

Leo Pike—A216407—Armament Fitter

Well, 50 years on and doesn't time fly when you're having fun!

Hi, fellow Mangoes! This potted history is written by William John Pike, known these days to all and sundry as “Leo” - my preferred first name. Unlike most of you who completed your time in the RAAF in your original trade, I did not. In fact, as an ARMFITT (read “aerospace ordnance technician”), I completed only three years post-graduation in the mustering. The medico’s caught up with me and, because of a significant hearing loss, I was deemed “unfit for the duties of my mustering” and given the choice of discharge or remuster. I chose to stay and became a CLKA, rising to the exalted rank of corporal in 1964. Two years later I applied for a commission in the administration branch and, despite having to fight for a medical and educational waiver, I was commissioned as a pilot officer administration in January 1966.

My first admin posting was to 34 Squadron in Canberra, which I found to be most enjoyable and extremely educational. Observing politicians and other VIPs at reasonably close quarters really opened my eyes. Some were arrogant and full of self-importance, while others were quite approachable and willing to chat with the plebs. I had some dealings with Garry Gent when he was ADC to the governor-general in scheduling VIP flights for his master. The opportunities arose from time to time to take various trips as supernumerary crew (imprest holder, generally) with such notables as Malcolm Fraser, Minister for Army, to PNG and the Solomon Islands. While in Wewak in PNG, I briefly bumped into Al Perry, who was then a Caribou pilot. At Port Moresby our Convair 440 Metropolitan caught fire (carby overflow) while running up for take off. This later entailed an engine change. Other trips included New Zealand, most of Australia, and a whistlestop tour with Billy Sneddon (Minister for Immigration) involving naturalisation ceremonies in western NSW and Victoria. That trip introduced me to the evils of over indulgence in red wine. The consequent hangover was one which, I assure you, I will never, ever, forget!

A memorable part of my tour with 34 Squadron was involvement in the Harold Holt tragedy and the subsequent memorial service. On 17 December 1967, I received a phone call from Tony Eggleston (secretary to PM Holt) asking that an aircraft be tasked to take Dame Zara Holt to Melbourne as the PM was “missing”. Subsequently, a Mystere 20 (Falcon) was provided and together with the acting CO and the PM’s personal pilot (the former CO) I joined the crew as a “flight steward”. We then flew to Essendon and, on arrival, the photograph taken by the *Melbourne Sun* of Dame Zara disembarking identified the chap saluting her as a “Commonwealth driver”. Jeez, was I miffed. Later we flew to Mangalore to pick up the acting PM, Mr McEwan, and returned him to Canberra, so it was a rather hectic flying day for all concerned. But wait, there’s more!

The squadron pilots were a canny lot and had exited Canberra over the Christmas/New Year reduced activity period, and at least half were unable to be contacted. Hence, when it was announced that a memorial service for Mr Holt was to be held on 21 December 1967, some established VIP procedures had to be ignored and, with Mr McEwan’s blessing, ad-hoc staffing implemented. As a result, I found myself as the squadron operations and tasking officer and later, on four flights in a HS748 aircraft, as “copilot” and (when airborne) steward, with Squadron Leader Keith Munday as captain.

My copilot skills (or lack of) became evident when I nearly creamed a hangar at Mascot, blissfully unaware of the sensitivity of the nose wheel steering delegated to me by the captain (he was busy fixing the aircraft pennant). I also managed to inflict some short-term, but painful, damage to the ears of the VIP passengers when I over-enthusiastically operated the dump valve on landing. However, after managing not to stuff up reading the check lists and successfully operating flap settings, I was forgiven. When airborne, my real talents revealed themselves: serving tea, coffee and biscuits to the VIPs. Although, stern looks came

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my way when I failed to make the first offer to the senior foreign delegate. Clearly, diplomacy was not my forte!

