

## **Les (Nub) Bunn—A14401 - Engine Fitter**

### **Prior to 1954**

Born in Childers, Queensland, where my father's family was large (about a baker's dozen of them) and well known in the town and district. Dad was a cane cutter and Mum was just a Mum. Her family came from Hungary but she was born in Chillagoe, also in Queensland. With one elder brother we all moved to Ogmore (population three hundred, just north of Rockhampton) where Dad graduated (?) to underground coal mining at the Styx State Coal Mine.

Living in Ogmore had its moments with us kids running wild in the bush, but it was pretty primitive (dirt floors, wooden prop-up windows, thunder box, part-time power, etc). Consequently, the family broke up as a result of Mum leaving and we kids were sent to the Rocky Grammar as boarders. Dad died soon after but I think we coped pretty well with life as boarders for the next five years with help from other family and friends.

An uncle had served in the RAAF from 1939 to the time when money for boarding and other fees was running out (Queensland junior certificate year 1953) and he arranged for me to apply for an apprenticeship with the RAAF. And that's how I became a Mango.

### **After 1954**

After fifty years early memories tend to be mostly impressions remaining from significant events. Some follow:

The trip by rail with a bunch of blokes who seemed OK; being photographed in Sydney.

Arrival at the Garden City of the South and being loaded into the Snake.

Several very confusing days with Dave Menzies appearing as a flight commander.

Meeting a Daffy (Robert "Fungus" Palmer), a student at the Rocky Grammar the year before who started the nickname "Nub" following a craze at the Grammar to spell everyone's name backwards and call them that - I was Sel Nnub, my brother was Derf Nnub.

The smell of the trees along the main road near the Appies' area.

Crap food in the horrendous Apprentice Mess and regular calls of "maggots in the meat".

The stoush with the Nashos on the rugby ground with someone (Choppy Gannell?) on top of the obstacle course net playing a trumpet.

Being "volunteered" by Red Staines to be on the Boffins Course.

My first choice was for elec, but I obviously wasn't smart enough. But my allocation to engines didn't worry me a bit as I generally enjoyed it after the ups and downs of basic year. Albert "The Golliwog" Keer was the basic instructor for No 1 Flight, the Boffins Flight. I enjoyed the allied trades parts of basic, particularly machine shop and welding. I remember being zapped on the ear by some fiend who had hooked himself up to the spark-gap torch igniters with a welding rod, and everyone checking their back pocket flap when the smell of burning rags wafted throughout the shop?

My first hut was 107 (I think) which housed mostly Queenslanders and northern NSW members. I regret I can't remember who had which bed but some inhabitants were Tom and Titch Carlyon (JEAT), Red Keating, Harry Hobbs, Scotty MacFarlane. I'd like to catch up with Hut 107 members at the reunion and fill in the gaps. Gus Wells was our hut NCO.

My performance at Wagga wasn't particularly meritorious, though I do claim the quickest promotion/demotion record. On return from leave at the start of our third year I wrote myself off in Sydney and it was noticed (probably because a couple of mates had to carry me onto the train at Central Station). On parade on our first day back I was named as being promoted to corporal apprentice and to be a hut NCO. Straight after that I was given a fizzer and Barney Keating gave me fourteen days CB for "conduct prejudicial to the good order, etc" and removed me from the promotion list. I had been a corporal apprentice for about two hours.

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Terry Thompson featured for the same reason and got the same punishment. Strangely, fate stepped in and Terry was posted to the RAAF Academy part way through his CB which was terminated, and, to be seen to be fair, so was mine!

Being in the Boffin's Flight in first and second years meant quite a bit of extra classroom work and I did envy those who didn't have to do it. Nevertheless, I managed to participate in soccer during first year (Alf Barker was the coach). I'd previously played league in Rocky, had never seen union before and it took a year for me to decide it wasn't as crazy as it looked. Playing with the Reds in 1955 and the Greens in 1956 gave me a lot of satisfaction. I still have the U-18 Greens Pennant we won.

Third year saw a number of us Boffins volunteered, again by Red Staines to do extra education to qualify us to go to the old Royal Melbourne Technical College, subsequently the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, to do a diploma of engineering after we graduated. I don't know whether I appreciated at the time what an opportunity I had been offered.

Third year and graduation followed as well as a somewhat delayed promotion to corporal apprentice which came half way through third year.

