

**William Downton—A216375—Instrument Fitter**

Like most people I have had a few things happen in my life that interest me, but I don't know if other people would find these incidents interesting. But perhaps they might. When I was up in Toowoomba a couple of years ago buying some timber moulding, I noticed a RAAF packaging can in a corner of the premises (no doubt it came from the now defunct 7SD), and I was reminded of the way they came into the RAAF inventory. It was about 1969 as I recall, and I was at Support Command, and the "Boss", Squadron Leader Ernie Blundell called me into his office with a problem regarding massive damage to an instrument which happened in transit. I was the "Expert" (on paper) project officer responsible for instrument packaging! The item was an inertial navigation platform from an Orion and the damage had occurred en route to the repair facility because the item was incorrectly packaged. This item had a special "box" which was A-class and the unit had not bothered to draw the box from stock. However, the relevant file recorded too many instances of damage occurring to instruments in transit. The real problem was that we were using cardboard boxes and shredded paper which offered very little protection: the simple answer was to buy MILSPEC cans from the USA. Unfortunately these were only available in lots of ten thousand per size which made them very expensive.

Being an "instant expert" I was told to "FIXIT"! After some investigation I got on to an ex-squadron leader EquipO named Frank ? who knew of a small company in South Melbourne (I think), who made a variety of specialised cans. One looked promising, so we took a sample away and, after a lot of suggestions and discussion we had it drawn up incorporating a number of modifications to make the can dust proof and more secure. A prototype was then made up for evaluation. The consensus of opinion was that we had a container that was worth using. At the time it was thought that improvements would be made to the container as time and usage would indicate. Next was to find out what would be the best medium to use inside the can. I quickly learnt all about the various grades of foam plastic and how to cut it, unfortunately electric knives weren't around at the time. Four sizes of cans were purchased in small quantities, an instrument instruction was issued, the EquipOs were finally convinced that the can should be C-class and we were in business. However, these containers no sooner hit the system than they disappeared. NIC, a civilian overhaul facility had cornered the lot, so a further number were purchased. I believed that they were also used by other trade groups as well. A few months ago I was staying overnight in a motel at Murwillumbah and the proprietor was an ex-Army major who had quite recently introduced square modular plastic containers which were designed to replace the steel cans and other types of packaging. So I guess time and improvements in technology finally caught up.

The can manufacturer approached us (the RAAF) with a request to enter the cans in a packaging magazine contest for new products. This was done under joint sponsorship and the four sizes were entered. Three first prizes were awarded and also a special mention. Naturally all concerned were quite pleased, especially the powers that be up in Canberra who did sweet xx! xx! We even had to get them a copy of the certificates that were issued. By the way, the can I saw in Toowoomba was larger than the four we originally introduced. I guess that like all of us there were many things I wish I had done, but I couldn't have wished for a better job than I had at SupCom, 1967-1971. And that was when I ended my Air Force career. A pity no one told me that Whitlam was going to change the rules or I would have stayed on a few years longer. However, there was one sad thing that happened while I was at SupCom that I will never forget: the death of my father.

My mother died when I was just a few months old and, as happened in those days, the family was split up. I ended being brought up by my maternal grandparents and as such I didn't know my father very well. Over the years a relationship was slowly formed when it was suddenly terminated.

## Mango Stories

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On the Monday morning of 8 July 1968, the phone rang and the boss asked me to come to his office. An officer from the Melbourne Provost Marshall's office was there with the news that my father had been murdered earlier that morning at his place of work in Sydney. Not very nice news! I was told to take compassionate leave, so I rang my wife and asked her to collect the children from school and pack ready to go to Sydney. I went to pick up the car only to find that some nit had parked me in. I wasn't too happy as you can imagine, but fortunately the owner of the offending car only kept me waiting for a never ending half hour. By late that evening we were at Yass and stopped there for the night. My young son managed to lock himself in the bathroom (a defective door lock). Not a good finish to a bad day.

