

Preface

Memories drive it

This Mangoes' fiftieth reunion history project is the brainchild of Kev Stapleton assisted by Jim Nicholls, and we owe them a vote of thanks for their interest in capturing the collective memories of us all.

Memories drive our recollection of the events which we have committed to the written word. Memories usually come associated with events which, to us, were pleasant or unpleasant, exciting, frightening and very much linked with strong emotion at the time. The events will not necessarily generate any strong response from those who may read the histories we write. But they are our stories and together will present an overall view of a group of very special people.

I take great joy in attending our local reunions in Brisbane each year and had a wonderful time at the fiftieth celebrations (fifty years after the apprentice scheme started) in Wagga in 1998. I'm happy to contribute towards our fiftieth reunion and remain impressed at how strong the bonds developed so long ago still remain.

What more can one Mango say? What we received as impressionable kids fifty years ago set us on individual paths. I have no real regrets, and I hope most Mangoes can say the same. I still do my buttons up and polish my shoes.

My memories are good. I wish I could remember more, but that's what reunions are for: to catch up and renew bonds.

Les Bunn

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Every effort has been made to correctly identify people in photographs. If unknown by the supplier of the photograph names were listed only after identification by at least two other persons. If there are mistakes we apologise.

Foreword

I was more than pleased to be asked to write the foreword for this book detailing the lives of many of the young lads who joined the RAAF in 1954 as No 8 Apprentice Course and No 3 Junior Equipment and Administrative Trainees. They were known as Mangoes and I am sure the full meaning still brings a smile.

Having joined as an apprentice in 1949 I was thrilled to achieve my ambition to be the first ex-apprentice to return as Commanding Officer of the RAAF School of Technical Training as it was known in 1978. Sadly, I found many of the traditions had evaporated, but with some effort the pride of graduating on a full dress parade was returned. The bonding and development of that strong esprit de corps which occurred in those early informative years, when boys became men, has meant so much to us.

The Air Force has benefited enormously by breeding such committed people. They were adaptable, dedicated achievers and loyal. Sadly, by 1993 the economical rationalists could prove it was not cost effective to train youngsters and the youth of that era were different. Most of us would strongly suggest, "How wrong can you be!"

The life stories presented in the following pages are unique with some great surprises. They provide a fascinating insight of how a group of young people, from all walks of life, gave the Service a brotherhood of achievers who were of benefit to our country, even when they left the RAAF.

Australians are renowned for their teamwork and our country's history in conflict confirms that emotional ties can overcome adversities and win the day. This band of Mangoes are examples of such men and when one notes that about forty percent of graduates were commissioned (two reaching Air Commodore rank) - this alone is tangible evidence of the measure of commitment.

I applaud the publication of these stories as they form part of history which adds to the heritage of life - too easily forgotten! These recorded events are important and the authors are to be commended, for too often it is left too late.

J R Bartram, AM
Group Captain RAAF (Ret'd)
(A Sunbeam)

The Mango story

Who could ever have foreseen as we arrived at Wagga Wagga on a hot January day in 1954, confused, bedraggled and bewildered that fifty years later we would be celebrating the occasion.

We arrived at the RAAF School of Technical Training from all states of Australia: young boys aged between fifteen and seventeen. On arrival at the Forest Hill RAAF Base we became aware that our intake had been named the Mangoes by the senior apprentice squadron. Anyone with the audacity to ask, "Why Mangoes?" was quickly told, "Green on the outside, yellow on the inside and too many of them give you the shits."

Besides this RAAF apprentice tradition of bestowing a name on each new intake, we were also subjected to various initiation rituals by the senior third-year apprentices. The most spectacular was the blanket toss as shown on the cover photo of this book. Other initiation rituals included being seconded to clean the senior group's huts regularly on "panic" nights, and other servant tasks like polishing shoes or brass. Anyone who objected or resisted generally copped twice as much attention, so one quickly learnt it was easier to submit. Generally the senior apprentices protected us from the second-year apprentices who also attempted to use us as servants. The only consoling factor one had at the time was that one day we would be the senior group and the roles would be reversed.

As a new group it bought us together more quickly because we were all being subjected to the same character testing. Initiation, together with the first six weeks spent on the parade ground being drilled, was a tough introduction to an apprenticeship. Receiving multiple injections for various overseas exotic diseases at the hospital and then being required to drill immediately afterwards on the parade ground for hours (in the middle of summer) caused many apprentices to faint or become sick. Times have changed as one could not imagine such treatment occurring nowadays without a public outcry followed by a parliamentary inquiry. Several recruits dropped out and returned home during this period.

This fiftieth reunion of the Mangoes is linked to those initial memories, the good times, the sad times and the emotional times we experienced growing up from teenagers to young adults over the three years at Wagga. However, it is the special bond of friendship between all who went through the experience that is the glue to the reunion. In many cases we will be catching up with people we have not seen since leaving Wagga forty-seven years ago.

The mid-fifties was a unique time in RAAF history: the Korean War had finished, the jet was about to replace propeller aircraft and the Cold War had started. We seemed to be in the right place at the right time. The transistor radio had been invented. Rock 'n' roll was all the rage. It was an exciting time to be young and to be experiencing the world that was changing around us.

Whilst no one can take away those memories, we are now fifty years older. Some have passed on. Those of us left are all physically less able, grey-haired or bald with too many health problems. Although, one thing in our favour is that we are much wiser from life's experiences.

This book is a collection of individual life stories which, hopefully, will in some way again link us to fellow apprentices with whom we have long lost contact. When one reads the life stories in this book, one can see that none of us has had an ordinary life. Each story is a unique human life experience.

These are extraordinary life stories told by a special group of people.

Kevin Stapleton and Jim Nicholls

Mango Stories

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