

**Mal Bowden—A42401—Engine Fitter**

It occurred to me whilst preparing the draft for this history that most of the major changes that have happened in my life have been brought about by relatively minor incidents or decisions taken, which at the time were insignificant - or so I thought. Like the rainy day in June 1953, because it was too wet to kick the footy at lunch time, I went to the employment opportunities desk to pass the lunch hour and saw this wonderful booklet describing life as an RAAF Apprentice at Wagga. My next fifteen years had been mapped out for me.

Or agreeing to be best man at a mate's wedding and going out to meet the bridesmaid beforehand - to get to know her, he told me. Forty-four years and four kids later I'm still trying to get to know her. Because my next door neighbour in Malaya couldn't find a buyer for his little twelve-foot runabout, he sold it to me for a pittance. Eight boats and many thousands of dollars later my wife will tell you how much that neighbour has dominated our life; in fact still is. I've just recently bought number eight!

Looking back over fifty years has been an eye-opening experience. I really had never sat down and looked back as keenly as I have to draft this; memories come flooding back, some good, others of course not so good, but luckily the good memories are by far outweighing the not so good ones.

The RAAF was pretty good to me, I enjoyed almost all of those fifteen years and look back with mostly fond memories, but I knew for the last six to eight that I didn't intend to re-engage at the completion. Like most of us I did my twelve months at an aircraft depot after Wagga, mine being 1AD Laverton, and was then posted three hundred metres across the tarmac to ARDU. Eighteen months later, having married Phyl six months earlier, I was lucky enough to get that sought-after posting to Malaya (as it was then known) and was also lucky to be amongst the first three accompanied postings to the still uncompleted RAAF Butterworth. Arriving by sea with our wives didn't endear us to a lot of the 3 Squadron guys, some of whom were still awaiting their wives after several months.

Returning in 1962 to Edinburgh just north of Adelaide I wasn't quite so lucky. A base with no aircraft and hardly any work, other than the occasional D servicing sent down from Woomera, this was the worst and most boring four years of the fifteen. One thing I will say for Edinburgh, it was the "foreigner" capital of the RAAF. I built my second boat there, much of it inside the base. Perhaps the biggest event of these four years was the building of our first house. We have owned three others since, but none compare with the excitement of the first. Within two years of completion, the RAAF posted me to Richmond, this time unaccompanied. Married quarters at Richmond were like hens' teeth. After three months of separation I was able to find a private letting we really couldn't afford.

My final two and a half years were spent at 38 Squadron as a loadmaster on the Caribous. Away most of the time, two months in every six spent at the detachment in New Guinea, any thought of re-engaging would have meant divorce. This certainly was the worst period of our married life. I didn't understand then, but I do now, home alone with three young kids could not have been any fun for Phyl. It also brought about the biggest disappointment of my fifteen years. The Caribous were in Vietnam with 35 Squadron and everybody at 38 Squadron was rotated to 35, some more than once. My posting was 6 December 1967 leaving Australia on 3 December. Promoted to sergeant on 1 November, I was advised five days later that my posting had been stopped as there was only establishment for one sergeant amongst the six loadmasters, and I would replace the present sergeant in August 1968. By then I would only have five months of my term left.. To complete a twelve-month posting meant having to sign again for a further five years, something I wasn't prepared to do. Because I badly wanted to go I decided to fight the decision. First an attempt to resign the promotion failed, I had left it too long. Then followed an appeal to the Air Board to extend for twelve months under an Air Force Act for which there was a precedent serving in

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Vietnam at the time. It too failed. I often ponder over what might have happened had I signed again. During the next five years the pension scheme was altered to allow a pension after twenty years service, no longer having to wait till age forty, as it was in the sixties, and loadmasters were all reclassified to the new mustering of flight engineer, which meant conversion courses and postings were available to Hercules and Orions, later 707s, and perhaps the civil opportunities that this mustering opened up.

