

Merv McDougal—A14407—Electrical Fitter

An Apprentice story (or tales of a sometime punter)

How I came to be an electrical fitter apprentice was considered a little unusual at the time. When I joined in 1954, the first twelve months of training was common to all, with specific trade selection occurring at the end of the first year. For some reason, trade selection for our intake was not finalised in the normal timeframe and we had to wait until our return from Christmas holidays to find out our trade destiny. Each apprentice put in his preferences from the six available trades (engines, airframes, motor transport, armament, instrument and electrical). In practice, most received their first or second preference with the occasional one getting his third preference. On returning from leave we were all called on to the parade ground to find out our trade selection. I had selected engines and airframes as my first and second choices, and as I had achieved good education scores and excellent hand skill scores, I was quite sure I would get my first or second choice. First, the airframe selection was announced and the selected apprentices moved off the parade ground. As my name hadn't been called, I was convinced I must have made the engines group. As the engine names were called out, I started to move off with that group. However, the engine roll ceased and my name hadn't been called. I hadn't been following the other calls too closely and wandered back into the centre of the parade ground where there was only one group left. I asked what the group was, to discover it was electrical. To my great surprise, I had been allocated my fifth selection out of a choice of six trades!

I was still in shock when we marched up to the Electrical Training Flight to receive our indoctrination briefing from the officer-in-charge. I sat through the briefing in disbelief, and at the first break, I dashed across to the Engine Training Flight, which was in an adjacent hangar. I asked the warrant officer engineer (WOEng) if there was anything I could do to have my trade allocation changed. He suggested, as I was only sixteen, I could ask my parents to get their local member to see if he could assist me. The WOEng then had a look at my education results and said I had probably been selected for electrical because of my strong maths and physics results. He then said I would probably be bored as an engine fitter because it would not be challenging enough for me (Who said WOEng's knew nothing about psychology?). He suggested I give electrical a try for a few weeks, and if I still wanted to change, to come back and see him again. His talk certainly boosted my morale, and sure enough, I soon found that I did have an affinity with electrical theory, and was happy to remain in my unexpected trade allocation.

The next significant change in my career direction came early in our third year. Those amongst us who had purchased motorbikes were more than a little disgruntled upon our return from Christmas leave to be told that apprentices would no longer be allowed to keep motorbikes on the base. A tragic accident then resulted in the death of Lex Dunn, a fellow electrical apprentice and motorbike owner. Lex and some mates had gone off for a weekend when their car was washed off a bridge by a sudden flood. The others were found alive the next morning but Lex had perished during the night. The base held a whip-around and donated the funds to the Wagga Rescue Service, enabling them to purchase some powerful lighting so that future searches could be carried out at night. I had been fairly close to Lex and had spent part of the previous leave, including New Year's eve, with him and his family at their property at Nyah West on the Murray river.

At this stage, I had lost a bit of interest in the course and was just plodding along when a scheme was announced whereby selected apprentices could complete two physics and two maths subjects from the Victorian Leaving Certificate course, and qualify for entrance into an engineering diploma course at RMTTC the following year. Applicants had to achieve satisfactory results in a special aptitude test. I applied and duly sat the test, but during the test I had cause to wonder whether I might be wasting my time. To explain, I had recently

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completed a phase test in physics where our instructor was one Flight Lieutenant Ray (Tubby) McDermott. Those who had the experience of being taught by Tubby would remember his habit when asked a question of responding, “You will find the answer on page xyz of McKenzie’s *Heat & Hydrostatics*.” Invariably, when looking up the reference, he would be dead right. Well to cut a long story short, in the test I had nearly reached the bottom of the page when the next question asked me to explain why, when melting a piece of wax, the temperature rises, then stays level for a period, before starting to rise again: a phenomenon known as the latent heat of fusion. As luck would have it, I remembered the page in the textbook where this was described, and could not resist imitating Tubby. I wrote out the question on my answer paper and continued: “For the answer to this thrilling question, read McKenzie’s *Heat & Hydrostatics*, page abc (whatever the actual page number was), or turnover the page”. On the reverse of the page I wrote out the correct answer in full. Needless to say this did not meet with universal approval, and I was threatened with losing all marks for that question. During the aforementioned aptitude test, I noticed that each time the invigilating officers changed over, there would be a whispered exchange and much pointing in my direction. I felt sure I’d had it, but apparently the humour of the situation won out over the ire, and I was eventually placed on what become known as the diploma course.

