

Graham (Giff) Giffin—A14425—Mechanical Transport Fitter

On leaving Wagga without too much sadness I duly arrived at Amberley and started work at the transport repair depot. But enough about work which, of course, is just another four-letter word. It was at a Christmas break-up at the depot after a few beers that, after briefing a mate, I took a tin of paint and sat in the middle of the mob on the floor stirring the paint.

My friend approached and asked, "What are you doing, Giff?"

I replied, "Stirring shit."

"Why are you stirring shit?"

"I'm making a warrant officer."

"Why not make a squadron leader?"

"Not enough shit."

The squadron leader laughed in good grace, but the WO lacked any sense of humour and, although he was not elephant-like, he had that animal's prodigious memory. I paid for that indiscretion over the years.

The base at that time was fairly large with many Erks, but with only an Officers and Sergeants Mess. The rest of us had to make our way to Ipswich and precariously back as best we could until, in their wisdom, the powers that be offered to allot so many kegs of beer a week to be drunk on one or two nights in an old WWII hut with no ceiling or linings. But, of course, airmen were not responsible enough to be allowed to drink spirits which was borne out by our favourite pastime of playing fighters and bombers, the fighters being the ones who perched in the rafters and swooped down on the bombers below.

I suppose the most momentous event was my marriage to a local girl. The wedding took place on a Saturday, a day on which there was also a state election, consequently the pubs in Ipswich were closed till six pm, but the camp boozier being on federal property was open, so picking the civilians from the RAAF was a simple task at the reception. David Dodds was the best man and, true to form, managed to lose the wife's wedding ring so I borrowed her mother's ring for the ceremony. You can imagine the look of consternation when I slipped the wrong ring on her finger. Fortunately the right ring was located the following morning. On the night of the wedding I refrained from drinking, thinking to do the right thing. Unfortunately my wife's aunty plied her with drink, so all my good intentions were for naught. But on waking at the in-law's house, I found the father in-law and his brother still trying to do justice to a nine-gallon wooden keg perched on the kitchen table, so I immediately started to make up for lost time.

Later in the day, as a member of the RAAF B-grade rugby union side, I remembered they were playing out at the base that afternoon, so the new wife and I drove out to have a look. On arrival it turned out that a player was missing, so I was kitted up and sent out to do battle and actually was running the wrong way at one stage until I sobered up. The wife, not being a fan, blew the horn if I touched the ball which, as a forward was not often, thus misleading the few spectators into thinking a try had been scored. All in all, a very unromantic beginning to a long relationship.

Woomera (5 years)

I arrived in Woomera with a pregnant wife and one child and settled into what I consider as my best posting. There were unique experiences not met on any other units, being involved directly or marginally with experimental weapons such as intercontinental ballistic rockets, air to air and ground to air missiles all on trial. The RAAF supplied radio controlled target aircraft including Canberras, Meteors and Jindivik drones. One of the tasks of the transport section was to retrieve the Jindivik which landed on a skid, entailing driving a small crane onto the strip and lifting the aircraft onto a trailer. I was just leaving with one of the old hands to learn the process when the Jindivik disintegrated several hundred feet above our heads. Being midsummer it took over an hour for all of the smaller bits and pieces to

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overcome the hot air up-draughts to hit the ground.

In South Australia, a mad Aussie Rules state, Woomera hosted the only four rugby league teams: the RAAF being one. The teams consisted of servicemen and civilian workers formerly from the eastern states. What was lacked in expertise and fitness was made up for by guile. It was a bruising league in which, due to the lack of reserves or lower grades, injuries had to be major to keep players off the field which was hard enough to double as a cricket pitch. It had a sparse covering of the only grass in the village and had to be fenced in to exclude the local kangaroo population which looked at it like kids at the window of a lolly shop. My son was our mascot and the wife knitted him a beanie in the club colours and promptly was called upon to reproduce one for team members and supporters.

As I indicated I enjoyed our years here, but it was only after leaving that my wife indicated that she was not as rapt in the place as I was.

Garbutt (8 years)

The arrival at Townsville was particularly welcome as we were back in the tropics and away from the cold winters of the southern climes, but instead we were subjected to the rigours of tropical Cyclone Althea which descended on us on Christmas eve. The depleted compliment of personnel on the base was ordered to remain, thus I was unable to be with my wife and children during the frightening force of the storm. Luckily our married quarter was not damaged and, though shaken, my family was unharmed. Christmas Day was spent clearing the airstrip by hand of roofing sheets and other debris to allow Hercules transports to ferry in essential supplies to sustain the city until repairs could be accomplished. While carrying out this task the winds were still very strong and one of our gang was of small stature. When he picked up a sheet of iron it whipped out horizontally and almost carried him away, so we made him the driver of the tip truck and out of harm's way. One of my mates originally from down south was always skiting that he would like to experience a cyclone but he confided later that half way through he wished he could have just turned it off.

I was unfortunate enough to encounter the WO with the elephantine memory in charge of the section and was immediately exiled into the tool store to ponder on my past indiscretion.

On a lighter note there was a young WRAAF who obviously had her cap set to snare an officer for a husband and took every opportunity to bring attention to herself. So, one night in the Airmen's Mess, when a young orderly officer on his rounds asked if there were any complaints, she responded by complaining that her sausages had wrinkles in them. I never found out if she did in fact accomplish her goal.