We arrived in Sydney on Tuesday and waited. Because of the necessary investigations, my father's body was not released until the Friday when the funeral took place. Dad was employed by the Post Master General's Department, as it then was, and the department gave permission to Dad's fellow workers to take paid time off to attend the funeral if they wished to do so. After the funeral at Mascot Anglican Church we had a police motorcycle escort through Sydney to the North Sydney Crematorium. During the trip a truck broke through between the first and second mourning cars; I don't think the truck driver was too happy about a motorcycle cop having a long talk to him. The service was delayed for about a half an hour to allow everyone to arrive. That was when I realised that there were five double-decker buses full of PMG workers attending the service. I later spoke to the person who organised the buses and he told me that only those who knew Dad were there. How I wished that I had known my father better.

In late January 1974 I was working for Westfield at Toombul Shopping Town in Brisbane and the weather was very wet and windy. The shopping centre was built on a flood plain area with the lower car park straddling Kedron Brook (Shultz Canal). The high spring tides were being held in by the very strong winds beating in shore, and on the afternoon of the Friday of the Australia Day weekend (you remember we used to have them before the politicians took it from us) the lower car park flooded and the water rose in the upper car park until it lapped around the entry doors. Some cars were trapped on the lower car park and got very, very damp inside, too!

On the Friday night I waited up until 0010 hours - about two hours after high tide - decided that the danger of flooding was past and went to bed; I lived on site at that time. Of course I was wrong, and at about 0030 hours the head night cleaner woke me up to tell me that water was coming in under the entry doors. By the time I threw on some clothes and got downstairs into the centre, the water was fifty millimetres deep and getting deeper by the minute. Fortunately the water only rose to my knee depth, but the pressure lifted quite heavy terrazzo (concrete) access plates, covering sewage and grey waste, out of the floor, which made it a bit hazardous to move around. A quick survey of the centre, and there outside the main Sandgate Road entrance were two big bruisers sitting on the back of a seat, obviously waiting for the water pressure to break the doors. At that time it was the custom for management to hire police officers to carry out security duties, so I rang the local constabulary (not expecting to find anyone there at that time in the morning). Happily the phone was answered by a constable dosing down on the floor as he was unable to get home through the flood waters. He came down to assist and the two "gentlemen" decided they would quietly disappear. That was quite a night, one way or another, the two 18-KV transformers feeding the centre were on a slightly lower level than the mall and were under water by nearly two thirds; another few inches and the shit would really hit the fan! The centre opened for business as usual on the Tuesday morning after the long weekend. I have never seen anyone work harder than the tenants, their staff and the centre staff. Major shopping centres are very interesting places to work.

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It was still 1974 and Cyclone Tracy had made a mess of Darwin. I remember putting up typed lists on the front doors every day, before the centre opened, of people who had left or were leaving Darwin, and where they were going. I was amazed at the number of people who were there waiting for the lists to go up to find out where their relatives and friends were. It must have been very frightening for those who lived through the cyclone. The only experience I had had of that nature was when I was living in Ipswich and a mini tornado, about half a mile wide, ripped through where we lived. The roof of a new garage, just built across the road, was torn off, thrown over our roof and ended up in our back yard! A bit too scary for me!

One of the major problems that existed when I first worked in shopping centres was the difficulty of internal communication with maintenance and cleaning staff. The PA system was used to page staff but they frequently were in places where the PA did not reach, such as back corridors, plant rooms, etc and a great deal of time was wasted in finding people. This created quite a problem, particularly in an emergency. Around 1980 two-way radios were at last being made in a size small enough to clip onto a belt and cheap enough to be viable. A shopping centre in Adelaide had recently put hand-held radios into service to solve their communication problem, so funding was sought from head office to introduce them into Westfield Shopping Town, Toombul with a base station in the centre office. At that time there were two Westfield Centres in Brisbane with a third being built and they were sufficiently far apart to allow us to have the same frequency which allowed staff to be moved between centres with their radios when and as the need arose. When the maintenance and cleaning staff first heard that radios were to be introduced, the feedback was that “WE” were going to SPY on them.