At a recent reunion, John Best (the ‘beast’) reminded me of an outing we had during that third year. For some reason, the pair of us decided one Saturday to hitch hike to the races at Gundagai. We were offered a lift in a big limousine, the occupants of which John swears had to be in the local mafia. Anyway, they were heading for the races too, and offered to give us a lift back as well, which was gratefully accepted. They also tipped us a horse called Birthday Gift in the main race that day. When it came to the main race, neither John nor I had managed to make our fortune, so we looked forward to scoring on Birthday Gift. Unfortunately, when we ventured into the betting ring, Birthday Gift was odds on. As such short odds would not provide the recovery we needed, we looked for better value in the field. Having made another selection, we ventured back into the betting ring only to find that our new selection was odds on, and that Birthday Gift had drifted out. We decided to have another go at finding value and made a third selection. Entering the betting ring again, yes, you guessed it, our new selection was now odds on, with both Birthday Gift and our second selection having drifted in the betting. With these setbacks, we decided to look on. As I recall none of the three horses we selected won, but there was an incident during the race which caused us to consider the honesty of those participating. As the horses reached the furlong post, the saddle slipped on a horse racing in about fifth or sixth place and the jockey could only hang on. Without restraint, the horse then bolted to the front. Unfortunately, he also headed straight for the outside rail which he jumped, losing the jockey in the process. We were then entertained for several minutes while officials tried to recover the horse without injuring anyone in the process. At the end of the meeting, John and I were much the poorer for our experiences and extremely grateful that the “mafia” turned up to give us a ride back to camp.

During our third year, several of our number “did a runner” for varying periods. This was due to a general malaise and discontent at restrictions or removal of traditional “privileges” such as the right to wear civilian clothes on leave during our last six months. To raise the temperature, whenever we knew that officialdom in the form of a drill instructor (DI), was present, we would start discussing whose turn it was to go AWOL next, and hint that there was a roster of willing absconders ready to take their turn. During this period I recall suggesting to Kev Ostila (I think) that we should join the “club” and hitch hike to Brisbane for the Stradbroke Handicap - Brisbane Cup meeting in June. The plan was that if we won we would come back in style, while if we lost we would hand ourselves in to the Service Police. In the event, we did not carry through with the plan, although my selections, Knave

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and Redcraze landed the double at 1400-1! (I did manage to back Knave with a local SP bookmaker at 20-1, so it wasn't a dead loss).

To continue with the racing theme, like all Australians, apprentices also relished the chance to have a bet on the Melbourne Cup. So it was that in the spring of 1956 I ran a book on the Melbourne Cup. I was prepared to gamble against the favourite, Redcraze, and laid him at 7-4 for all available money. At lunch time on the day of the cup, I had not laid a penny against the eventual winner, Evening Peal, when along came a lucky pair who took my 25-1 for a pound each way and ten shillings each way. While it was still a winning race for me, those lunch time punters stopped me having a complete "skinner".

So to December 1956, our graduation and out to the "real world". For those of us on the diploma course, it was to be three years, at least, of boarding at Laverton and travelling by bus into RMTTC each day. As my parents lived at Chelsea, I went home most weekends and was able to get to the races most Saturdays. The highlight of 1957 was watching Tulloch treat the opposition with contempt in the Caulfield Cup that year. Another occasion I recall was backing a hurdler named McKenna in a hurdle race at Flemington. I had £1 each way at 40-1, and when I went to collect, the bookmaker exclaimed 'put down a brick and pick up a house!' I thought he had a cheek as he must have won a fortune on the failure of the hot favourite, but the expression has stayed in my mind ever since.