#### **A few other impressions:**

Being let loose in the working area at night with a bayonet, which in the hands of an Appie is ideal for arranging entry into areas one would not normally be allowed in;

Panic nights and the smell of dust and floor polish and being an hour behind everyone else because of extra education;

Ration tickets for tobacco and cigarettes;

Harry Hobbs, barber extraordinaire who gave me my first crew cut and introduced me to a thing called Nubrush, a currycomb type of implement which I still use;

Rifle Club, the boot of a 303 and patching targets behind the butts; sneaking into pubs and not getting caught; the Coconut Grove; the beach in town and the swimming area further up the Murrumbidgee; the Shanty Pub and carrying a sixty MPH sign back to base; the apprentice rec room and those dreadful light blue blazers and thick grey slacks (Jim Ward and fencing?).

#### **After 1956**

After graduation, which my brother attended, the group selected to go to Melbourne Tech returned to Wagga for a few weeks to do exams. We returned as airmen and were housed near the WRAAFs. The airmen's wet canteen was a novel attraction. Dick Morrissey was challenged by some innocent who backed off when Dick just happened to have the inter-service boxing results available to show him.

The next three years were spent at Laverton as member of No 2 Diploma Course, the first to go direct from Wagga to Laverton. We met up with a bunch of ex-Appies from earlier years and a few airmen who were on No 1 Course. No 3 Course also came from Wagga to Laverton, but after that the system became the Diploma Cadet Squadron based at Frognall and participants were cadets rather than airmen.

Of major significance during my Laverton years, I met my wife to be at the Laverton Progress Association hall where a dance was held each Friday night, I think. Gwen was a WRAAF, just posted from rookies at Point Cook to 1 AD. We were married in 1960 and are still together - need I say more? A few Mangoes were also at Laverton, ARDU or No 1 AD - the South and West Australians and Victorians. I recall Ian Melbourne, Foxy Dennett, Phil Donnelly. Jim Honour was the education officer who looked after us, and Bob Halverson later took over administration of the diploma course.

#### **Diploma course days**

The diploma course was pretty tough particularly when the RAAF educators decided to lump a few aero subjects onto the mech and elec courses. But, as with Wagga, we had a

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sports ethic which resulted in the formation of the RAAF Laverton Rugby Union team which played weekly in the Melbourne/Geelong area competition. Most of us had played at Wagga but we drafted a few newcomers into the team, like Ron McGuigan, Pete Watson and Merv McDougall. I think we did pretty good.

Three of us were lucky enough to graduate after three years (me, Terry McGee and Howard Kay), were commissioned wef 1 January 1960 and posted to Rathmines for a knife and fork course and then back to Wagga for a basic technical officers course. Those were the days when Sabres were sort of chopping pilots' heads off during ejection and I recall ARDU being there and watching live firing trials using dummies with steak attached to knees to measure contact with the cockpit structure, and a bolt being fired through the canopy just before the dummy went through it and being caught in a net - probably the one from the obstacle course Choppy Gannell was on during the stoush with the Nashos.

### **Real work starts**

Gwen and I were married in Melbourne just before I went to back to Wagga for the basic technical officers course.

In retrospect, I had mostly an interesting and satisfying service career. My first "real" posting was to No 486 Squadron, part of No 36 Wing. No 36 Squadron had just received their C130As. I recall witnessing a pool of Avtur on the tarmac under the wing of one of the Hercs which lead to a major integral tank de-seal/re-seal program. I wonder at the health of the mostly small framies who had to go into the tanks as there was quite a stir associated with a similar program on the F111 recently.

No 38 Squadron had a bunch of Goonies and two Meatboxes (one Mk 8 and a dual Mk 7) supposedly the Communications Flight. Air Commodore Charles Pearce was OC Richmond and probably flew the Mk 8 more than most. It was known as the "World's Only All Jet Aero Club". We painted the Mk 8 silver with red lightning flashes on the rear fuselage and hung a fox's tail on the HF antenna. Gwen and I lived in Windsor and Richmond and our first child, a daughter was born in Windsor.

Maintenance Squadron life was great. Quite a few Mangoes (and other ex-Appies) were at Richmond, either at the wing, No 2 AD or No 11 Squadron. Wednesday afternoons were set aside for serious inter-unit rugby union. Blackie Blackwood was our coach but I can't recall who I played with in the wing team, other than the radio officer from Maintenance Squadron, Flying Officer Frank Pederick. I was also roped into the Richmond town rugby league team. We got five pounds a win, four pounds a draw and three pounds a loss, and presented with a white, long sleeve shirt if picked as "best and fairest". Five pounds then represents about \$100 today. If you don't believe me, I'll show you, using bottles of beer as the conversion factor.

