

Peter Smith—A216415—Electrical Fitter

The further adventures of Smith P.G.

After the mandatory postgraduate year at 2AD, I joined 36 Squadron at Fairbairn, working on Dakotas. This gave opportunities for some great trips including an engine change rescue to Coolangatta, (the marriedies told their mums it was at Oodnadatta) which looked like being the longest engine change on record until the CO flew in and read us the riot act, a detachment to Momote on Manus Island to close down the RAAF radio station, and numerous trips to the Barossa Valley to top up the various mess wine cellars. Being too junior to go with the squadron to the USA to pick up the A-model Hercules, I went instead with the advance party to Richmond to prepare for their arrival.

The introduction of a new aircraft is never easy and we had our moments with the Herc before getting it tamed. While at Richmond I started night school at Granville Tech to get the leaving certificate maths that I had bombed in the Boffin Flight at Wagga. My aim at this stage was to get into aircrew, but the goalposts for entry kept constantly changing. I finally got my ticket stamped by the EdO when I manage to reel off, without hesitation, Newton's laws of motion (I'd heard he had a thing about Newton, so had swotted up on spec). After more than a year of administrative battles, aptitude and psych tests, knockbacks, interviews and medical examinations requiring great perseverance, I finally got to the selection board at Rushcutters Bay to compete against the civvies who walked in off the street. Miraculously, I was selected for No 38 Pilots Course which started in January 1960, six years to the day after we started at Wagga.

Due to an administrative cock-up, I arrived at Point Cook a week early, so spent my first week on pilots course digging the gardens around BFTS HQ. The pressure was on right from the start. The requirements were simple - pass all academic exams with an overall average of sixty percent, and reach the required standard in all other activities within the time allowed. To make matters worse, a decision was taken that all pilots would henceforth be commissioned officers, so an officer training course had to be included in the curriculum without a change in timeframe. Meeting these requirements required constant application and the burning of lots of midnight oil. Assessment was strict and continuous (except on Friday nights, when we could open our little bar in the Cadets Club and let off some steam). Any shortcoming resulted in being immediately scrubbed from the course and sent off the base the same day.

After completing the ground training phase we began basic flying at Point Cook in midwinter on Winjeels. Thanks to being allocated to an excellent experienced instructor, I had no great difficulties, except on my final handling test with the CO when he became violently ill. Terrified, I got him back to earth very quickly. Apparently the cause was not my flying but a ruptured ulcer. Despite my protestations, I had to refly my FHT, and so was the last to finish basic.

We then went to Pearce for a Vampire conversion and the applied flying phase. I had some difficulty going solo in the Vampire but finally succeeded after a change of instructor. 38 Course was the last course to do dive bombing and gunnery on course, and I particularly enjoyed this phase. In what my instructor termed an "act of gross overconfidence", I ignored his advice and indicated a first preference for fighter flying in the wild hope that a boyhood dream could be realised.

On 28 April 1961 I was presented with my wings and commissioned into the General Duties Branch, one of the twelve survivors of the twenty-eight hopefuls who began the journey sixteen months earlier. To my complete amazement and total delight, I was posted off course to 76 Squadron at Williamtown. The sixties was a great decade to be a fighter pilot in the RAAF; flying hours were plentiful and flying regulations were a lot less restrictive than they are today. There were two fighter squadrons overseas at Butterworth

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and plenty of exercise deployments around Australia, so there were many opportunities for travel. The majority of the pilots at Williamtown were single and lived in, making life in the Officers Mess very spirited and most enjoyable.

76 Squadron, a Vampire squadron, was in the process of re-equipping with Sabres when I arrived and for a while operated both types. The day finally came when the remaining Vampires were transferred to OCU, and those of us not Sabre-qualified went with them. We formed the nucleus of what was to become Vampire Weapons Flight, doing all sorts of odd jobs. One of mine was to ferry a Vampire from Williamtown to Darwin to act as a calibration aircraft for the Darwin radar. In the course of this transit, I flew the first jet aircraft ever into Daly Waters airfield. In due course I completed the Sabre OCU and returned to 76 Squadron.

The Sabre was a great pilot's aeroplane and I really enjoyed flying it for a living. It was almost a shame to take the money! In those days some of the squadron executive duties were performed by pilots as secondary appointments, and in succession I became engineering officer and then adjutant - all good training for a young officer. After two and a half years my first tour ended and I was sent to East Sale to do the advanced navigation course as a prerequisite to taking up the post of wing navigation officer at 78 Wing in Butterworth.

