

Ernest Horth—A216385—Engine Fitter

The venerable “Hornie Earth”

Reflecting on fifty full and eventful years is both awesome and humbling. When I started at RSTT I lacked a great deal of self-esteem and self-confidence. A few years prior to arrival at Wagga I served as an ATC cadet, an experience that was positive and affirming, especially through participation in junior and senior promotion courses. But by the end of first year at Forest Hill my education struggles were to haunt me yet again. I was carpeted in front of Wing Commander Lewis. He told me that unless my education results showed a marked improvement I would be back on civvy street before the end of second year. We agreed I could undertake extra tuition to try and improve my predicament but the self-esteem and self-confidence were on trial again. As we headed off for our Christmas break back home I was loaded up with extra assignments to complete. Bronco Johnson and Tubby McDermott had the pleasure of my stimulating company at special evening tutorials for at least the next six months. Something must have worked because history speaks for itself. I graduated! I'll always be grateful to these two men, plus others I can't remember, who put time and effort into helping me make the grade.

Fourth year of apprentice training was served at 2 Aircraft Depot, Richmond, NSW. If my memory is correct, it was Alf Balfour and me who were assigned a task no one thought we could do. A Goblin jet engine needed to be packaged and dispatched for servicing. The cradle in which the engine was meant to sit had no anchor point to keep the engine from moving whilst in transit. Alf and I were told to design, make and install a bracket so the engine could be bolted to it. There were two nervous apprentices and an audience on the day the engine was lowered into the cradle. We were all amazed when the bolt slipped into the bracket perfectly. Alf and I don't mind bragging about such a minor detail, much. We were both pretty impressed.

At Maintenance Squadron East Sale a year or so later I made a name for myself unexpectedly, and earned at least five days CB as a result. A single-seater Vampire returned to base after a “Mayday” was declared because of a suspected engine failure. Guess who got the blame! Not long afterwards a DC3 I had serviced returned on one engine safely from a training exercise but everyone on board had at one stage believed their number was up. I feared my number was up too, but was greatly relieved when it was found that an unforeseen mechanical failure inside the engine had caused the problem. Phew! East Sale was an enjoyable experience and I was sad to leave at the end of 1959 after achieving quite a few milestones.

While at RSTT Chaplains Tom O'Brien, Stan Ford and Robert Davies had a sizeable influence on me. Robert Davies became Bishop of Tasmania and I partly worked under his leadership at a later date. Stan Ford, his wife and children were a great encouragement. It was a delight to meet Stan and Jill at the first worship service I took on moving to Brisbane in 1993. Unfortunately, I didn't get an opportunity to really catch up with Stan properly before he died. These people helped sow a seed that started to bear fruit during my time at East Sale. I linked up with the Anglican Church in Stratford, which is north of Sale in Victoria. Under the leadership and mentoring of its minister, plus a wing commander from the base, I became a lay leader in the parish taking on several responsibilities. Cutting a long story short, this led on to my seeking a discharge from the RAAF. The understanding at the end of 1959 was that I would be training for the ordained ministry. The Archbishop of Sydney had provided the RAAF with a letter to that effect.

Post RAAF

After discharge I had to overcome another major hurdle and gain my matriculation. This meant entering the adult matriculation course then being conducted at Sydney Technical College, Ultimo. It was a great year and I even enjoyed learning algebra,

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trigonometry and doing economics. But I didn't matriculate, I failed maths. I went back a second year but ran out of money and had to surrender. You can imagine what confusion I was in. During the second six months of that second year I was able to get some work with the Sydney Diocesan Youth Department. When a letter from the Archbishop of Sydney arrived telling me there was no place for me in the Diocese of Sydney, and I should find another bishop to sponsor my training, my faith was put to a severe test.

