

Jim Nicholls—A216400—Mechanical Transport Fitter

Early days at RSTT will always be remembered for a number of strange, illogical happenings.

Sometime towards the end of 1953, having already been advised that I had been accepted into the course, a form arrived in the mail. It contained diagrams of the human shape and a request to fill in my measurements in the appropriate places so that uniforms would be ready as soon as I arrived at Wagga. I can still recall the fun at home as my parents and I went through the process of taking measurements, including the ever-popular “inside leg”.

Of course, all this resulted in having to wait for weeks with only one set of clothes and one change of underwear before eventually being shunted off to L Group along with everyone else to collect a bundle of clothes which did not fit.

Then there was the trip from Cootamundra where I lived - a distance of about ninety kilometres from Wagga. A train ticket was received along with instructions to proceed to Sydney, report to the RTO at Central Station there, then return to Wagga on the overnight train. A letter from my father suggesting I could simply hop on that same train at Cootamundra the following morning received a haughty disapproval. What the hell! At least I got to share a New South Wales Government Railways’ dog box with the likes of Jimmy Coleman, Hooks Malone and Kevin Ostila, and four other people I no longer remember.

At Wagga there was still more fun to come. Not only were there no clothes for us, but a number of us also had nothing to sleep on. The term “make your own bed” suddenly took on a whole new meaning. I remember WOD Alf Barker leading a group of us to the barracks yard to sort through a pile of iron bed frames. That was also the first time I was ever to hear the expression “U/S”. It had me wondering just what part the United States had to play in the grand scheme of things.

And who can forget the instant introductions to Air Force life? The great brawl on the oval near the huts belting Nashos with cakes of soap wrapped in towels, the blanket tossing and the black boot polish - I’ve only just managed to get the last of it off!

I remember living, at various times, in a number of huts at RSTT, although the numbers of the actual huts are long forgotten. Among hut-mates were Dick Morrissey, John Middlebrook, Max Caust, Mal Bowden, Butch Ward, Grubby Oehme, Gerry Broadbent, Jimmy Spink, Ian Melbourne and John Best. The final months at Wagga were spent in a cosy sleeping arrangement with Tubby Squire.

The pigheadedness and illogical thinking that greeted our arrival did not end when we left Wagga. Those of us from New South Wales who had graduated as MT fitters were posted to 2AD Detachment F. Despite its fancy name the place was nothing more than a big shed at Mascot near the international airport where Air Force motor vehicles were stripped down to bare bones and put back together again.

Somebody in our group - I can’t remember who it was, but there always seemed to be someone amongst us who knew these things - reckoned we were supposed to go to Bankstown which was the barracks for people working at the nearby Stores Depot at Regents Park. This person in our lot somehow knew that Bankstown was also where we were meant to be.

After our leave, sometime in January 1957, we all met up again at Central Station in Sydney. This group consisted of Ron Beck, Jim Coleman, Bob Denovan, Shad Taylor, Ken “Wacka” Ward, Brian Williams, Radar Wright, and me.

Despite our pleading, the RTO corporal at Central Station remained adamant that we had to go to Richmond.

“It says 2AD. That’s Richmond,” he said, looking at our movement orders and sounding rather pleased with himself.

“Yeah, but it also says Detachment F,” argued our man who knew these things.

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“Never heard of it. Now get on the train to Richmond.”

“But we know we should be going to Bankstown.”

“Don’t argue. Now, get on this train.”

Of course, after a journey that took hours and included a change of trains at Blacktown and a struggle across the Richmond airstrip in the dark from Clarendon station, lugging everything we owned in the world, we were greeted by the orderly sergeant.

“No, you blokes have to go to Bankstown.”

After three years of trying desperately to become an MT fitter, I then spent the next eight or so trying desperately *NOT* to be one. With no prospects in sight, other than being forever covered in grease and dirt, I applied for every course that came along. After dipping out on things like air crew and air traffic control, I finally struck it lucky with a language course. Completing a Thai course with distinction in 1966, I was to spend the following five years at Point Cook, first as an instructor, then as a student again undertaking a Chinese course. Part of this entailed a return to Wagga to do an instructional technique course. How different things there seemed when seen from the luxury of the sergeants mess. I later spent twelve months at the top secret Albert Park Barracks near St Kilda involved in that wonderful old contradiction in terms - military intelligence. Each morning as I followed the other sheep through the gate I would look at a sign near the entrance, almost paying homage to it as I walked past. It read: *This is a NO PARKING area. Please do not use it as such.* I reasoned that if we couldn’t get our English correct, what hope did we have with Chinese.

