RON CUTTEN – AIR FORCE YEARS 1940/1945

Early 1940 Eric Crisp, my next door neighbour, and I enlisted in the RAAF which meant we spent 9 months studying 21 booklets dealing with theory of flight navigation and combustion engines, but were not as yet in the Air Force.

Eric was in his early 30's and I was 20 (Eric's nickname from then on was Grand Pa). We started our training at Pearce ITS (initial training school) it was known as the Empire Air Training Scheme. The nine months prior to admission to ITS was spent studying under an approved tutor.

We survived a very vigorous medical examination – a lot went by the wayside, some were colour blind. If you couldn't tell the difference between red and green you were scrubbed.

ITS was designed (in retrospect) to weed you out if you couldn't take the discipline and of course it was very strict. Our course was the first to be moved from Pearce to Clontarf.

Clontarf was a huge mansion commandeered from the orphanage, it was situated in a prime position overlooking the Swan River.

All activities were done "at the double" or "on the march" – we were ACIIs the lowest form of any personnel in the Force. The corporals reigned supreme, the only bod over them was the WOD – Warrant Officer Disciplinary.

One stinking hot day our corporal matched us from one lecture to a space in front of the next drill exercise. We were lined up to attention looking straight down at the Swan river about 250 yards away. He gave the order "one pace forward all the good swimmers"; myself and one other idiot took the pace forward. "Right" he commanded "You two clean out the fish pond!" The fish pond was a huge ornate

affair with a dirty great statue in the middle of it. It took us all the morning and half the afternoon to complete. This was the one and only time I ever volunteered for anything in my 6 years service!

From Clontarf we went to EFTS (Elementary Flying Training School) at Cunderdin, which was a huge acerage of flat ground.

My instructor was an ex racing car driver and a very good bloke as well as a very good instructor.

As a child I made many model aircraft and new all the controls and what they did. As a result I took to the Tiger Moth very quickly, at the end of five and one half hours training with the instructor he landed, got out of the front cockpit and told me "Your'e OK you can fly solo". Well I was thrilled, and as every sprog wanted to be a fighter pilot I thought, here's my opportunity to demonstrate my extensive five and a half hours experience and show the instructors what I was made of. The instructors all had flight boxes, a small shed like structure about the size of an outside dunny. Well I took off held the Tiger down to dot feet and shot the joint up, did a circuit, came in did a terrific 3-pointer, taxied up to the instructors turned the motor off and waited, expectantly for the congratulations.

It didn't come about as I had thought, the instructor was a peculiar colour in the face, he instructed me to "Get out you stupid idiot, people with thousands of hours don't carry on like that". I still had my parachute on which is a large affair which you sit, on and not at all meant for normal activities. "Now walk the perimeter of the airfield and report back to me you stupid bastard!" he said.

I did exactly that every step I took, and there were thousands around the perimeter, I was bumped in the arse by the very heavy chute. After a couple of very

weary hours I reported to him as requested,. “Now you will report to the sergeants mess and peel spuds for the next fortnight after your flying instruction”.

Ernie Hickling was one of my companions on the course, but Ernie was very late to solo. He eventually took off on his own, but every time he made his final landing approach he went around again. After some 6 to 8 attempts I heard his instructor confide in his fellow instructors, “I think we may have to shoot Ernie down!”

Another fellow pupil was Alf Kyle, Alf came in with what could only be described as an unconventional landing, he landed arse up with the wheels in the air and Alf hanging by his straps looking at the deck. Ordinarily that would have been a scrubbo job (end of his flying days), but Alf’s brother was a wing commander in the RAF in the U.K. Alf was not scrubbed!

Before I leave EFTS I must mention an exercise nobody looked forward to. It was spins under the hood. The instructor was in the front cockpit, me the pupil in the back cockpit with a hood over you which completely put you apart from everything but the very basic instruments on the panel in front of you. The instructor took off and climbed to 10,000 feet then put the aircraft into a spin, either left or right, you had to then correct the situation which meant that if you were spinning left (port) you put the stick forward and applied opposite rudder, ie. right rudder, but under the hood it was a very eerie and vomit making effect, this was the closest I ever came to being air sick. Many students were made sick and, of course, had to clean up the effect, not an easy job in the confines of a rather tiny cockpit.