### **Mirage and more Mirage**

Most of the rest of my RAAF years was spent associated with the Mirage. From Richmond I was posted to the Air Force Office, or whatever it was being called at the time (it seems to have changed a few times over the years) in 1961. In those days, Defence comprised only Air Block 1 and 2, Navy Block 1 and the great American erection called "Bugs Bunny". The defence complex of today just didn't exist then, nor did the Lake. I can recall driving across the Molonglo River (more a piddly creek) beneath very large bridges under construction thinking, what a waste. But, someone plugged the hole, the Lake filled up and makes Canberra the beautiful city that it is today. The BL (Before Lake) days were great for a young couple with a new daughter. Gwen was able to get a job and finance a deposit of ten percent to buy our allocated married quarters in Downer, an outer suburb at the time. The total cost was 4,890 pounds with the interest at four percent. It gave us the basis for financial security later on and my boss Wing Commander Lyn Compton, who became AMTS later on was the source of advice to buy. Thank you, Sir.

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After a couple of years with the Mirage Project, I was posted to be the RAAF Resident Engineer at GAF (Government Aircraft Factories) Avalon, outside Geelong. We lived both in Geelong for a while then in a new married quarter in Werribee. As well as production flight-testing and final acceptance of the Mirage, we also had a Canberra refurbishing program ongoing, removing and replacing DTD 683 alloy structural components as the material was susceptible to stress corrosion.

Avalon was the location for training the initial group of Mirage instructors. Tex Watson, Col Ackland, Mick Parer. Ron Green and Billie Hicks Collings were the test pilots and Bill made the first Mirage flight in Australia. The French Air Attache (a nice bloke, Commandant Radisson, I think), presented him with a bunch of flowers - apparently a quaint French tradition, but he didn't kiss Bill, another quaint French custom. ARDU also had a permanent detachment there flying a specially instrumented Mirage. This aircraft went out of control during stall trials and the RAF test pilot was badly injured, ejecting at very high air speed, possibly near Mach 1. The aircraft almost completely disintegrated and left a hole like a bomb crater where it hit close to Avalon.

That posting lasted a couple of years and was followed by a big move fifty kilometres up the road to the dreaded HQSC as the Mirage Project Officer in Air Eng, headed by Tony Dietz and Ian Traill Sutherland. This was a very interesting slot, being the very early days of Mirage operations. I also lucked out on a trip to France in a C130A to pick up the first dual aircraft. On the way over we ran across a Canberra crew at Gan in the Maldives. I'm pretty sure Al Perry was one of them. We remained at Werribee for all of this posting and became quite long-term residents. Our son was born there. Phil Donnelly lived nearby.

#### **Air Attache service**

A most interesting experience followed with a two-year posting to the staff of the Air Attache, Washington, DC, USA. I was involved in most types of aircraft except the F111 which was handled by a separate section. The P3C project was running requiring travel across the country from Texas to California. Replacement Caribou were collected from the De Havilland factory near Toronto requiring travel to Canada. I accompanied the Air Attache of the day (can't for the life of me remember his name, but it will come) on one trip and lucked out on being on a float-equipped De Havilland lightie which he landed under instruction on the Niagara River below the Falls. Winter in Canada was something to experience - cars plugged extension cords into sockets while parked outside to prevent the oil freezing.

Visits to the Pentagon, having tonsils out under local anaesthetic in Walter Reed Army Hospital at the height of the Vietnam War with many injured US servicemen in at the same time, playing up (which I should not have done) left many good memories - and some regrets, PX privileges, American housing, obligatory representational allowance (it had to be spent on entertaining contacts), the embassy circuit, the drama of a baby left in a car during Australia Day celebrations at the ambassador's house (a warm day and closed car) and the Air Attaché's wife, an ex-RAAF nursing sister trying to resuscitate the baby. Mustn't forget, my main duty was ensuring the Air Attaché's car was always washed and polished and fuelled.