During our time at Laverton we formed the Laverton Rugby Union team and played in the Victorian reserve grade competition. My mum and dad came to watch a few games and I often had a few of the guys home on a weekend. However, one occasion that sticks in the mind was a Saturday we played down at the Naval base at Cerberus. Dallas Boyd was the driver of the RAAF bus to take us down and back and, with six o'clock closing, we realised Frankston would be the last place we could get beer on the way back to Laverton. We stopped at a Frankston pub and stocked up on the necessities of life, only to find that they had no cold beer. We knew we would be OK once we got back to Laverton because we could get ice from the ration store, but that it would be a dry argument until then. I then suggested to Dallas that Chelsea would be on the way home, so we could stop off at Mum and Dad's and swap some hot bottles for Dad's cold bottles; I knew he would have at least half a dozen of the old tallies in the fridge. Dallas agreed and made the slight detour to my place. As I said, Mum and Dad were used to me bringing a few guys home at weekends, but apparently when Dad saw the busload of rugby players pull up, his only comment was; "We haven't got enough glasses!" Much relief all round when he found we only wanted to swap a few bottles of beer and get on our way.

During the diploma training at RMTTC, I palled up with another keen punter, Kev Cornwell, and we proceeded to lead each other astray. We found one way of gaining an insight into the chances of the new crop of two-year olds was to attend the trials held at Caulfield and Flemington. Unfortunately, these trials were usually held on a Monday or a Thursday, so college attendance suffered a bit. I also recall a successful outing to a midweek meeting at Pakenham, where we managed to back the winners of five out of the eight races. However, come examination time at the end of second year, I found that I did not have enough time available to catch up on all the study I had missed. To try and salvage the situation, I elected to dump two subjects that would be available in evening classes the next year, and concentrate on the remaining subjects. This strategy was successful in that I passed all but the two neglected subjects. Unfortunately, there was a change in policy and only one subject was allowed to be carried over for evening study. With my plans brought undone, I spent 1959 at No 1 Aircraft Depot, working as an electrical fitter while I attended evening classes at RMTTC. This period brought home to me the relative ease of full-time study compared with evening classes. The result was that after returning to full-time study in 1960, I paid more attention and completed the course successfully - race attendances were restricted to

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weekends only. Another surprise was to come when we finally had our results and were to be offered our commissions. I was advised that there was only one vacancy for an electrical engineer for the two electrical fitters (Des Bickle and myself) and that one of us would have to accept armament. Given the debacle over my initial trade choice, I decided that I was not going to switch again, so it was electrical or nothing. Fortunately, Des Bickle had always had an interest in armament, so he accepted a commission as an armament engineer and I got the electrical vacancy. Following our initial engineer and officer training courses I was posted back to Wagga, eventually becoming OIC of the electrical training flight. During this posting I met and married Judy who is still with me more than forty years later. We were posted to Support Command in Melbourne at the end of 1963 and I had the chance to introduce Judy to the joys of thoroughbred racing and VFL football.

We had a very good day when we attended the Caulfield Cup won by Yangtse. Although he had won the Caulfield Guineas at his previous start, Yangtse was not one of the favourites, and I had two pounds straight out at 14-1. Although the challengers got to within a half-length of him at the finish, we yelled like mad as Yangtse won after leading from start to finish. It was most enjoyable receiving thirty pounds for my two-pound outlay! On another occasion, we had two pounds between us and decided to go to the races at Caulfield. I had my weekly train ticket and Judy borrowed Dad's, so we were able to get to the course for free. In those days they offered entrance to the "Flat" on the inside of the track for one and six-pence each. In the first race (for two year olds), Judy liked a horse called Marmion which was showing at 66-1. I asked what she liked about it, and she said "the price". I looked up the form and found it had run fourth in a maiden at Pakenham at its last start. Anyway, Judy was adamant that I put five shillings on it. Given the meagre state of our finances I was most reluctant. Eventually I found a group of bookmakers taking bets as low as one shilling, so I had a shilling each way on Marmion at the best price available which, with this lot, was only 25-1. Well, Marmion hit the front as they jumped and the further the race went, the further in front he went, eventually winning easily. The thirty-five shillings collect was some help, but Judy has never let me forget that if I had put her original bet on we would have won almost twenty pounds!

