

Kevin Stapleton—A14416—Armament Fitter

I arrived at Wagga Wagga, a quiet shy country boy from Gympie, Queensland not knowing what to expect. However, I had the feeling that anything must be more interesting than the farm routine of rounding up the cows at four-thirty am every morning for milking. It didn't take long to fall into the new routine of Air Force life - made easier because all fellow apprentices were going through the same learning experience. The strongest memories of fellow apprentices are of the Hut 108 occupants, armament fitter course and Boffin flight group. Hut 108 apprentices were mainly from Queensland or northern NSW. 108 group included Hooks Malone, Red Garrett, Ted Gilbert (dec.), Doc Bayfield, Tubby Squire, Barry Jacka, Dave Menzies, Dave Dodds, Ron McGuigan, Curly Morris, Dave Pointon and Bill Heins with Max Morrow as hut NCO. I still have a quiet laugh about memories of some of the goings on of that group and the others.

Being originally from Queensland, my after-Wagga Wagga life started with a posting to 3AD Amberley. The work was principally servicing Lincoln gun turrets. One day I did manage to have a flight in a Lincoln to test fire the rear turret off the eastern seaward side of Stradbroke Island. The most memorable and frightening thing about this flight was the landing. As the pilot gunned the four engines at the top of the bounce after a severe landing I was shocked to hear the pilot say (to the copilot), "I thought you had taken over the controls." I sweated out the circuit analyzing how to get out if it crashed and wondering how much experience the pilots really had. On a successful landing the aircraft was grounded until a full inspection of the undercarriage could be made. This was also the year I purchased my first car: a Renault Dauphine (I never bought another French car!). On the base a workshop was available where airmen were permitted to work on their cars after hours. While a group of us were reconditioning a Ford Consul one evening, I remember how we were all called outside to view the first Sputnik travel across the night sky.

The following year was spent at Williamtown on Sabres in preparation for a posting to Malaya. Being in the first group at Butterworth, Malaya was the most exciting part of my Air Force career. Everyone knew they were together for a minimum period of two years. This seemed to bond all into highly efficient squadron teams and many strong friendships were formed. As a single person I was involved in many sporting activities and represented the Air Force in rugby union, tennis and hockey. Our base hockey team also managed to win the North Malaya premiership by beating the Indian Association team which up till that time had a ten-year mortgage on the title. In Malaya I also practiced Ju Jitsu and attained a second Dan black belt prior to leaving.

I returned to work on Canberras at Amberley in 1961 and continued with rugby union playing for Souths in the Brisbane competition. That year I achieved the reserve grade "best back" award. The following year saw me at Laverton for a six months electronics course. It was here that I met Vania whom I married in September 1962. After the electronics course and marriage my posting in 1963 was to Kingswood Central Ammunition Depot. Work involved use of my new electronic course skills on acoustic homing torpedoes and helping setup the Sidewinder missile repair facility.

After my marriage I started to look at the Air Force differently. We had purchased our first house at Penrith. Our first child was born in August 1963 (my God, he's forty!- how time flies). It was time to reassess my career future. I often visited the drafting office in the engineering workshop on the base to have building and other modifications drawn up related to setting up the new Sidewinder repair facility. Because there was such a backlog of drafting work I was allowed use of a drawing board one day a week (when the draftsman was on a TAFE course) to draft work related to the Sidewinder project. I began to investigate drafting courses that might have good job prospects on discharge and set goals to make it happen.

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I commenced a four-year night time architectural drafting certificate course at Sydney Technical College in 1965. However early in 1968 (after three years of the course) my course goal seemed to vaporise when I received a posting to Darwin to the Bloodhound ground to air missile squadron. The next day I submitted an application for deferment of the posting principally on the basis that our fourth child was due in March and my wife was advised not to travel to Darwin at that late stage of the pregnancy. In no time I received a refusal. At this point I was contemplating a discharge application (however I suspected it would be refused). It was then suggested to me that my wife write a letter including all the facts and send it to the Minister for Air requesting he look into cancelling the posting. Within about two weeks my wife received a letter back from the Minister assuring her that I did not have to go to Darwin at least until the Minister had further discussions. Meanwhile with the posting date growing closer I still hadn't received any official notification. With less than a week to go I was called to the adjutant's office one afternoon. He informed me I didn't have to go on the date nominated and then said, "I know you put your wife up to this letter writing. You will eventually be going. We view this matter seriously and I can say that your prospects for promotion are now greatly reduced! You are dismissed."

