

Ashton (Herb) Cavanagh—A53151—Instrument Fitter

Fifty years is a fair time - plenty of years for each of us to have gone off and done something, even if that something was largely nothing much. I think I've managed a little of the push hard-go-gettun bit and also some of the lie down - do nothing, and all in all it hasn't been too bad.

Off we went to Wagga when we were callow youths, at an age when the psychologists and trick cyclists would say we were very much searching for our identities, and certainly we were at a stage in life when many people know only a little about rather a lot. I wonder how many of us, on reflection, feel that we might just have missed out on something of a normal world while limited to the base, the hangars, the RAAF issue "civilian" clothes and somewhat meagre social contact with the outside?

Conversely it might be said by a few that by being apprentices we gained rather than lost, that we learnt more of the world and work and society than civilian life could have offered, and that we were fortunate to have passed through a system that even now still marks us.

In the end it is a matter for the individuals. For my part I have to say that despite all of the merits of being a RAAF Apprentice and despite the development of skills and the satisfaction of challenges met and jobs well done, I do wonder what might have been had I taken different paths earlier.

Now retired as almost all of us are, I find the post-RAAF years to have been very good to me. It was *after*, that I began to travel extensively, beyond the well worn Butterworth and Southeast Asia track - yet it didn't happen immediately on discharge.

For some couple of years I kept thinking that I'd made a mistake and should have stayed in, and whilst I would now probably regard my fears at the time as an example of institutionalisation, it was difficult then.

As I became more accustomed to *not* putting on my Air Force disguise every morning I underwent a change. Grew a beard. Hair was scraggly and ...ah... picturesque. Clothes were more scruff than style. Took to driving a truck all over the place. All very interesting ... and perhaps there was a bit of catch up in it, too. I was doing things that I wanted to do at my pace.

At one stage I was driving an old truck through that well known Queensland tourist resort of Hughenden in the middle of April. Having pulled up at a fuel pump I was met by an attractive young lady who, on filling the tank, asked me if I was going to Camooweal. This was a pretty boring trip, you understand. So, I said, "Of course". Camooweal was a definite stop, and did she want a lift?

"Yair," she said in a slow drawl. "I'd like to go to Camooweal because Hughenden is, y'know, the end of the earth and the Camooweal rodeo is on soon."

I was beginning to think this wasn't too bad a circumstance, but it turned out that the rodeo wasn't on till August and her father was two axe handles across the shoulders. Sigh. I just pushed off.

I came back to Perth and eventually tracked down the Army Reserve. Thinking I might be OK as a part-time military bod I went to see a Reserve recruitment officer, a second lieutenant who appeared to be only just out of school. The interview went something like this:

RRO: "Ah, Mr Cavanagh do you have any military experience?"

ABC: "Er, well I spent a while in the RAAF."

RRO: "Did you really! That's very interesting. And what did you do?"

ABC: "Um, well, instruments and air traffic control mostly."

RRO: "Oh. What sort of instruments actually?"

ABC: "Well, *aircraft instruments* actually."

RRO: "You mean like speedometers and so forth?"

Mango Stories

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ABC: “ Ah .. close.. not quite”

RRO: “ Well Mr. Cavanagh, I’m sure you’ll do well in the Army Reserve. What was your Air Force rank?”

ABC: “ Umm.. Flight lieutenant, and once or twice I filled in for the boss and did the acting bit”.

RRO: “Oh I see. Acting. So you’re a bit of a thespian!”

ABC: “ A what?”

RRO: “ A thespian, Mr. Cavanagh... you know .. an actor”.

ABC: (somewhat relieved) “ Ah .. no mate. I acted in the boss’s position while he was away”.

RRO (rather confused) “Well anyway, Mr. C., you must think of the loss of position. If you join the Army Reserve you’ll be a Private. You’ll lose your rank”.

ABC: “S’orl right. I just want them to teach me about diesel engines and such stuff, for free”.

RRO: “And you’ll have to *remove your beard*”

ABC: (splutter and gasp) “Wot! Never! This beard is my *protest!*”.

And so it was that I finally freed myself from my urge to return to the military, and in a way that is also how I came to be a university student.

