

Warren Coops—A53152—Instrument Fitter

Brief history 1956-2003

I was posted to Laverton after RAAF Wagga where I proceeded to become involved in night school, trade tests, ballroom dancing, women and sport intermingled with the learning of the practical intricacies of the aircraft instrument trade. While at Laverton I became engaged to the lovely, golden-voiced Elizabeth whom I later married - we have been together for forty-five years (two life sentences) to date. This union has engendered three daughters and one son (deceased) and ten grandchildren.

During the Laverton posting I completed electronic training at Ballarat. While on the electronic course, weekends were spent hitchhiking to Melbourne to see my fiancée as well as to play rugby union with the diploma-based Laverton team which was comprised of ex-apprentices. Prior to the Ballarat attachment I also competed in inter-service basketball, athletics and Australian football.

After marriage, I was posted to Woomera for over five exciting years working mainly on the auto pilot for the drone Jindivik, Canberra and Meteor aircraft being maintained and developed for missile trials. Other aircraft serviced were Sabre, Dakota, Beaver, Otter, Sikorsky Helicopter and Bristol Freighter. On this posting many spectacular missile trials resulting in the destruction of aircraft and the launch of the first Blue Streak intercontinental ballistic missile were witnessed. Here I gained considerable experience in radio, radar, engine, airframe, electrical, aerial photography and telemetry functions dealing with aircraft pitted against missiles.

During these Woomera years I competed in a wide variety of sports which included Australian football, rugby league, soccer, basketball, cricket, water polo and athletics. These sporting pursuits resulted in being selected for the South Australian Rugby League Team to play WA in 1963 and an invitation to play with the Norwood Australian Rules Team in Adelaide. I also completed matriculation and a number of engineering diploma subjects from RMIT during the same period. I also, obviously, managed to cohabit with my wife occasionally because our two eldest girls were born there.

My major technical achievements at Woomera were the invention of a comprehensive maintenance test modification for the Jindivik auto pilot and my selection in the Jindivik demonstration team to go to the USA in 1962 - my rumoured connection with Marilyn Monroe, who died while I was in California, is denied.

Being posted to WA from Woomera was a short-lived dream. While there I was selected for officer training at Point Cook and my third daughter was three months old when first sighted. However, at Pearce I did manage to learn the Link Trainer, maintain Vampire and Dakota aircraft, learn badminton and be a member of the team which won the inaugural WA Volleyball Championships. I also won the inter-service 120 yards hurdles title after replacing the selected competitor who had failed to arrive.

On completion of officers course and subsequent engineer training, I was posted to 3 Aircraft Depot, Amberley where I had a steep learning curve under a tough CO (Group Captain Ell). My next CO was to become CAS and later knighted: Sir James Rowland, Governor of NSW.

Amberley was also a sad time for me and my wife when our son died soon after birth in Ipswich. My wife almost died too and she took a long time to recover. I was permitted to arrive at work late and leave early to transport kids to and from school and look after my wife. Despite the difficult time at both work and at home I learnt much about the depot level maintenance of aircraft instruments and aircraft. I also managed to fit in promotion examinations, secondary duties and sport which included selection in the Combined Services Rugby Union Team to play Queensland and victory in the 400 metres at the inter-service athletics.

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A significant career change then occurred when I was posted to RSTT in charge of instrument fitter training with a staff of one officer and twenty-two NCOs. The number of instrument trainees exceeded two hundred and sixty. I was appointed a subordinate commander, base welfare officer, ANCP (Accountable Non Cryptographic Publications) officer and base athletics officer as a bonus. The hierarchy at Wagga definitely tested me by delegating to me a number of other legal tasks which included going to Richmond as a member of a court martial panel and president of a court of inquiry into the deaths of two airmen in a car smash. One legal task in which I was involved proved to be an embarrassing moment resulting from a charge against an apprentice for cutting hair in the barracks. I'd had my hair cut regularly by this apprentice and was blissfully unaware it was an offence under unit standing orders until I had to hear a charge against the "criminal" who cut my hair. Fortunately the offender had a clean sheet and an admonition (bollicking) was permitted.

The next posting was the obligatory stint at Headquarters Support Command (HQSC) to the Repair and Maintenance Branch where I remained for nearly four years and was responsible for the depot level maintenance of aircraft instrument trade equipment. I travelled interstate often during this period visiting civilian contractors and resident engineers to resolve maintenance and contractual difficulties. I also managed to be promoted and completed all the prerequisite promotion examinations for all remaining ranks. My recreation was limited to running around the tan track in Melbourne, indoor cricket and working back stage for local theatrical productions.

No 486 Squadron was my next tour of duty to be in charge of instruments, electrical, safety equipment, armament sections and Hercules simulator at Richmond, NSW. I arrived in the middle of the period of evacuation of the people from Darwin after Cyclone Tracy. All the Hercules were being turned around mostly in an unserviceable state as long as the aircraft could fly. The maintenance personnel had to be sent home - some of them almost asleep on their feet. Three months later, together with nine troops, I was attached to Vietnam to assist with the evacuation of Australians. Unfortunately the attachment did not get beyond Bangkok because surface to air missiles were being fired at the Hercules aircraft. I was involved in many of the humanitarian tasks such as feeding stock in flooded outback areas, searching for lost aircraft, fighting bushfires in the Blue Mountains and seeking lost seacraft.

