



My Story

Clarence James Stjernqvist, AM.

" Travelling at supersonic speeds was a real buzz, but so too was travelling at the speed of life".



Clarrie Stjernqvist was born and raised in the Noosa district of SE Queensland and educated at the Tewantin State School, Christian Brothers College Gympie and the Queensland University. He joined the RAAF as an aircrew cadet straight from university and graduated as a commissioned navigator in 1963.

In a past edition of [Radschool Magazine](#) he saw several photographs of a WRAAF reunion which was held in Brisbane in 2011. This brought back memories of his cadet days at the School of Air Navigation (now the School of Air Warfare) at East Sale because he recognised a few of them from that era. Cath Griffiths was employed in the SAN orderly room at that time and Rosa Wallis was a special friend with whom he spent some pleasant clandestine evenings usually with the cooperation of the Orderly WRAAF.

However, at times the hut NCO would answer the phone and was not so accommodating. He also remembers Carol Ford when he was aide to the AOC Operational Command. She was a Section Officer and he was a Flying Officer and he recalls that she caught his eye at a paynight function not long after she arrived at Glenbrook. This drew the wrath of 'Dizzy' Dynes, a WRAAF Squadron Officer, who acted true to form as a mother hen and put paid to any advances he may have had in mind.



As part of his training at Sale there was an attempt by the system to instil in the cadets a pseudo British class mentality by discouraging them from fraternising with WRAAFS for no better reason than some pompous, senior male dinosaurs must have regarded them as a lower rung on the food chain ladder. Although the instructors were obliged to pay lip service to this policy it was patently clear to the cadets that it was done so without any enthusiasm and it certainly was not policed. In any case the cadets were aware that many of the WRAAFS had come from more secure and privileged backgrounds than they themselves had, so it was an elitist policy that was destined to fail and fail it did because several cadets ended up marrying WRAAFS. There was irony in all of this because the status of cadets was on a par with bog rats and that is how they were addressed by some of the instructors. The suspension rate for each course was about 33%, the unfortunates would be unceremoniously plucked from the classroom while a lesson was in progress and that would be the last the course would see of them. As a reminder to the rest of them the failed student's faces would be blacked out on the initial course photo which hung on the classroom notice board.

His first operational posting was to No 11 Squadron which flew Neptune aircraft from RAAF Base Richmond. The role of this squadron was anti-submarine warfare, anti-shipping and mine laying. In peacetime it was regularly employed on search and rescue tasks. The Neptune carried a crew of ten comprising two pilots, three navigators and five signallers.



Within two years he had advanced to lead navigator status in one of the six squadron crews.



Neptune crew, Clarrie is 3rd from right.

One memorable event with which he was involved during this time was the search for survivors from [HMAS Voyager](#) following a collision with the aircraft carrier, HMAS Melbourne in February 1964.



A couple of hairy incidents occurred during one particular deployment to the Philippines. Familiarisation flights off the coast of Luzon were authorised prior to the start of the exercise proper. The crews were told that allied submarines would be operating in area. There was a typhoon brewing so the weather was less than clement. Clarrie recalls that on one of these sorties they were flying in cloud at a couple of hundred feet when the radar operator reported a small sharp contact on his scope which he suggested might be a submarine periscope. Clarrie advised that the contact was close to the Luzon coast but since it was in deep water a submarine could well be operating there. So it was decided to carry out a radar homing on the contact although they were still in cloud. Between a half and a quarter mile from the contact a wild yell came from the cockpit followed by a violent split ..se turn and naturally the rest of the crew who had no forward visual reference were wondering what the problem was. It turned out that the contact was a rock which topped out well above their flight path. Fortunately fate was on their side because the cloud had broken at a critical time sufficiently for the pilot to avoid a certain disaster. However this didn't get Clarrie off the hook because the crew were threatening to throw him out without a parachute. All was forgiven when the Americans explained that they had unluckily targeted an uncharted rock and apologised profusely for failing to inform them of this chart error.



When the full force of the typhoon hit a USN Skywarrior was struck by lightning at night over the South China Sea. This caused the loss of critical flight instruments so the pilot ordered the crew to bale out into a gale of about 160kph. The pilot subsequently regained control of the aircraft and landed safely. The exercise was called

off to search for survivors but they all disappeared without trace.

Also, in mid 1965 he escorted the convoy which ferried the first Australian combat troops to Vietnam while operating out of a tent city in Lae, PNG. These were the halcyon days of the Air Force with relatively few constraints on defence manpower and funding. There were a raft of alliances and treaties with which Australia was involved in the SE Asian region. During this era he regularly deployed to the Philippines, Singapore, Malaya, Thailand, Hawaii and New Zealand in support of the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO).

