/She was authorised to sign for all the maintenance tasks actually performed.
- Supervisor - usually a Corporal or a junior Sergeant. He/she was qualified to perform progressive supervisory checks on the tradesman's tasks, either at the completion of a small task, or at several important intervals during a major task. The supervisor, as the name implies, was directly connected with the task or tasks at hand and could be asked to give anticipated completion times for any of his/her tasks.
- Independent Inspector - As the name implies, this person, also qualified in their trade and aircraft operated at the unit, was not connected in any way with the logistics of the overall task, but was called upon to witness either a completed task or a progressive check where critical items were about to be covered by panels, other equipment, etc. Usually, an Independent Inspector was called where the item was a life saving device, e.g., an ejection seat, or the actual flight controls or engine controls had been interrupted and were now being reconnected.

Whilst the above structure was a vast improvement on the definitions of the areas of responsibility of maintenance, the penalties were also dramatically increased for any occasion responsibilities were breached.

First Example of the New DI(AF) Tech Charges

In late 1969, a Mirage aircraft suffered an engine ceasure minutes after takeoff from RAAF Base Darwin and crashed into Darwin Harbour. The pilot ejected and was rescued. The aircraft nose dived and crashed into the harbour resting in just a few feet of water. Subsequently, the entire aircraft was recovered and the engine was removed and sent to CAC in Melbourne for investigation.

Investigation revealed that this was the aircraft's first flight following an engine change during the previous night. The squadron had been on a heavy ordnance defence exercise in Darwin and both ground and aircrews were under pressure to give their utmost to achieve both serviceability goals as well as operational goals.

Both the tradesman and the supervisor, (the LAC and Corporal engine fitters assigned to the task), were reputed to be among the best in the squadron. The Independent Inspector, a highly experienced Flight Sergeant, knew this and when under pressure himself during the night to check other work within the squadron, became distracted.

When asked to inspect the engine being installed into the aircraft, just prior to it being covered up by other panels, etc, the Corporal spoke to the Flight Sergeant by phone asking him to come and inspect the task. The Flight Sergeant was at the other end of the runway, about to commence an engine run on another aircraft. They spoke for several minutes, discussing the different aspects of the task, and finally the Flight Sergeant told the Corporal to "Button it up, I'll look at it when I get up there". The aircraft engine change was duly completed and the post engine change engine run was performed satisfactorily. The Flight Sergeant, along with the Tradesman and the Supervisor, signed their tasks in all the appropriate places.

It was later revealed during the post crash investigation that an engine auxiliary drive mount had not been correctly secured and should have been picked up by the Independent Inspector. Therefore, with vibration, the auxiliary drive mount came loose early in the flight and the engine ceased.

Findings of the Court Martial

The President of the Court Martial, after hearing all the evidence from all sides, gave his findings:

- He awarded the Tradesman some 14 days loss of pay for not correctly securing the auxiliary mount;
- He awarded the Corporal some 28 days loss in pay as well as 2 years loss of seniority in rank, for not correctly supervising the security of the auxiliary mount; and
- Prior to informing the Flight Sergeant of his sentence, the President of the Court Martial informed him that he was indeed a most fortunate man. Had the accident been a fatality, he would have had no other choice than to award his own sentence then hand him over to a civilian court with a primafacie charge of Manslaughter. He then awarded the Flight Sergeant a loss of rank down to that of Corporal without any seniority, and 28 days loss of pay for not correctly carrying out the duties of an Independent Inspector.

This case totally and permanently changed the attitude of all Senior NCO's who had been promulgated as Independent Inspectors. Never mind that the Corporal was the most trusted in the squadron, anyone can miss a small item under pressure and hence the reason for the Independent Inspector. From that point onward, we all said, unless I've seen it and am totally satisfied with the quality of the task, I'm not signing a thing!

Political Climate of the Late 1960's

During 1969 - 1970, there were many demonstrations and marches in Melbourne promoting the Anti-Vietnam movement. During this period, some of the senior officers were advising current servicemen not to wear their uniform if visiting the city, and more particularly those with Vietnam active service were advised not to wear their medals. I thought these instructions were particularly cowardly coming from senior officers. Fortunately, not many airmen complied with the instructions. I can remember a number of anecdotes, some humorous and some very sad.

On one occasion whilst on a day's leave in the city, there was a huge march in the city which terminated with a gathering of about 5,000 people on the steps of the Melbourne GPO. I saw this young fellow speaking to the crowd, or rather chanting to the crowd via a hand held loud hailer or portable PA system. Then two army soldiers in uniform complete with Vietnam ribbons marched through the crowd, up the steps and halted immediately in front of the speaker. One soldier carefully took the hand held PA from the young fellow, and the other soldier gave the young fellow a magnificent king hit. He went to the ground like a bag of spuds! Then the two soldiers simply did an about turn and marched off, right through the crowd. I found myself standing next to a uniformed policeman and asked him, "Did you see that?" He simply said in surprise, "See what? - I must have missed it!"

On another occasion, I was in the Base Duty Crew quarters one evening watching a news presentation of one of the larger moratoriums. This time the camera centred on close up shots of some of the demonstrators. Some of these men and women were from nearby universities and looked something like a "Rent-a-Mob" material. Dressed like scruffs, they simply chanted their slogans down the street on and on. One of our older Senior NCO's, probably in his late 40's, *(that was old to us then!)*, Watching the news with us, commented, "Take a good hard look son, in amongst all that riff-raff are tomorrow's leaders". When one looks at some of our Federal Ministers and some of our Shadow Ministers of today, it can be seen that his prophecy was correct.

During late 1969, it was reported that an Australian SAS unit had captured a North Vietnamese Army bunker, which on inspection was a major storage area for enemy supplies. Whilst taking an inventory of the stock, numerous large bags of medical supplies, domestic items and other hygiene items marked "To the North Vietnamese Army - from Monash University - Melbourne". We all said that General Sir John Monash would have turned in agony in his grave!

Apart from causing a huge controversy in Australia, the newspaper cartoonist "Rigby" picked up this little item and published a topical cartoon. The picture featured a typical soldier dressed in a blue singlet with olive-drab shorts and GP boots, reading the paper outside his tent. Nearby was a smartly dressed officer marching past the soldier. The caption under the cartoon told of the soldier's words, "That's universities for you, they send supplies to the enemy and officers to us!"

Well, this cartoon was photocopied literally hundreds of times, expanded out to A3 size and distributed around several bases. Not only was the event embarrassing for the anti-war lobby and many universities, the cartoon became a thorn in the side for the Officer Training establishment throughout the services.

The other occasion happened in 1970 when the marches were really gaining momentum. The Deputy Leader of the Federal Opposition, Dr. Jim Cairns, was leading the march and this time he was publicly inviting currently serving soldiers to lay down their arms if they were posted to or already serving in Vietnam. Well, as he was leading the march up St Kilda Road, an army Warrant Officer came out and stood right in front of Dr. Cairns and pronounced "I hereby arrest you on the charge of Sedition of Her Majesty's Soldiers!" After a short period of silence, a Colonel came out and spoke to the Warrant Officer. In a minute or two, the Warrant Officer retracted his charge and left the scene. It was later revealed that the Colonel had unlawfully threatened the Warrant Officer with serious disciplinary actions, to the extent of terminating his service if he continued with this charge. We all thought this was a very sad outcome. This was the result of a corrupt senior officer asserting his unlawful command over a Warrant Officer who was did not have the backbone to stand up for what he believed was correct.

Domestic and Social Life in Melbourne

Life in a small Laverton married quarter was not going to be exciting after spending three years in Penang. However, soon after settling in, my wife soon initiated her two favourite passions: furthering her sporting ambitions and to buy a Dalmatian dog and begin a new world in the dog showing empire.

Sporting Interests

As our life in Penang had been centred around the sporting calender of Basketball, Softball, Netball and Volleyball, my wife was pleased that Melbourne was the sporting capital of Australia for several of these sports. Although I played a little basketball at previous postings, I was not good at it and therefore could have accepted my fate if I did not continue it. However, my wife began Basketball with a passion and entered one of the better teams at the Albert Park Basketball Stadium.

This continued until she had a serious fall during a game and damaged the cartilage in one of her knees. Unfortunately, although her team gave her considerable moral support, she was unable to continue in the same team and her interest waned over the next year or so.

The Dog's Life

This began rather innocently. We had purchased a two year old Labrador dog and enjoyed its company considerably. I enjoyed taking the dog to the nearby dog obedience classes each week and found that she, the Labrador, was a natural. Then my wife purchased a pedigreed Dalmatian pup. Her intention was to enter the dog show world with her new dalmatian. Sadly, our Labrador was killed in a shooting accident near the RAAF base and therefore I no longer attended the dog obedience classes.

This dog showing programme started out well and we both learnt a lot of things in this new environment. However, once into this new world, my wife became captivated by the opportunities it offered. I believe that over the next two years, we must have travelled to almost every town in Victoria to present our dog in their dog show.

So our social life became centred around the canine fraternity. Even our home life seemed to be centred around either dogs or people with dogs.

Looking to the Next Posting

After some time in Laverton, I became rather unsettled. Whilst some of the projects at ARDU were on occasions stimulating and interesting, I still found the working environment stifling after experiencing an operational squadron. I yearned for a return to operations.

Our home life was falling into a repetitive pattern and our Married Quarter was either freezing or very hot. To increase the tension, we still had not saved any significant amount of cash reserves after being back in Australia after two years.

So, I began applying for a posting. For some time, the top of my preferred list of locations had been "Vietnam", and on the top of preferred list of vocations was "Operational - Bomber, Helicopter, (Both in Vietnam), and Fighter squadrons". As I had acquired significant Canberra aircraft experience, I thought I would have a good chance of being posted to the Bomber squadron in Vietnam. Also, I thought that once in an "Active Service" environment as a single man, I could save some serious cash.

Well, I was somewhat surprised, but definitely not disappointed, to receive a posting to No 9 Squadron in Vietnam. I was to go to RAAF Base Fairbairn in Canberra for two weeks in November 1970 for a Iroquois Familiarisation Course and then to Vietnam in December. I was really looking forward to it. My wife, I believe, was a little disappointed that I was going to an unaccompanied post, but she enjoyed her new life in the Melbourne area and assured me she would be OK.

When I was in Canberra on the Familiarisation Course, I then realised just how many of my old acquaintances would be in Vietnam when I arrived.

Vietnam at Last - No 9 Squadron Helicopters

Transit Flight and Arrival - December 1970

In December 1970, I departed from Melbourne domestic terminal at Essendon on a flight to Sydney for an international flight to Vietnam. The flight from Sydney to Vietnam was rather unusual to say the least. First of all, the atmosphere in the departure terminal at Sydney was quite sombre. Fathers were telling sons how proud they were; mothers, or wives or girlfriends were quietly crying, trying not to let their serviceman to be affected; and last of all, the servicemen themselves were the stabling influence amongst the whole group.

However, once on board the aircraft, the entire atmosphere changed. Once the taxi out and takeoff was completed, the packs of cards came out and the cans of beer were being opened. It was if the Sydney terminal was years behind.

On arrival in Singapore, the Qantas aircraft was to be refuelled so it could fly from Singapore to Saigon and then to Sydney without taking on more fuel. During this fuel stop, all passengers had to disembark into the transit lounge and have some breakfast. The authorities had decreed that upon leaving the aircraft in Singapore, we were not to look like service personnel. To achieve this, each of us had to change into a civilian shirt. Therefore, 120 passengers all dressed in similar polyester olive coloured trousers and different coloured shirts all left the aircraft to have breakfast.

On arrival at Saigon airport, we were met with the servicemen we were replacing. It was an interesting few minutes conversation. Then as they prepared to board their homeward bound aircraft, we were taken to a No 35 SQN Caribou aircraft for a flight to the Vung Tau airfield. On arrival at Vung Tau, we were met by our squadron people and taken to the barracks for routine introductions and other domestic chores.

Introduction to 9 Squadron and Base Duty Rosters

During the first few days, we were introduced to our individual sections, and informed of the various rosters and duties we would be performing. The Armament section comprised of one Armament Officer, one Flight Sergeant, two Sergeants, three Corporals and six LAC's. Our duties were spread over aircraft hangar servicing, duty crew and the Forward Arming Crew at Nui Dat.

So December 1970, I arrived at 9 SQN in Vung Tau after applying for Vietnam for nearly four years. On arrival, I was met by my old chief, FLTLT 'Swampy' Russell, and FSGT Alan Ely. Others included SGTs Les Poustie and Dinny Haines, (replaced in January by SGT Blue Clavan) CPLs Dave McArdle, Peter (the Colonel) McGuiness, and Peter (Holywood) Daetz, who arrived in January to replace Cpl Brian Raby. As many would remember, the Armourer's life at 9SQN revolved around a small amount of time in the workshop and hangar, with the rest taken up with either Duty Crew or the weekly roster to Nui Dat Re-arm centre.

Duty Crew

Duty Crew required one Senior NCO of an aircraft trade, one LAC from each aircraft trade and two LACs from the Armament trade. Each week's duty began on Saturday morning and ended at the close of duty the next Friday evening. Each day's duty began 0500 hours with performing the day's aircraft pre-flight inspections and overseeing their departure from Vung Tau to Nui Dat. At 0800 hours, when the day crew arrived, the Duty Crew were stood down and returned to their barracks. At 1645 hours, the Duty Crew reported to the hangar to be briefed on the status of all aircraft yet to return to base. Their duty was to perform after-flight servicings on all aircraft and to rectify all unserviceabilities (U/S's). When these U/S's were significant, e.g., requiring engine changes, flight control changes, or other major work, etc., the squadron recall crew were called to the hangar. The Armourers on duty crew carried out their after-flight servicings on the aircraft, and then performed post firing servicings on all side guns which were fired that day. As all normal "Utility" aircraft carried one M60 machine gun on each side pintle post, and all Gunships carried two M60 machine guns on each side pintle post, the quantity of guns to be cleaned varied from a dozen or so right up to about 60 or so weapons. So it was not unusual to find the armourers still cleaning and servicing weapons at midnight. When all aircraft and all guns were serviceable, the Duty Crew could stand down for the evening until 0500 the next morning when it all began again. I did my first duty crew with George Shores who had been in the squadron for some time and was able to show me the ropes. In fact, I spent Christmas Day on Duty Crew with George. Following that duty, I did many weeks of Duty Crew with Eric Easterbrook. In fact, Eric and I became a formidable team on Duty Crew.

During these frequent evenings when we two armourers were cleaning dozens of the M60 Machine Guns used during the day, there was the odd occasion when we'd find a weapon with a round still loaded in the firing chamber! This reinforces the policy that one always had to be careful how one picked up the next weapon from the pile waiting to be cleaned. On such an occasion, we'd carefully place the weapon to one side, record the serial number, its aircraft for the day, and contact our SNCO at his mess to inform him of our findings. He would then continue with the investigation, finding out why the crewman didn't check the weapon was cleared properly and any other pertinent details.

Nui Dat Forward Arming Pad

Nui Dat was the site of the huge Australian Army base in South Vietnam. At some stage during the conflict, there may have been up to 6,500 Army personnel stationed at Nui Dat

The Nui Dat Forward Arming Crew comprised of one Senior NCO of an aircraft trade, one Flight Fitter "A", (either an Airframes or Engine Fitter), one Flight Fitter "B" (either an Electrical Fitter, an Instrument Fitter or a Radio Technician), one Corporal Armourer and one LAC Armourer.

Re-Arm Pad at Nui-Dat

Whilst their primary duties were to maintain the gunships in a serviceable state, including re-arming them after each flight, they also carried any minor rectifications on other squadron aircraft to save them returning to Vung Tau when the minor problem could be rectified by our tradesmen at Nui Dat. Squadron gunships were known by their call signs, "Bushranger 1, 2, 3, or 4"). The Gunships were usually involved as escorts for troop insertions and troop extractions by the utility helicopters. On these types of flights, the probability of the gunships firing their weapons was moderate, depending on whether the troops were in danger of attack. However, it was on occasions when a Regiment patrol or a SAS unit became surrounded and/or ambushed that our gunships really came into their own. On such occasions, a scramble was called and within one or two minutes, Bushranger 1 and 2 were airborne headed toward the target. If necessary, Bushranger 3 and 4 were scrambled from Vung Tau to join Bushranger 1 and 2 becoming a four aircraft pattern as used by ground attack fighter aircraft.

The ordnance load of the gunship was very significant, considering the size of the aircraft. It contained:

- 4,500 rounds of 7.62mm mixed ball and tracer ammunition (one tracer to four ball rounds) for each minigun, carried internally and fed through ammunition chutes to each gun.
- Two - seven tube 2.75 inch rocket dispensers, one on each side of the aircraft, position on the rear mount behind and below the minigun. The rocket tubes contained one White Phosphorus (WP) rocket for target marking, and 13 high explosive (HE) rockets.
- Each side gunner had two M60 machine guns with 1,000 rounds of 100% tracer 7.62mm ammunition per gun.
- Also, to assist either gunship crews or ground units to mark targets accurately, each gunship carried about 20 coloured smoke grenades.

The accuracy of the Australian Iroquois helicopter gunship had become legendary. On many occasions, the gunship crews were given a target with the information that friendly forces were positioned some 40 to 50 feet to one side of the target and some 70 to 80 feet behind the target. Yet the gunship's crew could achieve a five foot group with the miniguns and place individual rockets within six feet of a target. This accuracy was far ahead of any US Army gunship as in the US versions, all their gunmounts were hydraulically controlled by the pilot to answer slight directional changes to the gunsight. In the Australian gunship, all the gun and rocket mounts were welded fast, and any changes in aim by the pilot were effected simply by a slight movement in the rudder, etc., just like any other ground attack aircraft.

Busy Day at KangaPad - Nui-Dat - 1971

John beside a Gunship at Nui-Dat - 1971

Of the Nui Dat trips, I did about an equal number with Dave McArdle and Peter Daetz. As his name implies, Holywood always wanted to be in on a trade, but always seemed to be on step behind in the barter. It was little wonder that when he went home for his R&R, he asked not to return for compassionate reasons. There were numerous army chaps asking for his skin!

One of Holywood's little habits at Nui Dat was to fire a smoke grenade into the nearby creek each morning. He said he was proof testing, but I think he just liked to fire off things. This was fine until one morning the colour of the smoke selected by Peter exactly matched the colour chosen that day for the Army's Base Red Alert signal. Considering the commotion caused, Peter laid very low for a few weeks after that.

Introduction to some controversial Policies

At the conclusion of all our official arrival briefings, including domestic, security and work related matters, there was one verbal order given to us. The Squadron Armament Officer was known to me from Butterworth and Thailand and gave us this stern warning:

“Men, as Armourers, an occasion may arise where a US. Army Gunship crew may request an emergency supply of ammunition and rockets from our supply at Nui Dat. Should this occur, by all means supply them with their needs providing our stocks will allow, BUT, under NO circumstances are any Australian Armourers to assist a US Army crew to arm their gunship”. He continued, “By the way, you'll not find this order written anywhere! This is the express order of the CO and myself”.

To seek clarity, I replied, “Sir, this is a war zone, what if there are 1,000 yellow men coming over the hill!” To which he replied, “I don't care if there are 3,000 yellow men coming over the hill, Australian Armourers will NOT assist any U. S. Army Gunship Crew to arm their aircraft”. I think I commented this was rather strange, and the Armament Officer responded; “This applies to the U. S. Army gunship crews. One day, you will see their procedures and you will understand”.

Sure enough, several weeks later, I was in a position to witness a U. S. Gunship crew load their aircraft. Instead of having serviceable equipment, their aircraft weapons system was hopelessly corroded, under serviced and most definitely unfit for active service. Rockets are meant to be gently pushed up into a clean rocket tube with just two fingers until the detente catches. Guns are meant to be pointed in a safe direction prior to loading, and the Firing Sector of the Mini-Gun removed during the loading procedure. None of these safety precautions were carried out. I saw a crewman belting a rocket into a tube with a spare M60 Machine gun barrel after it had jammed inside the severely corroded tube. After several really good wallops, he finally managed to get the rocket to reach its stop. Then, he started on the next six. At this stage, I knew what our Armament Officer had been talking about. He had obviously tried to get them to change their procedures, but in vain, so he did the best he could to protect his own men.

A New Modification to the Gunship

One of the Armament trade's finest achievements during this year, was the introduction of the “John Payne” Ammunition Hopper Bins. The Iroquois Gunship had used the US Army type of ammunition bins which went right across the floor and the ammunition was assisted out to the gun by electrical booster motors. These were a considerable source of gun stoppages. Therefore, the resident ARMO, John Payne, who had recently replaced our friend Norm Russel, invented the huge “Hopper” Bin. It was constructed locally, and could hold up to nearly 4,800 rounds of 7.62mm belted ammunition, just neatly laid row over row in the large bin. The bin was pre-loaded and on the gunship's arrival, the empty bin was removed and replaced with the full bin on each side. Ammunition would then be fed down the chute and loaded into the gun. The first trial was with FLTLT Norm Goodall (affectionately called “Boldfinger”, as he was the first pilot to expend 1 million rounds of 7.62 ammunition). It was subsequently proved that a gunship could be turned around in just ten minutes. Yes, 5 minutes to re-fuel, and 5 minutes to completely re-arm, all with the engine running and the copilot holding the controls. This then allowed all four gunships to rotate through a target in 50 or 55 minutes, and keep going like that throughout the afternoon.

Aircraft Servicing in the Hangar

The hangar crew's daily tasks were primarily involved with the scheduled servicing of the aircraft. To maintain a high serviceability rate, a monthly "C" check was carried out each 16 days. Whilst this may have been interpreted by some outsiders as an "over-service", it was highly recommended due to the unpredictable and often high flying rate. Also, most of the flying was done within the top 10% of the performance envelope. Therefore, with 16 aircraft in the squadron's inventory, there was always one aircraft in the hangar receiving a "C" check. On the odd occasion when the Intelligence Officer warned the squadron that all 16 aircraft would be required on a certain day, that day's planned "C" check would be accomplished the previous night.

9SQN Maintenance Hangar - 1971

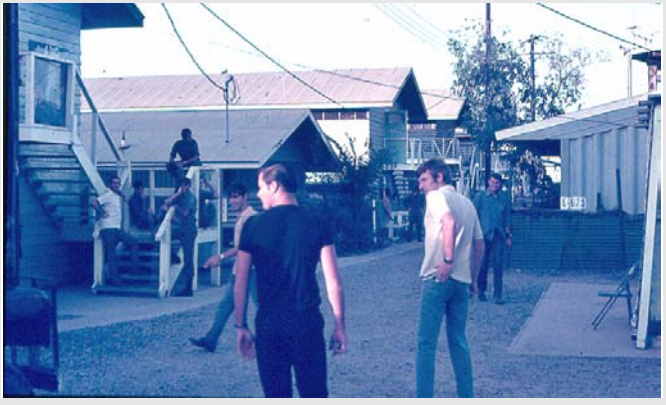
Intermediate level maintenance, a check taking about three to four days to accomplished, would be carried out on each aircraft over a six month period.

Once when doing a "C" check on a gunship helicopter in the hangar, there was a scramble and the pilots called for the aircraft. We had to finish the check ASAP and get it on to the pad and armed up with the full load of ordnance. Peter McGuiness was the aircraft coordinator and moved things very well. However, the Armament Officer (FLTLT Norm Russell) came out and began to get involved in the coordinating. Peter, in his diplomatic (?) style, asked to talk with the boss in his office, to which he replied, "Yes Peter, but be quick". So Peter allowed the FLTLT to enter the office then slammed and locked the door from the outside using a hasp bolt and promptly finished the aircraft servicing and ordnance loading. An hour or so later Peter came in to let the very angry FLTLT out of his office.

General Working Conditions and Morale

In general, I began to really enjoy working in this operational environment. Not only was I back in an operational squadron, but this was my first posting in a truly "Active Service" area. In some ways, the atmosphere of the unit had some similarities with the unit at Ubon in Thailand, although the work load in Vung Tau was much heavier than at Ubon.

The level of professional satisfaction gained from working in an Active Service area can be outstanding. Basically, we were a group of highly trained and disciplined men whose dependence on one another and support of one another was paramount. The level of cooperation seen at an active service post is one rarely seen in any other post. Although there were up to seven or eight different trades working in the close knit squadron environment, I had not before seen such inter-trade sharing of knowledge, or inter-trade support. For example, when on Duty Crew, if one member had completed his duties for the evening and we Armourers were still cleaning and servicing guns, the other member would offer his support asking if there be any medial tasks he could do which would relieve some of our duties. Likewise, if we completed our tasks early, I offered on more than one occasion, to drive the crane for the Engine Fitters for their engine change. At least this freed one of their fitters to continue on more technical tasks.



Airmens' Quarters RAAF Vung Tau - 1971

In short, I was enjoying the unit immensely. The only strange condition I felt was that most of the other married men were understandably pining for their families, but I could not comprehend this feeling. This was yet another sign to me that my marriage was not as strong as it should have been.

Examples of Outstanding Feats

It was found that the most likely scenario for the outstanding feats were when an aircraft had been shot down during the day. When news of such an event was issued, the first and immediate reaction was for the crew. Once their rescue and safety had been organised, the next step was the rectification of the aircraft.

To this end, the immediate question was "Did the aircraft burn?" If so, there was usually very little one could do to rectify or salvage anything from the aircraft. However, if the aircraft did not burn, yet suffered considerable ground fire damage, there was indeed a procedure.

Squadron procedures required that if an aircraft had been shot down by ground fire and it had not been destroyed by fire, the aircraft was to be inspected at the earliest opportunity. This was to evaluate the most efficient method of returning the aircraft to home base for repairs. To accomplish this, the Warrant Officer Engineer (WOE) in charge of all aircraft servicing, upon being notified of such a downed aircraft, would create a maintenance team by quickly selecting one man from each of the maintenance trades, plus one Senior NCO and dispatching them by helicopter to the crash scene. On their arrival, usually only minutes after the crashed flight crew had been evacuated, each tradesman was to quickly assess the serviceability of the aircraft within his trade and report to the Senior NCO accordingly. The team would then decide on the best method of transporting the crashed aircraft back to home base for repairs. If it were capable of one flight, this would be organised and approved. However, as was usually the case, if the aircraft was certified not capable of flight, a US Army Chinook helicopter was requested to carry the damaged Iroquois back to our home base for repair.

On arrival at the hangar the damaged aircraft would be set upon by a team of tradesmen. If the aircraft was a Gunship, then all the gunship equipment, mountings and accessories had to be removed prior to the commencement of major repair. These items would then be checked for serviceability and refitted to another aircraft available for configuration for gunship roles.

In my experience, I believe I was involved in at least three of these rectification teams during the year. The teamwork and support was outstanding. There were times when a damaged Gunship had its weapons system removed whilst the aircraft was still out in the field, or perhaps on the pad at Nui Dat. The components would then be flown back to Vung Tau for a serviceability check and installation to another aircraft.

Toward the end of the year, around late October 1971, just after the re-arm team had been withdrawn from Nui Dat, we were operating all our gunships from the revetments at Vung Tau. It was during this time when the squadron answered a call to defend an Army Pilatus Porter aircraft shot down in the Long Hai hills. During the ensuing battle, the squadron recorded its highest daily expenditure of ordnance since its arrival in Vietnam. In the afternoon, from the start of the scramble at about 1350 hours to its finish at around 1930 hours, the gunships had expended some 107,000 rounds of 7.62 ammunition and more than 550 rockets. As part of the re-arm team of the day we finished replenishing our ready-use stocks again by about 2300 hours. I remember being quite impressed when FLG OFF Rhese James, one of our gunship pilots, came to visit us at around 2200 to personally thank us for the effort.

The teamwork during these high pressure and stressful rectifications was outstanding. Although working well into the night, we all would be checking if there was anything we could do to help one of the other tradesmen who were buckling under the pressure. Some of these rectification tasks involved major reconstruction of the aircraft, yet the entire task took less than three days.

Secondary Effect of Squadron Aircraft Being Shot Down

On a sadder note, it was during this year that the squadron suffered more than 6 aircraft shot down. Of these occasions, we lost four members of our flight crew, 2 pilots and 2 crewmen, each on separate occasions. It was during times like these that the squadron really clicked together, worked tremendously long hours, developed a fantastic rapport with the flight crew and I found the experience extremely rewarding. Quite a paradox!

On this note, I think the hardest part of any duties was being chosen to inspect an aircraft after it had been shot down. If an aircraft had received multiple bullet holes from ground fire, causing the crew to perform an emergency landing, or an Auto-rotation and if the aircraft did not burn, a ground crew party of one airman of each trade and one Senior NCO, was immediately ‘volunteered’ by the WOE to be flown to the site and inspect the aircraft. This party's instructions were to examine the aircraft and if possible certify the aircraft to fly one sector to home base for repairs. If it could not be certified for one flight, the aircraft would be carried underneath a US Army Chinook back to base. I ended up in one of these parties on three different occasions. The decision on all three occasions was to “chook” it back. But the initial sight of the aircraft, seeing it minutes after the flight crew had been taken away by the medivac, will stick in my mind for ever. You would not believe so much blood could come from just one man.

It was on one of these occasions, when a Gunship had been shot down, that the recovery of the aircraft back to Vung Tau could not take place until late the following day. Therefore, the ground crew were instructed to remove all the gunship components from the aircraft in the field and return them to base. These components were then used to build up another aircraft into a gunship that day. I believe the disassembly began late in the afternoon, and the assembly or build up was finally completed, including harmonisation of the guns, at about 4 in the morning. I can remember walking across the hangar to the workshop when it was nearly 3 in the morning, and I must have been unsteady on my feet. Then Sergeant 'Blue' Clavan told me to sit down before I fell down and hurt someone. So I had a 30 minute spell and continued on. Our little group had been at work since around 8 the previous morning.

Social Activities

Speaking of social occasions, the culture of the enormous beer order by the RAAF Airmen's Club at Vung Tau needs to be explained. I'm led to believe that the average weekly consumption of beer by the entire RAAF base was about one ton of cans per week, whereas the weekly purchase was in the vicinity of about six tons per week. (One pallet of beer cans, i.e., the old steel cans, weighed about a ton). The remaining five pallets were used for several purposes, including:

- payment for jobs carried out by army units for squadron benefit,
- the purchase of major aircraft components, including many electrical and instrument components, hydraulic pumps and other airframe components, major engine support components, and armament system components including mini-guns, rocket pods, etc.;
- The purchase of numerous consumable parts used by all trades in the hangar.

9SQN Barbecue - Back Beach - 1971

Without these purchases, I'm sure the squadron would never have been able to achieve the outstanding operations it did. It's just that the 'official' allocation of monies granted by the Australian Government were hopelessly inadequate for the task. It was amazing just what sort of components could be purchased for an agreed amount of VB! For example, complete Mini-guns could be purchased for about 8 or 9 cartons of VB, aircraft electrical generators and aircraft hydraulic pumps could be purchased from the US Army Stores Depot for about 15 to 18 cartons of VB. (Considering that the duty free price of VB at the time wholesaled at US$0.12 per can).

Early in 1971, the squadron submitted a request through the proper channels for an Army Engineer unit to renovate the squadron re-arm centre at Nui Dat. Instead of having our tools, spare parts, rations, etc., stored in tents, the request was for three inter-connecting airconditioned 'ATCO' type buildings to be installed. For this to be accomplished, the area needed to be levelled, a retaining wall installed, a power unit installed, and then the buildings supplied and installed. So while the written request was being officially processed, the 9SQN airmen called on the troops of the Army engineers unit. The troops duly arrived and gave us a "quote" for the installation task. After much negotiation, an agreement was reached and work began immediately. The troops performing the task were provided with appropriate 'refreshments' during the course of their operation, and a payment of x number of cartons of Tooheys was paid on completion. It was simply the way things were done. The simple carton of VB became currency in dealing with US forces and the carton of Tooheys became currency in dealing with our own army units.

Nui-Dat Fwd Servicing Centre (after rebuild) -

One of Peter's better exploits was his discovery of a particular part number in the US Navy's stores inventory. On request for this part number, the recipient was issued with a carton containing 56 individually wrapped one pound slabs of snap frozen steaks, delivered by air freight from the USA. Many a squadron barbecue was held in which the CO remarked on the quality of the meat. He would be quietly requested not to ask too many questions about the steak. In fact it was through the squadron's association with the ship USS Corpus Christie Bay that we were able to acquire this delicacy. This ship was a floating workshop designed to refurbish Iroquois Helicopters and their major components. Whilst none of our aircraft were refurbished on board, we did manage to get a number of components overhauled there. Our response was to invite some of their crew to our famous barbecue afternoons.