Thankfully the Bishop of Gippsland took me on, and Ridley College in Melbourne was happy for me to enter as a theological student. In those days, as a freshman to the college I had to undergo an initiation that helped bring back memories of what happened to us at Wagga. Remember the shoe polish, the blankets and the bedside table legs, just to mention a few, and the brawl with the Nashos on the oval. At college I was initiated twice (I don't know why a nice bloke like me was picked on like that). Senior students grabbed me and threw me into the back of a car and sped me off to some unknown (to me) part of Melbourne. I was pushed down between the front and back seats of the car and senior students sat on me so I couldn't see where we were going. They sped up to a gutter with a squeal of brakes, opened the door and threw me out in real gangster style. I found out later that the longer it took me to return to college the more the senior students started to panic that I might have met with foul play. Someone had been murdered recently in that part of Melbourne. I returned intact.

Later at another initiation "happening" during the peak hour rush, I had to stand outside St Paul's Cathedral, which is opposite Flinders Street Railway Station in central Melbourne. I had my student academic gown on, obviously to draw attention from peak hour crowds. I was given a string of six sausages and had to dodge between cars, pedestrians and trams to measure the then width of Swanston Street (seventy-seven sausages). One woman was so irate she grabbed the sausages and threw them under the wheels of a passing tram. I was able to retrieve them and continue with the task, even if my measuring instruments had been somewhat remodelled.

On entering Ridley College the Bishop told me in no uncertain terms that I would only be ordained as a minister if I passed all required subjects in the three years allocated, and no longer (he was paying the bills). Can you imagine my stress levels when I failed preliminary New Testament Greek two years running. That meant I had two major Greek subjects to pass in my final year, or I was again in trouble. A lot of prayer, hard work and living like a hermit went into that year with extra tutorials from a number of lecturers, especially the College principal. It is rather awesome to be on your own in a one on one tutorial with one of the world's leading New Testament Greek scholars and as the student you haven't a clue what you're doing. You can't fudge the situation, especially when he sits patiently tapping his fingers on his desk waiting for your feeble answers. "You haven't done your homework have you, Ern? Go and do it now and come back in two hours and we will go over it again." His commitment and effort helped get me through and I ended up graduating with an overall second-class honours pass, but with hardly any fingernails left. I was ordained in St Paul's Cathedral, Sale in February 1965.

My wife Ida and I were married in December 1965 in Melbourne. Ida is a triple-certificate nurse who served three years in India with the Leprosy Mission. We have been blessed with two daughters, Kathryn who has graduated in fine arts, and Louise who is an architect. Both are married, Kathryn to Poul and Louise to Stuart. We have a grandson and two granddaughters. Kathryn lives in Melbourne and Louise in Hobart.

We haven't let the grass grow under our feet. After nearly thirty-eight years of marriage we are currently living in house number eighteen. The longest in any one house was seven years, the shortest was about three months on at least two occasions. Eighteen of those thirty-eight years have been spent in Victoria, the remainder were spread between Tasmania,

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Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, and Queensland. Thirty of my sixty-five years, if I count the two years as an ATC Cadet, have been associated with the Defence Force. There were ten enjoyable years associated with the RAAF and I reached the dizzy heights of becoming a pilot officer. A few years into my ordained ministry I became an Army chaplain serving twenty years in that capacity, six of them as an ARA chaplain when the Vietnam campaign was in full swing. I retired with a RFD (Ruddy Fine Dill) and the rank of major.

The six years as an ARA chaplain were amongst the toughest, taught me much and were very rewarding. I was disappointed when I was stopped from going to Vietnam. This was a real blow at the time because the whole life and focus of Army revolved around Vietnam. It was a test of your manhood to go and mix it on the “sharp end”. Whenever I entered the Officers Mess I was conscious of the “ribbon club” and how those with the ribbons mixed together and those without felt excluded or were kept on the outer like second-rate citizens. On reflection now, at this distance away from that scene, I am relieved I didn’t go. I have enough problems now with skin cancer and wonder what I would be like if I had served in Vietnam.

Those Vietnam years revealed the highs and lows of human character and achievement. It never became easier to visit a family and tell them their loved one wasn’t coming home alive. There were too many such notifications to make and military funerals to conduct. I still keep in contact with the parents of one fellow who was terribly injured in a car accident during his recruit training. I had the privilege of ministering to him and his family. Some years later he died as a result of those injuries but a special bond remains with the parents. During my short term of service as chief executive officer of the Bible Society of Australia Inc. it was my privilege to negotiate with the principal chaplains and make a few changes to the format presentation of the New Testament and Psalms offered to recruits on entering all three services. In the past ten years it has also been good to minister as a chaplain in a local RSL sub-branch.