During this stay in Townsville I applied for and got a posting to Vietnam. My reasons were not solely patriotism, but also created a unique chance to save money and qualify for a war veterans' home loan on return.

Vietnam (June 68/June 69)

I arrived at Phan Rang USAF Air Base and joined No 2 Canberra Bomber Squadron. Unlike other RAAF bases in Vietnam, we had our own vehicles to be maintained along with aircraft handling and servicing equipment, thus the need for a transport section.

Obviously you experience situations in a place such as this not met in other postings. Sometimes personal safety was a concern, but there were also many humorous episodes. We mingled with Vietnamese, Koreans and Americans; I remember one night at the Koala Bar, which was our airmen's club, sitting drinking with a Mexican and an Eskimo from Alaska, both members of the USAF: a great chance to learn about other cultures first hand.

The Korean White Horse Battalion formed part of the air base's protection force and were a tough bunch left over from the Korean War. Like most Asians, life was cheap. The Americans hired large numbers of the local civilians to carry out the menial tasks around the base. One of these was an old guy with a bass broom whose job was to sweep gravel and

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stones from an intersection much used by dump trucks and bomb-carrying semis as well as general traffic. One day the Koreans drove up in a weapon carrier and blew the horn to shift the old fellow out of the way but he was either deaf or ignorant. On his not reacting to a second blast of the horn, they just ran over him. Consequently, the Yanks replaced him with a woman evidently hoping that she might be spared the same fate because of her sex.

I'm not sure how it started but our transport section became friendly with a USAF squadron flying C123 transports, like a mini Hercules. They had a system where, after the day's operations, there was a bar on the flight line where everyone from the CO down to the lowliest grunt could mix, wind down and iron out any problems in a relaxed atmosphere, but when they returned to barracks the normal separation of ranks occurred. On many occasions we joined them socially at this venue.

The Americans really do salute anything that moves with or without headgear. I was approached in our barracks area by one of their officers wanting directions to our canteen and to my consternation on leaving he saluted me, but not having my cap I was left floundering. On a neighbouring base which we were visiting with a WO in our midst, on seeing his gilt cap badge and eagles on his epaulettes, he was whisked off to their officers mess, mistaken for a bird colonel.

In retrospect I would not have missed the experience but it would have taken a good team to get me back for a second tour.

Dubbo (2 years)

The last two years of my RAAF career were spent here. I arrived as a brand new sergeant and immediately became the transport officer, engineering officer, officer in charge of the sheep, and bar member of the Sergeants Mess. As a posting it really had nothing going for it and, to make it worse, my wife took an instant and deep dislike to the place. Therefore, having completed twenty years of service, the pressure to get out became unrelenting. Consequently, I acquiesced, returning to Townsville for eventual discharge.

Civilian Street, Cairns 1976

Back to where I came from.

Unfortunately jobs were scarce and I ended up working as a mechanic again - the last thing I really wanted, but a job's a job and better than none at all. Ten years with a local shire council, five as a mechanic and five operating a suction road sweeper. When asked what my job was, I always replied that I swept gutters for a living.

I found the biggest hurdle to civilian life was conversing with civilians with whom I seem to have nothing in common, but of course this situation resolved itself as I became one of them. Joining the RSL helped bridge the gap further. My involvement in the RSL was, and still remains, very active, having served at district level as treasurer, secretary and president and as delegate to State Council. I am presently president of the local sub-branch and club. I also became involved in Cairns and District Legacy holding all positions from time to time.

On leaving the shire council I became the administrator of the RSL Warhaven Home in Cairns and Mareeba housing sixty-six veterans and widows. After dealing with the varied natures of the aged, I have some fond memories of some really unique characters. But with some others, the old adage that "Old people don't get difficult, difficult people just get older," fits the bill more aptly. Overall, the chance to build and improve the conditions and lifestyle of our vets and widows was rewarding.

Retirement 1997

As soon as the magic age of sixty arrived and I was entitled to a service pension to add to my DFRB, I pulled the pin. After all, WORK is just another four-letter word. Leaving the city life behind we moved to rural quiet on the Atherton Tableland where, by carelessly not paying attention, I have ended up as president of the RSL sub-branch, the RSL Club, the Eacham Community Help Organisation and on the committee for the SES cadets.

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My wife does voluntary work at the local Op Shop, so you can see that we are not exactly vegetating in retirement. Pastimes include regular visits to the RSL Club to check on quality control of available liquid and food products, plus regular games of lawn bowls.

Finale 2003

I failed to mention earlier that on two trips to Adelaide whilst under the influence of too much good cheer, I ended up with two tattoos on each arm; the less said about the wife's reaction the better. I've been married for forty-six years, we have six grand children and, on looking back, I really wouldn't change a thing.

Graham (Giff) Giffin
P.O. Box 681
Malanda, Qld. 4885
Tel. 07 4096 6029



Presentation of Vietnam medal.



Christmas Day Phan Rang Sergeants Mess 1968



With friend Phan Rang



Woomera junior ranks club entrance

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Taking over as president of Cairns Legacy Club

MANGO SCRAPBOOK IMAGES



Hut 107 L to R : Bunn, Black, Fiddes,
Tonkin and Harwood soaking up the sun