Typical 9 Squadron Barbecue - 1971

Many may remember when the Airfield Defence Guards (ADGs) from the defence section were selected to provide a vehicle escort for a group of senior Padres to visit the local orphanage. The drive took them through some questionable areas of the Vung Tau township. The ADGs of the escort group were told to arm their M60 machine guns to the "Cold Load" condition, i.e., the first round locked beside the bolt with the action still forward. One of the ADGs, when arming his M60 machine gun must have forgotten where he was, (being an ex squadron gunner). He cocked the action; placed the first round in front of the bolt and nonchalantly fired the action. About seven rounds were discharged before he let go of the trigger, all going over the roof of the Officers' Mess! Very embarrassing!

Reference has been made previously about the Anti-Vietnam marches. Well on one occasion I saw the result of one of those marches during one of my tours in Nui Dat. This young fellow came down to the Re-Arm area one day in a very depressed state to have a chat with us. He was with the Royal Australian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (RAEME) unit and had befriended us over a period of months. However, this day he was really down. He showed us a copy of a ten day old Melbourne Age newspaper with a front page photograph of a group of ladies displaying a sign saying "Save Our Sons" whilst taking part in an Anti-Vietnam rally. He identified one of these ladies as his mother. He said as soon as he saw the paper he wrote to his mother asking her NEVER to do that again. In his letter he told her that he had just signed up to transfer from being a National Serviceman to a Regular Soldier. He also said he had progressed from being a 20 year old uneducated bum to a responsible person who had a trade as well.

Pie and Stubby Nights

Although the Australian catering staff performed admirably in preparing palatable food from the U.S. Army rations, (more on that in the next heading), there were two types of food and/or drink which we Australians missed: One was the ordinary meat pie, and the other was the privilege of drinking beer from a glass container.

So, on about four occasions throughout the year, a special function was organised, called the "Pie and Stubby" night. This function took an immense amount of logistical organization to complete. From the next few weekly R and R flights to Australia, a search was conducted for a reliable fellow who was about to take his R & R in the actual Sydney area. Then some funds from the squadron social club were given to him with some precise instructions.

On arrival in Sydney, after he had completed his urgent marital duties of course, he was to contact Sergeants' Pies or Four n Twenty Pies, and order about five trays of assorted meat pies. These trays were to be delivered to Sydney International airport for dispatch on the same PAN-AM flight he was to return to Vietnam.

In addition, he was to order from the his local bottle shop a large number of cartons of Tooheys Draught glass stubbies. As all beer in Vietnam was from a steel can, the fellows thought it sheer luxury to drink from a glass stubby. Once again, the cartons were to be delivered to Sydney International airport for dispatch on the same PAN-AM flight he was to return to Vietnam.

PAN-AM Airlines were then advised of the extra cargo for the return flight from Sydney to Saigon. On arrival at Saigon, he was to supervise the transfer of his precious cargo from the PAN-AM aircraft to the Caribou flight to Vung Tau.

On arrival at Vung Tau, the precious cargo of pies and glass stubbies was loaded into the hangar fridges and the entertainment was set for the evening. I can assure you, these "Pie & Stubby" nights were really something to behold!

Meeting Between Long Lost Friends

Late in my tour of Vietnam, during one of my deployments to Nui-Dat, I had occasion to visit the airfield where the Caribous land. When there I saw an Army fellow I recognised from my home town of Wynnum, a bayside suburb of Brisbane. This chap, Ian, had knocked around with a group of we local fellows before I left for Malaysia in 1965. So, I asked him how long he had been in Vietnam as it was uncanny that we had been so close at Wynnum, yet not known each of us was here in Vietnam. He replied he was on his fourth trip to Vietnam! I had known that he had become a Cook in the Army, and later a Chef, but never known of any of his postings. He said he just loved the lifestyle in the messes in Vietnam so he kept on asking to be returned. I commented that he must be worth a fortune, but no, he said he had enjoyed a really good time, but yes, he had bought four blocks of land in Brisbane!

He told me that whilst in Vietnam over his four visits, he had purchased these four large acreage blocks of land around the south to south-east of Brisbane, all through the Courier Mail newspaper. He would see an advertisement in the paper, realising that the paper would be about 10 days old when he saw it, yet he would write to the contact mentioned and ask if it was still for sale and if so, could he buy it by sending a cheque from Vietnam. Much later, in the early to mid 1970's, when he was about to get married, he showed his bride to be the four blocks of land he had bought sight unseen and asked her to pick one. Upon her making her choice, he sold two of the remaining three and used the funds to build his house on the chosen block. What a wonderful start to married life. Many of us commented that we should have done what Ian did.

Domestic Living Conditions

Messes and Catering

The three messes of the base, Officers' Mess, Sergeants' Mess and the Airmens' Mess, each operated their own mess and bar facilities. The Airmen's Mess and the Sergeants' Mess shared the one kitchen, and positioned their respective dining rooms on either side of the cinema. The Officers' Mess had its own kitchen, although obtained its rations from the one central Ration Store.

I must confess that in past years I too have lined up the RAAF catering staff for the traditional amount of flack. These tireless workers have often been given the nick name "bait layer" even if on many occasions it was unfairly given. However, after my return from Vietnam, I vowed never to throw flack at the RAAF cook any more.

Quality of Food and Catering

The rations supplied to the RAAF Base were mainly from the U.S. Army Ration Store. How any cook was able to create a palatable meal from the rubbish given to them from these rations was simply amazing. Such things as potatoes, onions, carrots, and other non-frozen goods, were often supplied in 10 (US) gallon tins. As an example, a familiar sight was a ten gallon tin of dehydrated onions, and a ten gallon tin of mash potato mixture.

Most of the other vegetables were deep frozen, so were not too bad. Having seen the quality of the US rations, I was always impressed with the resultant quality of the meals prepared by the RAAF cooks. I must confess that I have been guilty on some previous occasions of having a crack at the cook in the Airmens' Mess. However, after seeing how they created a palatable meal out of the absolute rubbish given to them by the U.S. Army, I vowed never to criticize the Australian cooks again!

Supply of Eggs - US Army Style

The biggest surprise were the eggs. Imported from the USA, all eggs had been injected with a hyperdermic needle of ether to preserve them. Whilst the process was successful, yes they were preserved, the smell was something else! I think all veterans will remember the distinct foul smell of ether when one cracked open an egg.

There was a rule that the US Catering Staff were not to issue any eggs which were more than five years of age. Yes, that's right, five years. There was a little date stamp on each egg, giving a month and year. There were a number of rumours around that some of the eggs were of Korean War vintage, unproven, but not surprising.

Trading and Bartering of Rations

With the unusual restriction of rations for an Australian Mess, it was inevitable that some serious trading and bartering for decent condiments and genuine meat and vegetables would flourish. Now and again, there would be a comprehensive selection of sources, jams, conserves and spreads available on the tables. I had no idea where they came from and most men did not dare to ask.

In a previous paragraph, I illustrated how one of our Armourers had cottoned on to the opportunity of obtaining snap frozen steak, direct from the USA. Yes, Peter had been informally given a part number in the US Navy stores inventory which, when ordered, would supply 56 individually wrapped one pound slabs of high quality snap frozen steak. This of course, was only issued to squadron bar-be-ques, and not to the mess kitchens. On a few occasions at squadron functions, a squadron commander would ask about the high quality steak. We would simply reply, "Don't ask".

After Hours Meals

There were frequent occasions when a group of men, other than the Duty Crew, were still working in the hangar late in the evening rectifying aircraft unserviceabilities. Once they had been working more than four hours since their last meal, i.e., dinner, the senior NCO in charge of the shift would telephone the Airmen's kitchen, contact the Duty Cook, and request a number of late meals for his crew. This number could vary from six up to perhaps twenty or so.

For the Duty Cook, the easiest meal for him to prepare a meal at 2300 hours or later was simply steak, eggs and chips. So, after working four to six hours rectifying aircraft, a group of hungry men would arrive at the kitchen for a meal. After the meal, most of the men would return to the hangar for a further hour or so to complete their work.

Many years later, I had always wondered why I put on so much weight at a unit where there was so much physical exercise. I lost count of the times when after having a substantial meal at dinner time, complete with a beer or two or three, then being recalled to the hangar at about eight or nine in the evening. Then, at around midnight or later, we would be eating another hearty meal of steak, eggs and chips!

Corruption - Did I See Any?

Before any discussion can take place on the level of corruption within the defence industry in Vietnam, it needs to be established that I can only talk about matters within the aviation industry. I did hear of rumours, years later of major differences and corruption between policies of U.S. Army and Australian Army. These surfaced when I later spoke with colleagues from various regiments when I was working with the Queensland Government Security, and again when I was serving on the Committee of the Blue Mountains Vietnam Veterans Association.

However, back to the world of aviation.

Policy of Aircraft Maintenance When on Active Service

There was a world of difference between policies of aircraft maintenance in the Australian services and that in the U.S Services. Each of the two had a reasonably similar policy for when the aircraft were on their home soil. However, it was when the squadron was deployed overseas to an active service area that the two policies became worlds apart.

Aircraft Servicing within the Australian Services

When the aircraft were being flown and serviced from Australian bases, it had been government policy for many years to employ the services of the civilian industries as far as practical. In those days, all aircraft servicing, from flight line right up to major maintenance was performed by service personnel. (Today, considerable major maintenance is performed by commercial contractors within Australia).

During a major level aircraft servicing, a considerable number of aircraft components were removed from the aircraft by service personnel and dispatched to an appropriate civilian contractor for overhaul. Sometimes, this would also happen during an intermediate level of aircraft servicing, say a six monthly check. Representatives from the aircraft manufacturer would have a permanent office at an Aircraft Depot on an Australian base where their aircraft type was undergoing heavy maintenance.

However, when an Australian squadron of aircraft were dispatched to an overseas base, particularly in an Active Service role, all levels of aircraft servicing conducted on those aircraft at that base were performed by service personnel. If a component, which was normal overhauled by a civilian contractor in Australia was small enough to be economically dispatched back to Australia for overhaul, then that practice would continue. But, if the component was simply too large or it was not practical to dispatch it all the way to Australia for overhaul, then the servicing would be performed by service personnel on the base. Australian civilian contractors were not permitted to work on overseas bases, particularly when the base was in, or likely to be in, an Active Service area. I believe the authority for this policy was written somewhere in Queen's Regulations. I know it was never disputed. There were a very small number of Australian civilians in vietnam, but these were in the rare vocations where their expertise was required in the local area and could not be matched by service personnel. An example may be in the area of international intelligence, etc.

In some cases, particularly for aircraft which were unable to fly back to Australia in just one or two sectors, e.g., Fighter aircraft and Helicopters, all aircraft servicing, from flight line right through to the major level of servicing was performed on the local base by service personnel. The Canberra aircraft of No 2 Squadron were flown from their operational base in Phan Rang in Vietnam to Australia via Butterworth in Malaysia for their major Depot level of aircraft servicing.

Aircraft Servicing within the U.S. Military

While the U.S. Military had a similar policy for the use of civilian contractors for the servicing of aircraft and their components whilst on home soil, this policy was extended to all of their bases overseas, yes, including those bases in Active Service areas. For instance, very little aircraft major servicing was ever performed by their service personnel, either on home soil or on overseas bases. So, a considerable amount of major level servicing on aircraft and aircraft components was performed by civilian contractors right there on the base in Vietnam, as well as in other parts of South East Asia.

This is where their policy all started to become corrupt. Just think for a moment what sort of penalty rates a company would have to pay its employees to work on a USAF or US Army base in Vietnam for twelve months in an unaccompanied situation.

So a good number of these contracting companies were doing very nicely, thank you. During a number of squadron bar-be-ques and other off-base social functions, I had the privilege to meet a number of these civilian employees of companies with huge defence contracts. In many cases, their year in Vietnam would be sufficient to set themselves up for life back home. It was obvious that the U.S. Defence Department had no qualms of paying these huge amounts of money, yes, billions of US Dollars, to the civilian contractors.

Now the plot thickens. I did hear from several of my civilian colleagues, company representatives, etc, that each of the really big ones, e.g., McDonald - Douglas, Philco Electronics, Dyna-Electron, and some others boasted major shareholders, (i.e., at least 40% share holdings), whose spouses were members of Congress.

Some examples were:

- An American electronics company, Philco, had a contract to overhaul all airborne radar sets removed from U.S aircraft whilst on service in the whole South east Asia region. They had workshops of civilian employees at numerous bases throughout SE Asia, including several in Vietnam.
- Another American electronics company, Dyna-Electron, had the contract to overhaul all ground based radar sets used by U.S. aircraft in SE Asia. These sets included such things as Ground Control Approach radar, and other similar functions.
- It was widely known that a major share holder of McDonald-Douglas aircraft company was indeed the wife of a prominent member of congress.
- On our base, at Vung Tau, there were a considerable number of civilians, including representatives from the Bell Helicopter Company and other subsiduaries connected with the helicopter industry.

The above four examples were just a very small sample of the overall picture of the way the U.S. Military conducted its operations whilst on active service. There were other major examples of ordnance companies willing to let the USAF test their new or later models of ordnance.

Overall Effect of Commercial Involvement

This can be described in a positive way for the Australians, as they had the very minimum commercial involvement, and in a negative way for the U.S. Military as they had a very deep commercial involvement.

On each RAAF squadron, whether overseas on Australian soil, an aircraft serviceability status was taken at 0800 hours local time every morning. Each aircraft held on squadron strength was listed as either serviceable, meaning ready for flight or actually flying, or unserviceable, and if so, why and the anticipated time such rectifications or servicing was expected to be completed.

Due to the strict policy of aircraft being serviced by service personnel only on active service bases, nearly all active service squadrons achieved an overall aircraft serviceability rate of better then 93%.

This amazing figure was seldom if rarely achieved by squadrons on home soil. Active service squadrons had the advantage of always have their full compliment of personnel available within 15 or 20 minutes at any time of the day or night. As stated previously, there were numerous times when squadron personnel worked deep into the night to rectify aircraft unserviceabilities so a full compliment of aircraft was available for the next day's flying.

The result from the U.S. side was almost to the contrary. I saw any number of U.S. Army helicopters on the helipad ready for flight, yet their instrument panels were devoid of several important flight instruments. Even with all their amazing logistical support, they still had numerous occasions where aircraft recitifations were held up by spares or manpower problems. One of the main factors was that the military did not have any disciplinary control, understandably, over any of the civilian contractor's employees. Therefore, when an extra effort was required to achieve a special serviceability rate, they could demand their workers to work right into the night as we Australians often did.

I believe there was a point during the Vietnam conflict when the justification of the war, particularly from a U.S. point of view, took a dramatic change. Late in the conflict, i.e., from around 1969 or 1970 onwards, there were some areas of the U.S. Defence industry who certainly did not wish for the war to decelerate. There were certain eras when the U.S. quite deliberately did not want the war to end, rather there were moves which deliberately prolonged the hostilities.

This was in total conflict with the Australian ethos of operations. The attitude of all Australian units was that we should get in there and give it our all, i.e., our very best shot, and keep doing that until the battle is won. Then the rehabilitaion programme, in cooperation with the local population is escalated. That is the Australian way.

Therefore, one can now understand how several of our very senior officers had some considerable difficulty working alongside of some of the very senior U.S. officers. The ordinary Australian soldier, airman, or sailor did not have difficulty working with his U.S. counterpart, as he could quite philosophically shrug off any policy differences and simply get along with his job.

Considering the above differences, it becomes easy to see how in today's Active Service units, the relationship between Australian and U.S. servicemen has not changed a great deal at all. The Australian servicemen are far better trained, much more disciplined and far more innovative than their american counterparts. The record of Australian and American achievements in Iraq is testament to this.

There were of course other occasions where the Australians benefitted highly from the corrupt U.S. machine. A perfect example was the purchase of additional aircraft spare parts. The very fact that the U.S. stores depot could release an expensive aircraft hydraulic pump, or an expensive aircraft 115V 400Hz 3 phase generator for a few cartons of Australian VB beer must have certainly caused an accounting nightmare. Apparently, such items, as purchased by the Australians, were simply written off their inventory, at the expense of the big U.S. defence budget. Yet, there were literally hundreds of occasions, even just in the twelve months of my service there, when aircraft spare parts, normally worth a few thousand US Dollars each, were purchased for a few cartons of beer.

I believe by far the biggest example of the waste of equipment in the U.S. was the destruction of hundreds of Iroquois helicopters at the closure of the Vietnam era. This occurred after our return to Australia, but there was significant film footage of their actions. Apparently, to return thousands of serviceable helicopters to American soil would have a negative effect on the economy of the aviation industry. I'm still not sure how this assumption was calculated, but it was said.

I'm led to believe that some 1,500 serviceable Iroquois helicopters were pushed over the side of several U.S. Navy Aircraft carriers whilst at sea returning to the USA. They had actually worked out a procedure whereby the crew could safely egress from the helicopter. The aircraft captain would hold the helicopter in a hover with one skid lightly touching the deck of the carrier and the other over the side. All remaining crew members would egress the aircraft on to the deck of the carrier. Then the captain, sitting on the side closest to the carrier, would gently move out of his seat toward the deck, then, as he exited the aircraft, pushed the cyclic control away from him, causing the aircraft to roll off the carrier into the sea. When our squadron people heard of this, there was a combined howl of "What a waste!" Just think of where those helicopters could have been used, even if some of them would have ended up being stripped for spare parts.

Squadron Repatriation and Closure

Winding Down Squadron Operations

Contrary to some beliefs today, the command to wind up the Australian involvement in Vietnam was received by the men around September or October of 1971. For most of us, the command did not present a surprise at all, as we all knew it was coming. The only major criticism of the Australian withdrawl was with the order in which the various units were withdrawn. For instance, everybody expected the SAS unit to be one of the last units out, so that they could monitor enemy activity as the base gradually decreased in size. But, to everybody's surprise, SAS were withdrawn long before Christmas 1971.

In October 1971, there had been so much withdrawl from the Nui Dat Army base that our 9 Squadron Re-Arm pad detachment was withdrawn and we then operated our Gunships from special revetments at our home base of Vung Tau. By November 1971, our flying rate had decreased alarmingly so we could then carry out the required servicing and cleaning procedures for the aircraft to be loaded on to the HMAS Sydney and transported to Australia.

Each aircraft, in turn, was completely stripped, cleaned and serviced prior to being re-assembled and prepared for loading. To everyone's surprise, when the aircraft skin was removed from the underside of the aircraft, there were many cases of rice growing in between the frames and ribs and the aircraft skin.

Iroquois Strip & Clean - NOV 1971

In early December 1971, the personnel who were to be accompanying the aircraft on the HMAS Sydney were notified. Sadly, I was not one of those. Most of these people were also staying with the squadron upon its arrival at Amberley. I am told that the 16 day trip from Vung Tau harbour to Caloundra off the Sunshine Coast was an outstanding trip. The rest of us would be flying home in the Qantas Charter on 10 December 1971.

So, all the Australian Iroquois helicopters were flown out of Vung Tau by 10 December 1971.

There was an interesting anecdote about the aircraft loading on the HMAS Sydney. The desired target was to store all the helicopters in the below deck area of the aircraft carrier. However, the total length of the helicopter, from the tip of the tail rotor to the forward tip of the main rotor was longer than the length of the aircraft lift to take the helicopter down to the storage deck. With the first aircraft, it was suggested that the main rotor be removed to facilitate the aircraft to be lowered on the lift.

Then one of our innovative Airframe Fitters asked the Navy chap if the lift could be stopped half way. He replied that it could and wondered why the question was asked. So, for the second aircraft, they positioned the helicopter on the lift so the tail rotor cleared the structure surrounding the lift and then lowered the lift until only the main rotor was above the main deck. the lift was then stopped and the helicopter manoeuvred so the tail rotor was underneath the roof of the storage deck and the main rotor was clear of the super structure. the lift was then lowered completely and the helicopter positioned to its desired location in the storage area under the main deck. The remaining helicopters were then loaded in this manner. Also, I believe, on arrival off shore of Caloundra, all the helicopters were transported to the main deck in a similar manner. The squadron then took off from the deck of the HMAS Sydney and flew in formation to the RAAF Base at Amberley. This would have been a sight to behold. Sadly, I did not see it, as by this time I was in Melbourne evaluating a marriage which had simply deteriorated.

Promotion

In November 1971 I was informed I had been promoted to Corporal. After all this time as an LAC, I think I was surprised and somewhat caught unawares.

Social Activities - Disbandment of Airmens' Club

During the wind up of the domestic facilities of the base at Vung Tau, we were informed that if any funds were left over from any of the messes, such monies would be transferred to the "Disbanded Messes Fund" and probably not seen again by any of the men. So a meeting was held to decide where the Airmens' Club funds should be distributed. To our surprise, there were simply thousands and thousands of dollars to be spent. After some discussion, the result was, (to the best of my memory):

- A donation to the Guide Dogs for the Blind sufficient for the total training programme, i.e., the training of both the dog and the blind handler, for at least two dogs for blind persons;
- A rather significant donation to the local orphanage. Many of the airmen had been donating their time over their period in Vietnam to the orphanage, so this extra donation was quite significant. *(It was one of my sincere regrets that I never visited the orphanage during my stay in Vietnam. Sadly, my interests then were far too much related to the can of beer)*.
- Thirdly, the remaining funds were to be used to fund several very large parties to celebrate the withdrawl of the squadrons from the base. There were a few Australian and British concert parties invited to our base and yes we did party very well for those last few weeks!

Considering that the Caribou aircraft (No 35 Squadron) and their personnel, as well as the few remaining personnel of the support squadron did not leave Vung Tau until around February or March 1972, it must have been a very quiet Christmas after all the 9 Squadron personnel left.

Last Week in Vietnam and Departure

Then a week or so before our departure, an Australian concert party group had performed for us at the club and were an instant success. During the after concert drinks, a number of our men asked all the members of the party, some 3 or 4 ladies and 2 men, if they would like to attend a big party there on the next Saturday evening. To our surprise, they accepted. Little did they know that this party was to be the big "Pewter" night. Unit tradition was that on the last Saturday night in Vietnam, each departing airmen was presented with a 20 once pewter mug full of beer by the President of the Airmen's Club on stage. Usually, there were several pewter mugs being presented at any one time and therefore it became a race. However on this night, being the last Saturday for 9 Squadron, there were 72 pewters being presented. So, there were three heats of 24 each and a final with the best 4 from each heat. So one can imagine just how wild the party became, as nearly the whole night was with free drinks over the bar. Our new Australian friends had a ball. As curfew was 2300 hours, and the party was still raging at 0230, the guests could not leave the base until the next morning, I believe the evening celebrations gradually slowed down to a stop around 4 or 5 am. So, after a hearty lunch, our guests left early in the afternoon after nearly 24 hours of the best party they had been to in a long while.

When the squadron was repatriated to RAAF Base Amberley in December 1971, I was not lucky enough to win a place on the HMAS Sydney, and I left Vietnam on the Qantas charter on 10 December. I was posted to No 3 Aircraft Depot at Amberley. However, I first had to go to Laverton, where my wife was still living in a small house and try to fix things up there.

Intentionally
Blank

Return to Amberley - February 1972

Domestic Issues and their Consequences

Although I had left Vietnam on the 10th December 1971, I did not arrive at Amberley until mid February 1972. This time was made up of leave, and a six week attachment to Base Squadron Laverton. During this six weeks, I reported to the Base Squadron Armoury each morning, carried out a few little tasks and then disappeared. The whole intention of the attachment was to attempt to rectify a marriage which I knew even in Vietnam was most fragile.

There wasn't a great deal of negotiation, as we found that we didn't have much in common. It was all rather sad really, two people who had simply drifted miles apart. During some extended family discussions, my mother was very much biased on my side, which didn't really help matters very much.

So at the end of the attachment, I simply put what ever of my belongings of mine I could fit into my Falcon Station wagon and headed up to Amberley. I then knew that what ever I had left behind, eg, furnishings, silver, ornaments, or other oddments either given to us or acquired by us, would be lost for ever as I knew I would be going to be living in Single Mens' Quarters once again at Amberley. This hurt a little at first, as there were some considerable oddments, silver, etc, which had been part of our wedding presents, were actually part of my parents wedding presents back in 1929. Time, as they say, became a good healer.

In hindsight, considering the difficulties we had encountered over the past six and a half years, it was not surprising that the relationship floundered. We had arrived in Malaysia after being married just 14 days. I was thrust into a highly operational squadron environment for the next three years and as the Amah was employed to look after the married quarter, my wife was left to entertain herself with copious amounts of sport, and a highly active social life.

I believe that following my service in Vietnam, the desire to maintain a highly operational environment was overriding. After a fairly quiet couple of years in Laverton at the Trials Unit, I had yearned for the operational scene again. Now, I didn't want to leave it. My wife was like many other partners of veterans of Active Service and simply could not understand the idea or the rationale. Mind you, looking back, she certainly wasn't alone. *(In hindsight, I concede that whilst each of us were guilty of not treating the other as seriously as we ought to have, the operational and service conditions over the period 1965 to 1971 were probably a large factor of the breakdown)*. There were thousands of serviceman's wives who likewise could not understand what was happening to their men.

So, in February 1972, I drove to Amberley alone, quietly realising that this was it. The marriage was over.

Arrival at Amberley

So began my 'Single Living In' days once again at Amberley. Life at No 3 Aircraft Depot, particularly after Vietnam was quiet, frustrating, and upsetting as my wife then began a period of harassment. All I wanted to do was work at a unit which involved copiously long hours, operational flying and lots of hard work. However, I was at an Aircraft Depot which was not unlike a large factory whose primary role was heavy maintenance. The work was primarily 5 days per week and no overtime. That in itself was frustrating enough, as being single again, I desperately wanted to keep working, preferably about 50 to 60 hours per week. Socially, most of my peers were either married with children or on the wild scene, as were the days in the 1970s. So yes, it was a very frustrating time.

Work Environment at Amberley

Watching 9 Squadron Go to Work!

Before proceeding, it should be noted that when 9 Squadron moved into operations at Amberley from 1972, a programme of training more "Flight Fitters" was initiated. (A "Flight Fitter A" was a cross-trained Airframe - Engine Fitter, and a "Flight Fitter B" was a cross-trained Electrical - Radio - Instrument Fitter. The first candidates from 5 Squadron and 9 Squadron to achieve a combined Flight Fitter A & B informally called the "Super Fitter" were both Armourers.

As the 9 Squadron Flight Line office was just down the hill from our small section at Aircraft Repair Section, it tore on the heart strings a little to watch the air crew, supported by the ground crew walk out to their helicopter for the day's flying. We were told that many of their flights were defined as "Training", in order for the crews to become familiar with the local area.

One event which did re-occur from time to time was the call from an aircraft that the crew were experiencing engine difficulties and could a couple of Flight Fitters be dispatched to the site to rectify the aircraft. It would turn out that the crew had noticed the surf was brilliant at a particular beach and would put out the call. The fitters would duly arrive, rectify the 'problem', and all would have a half hour in the surf before heading back to Amberley. It must have been a rough life!

Settling Down to Factory Work at No 3 Aircraft Depot

So, I became the Corporal at 3AD Aircraft Repair Section, where I once worked nine years before as an ex apprentice. The same two igloo hangars were still there, however, instead of having Sabres in the top hangar, there were Iroquois Helicopters. As the Canberra were still in service, the bottom hangar was still being used for the major servicings on those aircraft.

Our duties at Aircraft Repair Section were connected with two major roles:

- The Canberra aircraft "D" Checks including a major modification to remove all the bombing equipment and install the photo-reconnaissance equipment; and
- The Iroquois Helicopter major servicing. Basically, for many of the UH-1H Iroquois aircraft, it was the first time they had undergone a major servicing at an Aircraft Depot, or even within Australia. These checks included a lot of corrosion searching and rectification, as well as other major frame reconditioning.

Our role at the small Armament Section within Aircraft Repair, was to remove all the major Armament components and sub-assemblies, eg, ejection seats, bomb beams and Canopy and Hatch detonators from the Canberra aircraft, as well as all the weapons systems from the Iroquois aircraft. Then when the aircraft frame had been totally refurbished and all the major sub-assemblies had been overhauled at the workshops, we would reinstall them into the aircraft prior to the aircraft test flight. As there were several aircraft of each type in the hangar at the one time, the progress of each aircraft was staggered so they would be completed a week or so apart. This kept a steady flow of work for the small sections like ours.

My fearless leader was SGT Vern Sams. What an experience that was! Vern had returned from Phan Rang, the Bomber Base in Vietnam, somewhat the worse for wear and was suffering from within the bottle. The RAAF medical team were no help as they prescribed Valium more than once. There were a number of occasions when I would rescue Vern from the middle of the hangar as he would be walking a foot above the ground! The hangar WOE, a most experienced and highly respected WOFF Paddy Rhinehardt, knew all too well what was going on, and he guided me a great deal in how best to help Vern, whilst still running the section in an efficient manner.

As one would expect, the quality of the work produced by the Depot was outstanding. Aircraft were refurbished with the meticulous detail not possible at the squadron level. My frustration was certainly not connected with any dissatisfaction with the work ethic of the depot. It was simply that I desired the adrenalin soaking atmosphere of an operational squadron, rather than the regular five day week life of a major servicing depot.

In fact, one of the Depot's outstanding achievements was the recent rectification of a F4 Phantom aircraft which had suffered major damage on landing at Amberley and one side of the arrester cable had seized. The end result was that the aircraft fuselage had been forcibly separated just behind the trailing edge of the wing causing major structural damage to the aircraft frame, as well as stripping and distributing major components all over the runway.

A visiting MacDonald Douglas representative recommended the aircraft be written off and a replacement ordered. The engineering staff at the Depot inspected the aircraft and disagreed. They suggested the aircraft be repaired at the depot. So, over the next several months, the F4 aircraft was totally dismantled, placed into a specially manufactured jig, and the repair work carried out. Just prior to my arrival, the aircraft had been test flown to check flight alignment and to ensure all flight controls were operating true and correct. The MacDonald Douglas representatives were totally impressed with the standard of workmanship and attention to detail of the depot workforce.

I was to discover that my posting to the Depot was with the intention of providing the Armourers with recent knowledge of Iroquois Gunships. So I taught the other armourers the various facets of the gunship, including small hints on the servicing of the guns and rocket pods, harmonisation of the aircraft weapons systems, etc.

After a year or so there, I was asked to work in the Man-hours and Depot Planning Section. Unlike an Aircraft Maintenance Control Section (MCS), where I had worked before at Laverton, this section collated and monitored the man-hours worked for all the various tasks allocated to the different sections within the depot. The task was an interesting one, and it also provided me with additional expertise in the area of planning of man-hours of tasks, etc. This was to prove most valuable at a later stage in my life outside the RAAF.

Secondary Duties at Amberley

As a newly promoted Corporal, and living in the single mens' quarters, it wasn't too long before I was chosen to be the NCO in charge of an Airmen's Block. Basically, the role was to oversee the smooth running of the quarters, to supervise the cleanliness of the ablution areas, and to ensure all the mens' rooms were maintained in a clean and hygiene state.

Air Force tradition maintained that the first night of the working week was "Panic Night", where all single mens' rooms and ablutions were cleaned, swept, washed and polished ready for an inspection, usually on the Tuesday morning. The inspection was usually carried out by the unit Warrant Officer Disciplinary (WOD), accompanied by the particular NCO in charge of the block. The experience was probably a first for me in a supervisory role outside that of aircraft servicing. So, it was good for me to put this experience under the belt.

The experience also taught me a lot about the living habits of many of the younger men at the time. Some of the ways in which we apprentices used to encourage others to wash their clothes would certainly not have been accepted in the enlightened 70's. So, I was to learn other subtle ways in which to encourage young men to improve their standards of hygiene. By and large, these cases were the exception, but they did happen from time to time.

The only disadvantage of the role was that the role consumed a fair bit of time from within the normal working day to replenish stocks of cleaning agents in the block laundry, monitor minor repairs of items within the block and submitting paperwork to the various administrative officers. Usually, I wrote out all the rosters during the evening and distributed them the following day.

Loss of RAAF Driver's Licence

During 1972, I was called to undergo a "Return from Overseas Medical" examination. This was quite a thorough examination, including pathology checks for my blood and all sorts of other less attractive samples. The exam also called for sight and hearing tests. It was the audio test which caused the most problems.

The test revealed that I had major hearing failure in the high frequency range. When examined by the Senior Medical Officer, he commented that my hearing standard was below that required for the retention of a RAAF Driver's Licence, so he requested I surrender my licence to the RAAF transport flight.