As with every walk in life there are moments you enjoy, others you want to forget. In 1988 I presented in Canberra a specially bound copy of the Australian edition of the Good News Bible to her Majesty the Queen. I once forgot a baptism, only to learn the chapel was full to capacity as people waited and waited for the non-event, and someone special had flown a light plane from interstate for the occasion (not happy Ern!). The baptism did take place at another date but I wasn’t the most popular person in town. I’ve had bride grooms or their groomsmen faint on me during a wedding. On one occasion I had just prayed for the couple and pronounced them husband and wife but he was completely out to it on his knees. So beware!

I’ve gained greatly from a life with varied responsibilities and challenges. These range from being a parish priest on three occasions, a missionary society regional officer twice, senior administration officer of a welfare agency in Canberra after being CEO of Bible Society. While in Launceston I was a hospital, school and police chaplain at various stages of the journey, added to that are my twenty years of Army chaplaincy experience. Currently, I am chaplain to the Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne. I have a second task, that of being an Archdeacon in the Diocese of Melbourne where my area of responsibility covers thirty parishes, plus a number of Anglican schools. It has been a great privilege to serve in these capacities because of the relationships enjoyed with some ordinary but very special people.

My ministry has been enhanced by the people I’ve shared experiences with. Their openness and sincerity have been an inspiration, and I never cease to be amazed at what some very humble and unassuming people do with their lives, not expecting any praise or reward. There have been times of joy and celebration in conducting a marriage service, in the birth of a baby or in a baptism. Many hours have been spent with people in their struggles, their

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disappointments and grief. Some of the most memorable moments have been at funerals when a life is celebrated and honoured. Rather than doom and gloom these have often been moments of thanksgiving for a life lived well and to the full. There have been some tough moments, especially when a child dies, or when a person I hold special is in the midst of a health or other crisis. These are the moments that test the reality and genuineness of faith.

When serving as Victorian secretary of the Bush Church Aid Society I gained more notoriety, and with this I close. Bishop Howell Witt, the then Bishop of Northwest Australia, a Welshman, a talented comedian and actor, was visiting Melbourne. BCA was giving a large amount of financial support to his diocese through provision of staff recruited from elsewhere in this country. As part of his visit to Melbourne he spoke at many engagements so as to thank people and encourage them in their support. On the particular occasion in question he attended morning assembly at one of Melbourne's girls grammar schools. On arrival we were escorted with due pomp and ceremony into the assembly hall that was full of unenthusiastic young women, most looking bored and wanting the whole endeavour to be over quickly. We were led onto the stage, took our seats and joined in a brief act of worship. At the conclusion of worship, the headmistress in full academic dress took centre stage and began her welcome focused on Bishop Witt (by name and nature). Having given some background information the girls were then invited to extend their welcome to the guest speaker, which they did with applause that was far from enthusiastic.

The headmistress then turned to me and said, "It is good to welcome back an old (??) friend of our school, the Reverend Hornie Earth."

There was a pensive silence for a moment or two as the words that didn't sound right sank in. Suddenly, Bishop Witt nearly fell off his chair as he burst into peels of laughter quickly followed by all the girls. The headmistress and I were left stranded with red faces.

Within five minutes of us returning to my office in the city Howell Witt was on the phone assuring that everyone he could think of was made aware of the incident and gaining maximum advantage from my embarrassment. Obviously, I'm stuck with it now, it may even appear on my gravestone, but my mother has outlawed the use of the name Ernie. I wonder why. Actually, I don't think she knows about this incident. Phew!

Ernest Horth
205 Gipps Street
East Melbourne, Vic., 3002
Tel. 03 9417 4338



Hut 110 group, L to R: Back-Landers, McDonnell.
Front-Lewis, McDonald and Lee.

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Measuring the width of Swanston Street with sausages. How many? Read the story



Hut 110 group, L to R: Back-Doyle, Gamble, Kemmis and Lee. Front- Jacka and McKenny.



A younger Ernest 1990.



My farewell service from Balwyn Parish November 2002