In September 1967, I was sent to the US for six months to undergo maintenance training on the F-111, followed by a posting to Amberley. Initially, I had to go to Amberley unaccompanied, as we waited for completion of a batch of married quarters at the base. While living in at Amberley, I met up with Barry Debenham, who had been one of our instructors at Wagga. Barry was also a keen punter so we attended a few of the local meetings, including Stradbroke Handicap day at Eagle Farm. I liked Cabochon in the Stradbroke, but as he had also won the much shorter Lightning Stakes, Barry considered he could not get the extra distance of the Stradbroke. To back his conviction, Barry offered to buy me dinner if Cabochon won. I stuck to my guns and had a nice collect when Cabochon duly won the Stradbroke, and then enjoyed a slap-up feed at Barry's expense. Eventually we moved into our married quarter and family barbecues replaced the race day outings, with some exceptions. A racehorse trainer, who shall remain nameless, operated from the Gold Coast and whenever he wanted someone to place a commission on one of his horses, he would turn to a group of punters at Amberley to help out. Barry Debenham was one of the group, along with Father Pat McCormick, myself and a few others. We were never paid for placing the stable bets, the idea being we also backed the horse for our own benefit. The first time I was involved was a midweek meeting at Bundamba. We were each given \$400 and told to put \$200 each way on the horse, but not to start betting until five minutes before the race was due to start. Barry and I were allocated one end of the betting ring, and selected a bookmaker each who was offering the best odds (33-1 in this case). When the time came, we both moved. I tried to claim the first bookmaker for \$20 each way, but he would only take half the bet at 33-1. The price

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tumbled quickly throughout the ring as the bookies tumbled to the plunge, and I quickly grabbed a place bookmaker to lay the place half of the each way bet before the odds disappeared completely. The straight-out bookmakers gave better odds on the win than the each way bookies, so I got a better overall result in this way. The horse finished third in a blanket finish, although Barry and I both thought the jockey could have done a little better. Nevertheless, the stable was happy that we had averaged reasonable odds for the place return, and they had had a win overall.

The next commission was for a Saturday meeting at Doomben, and we all met at Eagle Farm airport to be given our betting money. We were given \$600 each to bet for a win only on a horse running in the first race. Because of the total amount of money, we were told to start betting ten minutes before the start of the race. Although the horse had been listed at 33-1 in the morning papers, we found the best odds available in the betting ring were only 7-1. Even these odds were diminishing as we waited for the betting time to come. In the event, the best price we were able to get was 5-1, and this quickly reduced, with the horse starting 7-4 favourite. The horse was ridden by the same jockey as previously and won easily. The stable then had an investigator look into why they had missed the early odds. The investigator found that the jockey's wife had flown to Sydney the morning of the race and backed the horse at the Randwick races. The Sydney bookmakers had alerted the Brisbane bookmakers, and so the price was gone before we even started to bet. Naturally, the jockey was sacked and, as word spread, he moved to Hong Kong to be able to keep riding. It also turned out that he had not been told about the Bundamba plunge until he was legged up into the saddle, and as a result had not been able to back the horse that day. Barry and I were even more convinced that, with a bit more effort, he could have won at Bundamba.