The highlight at the end of my Richmond posting was an attachment to New Guinea and Mannis Island to inspect the engineering facilities at the landing strips and aid with the recovery from Jacinot Bay, Bougainville, of a Japanese Zero aircraft which was to be sent to a museum. During this attachment I was covered in brake fluid while assisting a flight engineer in the insertion of a hydraulic line into the brake system using a line taken from the ramp door system. A decision for which I received a kick in the bum on my return to Richmond, but at the same time was commended for the action. One engineering achievement at this unit was the development of an improvement in the deployment of dinghies from Hercules aircraft in flight. One flight in this development involved standing in a harness on the open ramp of the aircraft, in low level flight, to observe the deployment of the dinghy container. The flight engineer advised me to double knot my shoe laces to prevent the wind from removing them, and that I would probably be air sick after watching this deployment against the backdrop of the sea - he was correct on both counts!

The project cell in Canberra, for the computer-aided maintenance management of aircraft and its components, was the next posting quickly followed by a posting to Butterworth after having completed a number of computer courses in Canberra and then a Mirage flight control course in Williamstown.

At Butterworth the job involved control of all aircraft ancillary trades and responsibility for the liquid dry breathing oxygen for all units and the Mirage simulator. An annual trip was made to Singapore to liaise with the RAAF Resident Engineer and to visit the oxygen bottle

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supply facility. On one trip the resident engineer who was playing a game of squash arranged a meeting at a crowded restaurant in Singapore. While I sat waiting for my offside, a young lady sat at my table and asked if I wanted to “enjoy.” Fortunately I did not succumb, but at the time I did feel that I was being watched and sure enough when I looked around I was being observed by about fifteen Australians - a set-up had failed. This was one of two instances where I had been subjected to a set-up. The other one occurred at an all ranks ball in Penang where I was sitting with my wife when the entertainer, a stripper, made a beeline to me and proceeded to clasp my head between her boobs. Unfortunately she was still wearing a sequin type “bra” at the time and the embrace was not as nice as it may have appeared to all the cheering troops.

Malaysia with its wonderful multi-mix of Chinese, Indian and Bumiputra culture was experienced in all its forms. Many holiday trips were made, including Hong Kong and Thailand. A short stint at radio announcing was also tried. Sport involvement was mostly long distance and hash running with seasonal rugby and basketball including coaching of women’s, boys’ and girls’ teams. At one basketball game an amusing incident occurred when a Malaysian Indian airman barracking for his team was cheering, “Come on you black bastards.” Another more serious incident occurred when two drunken Army troops were double dinking on a push bike into the married quarters to watch the basketball but ignored the Malaysian guard’s order (in Malay) to halt. They quickly stopped when he cocked his machine gun.

Another incident was when on holiday in Phuket, money was loaned and assistance given to an Australian who’d had all his belongings (including his passport) stolen. Return of the money was promised but never expected. However, faith in mankind was restored when the young fellow turned up in Butterworth two months later to return the money.

Despite living in a guarded compound with the advertised constant insurgent threat, negotiating and organising the consolidation of all unit safety equipment sections into one facility, gaining consensus in the establishment review and resolution of one serious flight control system problem, Butterworth was in general an easygoing posting.

Naturally the return to Australia was to be HQSC again as a staff officer to Air Commodore I.T. Sutherland. This appointment involved responsibility for all resident engineers at all civilian establishments and all service aircraft standards and drawings. Major achievements included the initiation and development of introductory courses for all personnel entering HQSC and the compilation and development of HQSC Engineering Instructions for the new Logistics Command structure. Some acting in the theatre, running and indoor cricket were my recreational pursuits in Melbourne.

After resignation at HQSC, I continued in my post as a reservist until joining the public service as a technical cataloguer two years later. On completion of one year as a technical cataloguer I took unpaid leave and completed an associate diploma of technology (computing). While doing the diploma course I also worked fourteen hours a week as a laboratory technician at Toorak College, Mt Eliza. Soon after returning to the catalogue job I resigned from the public service followed by a return to full-time RAAF in Canberra to compile the F111 Avionics Update Management Directive. I then wrote a financial submission for the fitment of “black boxes” to all service aircraft. After this task I became a systems analyst on a four-man inter-service team to analyse the Defence Forces Health System for the establishment of a computer system for the consolidation of all three services health, pay, personnel, supply and medical systems.

Final RAAF retirement was followed by a taxation course and a casual job as schools’ assistant in Canberra. High schools soon sought my services when they found that not only could I set up science experiments, I could maintain all the equipment as well.

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On return to Frankston, Victoria to live, one of my neighbours, a bricklayer, employed me on a casual basis as a labourer. At first I thought I would die from this work, but after a couple of weeks the pain diminished enabling me to then obtain tremendous experience in the building industry. Two years later I completed an electronics, TV, and VCR course followed by a bookkeeping course. I then became the secretary/treasurer of the local arts council for three years.

After a shift to a unit complex I found one of my neighbours was deaf and blind. So, in order to communicate with him, a course in sign/touch language (AUSLAN) was completed. Otherwise the rest of my time is spent playing contract bridge (cards), doing theatre support, genealogy (family history), travelling, visiting family (residing in Victoria, Queensland, WA and Canberra) and doing odd jobs for neighbours and friends.

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With Leanne and Elizabeth at daughter Leanne's WRAAF graduation 1977. Leanne was dux of course.

Daughter Sandra with Miss Australia, RSTT Wagga base 1980. Sandra was the RAAF's first female instrument fitter trainee.



With Elizabeth at Support Command Ball 1980



With friend North Queensland. 1996