Another thing I remember about EFTS was a fellow pupil called James (I was best man at his wedding). We were doing a cross country solo Cunderdin – Wagin and another stop I don’t remember. We were in flight of 3 as we left Wagin we

passed James who acknowledged our presence by waving to us, he had set Red on Blue (not Red on Red) which meant he was 180degrees off course and he was on his own. None of the salient places identifiable became apparent to James, so he landed in a farm many miles in the arse up direction from where he should have been. He was eventually posted to Lancasters and was awarded the DFC. However to the course he was referred to as "wrong way James".

From EFTS Cunderdin along with many others I was posted to SFTS (Senior Flying Training School) at Geraldton. Avro Ansons and Air Speed Oxfords (twin engined mono-planes) were the aircraft we trained on.

The Avro Anson had a retractable undercart but it took 48 turns of a crank handle, situated next to the left hand seat, to wind them up. A bloody nuisance when you were flying solo which was most of the time.

We did a lot of instrument flying, the instructor would place a sort of hood over you when you were in the left hand seat which meant you were confined to the instrument panel and had to fly cross country on instruments alone. This training proved invaluable in later years, flying by the seat of your pants was and is absolute bull-shit

After we completed our SFTS training, both practical and theory, we were presented with our Wings at a special Wings Parade.

Initially I was to be posted to fly with the Americans in far north Queensland, but that did not eventuate. Instead I was posted to Townsville to 5 Communications Flight. The C/O was a Flight-Lieutenant. He was air crew but did no flying. The 'Flight' was Freddy Watt (my best mate in the Airforce), Ron Thomas, Wylf Mole, Mate McColl, Ted Wittle and myself. We had a motley lot of aircraft from Tiger Moths to Ansons and DH84s twin-engined byplanes. Ted Wittle flew the

Supermarine Amphibious Walrus, a byplain with floats and undercart with a Pegasis motor and a huge airscrew which was a pusher type behind the motor, quite an extaordinary aircraft to fly.

Wylf Mole was rostered to fly a Tiger to Cairns, we watched him take off but he was only just airborne when he did a real split-arse turn which is not in the book, landed downwind and leapt out of the Tiger, understandably so because he was sharing the small cockpit with a large snake!

Ron Thomas had to fly a DH84 with a payload of one cooking stove tied down in the passenger's compartment to an army camp west of Townsville, he took off and has not been found since. We assumed he may have experienced very rough weather and the stove probably came loose and may have bashed the kite to bits but we will never know.

I did a lot of flying between Townsville, Cairns, Cooktown, Jackie Jackie, Horn Island, Cohen, Laura and new the area very well so I was more than surprised to be asked to let Mate McColl fly Brigadeer Crawford to Cairns, as he had not flown the area before coming up from Brisbane.

A Brigadeer is quite a senior army type. The aircraft, a DH84, never made it. We spend over a week searching from the air around Cairns, but eventually the crosshed A/C was found by a ground party of the army. The Brigadeer was given a military funeral with the lot, slow marching and all.

The Christmas of 1941 I had to fly a DH84 with a load of Christmas food for the army detachment to Hugendorc. My briefing was to the effect that there was a large macadam strip just outside the town. I located the town OK, but could not find the strip anywhere. I did not have enough fuel to return to Townsville or Charters Towers the nearest strip, so I put down on a reasonable flat paddock as close to the

small town as I could and walked to the pub and contacted the army. The army drove out, got their gear and dropped me back to the pub. I sent a signal to Townsville and was left on my own. Back in the pub there was only one bloke in the bar apart from the barman. We had a drink and got talking, I mentioned I had lost my brother from 2 Squadron. He (Harry) was in the permanent airforce, a Warrant Officer, fitter armourer, air gunner. The bloke I was talking to said he had lost his brother too, it transpired his brother was the pilot of brother Harry's aircraft.

I stayed the night in the pub and had to somehow get the DH84 back to Townsville. I refuelled from a 44 gallon off the back of a truck, went back to the pub because it took two to start the motors, or – you had to swing the props. It turned out the bloke I had been talking to was a scrubbed pilot off a training course so he knew what to do and away I went after a fairly rough take-off run.

I was then required to fly to Weipa in the Gulf. There was no strip or air field but the missioner was a Scott and had his Aboriginal subjects clear the area to touch down. As it was the first aircraft they had ever seen on the ground, as soon as I taxied the kite to a stop and got out I was mobbed by the small children. They grabbed my arms and treated me like someone from god. I was touched by this obvious pleasure. That night the elders put on a corroboree in my honour. Looking back it was one of my proudest nights, with the performers acting out the aircraft landing.