Life in Butterworth was very comfortable. Part of my job was to manage the transfer of aircraft and pilots to 79 Squadron in Ubon, so I ended up spending the next two Christmases there to relieve one of the married blokes. "Konfrontasi" with Indonesia put an end to our lazy life, requiring a continuous air defence alert and additional detachments to Singapore and Borneo. While in Butterworth I met my wife, Margaret, who was a RAAF nursing sister involved in the aero medical evacuation of casualties from Vietnam. After almost three years overseas, I was posted back to Williamtown to convert onto Mirages.

The Mirage marked a major transition as far as fighter pilots were concerned. Firstly, we now had an all-weather capability and secondly, we were operating a weapons system rather than just flying an aircraft. A lot of concentration was required and at times the cockpit workload was extremely high. After conversion I went back to 76 again - my third posting there on three different aircraft types. With the introduction of the Ground Attack Mirage I went back to OCU for a ground attack course then found myself posted to 3 Squadron, which was then just reforming after giving up its Sabres.

In October 1967 I was one of three fighter pilots posted to Vietnam to fly with the USAF as an airborne forward air controller. So, almost overnight, I went from a supersonic Mirage to a Cessna O-1 Bird Dog which was flat out at ninety-five knots. Our job was to find and mark targets, then control the attacking fighters onto them. At times this could become a bit dangerous, particularly when troops on the ground were in contact with the enemy and required urgent help. It is a matter of personal satisfaction to me that, because I was able to assist, there are many soldiers who are now at home with their families rather than being names on a memorial. For one of these engagements I was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. After 284 combat missions I finished my operational tour and returned to 3 Squadron.

Shortly after my return from Vietnam, I found myself back at OCU for the fighter combat instructor (FCI) course. As the fighter pilot's university this course was undoubtedly the hardest of my RAAF career, both academically and flying wise. As a "reward" for becoming a Top Gun, I spent the next year instructing on Mirage courses before joining 77 Squadron as squadron FCI. Promotion bought another posting, this time back to 76 Squadron as B Flight commander. At the end of 1972 my fantastic run came to an end. In just on twelve years in fighters I had gone from pilot officer to squadron leader and from a new pilot to a category-A FCI.

The body snatchers found me a ground job in the Joint Warfare Cell at Headquarters

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Operational Command. The main function of the JW Cell was to organise and control the participation of RAAF operational units in joint exercises. We were frequently deployed into the bush on Army exercises and came to know the Shoalwater Bay training area intimately. A second task was to be the RAAF representative on the writing team for the original series of Joint Service Publications.

After four years as a staff officer, the system decided I'd better learn how to be one, so sent me off the RAAF Staff College at Fairbairn. When RSC finished, I knew I was out of sync for command of a fighter squadron, so wrote as my preference for next employment, "CO ANY flying squadron". To my complete amazement I found myself posted to command a transport squadron.

No 38 Squadron was based at Richmond flying Caribou aircraft and at the time I took over had five separate detachments ranging from PNG through WA to India /Pakistan. It was to be a full year before I caught up with all those under my command. The Caribou was a great aircraft for its role and I enjoyed flying it. My predecessor had left the unit in excellent shape, so in the command line I only had to continue on from where he left off. The two years in command were most enjoyable and went far too quickly.

My "joint" background now worked against me and I was posted to be the RAAF member on the directing staff of the Army Staff College at Queenscliff, Victoria. I don't know how the students went, but I certainly learned a lot. I also managed to subvert three cohorts of the Army's future leadership into seeing the inherent capabilities of air power. I could have done without the third year at Queenscliff, but Margaret and the kids just loved it and I had to put down a mutiny when the time to go finally came.

Another joint posting, this time as the joint warfare officer in the Directorate of Air Force Plans, Department of Air, Canberra. I found DefAir soul destroying and not a fit place for a proper airman. Fortunately my tenure was not long. After nine months I was interviewed for the post of Defence Attaché, Kuala Lumpur and was successful in selection. Then followed in quick succession an attaches course and a colloquial Malay course at the School of Languages, and we were off Qantas business class to KL, arriving mid 1984.

Life on the diplomatic cocktail circuit is very comfortable but can be wearing. The Defence Cooperation Program required a huge effort to keep on the rails, and the handover of RAAF Base Butterworth to the Malaysians was not without its problems. I found it a bit galling to be tactful all the time, particularly when I knew that the RMAF was determined to take us to the cleaners. Our three years in KL sped by and my replacement was posted in, but I didn't have a job to go to. The outgoing CDF visited KL on his farewell calls and during a dinner in his honour asked me where I wanted to go. I told him, and within a week of his return to Australia I had my preferred posting to be OC Townsville.