On the work front, delivery of the F-111s was delayed significantly and we received F4E Phantoms on a two-year lease while they sorted out the problems with the F-111. I was running the 482 Squadron field training flight for the F4E introduction, and was then posted to Operational Command at Glenbrook. Following almost two years at Glenbrook, I was seconded to Defence along with a bunch of others, including Ray Stevenson, to take part in a job evaluation review. We were given training by the management consultants, Hays, and then spent our time interviewing and writing position descriptions for selected positions in the three services. We would spend four weeks with Air Force, four weeks with Navy, and four weeks with Army in a continuing sequence for all of 1973. This was an interesting experience, and I was able to gain a much greater insight into the operations of the Army and Navy than your average Air Force member.

In 1974, I completed RAAF Staff College and was posted to the Training Directorate in Air Force Office in Canberra. This was also an interesting time as we faced the challenge of the increased training required to bring our technical manning up to established requirements. In August 1976 I received warning of a posting to Paris as the Australian Air Attaché, and was sent to Point Cook for French language training. In November, we received our first-class tickets to travel to Paris, with a few days leave in Hong Kong on the way. Unfortunately, Malcom Fraser then decided that, as from 1 January 1976, all travel for members below one-star rank would be economy class. When the orderly rang and asked me to return the tickets for conversion to economy class, I thought quickly and told him my wife had them and that she was staying with her parents in Unanderra until we were due to leave. "It doesn't matter," he said. "They will be converted when you check in at the airport!" So it was that we travelled economy class with an Australian diplomatic passport.

We travelled from Hong Kong on an Air France flight and I tried to encourage Judy and the kids (Rae Terese, 11, and Robert, 8) to try and understand the hostess calls in French. When we landed in Tel Aviv there was some kind of an alert going on and our aircraft was stopped on the other side of the airport from the terminal. Surrounded by armed military personnel

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we had to board a bus and be driven to the terminal for a full body search. However, when it was found we had diplomatic passports we were treated a little more kindly. One of the officials asked in French if the four of us were all together, and I responded, “Oui.” She then rattled off a more serious and detailed question and I thought it better to own up that we were English speakers. She apologised and repeated the question in English, the gist of which was to ask whether anyone had given us a parcel to carry for them. I can just imagine the consequences if I had given another of my “Oui” responses!

Anyway, we eventually arrived in Paris and, as the aircraft had filled up with refugees in Bombay, we elected to stay seated until the milling mass had left the aircraft. In the meantime, and unbeknown to us, the current Air Attaché, Arthur Skimin, had arranged for us to be given a VIP reception. When the first class section of the aircraft had cleared with no sign of the incoming Air Attaché, the public relations chief asked Arthur if he was sure we were actually on the aircraft. Arthur told her we would be off in a minute and that we probably had a lot of hand luggage to gather. Then when all the refugees started pouring from the aircraft the PR lass was certain she had been duped. Eventually we left the aircraft and were ushered to the VIP lounge, much to the relief of the PR rep. The VIP treatment was very good; we simply gave the PR people our passports and didn't have to get up until our bags were in the embassy cars.

In the briefing material before we left Australia, we were told to pack lots of games to entertain the kids as time would pass very slowly in the cold winters. Anyhow, after what seemed about nine months, we discovered our three years were up, and it was time to go home. Time seemed to fly in Paris. Judy and the kids settled in well and the office was very busy, so there was never any time to worry about what you were going to do next, it all just happened. We did decide to check out the Prix de l'Arc de Triumphe meeting at Longchamps, just outside Paris in 1977. The course is quite picturesque, the most unusual feature by Australian standards, is that it has two winning posts about a furlong apart. The distance of the race controls which of the two posts is in use for any particular race. It is a regular occurrence for a jockey to get to the first post and stop riding, only to have the rest of the field go past him. Much embarrassment and a roasting from connections and stewards, together with a fine and/or suspension is the usual outcome. French racing does not permit bookmakers, and they do not use red-jacketed clerks of the course, so it is not as colourful as Australian racing. Later in the day, a long odds-on favourite got beaten, and I was expecting some sort of a protest by the crowd. But no, the only protester was a lone male who hit his rolled up form guide against the rail then walked away. So much for Gallic temperament!