This became a bitter blow for me as I had some pride in the numerous vehicles I had accumulated on the RAAF licence. These included the normal sedans and light trucks, heavy trucks up to 10 ton, tractors, refuelling trucks, all types of tarmac tractors, aircraft towing vehicles, etc. So, I had the opinion that without a RAAF driver's licence, I could be a hindrance to a section. Time would tell.

Social Life in Brisbane - as a Single Man Again

Initially, each Friday I would drive to Wynnum, (about an hour's drive away), and spend most of the weekend with my mother. Some of this time was spend doing normal maintenance around the yard, mowing, gardening, minor repairs, etc. Although she was still living in her own home, (a much smaller one than we had lived in prior to my joining the RAAF), she was not as strong and as able as she once was and she certainly appreciated the help around the home.

However, when I began to search for entertainment on a Saturday evening, it became a new world. Most of my old mates from Wynnum were either married with families, or had left the area completely, so a 'singles' style of entertainment for me in my late twenties was a new world. Some of the social events were specially designed for the separated, divorced, or deserted men and women of society. Some were well organised, but some were particularly risque. They all offered a brief break from the loneliness of being alone, but to my knowledge, very few offered an introduction for either gender to meet a genuine mate, not that I was looking for that at this time.

Domestic Issues - Again

It was during this period at Amberley that my wife decided to take me to court for maintenance payments. She had managed to transport all her furniture and belongings from Victoria to Ipswich and found a place to live not far from her brother in the north-western regions of Ipswich.

Whilst I readily conceded that I had not handled our separation very well, I thought that as I had allowed her to keep practically everything we had acquired, all would have been well. So, I was quite surprised to hear that she had engaged a solicitor with the intention of requesting a court to demand maintenance payments from me to help her. I objected to the idea of such payments as she was now independent and without children, so she could have therefore seek employment like anyone else.

Sadly, the magistrate did not agree. After a most stressful day for each of us, during which all sorts of allegations and accusations were made, defended, denounced, or disproved, the magistrate made a formal suggestion: He proposed that we meet in the lounge of the nearby Palae Royale Hotel and discuss where we could go from this point. I indicated to my solicitor that the subject hotel was a most infamous den of iniquity and the Magistrate's suggestion was ludicrous!

So my reward was a court order to pay a fortnightly payment of A$25 to the court for maintenance payments to my wife. As a side issue, I also discovered that maintenance payments were not an approved a tax deductible expense and that her added income from my payments was not taxable.

Sad to say, the only achievement of the court order was to drive us further apart.

An Offer of a Posting

In early 1973, I saw a telex from Support Command asking for Armourers to be posted to a full time detachment at Canberra to be part of a Bombing range clearance team at Tuggeranong. At the time, I saw this as an opportunity to move out of the factory environment and applied for a position on the team. In May 1973, I learnt that my application had been successful and I had been accepted on the team. I was formally notified of my posting to No 1 Central Ammunition Depot, Detachment "A" at Tuggeranong, south of Canberra.

Tuggeranong - Bombing Range Clearance

Preparation for the Team

Prior to proceeding to Fairbairn in the ACT, I was attached to No 1 Central Ammunition Depot, the Ordnance Depot at Kingswood, west of Sydney.

In late May 1973, a small band of Armourers, including FLTLT Bill (the ferret) Mayne, WOFF Reg Manners, SGTs Bill Altman and Brian Dalziel, CPLs Peter (the Colonel) McGuiness and myself, six trusty Armament LACs and two Plant Operators met at the Explosive Ordnance Disposal section of the unit for training in the use of Ordnance locating equipment and some elementary Ordnance Disposal safety procedures. Bill Mayne and Reg Manners were already members of the EOD section of Kingswood and the rest of us were attached in for the course. This attachment preceded a formal posting to No 1 Central Ammunition depot, Detachment "A", RAAF Base Fairbairn, to work on the Tuggeranong Bombing Range.

I was to learn that the unit had recently searched the high explosive range at Morna point, just north of Williamtown Fighter base for unexploded ordnance. However, it was revealed that the personnel involved with that exercise were supplied from nearby units for brief attachments and it was difficult to maintain some continuity of personnel. Therefore, when work was to commence on the next bombing range, Tuggeranong, it was decided to formally post all the required personnel to the unit. This policy was to prove far more successful as the small unit became a most enviable group of men.

When the week's training was completed, we were all to meet at RAAF Base Fairbairn the following Monday, (4th June 1973), to pick up vehicles, tents, domestic equipment, ordnance locating and digging equipment and a myriad of other support equipment. Transport licences were arranged, rosters were set up for drivers and basically, a small unit was commenced, literally, from the ground up.

A New Unit at Tuggeranong

On arrival at the camp site, the huge marquee was raised, toilets and ablutions constructed, telephone and a landline installed. For the phone, the then Telecom commented they couldn't install a phone at our camp site, as there was no line from the main road, a distance of about 2½ km. With the help of our Plant Operators and their equipment, we dug a foot deep trench from the main road to our camp site, about 2½ km in length. The Telecom people then came out and installed the phone.

Camp Site - 1CAMD 'A' Tuggeranong - July 1973

Initially, as the area of the original bombing range had been explained and laid out for us, we then commenced to use the locating equipment, (basically, a sensitive and accurate metal detector), to attempt to locate unexploded ordnance.

Some of the team had previous experience of these procedures at the Morna Point range. However, we were to learn that locating a large 500 or 1000 pound steel bomb in beach sand dunes was far different from location small practice bomb tails or heads in a heavy clay and rocky countryside, which already contained all sorts of scrap metal, including old farming equipment, fence parts, etc.

Over a period of several months, we leaned a lot about the area, using our equipment to its best advantage and we became much more efficient at locating old practice bombs. The unit became affectionately known as the "Tuggeranong Tent Club".

Dining Area - 1CAMD 'A' Tuggeranong - July 1973

In the summer months, when the temperatures out in the field reached the high 30's and often into the low 40's, it was difficult to maintain a full day's work of hard manual labour. So a new system of working hours was introduced. Considering the ACT was by then into daylight saving, we were required to arrive at the site no later than 5.40am, and to be prepared to actually start work right on 6.00am. We would work right up to 12.00 noon, including a half hour break for morning tea and smoko, etc. Then we'd break for three hours during the hottest part of the day to have lunch and a swim in the nearby Murrumbidgee River. Sometimes we'd drive the RAAF vehicles down to the "Pine Island Reserve" on the river, but it was often crowded with picnickers and tourists. So, we'd often drive over the paddocks to another very attractive swimming location and beach site somewhat downstream from the reserve.

Tuggeranong Range from Campsite - July 1973

Then at 3.00pm, we'd resume our work on the bombing range and work through until 6.00pm. These new working hours actually resulted in far greater productivity as well as keeping the men fit and in good spirits.

Over the next 22 months, we dug up nearly 25,000 practice bomb heads. Some of these were the old 11 ½ lb practice bombs, and the majority were the old 25 lb ones. Of all these bomb heads, about 30 still had the detonator fitted. So, we had a small demolition from time to time. Although we hoped to find an old 500 pounder, which would have escalated the priority of the project, we never did. In June 1974, the tent was replaced with 3 ATCO buildings, which provided some well needed facilities, but I think some of the charm of the tent was lost.

Political Climate at Fairbairn

In late 1973, the newly elected ALP government was still stretching its tentacles into all sorts of policy changes from 23 years of conservative government. This was all the more evident as the Australia's involvement in Vietnam had ceased less than two years previous.

On one occasion late in 1973, the Prime Minister, Mr Gough Whitlam, announced that he would invite the North Vietnamese Trade delegation to Canberra for furthering discussions with the North Vietnamese and Chinese people. To this end, he formally requested that RAAF Base Fairbairn provide a formal Guard of Honour for the North Vietnamese Trade Delegates on their arrival.

The Base Warrant Officer Disciplinary (WOD) was requested to recruit the necessary personnel for the Guard of Honour and arrange for a few practice parades prior to the actual arrival of the delegates. The men were recruited, but not informed of the recipient of the guard. *(It should be emphasised that Guards of Honour were common at Fairbairn and therefore, the men simply thought, yet another VIP visitor)*. The practice parades were held without incident and a polished performance was expected.

It also needs to be emphasised that a large number of personnel at Fairbairn were wearing their Active Service ribbons from Vietnam, and some from other theatres of active service as well as from Vietnam. Therefore, when the men finally discovered just who this Guard of Honour was for, they were totally disgusted. Then on the very day of the delegates arrival, the Prime Minister and all his associates were at the tarmac waiting for their guests. However, there were no RAAF men there for the Guard. Not a single soul had turned up for the parade. The PM was furious and wanted the men charged with all sorts of disciplinary action. But no one was charged. It all just blew over and settled down.

Many a lesson was leaned from that little exercise about the values Australian servicemen hold dearly.

The Social Side of the Tuggeranong Tent Club

When hundreds of these old 25 pound practice bomb heads were being found, the discussion became centred around what to do with all these heads. An instruction came from our Commanding Officer that no bomb heads were to be taken to any scrap metal dealer unless they were broken up beyond recognition. So began the ritual of bomb head breaking. The bomb head was made of cast iron, but contained an 18 pound lead weight in the nose of the bomb head. the firing pin and its associated mechanism were all of brass, so almost overnight, a small industry sprang up.

We all took turns of swinging the large sledge hammer to break up the hundreds of cast iron bomb heads. Once broken, the pieces were separated into their various metal types. We therefore had piles of pieces of cast iron, piles of lead weights, and piles of brass firing pins. Prior to submitting any of this material to a scrap metal dealer, we had to further de-identify the components. So, at the unit bar-be-que site, a small forge was set up. An old Holden hubcap was found and used as a mould for molten lead. Another old iron container was found and used as a mould for molten brass. Finally, we had our first load for the scrap metal dealer.

Barbecue and Smelting Site - Sep 1973

As our site was a short drive from Canberra, we often received visitors from Department of Air office. Some were from the Armament or Engineering branch, but some were simply Administration or Finance people wanting to sticky beak at our little establishment. Many of these visitors asked what happened to the thousands of cast iron practice bomb heads we uncovered, as they would not have approved the idea of sending thousands of complete practice bomb heads into a scrap metal yard. They were most impressed on visiting our small unit to see several airmen working very hard swinging a large sledgehammer breaking these bomb heads up into small pieces. Little did they realise that these small pieces were then melted into cast iron ingots the shape of an old Holden Hub Cap. Then the sale of these ingots over the period of the units life proved to be great benefit to the social structure of the unit. The people at Sims Metal had no idea where the metal was coming from.

As I had the largest and strongest frame motor car, (an old 1963 model Mercedes Benz 220S sedan), I was the bunny to take the first load into the scrap dealer. He thought we were dismantling old Navy Communications equipment, so we decided he could believe what ever he liked. He was intrigued by all these lead weights which were the shape of a Holden hub cap! However, the net proceeds of our first sale were quite handsome indeed. Our Warrant Officer reminded us that a separate bank account needed to be opened, with three signatories, and that the funds were only to be used for unit social functions or comfort items for the unit. It was emphasised that no person would personally profit from any of these takings.

So, over the next 22 months, the Tuggeranong Tent Club had a very active social calender, with dance functions, bar-be-ques, even a couple of theatre evenings.

Colourful Identities

This was to be Peter McGuiness' last posting, as he elected discharge from here. It was during this posting that I, as a single man again, socialized with Peter a bit, and I lost count of the occasions he got me into some strife or other. One evening, Peter decided to attend an Officer's Dining In night, just for the challenge. He turned up in a fine dinner suit, complete with miniature medals and chatted with the gentlemen during the pre-dinner drinks. It wasn't until just before entering the dining room that a Wing Commander accidentally trod on Peter's foot and apologized, but Peter didn't notice. It turned out that Peter was still wearing "T" boots! So Peter announced to all present that he was none other than Corporal Peter McGuiness, Armourer extraordinaire, and thanked them all for their hospitality.

Bruce Richardson & Peter (The Colonel) McGuiness

Peter's family had established a Jeans Shop in the Canberra suburbs. Peter on occasions would help out at the shop, or perhaps help by fastening price tags to garments prior to them being displayed for sale. On more than one occasion, Peter would commence this tedious task after first consuming the odd beer or two or three.

The end result was often a whole batch of garments which were incorrectly priced or catalogued. Peter, helped by other family members, would then work well into the night recitifying all these price tags.

Social Life in Canberra

I found Canberra to be a strange place for a single man. Initially, it was difficult to find just where one may find mature social gatherings, without the need to simply gather at a pub. I was to find that in Canberra of those days, there were only about three or four hotels in the whole city, but there were simply numerous licenced clubs.

Eventually, I was to become a member of a social gathering called "Club 25". The name was to imply the approximate average age of its members, but the club met twice weekly at good venues for dances and other functions.

However, there was a strange atmosphere with the social life in Canberra. This is mentioned in more detail in a later chapter, but it seemed like a city without a soul. There were numerous parties, the social life became a whirl, yet I could not explain why I was still lonely. I still believe that much of the social activities of the day reflected on having a wonderful time, without ever looking at searching for any commitment after that. So, life always seemed to be full without ever seemingly achieving much.

I believe it was very different for families living in Canberra. Their suburbs were still a close distance from the city or their work places, especially compared with other capital cities, and there were good suburban facilities available for family entertainment.

Trips to Brisbane

During this time, my mother was suffering from yet another stroke, although she was still living in her own home. So, I tried to get to Brisbane as often as I could to see her and encourage her. In late 1974 she decoded to sell her house and move to a retirement village near Cleveland. Once again, I drove to Brisbane to help her move. Sometimes, I would use the inland Newell Highway though Goondiwindi and Warwick, and other times, I would go via Sydney. I found it was about a 15 hour drive or so. At least Mum enjoyed my visits.

Culture Change - Helicopter Ground Crews

From our conversations with some of the 5 Squadron helicopter ground crews at Fairbairn, we heard that a culture of "Us and Them" had grown into the helicopter crews. It seemed that a culture had crept into the helicopter family of those who had experienced Active Service and those who had not. Even though the ones who had seen active service were willing to share their expertise with others, the culture of "Us and Them" still grew. The RAAF in their wisdom found a cure.

Over a period of about two years or so, an enormous number of airmens' postings came out for 5 Squadron crews with helicopter experience, posting them to all sorts of different areas, replacing them, gradually, with other airmen without active service. The aim was to split the "Us and Them" culture and over a period of time, it worked.

The Windup and Closure of the Unit

Toward the end of 1974, it was evident that we had covered a greater part of the bombing range area. The main target area, a square of about 200 metres each side, had been extensively dug out to a depth of several feet. This was the area, logically, where most of the ordnance had been found. Outer areas had also been covered and searched thoroughly and as quoted before, some 25,000 practice bombs had been recovered. The unit commanders were requested to certify the area as "Clear of Explosive Ordnance". The end decision was to certify the target area clear of explosive ordnance up to a depth of about eight feet, and the remaining area as "clear". So, in February 1975, the unit was dismantled and we were all given our respective postings to other units.

Whilst the social life at Tuggeranong and Canberra became quite full, I thought Canberra was an unusual place for a single person; as the party life was hectic, yet one could still be very lonely in the city. However, after a most satisfying posting, all good things have to end, and we were all posted to other units. So in February 1975, the site was dismantled and I was posted to No 1 Central Ammunition Depot (1CAMD) at Kingswood, west of Sydney.

During the next year or so, one or two of the NCO's were recalled to the site for a particular question or clarification of the clearance details, but I believe construction commenced soon after on the new suburb of Tuggeranong.

Just a few years later, on a visit to Canberra, I drove out to the area trying to find our old camp site. The suburban construction had progressed so far that I had great difficulty in locating just where previously well known land marks were. At least we had the satisfaction that our work permitted the construction of a totally new suburb.

Kingswood - an Ordnance Depot **Chapter 10**

Kingswood - an Ordnance Depot - February 1975

Introduction to the Unit

On arrival I worked at the Bomb Tail Line for a few months. It seemed all new arrivals went there for some type of processing! Then I spent some time as NCO I/C Bomb Line, and then the Bomb Lab, doing inspections on various pieces of ordnance. The 25 pound practice bomb used on the Mirage and F111C was still fairly new, and we processed, painted and packed thousands of these. Blue painted trailers were seen to increase around the Kingswood area!

As one of the NCOs up at the Bomb Line, I had to make use of the tractor and grass cutting attachment. This took some degree of negotiating skill to prevent it being stolen by one FLTLT Harry Bartlett for the golf course. Coupled with this, I was given the task of coaching one of our more active LACs back to a respectable life, in one Peter (Wombat) Roberts. He was doing fine, as I thought we made a good team, then I got a call from HQ. Wombat had used the tractor to drive to the HQ building to attend promotion lectures. Not only did he use the tractor instead of seeking a lift from the unit truck, he then parked the tractor next to the CO's car outside the HQ building. It took me quite a while to fend off Harry and his golf course cronies after that.

Domestic Issues - A New Relationship and Marriage

Beginning of a new Friendship

In June 1975, I met Margaret, a fine young lady from the Blue Mountains who had two young daughters and we started a friendship and some outings. Over the next several months, as the friendship grew, we went on numerous drives and picnics all over the southern highlands and Sydney surrounds.

At Christmas 1975, she and the girls accompanied me on a trip from Sydney to Brisbane return to see my Mother. We had hired an old plywood 15 foot caravan and towed it behind my Peugeot. The friendship was tested a few times with differences of opinion between my mother and I over my friendship with Margaret and the girls. Fortunately, the friendship grew and we were engaged in March 1976.

Marriage - Again

In June 1976, Margaret and I were married at the Springwood Baptist Church in the Blue Mountains. As her parents were about to travel overseas for a few months, we were able to stay in their home for a while. Later, in December 1976, we were allocated a very small fibro married quarter at Kingswood.

Supervision and Management Course

In February 1976, I was selected to attend the Sergeants' Supervision and Management Course at RAAF Base Wagga. The service abbreviation for the course was "Sergeants SUPMAN" course, so it's easy to see how the course title became known as the "superman" course.

So, I drove down to Wagga in early February to commence the six week, live-in course. I was soon to discover just how valuable this course really was. Primarily, the course topics were:

- Supervision - the quality and methods of supervision of personnel at the workface. There were many 'role plays' during the course illustrating just how this topic could be used well, or could go right off the rails;
- Management - the quality and levels of management of sections and squadrons. There were lessons and examples of the effectiveness of different styles and purposes of management;
- Job Instruction - Not to be confused with the larger topic of "Instructional Technique", but rather the art of imparting the knowledge and expertise of actually performing a specific task on a 'One to One' basis. Each of us had three turns of selecting a particular task, be it technical, sporting or domestic, and teach another class member this task.
- Project Management - The entire course was given a particular workshop to survey for the purposes of submitting a proposal for improving the layout and productivity of that section. We were given the "Welders and Blacksmiths" section to study. The course was then split into three groups and each group was tasked with drafting and writing their own proposal.
- Written and Oral English Expression - Although this was primarily a series of English lectures, they were very different to the usual school type of english lessons.
- Safety - This included a discussion of 'Safety Vs Production', identification and elimination of hazards in the workplace, safety in supervision, accident prevention in the workplace, accident investigation, and safety surveys of a workshop environment.
- Human Relations - This was one of the most complex topics of the course. Topics included quality of communication, behavioural characteristics, handling an individual, group behaviour and managerial functions and responsibilities. Some of these exercises were interesting, educational and of course humorous at times.
- Job Methods - This simple topic became quite interesting. It involved the art of looking at a simple task and the method it was being accomplished, then look for ways this task could be done more safely, with less effort and with greater productivity.

Of the 18 members on the course, nearly half were already Sergeants, and the rest were Corporals. Most were married men and we were all staying in the single mens' barracks of our respective messes at Wagga.

Some of the men, while recognizing the value of the course, were pining for their families being away from home studying. One of their suggestions was to take a group of instructors and a mobile set of instructional aids for the course and spend six months at different bases carrying out this course for airmen within that area. One of the Warrant Officer instructors commented such an idea might be worthwhile if he could find seven divorced Warrant Officers, as if they were not divorced at the beginning of the programme, they soon would be!

All in all, we enjoyed the course very much and regarded ins content as extremely valuable. For many years after this course, both within the service and in other companies afterwards, I referred to my course notes on several occasions in other management seminars and courses.

A New World of Technical Administration

In early 1977, I was moved to the Explosives Engineering section to work for SQNLDR Ray Sonsie, WOFF Les Poustie and SGT Rex Gumbrell in this new expanding section. Actually, I was a Corporal in a FSGT position without the money. (I heard later that I was chosen from a number of Corporals because I had a vast experience of several types of operation as well as having enough gumption to tell a FLT LT he was wrong if necessary. That was fine to be able to say that, but it certainly made me do my homework before making such a statement!). The Armament Engineers, under the direction of the Senior Explosives Engineer, SQN LDR Ray Sonsie, were given the task of being authors and sponsors of Explosive Ordnance Technical Manuals. We soon became a valuable team. Rather than the officers being involved in the labour intensive task of writing the complete manual, we NCOs wrote the manual. It was conceived that as our NCO colleagues on the user units would be the main users of the manuals, we NCOs at Kingswood would write the manual, then the Explosive Engineers would supply all the ballistic and other technical parameters in the appropriate places. The section also created a Technical Library of Ordnance material from all types of sources around the world. I wrote two indexes for this library with a manual typewriter, one alphabetical and one by document name and number, for some 6,500 pieces of material. Of course today, one would simply use a Microsoft Access database. The work of publication writing and maintaining a Technical Library within Explosives Engineering was most rewarding and stood to serve me well in later years.

Of the many projects I participated in, there were a few which stood out as being quite significant. These included:

- Research of past material illustrating the probable outcome of a 500 pound bomb in a fire. A Mirage aircraft, loaded with 2 x 500 pound Mk 82 Bombs, had aborted a takeoff at East Sale. However, as the aircraft over ran the runway a little, a fire initiated under the aircraft and was eventually extinguished before destroying the aircraft. Both bombs had been exposed to some fairly intense heat. My role was to obtain all relevant material from our extensive resource library appertaining to a "Bomb in a Fire". From this material, they were able to plan an appropriate method of moving the bombs to a safe area for demolition.
- Recall and X-Ray of all stocks of Canberra Starter Cartridges. A Canberra aircraft had suffered major engine damage at Amberley when the starter motor disintegrated on engine start. Parts of the starter motor were found with unburned pieces of cordite some 200 meters in front of the aircraft. Initially, it was thought the cartridge had prematurely detonated. So after recalling and x-raying all available cartridges, no pattern of defect was established. It was then found that the starter motor itself was defective, as the aperture from which the hot gasses were to flow to the turbine had been blocked by debris from the previous cartridge start. So the end result was a revised inspection procedure prior to loading each starter cartridge.
- A third project was the F111C Crew Module rocket motor. Instead of ejection seats, the entire crew module of the F111C was severed from the aircraft and propelled away from the aircraft. When a F111C had a serious birdstrike at low altitude at Evans Head, an attempt was made by the crew to eject. The Crew Module was found in a wrecked condition some distance up the beach from where the aircraft had received the birdstrike. Initially, it was thought the rocket motor had detonated instead of propelling the crew module up to a safe altitude, as pieces of unburned cordite were found in numerous places up the beach. Inspection of the pieces revealed no defects, nor were any defects found in existing stocks. The crash investigators later revealed that the birdstrike, by a large pelican, had shattered the canopy, killed the Pilot instantly, and the navigator had initiated the ejection. However, in the split second between the strike and his pulling the handle, the aircraft had rolled about 90 degrees and the Crew Module was literally propelled by the rocket motor along the Evans Head beach at some 600 knots.

Maintenance Control - Torpedo Servicing

During a short term within the Maintenance Control Section at Kingswood, I had the responsibility of managing the servicing schedule of the "Warshot" and "Exercise" guided torpedoes held within the RAAF inventory. *(A "Warshot" torpedo is on with the High Explosive warhead ready for use against an enemy target. An "Exercise" torpedo is one which has had the warhead replaced with a unit containing sufficient electronics to track the path of the torpedo once it enters the water. These electronics are then used for Flight Crew training purposes once the torpedo is recovered and dismantled)*.

On one occasion, I was requested to arrange the assembly and dispatch of 8 exercise torpedoes from Kingswood to Richmond for transport by RAAF Hercules aircraft to the US Naval Base at Barber's Point, Hawaii for one of the multi-nation exercises. This was accomplished, quoting the correct part numbers, exact serial numbers, etc, for their dispatch. I was also requested to arrange for 8 'Warshot' torpedoes to be transported to RAAF Base Edinburgh to replace 8 of the torpedoes held as war reserve which were due for a periodic overhaul. Yes, the outcome is predictable as I read it now. Even though each batch of torpedoes were clearly identified by both type and serial numbers, the equipment people, (sometimes unkindly called "grocers"), got them mixed up. The first I heard of the mix up was when I was asked why I dispatched high explosive torpedoes to Richmond for transport on a Hercules with other passengers??? Suddenly, the penny dropped! The Warshot torpedoes were to be transported in the bomb bay of an Orion aircraft to Edinburgh, and the exercise torpedoes were to be transported by Hercules to Hawaii. With a few frantic phone calls, and the quoting of serial numbers. We managed to sort it all out.

Political Effects on the Explosive Ordnance Technical Library

Whilst working in the Explosive Ordnance section, one of my larger projects was to create a technical reference library and a suitable cross referenced index for all the various explosive reports received from Australian and overseas ordnance establishments.

Some of these reports came from Government or Military establishments, including the Royal Ordnance Establishment in the UK and many ordnance units within the US military. Other reports came from large corporate firms, such as Nobel. My task was to catalogue and index all presently held reports as well as those being received by our Armament Officers during their travels.

However, during 1975, many of us noticed a subtle decrease of the numbers of ordnance reports being received from the unit. There was nothing in writing to explain the drop in numbers, but various stories and rumours were being heard. On some occasions when one of our Armament Officers or Warrant Officers requested a significant report from an overseas establishment, they would be politely informed, "We'll consider it and let you know". But the report would not come. When our officer would make a discreet verbal inquiry, he would be politely informed that there was a security problem with our Air Force or with the Government Department of Defence and the unit in question did not think it wise to send a highly classified and sensitive document to the RAAF, considering its present security state.

Then, in November 1975 was the well publicised dismissal of the Labor Government in Australia. I do not intend to go into any depths concerning the dismissal as it is well reported by several authors far better than I. However, during 1976, following the landslide election of a conservative government, the receipt of classified and sensitive ordnance reports from all sorts of overseas establishments increased enormously. By late 1977, there were over 6,000 confidential reports and documents of an explosive ordnance nature catalogued in our technical reference library.

Medical Board Hearing

As mentioned earlier, whilst at Amberley in 1972, I had my RAAF Driver's Licence revoked due to a failed hearing test during a medical examination. Well, by 1975, this evidence had filtered down to Headquarters Support Command and they issued a statement that my hearing standard was lower than that required for the retention of mustering for an Armament Fitter! So a Medical Board was convened at the RAAF hospital for me to attend.

So, over a period of several days, I underwent another complete medical, including several audio tests, Following this, I underwent a number of interviews with a panel consisting of both Medical Officers and Engineering Officers. It was the intention of the Medical Officers that I be dismissed from the mustering and not permitted to remain an Armament Fitter. Fortunately, the Engineering Officers recommended that I remain an Armament Fitter due to the considerable experience I had accumulated thus far. Thankfully, the Board decided to agree with the Engineering Officers and I was permitted to stay as an Armourer.

Educational Achievements

Also in 1977, another milestone was achieved. I had enrolled in the Penrith Evening College with the intention of attaining my Higher School Certificate, or Year 12. In that year, I enrolled in four subjects, believing that as I was at a unit where there would be little overtime and no chance of deployments, etc, I could devote some time to serious study. Unfortunately, the unit Education Officer did not explain that I need a certain amount of "units" to obtain the Higher School Certificate. I remembered when I did my Junior Certificate and one simply had to obtain a pass at least four subjects. So, I studied hard, and at the end of the year, sat for the HSC examinations in Mathematics, English, Physics and General Studies. During the year, there were about 4 or 5 armourers from Kingswood who were studying the HSC at Penrith with me. I was the only one of the group who was there for their first time and I was the only one who obtained a "Level 3" pass for all four subjects. Well, I thought I was in! Then I received a letter from the NSW Board of Studies which proclaimed I had a "Statement of Achievements" of 7 units, 2 each for Mathematics, English and Physics, plus I unit for General Studies. It was only then that the Education Officer explained about the unit system.

Another Posting

Then in August 1978, I was posted to 492SQN Edinburgh in South Australia. I knew then that being in an operational squadron, I would not have any more opportunities to further my studies. Just quietly, I did not mind that one little bit, as I was overjoyed about the prospect of going back to an operational squadron.

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Operational Duties - Maritime Squadron — Chapter 11

Operational - Maritime Squadron - August 1978

Arrival and Introduction to the Squadron

After a long period in support type units, I relished the chance to get back to an operational unit. We moved to Edinburgh in September 1978, and were allocated a nice married quarter at Smithfield, even if it was in a housing commission area. I began all the relevant courses on the Orion and spent several weeks working on the flight line as a normal worker, simply gaining experience on the aircraft. Just to show what a small world the Armament one is, I arrived to find two old friends as chiefs. The ARMO was FLGOFF Eric Easterbrook, who I had worked with in Vietnam and also at Kingswood. The squadron Armament Warrant Officer was none other than WOFF Trevor Macintosh, whom I had known at Wagga, then at Butterworth, and later briefly at Kingswood. It is indeed at small world.

Promotion and the Sergeants' Mess

After spending several months either doing courses or gaining experience on the flight line, I was promoted to Sergeant in April 1979. One of the results of my promotion was SGT Rod Smith received a posting from Edinburgh to East Sale.

One of the privileges of promotion to Sergeant was attending the Sergeants' Mess Dining In nights and the Mess Christmas Ball.

The first Sergeants' Christmas Ball was a real eye opener. The main attraction on the Menu was fresh lobster, and I mean fresh! We later found out that an Orion crew had been on patrol in the Indian Ocean during the week of the ball, and were required to have their last overnight stop at Learmonth in West Australia. It had been arranged, however, that the a significant quantity of fresh lobsters were purchased early on the Friday morning just as the boats were arriving at the Exmouth harbour, and were transported straight to the aircraft for storage in the bomb bay pannier just before takeoff. Therefore, by just after lunch on Friday, all these fresh lobsters were delivered to the Sergeants' Mess for the ball that night.

John and Margaret - Their first SGT's Dining In Night

Maritime Squadron Work

The only difficulty of working a flight line whilst being in 492 Maintenance squadron while the Flight Crew were in either 10SQN or 11SQN, was the effort it took to build up a healthy rapport with the Flight Crew. But after some genuine efforts, it was most rewarding. I think the maritime Squadron would be the most rewarding work I have done outside of "active service". The squadron life was immensely satisfying from a work perspective, although it was punishing to the family. The Duty Crew roster came around about every twelve weeks or so and then night shift came about every four of five weeks, plus the maritime exercises. The deployments were very interesting, as most were politically initiated. My only regret was that I never managed to be selected to participate in the "Fincastle" competition with the squadron. (In fact, I was nominated to go the RAF Maritime Training Base in England in October 1980 with the RAAF as part of the Fincastle team, but sadly I was taken off that team and placed on a rushed team to go to Diego Garcia at short notice instead. Somehow, I think I got the short straw on that one!) To non-maritime people, the Fincastle Cup is an annual perpetuating trophy contested between Commonwealth Air Force Maritime Squadrons, on the art of Submarine Hunting. Mr & Mrs Fincastle of England donated the first trophy, naming it after their son who was killed in action during WWII in a RAF maritime squadron).

RAAF Driver's Licence - Re-Issue of Licence!

As I began to get more involved in the tarmac servicing of Orion aircraft, I commented to our Warrant Officer (Trevor MacIntosh), that I still was not an approved RAAF driver and was not permitted to operate any of the transport equipment on the tarmac. This time, as I had suspected earlier, I really was a hindrance to the squadron. So the WOFF sent a telex to Department of Defence asking what work I really was entitled to do, and what could be done to permit me to drive or operate tarmac equipment.

When the answer from Department of Defence arrived, we were quite surprised. I was issued with a complete and unrestricted RAAF Driver's Licence, endorsed on all equipment and vehicles held by the squadron. The only limitation imposed was that I was not to work in the pneumatic servicing section (where the pneumatic retro gun was serviced and test-fired), and I was not to be subjected to any noise hazard greater than 130 decibels, even with ear muffs. Basically, this meant that the only out of bounds area was inside the bomb bay of an Orion when the aircraft APU was operating with the aircraft air conditioning operating as well.