Those words were irrelevant when approximately one year on (still at Kingswood and in my last year of the drafting course) I was called before the same adjutant to be given my sergeants stripes. What's more he had to read part of a letter from the RAAF Printing Unit which stated: "The Sidewinder maintenance manuals have been the best assembled and presented documentation this unit has received and we believe the author should be considered for promotion." I walked out of that office with the greatest feeling of satisfaction in my Air Force career.

January 1969 saw me walking around Richmond with fellow Mango Ken Davies completing all the discharge formalities. With the architectural drafting certificate behind me I had no problem getting a drafting job in a St Ives architects office starting work the following Monday. This office principally worked on sports and services clubs. At the same time as starting work I applied for entry into the six-year architecture course at NSW Institute of Technology. This course involved attendance one full day and evening per week and allowed me to earn a four-day week income which supported the family. Whilst it was hard work I could see that six years was still going to pass regardless, so why not give it a go! On commencing the course it became obvious to me that my practical engineering and drafting course experience put me on equivalent footing with the sharp young school leavers. With ten percent of the course consisting of mature-age students there was a great course skills mix. A most unusual coincidence occurred on the first day of that course in 1969 when a fellow Gympie (my original home town) school student whom I had last seen in 1953 turned up to start the same architecture course.

My architecture course went smoothly until I and a third of the course failed fourth year. It turned out to be a NSW Architects Board political decision to reduce the number of students graduating and at that time was controversial news. Because I now had a wife and five children to support I, along with six others, decided to move interstate to finish the course. It was a good decision as I completed the remainder of the course in Queensland with credit whilst at the same time was made an associate director of the architectural firm I worked for. Most failed fellow students who remained in NSW failed again the next year or gave up the course. I was finally registered as an architect in Queensland at the age of thirty-nine in 1976. We had lived in Sydney and Brisbane whilst I worked with various architectural offices when in 1979 we moved to Melbourne for my wife to be closer to her mother who lived there. By now I was quite experienced with large office and shopping centre work where my skills were in managing teams and the documentation program. One project was Chatswood Chase (Sydney) shopping centre. This entailed winning three court appearances

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defending architectural aspects of the proposal prior to project start. During construction phase it was a full one-day meeting a week in Sydney with first morning aircraft from and last night aircraft to Melbourne. For the opening in Easter 1983 my wife and I were treated to a stay at the Regent, Sydney. It was during this overstay that Vania became quite ill and suffered severe headaches.

On return to Melbourne Vania's voice changed and she was referred to a throat specialist who suspected laryngitis. However because she had previously been treated for breast cancer she was referred back to the original cancer specialist. We were both shocked to find out that she had significant secondary cancers in the lungs (pressing against the voice tube) and the brain. She was given no option except that she must immediately have a course of chemotherapy! This was devastating to an attractive woman and mother of five who not only lost all her long hair, but her looks changed significantly with puffed out cheeks caused by the drug treatment. After more than six months of this treatment we were called into the hospital one afternoon for a conference with the specialists to be told, "Sorry there is nothing more we can medically do for Vania. We will support her with pain killing drugs and palliative care as she requires it. However, we suggest it is best if you take care of her at home."

Vania remained at home for the last six weeks and only returned to hospital for the last twenty-four hours before her death on 31 December 1983 at the age of forty.

This was an extremely difficult time after Vania's death with the realisation that she would not be around to share the future and see our children grow and travel through life. The eldest, Shaun was twenty whilst the youngest, Tigean was eleven at that time. I was not to know then we would also lose our son Michael at age twenty-five in a motorcycle accident later in 1991. These were the most traumatic times in our family, however, to lose a sibling suddenly without them realising their potential in life and no chance to say good-bye was the most difficult.

In 1985 I married Robyn whom I had known as my best friend Warren's wife. Warren Hodges had also come from Gympie and we first met at RAAF Williamstown in 1958. He was a radio tech in the Air Force and we played rugby union and tennis together when we moved to Butterworth, Malaya. On return to Australia, Warren was to go to France on the Mirages, however he decided to leave the Air Force. He joined Honeywell computers and quickly moved up the computer ladder so that at the time of his death at forty-one from acute leukemia in 1979 he was the Australian manager of ICL Computers. Robyn had two boys who were around the same age as my youngest. Whilst both families had lived in different cities we kept in touch. At one time in the last weeks of Vania's life she told me that I should seriously think of marrying again after she died and without hesitating she then said, "I think Robyn is a very nice person and you should think about marrying her." I was totally consumed with the present at the time and dismissed it because I couldn't accept Vania's imminent death. I now know Vania had terrific courage at that time to be thinking about my future and not her predicament. Also, she had insight in knowing she had at least sown that thought seed in my mind for the future.

