

Phil Donnelly—A53154—Engine Fitter

My first posting from Wagga was to 1AD Laverton. From January to August 1958 I was sent to Point Cook to work on Wirraways. After this stint it was back to ARDU Laverton where I spent almost ten years trying to get out of and away from Melbourne and their “Footy”. At Laverton I worked on a Lancaster, Dakotas, Winjeels, Vampires, Sabres and Canberras.

The period 1963 to 1967 I spent as part of the ARDU crew at Avalon with the test Mirage. The Mirage tropical trials in Darwin were interesting. Its performance was still secret in those days, but in the tropics it flew higher and faster than anywhere previously tested. In December 1961 I married Val Halcrow and we subsequently had two boys, Peter and Laurie.

We were posted to 478 Maintenance Squadron, Butterworth in January 1967. We lived on Penang Island and loved it. When our time was up we did not want to leave. I started work in the Sabre maintenance hangar and when the Mirages arrived I moved into the Mirage engine shop. This move did not stop me doing the normal rotations to 79 Squadron in Ubon, Thailand. The eight-week rotation happened two or three times each year. I was there the day 79 Squadron left Ubon. We had a major panic that morning because one of our Sabres had disappeared. When we got it back it was covered with stencils of all the American squadrons on the base. Both of the civil riots that happened in Malaysia occurred while I was in Ubon, so I missed out on the curfews, but Val handled it quite well.

In August 1969 we were posted back to HQSC, St Kilda Road, Melbourne. I was driving a desk in maintenance, planning in MPI, writing the TMPs and I was more footy! I was promoted to flight sergeant by December 1969. This time it took me nearly three and a half years to get out of Melbourne.

We were posted to Pearce, WA in January 1972 - back home at last! I have three brothers and three sisters, all younger than myself. The two years here I spent in the maintenance hangar looking after Macchi maintenance and two Dakotas. They tried to post us to Williamstown late in 1973 and because I was halfway through building a house I got out in January 1974.

After being spoon fed for twenty-one years I did not know what to do. I went to all the boat yards but because I didn't know the difference between a Mercury and an Evinrude I got nowhere. I was given a job in the pub around the corner working two nights a week in their lounge and dining room. This was sufficient to pay the bills.

One of my brothers, who worked in the Persian Gulf, had a boat moored in Fremantle so I felt obligated to help him use and maintain this boat. This only lasted three months.

Attwood Marine sent me a telegram referring me to their advertised workshop vacancy. They wanted me to start their mechanics on subcontract and use me as the thin edge of the wedge. The other mechanics knew the score and told me nothing. I had to learn from their books. The first power-head rebuild took me fourteen hours and I was paid for eight hours. The fit-up took me ten hours and I was paid for six. After a few months I could get two V4 outboards side by side to do a one hundred-hour service and this would take me eight hours and I would be paid for twelve. If I made a mistake I had to pay for it. I learnt real quick! After three years at Attwood Marine I knew it all and moved round the corner to Beacon Marine to learn about Mercury. That was in January 1978.

In August 1978 I got the job as Western Australian service manager for Mercury Marine. This job involved teaching the dealers' mechanics in service schools, processing all warranty claims, visiting all metro and country outboard dealers. While going on trips to the northwest I would time these according to the Broome tides. I was able to stay with one of my brothers in Broome for two weekends by breaking the trip on the way further north and on the way back via Broome; I never missed out on a feed of mud crabs and/or fish.

Mango Stories

Phil Donnelly—A53154—Engine Fitter

In 1987 after years of hassles with TAFE, Department of Education, unions, etc, I managed to get apprentice training for marine mechanics up and running.

Also, that year I became involved with the chase boats for the Americas Cup teams. All of the teams would let me have contact with their chase boat operators to talk about operation and maintenance. At the start of the series three of the teams used our motors. By the end of the series all but two of the teams had switched to using our motors. The service reps for all the other brands would refuse warranty on anything they broke because they said the motors were being raced. The boat drivers used to race each other but their “racing” was only fifty mph whereas real racing is a hundred mph or more. As a consequence I would pay warranty on everything they broke unless they sank or swamped it. All the teams used the same watering holes and the word soon spread that the “Merc guy” was a soft touch. Of course, when they did break things I would sit with the driver to determine how and why, and work out a way to stop it recurring.

After the series was over I wrote an eight-page report to Mercury about how I organised all the service, how the good parts worked, what went wrong and how I would do it again if necessary.

This report won me a Summit Award with Mercury Marine International. This was a trip for Val and myself to Casa Pepe in Santo Domingo in the Caribbean with twelve other couples from all over the world. We followed this week with two weeks touring in the USA with another Australian couple.

In the early 90s Mercury introduced an internal incentive program based on market share and sales target numbers. Western Australia won seven out of eight of the quarterly awards, which gave us extra bonus dollars and an overseas trip. Val and myself travelled back to Penang three times. We also visited Hong Kong to meet up with Bob and Elaine Stoyles and Geoff McNabb who were with Cathay. We also spent time in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Cameron Highlands, Phuket and Bali. After two years this beaut program was stopped.

In May 1996 I retired. Not long after, in August 1997, Val died.

After the 1998 reunion in Wagga I was doing nothing back home in Perth when my younger brother Jim suggested I could come up to Broome and help him. He has a factory making timber roof trusses and he also sells building supplies. So I locked the house up, hooked up the boat and went north. At the end of 1998 I returned to Perth, sold the house and went back to Broome. It is hard working for Jim because if the weather is too good he orders me to stop work and come fishing and go crabbing. To get bothersome sales reps from Perth out of his hair it is sometimes required to take them out as well.

Because of a heart condition the medics told me to stop work a couple of years ago. Now my occupation is being happy.

Phil Donnelly
PO Box 5619
Broome, WA. 6725
Tel. No. 08 9192 5213