So, what a turn of events! In 1972, my licence was revoked due to a failed audio test; in 1975 I was subjected to a Medical Board, escaping with the skin of my teeth, and in late 1978 I was back operating in an operational squadron complete with my licence.

Personally, I believe the change in decision was due to the differences between Support Command units and Operational Command units. The latter are simply tuned to making operational decisions and can cope with the flexibility of operational matters.

Margaret's First Flight in a RAAF Aircraft

During the first few months of our posting at Edinburgh in South Australia, I arranged for Margaret and the girls to spend a few weeks of the January holidays back at Margaret's parent's place in the Blue Mountains, flying each way by RAAF Hercules. So, her first flight and the girls' first flight in a Hercules took place whilst I stayed at Edinburgh on Duty Crew and other base flight line duties.

However, this trip turned out to be a blessing in disguise. On the day after Margaret's arrival in the Blue Mountains, her mother suffered a major heart attack and was admitted to an Intensive Care Ward at Nepean Hospital in Penrith. This allowed Margaret to be with her Father at home while her mother was in hospital. Apart from the morale booster for her father, it was important that Margaret was there to help her father with the normal domestic chores around the home.

Then, three weeks after her mother's heart attack, she was released from intensive care and Margaret's flight back to Edinburgh was organised. Margaret and the girls simply hopped on to the Hercules like veterans and enjoyed the flight.

The Weapons Systems Technician - a New Role

During this posting when the role of the new electronic P3-C aircraft was expanding, I thought I may have seen the beginning of a new mustering. The Armourers were learning a considerable amount on the Avionics side of the Weapons system of the aircraft from the Radio Technicians. Likewise, there were some of the Radio Technicians who excelled at the Weapons system knowledge and its idiosyncrasies. For some time, there was a new box in the Pre-flight sheet for the WST (Weapons System Technician). It was about the same time that they were suggesting the introduction of the Aircraft Technician and the Avionics Technician. We really thought that this may evolve into three major new trades. Sadly, history records that two survived and the WST died away, and its tasks were simply performed by Avionics people.

Aircraft and Ordnance Alert Trials

Another regular event which occurred at the Maritime squadron which is not seen today is the sudden Aircraft Alert Trial. Without any warning, the Senior Weapons Engineering Officer from Operational Command and a small band of his followers would land on the base and following a brief meeting with the Squadron Commanding Officer, proceed to the Flight Line desk. He would ask for a serviceable aircraft which was not committed to any ministerial task and declare, "This aircraft - WARSHOT - Now!". The stopwatches would begin and over the next four hours or so, the aircraft would be given functional and pre-flight checks for every type of ordnance carried on it. At the same time, a band of Armourers were dispatched to Ordnance Preparation where High Explosive Torpedoes, High Explosive Signal Underwater Sound (HE SUS), and a complete wartime ordnance load was obtained from the Explosive Storehouse, transported to the Ordnance Preparation area, assembled and prepared for loading.

The end product, after about four hours work, saw the aircraft fully preflighted, loaded with a full load of HE ordnance, and the Maintenance Release signed. Stopwatches were stopped and a critique was given by the visitors. Minor anomalies in the checklists, if any, would be exposed, shortcomings in our procedures would be noted and an enormous learning curve was the result. Each time the visitors did their test, we were just that bit better. Prior to the aircraft being unloaded, we would invite the Flight Crew to come to the aircraft and go through their own pre-flight checks, as closely as if they were going to sign a Captain's Acceptance. Most took this opportunity quite seriously and did the task properly. A few of the very junior pilots complained. So, as diplomatically as I could, I gave them a choice of doing a full aircraft preflight on a fully loaded aircraft here on the pad at home base in daylight without any time handicaps, or doing the same check one night in the future at Learmonth in the rain at 0300 hours. They soon understood. After all, these trials were an accurate method of testing squadron personnel in their primary role. I cannot commend these trials enough and cannot understand why they are not done today.

Maritime Deployments and Exercises

My share of maritime deployments included the following:

- Richmond/Amberley Air Shows - March/April 1979, about 12 days,
- RAN - RAAF Anti-Submarine Exercise at Pearce - May 1979, about 14 days,
- Mirage Armament Course, (of 4 weeks duration), at Williamtown in July 1979, (*I was on warning for a posting to 75 Squadron in Malaysia, but the posting never came!*),
- Exercise Kangaroo 3 - a Multi Nation exercise at Amberley - October 1979, about 30 Days,
- Bara Sono-Buoy Trials at Richmond - January 1980, about 6 days,
- Rimpac Exercise at Barber's Point Hawaii - February/March 1980. Although the total exercise involved some seven weeks, I was away for about 35 days.
- RAN/RAAF Anti- Submarine exercises at Townsville - July 1980, about 12 days,
- RAN/RAAF Anti-Submarine exercises at Richmond - September 1980, about 12 days,
- Operation “Beacon Compass - 80”, an Australian - US Air and Naval Exercise aimed at locating and marking Soviet submarines lurking in the Indian Ocean during the “Iraq - Iran” war, held at Diego-Garcia in October 1980 for some 5 days on the island, plus considerable C130 travelling time, totalling about 11 days; and
- RAN/RAAF Anti-Submarine exercise at Richmond - November 1980, about 12 days.

From the first of these exercises to the last was a period of about 21 months, or about 91 weeks, in which about 172 days were spent on exercise, ie, about 27% of the total time. Most of my colleagues would comment that I got off very lightly, and they would be correct. Some other Senior NCOs were away from home a lot more than I was. For example, for a three month period during which our son was born, I was given amnesty from exercises away from home base. Therefore, when it was in theory my turn, another Sergeant Armourer would be asked to do the exercise. I still carried out all other "on Base" duties and rosters as required.

P3-B Aircraft departing from RAAF Pearce on exercise

It should also be noted that in addition to all these exercises were the normal 'on base' rosters such as Duty Crew for a week at a time, Afternoon Shift Rectification Crew for a week at a time, and Orderly Sergeant.

Each of these deployments would consist of between two to five aircraft with their Flight Crews, supported by three shifts of ground crews. However, spare a thought for the Flight Crews. In addition to being selected to participate in these large exercises, each crew would be rostered to fly one "Fishex" and one "Rover" exercise mission per month. (The "Fishex" was a coastal surveillance exercise in which the crew would take eight days to fly around the entire coast of Australia at low level searching for illegal fishing vessels. No two flight plans were alike so no pattern could be anticipated from the ground. The "Rover" was a seven day patrol of the Indian Ocean searching for and identifying shipping, including submarines, from all nations).

Speaking of "Fish-ex" exercises, in mid 1979, I was invited to be a crew member on one of the round Australia Fish-ex flights. This was to be a wonderful opportunity to build a rapport with the crew, as well as witness the amazing coastline of our country. However, we also received the news that Margaret's brother and his family were to visit us and their visit was to be right at the time I would be away. So, most reluctantly, and at their request, I withdrew from the Fishex and another Sergeant was selected. Then, two days prior to her brother's visit, they cancelled their trip for personal reasons. By then of course, it was too late to be reinstated back on to the Fish-ex crew. Boy, I was upset. I withdrew from a most valuable exercise and then the personal reason disappeared!

During the Kangaroo III exercise in 1979, there were a few memorable lessons learnt. Four P3B aircraft were deployed from 11 Squadron to Amberley and four P3C aircraft were deployed from 10 Squadron to Townsville for the four weeks of the exercise. The ground crews for both deployments were allocated from 492 Maintenance Squadron. Unlike the exercises in previous years, both Flight Crew and all the ground crews had weeks of notice of their involvement in the exercise. Each squadron's deployment consisted of four aircraft and four flight crews. To me, this seemed a waste of aircraft resources, as all the time a flight crew was on crew rest or stand down, their aircraft lay idle. Surprisingly, it was the RNZAF who had the obvious solution. Their contribution to the exercise was one P3B aircraft and three flight crews. As each flight crew left the aircraft, all the aircraft's systems were left operating and an Avionics Technician boarded the aircraft to monitor the systems until the next Flight Crew arrived. They had practically no unserviceabilities and a small maintenance support team. We had a large maintenance team split into three shifts for each deployment and as our aircraft were being powered up and closed down by each crew, our aircraft had numerous unserviceabilities.

P3-B Aircraft being serviced at Amberley during K3 - October 1979

All that aside, there were some lighter moments. The USAF had a few KC135 B707 Air-to-Air Tankers operating out of Amberley. Their crews complained the Amberley runway was too short, as they could not have full fuel and takeoff from the Amberley runway. I remember one of their Flight Engineers saying that the only thing which gets his aeroplane off the ground is the curvature of the earth! Occasionally, due to wind conditions, ATC requested all aircraft takeoff to the south, but the KC135 crews didn't like it as there were a few hills of some 200 feet high in the near vicinity. As our P3B operating area was at the Ordnance Preparation area near the southern end of the runway, we saw that the KC135s had an altitude of about 3 to 5 feet as the aircraft flew over the southern end of the runway. Too close!

We heard from our Townsville colleagues of a P3C Orion which had a four engine over-speed. Legally, this should have been a four engine change, but the logistics of getting four engines, four propellers, and all the engine change equipment from Edinburgh to Townsville was totally prohibitive. So, how did it happen? The Base Commander from Edinburgh, an endorsed P3C pilot, paid the deployment a visit and asked to go on one of the missions. During the flight at one of the crew change times, the Air Commodore asked if he could sit in the left hand seat for a short while. The aircraft Captain approved his request provided the present Copilot assumed the role of “Pilot-In-Command”. During his small time at the controls, a RNZAF Sky Hawk, (from the ‘enemy’ side) jumped the P3. Not to be fazed by such an attack the Air Commodore asked the Flight Engineer for full power. Yes he intended to out run the A4. When the F/E said, “You have 100% Sir”, the Air Commodore simply said, “Pilot's Throttles” and took over and pushed all thrust levers to the firewall. Apparently, the over-speed lasted about 30 to 50 seconds. Quickly the aircraft Captain, a highly experienced 10 Squadron Flight Lieutenant, came back to the Flight Deck from the galley and ordered the Air Commodore out of the seat. I'm told there were a few very tense moments. The maintenance chief on shift at Townsville at the time was also the squadron Warrant Officer Engineer, who formally recommended disciplinary action be taken against the Air Commodore. But, as usual, he got away with it. A waiver was granted from Operational Command and the aircraft was flown with minimum crew from Townsville to Edinburgh so a four engine change could be carried out.

In most of these deployments, there was a great deal of hard work and long hours. We developed a sound rapport with the Flight Crew, sometimes accompanying them on their missions. As a side note, it was during a RIMPAC exercise at NAS Barbers Point in Hawaii that one of our very experienced pilots managed to get his P3-B aircraft in close enough to the side of the USS Constellation, (the largest conventional flat top in the world), simulate the firing of 4 shallow water torpedoes, scoring 4 direct hits, and then get out. All this was achieved without being detected on the ship's anti aircraft radar. I believed he carried out a very wide and low 180 degree turn at about 300 to 350 feet altitude.

Exercise RIMPAC at the US Navy Base

During Exercise RIMPAC at the US Navy Base Barbers Point in Hawaii in March 1980, an interesting incident occurred which reminded all of us that the US Navy takes its security very seriously. Part of the RAAF contingent was a small party from 1CAMD at Kingswood who performed all the torpedo preparations for us. While they were in the US Navy's Ordnance Prep area, they were instructed not to venture anywhere else apart from their own work areas. However, at the completion of one of their work days, an Australian airman, visibly obvious due to his blue overalls, was way out of his given area and was seen by a US Navy Security guard. The Australian was walking very close to the fence where the large submarine borne torpedoes and the larger 'special' weapons were prepared, and then decided to stay and watch some of the proceedings.

Then the US Navy Security guard simply placed a 45 calibre hand gun in the middle of the Australian's back and said, "This is not a piece of water pipe, sonny! Now, just turn around and let us walk slowly away together". After some considerable negotiation from the RAAF Detachment Commander, the young airman was released from US custody and permitted to leave without any disciplinary charge against him. A very lucky man indeed!

P3-B Aircraft in Bird Bath at NAS Barbers Point, Hawaii - FEB 1980

Early in the exercise, our aircrew were involved in the release of an exercise torpedo on the U.S. navy's torpedo firing range at USS Barking Sands, a small navy base on a nearby island.

Much of the flying during the RIMPAC exercise was searching for 'enemy' submarines intent on invading the area of Hawaii. This involved round the clock shift work, which was a 12 hours on & 24 hours off system continuing throughout the exercise.

P3-B Aircraft on patrol over Hawaii - FEB 1980

Another aspect about living on a US Navy Base was the catering. Their messes are not unlike a Burger King we may see here, but on different sizes. Although we had an open ticket to attend any of their meals at the US Navy messes without charge, each RAAF member was given an allowance of A$21.00 per day in order to purchase nutritional meals whilst on exercise. Therefore, most of us would exercise this privilege at the end of each day shift and go into a Honolulu restaurant for a proper meal.

Another interesting catering incident was at breakfast time in their mess. At the "Omelette" Bar, one fellow simply cracked three eggs each into a series of china cups. The other fellow simply stirred the contents of each cup and poured it on to the hot plate. After about two minutes, and at the most three or four turnings by a spatula, he declared them to be cooked omelettes. I watched this process with interest and when it was my turn, I asked him to leave the omelette on the hot plate for a longer time and serve the next chap. This happened several times where another chap would be served his omelette while mine was still cooking. Finally, after several minutes, I agreed mine was cooked and could be served on a plate. He scoffed, "It's burnt!" Actually, mine was a nice golden brown, just lightly cooked. So, imagine what the rest were like.

Toward the end of that exercise, our ground crew party was slightly reduced due to a reduction of flying, and I was one of several airmen who flew back to Australia with the F111C ground crews in a Hercules. That was an interesting trip, as we transited through the Marshall Islands, staying overnight at a small USAF base on the island of Kwajalein. What a beautiful little place that was!

Kwajalein, a small island in the Marshall Island group, was a USAF base used as a target for missile testing. Intercontinental missiles with pyrotechnic heads instead of explosive or nuclear heads, would be fired from a base in California to a target in the western pacific Ocean namely, near Kwajalein. Although it was a delightful tropical island, much of its work was most classified. Understandably, there were often several Russian "fishing" vessels lurking nearby. Strangely, these 'fishing' vessels had numerous antennae and were equipped with all the latest communications technology. When the RAAF F111C aircraft were about to depart, the USAF people quietly asked the Australian pilots to do a high speed, low level run over some of the 'fishing' vessels, just to give them a bit of a start! Our pilots obliged and after a very fast run over some of these vessels at a very low altitude, much of their radio equipment was strangely out of action due to the shock wave induced by the F111C aircraft. We ground crew then boarded the Hercules and flew to Amberley, Richmond, and thence to Edinburgh in South Australia.

Armourers servicing P3-C aircraft at Townsville - July 1980

P3-C Aircraft in Bird Bath at Townsville - July 1980

Barra Sonobuoy Trials at Richmond - January 1980

In the weeks leading up to January 1980, I had indicated to our Armament Warrant Officer that I was requesting some leave for our family to drive to the Blue Mountains to visit Margaret's parents for a week or so. He indicated to me that although he wanted me to be the Sergeant on the Barra Sonobouy Trials at Richmond in January, there might just be a method to achieve both our goals. The result is an example of just how squadrons can look after their members whilst still achieving their goals.

So, in early January, the deployment details were released with myself being the SNCO in charge of this small group of ground crew. We were to travel with the newly modified P3-C aircraft and its crew to Richmond so the AWA scientists could test the new electronics in all its roles, as well as testing the new directional Barra Sonobuoy.

However, Margaret and our two girls were also listed on the manifest of passengers of the P3-C aircraft to fly to Richmond. Our elder daughter was 13 years old and our younger daughter was nearly seven years old. The two hour flight to Richmond was interesting as our younger daughter spent most of the flight sitting on the Flight Engineer's knee watching all the activities of the flight deck. Our elder daughter was engaged in some computer games with the Tactical Coordinator, each sitting at different flight stations in the electronics bay of the aircraft. Little did she realize that he could provide input into her computer screen which would make her side of the game a bit more difficult. I took my turn in the galley preparing meals and refreshments for the crew and passengers, while Margaret had a restful flight looking at the scenery.

On arrival at Richmond, Margaret's parents had arrived to pick them up and take them to their place in the mountains. Before they departed, I took the opportunity to show them over the new P3-C aircraft. They departed and I stayed at Richmond taking part in the sonobuoy and electronic trials.

On completion of the trials, the aircraft departed for Edinburgh and I commenced my leave by travelling up to the Mountains to be with my family. About three days prior to the end of my two week leave period, I received a phone call from my Warrant Officer at Edinburgh saying he was going to 'officially' recall me back to the squadron. That way, he could increase our priority for seating on a RAAF aircraft from Richmond to Edinburgh. This was done and we received a call from Air Movements at Richmond instructing us to be there at a particular time the following day so we could board an Orion for a flight back to Edinburgh. So, all worked out well.

Submarine Hunting from Diego Garcia

As mentioned before, instead of going to England in October 1980, I was placed in a team to go to Diego Garcia. On a Friday afternoon, we were told of an impending exercise between the RAN and the US Navy, to be held in the Indian Ocean. The exercise was a way in which numerous vessels and aircraft could operate in the area, and obtain signatures of all sorts of other vessels, including those of the Soviet and Allied navies during the Iran - Iraq war. I was told I was a supernumerary crew member of one of the P3C Orion aircraft and to report at 0645 hours on the Monday morning. This I did and when on the third step of the aircraft, the Captain said, "Sorry John, you're not on this trip with us, but don't unpack". So, I simply went back to work and went home that Monday evening much to the surprise of my wife. On Tuesday, I took my case to work and brought

it home again. Then on Wednesday, I took it to work again and at 0900, was told to board the Hercules with the rest of the party and we would be off to the exercise. In the few minutes available, I was able to telephone my wife to say I would see her in a few days. I was not permitted, at that stage, to tell her where I was going. However en-route to Perth, we were informed that a P3C had become unserviceable at Tengah in Singapore and we would be diverting there to rectify it. While the rectifications were being carried out, requests for our accommodation were being sent out to all bases over Singapore. Tengah was full due to a local defence exercise and hotel accommodation was totally out of the question, so we ended up at a NZ Army base in the middle of Singapore Island. It turned out to be an outstanding night of entertainment. As much as we tried, the CMC of the Sergeants' Mess would not let us put our hands in our pockets for any of the meals or drinks. What a night! Thankfully, the flight from Tengah to Diego Garcia the next day in the Hercules was spent sleeping.

P3-C Aircraft at Diego Garcia - OCT 1980

On arrival at Diego Garcia, we joined up with our P3 Flight Crews and commenced several 'cat & mouse' games of vessel searching with a number of P3 aircraft from different forces. Many of the missions, we were told were flown near the edge of the exercise area close to the Gulf countries, taking signatures of Soviet submarines. One of my colour slides shows the tarmac late one afternoon with about five P3 aircraft parked on it, each one having a different squadron insignia.

There were a few very intense moments during the aircraft servicing and replenishment phases. It was well known that the Detachment Commander, (also the CO of 10SQN), was vehemently opposed to taking a squadron maintenance party to Diego Garcia and this feeling was most evident on several occasions during the detachment. On one occasion, I was still supervising the ordnance loading of the aircraft when the Wing Commander stormed on to the aircraft and shouted, "Get off my aircraft!" To which I replied, "Most certainly Sir, as soon as the Maintenance Release has been signed, but until then, we do have work to do. Therefore, could you please allow my men to do their work without interruption". I later found out that he had reported me for being disrespectful to him.

After 5 days in Diego Garcia, it was decided we could fly home. Our Hercules arrived and the LoadMaster began to supervise the loading of our squadron deployment kit and our personal baggage. He emphasised he wanted to weigh everything, as the weight calculation was a deciding factor of whether we flew straight to Perth, or stopped at Cocas Island for fuel. Fortunately, we were able to fly directly to Perth for an overnight stop, then on the Edinburgh the next day. So, I had been away from home just 10 days, and had spent 5 of those days inside a Hercules.

The Drug Chase

Another type of exercise which was initiated from our home base was the "Drug Chase". On one of these, with very short notice, two Flight Crews and a selected small band of ground crew were tasked with taking their respective aircraft to Singapore and monitor the progress of an ocean going yacht as it sailed toward Australia. When selecting the ground crews, I could not tell them their destination but to simply ensure they each had their passports and needle books. It turned out that to maintain 24 hour surveillance on a sea going yacht, they needed more than just two aircraft.

So other aircraft were drawn from other tasking areas and instructed to join the project. However, my small band of ground crew simply had to continue supporting more and more aircraft. Eventually, this yacht was tracked all the way from Singapore to Coffs Harbour, where an Australian Federal Police welcoming party met them. It turned out to be one of the biggest drug importation hauls caught for many years. As an afterthought, our merry band of men supporting this exercise were brought home totally exhausted. Basically they had enough personnel to create about one and a half shifts. With this team, they were supporting some three or four aircraft rotating around the clock.

Atmosphere and Work Environment When on Exercise

Whilst I had experienced numerous defence exercises and deployments in my previous squadrons, many of the younger airmen had not. Some thought these were simply 'good trips' to exotic places. (Although I failed to see how Richmond could be called an exotic destination!) So, over a period of time, I was able to explain to our younger airmen that each of these exercises were planned to test the operational capability of our squadron, if, or rather when, the squadron, including both air and ground crews, may be committed to a genuine warlike operational theatre.

The teamwork and camaraderie developed during these exercises was simply amazing, something I had not seen since my own active service days in Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. One could truly say that the professionalism of the ground crew was only really honed during these exercises. Some of these younger men had never been away from a home base before and it was a whole new learning curve for them. For the Senior NCO; well, he became almost a paternal figure. Not only was he their supervisor on the job, he was also their counsellor in times of domestic problems, sometimes their keeper when having the occasional off base drink, and often their mentor. Not only did we work together as a team, but although we did go to our respective messes for meals and sleep, there were many times when we, as a team, would be socializing together as well as working together. So, in my case, these were my first experiences as a real supervisor and leader when on exercises. So I regarded these exercises as a most valuable lesson in all aspects of squadron life, be it within our own trades, or personal development, or leadership development.

An Example of a Ground Safety Incident

A small example of just how close the ground crew became is an incident which occurred at the RAAF Base Pearce in Western Australia. The Flight Line 'hut' was a tent along side the taxiway near the end of the runway. One of the aircraft departed on a night submarine hunting flight, but returned to the dispersal area within minutes of its departure. However, the pilot had not switched the brilliant strobe white anticollision light off prior to re-entering the dispersal area. He had called for a Radio Technician to meet the aircraft and discuss an avionics problem.

The Radio Technician, a young junior chap, immediately walked out of the tent toward the aircraft, which still had its engines running, although they had feathered the port side engines and lowered the steps for the technician. However, the young Radio Tech was accustomed to seeing the Orions close down the outboard engines, (Nos 1 and 4), when taxiing in after a flight. But on this aircraft all four engines were still running. Still worse, the appearance of No 4 propeller with the aircraft strobe light flashing behind it rendered the propeller to appear stationary. Our young technician came within five feet of walking into a running propeller when another experienced ground crew tackled him to the ground.

A life was saved in the nick of time and a very serious lesson was learnt by both ground and flight crews at the same time.

A Young Airman Learns an Expensive Lesson

Around mid 1979, one Sunday evening, a young airman was becoming bored with mundane drinking in the Airmens' Club and desired a bit of excitement. He went to one of the pay phone booths near the club and phoned the Base switchboard on the outside number and told the telephonist that there was a bomb on one of the Orion aircraft.

Well, excitement he got! There was an enormous search of all aircraft which remained on the base that evening. Security was tightened, but they were never able to establish the source of the call. Then one evening a few weeks later, once again the same airman was in the club, somewhat worse for wear from the beer, he boasted to his mates that they never found out who made that call about the bomb. Another airman heard this boasting and notified the authorities.

Well, after extensive interviews with the Service Police, he was formally charged with making a false statement regards security and also of creating a public nuisance. His sentence was to serve some 28 days confined to the Military Prison then stationed at Holsworthy, south west of Sydney. *(I have been assured by others who have experienced a term at Holsworthy that 28 days there is the equivalent of at least 6 months at Long Bay, etc)*.

Well, some months later, after having served his time and he was back at work, this chap was selected to be part of the ground crew team on an exercise to a Canadian Air Force base. The aircraft were to stage through a few US Naval bases which operate the Orion. The squadron Orderly room then collected the passports from all team members and presented them to the Canadian and USA Embassies for temporary work visas.

In the case of this young airman, his passport was quickly returned to the squadron with the comments, "As a result of his recent conduct charge, no visa can be given to this airman until further notice".

So, another airman of the same rank and trade was quickly selected to go on the exercise, and the squadron Warrant Officer initiated an investigation with the USA Embassy as to how long it may be until this airman may be granted a visa. The response was, "For the next foreseeable several years, perhaps ten, maybe more, his passport is purely cosmetic. No visa will be given to him by either the USA nor any other western nation. This is due to the nature of the charge which he committed some months ago. Even though he has served the sentence given by his Commander, no visa will be granted for many years".

So, he learnt a most expensive lesson for his moment of folly.

Working with the US Forces

On previous postings, I had worked with, or liaised with the RAF, (in Malaysia and Singapore), the USAF, (in Ubon Thailand), the US Army Aviation, (in Vung Tau South Vietnam), but all of those experiences were, for the most part, on our own bases, or where each of us were the visitor. However, it was during the exercise in Hawaii that I experienced working with the US Navy Aviation people on their base at the US Naval Station Barber's Point, and to a smaller extent on their base at Diego Garcia.

US Navy Hospitality

Working with the US Forces, particularly on their base is full of paradoxes. They are wonderful hosts. From the time we were met on our arrival through to the time of our departure, the logistics of accommodation, transport, hangar space, use of their tool stores, refuelling equipment and many other facilities were placed at our disposal.

Settling In and Technical Liaison

Usually, the first few days of any large multi-nation exercise involved a period of settling in and adapting our squadron's procedures to the new locality and conditions. Sometimes, we would call on our hosts for logistical or domestic needs, or more importantly, for some technical assistance. I found that the host US Navy squadrons were good hosts, available when needed, yet not intrusive. They had found that the RAAF had developed a very sound knowledge of the P3 Orion aircraft in all trades. Therefore, each of us were respectful of the other regarding the sharing of knowledge and expertise on the idiosyncrasies of the Orion aircraft. All in all, they were good to work with and were good hosts to us.

Social Scene and Personality Traits

However, it was during little personal exchanges and during some of the social occasions that our differences became interesting. The average Australian Serviceman has this larrikin or laid back sense of humour, and the ability to laugh at himself, as well having a bit of a gentle crack at his international friends.

One memorable occasion happened at a Bar-B-Que held at the beginning of the exercise. Being a RIMPAC exercise, there were many services represented, US Navy, USAF, Canadian Air Force and Navy, RNZAF and the RNZ Navy, RAAF and the RAN, and also the Japanese Naval Defence Forces were attending for their first time at a RIMPAC exercise.

Even though this was 1980 and it was some 38 years since the bombing of Pearl Harbour, there were still some sensitive feelings among the US forces. But, to their credit, the US Navy did their best to welcome their new guests to the base. However, one of the Australian airmen asked one of the Japanese officers, in a very audible tone, a question which didn't go down too well with our US hosts:

He asked, "How come it took you so long to come back here after such a good start?

On another occasion, there was a formal dinner at the Officers' Mess where the Detachment Commander and the Senior Maintenance Officer of each of the participating units were invited. During the evening, each Commander was invited to say a few words of appreciation to their hosts, etc. All was going well until it was the Japanese Commander's turn. I believe there was a little tension in the room when he began to speak. He really tried to make a little satire out of their visit when he said; "We would like to thank the US Navy for inviting us here for this exercise and we appreciate just how sensitive it could be". Then he tried to lighten the evening with a little piece of history; "History reveals that our squadron has actually been to Hawaii before, but unfortunately we were unable to land on that occasion". Well, sad to say, the atmosphere of the dinner suddenly went flat and basically, the dinner was over!

So we were to realise that, particularly in Hawaii, US and Japanese relationships were still a little tense. I do believe that in later years, this has eased a bit as more Japanese tourists come to visit their land.

Competitive Spirit Between Squadrons

As mentioned previously, our flight crews did very well against the US Navy. It was also revealed that our RAAF anti-submarine crews were accustomed to hunting the RAN diesel/electric submarines which are usually very quiet underwater. Whereas the US anti-submarine crews are accustomed to hunting their own nuclear submarines, which are very fast, but also very noisy. So, the US Navy found it very difficult to find the RAN's submarines, and the RAAF could locate the US Navy's submarines with reasonable ease.

All in all, the spirit of comradeship between the Australian and US forces was usually very good. There were the usual little digs and humourous mishaps between us, each giving as good as the other received, but each of us learnt something new on each occasion we met.

Application for Commission

In early December 1979, I submitted an application for a commission within the RAAF to become an Engineering Officer in the Armament branch. I had been a Sergeant for some eight months and had completed my Higher School Certificate in New South Wales during 1977 at Kingswood. After submitting the application, over the next month or two, I was called for various interviews by my squadron Commanding Officer, the Base Armament Officer, and then the Base Officer Commanding. These interviews seemed to go reasonably well and I felt quietly confident about the future.

Then, I was requested to attend an interview panel on Adelaide for Commissioned Officer selection and training. I had been warned that some of their questioning style can be distracting to say the least, so I thought I was prepared. After the initial introductions had been completed, the very first question was, “How come you didn’t wear a blue and grey tie?” This baffled me for some time as I couldn’t see the relevance. A minute or two later, the officer asking the question explained that he had seen from my documents I had been to the Church of England Grammar School in Brisbane many years previously, and he had attended Brisbane Grammar, a GPS competitor!

As the interview progressed, I was asked all sorts of questions on management style, opinions of various operational matters, hardships of deployments and absences from family, etc.

However, when I was asked by the panel Psychologist how my family would cope if I was sent to RAAF Base Point Cook for several months, I responded that my wife was a most capable lady, she had the support of her family as well as a dedicated church group and therefore I was confident all would be well. From that answer, I was described as arrogant and careless. I believe the interview went downhill from that point onwards. So, I became another victim of the panel psychologist. No wonder they were called “Trick Cyclists”.

Home Base Duties and Family Events

The following the birth of our son in May 1980, we undertook a marathon driving trip. The whole family, my wife and I, two daughters, then aged 14 and 7, plus a ten week old son, travelled in the reliable old Toyota Corona Station Wagon with trailer over a three week period from Adelaide to Brisbane to Sydney to Adelaide in July / August. This was the show off the grandson trip. We took three days to drive from Adelaide to Brisbane via Broken Hill and Goondiwindi, then spent five days in a Brisbane Motel while we visited my Mother at her nursing home, then drove from Brisbane to Sydney. We then spend seven days at Margaret's parents' place in the Blue Mountains, prior to driving back to Adelaide. People today ask how we did it!

Dealing with Frustrating Leadership

A few days before Christmas 1980, not long before I left the unit, I had the unfortunate experience of having to do battle with the same infamous Air Commodore mentioned earlier. I was the Sergeant in charge of all Armament servicing on the P3 flight line and the Air Commodore came to the flight line office with an unusual request. He asked if a full load of Lindholme Life Rafts and Storepedoes could be loaded on to a P3 so they could be dropped into the ocean just off Victor Harbour as a display. (This was not totally unexpected as he was a member of the Victor Harbour Yacht Club, and it was well known he would try all sorts of things in an effort to impress the club). I had known of the Operational Directive which authorised the carriage and release of these life rafts in a life saving situation ONLY. As there were no pilots or flight commanders in the flight office at the time, it seemed I was the bunny to make the decision. It was amazing. One second there was a dozen airmen of various ranks in the flight office, all busily doing their tasks. The Air Commodore was always very loud and vocal, so everyone heard what he was asking, and when I said, "I'm sorry Sir, unless I receive a written directive from Operational Command, I cannot load the Lindholme gear for display purposes". Well, in three seconds, the flight office was empty! I suppose in hindsight they did me a favour. Because, he then started shouting and screaming at me for disobeying his command. He was almost frothing at the mouth! So after some minutes of this, I emphasised, "Sir, if you can produce a written directive from Operational Command, I'll do it. But in the meantime, I have important work to do and I must ask you to excuse me", and I walked out.

I can remember recalling to myself just after that incident that I had been fortunate enough to have served under quite a number of extremely good leaders, and had witnessed a number of very good pilots. However, this chap was not only an extreme minority, but also he was at the bottom of the barrel.

