

Garry Gent—A311710—Armament Fitter

Wagga, fifty years ago! My faulty memories of the three years are good. We were all very young and I think the overall environment may have contributed to what my other half calls my male chauvinism.

Having been blessed with a very poor memory (all married men have them) my recollections of the past fifty years may have happened in reality or only in my mind. I'm sure someone will correct me where necessary. Probably the thing I regret most about Wagga, that I had control over, was taking up smoking. A habit I continued until 1 January 2000. All smokers in the world rejoiced when I stopped.

Good recollections include the friendships, watching Lew Hoad and Ken Rosewall at Albury, after sneaking into the stadium, sleeping overnight wrapped in newspaper and freezing. Having long holidays twice a year then returning after each break and hearing of other people's adventures and misadventures. The Palaise de Dance or Bloodhouse on Saturday nights. The back bars of various hotels and trying to outsmart "Plasto" and his mates. The "rumble" with the Nashos shortly after arriving. Issued clothing that didn't fit. The bull ring in summer wearing new overalls.

The time arrived when we had to leave and Laverton was the destination. I had just turned eighteen and could legally do things. During the next twelve months I discovered I should never gamble; self, Geoff Gahan, Gerry Broadbent and a few others decided horse racing was the sport of kings. Although wins for me were few and far between I enjoyed the races. Geoff Gahan was lucky. We now had a big city to explore; many town halls for dances, (Don Guy bought an almost new Holden) West Melbourne Stadium for the fights and wrestling. Don had his car stolen on one of our visits.

Work-wise we were treated as if we knew what we were doing. I spent many months refurbishing munitions, sealing them in plastic and dumping them at sea. A few of us bought a '26 Chevvy which we raced around a track at Laverton. I attempted several times to take it out on Saturday night dates - would get to Footscray opposite the Rising Sun Hotel, and the engine would seize. A few drinks and it would unseize and allow a return to Laverton. Left it in the car park when posted to East Sale. Butch met Helen at one of our Saturday night dance excursions and that was it.

I started servicing aeroplanes - Vampires, Lincolns, and bought a '32 Chev with dickie seat for the Saturday night run. Mid year I went to Ballarat on electronics course. If you thought Wagga was cold in winter, Ballarat wins. I learnt enough about electricity to avoid electrocution. My '32 Chev ran off the road one night in a storm and suffered uneconomic damage; I returned to Sale and without wheels. Butch and I drove to Adelaide to attend Mal Bowden's wedding. I think I had a late night before we left as I remember Butch did most of the driving. I think I was seeing elephants and, besides, I never had been good at night driving.

Tiny Brooks had a Riley which he kindly lent me occasionally to pursue my Saturday night dancing events. I eventually, for forty pounds, bought a '36 Pontiac that had been mechanically reconditioned; it looked average. I was posted to Williamstown mid year and drove. Unfortunately an external oil line broke near Wangaratta and emptied the sump. It only melted one white metal big-end bearing and had to be left for repairs. I hitched down a few weeks later for recovery.

This was my first of five postings to Williamstown and involvement with Sabre aircraft. Newcastle and Nelson Bay have great beaches, so summer time was surfing. At work I had my first deployment to Darwin, in the wet season. I loaned my Pontiac to a Pom; he dumped it into a drain, occasioning severe damage. I sold him the wreck and bought a 1947 MGTC for one hundred and eighty pounds. Phil Nixon already had a TC so we acted like cool dudes in the surf scene (I couldn't take it off).

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I decided my career was stagnant at least six years before promotion to corporal, so decided to do what I always wanted to do: fly aeroplanes. The system had just upped the entry qualifications for aircrew to leaving certificate, so I enrolled at the local Tighes Hill Technical College for night school. Harry “Buck” Dunn (Pansy), Choppy Gannel (Daffy), me and Snow Wotton (Doughnut) formed a car club and during 1960 spent four evenings a week at school.