The major excitement during my time in Paris occurred whenever I got involved with the French motorcycle police who all seemed to have a death wish. The first occasion was when a small policy-level team came over to have a look at the Mirage 2000 as part of a process for coming up with a short list for the Mirage III replacement. We were waiting for our cars to arrive at the hotel where the visitors were staying, when (Air Commodore) Ralph Anstee wanted to post a letter. I took him to a post box around the corner and when we returned we found that the others had left, with one car staying for us. Just then two French motorcycle police turned up to provide us with an escort. We said it wasn't really necessary as Dassault had put on a special Falcon 20 jet leaving from LeBourget and it would not leave until we got there. The motorcycle police insisted that an escort had been booked and we were going to get it whether we needed it or not! So with one embassy car and two motorcycle police with lights and sirens, we headed off. There is a motorway known as the Peripherique with three lanes in each direction which runs around Paris. As was typical during peak periods the motorway traffic was bogged right down. Not to be deterred, our two intrepid motorcycle cops forced their way between the second and third lanes, banging on the windows of the cars either side to move aside and make way for our car. We sped along this temporary

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“bubble” forced between the two lanes with no more than an inch either side of our car. Some seven and a half minutes later we were at Le Bouget airport, two total nervous wrecks. We then had some thirty minutes to pull ourselves together before the flight to the French test centre at Istres. This was the seventeenth test flight of the Mirage 2000, and the first to be witnessed by a foreign delegation.

As a result of the policy review the Mirage 2000 made the short list, along with the F-16 and the eventual winner, the F/A-18. For the final evaluation a much larger team, Bill Belton among them, arrived in Paris and again we met up with the dreaded motorcycle police. Because of the size of the cavalcade there were several hairy incidents, including going the wrong way up a small one-way street in St Cloud. The pick of the bunch for mine, though, was the decision by the motorcycle escort to take us on the wrong side of the Champs Elysee and head on into the oncoming traffic. The police had to rely on the oncoming traffic getting out of our way while we drove along behind the police at some sixty to eighty km/h. Talk about a terrifying ride!

We bought a VW camper van and did a lot of touring around Europe in our time in Paris. On one occasion we drove up through Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, and caught the ferry across to Newcastle. We then drove up into Scotland where Judy and the kids decided to stay on for another week while I caught the train from Edinburgh to London and on to Paris. When I arrived back in the office my secretary said the credit card company had called to check that our credit cards hadn't been stolen. I guess credit card receipts popping up all over the place had given them some concern, so I said just call them back and tell them it's only my wife shopping!

From Paris we went back to Canberra where I had another stint in Air Force Office, this time in the Directorate of Technical Plans. In 1983 we went back to Amberley where I had two years and eight months as CO of No 3 Aircraft Depot. This was the largest technical unit in the RAAF with a strength of some eight hundred personnel. This was a very challenging and rewarding job, and on my farewell I noted that I had served at 1 AD as an LAC and at 3 AD as a group captain, and it was a lot more fun as a group captain! I was posted to Operational Command at Glenbrook from August 1985 until my resignation in February 1987: a total of thirty-three years since signing on at Wagga.