A New Era - Females in the Technical Arena

During the period of 1979 to 1980, our squadron was to receive a couple of female technicians from the Technical Training School. To us on the squadron, this heralded a new era. Some of the fellows adapted well to the girls arrival, and some did not. The girls, in particular the two we had, adapted well to squadron life in my opinion. They had some serious logistical handicaps to overcome, particularly with provision of barracks during duty rosters and maritime exercises, etc. Our two were a young Radio Technician and an equally young Airframe Fitter.

One of our rostered Tarmac Servicing Controllers, a crusty old Flight Sergeant, was best described as a rough diamond. He worked incredibly hard at his role, ran the flight line like a well oiled machine, and did not take crap from anyone, irrespective of rank or gender! Actually, the girls proved he was a softy at heart. His main disability of managing the girls was that he still believed in Chivalry, except for the language. On one hand, he was accused of trying to hand out the jobs in such a manner that the girls did not get the dirty jobs, yet he would write at least 15 apologies in advance on the task board for his swearing.

I was to witness an incident concerning the young Airframe Fitter lass which was a classic story of feminine intuition. The young girl was requested to carry out a wheel and brake change on one of the P3 orion aircraft parked on the flight line. If the same request were to be given to a male, another chap would accompany him to give a hand with the heavy lifting. On this occasion, all the male fitters not engaged in work simply sat there in silence. Not to be outdone, she went to the tool store to collect the necessary equipment and tools for the task. Next she appeared with a little trolley of tools as well as the spare wheel and brake unit. Apparently, she had requested the tool store issue her with the standard wheel lifting device used by the US Navy for the task as they are not permitted to lift more than 38 pounds (about 17kg), without assistance. For our men, it was macho to struggle and lift a heavy wheel on to its axle. But she did the whole task on her own using US approved equipment. After that, she gained a lot of respect from the fellows and the relationship between the girls and the fellows improved a lot.

Posting Paradox - Request for Posting Away from Maritime

In August 1980 after returning from our interstate vacation, I submitted a request for a northern posting as my mother was becoming quite frail. While it was understandable to wish to go to be with Mum, it was difficult requesting a posting away from a most rewarding unit. In response to this request, I was posted to No 2 Squadron at Amberley commencing mid January 1981.

Amberley Again Chapter 12

Amberley Again - January 1981

Final Days of No 2 Squadron

Once again arriving at Amberley, it seemed like an old home. This time to work on the Canberra aircraft once again as a SGT and the aircraft by this time were a little geriatric. No 2 Squadron was a very fine squadron but by this time, they were having considerable airframe fatigue problems with the Centre Section Forging and the attachment points for the Wing Main Spars. The squadron trades had become far more integrated by now and this was a good thing. As other trades helped the armourers in the days of active service, we found we were helping the others when their chips were down.

2SQN Canberra on takeoff at Amberley - 1981

In 1981, the Canberra aircraft were still flying target towing missions and several photographic missions in a number of areas. With all the geriatric care the aircraft were receiving, we managed to still maintain one or two target towing deployments to Butterworth per year, a few target towing deployments to Williamtown per year, two photographic deployments to Biac in Indonesia per year and one to Port Moresby.

Squadron Deployments and Exercises

Coming from a squadron where deployments and exercises were common place and sometimes rigorous, the type of deployment No 2 Squadron had was somewhat quieter than at Edinburgh. Nevertheless, the commitment of both ground and air crews was just as thorough and dedicated. In fact, for the ground crews, their dedication was tested far more as the servicing of the old Canberra had become somewhat geriatric in its nature. Still, the grand old lady of the skies never failed to impress those who saw her in action.

In July 1981, I was part of a party to go to Butterworth for one of the "Tug-But" exercises. The Canberra aircraft would be deployed for about 8 to 9 weeks and the squadron personnel would be split into two parties. The first would go up with the aircraft and accompanying Hercules and after 4 or so weeks, would return in a RAAF 707 Butterworth Charter. The second party would travel up in the 707 charter, replace the first party and several weeks later travel home in the Canberra aircraft and accompanying Hercules.

2SQN Canberra & 3SQN Mirage at Butterworth July 1981

It was during one of these target towing flights that a most questionable practice from one of the 75 Squadron pilots was revealed. It had been a courtesy extended to the Canberra pilot for him to attend the post flight briefing for the fighter pilots. During these briefings, many of the films from the gun cameras were shown to illustrate any possible improvements the pilots should attempt. One of the fighter pilots was always known as a really crack shot on air - to - air gunnery. Our Tug pilot was to see why. His gun-camera film usually began each segment with a shot of the Canberra aircraft, which was obviously an excellent radar target, then the graticule would move from the centre of the aircraft, down the 1,000 feet cable to the banner, and then he would commence firing. It was then established that he had the trigger pressed to the first pressure all the time from the Canberra down the cable, and as the graticule approached the orange coloured banner, he squeezed the trigger to the second pressure, firing the guns. A brief word to the Range Safety Officer from our Canberra pilot soon put a stop to his methods!

Whilst in Butterworth, our aircraft would fly many target towing missions each day from Monday to Friday, and one of the aircraft would depart late on Friday afternoon on a 'Navigation' exercise. The flight from Butterworth to Tengah in Singapore on the Friday afternoon would take between four to five hours, whereas the return flight o Monday morning would take about 50 minutes! We later found out that this was an intelligence gathering flight over the Malaysian and Indonesian coastlines.

One of the ironies of my return trip to Butterworth was my attendance at the local Baptist Church. In the mid 1970s, I had become a Christian and had become an active member of a Baptist Church in a number of localities. When in Butterworth for this exercise, I asked about attending a Baptist Church somewhere on the Island. Following the directions given to me, I found it to be just up the road from the Chinese Swimming Pool area, about half way between the city of Georgetown and the suburb of Hillside, where many of the Australian married quarters were. During my three year stay in Penang previously, I must have passed this building dozens of times, and not noticed it. In my short stay in 1981, I attended that church 3 or 4 times and found them to be dedicated and most genuine Christian people of a mixture of backgrounds. They came from Chinese, Indian and Malay peoples and it was the Malay who paid the highest price for becoming Christian.

Meeting with Maritime Friends

During my deployment at Butterworth with the Canberra aircraft, I saw that the P3 Orion Butterworth detachment was in full swing. Some of my colleagues explained that it became evident that Soviet submarines were sailing down the Pacific Ocean hoping to get to the Indian Ocean through the many straights in South East Asia undetected by allied anti-submarine aircraft. If successful, this alleviated the necessity of sailing right around the southern coast of Australia and thence up the Indian Ocean.

However, the U.S. Navy anti-submarine fleet would detect them as they sailed between the Philippines and the Asian mainland, but lose them as they sailed between Malaysia and Indonesia. Therefore the RAAF were requested to maintain a P3 Orion presence in Butterworth to keep track of Soviet shipping through the Malaysian and Indonesian waters.

However, with just two aircraft and two crews on the detachment, their flying became quite risky. To maintain continuity on a submarine watch, each aircraft crew had to replace one another toward the end of their fuel endurance. This meant that at times they were flying a 13 hour mission with a 11 hour rest period. One of the P3 Flight Crew later told me that there were times when crews would repeat an inflight checklist as one of the parties involved was too tired to follow the checklist closely. When continued for some days, it amounted to very risky flying indeed. Yet no amount of lobbying to the Defence Department would succeed in the supply of more aircraft and crews to the task.

My Last Deployment in the Canberra Aircraft

My last deployment within the squadron was a simple five day target towing exercise at Williamtown. A small party of about five airmen were flown down in a Caribou from Amberley and as their Senior NCO, I had the privilege of going down in the Canberra. As we only had the one aircraft there, it was quite an easy week's exercise and on the Friday, the exercise came to a close.

The Canberra was to drop the last target banner over the taxiway and climb out of the circuit area and fly home. So, after ensuring all the airmen's travel and other domestic details were in order, I climbed into the Canberra for the last mission. Little did I know that this was to be my last flight in the grand old lady of the skies. As the flying days of the Canberra were edging toward their close, there was a great deal of flag waving and fly pasts when ever opportunity arose.

This flight began normally and after dropping the banner, we climbed out of Williamtown to our cruise altitude of 38,000 feet and proceeded up to Amberley. It was a beautiful day and the three of us were just chatting, when the Pilot said the Navigator, "We must be very close to our descent time". As the Navigator was checking his chart, the Pilot said, "I have Amberley visual". Actually, we were about over head of the Cunningham's Gap Range, which even by road is less than an hour from Amberley!

After contacting Amberley approach, he confirmed that the Amberley approach area and Amberley airfield was clear of traffic, he announced to ATC that his approach speed would be high and requested a fly over the runway at high speed before joining the circuit and landing. This approved, we descended at about 6,500 feet per minute until we levelled out over the runway. I can remember looking at the altimeter and the Mach Meter. When in level flight over Amberley, we were at about 400 feet, and the Mach meter was on 0.83. I can't remember what the Air Speed was, but it must have been over 450 knots! The wings were just beginning to vibrate, so I'm told we must have been very close to the maximum speed of the aircraft. It was amazing! Following our high speed run over the airfield we climbed to 1,500 feet, washed off our speed and joined the circuit for a landing.

RAF Nimrod at Amberley for Kangaroo Ex - March 1982

Application for Commission - Again

During mid 1981, the unit Engineering Officer approached me holding a telex transmitted by Department of Air asking for various unit's Commanding Officers to recommend qualified Senior NCO's to submit application to become Commissioned Officers. Upon his suggestion, once again, I put together an application and submitted it to the Squadron Commanding Officer.

So in late 1981, I was called for the various interviews with the Base Armament Officer, the Squadron Commanding Officer and then the Base Officer Commanding. All the interviews went rather predictably until the Base OC.

We spent the first few minutes attempting to identify where we had served together in the past. We revealed that he had been a fighter pilot with No 77 Squadron during my time in Malaysia in the 1960's. We then chatted amicability about various leadership qualities for some time and then he gave me his heart felt opinion: He said that even though he was going to sign my application as "Recommended", he felt that my best vocation in the service was running a Flight Line in an operational squadron. He said he could just see me, aircraft departing, arriving, being re-armed and refuelled, rectifications being carried out, and then departing once more. All this with 75 problems to overcome in a day's work.

After the interview, I thought quite deeply about his comments and later agreed he was absolutely correct.

Then in March 1982, I was called for an interview in front of a selection panel in Brisbane. The interview did not go well at all. One of the officers thought that being a Sergeant after 22 years of service reflected a poor rate of promotion. Even though I explained that Armament was a slow trade, he was not convinced. The panel Psychologist implied I was poorly educated, and that as I didn't proceed with my education I lacked motivation in this area. I explained that when in an operational squadron, as I was, and enjoying it, it would be selfish of me to ask for time off simply for my own self advancement.

Comments like these certainly did not endear myself to the panel and the interview simply wound down. So, once again, I fell foul of the 'trick cyclist' and my application for commission was formally rejected.

Squadron Colours and Parades

Toward the end of the squadron days, there were several ceremonial parades, in which the squadron colours were officially paraded. ANZAC Day of 1982 was a memorable one, as every squadron from Amberley paraded its squadron standard in the Brisbane Anzac Day march. I had the privilege of being the Colour escort for the No 2 Squadron. Ironically, the last year of the squadron's life prior to its disbandment, the Squadron was awarded the Duke of Gloucester Cup for the highest standard of aircraft servicing. There was a ceremonial parade for that occasion as well so the Governor General could present the Cup to the squadron. Once again, I lobbied hard for the position of Colour Escort.

Sad News Comes Just before the Big Parade

Then on the night before the Air Officer Commanding huge ceremonial parade in June 1982, to which I was one of the Colour Escorts, my Mother passed away. I was indeed fortunate to have been in the Brisbane area to see the last 18 or so months of her life. After suffering some 5 or 6 strokes, she finally passed away in her sleep that evening. It was good to be able to spend a few hours with her before she slipped away. The next morning, I went on the parade, as I promised I would, then gave my apologies and spent the next week sorting out various family and domestic affairs.

Subtle Changes to Service Culture and Work Ethics

During my days at No 2 Squadron, I was gradually observing subtle changes to the Air Force I loved and I wasn't sure I liked what I saw. To give an example during the last days of the squadron, there were a number of times when the Senior Engineering Officer, a young engineering graduate and a number of young squadron pilots were discussing some of the more colourful squadron identities, particularly from the maintenance side. A great number of the previous maintenance personnel had around 18 years' service prior to even becoming Senior NCOs (Sergeants), and at least 25 to 28 years of service prior to becoming Warrant Officers. The young officers could not understand how such talented men could spend so long in the service with such 'slow' promotion. I tried to explain that the service I grew up with centred on "Service" and not on "Ambition".

Many of these men had served in such fine units as No 78 Wing at Malta, No 77 Squadron in Korea, No 1 Squadron in Singapore with the Lincoln Bombers, the Fighter and Bomber squadrons in Malaya and Thailand. Many had seen the Malayan emergency in Butterworth in the 1950s, the Indonesian Confrontation in the 1960s, early squadron days with the Canberra aircraft, the transition and flying of the Mirage from Williamtown to Malaysia, one of the three squadrons in Vietnam, and many more. Such a wealth of experience can only be earned over time.

I tried to explain to them that the service we saw in the 1980's was a much different service to the one I joined in 1960. In the 1960's it was not unusual to see LAC's and Corporals spending around seven years in each rank, as the RAAF was then 'service' orientated and not 'career' orientated. I also explained that in the 1960's I knew of several officers, both pilots and engineers, who spent up to 12 or 15 years to get to Squadron Leader from a junior officer's appointment. Sadly, I don't think they understood.

Sadly I was to observe that the RAAF was being overcome by talented ambitious young men. The talent in these young men I welcomed. However, it was the aggressive ambition I found difficult to accept. Such ambition could not be compatible with the type of service where success of the squadron depended on personal sacrifice.

Final Disbandment of the Squadron

Sadly the life of the squadron became very political as the RAAF lobbied the government for a replacement for the Canberra. The Grumann Gulfstream III was a hot favourite as the RAAF had received numerous quotes for the supply of an aircraft which performed all the functions the Canberra did during the 1970s and early 1980s. But, as history records, the Government simply disbanded the squadron and that was that. The whole programme was handled very poorly. To this day, many still wonder why the explicit instructions of the Chief of Air Staff (CAS), and his deputy were blatantly disobeyed by several members of Department of Defence officers. The CAS had given special instructions of how the last five serviceable aircraft were to be flown by squadron personnel to their last resting places prior to the squadron closure, and only one of the flights happened. It was a sad time. Every one knew the Canberra was getting old, but they could have at least let the squadron go out with dignity.

In hindsight, it was many years later that we were invited to another ceremonial parade for No 2 Squadron - this time at RAAF Base Williamtown. The squadron was being re-instated as an "Early Warning" or EWAC squadron and was to be fitted out with Boeing 737-700 aircraft. It was good to see the squadron colours being paraded once again.

So I was one of 6 Senior NCOs who supervised the final closing of the squadron and locked the door, On the last day I received a posting to No 3 Aircraft Depot and I knew this would not be good.

Back to Heavy Maintenance at the Depot - October 1982

I found I was never suited to the factory life of an Aircraft Depot. I missed the adrenalin of the squadron and it was difficult to settle. I had various jobs, all related to Quality Assurance Inspections on aircraft major checks. The Depot was maintaining the four remaining Canberra aircraft until they had been allocated a flight to their final resting places. The unit's main tasks included F111C aircraft major servicing, F111C aircraft Crew Module explosive changes, and a few Iroquois major maintenance checks. I kept on asking for a posting to any squadron but to no avail. I was working with FSGT Bob Raby, yes, younger brother of Brian, SGT Barry Falkner, CPL Bill Bailey, yes the same Bill Bailey I knew in Butterworth and Ubon. He had left the RAAF and rejoined. There were a number of others whose names escape me now.

Initially, I was tasked with compiling a Maintenance Record for the four Canberra aircraft recently transferred from the disbanded No 2 Squadron to the Depot. This task took some weeks to complete after which I was able to hand over a functional Maintenance Control record for the four aircraft to the existing staff of the Depot MCS.

Then came my introduction into the Depot Armament section and its workload. I was to discover they were a good team doing intricate yet repetitive maintenance on the F111C aircraft. The main task was the replacement of all the explosive items of the Crew Escape Module. This task took some four to five weeks for each aircraft. For the first two aircraft, I was one of a team learning the aircraft and the module.

For the first few months, I was a team leader on the F111C Crew Module team. Barry Faulkner was the independent inspector and Bob Raby was the F/SGT in charge of the section. Toward the end of 1983, Bob Raby decided to leave the service and conveniently, Barry Faulkner was promoted to F/SGT to become the NCO I/C section, a well deserved promotion. I then became the promulgated Independent Inspector for all Armament tasks at the depot. On a couple of occasions, I submitted a Quality Assurance report to management on how the pressure of time affected the quality of the workmanship of this fine team of men. Some of the men, after an early morning start to install the crew module rocket motor, began to show signs of fatigue later in the afternoon and began to make serious yet silly errors, including lockwriring bolts the wrong way, ie to lock them in the undoing direction. Such silly mistakes were quite out of character for these good men and it was easy to see that the main culprit was fatigue. My report to management illustrated all these events, but sadly it was simply filed and nothing was done.

So, the depot heavy maintenance tasks simply continued one week after the other.

Whilst the task was challenging, I still missed the adrenalin of the operational squadron. I asked the powers that be a number of times about a posting to an operational squadron, any squadron, but it was not to be. I was becoming more and more disenchanted with this type of work and life.

Purchase of Land and an Offer of Work on the Outside

My wife and I bought a nice block of land on the north side of Brisbane supposedly as an investment. Within a month or two, she was planning the furniture on this block which did not even have a building on it. So I began looking for a job as well as a house.

We started looking at different builders and also looked at some of the kit homes being offered, including the steel framed houses. This line of inquiry led me to contact “Nu-Steel” Engineering about a couple of their house designs.

During our inquiries about one of their house plans, their manager asked what I presently did for a living and I described my position as a Quality Assurance inspector at Amberley. So, in May 1984, he invited me to attend an interview with him over the prospect of employment at his Nu-Steel Engineering workshop as a Quality Assurance Inspector.

During the continuing conversation, he actually offered me a good job as one of their Quality Assurance inspectors at the Eagle Farm plant. We spoke a bit more in depth about the proposed position and eventually, I accepted. I then explained that for this to take place, there were some conditions I needed to satisfy from a service point of view. I explained that I needed to give the RAAF some four months notice, including any time spent on "Resettlement Leave". Also, I explained that I would need his offer in writing to give as evidence to the RAAF to authorise the four weeks Resettlement Leave. he agreed to all these conditions and gave me the offer in writing.

All was well for some months. I submitted my notice to the RAAF, requesting my discharge from the service effective from 05 October 1984, including a request for four weeks' "Resettlement Leave" in September 1984 to spend on site with my prospective employer. Over the next few weeks, all of my requests were approved and the wheels were in motion to process my departure from the service. I felt comfortable about this as I had lined up a good job and I convinced myself that the RAAF was not was it used to be. We continued to liaise with Nu-Steel engineering on our proposed house plans and we signed a contract for the supply and building of our house.

Nu-Steel continued the process of the house plans and when September arrived, I began my resettlement leave at their Eagle Farm plant. We had vacated our married quarter house in Ipswich and began renting a house in Carseldine, a northern suburb not far from our block of land.

It was during the second week of my work, unpaid mind you, at Nu-Steel, that I discovered that there was no job for me at their plant. I had asked their accountant when they wanted my details such as Tax Concession forms etc for my pending employment. The accountant then informed me that there had been no mention to her about my employment and I then asked the manager who initially offered me the job.

He then confessed that his accountant was correct; there was no job, he only offered the job to me in order to effect the sale! I was devastated! I had now gone past the point of no return with my discharge process and was committed to leaving the service.

I then informed him that I could not continue to work for a person who was simply a cheat and I regretted immensely that I was locked into a house contract with his company. I told him that until the house was completed, our relationship would be at best very strained and that when completed, I hoped I would never see or hear from him again. I ended my statement with the words, "You have just ruined the lives of an entire family".

So, in October 1984, I departed the service I loved and I was unemployed for the first time in my life.

Owner Builder of our New Home

For the next several months, my time was split between being the "Owner-Builder" of my house and searching for a job. They were not very pleasant months at all. Fortunately, all the sub-contractors on the house were decent men and understood my plight.

As an "Owner Builder" of my home at Eatons Hill, I found it a rewarding task to do, but frustrating as I was also looking for work.

The task was commenced in the digging and pouring of the footings during early September 1984. Then a week or two later, the slab was poured. There was a fellow recommended to me who then worked for me to erect the frame of the house. I had arranged for local, yet highly recommended tradesmen, including the plumber, electrician and the bricklayer to come on site just at the right times and the task proceeded smoothly. Whilst searching for a job, I would also phone my wife several times during the day. So, at any time I was needed on site, word went out to my wife if I wasn't nearby, and as soon as I was aware of their request I went straight to the site. I found the task immensely rewarding, but was made frustrating as was also attempting to find work to feed my family.

In January 1985, we moved into our new house. The house itself was a good product, but the management left a lot to be desired. I was later to find that for almost two to three years, I was harboring a deep resentment of that man to the extent I vowed that if I ever saw him on the road I would run him down like a mad dog! It was like a cancer eating away at my soul. It took a lot of counselling and God's grace to convince me to simply forget him and make the best of my new life, as difficult as that was to be.

Intentionally
Blank

New Life - Outside the Service

Finding Work

Recovering from the shock of being unexpectedly unemployed upon leaving the RAAF, I was torn between two primary duties; supervising the building of our home as an Owner Builder is expected, and seeking employment so the family could eat. I found it rather humbling to have to go to the "Commonwealth Employment Service (CES)" as it was called then to register for unemployment. If visiting the CES was humbling, then attempting to get the full attention of the attendant was even more difficult. I presented the officer with my Resume, and he balked at the size and the detail of it. I then asked, "How does one write 25 years of experience into two pages?" I must concede that it was written in similar detail that I was accustomed to writing Service Documents!

So, I would scan the notice boards for positions which I thought I could perform and took about 5 or 6 cards to the counter for discussion between the officer and myself. Each time he would look at one of the cards, he would say, "You're too qualified for that and simply discard it. When we had done this process for the entire six cards, he would then say, "Oh well, bad luck today". I refused to accept his diagnosis, so I asked him to go through the cards again and discuss them one by one. Finally he agreed to telephone one or two of the employers concerned and arrange an interview. This process would be repeated two to three times per week. I often wondered why I had to practically fight him to arrange for an interview.

This process, in addition to my searching the newspapers for vacancies, continued for some four to six weeks. I found that many employers expressed their liking for the ex-serviceman, but were not willing to be the serviceman's first employer following their departure from the service. They admired the serviceman's self discipline and work ethic. However, many ex-servicemen found the transition from the discipline of service life to the flexibility and non-discipline of civilian life very difficult. Whilst I was successful in obtaining a number of jobs in the first few years after leaving the service, I still took many years to undo some of my service traits.

Through this process, I was eventually placed on the short list as a "Storeman" at Bell Helicopter, and I was accepted as a "Costing Clerk" at a Repco Engineering Workshop in the Valley in Brisbane. As one was an acceptance as the other was a short list, I quickly accepted the job at Repco.

Working at Repco

In February 1985, I began work at Repco Engine Workshop in James Street, Fortitude Valley. My duties began at around 08.30am and finished, hopefully around 5.30pm. When I attempted to use my previous work ethic from the RAAF, i.e., not to attempt to leave the workshop until my allotted tasks for the day had been completed, I found myself in trouble with the manager. He interpreted my actions as a request for overtime.

I assured him I wasn't seeking overtime, rather I was attempting to complete the tasks allocated for the day. The civilian employers found this ethic most difficult to understand. In summary, my duties were:

- Costing of all repair and overhaul tasks within the workshop for invoicing purposes;
- Recording all invoices and cash sales with the computer, plus a daily update of ledger and banking requirements; and
- Monthly returns of workshop man-hours and productivity.

In hindsight, it wasn't such a bad job. It's just that as it was my first job since leaving the service, I put so much effort into it and therefore found it exhausting. One of the tasks I found particularly daunting was answering the many telephones, and therefore attempting to allocate my priorities between a current task and one from a telephone caller. There were more telephones at and behind the counter than there were people. However, after a few months, just when I was beginning to get the hang of the job, an offer came from Bell Helicopter for their "Storeman" vacancy. I really believed that this may have been an opening to re-enter the world of aviation. How wrong I was!

Working at Bell Helicopter

I began work at Bell in late May 1985. As one of their Storemen, we were tasked with supplying their many helicopter customers as well as our own workshop with helicopter spare parts. In summary, my duties were:

- Process all technical spares requests for all aircraft and workshop maintenance tasks;
- Monitor, and where necessary, recommend updates for min/max quantity figures of technical spares used by maintenance personnel; and
- Assist other store men in the processing and distributing of technical spares to commercial helicopter operators.

I managed to develop a good rapport with the workshop people, even though it gave me no advantage within the company. I think it was just that I missed the life of working on aircraft. I took it thinking it would keep me within the aviation world. It was a disaster! In the 13 months I was there, I saw the utmost in back biting, dobbing, you wouldn't believe!

Even after some six to eight months in this job, I found myself looking at the job vacancies again. The dobbing and back-biting between employees was rife to such an extent that no employee was safe or immune. One was always looking over one's back. I even applied for a position as one of the Gateway Bridge Toll Collectors. Later I realised that I was simply clutching at anything going. Then a friend from within our Church gave me a clipping from the Brisbane paper advertising for "Protective Security Officers". I applied and some weeks later was called up for an interview, security check and medical. I remember taking a day's leave from Bell as I didn't want them to know anything about this position. In May 1985, I was notified that I had been successful and was requested to start in late June.

A Marriage in the Family

Toward the end of this period, in June 1986, we saw the marriage of our elder daughter. Unfortunately, we were not in a financial position to give her a resplendent wedding, but we did what we could. At her request, to keep things simple, yet maintaining some dignity, the wedding was conducted by our Church Pastor in our back garden at Eatons Hill. Considering our property had views over the nearby Bunya National Park, it was a nice setting. The reception was in our house and it went quite well.

Working for the State Government

In late June 1986, I began work with the State Government as a "Protective Security Officer". This was good steady work, albeit shift work The induction course was a full five days in which all the government security and its relevant protocol was explained. Clothing kits were issued and we made our pledge of allegiance to the Crown again.

The security of Government Buildings was divided into several classifications. Simply, this meant some had their own team of Security Officers, such as the Law Courts Complex and Parliament House, etc. Some still had their own Security Officer, but one officer at any one time was sufficient to tour the building and monitor its security. Then other buildings which did not warrant a resident security officer, yet still required frequent internal inspection became the task of the Security Officer's mobile patrol. Whilst on patrol, an officer would visit all the buildings allocated to him at least twice during an eight hour shift. Some he would enter and inspect, and others he would simply inspect by carrying out an external inspection. The work involved the maintenance of security of government buildings, particularly the politically sensitive ones, including the Supreme Court Complex, Executive Building, etc.

During this period, following my induction into the service, I gained some experience in mobile patrols, which were quite interesting. On each shift, there were about five or six different routes and patrols. It took several shifts to learn each one and I managed to learn about four of them before I was moved to look after a particular building.

In October 1986, I was admitted to hospital for a Gaul Bladder operation, so on my return to work I was given a building to monitor as this would be a lighter duty than the mobile patrol.

Over the next eight months or so, I managed to learn the security of a few government buildings, including the Railway Building complex adjacent to Central Station, the then new Sunmap building in South Brisbane, Education House and the Law Courts complex.

I met Larry Hayne, who was on my RAAF Apprentice intake, there after some months and another ex Armourer, Allan Jones. There were quite a number of ex Army men in the Security Service, particularly from the Regiments and SAS.

Senior Protective Security Officer's Course

In June 1987, I was one of twelve Security Officers selected to undergo a Senior Protective Security Officer's course, held over four weeks at the Queensland Police Academy at Oxley and at the Law Courts Complex in Brisbane. This course was extremely rewarding as all the instructors were from the Special Branch, who in turn had been instructed by the Australian SAS. It was considered beneficial for the Security Officers handling such places as the Supreme Court and Government House to be trained up to the extra level. Some of the topics in the course included VIP escorting, weapons searching, and an introduction into hostage negotiation.

The first two weeks of the course were mainly held at the Police Academy at Oxley, west of Brisbane. During this phase, we were instructed in many phases of law and the different ways a police officer or a Security Officer can uphold or enforce the law. It was a period of intense study with formal written examinations at the end of each phase. On the lighter side, the way in which the instructors could describe a typical scenario was often filled with humour as they could convey the humorous side to almost any of their previous situations.

When we studied the theory part of Hostage Negotiations, one of our instructors revealed he was one of the team engaged in the then recent drama at the Brisbane Domestic Airport. A man, deeply involved in a custody battle, had taken his eight year old son as a hostage and was standing beside an AVGAS fuel tanker at the Brisbane Domestic Airport, threatening to light up if he didn't get his own way in the custody battle. Our instructor had been the chief negotiator for some six or so hours until the fellow finally gave himself up. Considering the entire Brisbane Airport was closed throughout the ordeal, it was a very high profile hostage negotiation case. He also revealed that a select team of five top class marksmen were strategically positioned around the airport buildings, ready to fire the lethal shot just in case the fellow looked likely to light a match. Fortunately, their firepower was not required.

Later, during the practical stage at the Law Courts, our practice session in one of the Supreme Courtrooms took on a most serious scenario. Two other Special Branch officers took the part of the criminal demanding release, and we, operating from an adjacent room, took turns as negotiators.

The scenario was that a criminal had just been found guilty by a jury of murder and the Judge was about to address the accused. At this particular moment, the criminal's girlfriend threw him a 9mm pistol from the public gallery and then the two of them held the Judge and Jury hostage. It was our task to gradually play this game of gradual 'give and take' in order to be seen to be giving him a few of his demands, whilst finding the time to get the rapid response, or swat, team to arrive at the courtroom.

These special branch fellows really knew their stuff and made it very difficult for us to achieve any headway in our negotiations.

So, all in all, it was a most interesting yet demanding course. About eight of the twelve course members were ex-military, and of those two were ex-RAAF, and the other six were ex-Army regiment or SAS.

So after several formal written examinations and several practical assessments, a graduation ceremony was held. The managers selected seven from the course members for promotion to Senior Protective Security Officers and the remaining five were told we were to be held on standby pending any future need of Senior Protective Security Officers. The Department Manager informed us that as soon as a vacancy occurred for a Senior Security Officer, one of we five officers would be selected. Sadly, I was one of the five held on standby.

To this day, I have never been informed whether I passed the course, nor have I ever received any written confirmation of ever completing the course!

Change of Role Following the Course

Following the completion of the Senior Security Officer's Course, we remaining five remained as normal Security Officers, yet we were given the special task of guarding "Watts House", the building which housed the staff of the Fitzgerald Police Corruption Inquiry.

This post involved afternoon and night shift, so when our day shift arrived, we were allocated car park duties at some government car park. We five all thought this was quite unfair, having just completed the Senior Security Officer's course. However, during the afternoon and night shifts, when we were patrolling and securing the building, we were somewhat privy to some very confidential and interesting information and stories from the inquiry.

It was during this period that I gained a deeper respect for my fellow servicemen, particularly some of the lesser known units in the Army and Navy. For now, several of my work colleagues were the ex-Regiment or ex-SAS fellows. Many a discussion during night shift was centred on some of the exploits of the SAS, and how they respected some of the RAAF units. One chap clearly described what it was like to call a strike from one of the Canberra aircraft. Rather than the highly spectacular noisy attack from any of the USAF aircraft, the Canberra would approach almost quietly and if necessary, drop one bomb at a time. The pilot would ask his Army guide if that was satisfactory, and the Army chap would be discussing the accuracy of the drop in matters of feet, not yards. The second and subsequent drops would be with pinpoint accuracy, even though he had attracted considerable flak from the ground.

During one of these conversations, (Night shift was always a good time for some of these ex-service chats!), I heard that some members of our SAS had actually been to Argentina during the Falklands War in June/July of 1982. I knew that our services had sent a number of people to the British services as "back-up" so their own men may be released for active service, but that was the first I had heard of our SAS being in the thick of it. He simply concluded, "You would be surprised just where we have been!".

A month or so after the course, we heard that one of the Special Branch officers, one of our instructors, was involved in a drug raid in the northern suburbs of Brisbane. It had been a very highly coordinated raid, but somehow there had been a leak in security. When the initial raid took place into the drug dealer's house at 5.00am this particular morning, the dealer was waiting for the attack and the first special branch officer in the door was shot dead with a high powered shot gun. The second and subsequent officers then shot the dealer and took his accomplice into custody. The dealer's girlfriend complained that the police fired indiscriminately, but we had heard that the police officer managed to get three mortal rounds of 9mm into a two inch group, killing the dealer instantly! So, we thought that was the exact opposite from 'indiscriminate'.