Late in 1960 I was posted to Butterworth, pleaded my case to the system that I wished to complete night school and arranged an exchange, allowing me to stay. I continued the next year at night school and early on applied for aircrew. Buck, Snow and I went to Sydney for interviews - one day of aptitude tests and the next day interview. Snow and I went in early and the interview only lasted a few minutes. Buck then went in and we waited, intending to have a counter lunch then return to Williamtown. Seemingly hours later Buck emerged looking depressed. The board rejected his aircrew application on the grounds he was too intelligent and wanted him to complete his night school. He went on to do electrical engineering at Sydney University and won the University Medal. Snow and I went to Point Cook in May 1961 for pilot training. I sold the TC for two hundred and forty pounds in Newcastle.

I found the flying training on Winjeels relatively easy but the ground school a bit tougher. But I passed OK and was posted to Perth for advanced training on Vampires. I bought a 1957 Holden and drove to WA in convoy with Snow: 1157 miles of dust. We drove about six hundred miles each day at sixty mph and brain in neutral. I blew out four tyres in bull dust holes. The car had retreads when I bought it and I arrived in Perth with four new tyres. There were enough service stations enroute to change to the spare, buy new tyre as spare, replace with spare, etc.

Vampires were easy to fly and I graduated in May 1962 and was posted to fighters at Williamtown. Having driven one way, there was no way I would do it again so I put the Holden on the train to Port Augusta. At Williamtown I learnt to drop bombs, fire rockets and guns from the Vampire then onto Sabre conversion. As they were single-seat aircraft (no dual instruction), simulator and class room training was quite extensive. After a couple of weeks I had my first flight and probably made the softest landing ever. With the course completed I spent a few months in 75 Squadron at Williamtown before being posted to 77 Squadron Malaya. During the next two years I spent ten months in Ubon, Thailand and made numerous trips to Singapore (Changi and Tengah airfields) during Confrontation. I started playing golf which became, and still is, a habit I can't kick.

From hot and humid to hot and dry was my next posting to Woomera. For the next fifteen months I became a ground controller on Jindivik, Meteor and Canberra aircraft and was checked out on the Meteor Mark 7 and 21. I saw a few spectacular crashes from droned aircraft and participated in a couple. I joined the local golf club and learnt to appreciate sand greens and fairways and bush flies. The flies were unbelievable in quantity and stickiness. Woomera itself at the time was a green oasis very busy with rocket testing and the European Launcher development. In mid 1966 I was offered and accepted the job of ADC to the Governor-general. It got me out of Woomera.

Probably the next eighteen months were the most interesting and busiest period of my life. Those who know me can appreciate it was a very steep learning curve on the couch and culture front. Lord and Lady Casey were both terrific. He had a new Porsche 911 and a 1938 Bentley. I drove the Bentley a few times but couldn't get my hands on the Porsche. I lived in Government House and the staff dined with the Casey's for most meals. There were many visits around Australia and PNG. I met interesting people including LBJ. I had a few days off during the time and after a while was having such an interesting time I didn't think about days off. The only flying I did (apart from as a passenger) was with Lady C in her Cessna

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150 from their home near Melbourne. My last interesting involvement was the disappearance of Harold Holt and the constitutional dilemma.

Back to Williamstown on staff at OCU marking time until the first Macchi flying instructors course at East Sale. That lasted until the end of August when I was posted to Pearce where I started instructing on Vampires and Macchis. I bought a new Fiat 124 sports coupe and thought I was the ducks nuts. This was only a short tour as they were short of instructors at OCU Willy, so in late June 1969 I was posted back on staff. My first social event was the midyear ball where I met my wife, Lesley, who was partnering her father who was an official guest.

In December I made a unilateral decision and we married during the Christmas stand down. I couldn't do it any other time as someone might steal my flying. A team was sent to Indonesia with the gifting of Sabres which bled OCU of staff. We lived at Shoal Bay in rented accommodation for the next two years. I converted onto Mirage early in 1971 and stayed on staff until Christmas when I was posted to 75 Squadron Butterworth. Three years in the tropics and I took up golf again. Lesley also played a bit. I bought a new Volvo which was just as well because Singapore detachments started, so Lesley would drive down and have a few weeks in Singapore staying at the Y or Aggies at Woodlands - a very enjoyable time. It's a shame to see how the Butterworth base is now.