The last few months of my service were dominated by how I was going to feed a family, and where we were going to live. I had studied accountancy for five years during my service but it no longer had any attraction. I knew that I wanted to work for myself, but I didn't know if I had the guts to try, and if I did what was I going to do. One thing about the RAAF I was going to miss was that fortnightly pay, always there, come rain hail or shine. We both came from Adelaide, we still owned a home there, but South Australia wasn't at that time the best economy in which to try and work for yourself. And so to the disappointment of both our families we decided to stay where we were: Sydney. Without really knowing much about the transport industry I used all \$3000 of DFRB and long service leave as a deposit on a tip truck and went to work in the construction industry, carrying rock away from all the big holes being dug at the time in the Sydney CBD.

Two years later I had managed to feed the family and pay the rent, but that was all; we really weren't going anywhere. So after much soul searching and sleepless nights I decided to bite the bullet, borrow the money and buy a brand new Volvo semi-trailer and try the interstate game. A bad decision! Once again, never home, always tired, I soon knew I wasn't cut out for this game, but like all owner drivers I was tied to finance company payments and I could only see one way out. Buy more trucks. Borrow more money. Once you owe them a small fortune they can't afford to repossess: well that was the thinking behind the idea. Within three years I had seven of them, I was still never home but at least I was only a mile or so away lying under a truck, or on the phone arranging the next load. I was still always tired but at least the few hours I did spend in bed was in my own. I must have spent some time there because during this period another boy come along: number four. Twelve years after number three. What a surprise!! Perhaps not what I said at the time. But I must have done something right because with our own freight - both ways Sydney to Melbourne - things started to go our way at last financially. We started to own the trucks outright, the bank manager even lent us enough to buy a home and the boats were getting bigger. Now it was a forty-two-foot game cruiser. Another bad decision was on the way.

I had become obsessed with cruising. I now had a boat big enough, financially things were going our way, but I couldn't see how to get away and still keep the business going. Answer !! Sell the business, take the kids out of school and go to the Barrier Reef till the money ran out. Probably the worst business decision I made in the entire twenty-seven years. We had a great six months up there, caught some wonderful fish, saw some magic places and at least three of the kids were finally seeing their Dad twenty-four hours a day. The eldest was at university and only joined us for the holidays. All good things come to an end. Home again, not much money left, and no business. It was only then that I began to realise what a good business I had had and what a stupid decision it had been to sell it. So we sold the boat and started again. This wasn't to be the last time that I was to sell a boat to finance a business decision.

The proceeds from the boat were used to buy a bankrupt Caltex fuel distributorship in the Blue Mountains outside of Sydney. For two and a half years I commuted daily to Medlow Bath from Wentworthville, until in 1982 we moved to Katoomba. By we, I mean Phyl and

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I and the youngest son, the eldest was now married and the next two were both at university and stayed in Sydney.

The business I had bought was based almost entirely on heating oil sales. And Caltex had failed to tell me that the Fraser Government had forced the oil companies to price heating oil and kerosene off the market to leave more of the barrel available for petrol, a decision taken during the second “oil crisis” in 1978. Customers were changing rapidly to LPG for heating: a considerable cost of living in the mountains. Within eighteen months of buying the distributorship I had to do something about the switch to LPG. If you can’t beat them, join them. To do this I had to get an oil company to sell me LPG and Caltex didn’t produce it. Shell agreed to supply me, and within a year I had regained a lot of our previous customers. Caltex forced me to remove the Shell product, LPG, from their depot and to do this I had to borrow the money to buy the land and build an LPG depot. After twelve months of negotiations with the Blue Mountains Council I convinced them that it wouldn’t blow up and destroy the town of Lawson, and building began in 1985. I was now a Caltex fuel distributor and an independent LPG supplier in debt to the eyeballs. By this time I had bought another boat, a forty-two-foot secondhand steel yacht, our second yacht. The wind was free and I certainly could no longer afford fuel for a power boat.