After being commissioned and completing an OTS course, I was posted as AdminO to No 1 Flying Training School. This was a pretty good posting, dealing with young cadets, getting airborne with CO Wing Commander Rex Ramsey and spluttering around the skies over southern Victoria in a Winjeel. A lot of flying was done over the nearby Werribee sewerage works, inducement if ever there was to ensure that seat belts were done up!

I think I may have created some sort of record at Point Cook. I’ve never bothered to check it out, nor have I applied to the Guinness Book of Records, but I wonder how many other people have ever lived in the three different messes while on the one posting: arriving as an airman, then being promoted to sergeant then, several years later, packing up and traipsing across the road to the officers mess.

My RAAF involvement ended in November 1974 at the expiration of a short-service commission. By then I had reached the exultant rank of flight lieutenant and was the AdminO of Base Squadron Amberley. I will relate two of the incidents that befell me while I was at Amberley: one tragic and the other rather funny. The tragedy saw the death of three airmen in a bizarre incident. Late one night, a mentally disturbed patient stole an RAAF ambulance from in front of the base hospital, crashed it through the boom gates and did wheelies around the married quarters before spearing it into a creek bed beside the Cunningham Highway where it burst into flames, incinerating him. Two RAAF fire tenders attending the blaze were parked tail to tail on the highway with the firemen operating the controls between both vehicles. A southbound semi-trailer suddenly roared over the hill and ploughed into the leading tender, crushing the two men. At the inquiry that followed, it was learned the semi driver had just bought a hamburger and, as he was about to take a bite, dropped it on the floor. At the time he hit the fire tenders, he was rummaging around on the floor of his cab trying to find it.

The other incident is a bit less traumatic. As library officer, one of my jobs was to restock the mess library as required. This involved heading into Brisbane with an offsider and, in theory, carefully selecting a pile of new books. That was the theory; what actually happened was we’d leave a purchase order at Dymocks, tell the manager to use his discretion and, “We’ll be back around four o’clock to collect them.” The two of us would then make a beeline for the nearest pub. At this time the wowsers of Brisbane all had their collective

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knickers in a tangle over one hotel - the one we were heading for - employing a team of topless barmaids. Unbeknown to us at the time, every TV station in town had a camera set up on the footpath in front of the hotel and reporters were interviewing several of the girls. In our haste to get to where we going, we dashed around the corner and literally fell into an amazing scene. Later that day, I made it back to Amberley just in time to see myself on the six o'clock news becoming tangled up in a maze of camera cables and stumbling through a brace of bare bosoms, bikini bottoms and stiletto heels.

Another incident is also worth recalling. I was responsible for signing the final clearance for airmen being discharged from the service. One afternoon a squadron leader led a disgruntled senior NCO into my office and asked me to give the bloke a serve for failing to salute him.

“You're not out of the Air Force yet,” he admonished the sergeant.

“Salute! Gawd!” a bemused Hooks Malone said to me when we were alone. “I've just spent the past four years at Dubbo Stores Depot. I never even owned a bloody hat!”

My time in the RAAF could best be described as interesting - it was certainly nothing outstanding - with the travel being the most enjoyable part of it all. After a year at Mascot, there were two postings to Darwin - the first one to 5ACS and a later one to Base Squadron - a couple of delightful years at Fairbairn, then Townsville, Ubon in northeast Thailand, Tindal with 5ACS again, Point Cook and Amberley. During this time there were also attachments to unusual places such as Darwin River Quarry and Snake Creek. How many people know there was once an RAAF base at a place called Snake Creek? I also enjoyed visits to Singapore, Butterworth, Cocos Island and Port Moresby.

After almost twenty-one years it was over and I left with a DFRDB pension, a wife named Shar (short for Sharolyn) and a young son we named Robert. On Monday 6 January 1975 I began work as an administrator at the Queensland Agricultural College near Gatton west of Ipswich. Here I was caught up in such things as looking after student accommodation, security and conducting examinations, along with any other dirty job that no-one else wanted to touch.

This was the beginning of another phase of my life. We bought a house in Laidley, about twelve kilometres from the College, and it was here that we also gained a daughter who was to be called Amber. College life was good - a great social atmosphere. I devoted so much time and effort to the staff club committee that I was made a life member. There were also other interesting appointments such as being secretary of the Overseas Students Association, and the College representative on the Forest Hill (yes, there's one here also) Community Police Liaison Committee.