That type of stopgap manning prevailed on all of our aircraft. Two Viscounts, two Convair 440 Metropolitans, three Mystere 20s, and two HS748 aircraft were tasked to provide shuttle services between Mascot, Canberra and Melbourne for the period 20-22 December without any major unserviceabilities arising, and with a weird assortment of ad-hoc crews. The ground personnel, very seriously depleted in numbers, were magnificent and worked very long hours without complaint. It was probably the only time in its modern history that the otherwise much-maligned VIP Squadron really earned its stripes. I was indeed proud to be part of 34 Squadron at that time.

The RAAF treated me very well in subsequent postings, most of which I had indicated as first or second preferences on my annual reports. AdminO of Officers Training School, Point Cook was probably the exception preference-wise. On moving to the Point, however, my engagement to a very lovely lady ended, as she could not leave Canberra and her critically ill father. That's life I guess and, as it was my fourth attempt to find a partner, I realised I was doomed to remain a bachelor. Sadly I still am.

My next posting was to Base Squadron Butterworth as area welfare and recreational officer, during which time I toured, by hitchhiking, Vietnam units at Vung Tau, Saigon and Phan Rang. I also supervised the rebuilding of the Butterworth officers mess bar. Then off to HQOC as Medical AdminO (where I rebuilt the officers mess bar), and two years later to RAAF Recruiting Office, Townsville (where I installed a staff bar). Each of these were enjoyable in their own way, but more importantly provided me with a wealth of diversified administrative experience; and experience in bar building.

While at Recruiting Townsville, somebody "down there" thought I could handle higher rank and I was promoted to squadron leader in January 1975. I was moved "sideways" to Base Squadron Townsville as senior AdminO and also assumed the role of deputy CO. Later I "won" the secondary appointment as president of the officers mess (and resident tippler), during which time I helped renovate the mess bar. I enjoyed this posting, but had several disappointing experiences which led me to query the competency of my superiors and fostered within me a mounting disillusionment with the RAAF hierarchy.

My final posting as Command personnel officer (airmen) at HQSC was, of itself, quite rewarding. However, frustration was the norm when trying to get Air Force Office to come to the party on matters of relief manning for units, proper compassionate consideration of members' needs, and a plethora of other personnel management problems. Les Bunn and I were jointly able to overcome a serious manning problem within his technical spares assessing (TSA) area, as well as jointly enjoying the treats of the mess and other spiritual dispensing agencies. The bar of HQSC did not require renovating so we decorated it instead with our miserable bodies. I retired from the RAAF in April 1979, after twenty-five years and three months of (mainly) enjoyable service.

The next move was to see if I could succeed in civilian life as a restaurateur. I formed a partnership with a younger RAAF EngO (we were known by some as "the odd couple") and proceeded to convert some old Queensland holiday flats in Maroochydore into an eighty-seat a la carte restaurant, which we named The Tudor Inn, in keeping with the decor. Opening night was an absolute disaster! The electrician had incorrectly wired the dishwasher so it sucked instead of blew, the "chef" we hired turned every steak into charcoal, and the casual staff mixed up orders and spilled drinks on patrons. With a full house that night, we certainly didn't need those hiccups. We closed for two days to educate the "chef" on how to cook steaks and the staff on how to take orders and deliver top service. Once these problems were overcome, we enjoyed a good reputation and had a good regular clientele. By the way, I built and ran the bar!

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On two occasions, we had “RAAF reunion” nights and attracted up to eighty ex-members each time, from AVMs to ACs, with a great night (ten dollars per head for all they could eat with beer and wine) being had by all! We also had some popular theme nights, such as “roaring twenties night”, all of which were well patronised. Our elderly pianola proved a hit, as did my barely acceptable impersonation of Al Jolson and my partner’s horrendous rendition of Tiny Tim numbers. Encores were the norm and lasted till the wee small hours.

After two years of working sixteen-hour days, we sold the property to a developer for a decent profit and I retired. My partner, however, found work with the RAAF Reserve and later returned to the PAF to complete his twenty years. We remain the best of mates to this day, and he and his wife and kids have become my de facto “family”. In fact, the kids call me “Pop”!

