

**Mike Gleeson—A216382—Engine Fitter**

**From sixteen to sixty-six and the fifty years somewhere in between**

This chronology of events is dedicated to my wonderful ninety-year-old mother. Many thanks also to Jim Nicholls for talking me into putting pen to paper- Jim could sell Bibles to Bin Laden

I cannot remember the day/month in 1953 my call-up letter arrived, but Mum and Dad were ecstatic and I was relieved to be leaving Stuarts Point, a little coastal village of seventy (odd) people located on swampy ground at the dead end of the Macleay River about twenty-two miles north of Kempsey.

**RAAF service**

Following three tumultuous years at RAAFSTT, I was released into the working world of the blue suiters with a posting to 2AD Richmond along with Pat Gallagher, Blue Dawson, Jim Spink, John Middlebrook, Bob Wark and others I cannot recall at this stage; perhaps a beer or three at Coffs will jog the memory box.

Richmond provided real life education at the hands of some tough Korean War vets and others with long but somewhat dubious experience. The social highlight of our week was a (compulsory) attendance at the airmen's booza to watch the magic of TV and sing along with the Mickey Mouse Club, drink lots of beer, but under no circumstances talk loudly. Times have changed since then haven't they? At the end of twelve months depot training John Middlebrook and I were posted to Maintenance Squadron East Sale for aircraft experience; to this day I suspect mine was an unofficial disciplinary posting.

On arrival at ESL we were placed into the tender care of Corporals Jim Keppler and Bruce Munday, who prescribed and enforced upon us a daily dose of the fine art of cleaning drip trays, sweeping floors and jumping to great heights before respectfully requesting, "Corporal, can I come down now?" It was not long before we faced reality and settled down to becoming good LACs and airmen.

Another twelve months and many lessons later I was off to 3AD Amberley. Then in 1960 my fourth posting in four years to RAAF Williamtown for the reformation of 76 Squadron with MK 35A Vampires, followed a year or so later by Sabre aircraft. Williamtown provided many good memories and experiences for an LAC. Apart from a great social and sporting life and many work incidents, two items stood out: I helped introduce safety shoes - T Boots - into the RAAF system which prevented many nasty spills from kero-covered mainplanes, and then sadly witnessed the accidental ground level firing of a Sabre ejection seat that killed an armament S/NCO.

If ever an aircraft was a danger to mankind, it was the Sabre with its man-swallowing intake, tremendous exhaust strength, anatomy-rearranging undercarriage doors and speed brakes, and ear-destroying engine start A failure explosions. However, I still regard it as the best aircraft I have worked on albeit I treated it with utmost respect. These sentiments were portrayed succinctly by the words of the CFI Pappy Papworth: "There are old pilots and bold pilots. I am an old pilot." Pappy also disliked night flying and ensured he was first off and first in when required to night fly. He philosophised: "Birds don't fly of a night time, so why should I." Every airman I knew held him in high esteem as night flying interfered with social commitments or family activities.

In 1962 my personal life changed for the better: I married, started my family, and joined the ranks of the brown baggers. With wife, baby daughter and high expectations we were posted to Malaya. This posting produced our second child, a son, and provided two attachments to Ubon, several quick trips to Singapore, one in particular with fully armed aircraft to cover the annexation of Singapore from Malaya on 9 August 1964 (unfortunately, my wife's birthday). At the time we were all confined to base in case of civil unrest, so in the best high spirited manner some larrikins in the squadron commenced to paint red kangaroos on

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strategic targets throughout the British controlled base. The Poms were less than impressed and about to turn their MPs and dogs upon us at work the next day when our CO (I think his name was Peter Larrard) quickly defused the situation by pulling his revolver and threatening to shoot any MP who attempted to let his dog loose. Many years later the RAAF was still receiving payment overdue invoices from the Poms.

The icing on the cake of the Malaya posting came with a thirty-day attachment to Labuan Island, Borneo, just long enough to receive the coveted War Service Medal and status. Live armaments and heavy workload required plenty of nightly refreshments and lots of fatty wild pig bacon sandwiches hot off the barbecue plate in the local village; the RAF mess food did little for our Aussie stomachs. I experienced my one and only full eclipse of the sun in Labuan: an eerie half darkness transcended upon the island followed by an almost total silence that was awesome. The next day I sighted the biggest snake I have ever seen, only to be told by local experts that snakes did not exist on Labuan Island. Luckily we went home a few days later.

Promoted to corporal and repatriated (I like the word) back to East Sale for an extended stay of seven years. Our third and final child, a baby daughter, arrived during this period. Two more promotions and off to Headquarters Support Command to a post designated TSAIB2B2 which when roughly translated means: Technical spares assessing, S/NCO level, spanners, screw drivers and bits and pieces - not a task of choice.

In 1974 I became an officer and gentleman in accordance with the decree of Sir John Robert Kerr, off to Wagga Wagga with Group Captain Bob (Freeza) Bartram as my CO, then back to HQSC SOPROJ again with Group Captain Bartram. In 1984, for the first time in my career, I refused a posting. Being a SengO in New Guinea at the height of the Rascal period was not an option for a family with their youngest daughter about to start her final year of high school. So, after a disagreement with Group Captain Ian Trail Southerland, I tendered my resignation and retired on 25 January 1985, thus ending thirty-one years of service on a very happy and rewarding note. My wife and I parted company a short time later.

Throughout my RAAF career I was present at the farewell flights of the Lincoln, Wirraway, Winjeel, Vampire and the Dame Nellie Melba of them all: the Dakota. I also had a part to play with the introduction of the Macchi, HS748, CT4 and FA18. In civilian mode, I had a deep involvement with the PC 9.