After leaving the RAAF, I joined (then) BH Pacific, the Bell helicopter distributors in Brisbane. After a name change to Helitech, they have recently been taken over by Sikorsky. My first job with Helitech was as a project manager for a UH-1H upgrade. I then became quality manager and in 1989 was sent to CTI in Dallas to learn about helicopter rotor blade repairs. Helitech had bought CTI in 1988 and wanted to establish a helicopter rotor blade repair facility in the UK. After some delay Judy and I finally flew to the UK in June 1991. The initial staff was myself and my 2 IC, Brendan Redden, who had been recruited from Ireland by CTI some two years earlier. We hired a bookkeeper/receptionist and a couple of local trainees and set to work. We occupied a brand new hangar at Thruxton airfield in Hampshire and set about buying and setting up the paint booth, bond and balance room and the other facilities needed. We achieved UK CAA approval in August and received our first repair blades in September. These blades were for a McDonnell Douglas 500 helicopter and were sent to us by SAAB Helikopter in Sweden. The helicopter concerned was to be carried on board a ship sailing for the Arctic at the end of September, so we had no time to spare. Because Brendan had no experience in painting, and I had painted a couple of cars over the years, I was elected chief blade painter. We had the parts required flown in urgently from the CTI facility in Stockton, California and got the repairs underway. When the repairs had been completed I came in first thing next morning and put the epoxy primer coat on. This required a minimum of four hours drying time and Judy and I had to then rush in to London where we were displaying our potential repair capability for the UK military. When the display ended

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we packed up the booth and headed back to Thruxton. Judy dropped me at the hangar where I proceeded to prep the blades and apply the finishing coat of epoxy enamel. When I had finished that I had to wait an hour or so before I could mask up and apply the tip colours. During this time Judy brought my dinner over and we ate dinner while the blades were drying. When the finish coat had cured I masked up the blades (five in a set) and applied the tip colours. We called it a day at that stage and got home to bed just before midnight. Brendan came in early the next day, balanced the blades to our balance master and they were packed and on their way by lunch time. The blades made the deadline for the ship to sail and SAAB Helicopters became one of our major customers from then on.

We gradually built the business from there, recruiting more staff, including a painter and establishing a reputation for good quality and fast turnaround. In 1992 we still needed to build the business further to meet our high fixed overheads, so Judy and I mapped out an itinerary to drive through France, Switzerland, Germany and Belgium. The plan was to visit at least two potential customers each day, which proved to be feasible. Judy did the navigating and I did the driving and the presentations. The only time I had cause to doubt her navigation was when she appeared to direct me the wrong way when I was driving between customers in Germany. I questioned the directions, only to be told not to worry and keep driving. It all became clear when I turned a corner and found myself in front of the Kaiser porcelain factory. I should have mentioned that Judy is very keen on porcelain and crystal (she says it's the only shopping she can do without worrying about whether it fits or not). We had time to pick up a few porcelain pieces as well as make my next appointment.

Back in England we found time to make the odd social trip to France, as having lived in Paris for three years it was almost like our second home. In 1993 we planned to fly to Paris for our thirtieth wedding anniversary, and the *Financial Times*, in conjunction with British Airways, was running a promotion involving first-class airfares to Paris and champagne service on the flight. It was too good an opportunity to miss, so I duly collected the requisite newspaper coupons and purchased the cut-price tickets. We were due to fly over on the day of our anniversary, have dinner at a top restaurant, stay overnight and fly back the next day. Unfortunately, on the Saturday before our flight, which was to be the next Tuesday, we discovered that Judy's French visa was out of date. Because my father had been born in Edinburgh, I had been able to get myself a UK passport, so I didn't have a problem. We rang the French Embassy in London only to find they were closed over the weekend. As Monday was a public holiday, the embassy would not be open until the day of our planned flight. We decided the only thing to do was to get packed and drive to London first thing in the morning, and go on to the airport once we had secured a visa. However, when we arrived at the passport section we found the queue for visas stretched out into the street and around the corner. Judy got in the queue while I went into the building to see if there were any options for speeding things up. I drew a blank and went back to join Judy in the queue. The rate of progress in the queue meant that it was doubtful that we could make it inside the building before the end of the day, let alone make our two o'clock flight. Judy decided she would try her luck while I held the place in the queue. She went to the enquiry desk, but was about to be told she had no option but to wait in the queue, when the French lady behind the counter noticed that Judy's wedding date was thirty years ago that day. With l'amour being everything for the French, she realised that we certainly had to get to Paris that day. After a short discussion with a colleague she told Judy to come back in an hour to collect her visa. Sure enough, it was ready when we came back and we made it to Heathrow with time to spare.