So, it was another reminder that these special branch officers literally placed their lives on the line every time they went on a confidential raid.

Sad Family News

Then in 1988, my wife's parents in the Blue Mountains both passed away within 14 weeks of one another. At the same time, I saw a position advertised in the RAAF News for ex-RAAF ground crews to become Aircraft Maintenance Engineers in Qantas. I inquired and yes they would employ ex Armourers. So, although the primary motivation for the change of career and interstate move was a compassionate one for family reasons, this move also allowed me to once again enter the world of aviation, this time as the start of a whole new career.

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Welcome Home Parade - At Last

First News of the Parade and Preparations

As stated previously, early in 1987, I was working in the State Government Protective Security department in which there were a number of ex-service personnel working. Around late January or early February, I heard some rumours about a large parade being organised for later in the year. At the time, I did not belong to any of the ex-service or Vietnam Veterans organizations. So, I asked a few questions about the parade from my ex-service colleagues.

I received a few names to call who would be able to give some more accurate information. A few phone calls over a few nights and I had a better idea of what was planned. The seeds were sown when thousands of ex US servicemen held their own "Welcome Home" parade in Washington DC. So I was told that it would be in Sydney on the October long weekend of that year and that I had better think quick about making an accommodation booking before all of Sydney became booked out.

So, in March I made a booking for a room at a Guest House at Kirrabilly, just north of the Harbour Bridge in Sydney. I also found out that there were several bus loads of servicemen travelling from Brisbane to Sydney return. The Queensland Rail would not make a statement about any discount fares for ex-service personnel travelling to Sydney, so many of us, including myself, booked on one of the many coaches.

Spreading the Word

In the months preceding the parade, word was travelling between all ex-servicemen, be it through work places, sporting bodies, social or community associations, and any where else veterans gathered. There was some considerable resistance from several bodies early in the preparations, some from the RSL, saying it would never amount to anything, and some from government bodies, saying it would be doubtful it would receive any official support. Still, the momentum gathered.

The Trip Down

It was with a mixture of apprehension and excitement that I boarded the coach outside the Roma Street Terminal early on the Thursday evening. I had earlier paid a discount price of $56 for a return trip BNE - SYD - BNE by coach. Considering the prices of the day, this was a pretty good deal.

As the coach contained a mixture of Army and RAAF men, and the Army content also contained a mixture of ex National Service men and Permanent men. Yet, within the first hour of travel in the night, I realised that there were at least four or five people I had known from Vietnam. The trip was not as rowdy as one might have expected, as I thing we all were a little apprehensive of what we would find in Sydney. Most of us managed to get at least a few hours sleep during the night's travel.

It wasn't until the next morning when we were within a few hours of Sydney and the driver tuned his radio to one of the popular Sydney radio stations, and we began to hear much of the commentary about this parade. Yes, it was going to be HUGE! The whole of Sydney was simply buzzing with the imminent parade. There was a howl of complaint when we heard that the current Prime Minister, Mr Bob Hawke, was going to be standing on the saluting dais. Most of us remembered Bob Hawke in Vietnam days as the Leader of the ACTU and all his efforts in attempting to block the supply of spares and other goods we so desperately needed then.

However, our worries were in vain, as the Governor of NSW, Sir Roden Cutler, VC, was to take the salute and this pleased us all.

We arrived in the heart of Sydney, just near Central Station, around nine or ten on the Friday morning. We all split up and went to our respective accommodation. Some small groups of men had arranged group bookings, but as I didn't know any others near my home, I booked alone. Sydney was simply awash with ex-servicemen, servicemen in uniform, etc.

The First 'Informal' Function

On the Friday evening, we had been informed that all the RAAF units, No 1 OSU, Nos 2, 9 and 35 Squadrons and other support units, were to meet at the different floors of the Leagues Club in Sydney. I arrived at this "informal" function at about 7pm and found the biggest gathering of RAAF people in one place I had ever seen. Yet, this was only a prelude. Whilst we first gathered with our respective units on different parts of the building, within an hour or so, we had all intermixed and the party was on! Even on that Friday evening, there was some fairly serious drinking, story telling, and general catching up with one another. It was terrific.

As I had intended to attend the dawn service the next morning, I decided to call it a night at around 11pm and go back to my humble abode.

Parade Day

The Dawn Service

I had arranged for a taxi to take me into Sydney to the forming up point by about 4.15am. As I arrived, men were forming up ready to march into Martin Place. They had formed into ranks of ten abreast, and I was about 30 to 35 rows from the front. By the time we marched in, there were some 80 to 120 rows of ten each.

As we turned into Martin Place, my breath was literally taken away with the size of the crowd. There were people everywhere! They were at least 12 deep at the roadside and were also sitting on vantage points on any part of a building they could find.

One of the hymns during this service was the stirring "God is my Refuge" to the Dambusters March tune. Most servicemen are not known for their hymn singing, but this rendition, from the men as well as the crowd, brought tingling down the spine.

The speaker for the service was the legendary Lt Col. Khan, affectionately known by his men as "Gengis". I had heard of him from several circles, he was one of those leaders whom the men followed almost like the pied piper! His speech was brilliant! To this day, I still have a copy of his speech in my files.

After the service and wreath laying, we all marched out of Martin Place and were dismissed so we could have some breakfast. We were informed that the march would commence at 0900 hours sharp.

The Parade

We were to meet at the Domain and form up in our respective units. For those who know the size of the Domain in Sydney, the entire area was marked out with every Army, RAAF and Navy unit which had ever served in Vietnam. It was incredibly well organised, and men found their units with very little problem.

It was later revealed, to supply some statistics, that some 56,000 Australian Service personnel had served in Vietnam at one stage or another, and there were more than 32,000 men and women on this parade on this day. It was the largest parade Sydney had experienced since the end of the Second World War.

Initial starting of the parade was slightly delayed as they insisted that an Australian Flag be carried for each serviceman killed in action during Vietnam. Where possible, the surviving relative was requested to carry the flag for his/her relative, but there were some flags which had to be allocated to men on the morning.

As our RAAF units formed up in preparation for the march, I was very moved at the enormous number of veterans attending and the distances they had travelled. All states of Australia were represented, plus a few had flown from overseas to attend. I would guess that we had one or two thousand men on the day. It was incredible.

The flags all allocated, the march commenced with the flags leading. All the Army units went first, followed by the RAAF, then Navy. When our turn came to march from the Domain into the streets of Sydney, it was simply overwhelming. There were literally tens of thousands of people everywhere. Many a man had unashamed tears flowing as they marched through the streets. The march took a similar route to the normal Anzac Day march, which was several kilometers.

Some of our men were in wheelchairs, some had walking difficulties but refused a wheelchair. Some walked with help, and thousands marched as straight as a rod.

It can be categorically stated that much of the veterans' healing evident today commenced with that Parade in Sydney in October 1987.

Following the end of the parade, it took seemingly ages to get to our allocated club or hotel. Literally, thousands of people wanted to shake the hand of a veteran and simply say "Welcome Home". To this day, I find it difficult to describe the feeling.

The Party After the Parade

Back at the Sydney Leagues Club, where all the RAAF units had gathered, there were far more men here than the previous evening. The place was absolutely packed. Initially, the different floors of the club were allocated to the various RAAF units who served in Vietnam, i.e., Nos 2, 9, 35 Squadrons, and No 1 Operational Support Unit and RAAF Transport Flight Vietnam. However, before too long, as many of us had known each other from more than one unit, we began to mix and mingle between all the floors. The atmosphere was almost electric, the drinking was heavy, yet there was no evidence of any drunkenness that I could see. It was amazing. There was simply so much catching up to do. Many of us had not seen one another for years. When one considers that all the RAAF men were permanent servicemen and most of us would meet at least some of our Vietnam compatriots on other postings, many of us had left the service some years before the parade. Therefore, in some cases, we had not seen one another for up to 15 or so years.

One of our helicopter crewmen later commented that he paid a visit to the venue of the SAS regiments. He was somewhat taken back when he realised that of all the SAS people in the room, he had known all except a handful of the men.

However, for the many Army units, there were meetings between veterans who had not seen one another since they departed Vietnam. Their emotions were really high.

The social gathering was supposed to commence with a lunch of sorts, which it did in most places, but the party was still going well into the night. There were reports of several of the venues being drained dry by the veterans.

Sunday - The Concert Day

It had been well publicized that a concert would be held in the Domain featuring as many artists as possible who had performed in one of the concert parties from Australia to Vietnam. This concert was planned to start at 1300 hours on Sunday following the parade.

I arrived at the Domain at about 11.45am and found it to be nearly full. It took quite a bit of searching to find some of my squadron mates. Then, as planned, the concert commenced at 1300. To this day, I cannot remember all of the artists, although some of the high profile names stand out more than others. Of course, these included Normie Rowe, Lorrae Desmond, Digger Revel, and many others.

For me, the day was outstanding, but a bit of a blur. I was amazed at the shear size and number of people attending this concert. Understandably, there were the veterans themselves, plus in many cases their wives, plus thousands of Sydneysiders who had come in to see the concert.

By late afternoon, I was just about exhausted. Considering the coach trip on Thursday evening, the party on Friday evening, the Dawn service and the Parade on Saturday, followed by the party on Saturday evening, I had hardly slept since Wednesday evening at home.

Memorable Tales from the Parade

This event became so memorable that a book titled “Homecomings” was published by the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service. However, there were many other less formal stories which came to light after the parade. Each one of these simply adds to the unique character and spirit of the Australian Serviceman.

The Australian Journalists Club

This club had proudly stated that it had maintained a 24 hour licence since its opening early in the 1920s. This period included of course the depression, the Second World War and many other national calamities. Their claim to fame was that in all this history, they had never, repeat, never ran out of beer or wine on any day of their operation.

However, one of our Army units had booked this prestigious club for their post parade function on that weekend in October 1987. Late on the Saturday evening of the post parade party, the Australian Journalists Club ran out of beer! The first time in more than 60 years of operation.

RAAF Contingent Belmore Park

Early in 1987, a small group of four RAAF fellows, having heard of the parade in October, sent one of their party to Sydney in January to procure a suitable unit or flat for the four of them to stay. Their intention was to stay together and stay at a comfortable unit, which was also conveniently located.

So, in late January, one of their number travelled to Sydney and found a suitable unit which would cater for the four of them comfortably and booked the unit for four nights, Friday to Monday nights in October. The lady who managed the block asked for $100 per night and he agreed, paying 50% of the total tariff as a deposit there and then. It was also agreed that the remaining tariff would be paid on their arrival.

All was well until that weekend in October. The four men arrived at the unit and the lady informed them that the tariff had been increased to $200 per night and that they would have to pay the extra. Our men objected strongly saying they had paid a deposit and she should keep her agreement. Obviously, at the time of the booking, the lady had no idea that Sydney would be booked out in October.

Both the men and the lady stood their ground with neither giving in. The lady stubbornly said, “You’ll have to pay now as you won’t find anywhere else in Sydney to stay”. The men said that was their problem and stated either the lady kept her deal or they would seek a full refund of their deposit. The lady refused to keep her deal and reluctantly refunded the deposit to the men.

So, our four RAAF men were without accommodation. Without any worries, the men took their ablutions to Central Station where they showered and shaved prior to attending the pre-march party on the Friday evening. Then very late in the evening, they walked to Belmore Park, opposite Central Station, purchased a five gallon keg of beer at the nearest pub, and began to spike it in the park.

A young policeman saw them with the keg and told them they could not do that here in this park! One of the four simply told the young policeman to run away and get someone their age to come and talk to them. Feeling a bit wounded, the policeman went back to his station with the sad story. The old experienced Senior Sergeant came to the scene determined to sort this problem out. On his arrival, one of the four looked at the Senior Sergeant and said, “I know you, weren’t you at Williamtown in 1965 or thereabouts?” The Senior Sergeant agreed this was correct and once establishing he had indeed found old mates, stayed to help them with the five gallon keg.

After the Saturday march and party, and after the Sunday concert, this routine of the keg in Belmore Park was repeated for their entire stay in Sydney.

The Song - "He was only Nineteen".

One of the most famous and memorable meetings took place in the Domain just prior to the commencement of the march. An Australian Infantryman was seriously wounded by standing on a mine in July 1969. In fact, it was the same day as the NASA men landed on the moon. In the months after that, while this fellow was in hospital, an Australian song writer penned the song, "He was only Nineteen". The lyrics included lines like "on the day Man stood on the Moon, Frankie stood on a mine, and .... He was only Nineteen ....".

Well, it was later revealed that the soldier and the song writer had never met, that is until October 1987. While the men were assembling into their units, Frankie, the soldier, in his wheelchair with both legs amputated, was introduced to this chap who was in fact the songwriter. We are told it was a very emotional meeting.

The Trip Home

Sunday afternoon and Monday morning saw us saying goodbye to mates we met at the parade and probably may not see again for many years.

On Monday morning, we all assembled at the allocated pick up points for our transport to our home towns. Our coach was waiting for us kerbside at Belmore Park near Central Station. Departing at about 09.30am for Brisbane, the trip was a strange one. It wasn't noisy as I expected, although there was plenty of conversation. All the men had this quiet smile on their faces, many simply slept.

We arrived in Brisbane just after midnight on the Monday night, and I can remember being pleased I didn't have to go to work until the Wednesday. My wife and children were there at the Roma Street Coach depot to pick me up and take me home. It had been a weekend of outstanding success. Many of took several months to gather in the meaning of all it represented.

Still months after the Parade, articles were written, the book "Homecomings" was published and in general, the healing of many veterans had begun.

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A New Career - with Qantas Airways

Moving to Sydney and Starting Again

In August 1988, we moved to Sydney. I started work in Qantas as an Aircraft Maintenance Engineer Grade 1 at Mascot, and we bought a house in Penrith. *(Don't forget this was at the height of the real estate boom in NSW!)*. My induction into a Qantas workshop was not without its embarrassment and difficulties. I had been completely unaware that in Qantas, all tradesmen supplied and worked with their own tools. Understandably, they cared for and guarded their tools with a healthy respect. However, in the RAAF, it was unlawful to take one's own tools on to an aircraft, as all tools were supplied from a specially made up Composite Tool Board.

So I was most embarrassed when it was revealed that I had reported for work at one of their workshops and did not have a single tool of my own. So, at considerable expense, I had to purchase a complete tool kit, relevant to this workshop.

New Beginning - Qantas Engineering

First Position - Component Support Maintenance Workshop

I spent the first 12 months working in a support workshop with the hope of one day studying to become a "Licensed Aircraft Maintenance Engineer (LAME)". Briefly, my duties at CSM included:

- Servicing of all Aircraft toilet modules and their associated components;
- Servicing, repair, and balancing of Aircraft flight controls and trim tabs;
- During overtime periods, various aircraft servicing tasks within major servicing, and flight line servicing; and
- Special Projects Officer to Component Support. (This included a workshop layout and facilities improvement programme for six different sections within Component Support).

For a short period of time, there were about five ex Armourers working in this support workshop. This developed into an interesting event one day. We all were requested to take part in a cabling job on a B747-300 just outside the hangar. Having completed the job, we waited while the Leading Hand completed the paperwork. Conversation led to us speculating where we would attach what piece of ordnance under the wing and why. Unbeknown to us, there was a B747 Captain and a L.A.M.E. engineer discussing a separate issue but they could hear our discussion and were most concerned. Our discussion included such items as an ECM pod, Flare Dispensers, Chaff Dispensers, and if one wanted to a bit risky, a Sidewinder pylon out on the wingtip! Oh well!

During this period, I managed to be nominated for one of the CAA recognised Jet Engine courses, held at Qantas ground training. The four week course was recognised by the then CAA as one of the fourteen courses required for a L.A.M.E. certificate. It had been an ambition of mine to seek the required training to became a LAME with Qantas. However, it was not to be. Qantas Engineering then decided it would not hold any more of the courses as they were available at the T.A.F.E. at Padstow, on the Bankstown line. Considering the extensive time required for late night rail travel from Padstow to Penrith via Sydney, I decided that the transport logistics made these courses too difficult and were therefore becoming out of reach.

After completing this course, I was selected to do some planning work for the General Manager of Heavy Maintenance. I was asked to look at the layout of a section and submit a drawing to him illustrating how the productivity may be improved. It was a bit like the project work we did on our Supervision & Management course at Wagga years earlier. The most ambitious of these projects was an idea to build a separate large workshop to be primarily dedicated to Landing Gear overhauls. I was asked to produce a drawing of a proposed Landing Gear overhaul facility, illustrating the flow, in a production line format, of each major unit from entry into the workshop, initial disassembly, to major disassembly and overhaul of sub-components, to the final assembly and functional checks. He suggested that as at the time there were no major Landing Gear overhaul centres west of Los Angeles dedicated to 747 aircraft, Qantas should build a large one in Sydney. Such a facility would not only handle ALL the landing gear from our own B747-200, B747-300 and B747-400 aircraft but be available to tender to other operators in the western Pacific region to overhaul Landing Gear sets for other operator's B747 aircraft. Although it would have been a very large capital outlay, sadly, the Qantas Board did not share his vision and the plan was scrapped.

Then I discovered that the then CAA (later CASA) did not recognise Armourers as people who worked on aircraft. No amount of evidence or paperwork would convince them, so a change of plan was required. I applied for the position of a "Production Planner" within the Aircraft Allocation and Maintenance Planning Section. This is where I appreciated my past experience in MCS of a few units.

Change of Role - Maintenance Planning

Over the next six years, I was part of a team which planned the content, timing, and level of all maintenance of all Qantas International aircraft. I then found out what stress and pressure means! I found that tasks normally performed in Maintenance Forecasting and Control by NCOs in the service are actually performed by tertiary qualified Production Engineers in commercial aviation.

During the period between late 1989 and early 1991, there were two major events happened, each unrelated to the other, but each having a major effect on the workplace and the family.

My Experience at TAFE

The first was the decision I made to attend the Sydney TAFE at Ultimo with the view of attempting a Degree or rather a Certificate in Production Engineering. I decided to take it at three subjects per semester. So, on the first semester in 1990, I began the subjects of "Total Quality Control", "Just In Time", and "Engineering Drawing for Engineers". I seemed to handling the studies reasonably well, although the first two topics were not related well to Aviation. It was reasonably difficult managing the studies and Tech attendance with a shift roster of 7 day - day/afternoon shift work. Then, before I enrolled in the next year's studies, I discovered that the Department of Defence intended to award an Associate Diploma to any ex Army, Navy or RAAF Non-Commissioned Officers who could substantiate at least 900 hours formal tuition within the technical trades not including their original apprenticeship. So, I surveyed all my certificates from all the various training centres in the RAAF and tallied up a total of hours. I had received more than 1350 hours of tuition in all my courses since graduating from my apprenticeship in December 1962. So, I submitted the application and gave my apologies to the TAFE saying I would not be returning. It is worth noting that my "Associate Diploma of Applied Science of Ordnance Engineering" was finally signed and delivered to me in late 1996. So the Department of Defence were good on their promise, but just a little slow achieving it.

The Recession We Had to Have!

The second major event had to do with the recession we had to have! Yes, we had sold our "War Service" home in Queensland and purchased a home in Penrith at the normal every day interest rates, which at the time were 13.5%. However by late 1990, the interest rates had climbed to a massive 18.75%, and needles to say, were crippling us. At that stage, my wife saw an advertisement for the Defence Service Homes Corporation (DSHC) and suggested I seek advice as to my eligibility. It turned out that due to my War Service and my length of service, I was entitled to another bite at the cherry!

So, just before we could have been forced out of the back door, the Penrith house went on the market so we could purchase another through the DSHC. The sale went through and we purchased another home at Emu Heights, using the simultaneous settlement date of 27 March 1991.

All of these events happened while I was doing shift work in Maintenance Planning.

Planning of Aircraft Maintenance

During my term in Aircraft Maintenance Planning, I was to learn a significant amount about how reputable airlines plan their heavy maintenance. In a similar manner to the RAAF "Technical Maintenance Plan (TMP)", the Boeing Aircraft Company had a system called "Overhaul and Special Inspection Period (OSIP)".

Aircraft Maintenance Planning in Commercial Aviation

It was in this section that I began to learn the differences between military and commercial aviation. As a member of Aircraft Allocation and Maintenance Planning, I worked for a brilliant Manager, who not only was outstanding at his task, but also had extremely good people skills. However, the Principal Planner for whom I worked was almost the opposite. He would do anything to ensure his section could not be blamed for not meeting schedule. Quality of workmanship or integrity of serviceability, or honesty in dealings with neighbour sections were not important. On a number of occasions, when I suggested that the Manager Quality Assurance be informed of some particular occurrence, I was informed that I will only be as honest as he wanted me to be!

It was on one of these tense occasions that I reminded him I had seen no less than three aircraft burn on separate occasions each due to a technical failure in an engine. I further suggested that if he wished to share such an experience, he simply had to continue with his present policies. So as one may understand, I was not the flavour of the month for some considerable time. On another of these tense occasions, I was quietly told that my "ethics" may well spell the end of my employment in this company. Either I buckled under and worked under the ethics dictated by him, or I would be unemployed. So, for the first time in my life, I backed down. I was 47 years of age at the time, I was not tertiary qualified, I was the sole breadwinner of the family and had what I perceived to be a large mortgage. So I did the best job I could to ensure the maintenance of our aircraft was planned to capture the best opportunities available. Following these tense occasions, I believe I managed to learn how to maintain a high standard of maintenance planning without letting this fellow getting too upset or letting him get under my skin!

During the next few years, I managed to gain experience in all the sub-sections of the department, which included some of the following tasks:

- Initially, in November 1989, I was one of the Duty O.S.I.P. Planners on a seven day - day/afternoon shift basis, planning and monitoring the minor maintenance of a fleet of international aircraft, my fleet being the B747-400 aircraft;
- Then in late 1990, I became the Aircraft Component Planner, which involved planning the replacement of various major components at appropriate and opportune times from aircraft at their minor or major maintenance check, for overhaul at various Qantas maintenance facilities;
- In early 1992, I commenced a dual role, ie, I continued to perform the functions of the Component Planner, as well as being the Relief Planner for any of the Duty OSIP Planners when one of them was on leave. This combined duty placed immense pressure and increased workload on me. In order to maintain the accuracy of the component planning functions, there were numerous occasions where I worked more than 55 hours per week. Most of these occasions were during a period of an overtime ban. The work still had to be done or else the aircraft would not have been serviced, so I just did the overtime without the pay!
- Then in order to create more versatility in my expertise, I requested to learn the roles in the aircraft planning side. I began by assisting in the allocation of the flying patterns to the various Qantas aircraft fleets, ensuring maintenance intervals were appropriately spaced;
- Eventually, I managed to move away from the OSIP side of planning and was able to learn more of the Aircraft Planning side. My next role was to draft a Landing Gear overhaul plan for all B767 and B747 aircraft over a seven year period. This had extra difficulties as whilst our plans were supported by our own Management, many of these plans were disbelieved by senior or executive management, thereby necessitating a re-write by the time the plans were to be implemented.
- By 1995, I had been appointed to plan and monitor the long term planning of the heavy maintenance cycles of all International aircraft. This involved drafting a long range plan for all aircraft “D” checks, over a period of 7 years. *(A “D” check is the largest level of maintenance on a Boeing 747 to be performed outside the Boeing plant)*.The difficulty of this plan was increased by many of the aircraft types having different flying rates, and ensuring the heavy maintenance facility was kept with a steady workload, and still attempting to achieve the maximum available flying from each aircraft's servicing span.

Once again, the experience gained in MCS and in Explosives Engineering at Kingswood helped me to obtain a planning position in Qantas. Although, as mentioned above, there was an enormous stress attached to this role. On one hand, we were attempting to satisfy the ground engineers by giving them an appropriate time in which to do their work thoroughly and on the other hand, we were being criticised by the Commercial departments for keeping the aircraft on the ground too long. It must be emphasised that I have the utmost admiration for the ordinary Licensed Aircraft Maintenance Engineer (LAME), whether working at a Airline Terminal or working in a heavy maintenance environment. Even though they are under immense pressure to get the job out in record time, they still stubbornly refuse to release the aircraft until they are confident everything is correct.

Promotion - A Difficult Achievement

As previously stated, I was fortunate to work for a brilliant manager in the Aircraft Allocation and Maintenance Planning section. The Production Planners in his section ranged from a Level 5 planner, known as the "Principle Planner", two Level 4 planners, known as "Senior Planners", several Level 3 and Level 2 planners and a few Level 1 planners, including myself at the time.

About twice per year, the Managers of the various planning sections would gather to discuss possible promotions from within their sections. Any nominations for promotion for a Planner would need to be approved by the Promotion Board, a small committee made from selected Managers, the General Manager, and a Union Delegate.

After I had worked in this section for about nine months or so, my manager nominated me for a promotion from Level 1 to Level 2. Initially, the Union Delegate vehemently opposed my promotion as he said I was too junior and hadn't served enough time to learn the necessary skills. When asked to justify the reasons for my nomination, my manager explained that I had acquired the necessary skills prior to my joining Qantas. The Union Delegate asked where these had been learnt, and my manager answered, "In several Maintenance Forecasting sections of RAAF units". The Union Delegate promptly replied that he was strongly opposed to promoting anyone who was ex-military. So, my promotion was denied.

It took my manager a further two attempts to promote me from a Level 1 planner to a Level 2 planner. Then, about two of three years later, he tried to promote me from a Level 2 planner to a Level 3 planner. Once again, he encountered the same problem with the Union Delegate. So, once again, it took three attempts for him to promote me to a Level 3 planner which is where I stayed for the rest of my time in the section.

Levels of Aircraft Maintenance

The entire spectrum of aircraft maintenance can be placed into four major categories. The following examples are taken from a typical maintenance life of a Boeing 747 aircraft, assuming each aircraft would fly an average of about 4,000 aircraft hours per year:

- **First Line Maintenance:** At this level, all planned maintenance and rectifications can be performed without the aircraft leaving the terminal if necessary. These include a "Turnaround" where the aircraft is at the terminal for just a few hours. For longer periods of ground time, yet without any planned maintenance, the check is often called a "Layover". Minor rectifications which do not require the aircraft to be towed to a formal maintenance facility can also be performed during this period. The man-hours of maintenance planned for this category, excluding rectifications, usually do not exceed around the 150 to 200 man-hours.
- **Minor Maintenance:** The most common form of 'Minor maintenance' within the Boeing fleet is an aircraft "A" check. This maintenance check is usually based on aircraft hours flown, around 600 aircraft hours, and is usually planned to occur about each five to six weeks of programmed flying. This check is usually performed at the operator's Home Base Maintenance Facility. The aircraft is usually removed from the flying programme late in the day or evening prior to the planned check day and towed to the maintenance facility. On the planned day, planned maintenance from all trades begins at first shift, around 0600 hours local time. By the end of the second shift, around 2200 hours, most planned maintenance, planned modifications and rectifications should have been completed. Early in the next morning, prior to the Maintenance Release being certified, a last check of rectifications or any unscheduled maintenance is carried out. For instance, if a component change has been performed requiring an engine power run to be carried out, then such engine runs would be done early on the second morning. The entire check would have involved around 600 to 750 man-hours from all trades.
- **Intermediate Level Maintenance:** Some operators include this topic into their "Heavy Maintenance" category. Some operators have found that as their aircraft reliability successfully increased the amount of permitted flying between heavy maintenance checks, they found that an intermediate level of maintenance was required. These are usually called at around 2,000 aircraft hours intervals, or about five to six monthly and is carried out by the heavy maintenance personnel of all trades and takes about two and a half or three days. More detailed diagnostic inspections and testing planned due to the increased ground time. Some aircraft system checks or component replacements, due at various intervals of 2,000 to 4,000 aircraft hours, are planned at these checks. Usually, these checks consume about 2,500 to 3,500 man-hours of maintenance from all trades.

- **Heavy Maintenance:** I have always believed that the Heavy Maintenance check on all aircraft is by far the most important and critical. My belief was certainly reinforced by my experiences at Qantas Maintenance Planning. Nearly all operators carry out First Line and Minor Maintenance checks as well as each other, but there's a world of difference in the quality of Heavy Maintenance carried out between the responsible operators and others. In the Boeing 747, there are two levels of Heavy Maintenance, the "C" check and the "D" check.
  - The Aircraft "C" check is usually based on a combination of calender time as well as aircraft hours flown. The check is usually called at about two years intervals. There are many internal aircraft system checks and component replacements due at intervals between 6,000 and 10,000 hours. Therefore all these would be planned at the "C" check interval. The check is performed by Heavy Maintenance personnel over a period of about five to seven days. During this time, some 6,000 to 8,500 man-hours of maintenance from all trades would be performed.
  - The Aircraft "D" check is the highest level of maintenance performed by an operator outside the Boeing maintenance facility. It's frequency is governed by a combination of aircraft flying hours, aircraft cycles or landings, and calender time. Usually, the "D" check is carried out at an interval of about 25,000 aircraft hours or 7 years and consumes about a period of about 45 to 56 calender days. This check requires the aircraft to be stripped of all seating, soundproofing, galleys, lavatories and washrooms and floor boards. Therefore the underside of the aircraft skin, aircraft control cables, hydraulic components, hoses, connections and components, inner side of all fuel tanks, wing spars, engine mountings and struts, undercarriage and related systems, and all frames and structures are exposed and available for inspection. As one can see, the "D" check is enormously labour intensive and consumes around 65,000 to 75,000 man-hours from all trades. If during these detailed inspections, corrosion is found, the enemy of all aircraft, this will add at least 5,000 to 8,000 man-hours to the check.

Example of Dedicated Heavy Maintenance

In the early 1990's, Qantas Maintenance received an invitation to tender for the task of performing an aircraft "D" check on two American B747 Freighter aircraft for a major American freight company. Qantas sent several experienced and qualified heavy maintenance engineers to their site and inspect the aircraft. Their task was to quote the man-hours required to perform a standard Boeing "D" check on each aircraft.

They duly inspected each aircraft and reported to their Qantas management. Their report concluded that a standard "D" check would count for about 65,000 to 68,000 man-hours, but emphasised that both of the aircraft were riddled with major corrosion problems. This they estimated would add some 12,000 to 15,000 man-hours to their task. Each engineer emphasised that he would not sign a maintenance release without rectifying the major corrosion problems.

Executive Senior management, i.e., way above that of maintenance, commented that if they were to quote the extraordinary amount of 80,000 to 83,000 man-hours, i.e., the "D" check plus the corrosion repair, the company would never get the contract. The engineers, in their philosophical manner, simply stated that this was not their concern, but emphasised that if Qantas Engineering were given the task, that was precisely how long it would take to render the aircraft airworthy once again.

Qantas had also discreetly discovered that other aircraft maintenance opertators were submitting tenders without catering for the corrosion with the thought that their engineers could be pressured into signing a maintenance release after performing a "D" check and not rectifying the corrosion. So, Qantas submitted a tender for the task, and guess what they quoted, yes, 65,000 man-hours for each aircraft. Surprise, surprise, Qantas won the contract.

It would be of no surprise however, that when each aircraft underwent its "D" check, as promised, our engineers refused to release the aircraft unless the major corrosion problems were rectified. So, how long did each check take; 80,000 man-hours! Who paid for the extra 15,000 man-hours? We did of course.

The final analysis was that two freighter aircraft, fresh out of the Qantas hangar, were immediately placed on the market with the tag, "Just overhauled by Qantas". So the professional standards of Qantas servicing were broadcast even further.

Analysis of the Heavy Maintenance Check

The authorisation for each item in a heavy maintenance check came from one of three categories; "D" meaning departmental (both CASA and the manufacturer's authority), "B" meaning highly recommended by the aircraft manufacturer, i.e., Boeing; and "Q" meaning recommended by the operator (in this case Qantas), due to possible survey results on serviceability checks of components or possible survey results of component failures at significant service intervals.

Let us compare these levels of authority with a fleet of motor cars.

- In very simplistic terms, the "D" category may mean those inspections required for a mandatory roadworthy check. In other words, they are legally required to operate the vehicle. In similar, but far more intense terms, the "D" authorised inspection MUST be performed prior to an airworthiness certificate or maintenance release being certified by any Licenced Aircraft Maintenance Engineer.
- Also in simplistic terms, the "B" category, or those inspections highly recommended by the aircraft manufacturer, represent those inspections written into the vehicle servicing schedule, but excluding those required for a roadworthy certificate. If these inspections were not done within the specified time frame or aircraft hours, the aircraft manufacturer would probably be very upset with the airline operator and begin talking about the worth of the contract between the two groups.
- Also, in simplistic terms, the "Q" category represents the small inspections recommended by the operating company due to its evidence of its operating conditions, or endurance trials. By inspecting some additional components at planned opportune times, they could save unplanned or unscheduled rectifications when away from the home base. The same applies for aircraft operators.