In Laidley I joined the local bowls club and took an interest in community activities; at various times holding positions in organisations such as the Boy Scouts committee, the soccer club, Laidley Creative Writers, the 1995 Australia Remembers committee and the International Year of Older Persons (by which time I had become one!). I served two terms as president of the bowls club and managed to win such “prestigious” events as the club's B-grade singles and a couple of triples and fours titles. In May 2003 I was a member of a Laidley fours team which travelled to Norfolk Island to take part in the Bounty Bowls tournament - we made the quarter finals.

In 1991, while still at the College, I was offered the job of local correspondent for the Ipswich-based newspaper *The Queensland Times*. Although the pay was minimal, this was a pretty good job that involved covering everything from local council meetings, baby shows and the weekend football roundup.

After nineteen years and shortly after my 55th birthday, I decided to take the superannuation and run. By then the College had become part of the University of Queensland following an initiative of Education Minister John Dawkins who, in his final act

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of bastardry before resigning from federal politics, decreed that all tertiary education facilities with fewer than two thousand students would no longer receive federal funding. Big Brother moved in and took over; things were never going to be the same again. I then devoted my time to writing and, in addition to the items for the *QT*, wrote a number of stories for a variety of publications, mainly to do with train travel. Over the years Queensland Rail have given me several freebies on their trains to write promotional material for them; the most recent being a dash to Cairns and back on their new Tilt Train.

In 1996 I had the bright idea of travelling around the world entirely by a series of trains (except for those big watery bits, of course). Shar and I carried out the actual trip a year later and the journey resulted in a book entitled *The Runaway Rattler* which was published in 2000. That exercise may also have set another world record which I have not bothered to check; part of the journey involved an unbroken rail trip of some 16,000 kilometres from Scotland to Vietnam - made possible since the opening of the Channel Tunnel.

You'll have to buy a copy of the book if you want to know any more about such things as a late night phone call in a Siberian hotel asking me if I wanted to join the Russian Guild. I became rather excited at being offered such an honour, but became even more excited still when I eventually realised that I was being asked if I wanted to enjoy a Russian "gill". Or being refused entry into Vietnam from China at a godforsaken border post called Dong Dang until a suitable bribe was coughed up.

I was also co-opted ("conned" might be a better word) in 1999 to write a history of the Salvation Army in the Lockyer Valley. My most recent work is a book entitled *Murder in the Rain*, published in November 2003, which tells the tale of a murder committed near Laidley in 1933. In January 2003 I received the Laidley Shire's Australia Day Senior Cultural Award for my literary efforts. Can you imagine the words "Nicholls" and "culture" occurring in the one sentence?

Our son Robert is an officer in the Salvation Army stationed in Canberra where he is involved with the Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Centre at Fyshwick (I've asked him to put a bed aside for me). Daughter Amber is living with her husband Scott at Tanah Merah south of Brisbane where she works as a pharmacy assistant. So far, neither of our offspring have seen the need to produce grandchildren.

Declaring myself to be a freelance writer, my life now seems to revolve around travelling and writing stories. A great life and also a bit of a lurk - the travel is regarded as research, and can be claimed as a tax deduction. In this way we have visited places like Gallipoli, the Zulu battlefields in South Africa, Switzerland, Venice, Odessa and Yalta on the Black Sea and Sabah, as well as making several trips around the United States and many return visits to Thailand. All that needs to be done when I get home is write a story about it!

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L to R : Denovan, me, McEvoy and Coleman.
New Years eve Darwin 1958

CAMPUS NEWS

Campus News is published twice each month by The University of Queensland Gatton College

Farewell to Jim Nicholls

A great many Gatton College staff turned out to farewell Jim Nicholls on Friday 8 October and there were many nice things said about "the friendly face in Administration"; "the neat and tidy gentleman"; "the man to ask for helpful

advice".

Jim Nicholls has been at Gatton College since 6 January 1975. He started as an administration liaison officer in the days when the Foundation Building was the administration centre. He stayed two



The young Jim Nicholls in 1975.

years in general administration before moving on to Academic Services and then to External Studies.

Jim is leaving Gatton College but not to live the life of a retired gentleman. He is starting a new career. Jim has been a feature writer for the Valley Times for some time and wants to expand his experience as a journalist and writer. In his speech Jim said he was not sure if he was doing the right thing, especially having recently moved into his new office but he felt that if he didn't make the move now he would regret it in a few years time. At present Jim is sorry to be leaving so many Gatton College friends.



The "mature" Jim with wife Char, daughter Amber and son Robert.