Another of my jobs for 5 com. flight was to fly squadron officer Gwen Starkie around all the north Queensland RAAF bases where there were WAAF (Women Auxiliary Airforce) personnel. The aircraft was always the old Tiger Moth, she was a really good out scout. I say old, she must have been around 35 but that was ancient to a 20 year old. Another job I copped was to take a Mr Chandler, the manager of a large cattle station in the Gulf (Inverleigh) to inspect the fencing which would take a

couple of days. While in the area I put down on a clay pan at Karumba (which was a base for Catalinas), right at the bottom of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

One of the Cat squadron's ground staff was given special leave to visit his wife in hospital. The Catalina was taxing out on the water ready for take off. On board was Squadron Leader Angus, he was the canteen officer in charge of all supplies for the northern RAAF area. He was also about 25 stone, a huge man. The kite was signalled by Aldis lamp to hold its take off and the bloke with special leave was taken out on a crash boat (a very fast launch) and boarded the Cat which took off. But on landing at Townsville Harbour it nosed in and was under water for a short time, unfortunately Squadron Leader Angus was the first to try and get out, blocking the exit and drowning along with the rest of the passengers including the bloke on special leave.

Freddy Watt and myself were posted to 36 Squadron they were a transport squadron C47s (Dakatos). We were based at Townsville and flew mainly to New Guinea, Port Moresby. We were both second pilots for some months. I was the first to be trained as a Captain, my instructor was Arthur Malpars, he was a ex CAN Captain before joining the airforce. A very competent Captain and instructor. During my instruction he said "I'll show you what can be done with a C47".

Normal landing procedure required the aircraft to be at about 50 feet at the edge of the strip with gear down and locked ready for the touchdown. He circled the field but climbed to 1000 feet with the wheels down at the edge of the strip, not the usual 50 feet, put down full flap, shoved the control column forward and down we went, flattened out and landed with plenty of strip left to pull up in. All you had to worry about was the violent change of altitude and allow for the squash, but it was handy if the strip was closed for weather and you had nowhere else to go.

He also put me through the Lorenze landing system, we had that at Townsville, it was an approach over the sea to the strip. You flew at 1000 feet straight and level, with your cans (headphones) on, if you strayed left you got a morse signal A-dit daugh. If you strayed right you got an N.daugh dit, about one mile from the strip. There was a cone of silence which required you to lose height at 300 feet a minute still on the beam, which was a steady signal sound on your ears still keeping the A and Ns out of your ears. You then had another cone of silence which was at 300 feet, by then with a bit of luck you could see the strip.

Over the next few years as Captain I used that system several times. I was very glad I knew how to use it coming back from Moresby. Hence the quote "on the Beam", or "right on the Beam".

Three crews were detached to Clarke Field Port Morsby. I was one of them along with Freddy Watt as my copilot. There was a north courier flight and a south courier flight. The north was from Morsby to Nadzab, Fenchaven then back to Morsby. The south was longer and went to Milne Bay, Goodenought Isdland, Kirrwing, Woodlark, back to Milne Bay then home to Morsby.

To pass the time we would play poker until one of the three crews won all the money, then we would play contract bridge, all the time we were playing we would drink New Guinea gin, the only grog available, it was 4/- (40c) a bottle. The crew rostered to fly would, of course, be sleeping and not playing or drinking as it was always a flare path take off before first light. I was the stand by crew, Stan McNicols was the captain of the crew due to fly, he got up from his stretcher in the tent to have a piddle, fell over in the jungle and broke his arm.. At the time Fred, my copilot, and I thought it a great joke driving our jeep down to the strip singing and in great alcoholic well being. We boarded the A/C, I started the motors, taxied to the end of the strip,

turned into the wind, opened the throttles and was doing OK until Fred said: “there up!”meaning the wheels, but we were not airborne, so I shoved the throttles through the wire which is at the extremity of the throttle quadrant and strictly for emergency only, which it was. The airscrews would have missed the strip by no more than half an inch, and by doing so sobered me up rapidly. Our first call was Milne Bay, a lousy strip to approach, so I made Fred land which turned out to be an arrival of sorts. We were next ordered to fly 35 Negro combat troops with their gear to Nadzab. We took off, climbed to about 15,000 feet levell1ed off but the aircraft was flying tail heavy not the right attitude, so I asked Fred to request the black troops to shift their gear forward. No result, he asked them twice more with no response, so I told Fred and the WAG (wireless air gunner) to buckle up. I then shoved the control column violently forward then back about three times. This action sent all the gear in the back flying all over the joint. Fred asked again to have the stuff shifted forward, which was done very quickly and we flew on with the tail up and nose down. On landing at Nadzab Fred opened the doors they all got out with their gear. I stayed up front then taxied some 200 yards to a dispersal bay not wishing to confront the black American troops.