What did I do at Uni? Good question. Social Science with Linguistics minor. Fascinating. I think I was the oldest student they had seen in few years. The just-out-of-school lot were under orders to make sure I had a comfortable seat. Lecturers would bring me coffee during the breaks. When someone spoke about history, they would look at me for confirmation from one-who-was-probably-there-at-the-time, as far back as the Boer War quite likely. When they spoke of “pre TV” they would look at me for help, and sometimes I would talk of pre-transistors, and pounds shillings and pence, and gallons and telephone exchanges and party lines and food rationing, and children joining the RAAF when they were fifteen years old.

I worked for the public service as a dole clerk for a while and found the experience to be singularly dreadful. I guess that the unemployed around Perth whose surnames began with either H, I, J or K thought that my work was for the betterment of society but I was climbing the walls. The crunch came when I needed a new roll of sticky tape and the Bolshevik in the store room told me that I would need a “chit from the boss” before he would give me one. I went off and finished what I’d started at Uni.

Somewhere along the way I convinced a very nice lady named Diane that she ought to marry me. This was a good number of years after my first marriage went belly-up. I thought that getting married again—and to Diane—was a very good thing indeed, and my daughters, one now a cartographer and the other a nun (don’t ask me how), agreed.

Soon after the matrimonial doings we began to travel here and there. It started when Mrs.C (a medical person) came home and said something about being nice to other people, so off we went for two years to a place called Sargodha in the really hot part of Pakistan on the ten inch isohyet. Until then I hadn’t thought a place where the summer temperature stayed above 35C even at night could exist, but at least the winters were comfortable. Diane did her doctoring and I taught English at a girls high school not far away from the little hospital. When a teacher entered a classroom there would be a standard salutation, which meant that I would be greeted with, “Good morning Sir Ashton Sahib”, as the students bowed and I bowed in response. It felt pretty strange.

The medical services at the hospital were always stretched beyond the limits. People died, often from malnourishment. Malarial diseases were common. If a child reached the age of five it was thought that he or she had probably developed enough resistance against malaria to get by, but the cerebral kind of malaria usually kills victims in one day. Typhoid and

Mango Stories

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typhus struck now and then. For the first year we felt rather less than healthy.

When I wasn't teaching English I'd fix things at the hospital. The X-ray machine was fairly old and ran on glass valves and pentodes and large oscillators and slow-conduction fuses. Other lab equipment was of similar vintage. All this was not entirely unfamiliar to a 1954-56 RAAF apprentice but one has to admit to a few mistakes and a lot of guessing because of the absence of things like circuit diagrams, and also to one or two quite impressive smoke clouds accompanied by louder noises than usual, and very vocal epithets in English and pig-Urdu, and some pungent burning insulation scenarios, yet it is true to say that nothing was utterly destroyed during all this "repair and maintenance" work. Reduced to looking very unserviceable indeed? Yes. Unfixable? Never, except for the mains power supply, which dropped out frequently and caused great difficulty if an operation was in progress.

We returned to Perth after two years and were grateful to have been to Sargodha, and were grateful to be back, and we'd like to return one day.

No chronologies, right? OK, but we did get away to England for a few years and while there visited many nearby places for varying periods. At the start of the UK expedition we left Perth (+35C) and arrived in Manchester (-2C and snowing). That evening outside our house in Shropshire it was -6C. The interior heating was very efficient. There were blizzards sometimes. No traffic moved and snow would lie around for some time, about two feet deep. To walk to the shops even in high gumboots was to invite getting feet sloshing about in slush as deep snow fell into the boots and melted. Hmm. For a bit of balance, the summers were great. We did the Europe/US thing and generally had a great time.

At some stage I went back to flying. I suppose quite a few of the old Tiger Moth apprentices and many others have done the same. It's a real joy. We bought and still own a 1968/69 Piper Cherokee (VH CVV) and fly when we can get away from other matters for a while. Now that Diane has a licence I find it harder to get in the pilots seat because she often engages in trickery (eg: "Would you just check the pitot cover? I think I left it on") and straps herself in while I am doing such checks.

We now live at Bunbury WA, where I am in charge of mowing grass (not to be confused with lawn), pushing brooms, chopping wood, washing dishes, keeping the house above the grot level, paying bills, cooking food (often, but with little skill) and flying (not often but with rare skill, ho ho). Our house is actually controlled by two anarchistic dogs of diminutive size but very large ego power drives. They have a particular gift for identifying salespeople and meter readers, council rangers and deliverers of unsolicited mail. All Mango visitors are truly welcome, however.

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Mango Stories

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With VHCVV at Bunbury



In the scrub at Caiguna



Diane and me



Diane, me and youngest daughter
Caroline in hills of heather, Cumbria