While living in Hampshire we attended a couple of the big jumps meetings at Newberry. They were well run meetings and we managed to back the odd winner or two. The main problems were that jumps races were held predominantly in the winter, so it was generally

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bitterly cold, and the traffic jams getting out of the carport were horrendous. An unusual (for us) type of race meeting that we found very interesting was point-to-point racing. These were also jumps meetings, and therefore held in the winter as well. They were like big picnic affairs with bookmakers, bars and food stalls. Each race was an out and back affair, generally over about five miles, and the jockeys were all amateurs. Backing a winner was a little more difficult, it was more like trying to pick who you thought would be the last one standing!

During 1995 I had negotiated a licence agreement with Agusta to carry out blade repairs to Agusta blades and, after signing the agreement, I handed over to a local manager and we returned to Australia at the end of the year. Back in Australia I ran the Helitech Service Centre as a temporary arrangement until they could find a permanent appointee. This happened in July 1996 and I dropped back to helping out in the Helitech blade repair shop. Then in October we were involved in a bad head-on collision on the Sunshine Coast motorway. It turned out the lass driving from Brisbane thought she was on a dual carriage motorway and that it was safe to overtake using my lane. We were all wearing seat belts and although it took a while to cut me out of the wreckage, the surgeons at Princess Alexandra hospital managed to get me back together again. I spent two and a half months in hospital and quite a bit of time in rehabilitation afterwards, but was quite lucky to be alive. As I was slowly recovering, the guy who had replaced me at Thruxton began having some problems and I was asked to go back to the UK again. Judy was quite happy to return and so began another three years at Thruxton, with more side trips to France and the rest of Europe. While I had been away the deal with Agusta had not lived up to its potential and we managed to sort out the bottlenecks and get that part of the business operating properly. With the company operating in the black at last, we continued to expand, building up to a staff of twenty-two, and a turnover of 1.2 million pounds.

I also got around to attending Sandown racecourse with a punting pal visiting from Australia. We got to the course well before the first race as we weren't sure how bad the traffic would be. Anyhow, after studying the form, I came up with a couple of selections at good odds and meandered down into the betting ring. The bookmakers in England still use blackboards and write the horses' names and the prices in chalk, a really weird practice in this day and age. However, I then discovered that the first few bookmakers I came across did not have the horses I wanted to back on their boards. I assumed I must have missed a couple of scratchings and decided to let that race go by. Imagine my surprise when the race was run and one of the horses I wanted to back came in second! Apparently the bookies I went to didn't want to lay these horses so they simply left them off their boards. Fair dinkum, an Australian bookmakers' supervisor would have a field day. Although the courses are excellent, with very good quality horses racing, the stewards are all amateurs and the administration is a joke. Each week you could read of judges getting the placings wrong and appeals being made to have the judges decisions amended. One female official was so bad, the papers called her "Calamity Jane". In one case she misread the photo finish print and awarded the race to the horse which actually finished third. The connections appealed and a week later the results were corrected with the prizemoney being paid out to the actual winner. However, this didn't help the poor punters who were paid out on the results as the judge declared them on the day. I thought I'd seen almost every way there was to lose your money, but English racing seemed to invent a new way every week! Needless to say, that was my first and only visit to Sandown.

After three years back at Thruxton, and with the business running well, we finally decided it was time to hand over management to another local and head home for good. Despite the best intentions of retiring at that point, I find that some fifty years after signing on at Wagga, I am still carrying out some consultancy work in the helicopter industry, albeit much less

Mango Stories

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often. After fifty years, would I still do it all over again? You bet!

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The Mirage 2000
unsuccessful in selection
of new RAAF fighter



Not a mirage—a racehorse photo to go with the story (KS)