My next three years were spent in limbo with a debilitating neurological disorder, causing some memory loss, left-sided mobility problems and extreme fatigue. The specialists could not confirm a diagnosis at the time and it was thought that I had contracted encephalitis. Anyway, I eventually recovered enough to relocate to Melbourne and re-enter the workforce. At forty-nine it was tough and, coupled with the lack of tertiary qualifications, I was left with few employment choices. So, after a year or so doing handyman jobs (building bars), I sat for the Public Service exams and the very next day was offered a position at ARL Fishermen’s Bend, starting once again at the bottom as a clerk administration class-one. Keeping my eye on the Gazette, however, bore fruit and nine months later I won a position as a clerk administration class-six in Canberra as an investigation officer in the Defence Department’s Defence Force Ombudsman (DFO) cell. I took up this position in March 1987.

As I believed that the DFO cell’s functions were more relevant to the Defence Force, rather than the civilian element of Defence, I lobbied to have the cell transferred to HQADF under the assistant chief of personnel. This was done in 1989 and for the next four years I acted as the interface between DFO’s office and the ADF on complaints lodged by serving and ex-service personnel. My final four years with HQADF were spent investigating redresses of grievance lodged by officers and warrant officers: that is, those which had been rejected by their individual service chiefs. This position entailed extensive investigation of the members’ complaint, writing briefs for CDF and drafting appropriate responses for his signature. Curiously, I estimate that in at least sixty percent of cases I recommended to the CDF that the decisions of the service chiefs be overturned and that redress be granted to the complainants. I found this job to be the most rewarding and enjoyable administrative post I have ever held and I really felt that I had finally found my niche.

As mentioned earlier, I suffered a severe neurological disorder in 1981 and this reactivated itself on several occasions over the years but, thankfully, with reasonably lengthy periods of remission after each episode. In 1997, however, the “beast” returned with a vengeance and it was only then that I had a first-class GP who ordered extensive investigations into the problem. Subsequently, a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis (MS) was made and later confirmed by a Melbourne professor. At this point I decided it was affecting my work to such a degree that I just wasn’t “putting-in”, and decided that, at sixty, with a DFRB pension and a commonwealth pension, it was time to retire. Thus, in February 1998 I retired to my present home in Rosebud, Victoria and now indulge my passions of woodworking (I built two more bars), gardening, golf (with a cart of course), maintaining my model car collection, while admiring the view over Port Phillip Bay. Fortunately, my MS is relatively mild and I can get around with a stick or, when shopping or on reasonably long walks, with the aid of a wheeled walker. Les and Gwen Bunn visited me in 2001 and Les kindly pushed me around the Avalon Air show in a rented wheelchair. I was not the least embarrassed by this but was later a sorry sight with a shocking case of sunburn, as Les will confirm. Generally, my health is quite good (no blood pressure or diabetic problems), but other niggling problems have

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“earned” me the DVA Gold Card (EDA) which helps pay the bills.

During Les’s visit, and later when Kev and Robyn Stapleton visited, reunion lunches were organised at Arthur’s Seat restaurant with other ex-Mangoes. Warren Coops, Butch Ward, Tom Carlyon, Doug Patterson, Bill Belton and Rod Mackenzie were among those attending. Visits were also welcome by Tom and Noelene Scutts and Mick and Carole Scrace. As I have two spare double bedrooms, visitors are most welcome - with ample notice of course so that I can get the bobcat in and tidy the place up a bit.

In summary, I can say I really enjoyed the camaraderie we had at Wagga and indeed feel privileged to attend the fiftieth anniversary to renew friendships. I wish you all a long and healthy life. Cheers!

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PS: One week after receiving this story, Leo was diagnosed with lung cancer. He has subsequently had an operation to remove part of one lung. Despite this he is determined to be at the fiftieth Mango reunion. Best wishes for the future, Leo. (Kevin S,10Dec03)

MANGO SCRAPBOOK IMAGES



Hut 108 outside cleanup! L to R : McGuigan, Stapleton, Giffin, Pointon, Squire, Max Morrow (*hut NCO*), Dodds, Garrett(Red) and Morris behind.