I saw the first demonstration of the Harrier Jump Jet at Andrews AFB outside DC. The Marines bought a bunch of them later on. I also flew in a small double main rotor Karman chopper the USAF used for initial fire suppression and rescue at aircraft crash sites. Less impressive was a banana-shaped Sikorski (I think) the USAF used for ferrying people around the local area to the Pentagon. My memory is of 40,000 rivets in close formation, all vibrating and a solid shaft running along the inside of the fuselage between the engine/front rotor and rear rotor. It looked like a Biafran Chinook

If you ever get the opportunity to greet ex-Squadron Leader Roland Teape Davis, an

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EquipO, remind him of the time he and I had just caught an Eastern Airlines flight from Atlanta to Washington DC. While we were taxiing, the stew asked our destination and Roland (we had had a few) said something about Havana. The stew said he had just committed a federal offence (Eastern aircraft were being regularly hijacked to Cuba at the time) and we returned to the terminal. FBI agents took him off and decided that as I was wearing the same uniform I was probably a potential hijacker as well and I was off-loaded too. Most embarrassing - and wasn't the Air Attache amused!

In retrospect, I could have done a better job but was diverted by exposure to a very different culture and didn't handle it as well as I should have - no excuses.

### **Back to Oz**

The Mirage was calling again. No 2 OCU, Williamtown was the next job - senior engineering officer. What a potential catastrophe! We had Sabres, Macchis, a Winjeel or two, Mirages (dual and single). We had to convert aircrew including kids who had just completed AFTS on Macchis on Mirage without transitioning through Sabres. At the same time we had to take on fitters and mechanics almost direct off course with little experience. Technical manning was controlled by No 478 Maintenance Squadron and guess who got the most experienced blokes? Nevertheless, the maintenance blokes were a good bunch - NCOs and troops. Touch wood we didn't lose an aircraft during the year I was there. The photo shows a few of us celebrating winning an inter-unit athletics competition. Bill Richardson was CO for a while. Corporal Bill Hilton, the orderly room corporal is in the bunch - Bill lives in Mount Isa - small world. I wonder where the others ended up? Two ex-appies with the group are Bas Straughair and Bushie Trimble. I see them usually at the annual reunion in Brisbane. Jim Kennedy, an early Diploma Cadet Squadron graduate is the flying officer in the front, right next to Bushie on his left, rear. Bas is crouching front left. They look older these days.

An interesting experience involved being the technical member on a court of inquiry into a double fatal Canberra prang in the circuit at Amberley. Grisly stuff.

### **Butterworth here we come**

No 3 Squadron became home next. As senior engineering officer I was required to live on the mainland rather than Penang Island but that was OK. Peter Scully was CO and a mad keen boatie. I got trapped into the RAAF Butterworth Motor Club, probably the fault of Foxy Dennet who is still a mad keen motor sports person and was there at the time. Mogs Morrow was my ArmO. The photos shows the squadron in toto and the pilots and "blunties" in our drinking suits. Gwen "lost" mine after we came back to Oz.

We tragically lost Lloyd Smith, an ex-radio Appie, I think, on a night navex. He hit a ridge just below the summit of Gunong Tahang, the highest mountain in Malaysia. A couple of metres higher and he would have cleared it. It took a couple of days to find the crash site and the RMAF choppered a team of us in to collect what was left of Lloyd and parts of the aircraft which had disintegrated and scattered down the backside of the ridge. If anyone knows a giant of a young-at-the-time ADG Sergeant Fred (Germanic name), don't be below him when he jumps on a semi-hovering helicopter. When he jumped on, he nearly pulled the aircraft out of the sky on to the top of us waiting to get on board.

We had a permanent Mirage detachment at Tengah, on Singapore and manned it for three months in turn with No 75 Squadron. I had the best of all worlds being able to commute in the back seat of our dual as required. One trip included a HE bomb run to Birdshit Island with Brick Bricknell driving. First time I've greyed out. Another bit of excitement involved flight testing a repaired and highly modified under-fuselage 1700-litre fuel tank. We fitted a new nose section as the old one had been damaged and the tank written off. It was used to carry gear from Tengah to Butterworth and back. I think we hired it out to 75 Squadron when they were on detachment. Speedy Coleman was the squadron test pilot and took the

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opportunity to bounce a flight of four of our aircraft returning to base as Mice Meissner would say “in the weeds”. Aircraft everywhere and lots of head bumping.

On posting to Butterworth, Gwen tested allergic to one of the obligatory needles - nearly killed her. On return, she and the kids had to go into quarantine in Fremantle as we returned via Perth. I went back to Williamtown as I had been posted to the US again to do the USAFIT (United States Air Force Institute of Technology) masters degree in science course, specialising in logistics management at Wright Patterson AFB, Dayton, Ohio. We were reunited after about three weeks quarantine for Gwen and the kids in a beach front quarantine station, and me doing nothing but enjoy myself in the mess at Williamtown. Too much booze involved but again, no excuses.