Again luck went my way. Heating oil and wood prices went mad in the mid-eighties and the many fuel strikes that were a part of life in the eighties didn’t hurt an LPG business. The LPG part of our business had now overtaken the fuel side and that presented another problem. For every new customer we gained I had to find two cylinders at \$100 a cylinder to put on the side of their house, and I had been buying them with National Australia Bank’s money. The business was expanding more rapidly than the bank would lend money, and so to keep the cylinder supply up I sold the yacht. Living in Katoomba wasn’t the best place to use a boat from, so this time it didn’t hurt quite as much to be without a boat. That’s how I justified to myself selling it, anyway.

In 1986 Shell offered me their Sydney metropolitan domestic and industrial LPG distributorship. To finance the purchase I had to take on two minority partners, one of whom was my second son, an accountant who took over the financial side, the other a retired silent partner. Now I was commuting to Sydney and back each day, the reverse of what I had been doing only four years earlier. I had put a manager in the mountains to look after both the fuel and gas businesses, but Caltex was threatening me with legal action for not being available to them, and in 1987 I sold the fuel distributorship. This released money from the sale of tankers and goodwill, which allowed me to pay off some of the bank’s debt, and let me concentrate on gas. Things were going pretty well now, financially better than at any other time since leaving the RAAF. I could now afford to employ enough people to make life easier, my son was taking more and more responsibility for the day to day running of the show and I was thinking of bigger and better boats.

In 1990 I commissioned a boat builder to start a fifty-foot oceangoing steel yacht. Just when I thought finally I had made it and nothing could go wrong, Shell sold their entire Australian industrial and domestic LPG business to Wesfarmers Kleenheat Gas. Shell’s entire eastern state gas was sold through eleven distributors like us. Kleenheat advised us that they did not use distributors and would buy us out. Legal advice to all eleven of us was that they were too big for us to fight; take the money they were offering. Part of the sale conditions was that one of us had to stay with them as manager of the Sydney operation. My son stayed (he is still with Wesfarmers in a senior position in Perth) and I returned to the mountains. Luckily I had kept the mountains business separate from the Sydney operation. The money received for the Sydney operation finally allowed me to be free of debt. Both the depot at Lawson and our home at Katoomba were free of mortgage. My only problem was a big one, a half-finished fifty-foot yacht being built at Lake Macquarie near Newcastle.

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I was legally contracted to the builder to finish it, but I no longer had the income I thought I was going to have when I started it.

It did get finished, at the cost of another mortgage over the house, not quite as luxuriously as originally planned, but very usable. While the boat was being built at Lake Macquarie we used to go up fortnightly to see its progress, and in doing so I fell in love with the lake. I hated living in the mountains and although my income depended on cold weather, I had been trying for years to get Phyl to move.

Unfortunately she loved it up there and wouldn't hear of moving. But the lake got to her too and in December 1992 we moved to our present home on Lake Macquarie, right alongside the old RAAF flying boat base I had visited in 1954 as a first year Apprentice. The bowling club I belong to is in the former officer's mess. Now I lived at Lake Macquarie and worked at Lawson in the mountains two and a half hours drive away. For the next four years I rented a home in Katoomba from Monday to Friday and went home at weekends. One day I was going to learn to live and work in the same place. Living alone on my own five days a week was no fun, and after four years of it I sold the mountains business to Kleenheat and retired.

The first twelve months of retirement took some getting used too. I felt guilty about reading the paper till nine or ten each day, in fact I almost went back into business again during the first twelve months. This time a restaurant of all things, but common sense got the better of me and I bailed out. The first seven years of retirement has meant mainly boating and travel, sometimes combining the two, with only cost, no longer time governing where and for how long. Boating did until last year dominate our earlier retirement. We have done the Barrier Reef trip three times now, going all three times as far as Lizard Island north of Cooktown. I love the area and lifestyle, but unfortunately Phyl doesn't share my feelings and so we always came home. I did talk her once into staying for six months, but we spent too much of the time in shopping centres ashore and not enough at sea or on the islands. A fifty-foot yacht is a big handful for two people and as age caught up and Phyl's dislike of sailing grew, I finally after ten years agreed to sell it. Recently the new owners called into Newcastle on the first stages of their round the world trip and on seeing it again after eighteen months I really did feel quite bad about having sold it. Even Phyl admitted to a few pangs of nostalgia, something I never thought I would ever hear her admit. A few months ago we bought a little twenty-foot trailer half-cabin fishing boat to use on the lake, so we are still in the boating scene.