However, when the staff began to use the radios and realised how much time and effort was saved, a crowbar would have been needed to prize a unit out of an operator’s hand. I remember that one radio was dropped thirty feet onto a terrazzo floor. Amazingly, even though the case was badly damaged the radio still worked, so the operator strapped it back together and was most unwilling to give it up for repair - reckoned he couldn’t do without it. So much for spying on the staff !

At one time we had an assistant management controller who would come up from Sydney HO to do “inspections”. Every time he came up on a flying visit for a day he would pick us for not having the grass cut along the canal bank. Of course it had probably been cut the day before, BUT the grass grows very quickly in the summer season in Brisbane. Anyway this particular person came up for a three day visit, and the first thing he did was - you guessed it - ask why the grass hadn’t been cut. In fact it had been cut the day before! A quick call to the gardener and the grass was cut again. Next day this “Person” was shown the twenty-four-hour growth and no more was ever said about cutting the grass. This “Person” later became the Queensland state manager and did a lot of mowing of grass at his home!

After I left Queensland I went back to Sydney and worked in shopping centres and high-rise buildings. The last place I worked was in The Rocks in a building called The Clocktower Square and I watched quite a few New Year fireworks displays from the building roof top. The building management industry is an interesting way of life with the tenants paying the rent, the owners wanting everything done their way and the management staff running the gauntlet in between. I’m not the most tactful person and I’m sure that I upset quite a few people. But then I received the very occasional compliment too.

While living in Sydney I looked after the 8th Intake roll for a while and we had a couple of good nights out. Regrettably, not all Mangoes living in Sydney were then on the roll, but perhaps I’ll see them all at the reunion at Coffs Harbour.

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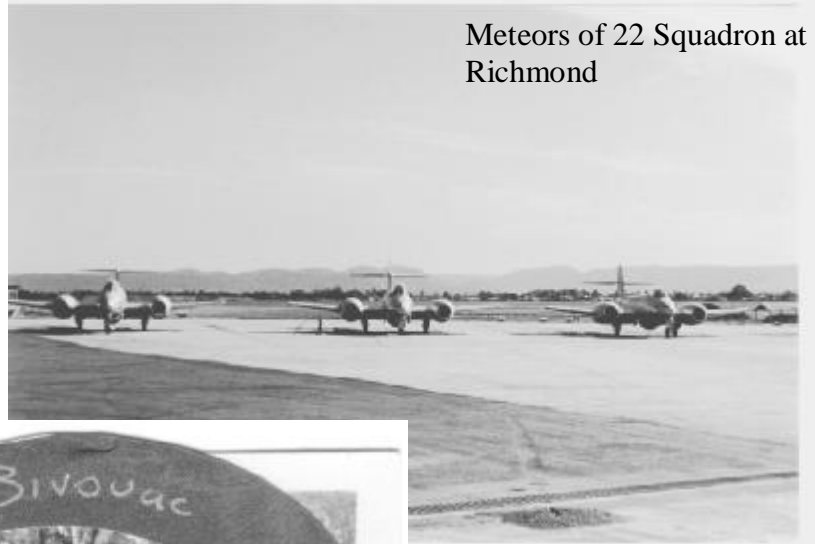
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I'll never forget the night in January 1954 when a group of youths boarded a train at Central Railway in Sydney en route to Wagga Wagga to start a new life in the Air Force. How could one ever forget?

Incidentally I met and married again while I was in Sydney; this time to a Sydneysider.

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Meteors of 22 Squadron at Richmond



Bivouac Kapooka 1956.  
Me centre rear.

Sabres in Darwin 1966.  
Me standing with Keith Horn.  
(I still had hair on my head then)