### **The States again**

The AFIT course as it was known, was described by an American mate as “a \$10,000 course shoved up your ass a nickel at a time”. The course cohort of about sixty comprised mainly USAF captains, a few majors and a lieutenant-colonel. The Marines had a representative as did the USN and a few Defence civvies were on board. I had just been promoted to wing commander and was the only foreign officer present. Bill Burgess (ex-Appie) was just finishing his year and Keith Johnston (also ex-Appie) had finished his the previous year.

In short, we were pushed very hard with long hours of study essential to maintain a passing grade. I put myself under considerable extra pressure being the only foreign officer student and not wishing to be the first RAAF student to fail. I wasn't good company for Gwen and the kids who went to local schools and came back to Oz with Yank accents.

A key element of the course was our masters thesis report. Teams of two had to do original research into a logistics-related subject offered by the USAF, prepare a report and have it accepted by the institute. My thesis partner (and closest friend) whom I'm still in contact with researched ways of effectively providing professional military education (PME) for senior foreign military officers. The research required us to travel between terms to major service institutions such as the Naval War College, Newport, RI, Inter-American Defence College, Washington DC, National War College, Washington DC, Air War College, Alabama, Air Command and Staff College, Alabama, and HQ USAF, The Pentagon.

Graduation was a huge relief but I think the unrelenting stress had a compounding effect later on.

### **Back to Oz again**

The dreaded HQSC again - to Staff Officer Maintenance Plans (SOMP), the Repair and Overhaul (SORO) Division and Staff Officer Technical Spares Assessing (SOTSA) where many good people, especially SNCOs pulled the pin - a great loss to the RAAF. Phil Hodge was posted to Amberley to die from lung cancer. At his farewell Phil said that it was a bugger of a way to get a posting to Amberley.

During these years I don't think I performed to my capabilities. I lost the plot to some extent and if I feel any regret it is in respect to this time in my career. I could have done better.

Four years later I felt I had to get away from what I recognised as a fairly serious booze problem which was adversely impacting on family relationships as well as work. My amateur shrink diagnosis in hindsight suggests I was suffering mild depression and who knows what the future might have been if I had sought help.

### **Pull the pin**

So I pulled the pin, leaving behind a reasonably successful RAAF career and a lot of great people and came to The Isa. I enjoyed the change of working as the chief EquipO for MIM and mixed success and failure in small business later on. Mild depression appeared (again?) and the psychiatric treatment I received several years back has me fit as a buck rat these

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days and twice as dangerous. I am very much involved in community service activities and was honoured in 2002 by the award of the OAM.

I now classify myself as Permanently Voluntarily Non-employed Too Busy To Be Retired (PVNTBTBR) and would not be dead for quids. My interests include the local rugby union (referee, touch judge, chairman of the judiciary committee) and I'm currently president of the Golden Oldies RFC. Each two years we attend the Alice Springs Master Games and represent Mt Isa as the Ugly Mongrels. I still play but am eligible to wear gold shorts which means I can't be tackled. I'm a star as I can still run! I'm involved with the local TAFE, Community Adult Literacy, and a QANGO of the federal Department of Transport and Regional Services, the North Queensland Area Consultative Committee (NQACC). I'm seriously considering throwing my hat in the ring for the local council, possibly the mayor's position, which comes up next March. Gwen thinks I'm mad.

### The end

I take great joy in attending our local reunions in Brisbane each year and had a wonderful time at the fiftieth celebrations in Wagga in 1998. I'm happy to contribute a bit towards our fiftieth reunion and remain impressed at how strong the bonds developed so long ago remain.

What more can one Mango say? What we got as impressionable kids fifty years ago set us on individual paths and, except for the one area of retrospective concern, have no real regrets. I hope most Mangoes can say the same. I still do my buttons up and polish my shoes. My memories are good - I wish I could remember more - but that's what reunions are for - to catch up and renew bonds.

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Back: L to R : McDougal, Harwood,  
McFarlane, Fiddes.  
Front: Hobbs, me, and Black



Blue blazer parade: L to R : me,  
Lambie, McDougal and Hobbs.

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No. 2 OCU—celebrating an inter-athletics win  
I am standing 3rd from left



No. 3 Mirage Squadron Butterworth