Some of the characters I have met of almost folklore proportions, especially after a few dining-in night ports are: Rat Roddent; Jack Donlan; Pat Joncore; Monty O'Harra; and Bobby Kinsella. There were lots more; perhaps Coffs will embellish this area.

### **Civilian career**

A day after discharge I joined CAC as the FA18 F404 engine DLM manager. Following a few months of studious work I realised the job was a non-event. CAC directors disagreed, so when the opportunity arose I transferred to military sales. My timing was impeccably poor. "Sales" was in decline along with CAC. Hawker de Havilland intervened and purchased the remnants of CAC in early 1987. Luckily opportunity knocked on my door. I was offered and accepted the position of HdH PC9 facility manager East Sale, a good decision this time and one that changed the remainder of my working life.

The task at East Sale was revolutionary and highly controversial and basically consisted of setting the facility up along civilian lines whereby all PC9 aircraft work and support was performed by civilians with Central Flying School the customer.

Although we over achieved on every milestone, won the prestigious Defence Quality and Achievement Award and had a very happy customer, the Defence hierarchy were unimpressed.

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In particular the CAS resented civilians having control of his prime promotional asset, the PC9 Roulette Aerobatics Team. Needless to say the contract was not renewed on expiry in December 1990. We did, however, have a lasting effect on the way the RAAF operated non-operational flying bases: the introduction of multi-skilling within the technical trades, and manpower utilisation - our team of twenty-one did the work of a RAAF East Sale estimated team of fifty-four personnel.

With a touch of *deja vu*, the passing of time and a new CAS, the PC9 contract was again placed in the hands of civilians in 1993-1994. HdH rebid the contract but for some strange reason did not get the nod.

During the latter stages of 1990 I was seconded to Melbourne to assist develop the F111 fuselage deseal reseal (DSRS) bid. To my good fortune HdH won the contract and I was off to Amberley to manage the contract and set up the facility. With unemployment running at around thirty-five percent we had literally thousands of job applications to fill a hundred and fifty positions. The program started well and was an outstanding success for HdH. All aircraft were delivered on or ahead of schedule and the company made a good profit. We again won the Defence Industry quality and achievement award and concluded on a happy note in September 1993. (This euphoria may now be misplaced as civil action is being introduced against HdH for personal compensation as a direct result of the Commonwealth board of inquiry into RAAF deseal reseal activities, this despite HdH receiving a clean bill of health from the board).

Follow-on tasks after DSRS were to help set up HdH at RAAF Richmond for P3C deep maintenance and then lead the bid process for Caribou deep maintenance – probably one of the worst bidding tasks I had, as it occurred during the 1994 summer bush fires that almost destroyed Sydney. It was hard to concentrate and work twelve to fourteen-hour days when surrounded by high temperature and constant power glitches that caused the computers to corrupt almost everything that was entered. However, we survived and won the contract.

Past memories and successes then clouded my better judgement and I knocked back the managers post with HdH at Perth airport and returned to Amberley in January 1993 to set up and run the F111C avionics update modification program (AUP) as the HdH subcontractor to Rockwell: a strange decision for a Blackhander who was and still is a computer/electronics dunce. The AUP program was a contractual nightmare and was notable for its extremely high costs (in excess of \$600 million), schedule slippages and changes in contractors: Tenix purchased HdH; Boeing purchased Rockwell, then purchased the subcontract from Tenix and took over the final stages of the modification. I remained with Tenix. Although there were some 1600 changes made to the prototype configuration, the final result was excellent and convinced the RAAF to do a digital flight control system mod to their F111G aircraft.

As Tenix and Lockheed were the contractors, I slid from AUP to DFCS, set up a new facility in 1997 and pinched as many men from Boeing as I could. This was a great program and finished successfully for all concerned in November 2000. Of necessity a final big decision needed to be made by myself and like the flow of water I took the easy path and retired. I remarried in romantic style on the West Coast of Mauritius as the waves lapped the beach and the sun was setting below the horizon of the beautiful Indian Ocean.

On return to Australia, Rosalie and I had a further holiday in Port Macquarie. A former boss of mine caught up with me there and off to work I went again; this time as a consultant with Hawker Pacific to help Eurocopter (French) with the bid for the Armed Reconnaissance Helicopter. Three months later the bid was hand delivered to Canberra with around thirty minutes to spare. The French team had the knack of leaving everything until the last minute then expecting the Australian team to fix everything up. Of the French team of sixty, fifty-nine went back to France a week before the bid was completed - very helpful. They won the

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the contract on the strength of their superior weapons system, then purchased the Defence arm of Hawker Pacific, set up facilities in Brisbane airport under the guise of a company called Australian Aerospace, and in doing so now control the Caribou contract as well.

In the meantime I retired once again and was starting to learn the intricate art of lawn bowls and how to make a one-hour gardening job last several hours when the call to arms came again. This time a three-month contract to manage the Hawker Pacific/Australian Aerospace transition at the Brisbane airport. Three months turned into seven months, and was in danger of becoming permanent, so pen to paper and my third and final retirement occurred in March 2002, ending forty-eight years in the Defence industry.

By the time of printing of this book, I will have rounded out a fifty-year journey with two years of retirement at our home in Ipswich where you are all welcome to visit.

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Mike Gleeson and Wing Commander Milne CO of CFS with a photo of the first three PC9s delivered to RAAF.



The PC9 team at East Sale in 1988 with the first aircraft in Roulette colours