My next experience with Negro troops was quite different. We had to fly some 30 black wounded stretcher cases from Moresby to Base Hospital in Townsville. After we had been briefed by the Met Oppo room, the information was that there was a mild front some 30 to 40 miles out. On board was a Flight Lieutenant lady nurse (unlike the WAAF), Flight Lieutenant nurses were the same rank as us, and all were terrific people, we also had a RAAF doctor. The three of us consulted as to the most comfortable height to chose for the comfort of the patients. The only oxygen available was to the crew, so it was best to keep under 18,000 feet. The so-called mild front turned out to be a right stinker and I was on instruments for a good two

hours. American crews flew with 'George' (automatic pilot plugged in), our C/O Harry Purvis would not have a bar of that, we had to hand fly which was much better. George's actions were quite severe whereas your own were much more sympathetic to the control surfaces, but the Sperry panel consisted of an artificial horizon and a small indicated aircraft, a radio compass and altimeter just in front of you. That was all you could and should look at, but after two and a half hours concentration and physically operating the control column and rudder pedals you got bloody exhausted, at least I did. We were about fifteen minutes out of Townsville and the radio opp informed me that the strip and airfield was closed, so I had to divert to Cairns. It was also savannah 4 (savannah was the code to imply the condition of the field, savannah 5 was closed, savannah 1-3 was good). We made it OK to Cairns, taxied up to the waiting ambulances, cut the motors and I walked from the cockpit down the through the stretchers to the door to the applause of the patients which was very satisfying – I was darned glad myself.

My next initiation was dropping parachute troops. The RAAF took the two most experienced crews from each transport squadron (6 squadrons), so there were 12 crews. The number of parachuters per aircraft was 18, referred to as a stick. The idea was for the 3 aircrews to fly in close formation so that the 3 lots of 18, totalling 54 fully equipped troops, would land very close together forming a compact fighting unit. The parachutes were released per static line, a line down the troop section of the aircraft. There was no rip-cord and the height above the DZ (dropping zone) was 400ft. The most demanding of the technique was that the 3 aircraft had to throttle the port engine back to minimise the slip-stream on the troopers. In close formation this required all your attention. Each aircraft had a senior army bod referred to as the Jump Master. Before each training operation the stick would line up outside the aircraft.

The jump master would ask the A/C captain “Sire have you dropped troops before?”, no one of course had done, and when the answer was “no”, the entire 18 troops in unison said “shit” and with a large degree of justification because the initial trial drops left a hell of a lot to be desired. Paratroops emerging from trees, yards from the drop zone.

Each member of the paratroop Batallion had to drop including the cook, pardre etc. Also each A/C captain was required to be an observer in the leading A/C to observe what happened after the red light came on. The A/C I was an observer on included both the cook and the pardre. The cook was the first to go but he tripped on the way to the exit door, picked himself up and just dived out without observing the correct procedure ie, hands each side of the open door then exirting in the manner by the book. The pardre was about number 3, he put his hands correctly each side of the door but had a few words I assume with his maker, this didn’t suit the next in line who raised his right boot and booted the pardre out.

After some two weeks we all got the hang of things. We must have because the paratroopers invited us back to their mess for a do. We later found out the reason for the training was to drop troops to assist the Tarakan evacuation. Of the allied POWs the Japs marched 2000 allied troops only 6 – yes 6 survived. I assume, as the evacuation did not take place, the top brass stuffed up which was a typical SNAFU situation.

By this time I had quite a few hours up as captain and was made a “Route Check Skipper”, which meant if there was a second pilot considered good enough to be made captain, he would do a few trips with me, and at my discretion would do landings and take off”s. I think there were another two skippers who were also Route check blokes.