Prior to our marriage Robyn was also diagnosed with breast cancer. Whilst this was devastating news Robyn (even though she was a nurse) had established strong beliefs in alternative treatments after witnessing Warren's and Vania's deterioration in their quality of life. Also, she has had the strength to follow through her beliefs to this day despite disdain from several medical specialists along the way. It hasn't been plain sailing with several reoccurrences over time. However, Robyn has maintained a quality of life over the now nineteen years. Robyn was a terrific support to me at the time of Michael's death and our combined family became even closer.

I changed work direction in 1984 and with two others started a Computer Aided Drafting

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Bureau using a mainframe computer and workstations. After two years in Melbourne we moved back to Robyn's home in Sydney where a similar CAD Bureau was setup in Sydney. By 1988 we were in trouble with creditors when bureau users dropped off our service and purchased their own new, more powerful PCs. I then decided with the fellow directors to approach a bankruptcy specialist for advice options. Our meeting was with Max Donnelly of Ferrier Hodgson. After nervously working through all the company details with him he just leant back and said, "Don't worry about it. I can see you are honest and it will be a very straight forward bankruptcy application."

Then he went on, "Now, let me tell you about this fellow Christopher Skase I am dealing with ..."

I walked out of his office feeling that things weren't as bad as I thought. After a court hearing I was declared a bankrupt. The CAD system was sold to Civil and Civic, a major construction company and part of the deal was that I and the programmer go with the system for a minimum one-year contract. Our role was to introduce CAD documentation to the company. It turned out to be a lifeline to recovery and was the best business deal of my life. After three years I had paid the agreed court bankruptcy payments to creditors and was discharged as a bankrupt. I now worked back at what I had been best at: managing large architectural projects but with the added skill of setting up the project on CAD. A separate Lend Lease Design Group was formed which went from strength to strength. I had various roles in the group and at its peak I managed over eighty architectural staff. As each year progressed I would land another wage increase and bonus that often was embarrassing to me. The end result was that after eleven years at Lend Lease I completely reversed my bankruptcy status to that of a self-funded retiree in 1999.

What have I left behind? Some bricks and mortar projects I was closely involved in as an architect at Lend Lease Design Group were Cockle Bay Wharf and Darling Park office towers Sydney, Penrith Plaza shopping centre, Greensborough shopping centre Melbourne, Mater Hospital North Sydney and Sunshine Plaza shopping centre Maroochydore. In 1998 I travelled to London to report and make recommendations on the staffing and documentation program proposed by the English Architects and Engineers working on the \$1Billion Lend Lease Bluewater shopping project in Kent.

At about ten pm on the day I arrived in London, when in the Waldorf Hotel room, a bomb exploded directly outside the front of the building. It was an IRA bomb apparently set off accidentally by the carrier whilst traveling on a bus. At least two people and the bomber were killed. The scene was cordoned off for at least four days and we had to enter the hotel by the back door for that period.

So what were my outside family and work interests over the years? After Michael's death in 1991 I again took up motorcycling with the Ulysses Club. This move, I believe, greatly helped my grieving process. We travelled by motorcycle to Alice Springs, Tasmania (twice) and Toowoomba to the Ulysses Club's annual general meetings. It was on one of our weekend rides up near Newcastle that I met up with fellow Ulyssian, Mango and armourer, Tom Scutts.

In 1997 we hired a Honda Goldwing to travel around England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland in motorcycle luxury. I still have a 750 Honda VFR. Robyn and myself have walked the Annapurnas in Nepal, the Milford Track in New Zealand, and now that we live in the Blue Mountains all our walks have a view. I volunteered for the Sydney Olympics in 2000 and worked with visiting officials at the Hockey Stadium and during the Paralympics at the airport. I am involved with Bushcare and Landcare groups around Leura and with NPWS am a community representative looking at options for control of foxes in the mountains.

The Air Force apprenticeship experience was a youthful and timely awakening for me. Like everyone else I had to quickly learn to take responsibility for myself as my mother was no

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longer the fallback to wash, pick up or iron my clothes. (My wife still tells people my ironing is legendary!). At least that's something I learned that is still noticed. Thank God there is no more starching! However Air Force life was survivable because we were all in the same boat and there was always the comic who defused tense situations. I now look back on starting my working life with the Mango experience with great pride and something I would not want to have missed.

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Ready for Hockey 1956



With Tigean, John and Robyn at their wedding
December 2003 in Leura (maximum 8degreesC day)



My toy



Family Brisbane 1974 L to R : Shaun, Penny,
Kevin jnr. and snr, Tigean, Vania and Michael