Our one and only was born in Butterworth - Alexander now twenty-nine and a mechanical engineer in Sydney. He recently installed the largest robot in Australia at his workplace, his brains obviously stemmed from his mother.

I was posted back to 77 Squadron at Williamstown in December 1974, lived on base and for the next two years flew Mirages. At this stage the writing was on the wall that I should have another ground job, so I was posted to Canberra. We lived at Evatt and I was initially in operations, then in planning. Long cold winters and short hot summers did not promote much outdoor activity, but it was a nice place to visit. Time again indicated I needed training so I was posted to the Joint Services Staff College for the next six months. Each course has a major overseas tour for about three weeks and ours was to India via Hercules. We saw the Taj Mahal, Mount Everest, Delhi, Bombay and a few military establishments. It is impossible to get a meaningful defence briefing in India, as they are famous for the three C's - coffee, cashews and conversation. There is unbelievable poverty across India - we are certainly a lucky country.

We came back via Bali for two nights. We had an Indonesian on the course from there, so he hosted various tours, etc: lovely people - we avoided the tourist bits.

Off course, I was posted as CO to 77 Squadron. During this time I started to reflect on where I was heading, male menopause - a bit early in my case. Coming up to thirty years in the RAAF, I could expect my next posting back to Canberra and possibly no more flying. After a dispute with Personnel Branch I resigned and had a house built on a fifty-acre property near Taree.

Lesley moved into the new house in May 1983 whilst I was on deployment in Darwin. It rained for weeks before and after, so it was a most uncomfortable move. I eventually left the RAAF in July and tried this hobby farming bit and finished the house. Hobby farming was hard work and a blotting paper for money and I underestimated the amount of work needed to finish and establish a house. FA18s were selected to replace the Mirages, and redevelopment of Williamstown was imminent. I was contacted and asked if I would accept a reservists position to help coordinate the new work with daily operations for what I thought would be for about two years. Five years later, working about three days a week commuting from Taree and living in, it had become a drag.

An opportunity came up with a local automotive component manufacturer as a personnel manager's position. I quickly learnt the difference between RAAF and civilian approaches to

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personnel management (RAAF more benign). For the next five years I was responsible for hiring, firing, payroll, industrial relations, OH & S, superannuation and training. I was extremely busy with long days and no staff apart from a payroll clerk. We both joined in community things - PCYC, volunteer bush fire brigade, P & C, P & F, SES. We were in the one place for fourteen years, Alexander was at university, Lesley getting tired of digging postholes and fencing, and I was tiring of chasing runaway steers.

We bought a townhouse in Newcastle and have been here for seven years. The move gave Lesley the opportunity to study Greek and Roman history and archaeology at Sydney University, something she had wanted to do for years. I joined the local golf club and Legacy, Lesley the historical society and Friends of the University. We have MIL about three kilometres away and Alexander working in Sydney, one hour, forty minutes away. Lesley had a long trip overseas last year with Oxford as her base and met up with Alexander who had taken twelve months off work to travel.

I have two or three short-term targets, one to repaint our townhouse and two to lose at least ten kilos. I hope I have achieved both by the reunion and I can again hit a golf ball. Without being too boring, I recently fell off my push bike (takes skill), broke eight ribs and my collarbone and put on six kilos and no golf for four months. The fall was a direct result of a magpie attack. I now hate magpies or anything vaguely connected such as 75 Squadron, Collingwood: in fact all things black and white.

Readers can stop yawning, and hopefully the next story is more riveting.

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MANGO SCRAPBOOK IMAGES



Shotgun wedding! L to R: Rose, Scutts (rifle), Rideout and Pike