So, the obvious question is what proportion of each type of these inspections were written into a normal aircraft "D" check? Well, I concede that I never did an accurate calculation of how many inspection tasks were authorised as a "D" or a "B" or a "Q". However, a reasonable estimate could be about 25% of the tasks would be under the "D" authority, and about 65% of the tasks would be under the "B" authority, and about 10% of the tasks would be under the "Q" authority.

It is widely agreed that the responsible airline operators plan their heavy maintenance around the above principles. However, I was made acutely aware that there are certainly a few operators who would make every attempt to fudge or erase the "B" authorised inspection if and where possible, and certainly would not undertake a programme to include the "Q" inspection without external pressure.

It now needs to be emphasised that even within the world of responsible airline operators, commercial pressure is often brought to bear on maintenance teams to look for ways to trim their maintenance plan.

The Qantas Health Check on B747 Aircraft

A typical example is the following cut back which happened some years ago in Qantas.

Qantas Engineering had a well organised and locally authorised maintenance plan to perform a full high power engine run on all Rolls Royce powered B747 aircraft, inspecting the performance figures over the entire spectrum of all engine operations at every second "A" check. Being a full power engine run, this was planned for the morning after the completion of the "A" check, with a planned afternoon departure. This procedure took some four to six additional hours to achieve. However, the benefits of this check, or in layman's terms, to give the engine a full tune every 1200 hours or ten weeks, were numerous.

The incidence of engine or fuel related components failing at away from home bases were extremely small. The overall aircraft serviceability remained very high.

Then in the early to mid 1990's, the commercial department found that maintenance personnel were performing a four to six hour inspection which was authorised only by a local Qantas Engineering authority. So they then re-wrote the flying pattern so that the ground times for each "A" check were slightly smaller than before, thereby increasing the flying rate significantly and also making it impractical to carry out the bi-monthly engine performance checks.

The result was a marked increase of unscheduled rectifications at line stations, resulting in several delays. Nonetheless, the commercial department were willing to risk the increased rate of unscheduled rectifications for the overall increased flying rate.

Planning the Major Overhaul of Aircraft Landing Gear

As was mentioned previously, I had drawn a draft plan for a section capable of handling the overhaul of all B747-200/300 and 400 aircraft Landing Gears in a production line environment. Sadly this major project was not approved. Therefore, some years later, when a suitable engineering company in the USA had been granted the contract of overhauling all Qantas 747-400 Landing Gear, I was asked to draft a plan for their timely removal and dispatch to the USA. One of the Commercial representatives on this committee was surprised that on receipt of an overhauled Landing Gear, Qantas still had to assemble the Landing Gear from packing crates, replenish all the hydraulic fluids and carry out functional checks prior to installing the gear to the aircraft. He honestly thought the entire Landing Gear would be transported as an assembled component by airfreight from the USA to Sydney. Qantas engineers, in his opinion, would simply have to remove an assembled Landing Gear from the crate and bolt it to the wing. *(It would certainly be a big crate!)* It took some weeks to convince him that his idea was simply not practical!

However, even after drafting a suitable plan with sufficient stagger to accomplish several landing gear replacements with enough gap to cover the overhaul time for each, executive senior management did not accept the plan. Therefore, by the time they accepted the need to actually commence the programme, the first few units were due for overhaul very close to each other. This meant some very close scrutiny of the plan until a stagger could be introduced.

The Stress Between Commercial and Maintenance Departments

The continued pressure between the commercial department and the maintenance department only built up further over the years. I have personally seen engineers of a high standard and expertise almost begging we planners for more ground time on the aircraft so they could perform their tasks in a professional manner. Fortunately, most of the engineers had been given fine examples by their forefathers and would stubbornly refuse to sign any maintenance document unless the task was CORRECT! I still believe this has been the saving grace for the Australian aviation industry, that our aircraft engineers remain dedicated to perfection and will not give in to short cuts just on the pretext of cost-cutting.

Over a long period of time, including both military and commercial aircraft operations, I have always believed that there is no substitute for long term planned maintenance, always erring to the side of the conservative rather than to the policy of replacing upon the component's failure. To that end, I have concluded that in the long term, there is no such thing as "a cheap flight"! Someone has to pay for the heavy maintenance somewhere. Later. I was to learn that similar high principles were to apply in the field of Flight Operations.

Family Milestones

In June 1993, we saw the marriage of our younger daughter. Early in the wedding planning stages, she suggested I contact the nearby RAAF Base at Glenbrook and ask if the wedding reception could be held in their Sergeants' Mess. Well we did ask and permission was granted. It was a chance to plan for a good wedding reception at a reasonable price. So after much planning, in which I ensured both our daughter and her fiance were actively involved, the event came. The wedding was a huge success. During the reception, I had a quite word with our elder daughter and her husband. I wanted to reassure them I hoped they had a good time as this was an attempt to give something to them as well as our younger daughter, as I was very conscious that she didn't receive a reception like this one.

Stress - The First Signs

In late June 1994, just prior to my 50th birthday, I came down with a severe infection of Shingles. When diagnosing a suitable treatment, our family GP also stated this illness was most frequently stress related and I should seek stress counselling through my manager. So, on return to work, my Manager, who I have previously mentioned was a brilliant man with exceptional people skills, had organised an appointment for me with the Company Psychologist. At the first appointment, the whole concept of stress, and stress counselling was outlined and it was explained that the programme may last upward from four to six months.

These counselling sessions began twice weekly, then to weekly, then to fortnightly until the end, completing some five months of counselling. The end result does not prevent the member from experiencing stress, but it enables the member to recognise the symptoms and carry out appropriate exercises to bring the symptoms under control. Toward the end of my programme, it was revealed that some 65% of the personnel from our floor were being counselled for stress management! This then began an inquiry about the supervisory practices of our Principle Planner. A very welcome move.

Search for a Move - Also as Stress Relief

After several years in the position, I was getting itchy feet again and began looking for different type of work. In my search for another position, I submitted so many applications for various positions that there began a local joke in that when another manager decided to employ me it would be to stop the flooding of John's resume across the Jet base and other areas of Qantas.

Highlights of Seven Years in Engineering

Overall, the highlights of my seven years in Qantas Engineering were:

- Early 1989 - drafting suggested improvements for workshop layouts and procedures for a number of support sections, including Chair Maintenance, Wheel and Brakes Servicing and Component Support Maintenance.
- Mid 1989 - Designing a proposed Landing Gear Overhaul Section capable of undertaking the overhaul of all B747-200, 300 and 400 Landing Gear units, sadly not accepted.
- 1991 - Introducing a more productive programme for the overhaul and testing of Aircraft Escape Slides;
- 1991 - Introduced a staggered maintenance programme for many of the then new 747-400 aircraft and engine components; and

- 1994 - Drafted and submitted several long term plans for the introduction of the major overhaul and servicing of B747-400 Landing Gear units. As the first overhaul of many of these units would fall due within a short space of time, the proposed plan called for a staggered maintenance space between units. Sadly, many of these plans were rejected by senior management, thereby resulting of rushing the first few Landing Gear units through their overhaul as they became due almost within a few months of one another.
- During the six year period in the Aircraft Allocation and Maintenance Planning section, I was the only planner to gain expertise in every part and function within the entire section.

Flight Operations - A Whole New World

The Application and Interview

In late June 1995, I applied for a position within Flight Operations to maintains all the Operations Manuals carried on board the flight deck of Qantas aircraft. My hopes were boosted when I was called for an interview for the position. I can remember putting all my efforts into this one interview, i.e., the best suit, spit polished shoes, having spare copies of my resume available and arriving slightly early for the appointment. The interview, in front of a panel of three, lasted nearly 90 minutes and I really tried hard to convince them I wanted the job.

To my complete surprise, in early July I was notified that my application had been successful and that my new manager would negotiate a starting date with my present manager. After some wheeling and dealing, it was agreed that I would start the new position on Wednesday 02 August.

Initial Acceptance into Flight Operations

At the time, I joined a small band of Technical Officers each of whom were dedicated to one type of aircraft within the Qantas International fleet. Their role was to maintain a suite of manuals which were carried on the Flight Deck on their respective aircraft and used by the Flight Crew during flight. These manuals included Operations Manuals, Quick Reference Handbooks (QRH) (to be used in cases of aircraft system unserviceabilities or other non-normal situations), Flight Crew Training Manuals, and various Performance Manuals. The greater majority of their work would be with the Operations Manuals (including the QRH), and the Flight Crew Training Manual.

The section maintained a current copy of the Boeing manual for each aircraft type as well as the master copy of the Qantas manual for each aircraft type. When Boeing issued amendments to their manuals, or if CASA issued a change of procedural policy on Australian flight procedures, or if Qantas Flight Operations decided to improve the quality of their flight procedures, any of the above could generate an amendment to one or more of the Qantas Operations Manuals suite.

As I had been appointed to be the Technical Officer for the B747-400 aircraft suite of manuals, I spend several weeks becoming familiar with the suite of manuals for that aircraft as well meeting various aircraft captains from this fleet. During this period, I was somewhat overwhelmed by the close attention and the support being given to me by these highly qualified senior captains. The experience was quite humbling and certainly shaped my attitudes for the rest of my time within Flight Operations. The fact that these men were willing to give me their unqualified support became so meaningful that I would certainly make every effort to give my all in return.

After being introduced around the department, I met the Technical Manager for the B747-400 fleet, a Captain whose fame had somewhat preceded him. He was Captain David Massy-Greene, who had captained the first Qantas B747-400 aircraft from London to Sydney non-stop. In my early years in the section, he became somewhat of a mentor to me. I also recognised that his workload was far more than average, yet he was always willing to coach me in my role. He explained early in the piece very simply how the various manuals are used:

- The Flight Crew Training Manual, as its name implies, explains to a pilot ***how*** to fly the aircraft, including any particular ideosynchasies of the aircraft;
- The Operations Manual assumes the pilot has learnt how to fly the aircraft and therefore explains to the pilot how to ***operate*** the aircraft within the parameters of safe flight and various regulated flight envelopes.
- The Quick Reference Handbook (QRH) is used by the pilot in any non-normal situations, including aircraft unserviceabilities, or unusual external circumstances.

As I became more familiar with the working life of Flight Operations, I also learnt how their policies and procedures were strictly monitored as was the change process where change was required. My respect for the Qantas way of flying just grew and grew.

In the following months, my learning curve continued as I attempted to draw in knowledge of the 747-400 aircraft and its systems. I was indeed fortunate to have an excellent and very patient tutor in my Technical Manager, as well as enjoying an excellent rapport with the 747-400 Flight Crew. To this day, I am in awe at their willingness to share their knowledge and their support for me.

My First Formal Training Course in Flight Operations

For some months after starting within the section, my manager had tried to enroll me into a B747-400 "Pilot Under Initial Training (PUIT)" course. Completion of this course was also part of the requirements of this position. However, as the people in the Flight Training section explained, we had to wait until their were an odd number of pilots on a particular course so I could make the even number.

Then in May 1996, a position came up for me to enter the course. The course would occupy a full four weeks, including several after hours flight simulator sessions, and would commence in early June 1996. The course initially had a minimum entry level of a Commercial Pilot's Licence, but preferably a pilot who had flown an earlier B747 aircraft.

So with my ground crew background and particularly that of an Armourer, I was told to expect a learning curve similar to that of drinking from a fire hose! I was one of six students, which for the sake of Flight Simulator exercises, were divided into three pairs. The other five were qualified holders of Commercial Pilot's Licences, on their introduction course to become a Qantas pilot. So I became the "Crash Buddy" for the No 5 pilot of the course. Actually, it was an amazing incentive to study harder as I didn't want to be a burden to my crash buddy and hold him back from achieving his acceptance of becoming a Qantas pilot.

Prior to the enviable sessions in the Flight Simulator, we were given audio visual studies of all the different flight systems of the B747-400 aircraft. It was interesting to view them from a Flight Crew perspective rather than an engineering perspective as I had done before. Many of these studies were accomplished in our own time, yet we, ie, the two students in each team, had to view the audio-visual together at Flight Training and discuss what we had learnt from that day's studies. We also had to learn the complete layout of the 747-400 flight deck and learn off by heart the First Officer's preflight. For the pilots, this was simply part of their routine, but as I had been accustomed to checklists for just about everything, this preflight became quite a task for me. When setting up the Flight Management Computer on the brown bomber, (the imitation flight deck and instrument panel), I admit to having a small checklist of my own! The instructors knew this of course and showed considerable empathy to me! It was an enormous workload but most rewarding.

Then about 40% through the course, the flight simulator part of the course began. Whilst these exercises were amazingly enjoyable, they were also very exacting. In most cases the flight plan was between two major Australian cities, e.g., SYD-MEL or SYD-BNE, and between the two of us, we would control the whole flight, including instructions from Air Traffic Control to change course due to weather or traffic or sometimes with an unserviceable aircraft, etc. Many times during Flight Simulator sessions, I would be asked to revise the Flight Management Computer settings, and to an old dog like me, this was not a quick few seconds task as it is for the pilots. The instructors showed an incredible amount of empathy and patience with me! The Flight Simulator sessions were very exacting and amazingly enjoyable!

However, at the end of the four weeks, I sat for my exams with the rest of the pilots and just scraped through. After our exams, I went back to my section, and the other five went on to further and deeper courses.

A Comprehensive Job Description

To give an idea on the comprehensive nature of this position, here is a brief rundown of the duties of the position:

- To control and analyse proposed changes that affect Technical Crew operating procedures, to recommend action to vary or change them, and to authorise the final content for publication in consultation with the General Manager Flight Technical;
- To evaluate manufacturer's revised operating procedures, to analyse their effects upon Qantas Flight Operations, and to provide recommendations to the General Manager Flight Technical;
- To manage and control the required circulation of draft revisions to Aircraft Operations manuals seeking comment from Flight supervisory staff;
- To assist as required in acceptance testing and delivery procedures for new and modified company aircraft; and
- To participate in Flight Operations meetings, acting as a Secretary where necessary in probably one or two of these, including but not limited to Operations Procedures Committee, Operations Engineering Committee, Flight Standards and Procedures Review Board, ensuring that committee members are properly briefed regarding proposed changes.

Restructure of the Technical Officers

In 1997 the make-up of the section changed significantly, with we Technical Officers being required to performing much more of the investigative work behind the revision process. I could sense the position becoming more and more technical. We Technical Officers were given a new title of “Flight Technical Coordinator” and also given a much increased technical scope.

In early 1998, a new position of Senior Flight Technical Coordinator was granted on the condition it was performed by one of the incumbent Flight Technical Coordinators. At the time there were four of us in the team, of which two were far more experienced and senior to I. Personally, I felt that the position should have been independent and not simply one of the incumbents. So, believing one of the Coordinators senior to me would be chosen and also as I considered the job description to be rather heavy workload for an incumbent, I didn't submit an application. The position called for administrative coverage of the Technical Coordinators, e.g., leave, courses, etc, as well as ensuring all generic operational procedures were incorporated concurrently into all the manuals of the different aircraft types. However, there were numerous times in the following weeks, when the then Manager Human Resources and my own Manager asked me for my application. So on the closing day of the position, I quickly wrote an application by hand without giving it to much detail. Then about a week later, I was asked to re-phrase some of the words on my application and hand it back. Surprise, surprise, I was given the position.

Family News - Our Son Joins Qantas

At the end of 1997, our son completed his Year 12 examinations (Higher School Certificate) at Blaxland High School. Instead of going out to end of school parties, etc, he volunteered to work as a "work experience" worker at Qantas Holidays in North Sydney. He was informed that as he was no longer under the control of the Education Department, he would have to pay for his own Workers Compensation Insurance and Security checks. This he did and he commenced working at Qantas Holidays the very Monday after his last HSC examination. Apparently during his first week, most of the permanent employees simply regarded him as 'just another work experience kid'. However, after his third and fourth week there, they became concerned. The supervisor explained he could not offer him a position unless one was formally published, but explained there would be something in the mill. So, a position of a Qantas Holidays sales representative was advertised just before Christmas 1997. He applied, was interviewed by the supervisor who had seen him the past four weeks and was accepted. So, do not ever under estimate the value of work experience!

Early Signs of Stress Appearing Again

During this time, as a result of my desire to be more active in the community, I had been elected to the Committee of the Blue Mountains Vietnam Veterans Association and I had also been elected to be a Deacon of the local Baptist Church where we were worshipping. While both of these were rewarding activities, when combined with my now increased workload the combination was punishing.

In mid 1998, Qantas agreed to purchase three used 747-400 aircraft from other airlines in the Pacific region. As the engines and avionics configuration of these aircraft were significantly different to our existing 747-400 aircraft, numerous changes were required to both the Maintenance Manual and the Operations Manual, the latter being my responsibility. It was an enormous workload, with deadlines almost seemingly unachievable. However, with many 55 and 60 hour weeks and some considerable help from a couple of willing Pilots, we just made the deadline and published the revised manual immediately prior to the newly purchased aircraft entering commercial service.

In July 1998, I was granted the privilege of flying to Singapore with the 747-400 Training Manager and his crew to pick up this 747-400 aircraft the company had purchased. I commented to the crew that even though I had been on a considerable number of deployments, this would be the first time I had ever stayed at a hotel at someone else's expense. On our arrival at the crew hotel, I met many other Qantas Flight Crew who were on their rest period at Singapore prior to flying to other destinations. Well I was taken around the town like a VIP guest! Except a few of the young Second Officers were a little cheeky. They asked me when I was last in Singapore for any length of time, and I replied April 1968. They then asked if that was when the Japanese were there! Ha ha.

One of the privileges I had in this position is to go on a Familiarisation flight with our Flight Crew on the flight deck for a couple of sectors. This usually occurs once or perhaps twice per year. In late 2001, I went with a Flight Crew on a flight from Sydney to Cairns, returning straight away to Sydney. I noticed during this flight that my hearing has deteriorated to such an extent that I had great difficulty hearing what they said to one another and I was just three feet behind them! Many of the pilots used the practice of wearing the headset on only one ear, leaving the inboard ear uncovered for conversation within the flight deck. I found I could either wear the headset on both ears or not al all. If I used their method, I found I could hear neither communication from the headset, not voices on the flight deck! Not only that, the First Officer, on hearing I was ex RAAF, asked if I knew his father. When the name was mentioned, yes he had flown Sabres and Mirages during the 1960s and 1970s, retiring as a senior officer not too long back. Made one feel quite old.

Examples of Conflict between Commercial and Operations

The following incident is an example of how the Commercial Department of an airline can ride roughshot, or try to ride, over the safety of the Operations Department.

During one winter's skiing season, one of the commercial managers was on leave in Queenstown, New Zealand. Whilst there, he saw an Air New Zealand B737 taking off from Queenstown Airport. He thought, "We have B737s, why can't we operate out of Queenstown direct like the kiwis?" *(Had he have asked, he would have discovered the Air New Zealand B737 was flying from Queenstown to Dunedin, a short flight indeed)*. Without any further investigation or seeking any operational authority, he returned to Sydney and suggested Qantas sell tickets for direct flights from Sydney to Queenstown return.

Flight Planning then had considerable difficulty creating a flight plan, as the Queenstown airport runway was not long enough to take a B737 with the fuel load required for a flight to Sydney. The General Manager of the Commercial Department was invited to witness several simulated B737 Takeoff Procedures in a Flight Simulator by the cream of the B737 pilots. These simulated flights proved that a B737, with a full passenger load, no cargo, and the required fuel for Queenstown - Sydney, simply could not manage a safe takeoff from the Queenstown runway, even with maximum power. The runway was simply not long enough. Yet, the commercial department still went ahead with the ticket sales.

Even after dozens of simulator flights, and several attempts by Flight Operations to get Commercial to cancel the idea, alas in vain, the Operations Department then placed a weight penalty on each return flight, significantly reducing the maximum passenger and baggage weight in order for the aircraft gross weight at takeoff to be within the safety limits for takeoff. So, when about 55% of the seats had been sold for each flight to Sydney, the flight was deemed as FULL. This was the only way flight safety could be maintained.

Fortunately, the Chief Pilot and the Operations Department of Qantas carried enough weight and authority to force the weight penalty. On many other small 'budget' airlines, such a penalty may not have resulted, probably with terrible consequences.

Long Service Leave - Our First Overseas Flight with Qantas

In September 1998, I had just gone past my ten years in Qantas and was therefore entitled to a free trip with Qantas Staff Travel. My wife and I had planned a wonderful overseas trip including three coach tours in Europe and in the UK. Of all our vacations, this trip will go down as one of the best. We were out of the country for about nine weeks and saw a great deal of central Europe, a flying tour of England, Wales and Scotland, ending the tour with a magnificent tour from London to Rome.

Introduction of Electronic Manuals into Flight Operations

In 1999 Boeing began to publish its manuals in an electronic format and invited airline operators to receive the electronic manual instead of the traditional hard copy. Boeing then informed us that the B747-400 would be the first aircraft type to receive the new electronic manual. As the 747-400 was my fleet, I became the guinea pig for the electronic manuals.

The learning curve for me to become an operator of this new publishing medium was enormous. Basically, my first edition of this manual was a transcript of the Boeing manual with the few approved Qantas differences included. Initially, I was using the electronic system as a word processing and publishing medium only. It was not until a few years later that I managed to learn how to use the system to create a proper electronic manual, with the search and reference properties enjoyed by the electronic means in the Adobe format.

Following the publication of the 747-400 Operations Manuals in the Adobe format, other aircraft were introduced to the same system. The other Flight Technical Coordinators, being younger and quicker on the computer than I, managed to gain their expertise on the Adobe system somewhat faster than I did.

In fact, one of the other Technical Coordinators tried to pay me a compliment on my computer skills. I do know his intentions were honourable, but it just didn't come out right! He said, "John, I think your computer skills are very good for someone your age!"

Visit to the Boeing Plant in Seattle, WA.

In January 2000, I had the very fortunate privilege of being invited to accompany my Manager to the Boeing plant in Seattle, WA, as part of the Qantas team to inspect, test fly, and take delivery of a new 747-400 aircraft. At my Manager's invitation, my wife accompanied me on this trip, so I quickly organised to pay for her Staff Travel flights.

While I went to work at Boeing each day with my Manager, my wife had the run of the city with some of the other ladies, did shopping and had a wonderful time. Meanwhile, I had the most rewarding task of meeting my compatriots in Boeing Flight Operations, discussing some real issues with them in a one on one basis. I then accompanied our test pilots in the ground checks and test flights of the aircraft.

As mentioned above, during my short visit to the Boeing Flight Operations section, I had the privilege of discussing several Operations Manual topics with the relevant managers. I found this most humbling as these men were at the top of their league, yet willing to listen to my input and then discuss the Boeing policy and procedures in their respective field with me. On one occasion I was to discover that the man sitting before me answering my questions was none other than the Chief Test Pilot for the Boeing company. It was really enlightening and humbling to be able to discuss various topics of the manual with the people who actually wrote the manual!

After about 11 days and nights in Seattle, we flew in the new aircraft direct from Seattle to Avalon in Victoria where the aircraft was to undergo some modification work prior to entering commercial service. All in all, it was a most rewarding an unforgettable trip for both my wife and I.

Flight Simulator Exercises - as an Observer

Although the Flight Technical Coordinators had each completed a Pilot Under Initial Training (PUIT) course within Flight Training, it was rather impractical to expect each of us to attend refresher courses at the Flight Simulator as the pilots were required to do. So, as the Senior Flight Technical Coordinator, I arranged for each Coordinator to be placed on a roster to attend a Licence renewal session at the simulator for their type of aircraft at least three times per year.

This proved to be popular and of significant advantage, not only for we coordinators, but for the Flight Crew as well. It increased the quality of the rapport between the Technical Coordinators and the Flight Crew. These sessions gave us a magnificent knowledge and exposure into the highly complex world of pilot training in the simulator. To be able to witness the training and the complex testing when they are under extreme pressure was certainly a privilege I'll not forget.

I was always impressed with the most professional manner in which these flight simulator sessions were conducted. Some of the test sequences really placed the pilots under considerable pressure as they navigated their way through aircraft unserviceabilities, system failures, non-normal landing configurations, and testing their expertise to some length.

Yet, the examiner was never condescending, always encouraging, ensuring the pilots always benefited from their simulator session.

One pleasant side advantage of these simulator observations was the chance to fly the simulator. On a number of occasions, at the end of their training session, I was given the chance to fly the B747-400 Flight Simulator on a few circuits at different airports of Australia. I was quite impressed at just how light and sensitive the flight controls were for such a large aircraft. Just when I thought I was becoming reasonably fluent at flying a circuit in the big aircraft, they gave me a simulated No 4 engine failure whilst departing Cairns airport to the south! For an instant, as part of my recovery procedure, I used the wrong direction of rudder, before quickly correcting. It was a close call, those hills became very close!

Qantas Leases another Aircraft

During 2000, once again Qantas had agreed to obtain another aircraft from another airline, this time a leased aircraft from British Airways. Once again as the avionics of the nominated aircraft were considerably different to that of our own aircraft fleet, there was a mammoth amount of work to do to ensure the Operations Manuals gave an accurate description of the newly leased aircraft. This time sad to say, I just about folded up into a worn out heap by the end of the year.

In this case, the work became particularly difficult as the Qantas Commercial managers expressed difficulty in understanding how the lease aircraft was considerably different to the Qantas fleet of B747-400 aircraft. Just because the lease aircraft had Rolls Royce engines like the Qantas aircraft, they thought it must be the same. However, this aircraft used navigation and instrument software which was significantly different from our Qantas aircraft. So, we had to use enormous pressure and persuasion to obtain company authority to have the lease aircraft fitted with the same GPS, SATCOM, etc as our Qantas aircraft.

I was attempting to carry out the extra duties of the Senior, the additional work appropriate to the acquisition of this leased aircraft and attempt to contribute to my community within the Church and the Vietnam Veterans. Looking back, it was little wonder the body folded up with emotional and physical exhaustion.

More Signs of Stress and Requesting Help

As a result of this stress, at the end of the year 2000, I regretfully resigned from both the Church Diaconate and the Committee of the Vietnam Veterans Association. Even then by the end of 2001, I was still a stressed out mess. I applied to my Manager for some type of part time work and considering the worldwide upheaval within the airline industry during 2001; the management of Flight Operations were still able to approve a new part time position to which I was appointed in February 2002. I was indeed fortunate to be offered this position and continued support.

The visible signs of my stress were the frequency of simple yet silly mistakes in my work, particularly in drafting proposed amendments to a manual, or in the writing of minutes of a meeting. Also, there were times when my written correspondence, usually via e-mail, to other Technical Officers, or at times to support pilots, was not very polite. Instead of expressing a view which may have encouraged them to change their opinion on a certain task, my written words ended up quite offensive. Fortunately, management saw these errors as quite 'out of character' for me, therefore showing considerable empathy toward me as I continued with my counselling sessions and supporting me as far as they could until my retirement.

Also, I was finding it very difficult to prioritise tasks given to me. Many of these tasks were of routine importance, but I would feel overwhelmed and unable to assess their required manhours and thereby allocate an appropriate time frame. Subsequently, procrastination would set in, and then some of these routine tasks would become important as their target date grew closer and I would panic as I had not commenced that particular task.

So, in February 2002, I was appointed to a Part Time position within the Flight Technical branch. My duties were restricted to the publishing and upkeep of just one manual, the department's Policy and Administration Manual. My secretarial duties were also limited to just one meeting, a huge relief.

For my stress counselling this time, I went to a consultant Psychiartrist on the recommendation of a Welfare Officer of the Vietnam Veterans Association. He explained that I was experiencing a form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at an age common to a number of Vietnam Veterans. So began a lengthy but productive association with the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Highlights of Flight Operations

Over my eight years in Flight Operations, the notable highlights were:

- June 1996 - my four weeks of intense study at the 747-400 Pilots Initial Training Course;
- May - September 1998; Incorporation of the GE powered aircraft into the 747-400 Operations Manual, including the delivery flight of the first aircraft;
- Our Long Service Leave trip to the UK and Europe;
- June - September 1999; Importation of the first Qantas Operations Manual from the old "white paper" copy into the electronic Adobe "FrameMaker" version and thence maintaining these manuals in their electronic format;
- January 2000; Member of the delivery team at the Boeing plant at Seattle, WA, to participate in the acceptance tests, test flight, and the delivery flight of the new aircraft to Sydney; and
- July - October 2000; Incorporation of the lease aircraft from British Airways into the 747-400 Operations Manual.
- Overall, I was always impressed with the young, yet highly qualified men and women within the Flight Operations branch. They were mostly tertiary qualified, yet never condescending toward me. Many of the pilots, particularly the younger ones, were tertiary qualified and yet always ready to listen to any advice I had for their manuals. I was quite flattered at this point that these men and women, who were far more qualified than I, were willing to listen to an older chap like me, who could only give them a small piece of my expertise in aviation.

Early Retirement

My work productivity had been observed over several months to see how I was coping with the Part Time obligations. It could be seen that whilst my performance was slightly better than when I was in the Full Time position, my part time role could not last too much longer. In August 2003, and with my doctor's recommendation, I submitted my request for retirement from Qantas, to take effect from mid September 2003.

September duly arrived and I was farewelled in style. I had achieved just over fifteen years service in Qantas in three departments, the workshops, Maintenance Planning and finally Flight Operations. Who would have guessed back in 1960 that this young naive apprentice Armourer would one day be writing Operations Manuals for Qantas Pilots?

However, there is one topic of most considerable regret. I was given a magnificent dinner in the city and several people spoke highly of me, yet, I had not prepared a response. Yes, procrastination had reared its ugly head again. I didn't even stand up to respond; I just sat there, glued to the seat with fear, mentioned a few points of appreciation from my seat and it was over. Afterwards, I was so ashamed, but by then it was too late.

Following my retirement from Qantas, we sold our home at Emu Heights and moved to the outer northern suburbs of Brisbane where we built our new home.

Intentionally
Blank

Motor Cars - The Good, Bad and Others

It seems prudent at this stage to talk about the cars which seemed to run my life. *(Don't they control the lives of so many young lads?)* If there is anything I inherited from my father, it was the love of a fine motorcar, and the willingness to trade one motorcar for another without too much forethought of economic consequences.

Purchasing my First Car

During the months of May and June 1961, whilst still a Second Year apprentice, I wrote to my Mother about the idea of my purchasing a motor car as I was to turn 17 during the forthcoming June Leave. She was horrified that some sleazy salesman would sell my a bomb and it would end up being the death of me. So a long standing family friend, yes the same one who suggested I try the RAAF Apprenticeship Scheme, searched for a suitable vehicle for me to start with.

The Early Years - 1961 to 1965

In these short years there were no less than five motorcars in my inventory. To give a short run down on each, here they are with a short commentary:

- July 1961 - Morris 6 sedan (1951 model).
- July 1962 - Riley 1 1/2 litre sedan (1951 model).
- January 1963 - Ford Zephyr Sedan Mk 1 (1953 model).
- January 1964 - Simca Aronde sedan (1960 model).
- April 1964 - Austin A90 Westminster sedan (1957 model).

The Morris 6, my first car, had the same body as the famous Wolseley 6/80, used by the British police in the early 1950's, otherwise called a poor man's Wolseley. It was driven fairly hard over the 12 months I owned it and I also carried out a replacement "Rings and Bearings" on it twice in that period. But it was a hardy beast and very suitable as a first car.

John's First Motorcar - 1951 Morris 6 - July 1961

The Riley was a classy motor car, even if it was a little under-powered. Just a shame that as some of the early British cars did, it had a wooden sub-frame in the upper body. Therefore, it didn't take some of the rough roads around Wagga too kindly. Also on the trip from Wagga to Brisbane after graduation, we just arrived home as the oil ran out and I spent the next two weeks over-hauling the engine prior to selling it.

John's Riley - August 1962

On my arrival at Amberley as a new tradesman, I also started with a new car, the Zephyr. This covered a lot of mileage around the south-east of Queensland and was a good robust car. Sadly, I rolled it in April of 1963 with my mother travelling in the car behind. I also tried my hand at spray painting and repainted it a nice two tone dark and pastel grey.

Remember the little french Simca? This little fiery sedan was powered by a small 1300cc overhead valve engine, yet could go like a little rocket. The only drawback for the Simca, was that it kept on blowing cylinder head gaskets! I owned it for only four months, yet the cylinder head was off some three to four occasions replacing the gasket and shaving just a bit more off the alloy head.