OC Townsville wore two other hats as commander Tactical Transport Group and commander of the air component of the Operational Deployment Force. With five flying squadrons, ATTU and the ADGs under command, TTG was the largest command in the RAAF in terms of men, equipment and aircraft. The decision to transfer the battlefield helicopters to the Army, taken against all professional advice, came at the end of my first year in command and gave me eighteen months of heartache managing the handover and trying to resolve the ensuing personnel, administrative and operational problems. During this period I began to lose confidence in the higher leadership of the RAAF and was contemplating resignation. In 1989 a further decision to cut 121 senior officer appointments from the Defence Force virtually put paid to any promotion prospects, so when I was offered an early retirement without pension penalty and with a bonus, I could hardly sign the paper quickly enough. I was placed on the retired list on 1 February 1990 after thirty-six years service and became a civilian for the first time in my adult life.

Apart from a contracted consultancy job for Chevron Oil soon after retirement, I have been

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a self-funded retiree since, thanks to the DFRB. I am active in ex-service and charity organizations, having served on the board of management of Brisbane Legacy for the past eleven years, including two years as president. For four years I was a director of the RSL (Qld) War Veterans Homes and have served as president of the North Brisbane branch of the RAAF Association. The little spare time left over is devoted to slowly (very slowly) renovating our house at Gaythorne in Brisbane. Our three adult children have flown the nest: daughter Katrina a lawyer in Brisbane, daughter Tara an occupational therapist in the UK and son Toby studying multimedia, also in Brisbane.

I was born in Coffs Harbour and look forward to returning there for our fiftieth.

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My mummy sold me to the Air Force



This won't hurt a bit



What time does the bar open?

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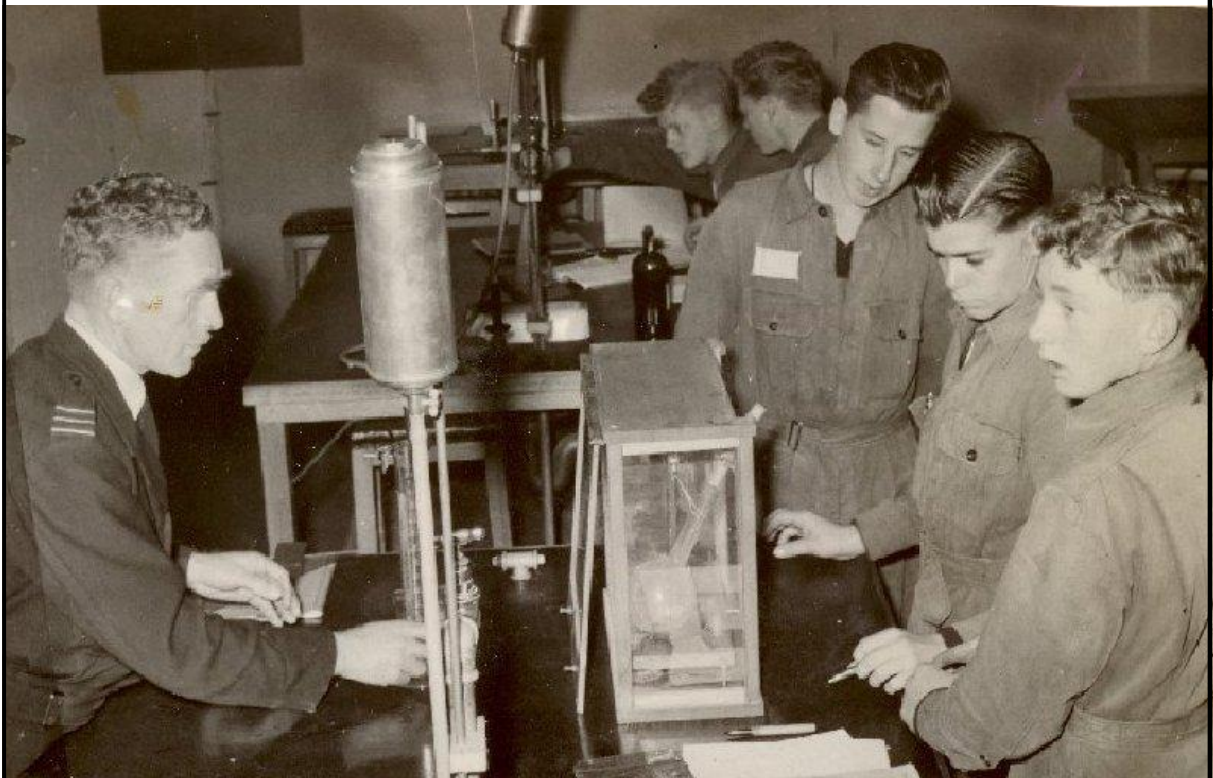


If I shoot a hole in this tyre....



My wife takes macramé lessons

MANGO SCRAPBOOK IMAGES



Boffin course physics group. Wing Commander Staines with L to R : Morris and Morrow in background. McKenny, Stapleton and Smith P G in foreground.