Like all truckies I had earlier developed an intense hatred of caravan drivers and promised myself never to own one, fortunately a promise I broke in the first year of retirement, and we now spend two to three months a year away from home. Caravanning has shown us many parts of the country we would never have seen any other way. Like many others we did the round Australia trip. Recently we went from the east to the west across the centre including 2200 kilometres of dirt and gravel. Although I would never admit it to my wife, it is certainly a lot cheaper than boating. With three of our four boys living in Canberra, Perth and Darwin, we are probably going to do a few more miles in the next few years, health permitting. Our fourth son lives in Holland and last year we did get over there to see him as part of two months in Europe including a month-long cruise from the Mediterranean to the Baltic countries, a very enjoyable if costly experience.

The fifty years since that day in January 1954 have been pretty kind to me. A wonderful wife (even if she wouldn't sail round the world ) four sons to be proud of (though one is an army officer) and enough luck in work to counteract all the bad decisions. Luckily we both enjoy pretty good health so far, so important in being able to enjoy retirement.

Like Frank Sinatra once sang, "Regrets I have a few; too few to mention", I do regret not spending more time with the boys when they were younger instead of working seven days a

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a week, I do regret some business and personal decisions I thought were right at the time and I sometimes find myself wishing that I could change some things from the past, but though I know its not going to happen, it doesn't stop me sometimes daydreaming about what might have been.

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Wife Phyl and two youngest sons  
on our six-month holiday trip 1977

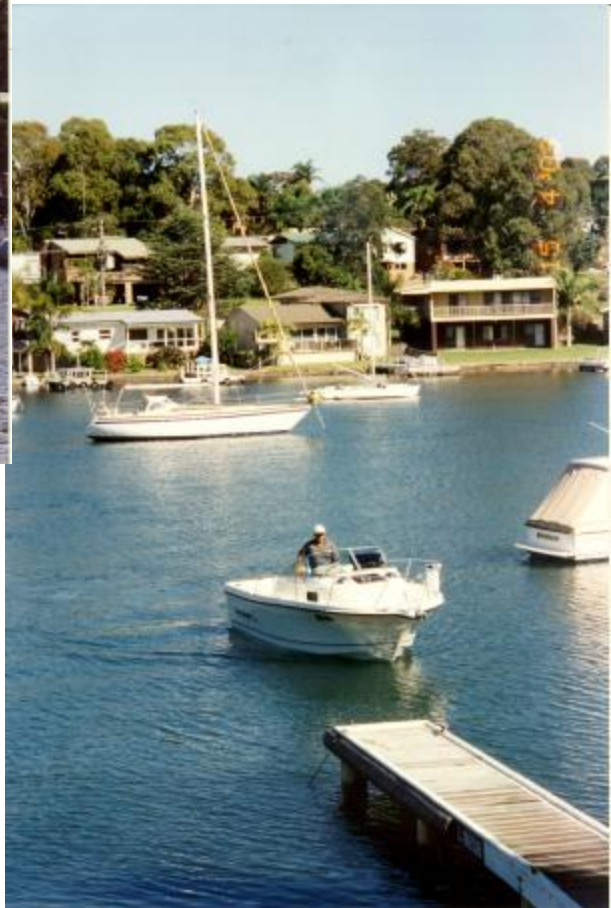


The fifty-foot steel hull ocean yacht 1999

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My favourite ;  
fifty-foot steel hull ocean yacht 1993



My current twenty-foot cabin cruiser