From a little Simca to a big Austin A90 Westminster. To me in those days, this was a large sedan. It had a large 2.7 litre 6 cylinder engine and weighed nearly 1 1/2 tons. Still, even though I reconditioned the engine just once, it was probably the best sedan I owned in those early years. It was strong, yet a good tourer on trips.

John's Family at a picnic with the Austin A90 - October 1964

In September 1965, prior to I departing to Malaysia with my new wife, I sold the reliable old Austin and hoped to buy something better over there.

Motoring in Malaysia - 1965 to 1968

After hearing all the stories about how RAAF men had brought home these exotic motorcars, we soon found out that if one wanted to do that, one had to decide almost straight away. As we didn't have the money to purchase a new car, we sadly elected not to buy a Mercedes or Volvo, etc.

Most Australian servicemen who didn't buy a new car, bought a little second hand British motor car. There were literally hundreds of Hillman Minx, Morris Minor and Austin cars of around the early 1950's vintage. For our entire three year stay in Malaysia, we purchased just two motor cars, covering a period of about eight months, and the remaining period, we hired a car if the need arose. Our two cars we purchased were:

- October 1965 - Austin A40 two door (1949 model); and
- December 1965 - Vauxhall Cresta (1961 model).

We bought the small Austin A40 for a mere $150.00 Malay. I was very silly, as I sold it only a few months later. the car did need a bit of work on the brakes and some body areas, and I wasn't aware that labour was so cheap. If these tasks were done, it would have been the perfect runabout for the whole time we were there.

However, in January 1966, we bought a nice Vauxhall Cresta, 1961 model. But to do so, we borrowed about half of the price. Yes it was a nice car, but superfluous for our needs. Also, the loan was outrageous and we had to sell the car to clear the debt.

John's Vauxhall Cresta in Penang - December 1965

Therefore, we did without a car for the remainder of our tour. This was the result of our mistake in buying the Vauxhall instead of keeping the little Austin.

So, thankfully, hiring of motorcars was not too expensive, and if we needed one, we simply went to the car hire place in the next block and took one of his. He had quite a range, from the usual Toyotas, Nissans, etc, to a couple of late model Volvos, and sometimes a Mercedes. So, one got the chance to drive a variety of cars.

Post Malaysia - 1968 to 1972

Following my return from Malaysia in October 1968, I was most embarrassed as I was one of very few people who returned to Australia broke, yes, broke. There were just two cars in this period:

- October 1968 - Austin A50 Cambridge sedan (1956 model); and
- March 1969 - Ford Falcon XP Station Wagon (1966 model).

So, my first car I bought back in Melbourne was an Austin A50 Cambridge sedan (1956 model) for about A$150. It was an underpowered little car that was really showing its age. We drove it for some months, yet I was always purchasing some spare parts for it almost every couple of weeks.

So, in March 1969, we borrowed some money and bought a Ford Falcon XP Station Wagon, 1966 model. Considering that we were into the dog shows while living in Melbourne, this Falcon Wagon was an outstanding car. I believe we must have driven more than 65,000 miles in the three years I had it. In fact, on my return from Vietnam, the Falcon was still there but now showing signs of being worse for wear. In fact, while I was away, some friends of my wife's informed her that the Falcon's engine needed an overhaul. So these people commenced to remove the engine and send in various major assemblies for reconditioning. On my return, I found an assembled engine sitting beside the car as no-one could be bothered to re-install the engine. Therefore, my first functions on return was to fit the engine to the car. Sadly, the Falcon was never the same after that.

Single Again - 1972 - 1976

I may have been single, but I certainly didn't have the cash flow required for fancy single living. In this period, there were three motor cars, not including the Falcon I drove up from Melbourne. These were:

- June 1972 - Morris 1100 sedan (1968 model);
- May 1973 - Mercedes Benz 220S sedan (1963 model); and
- October 1975 - Peugeot 504 Sedan (Brand New).

When I traded the Falcon, I knew I would not fetch a good price as it was in very poor condition by this time. The body had received a few scrapes, and the drive train was showing some very visible signs of wear. Therefore, I was fairly limited in my choice of my next car. A friend had driven a Morris 1100 and found them very economical, while being reasonably nippy around town. So, I found on in fairly good condition and traded the Falcon for the Morris in May 1972.

Deep down, ever since my father has owned his Mercedes back in the mid 1950's, I had always wanted to own a Benz. I noticed that by the early 1970's, some of them were selling for affordable prices. In early 1973, I just missed a really good Mercedes 190 sedan, which sold for about $1500. A few weeks after that, I was told of a Mercedes 220S on the market for about $1500. So I went to inspect it. The company was in the business of buying and restoring old Mercedes cars. In their shop where this one was for sale, there was also a fully reconditioned Benz 220S for sale for about $3,500. I felt I couldn't afford that, so I was offered one that had just come into their yard. I could buy it "as is" for just $1,500. Like a very foolish chap, I bought the cheap one.

Yes, the Benz was a beautiful car to drive, but in the 2 1/4 years I owned it, I spent nearly $3,000 on it. Even so, I still managed to travel nearly 60,000 miles in it over some 30 months. It took me on several Canberra - Brisbane trips to see my mother, as well as general touring around the ACT. The Mercedes agent in Canberra and I had discussed the probable history of the car; the odometer showed at this time about 76,000 miles and it was about 42,000 when I bought it. Therefore, we tried to decide whether the real mileage was 176,000 or 276,000 miles. So, I should have bought the reconditioned one in the first place.

John's Mercedes Benz 220S - December 1973

Then, by mid 1975, the body condition of the Benz had deteriorated to the extent that it would not have passed the next Registration roadworthy inspection. I also found that by then I couldn't afford to buy another Benz in good condition as most Mercedes agents were readily able to correctly assess the true condition of my Benz. So in October 1975, I borrowed some serious money and bought a brand new Peugeot 504, my first new car.

John with Margaret & girls and the Peugeot 504 - December 1975

For their day, the Peugeot was way ahead of their time. They had a very reliable wet sleeve two litre motor, independent suspension all round, and disc brakes on all four wheels, quite uncommon for that day. By the time Margaret and were married in June 1976, the Peugeot was only nine months old and it had about 30,000km on the clock! I had done about five Sydney - Brisbane trips plus numerous day trips around the Sydney region.

Married Again - 1976 to 1984

In this period, from the time Margaret and I were married until the time I left the RAAF, there were no less than six motor cars and one Utility. These were:

- October 1976, sold the Peugeot privately to try and buy a house;
- October 1976, purchased, privately, a Fiat 1500 sedan (1964 model) for just $500;
- November 1976, traded the Fiat for a Toyota Crown (1970 model);
- January 1978, traded the Crown for a Toyota Corona Station Wagon (1976 model);
- February 1983, after selling our house in Booval and moving back into a Married Quarter, purchased a Toyota Tarago wagon (Brand New);
- August 1983, Bought Honda Zot two door as a 2nd car while Tarago was being repaired after a serious accident;
- June 1984, sold the beloved Tarago to help pay for our block of land;
- September 1984, traded the Honda for a Toyota Corolla sedan (1979 model); and
- September 1984, just prior to leaving the RAAF, we bought a Mazda one ton drop side utility to help in the building of our home and with the promise of a job at “Nu-Steel” engineering.

As stated above, when Margaret and I were first married and living in Springwood, we thought if we sold the Peugeot, it may fetch a reasonable price which would help us with a deposit for a house. We were right on the first count, the Peugeot sold for A$7,200, just $1,500 less than its brand new price 11 months earlier. However, we were not fortunate enough to purchase a house at that time, so placed our names on the list for a RAAF Married Quarter and looked for a cheap motorcar. We looked at several, some I was willing to inspect, but as Margaret was also expected to drive it as well, they were ruled out. Finally, we looked at a small Fiat 1500, for just $500. Yes it was cheap, but I was had! There were a dozen electrical problems plus numerous body defects.

So very quickly, we traded the Fiat for a reliable sedan. This was the 1970 Toyota Crown sedan. This was to be the first of many Toyotas in our family. It was quite a sizeable sedan and very smooth to drive. It lasted for 15 months before developing gearbox problems. Margaret didn’t like the prospect of repairing the gearbox, so we looked around for a trade.

The Toyota Corona wagon was a hugely successful car for us. In the six years we owned it, over postings in three states of Australia, we covered nearly 150,000km. It may not have been a hot performer, but the Corona was immensely reliable, I always ensured the servicings were carried out on time, and always changed the oil and filter every 5,000km. By the time we sold it, the compression had decreased a little, but still very reliable.

Toyota Corona & Trailer - Adelaide - December 1978

The Toyota Tarago was our first new car as a married couple. We had just sold a house due to an imminent posting, and also as our family was growing, the larger vehicle was required. Our Tarago was one of the first release, February 1983. Some people thought they were underpowered, but as we had never owned powerful cars before, we didn't mind. Sadly, when the Tarago was only five months old, we had a serious accident in it just three blocks from home. On a small intersection, a small old Corolla smashed into us from our left at considerable speed. The tarago was out for nearly three months.

Toyota Tarago after crash - July 1983

Toyota Tarago at Campsite - December 1983

To provide some transport for us while the Tarago was being repaired, we looked for a small inexpensive car. We saw a little Honda Zot which Margaret fell for straight away. So for a mere $1,000, it was ours. It was incredible! This had a water cooled Honda two cylinder 360cc four stroke engine. Up to about 80km per hour, or around the suburbs, it was a very nippy little car.

In 1984, when we made the decision to leave the RAAF, we elected to sell the Tarago to pay off the block of land we had purchased at Eatons Hill. Sadly, we sold the beloved Tarago, even though the sale went to a good cause. As the little Zot was not suitable as the family car, we traded it on a Toyota Corolla. Like its larger brother the Corona, the Corolla was a very reliable car.

Toyota Corolla at Eatons Hill - July 1984

Just before leaving the RAAF, and with the promise of a job with "Nu-Steel Engineering" I bought a Mazda One Ton drop side 2.2 litre diesel Utility in good condition. This was supposed to be helpful for my role in the company, as well as being a useful vehicle to have when building our home. Sadly, the job did not eventuate, as the Manager pulled out of his commitment and left me unemployed. However, the Mazda Utility proved itself to be very useful when building our home. It was a genuine One Tonner! On one occasion, with 30 bags of cement, (25 bags to a ton), plus a few steel components, etc, the Mazda simply settled down and brought it all home smoothly.

When the home was completed and I was then employed with Bell at Eagle Farm, having the utility was a two car luxury we could not afford, so we sold the Mazda privately. This was the only vehicle we sold for a profit. We purchased the Mazda for some $3,600, and sold it some nine months later for $5,400. We then used the Corolla as our family car.

Post Service Life - 1987 to 2003

In this period of just over 16 years, there were just five motorcars. So my yearning for fine motorcars must have been starting to slow. Of course, in later married life, there is a much different budget to keep. These cars were:

- September 1987 - Toyota Tarago DX (1983 model);
- April 1989 - Mazda 323 sedan hatchback (1984 model);
- June 1992 - Mazda 121 sedan (Brand New);
- November 1998 - Toyota Camry (1991 model); and
- December 2003 - Toyota Kluger AWD Wagon (Brand New).

When we were living at Eatons Hill, Margaret's parents came to visit two or three times per year. However, as they had stopped interstate driving by this time, they travelled up to us by rail. Therefore, we found that the small Corolla, as reliable as it was, was simply not suitable to take them around. So we looked out for a second hand Tarago. (Several times, we wished we had not sold our other Tarago in 1984). We found a Tarago in good condition, albeit a standard DX model without air-conditioning, so we bought it.

Toyota Tarago - Camping on Stradbroke Island - December 1987

The Tarago served us for the rest of our stay in Queensland, and our move to Sydney. However, when I was working in the Qantas workshops and the early shift starts began, I knew I had to start driving to work. It seemed that the Tarago was a large vehicle for just one man to drive to work. So, I visited my fellow Vietnam Veteran Ray Boyle who was the director of Penrith Mazda and asked if there was a suitable car for our budget. So, we bought the Mazda 323 sedan. It was a five speed manual transmission, but very easy to drive. It served us well, and did many Penrith to Mascot trips for me. Later, when I was doing shift work in Maintenance Planning, the little Mazda did well for all those trips.

In 1992, Margaret was starting to notice that her Arthritis had affected her knees to the extent that it was difficult for her to operate the clutch of the Mazda, even though it was a light one to operate. So, another visit to our friend Ray Boyle at Penrith Mazda. Initially, I asked him to be on the look out for another Mazda 323 or a Mazda 626 Automatic in good condition. However, he asked who would drive the vehicle the most, and we said Margaret, so he showed us a new Mazda 121, yes the Mazda "Bubble" car. It was revealed that for the budget we had prepared for another larger used car, he could sell us a new Mazda 121. So, we bought it.

The Mazda 121, although very reliable, was terribly underpowered. It was an ideal car for the small shopping trips into the suburb, but not very comfortable for long trips. Ironically, it was in the little 121 Bubble that we did several Sydney - Brisbane trips, and one Sydney to North Queensland return trip.

In October 1998, during our Long Service leave trip to Europe and the UK, our Mazda 121 was stolen and written off in the same night. Fortunately, our son David had covered all the necessary details with the Insurance company even without having to inform us while we were over seas. (After all, what could we have done anyway!)

So, on our return to Sydney in November 1998, we were back into the car market again. This time, with a fixed budget of the Insurance cheque, we were able to purchase a Toyota Camry sedan in excellent condition. The camry served us well for over five years and covered some 110,000km in that time. This included several Sydney - Brisbane trips to see family. Although tempted on several occasions to update to a later Toyota, we kept to our commitment to keep the Camry until I retired from work.

Beginning of Retirement - 2003 and on

In December 2003, after my retirement and move to Queensland, we looked at a number of "All Wheel Drive" vehicles which would be suitable for us as a family car, and also suitable to tow a reasonable size caravan. After much searching, we decided on the newly released Toyota Kluger. It is certainly powerful enough for us, and roomy enough, and it can tow up to 1500kg. It is a dream to drive and handle so we are very happy with our retirement choice of car.

Toyota Kluger - with Caravan - November 2004

In October / November of 2005, Margaret and I undertook our longest caravan trip since purchasing the caravan. The trip was initiated by a RAAF Apprentice reunion in Canberra in October 2005, so we thought we should continue the journey across the Snowy Mountains into Victoria, drive the Great Ocean Road, and gradually head back home to Brisbane. The trip was wonderful, but we realised that our caravan, even though when loaded was just inside the 1500kg limit, was quite a burden for the Kluger. Also the petrol consumption rose enormously when towing the caravan. So, we considered what vehicle could be a suitable replacement for the Kluger.

We were reluctant to trade such a fine motor vehicle without careful thought on the qualities a replacement vehicle should have. So, after a long investigation, we decided to trade the lovely Kluger and we purchased a Toyota Prado Diesel, taking delivery in late January 2006.

Trading the Kluger for the Prado - January 2006

At the time of writing, the Prado is still very new and has not been used for towing yet. However, we now have ambitions for some exciting trips over the next few years. These include taking the caravan to the Gulf of Carpentaria via the Queensland outback, a tour of Tasmania, a tour of the Kimberleys in Western Australia, and also a trip to Perth and the wonderful Margaret River area.

So now that we have upgraded to a stronger vehicle and opted for diesel fuel, we hope that many of our retirement journeys can be planned and enjoyed.

In summary, over a period of more than 44 years of driving, there has certainly been a wide range of cars.

Time Frame	Place	Type of Car	Year Model
JUL 1961 - JUL 1962	Brisbane & Wagga	Morris Six Sedan	1951
JUL 1962 - JAN 1963	Brisbane & Wagga	Riley 1 1/2 Litre	1951
JAN 1963 - JAN 1964	Brisbane (Amberley)	Zephyr Mk 1 sedan	1953
JAN 1964 - APR 1964	Brisbane (Amberley)	Simca Aronde	1959
APR 1964 - SEP 1965	Brisbane (Amberley)	Austin A90 Westminster	1956
OCT 1965 - DEC 1965	Penang, Malaysia	Austin A40 Two Door	1949
DEC1965 - APR 1966	Penang, Malaysia	Vauxhall Cresta	1960
OCT 1968 - MAR 1969	Laverton, VIC	Austin A50 Cambridge	1956
MAR 1969 - JUN 1972	Laverton and Amberley	Ford Falcon XP St Wag	1966
JUN 1972 - MAY 1973	Brisbane & Amberley	Morris 1100 Sedan	1968
MAY 1973 - OCT 1975	Brisbane & Canberra	Mercedes Benz 220S	1963
OCT 1975 - OCT 1976	Kingswood & Blue Mts	Peugeot 504 Sedan	1975
OCT 1976 - NOV 1976	Kingswood & Blue Mts	Fiat 1500 Sedan	1963
NOV 1976 - JAN 1978	Kingswood	Toyota Crown Sedan	1970
JAN 1978 - FEB 1983	K'wood, Sth Aust, & Amberley	Toyota Corona Stn Wag	1976
FEB 1983 - MAY 1984	Amberley	Toyota Tarago Wagon	1983
JUL 1983 - AUG 1984	Amberley	Honda Zot H'back	1974
AUG 1984 - JUN 1987	Eatons Hill, Brisbane	Toyota Corolla	1979
SEP 1984 - JUN 1985	Eatons Hill, Brisbane	Mazda One Ton Utility	1979
JUN 1987 - APR 1989	Eatons Hill & Penrith	Toyota Tarago Wagon	1983
APR 1989 - JUN 1992	Penrith & Emu Heights	Mazda 323 Hatchback	1984
JUN 1992 - NOV 1998	Emu Heights	Mazda 121 Sedan	1992
NOV 1998 - DEC 2003	Emu Heights & Brisbane	Toyota Camry Sedan	1991
DEC 2003 - JAN 2006	Narangba	Toyota Kluger AWD	2003
JAN 2006 -	Narangba	Toyota Prado GXL	2006

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My Spiritual Journey

Background

Although I was raised in a non-Christian family in the true scriptural sense, my parents did instill into my upbringing an emphasis on such qualities as honesty and integrity, an awareness of one's duty and honour, and they set high examples of moral conduct, (both professional and personal), responsibility, honour, and pride of workmanship. In fact, during the 1940's and 1950's, decent parents such as mine were not uncommon. Although we were never 'church goers', I attended the local Church of England Sunday School, as it was the decent thing to do. I found that I learnt a lot of 'things' and historical facts about biblical issues, but I was not to know Jesus Christ as a person until many years later.

With this background, in January 1960, at the tender age of 15½ years, (just 9 months after my father died), I enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force as an Engineering Apprentice. During the next five to ten years, many things were to change.

Pre-Christian Years - 1960 to 1973

My spiritual knowledge increased only a little, but was far exceeded by a thirst or a wonder of just what sort of God was behind this big world of ours. During my apprenticeship years, most of the Religious Educational periods were based upon the Padre running one of the scientific films from the Moody Bible Institute of America. One positive aspect of those films was that it increased one's thirst enormously to want to find out more about God.

However, on the secular side a further development was taking place. During my early years, nearly all (about 90%) of my instructors and supervisors had seen Active Service …. Somewhere; be it in Malaya, Singapore, Malta, Korea, or Japan; and some (about 25%) had seen Active Service during World War II. The influence of such a high percentage of men who had seen active service leaves in indelible and positive mark. So I was instilled with a strong desire to serve - God, Queen and Country, although not always in that order.

This section is important as it played a vital role in framing my future adult character. When it became my turn to serve on operational squadrons, including overseas bases in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand and in South Vietnam, I really did count it a privilege to serve in some of Australia's finest squadrons. Also I counted it a privilege to serve along side of some of Australia's finest men. I was proud of my country and proud of my service. I found myself in an environment where we worked hard, drank hard and played hard, and for some time I thought, "This is it!".

Early Christian Years - 1973 - 1975

However, by 1972-73, after my return from active service and my second overseas posting, I found this life did not have all the answers. I was going through a messy divorce and was diving even deeper into the work - drink - play syndrome. It was during this period, (i.e., April 1973), that I was invited to attend an evening service at the Assembly of God Church in Mt Gravatt in Brisbane. It was there that I discovered the PERSON of Jesus Christ. I shall quote the pastor: "This magnificent church can't save you, (this was a huge, modern charismatic church seating some 2500 to 3000 people), I can't save you, but only Jesus Christ Himself can save you". Well that was it. It all came together, and when the pastor made his appeal, I went down to the front to ask the person of Jesus Christ to come into my life. I was happy to acknowledge that only Jesus can offer a life of freedom. Some three to four weeks later, I was baptized.

Alas, I was soon to fall. I was enjoying my new Christian life so much and saying that this Christian living is a breeze. So, because of my super over confidence, the Lord was to permit me to learn the hard way. Just at that time I was posted from Amberley, west of Brisbane, to Fairbairn, a base near Canberra in the ACT. During the next two to two and a half years, I was to allow my moral code of conduct to fall far lower than ever before in my life. I simply wanted to meet some nice people, and before too long, my social life was a whirl. I was attending more parties than I could care to remember. Although it seemed I had plenty of friends, (yes, including a few affairs with two or three of the ladies, plus a few other indiscretions), but let me assure you, never before in my entire life had I ever been so desperately lonely. One of the difficulties with this lifestyle is that my peers, ie, my service colleagues, did not think I was doing anything wrong! According to them, John was scoring well with the ladies and living a whirl of a social life. *(Let me assure you, this modern "Living together" or "Let's enjoy this without any strings" simply does not work!)*.

Then in mid 1975, after a posting to a base near Kingswood west of Sydney, I met a real lady. To this day, I firmly believe this lovely lady was, and is, God's instrument to bring this rebel back on the rails of Christian living. Not once did she ask me to give up my drinking and smoking, but she certainly asked her Lord in prayer. She did believe me when I told her of my conversion and baptism some years before. Am so thankful now that God answered her prayers so comprehensively.

So it was in late 1975, I re-dedicated my life to God and started once again to grow. Then in June 1976, this lovely lady and I were married in the Springwood Baptist Church, where she was a member. Some two or three months later, I too became a member of the Baptist Church, and have been worshipping Jesus Christ in one of His churches ever since. Yes, I have failed my Lord often, but He is always so gracious to pick me up, even though I never deserved it. Since then I have found that no matter what circumstances arose, I have never felt alone, and no matter how big or serious any problem I found before me, a victorious solution always eventuated as a result of prayer. Often the solution was not forthcoming in my anticipated timing, but it came.

Christian Growth - Be it Smooth or Rough

I also found that as the temptations of my previous life never completely left me, I was always in need of God's protection and strength to see me through. I found that during the early years of our marriage, particularly during those frequent absences of defence exercises, some overseas, the temptations of the 'party life' of old were very strong indeed. It was only through the continuous prompting and support of the Holy Spirit that I was able to defeat those temptations. For I found that during those times, my problem was not so much in the individual alcoholic drink, but rather in the permissive lifestyle it promoted.

However, I was also to discover that just a small measure of faith, coupled with a gradual learning of the Christian discipline, began to shape me for a new role of a Senior Non-Commissioned Officer (SNCO) in the RAAF. During many of these defence exercises, the Sergeant is often the first point of contact for many of the younger men, some of whom were experiencing their first exercise away from home. So, I was not only their supervisor, but also their counsellor, and sometimes their domestic intercessor. I was learning about "Leadership" from two of the finest sources, God, and Active Service.

It has now been many years since I made the decision to leave the Service in October 1984. For several years following that decision, I subjected my family to considerable untold hardships, emotional, domestic and financial, all caused by a huge lack of self esteem and an uncertain future, as I kept looking for the same "Esprit de Corps" and commitment which I had enjoyed in the service. Were it not for the support of my family, and their encouragement, I would not have survived these years. It is through the help and the understanding of a close family and a supportive church family that I have been able to maintain my faith. I am encouraged when I learn that God always supports me, even though I seem to lose Him from time to time.

Christian Ministries

In more recent years, when my work load became more stable, I expressed an intention to give some effort back to the community and the church which had so faithfully supported me in the past years. In 1996, I became a Committee member of the Vietnam Veterans Association in the Blue Mountains where we were living and I also was elected to become a Deacon of the Glenbrook Baptist Church where our family was worshipping. These were good times, and I enjoyed each role for its contribution to both the church and the veteran community. However, by the year 2000, the stress of my work had taken its toll once again, and I had to slow down. Unbeknown to me at the time, I was experiencing the early effects of "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)". As I was still working full time, it was with considerable sadness that in late 2000 I had to resign from both the Vietnam veterans Committee and the Church Diaconate.

The work on the diaconate gave me another unexpected area of Christian growth. For many years, before and after my conversion, I had been driven by "One's Duty". It was part of my service upbringing and continued right through my adult life, even into my Christian walk. My work on the diaconate I saw as "my Christian Duty". I now know that much of my PTSD was driven by my attention to duty and the need for the task to be completed. Of all the ministries vigorously pursued by this Church, it was the wonderful saving Grace of our Lord. It took me a long while to realise that the Lord wanted me to work in his Church simply because I loved Him, not because I thought it my duty. So, the Grace of our Lord had some serious work to do in making me slow down and letting Him call me to a task I could handle.

Slowing Down and Stress Management

In February 2002, I went from full time work to part time work due to my stress management levels. It seemed that later in the year, the part time work was doing me some good and the Church Leadership team asked if I would return to become a Deacon once again. I counted it a privilege to do so, and in November 2002, I was elected to become a Deacon again. Sadly, this was not to last, as the dreaded symptoms of PTSD were on the increase and I was forced to retire early with a medical certificate in September 2003. This gave my wife and I an opportunity to move to Queensland to be closer to our daughters and their children, so we sold our home and built a new home at Narangba in Queensland. Then in October, just prior to our departure from the Lower Blue Mountains for Queensland, I resigned from the Church Diaconate and we were farewelled from the church.

Currently, we attend a local Baptist Church with the hope that we can worship our Saviour and rest for a while in the fellowship of fellow believers. It is feasible that we may once again be available for some small form of ministry some time in the future. I'm a little afraid to volunteer for ministry service just yet, as I fear the old "duty" syndrome may raise its head again and with it the stress levels.

Today, when I am asked why I attend church, my reply is quite simple: There are two primary reasons why I attend church; the first is to worship the God who saved a rebel like me, and the second is that I have a real need to be replenished with sound biblical teaching and genuine Christian fellowship.

Yes, I have proven that Jesus Christ in person holds the only answer. National pride, conscientious service, hard work, pride of workmanship, integrity and accountability, etc, are all excellent qualities which I still hold dearly, but none is sufficient for salvation, only Jesus Christ, the living Son of God.

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Final Chapter - Retirement - New Start

A New Start

This may be the final chapter, but Margaret and I saw it as a new start. We went into retirement with three major goals, each of which were divided into several smaller areas of achievements. These major goals were:

- Purchase of our new home;
- Purchase of a new motor car suitable for not only local use, but also some serious touring. and
- Purchase of a new caravan in which to tour this wonderful country.

Our New Home

We moved into our new home in early March 2004. By the end of May 2004, a contractor had designed and planted a good landscape garden in our back yard. Some months later, the garden was seen to be growing nicely, giving us considerable comfort and enjoyment as we often relaxed either on the patio or in the garden. We have even become reasonably accomplished weeders as we tended to our new garden from time to time.

Our New Car

In December 2003, after searching through quite a number of vehicles, test driving a few, we finally purchased a new Toyota Kluger CVX. It is compact enough to be our normal local means of transport and shopping. Yet, it is strong enough to tow a reasonable caravan and to survive a normal country road, be it dirt, gravel, or uneven bitumen. Yet, as seen in the "Motor Cars" chapter, we found that for some serious caravan touring, we had to purchase a stronger vehicle. So, the new car for a retirement was traded just two years later for a Toyota Prado diesel.

Our New Caravan

The third major goal was the purchase of a caravan. In June 2004, we attended the Brisbane Caravan and Camping Show at the showgrounds. Whilst the show made inspecting caravans easier than tramping across different suburbs to the respective agents, it also became confusing to assess all the different models and options. However, after some time, we arrived at a short list of caravans which would not only come under our weight limit for the Toyota Kluger, but also suit our travelling needs.

We studied the short list for some weeks, then negotiated with one of the agents to purchase an "A-Van" Pop-Top 16 foot Caravan. We established we could get a better deal by ordering a new caravan just with the options we wanted, rather than take one of their show display caravans with a large list of options already installed. So, in November 2004, we took delivery of our new caravan.

Seminars - For PTSD with Veterans' Affairs

In late August 2004, we spent a most constructive week with a number of Vietnam Veterans and their wives at a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) workshop at Bribie Island. This workshop had two highly competent facilitators and led us all, members and wives, through many of the symptoms, causes and features of PTSD. For some, it was a very emotional time as they were taken back through some of their experiences. For me, as well as some others, the course highlighted that one does not have to be injured to later suffer from PTSD. As in many cases, if one simply witnessed an event which was shocking to see, this could trigger a PTSD reaction later in life. All in all, the members and their wives all thought the course was very constructive and valuable.

Unexpected Holdups to the Plan

After returning home from a most positive and constructive week with the veterans at Bribie Island, we received some alarming news from our GP when undergoing a routine annual medical check. Our local GP had noticed an anomaly with my recent blood tests, that my overall blood count was alarmingly low. So, after some quickly arranged tests, a CT Scan, and then a Colonoscopy, it was determined that I had advanced Bowel Cancer.

Cancer Surgery and Chemotherapy

In September 2004, I underwent major surgery to remove the cancer from the bowel and fortunately, the surgeon said he was confident he had removed it all. However, with a belt and braces attitude, he referred me to a noted Oncologist who recommended a course of Chemotherapy.

In October 2004, I commenced a course of Chemotherapy to be administered fortnightly. So I had some rough weeks, during and after the Chemotherapy, and I had some reasonably good weeks. On some weeks, the pre Chemo blood test revealed an unsatisfactory low blood count. In those occasions, the Chemotherapy treatment was deferred until the blood count improved. Over the twelve treatments, I experienced several deferments all due to low blood counts. So instead of the course taking 24 weeks, ie, 12 fortnights, it was some seven months before I eventually completed the course in May 2005.

Although my Chemotherapy programme was completed in May 2005, I maintained a programme of monthly visits to the Oncology ward in St Andrew's Hospital in Brisbane to have the "Port-A-Cath" flushed to prevent bacteria from entering the system. In March 2006, following a successful C/T scan, I underwent minor surgery at St Andrew's hospital in Brisbane to have the Port-a-Cath surgically removed.

My visits to the Oncologist and the Surgeon are now basically six monthly checks. This recent clearance now means that we are free to plan trips as long as we please. So, all our family agree that I have been extremely fortunate with my cancer treatment.

Returning to the Plan

We are very glad we went ahead with the purchase of the caravan, as it gave us a goal. We have used the caravan a few times, during my 'good' weeks, and we were able to maintain one trip of a few days per month in the caravan whilst I underwent the treatment. Then, we planned a reasonably large trip for late in 2005. This trip included a large reunion organised for our RAAF apprentice intake which was held in Canberra in October 2005. Following the function in Canberra, we travelled south through the Snowy Mountains, through Victoria, touring the many sights of the south-east of this fair land, including the Great Ocean Road and Mount Gambier. It was a wonderful trip covering some five weeks away from home.

Future Goals and Settling into a Plan

In the meantime, whilst at home, my wife and I hope to spend our leisure time pottering around in the garden, or in the workshop.

Then of course is the other goal of travel. We hope to use the caravan to travel and see as many different parts of this wonderful land of ours while we can.

John and Margaret - Christmas 2005

Our Son-In-Law said to us a little while ago in a very nice way: “It is so good to see you two enjoying the nice things in your lives after so many years of struggling raising your family and working”.

Although the PTSD workshop in August 2004 was a very productive experience, we learnt that these lessons do not cure or prevent stress or depression from occurring. However, these lessons do teach us to recognise the symptoms of each of these conditions when they happen. We have learnt since that I still experience bouts of minor depression and visible signs of stress, but thankfully I am able to recognise these little demons when they occur. To this day, I am on medication for a mild condition of “Clinical Depression”. When the symptoms do occur, we are able to talk about them with each other and to the family, and we are then able to do something do alleviate or improve the day.

So, after 43 3/4 years in the workforce and my retirement being some two and a half years ago, I have become accustomed to not going to work. It is a bit like a very long period of leave. Sometimes, I look back on the various tasks and appointments I have experienced, and I comment to myself, “Not bad for a man who has never seen the inside of a university!”

So, we both plan to just take each day and enjoy what it brings, and plan to enjoy our trips away.

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