My first second dickie was Norm Properjohn, a good mate of mine, we were at Milne Bay when I decided to give Norm the left hand seat to let him do his first take off. He did what we all did in the beginning and started over correcting, which meant he was going down the strip from side to side, the idea was to let him get out of the situation by himself, but he gave up with "handing over", so I took the controls from the right hand seat, climbed away, levelled off, and enquired of Norm, "What the bloody hell do you think you were doing. "Well", he said, "Horse, (my nickname) when we passed the duty pilots tower and I saw the whites of his eyes I figured it was time to hand over." Not long after that, I had a flight from Biak to Hollandia. I had ten passengers and an Allison in-line motor off a Kitty Hawk, which was well anchored and tied down. One of the passengers was Alan Bartlett, a Beaufighter pilot, one of my course contemporaries. We were at 10,000 feet about 60 miles out of Biak, Alan asked if he could have a fly, so I got out of the left hand seat, told him the height, speed etc., and lay down between the two seats. My second pilot was Robby Robinson who I was checking out. Quite suddenly the cockpit began to vibrate alarmingly. Adam shot out of the seat, I got back in, pulled the port throttle off, as it was the port motor carrying on, but it had no effect. I had what was termed a runaway prop, I tried to feather the airscrew, no good, it suddenly stopped and the whole motor tipped forward. Its at times like this that one becomes quite religious, and makes all sorts of requests to whoever in the almighty world may be listening. With the help of the starboard engine we made it ok to Hollandia, where I signalled base (Townsville), for a replacement motor. I got a call in the mess from an American Top sergeant, to the effect, did I want the motor put in, which I told for sure. He then contacted me Again to see him in the hanger. He told me how lucky we all were as there are 4 basic bolts holding the engine to the wing. The top two and one of the bottom bolts were

shorn right off, and the last one was bent over, but still managed to hold the motor up. He told me it had happened before when the motors had dropped out altogether, resulting in the aircraft crashing.

My old mate Eric Crisp was with 100 Squadron, flying Beauforts from a base close to Wewack north of New Guinea. I learned a flight of three aircraft, including Eric's, were changing stations when the starboard aircraft clipped the number 2 kite and all three aircraft went in, killing the three crews.

Freddie Watt and myself hitch-hiked (via RAAF A/C) to WA to see my WA family and mates and returned hitch-hiking back to Townsville from Perth. We got to Brisbane and were offered a lift back to Garbutt (Townsville Air Strip) with an American Colonel flying a B24 (Liberator). Fred and I flew it most of the way, the Colonel was very casual but when we touched down at Garbutt the aircraft ran on about 200 yards when all four motors cut out. It transpired that a Yank Colonel forgot he was rostered to re-fuel at Rockhampton. Had the motors cut out one minute earlier we would have all been history. Just before the war ending the Government organised a lend-lease situation, where we were to fly to America and pick up some C47s for lend-lease obviously to start the civil TAA situation. But on arriving in America the war was finished which meant that they, the government, had about 20 crews with no instructions as to what to do. At first we were domiciled at different venues. My mob were at The Mark Hopkins in San Francisco receiving full allowance for roughing it.

We spend three months in America, a lot of that time was in Hollywood, where I met Crystal Gherig. She was the niece of Lou Gherig, the baseball equivalent of Don Bradman, along with Babe Ruth. Another crew member in the outfit decided to hire some golf clubs and have a game. He met three Americans on the first tee and they informed him that they played for bucks a hole. He agreed to accommodate

them, what the Yanks did not know was that he was the Victorian Amateur Champion for 1938-39. Of course he cleaned them up but at the settling up the Americans told him they were VIPs in the automotive industry and told him to take the car in the parking lot, drive it as long as you're in these States, let them know the departure date and that's that.

On my return to Australia even though the war was over transporting occupation troops to Japan was of top priority. Which meant 75 fighter squadron and, I think, 76 had to go to Japan. I fell for the job of flying the route and signalling back the weather conditions, as single engined fighter aircraft were not as capable of instrument flying as the transport aircraft.

We were about 20 minutes out of Okinawa to be informed that the field was closed, and to go someplace else, which in my situation was nowhere. I circled the strip and soon worked out why it was closed. The American fleet stationed there were wrecked all blown ashore because of a cyclone, quite prevalent in Okinawa. The strip was only one adjacent to the sea. The cross wind or cyclone meant to approach it was dicey. An aircraft always wants to head into wind so that the cross wind landing meant the wings were parallel to the strip, therefore if you did not kick the kite parallel to the strip you would strip the undercart off and maybe yourself. With a lot of arse I got her down and spent three good days with the Yank airforce until the strip was cleared for take off and off to Japan.

On returning to Australia I was offered the job of flying the Prime Minister about (Ben Chifley). Like a bloody idiot I declined thinking of the red tape, the job went to Norm Properjohn, the guy I had checked out. After the war Norm was put in charge of Hobart airport, Norm was a Tasmanian.

That's about it except that we were offered the job of Captaining the civil TAA after the war. I declined because I had 2,500 hours and wanted a rest. Had they said "take a month off and we will ask you again", I would have accepted. Maybe had I done so, none of you mob would be here, so I'll leave it to you to work out who won.

Good luck,

Ron (Horse) Cutten

July, 2000