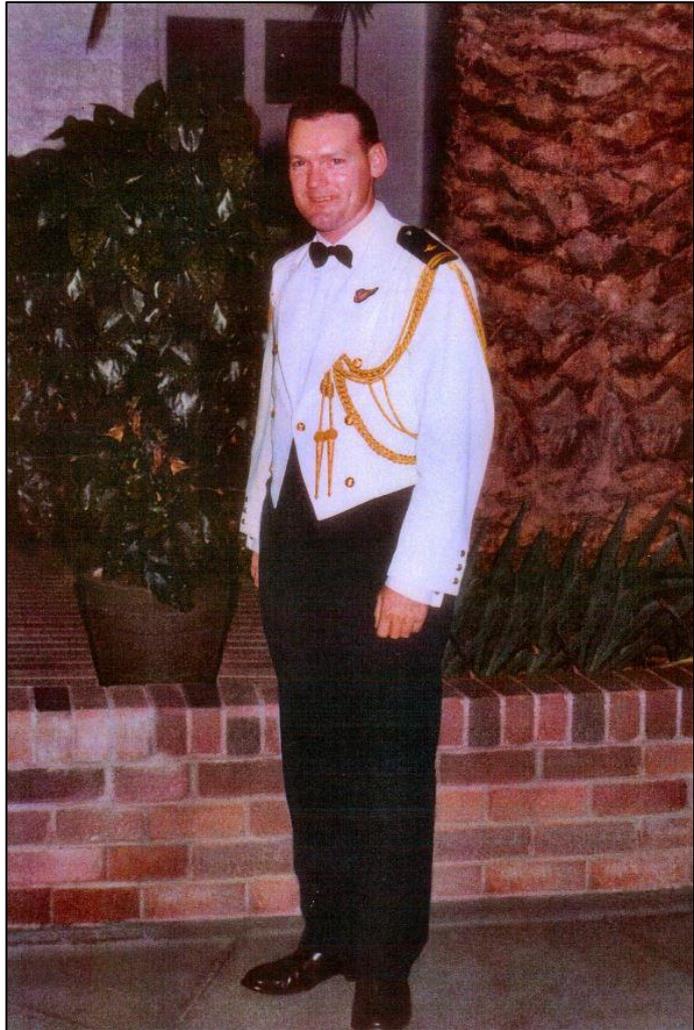
In late 1965 he came crashing back to earth with a posting as aide to the Air Officer Commanding Operational Command (AOCOPCOM). A headquarters of this stature was a daunting place for a junior officer but he quickly discovered that while the AOC was a martinet towards his command and staff officers he treated his personal staff most considerately. This posting broadened his outlook on the RAAF and the Defence Force generally as he travelled

with the AOC to most RAAF units across Australia as well as PNG and SE Asia including Vietnam at the height of the war.

Towards the end of his time at HQOPCOM the AOC informed him that he would be posted onto Canberra Bombers at Amberley and would most likely complete a bombing tour in Vietnam. So commenced a rather turbulent association with the bomber world. After converting to the Canberra (crew comprising a pilot and a navigator) and accumulating a few hundred hours he received a posting to 2 Sqn which was operating out of Phan Rang in Vietnam.

Clarrie, when aide to the AOCOPCOM.

He had psyched himself up for this eventuality when without explanation his posting was cancelled a week before he was due to leave. After several telephone calls to Canberra by his CO he discovered that he would now be going with the initial group of navigators and pilots to train on the F-111 in the US. He was rather excited at this prospect particularly when he realised that he would be flying out of Nellis AFB on the outskirts of Las Vegas.



While he was flying Canberras he deployed to Port Moresby with a young pilot (Al Blyth) to carry out aerial photographic tasks. They were given photographic targets at Amberley and were instructed that following a sortie they had to return to Moresby with sufficient fuel to divert to Cairns in case the weather closed in and in view of the limited letdown aids at that time.



No one had ever attempted to photograph Honiara because of its extreme range although it was on the list of requirements. Because they had fulfilled their quota of targets fairly early Clarrie told Al that they should give Honiara a shot if the weather conditions were favourable. The meteorological office at the airfield was informed of this intention and two days before they were due to redeploy the forecast was in their favour. They took off into a clear sky and as they approached the point of safe return things were looking good so they pressed on knowing that Port Moresby was their only destination.

After obtaining the required photographs Clarrie strapped back into the bang seat for what he thought would be an uneventful return flight. At about the halfway point Al asked him to come up front and have a look at the weather ahead. He was gobsmacked by what he saw. There in front of the aircraft was an angry cumulonimbus cloud which filled the horizon. Since the Canberra was bereft of radar Clarrie told Al that they had no other option but to plough into it blind. As soon as they entered all hell broke loose as lightning, hail and extreme turbulence hit them all at once. The aircraft was buffeted so severely that Clarrie had to grip the panic rail with both hands and trying to get back to his seat was mission impossible. They had entered the tropical storm at the maximum altitude of 48,000feet but they estimated that the top of the cloud was some 10,000 feet above their height. All the critical instruments toppled so even trying to fly limited panel was not possible. The only instrument that appeared to be operating normally was the altimeter and it was telling them that they heading for a watery grave. Clarrie believes that what saved the day was Al taking his hands and feet off the controls and letting the aircraft do its own thing. Eventually they were spat out on the other side of the storm right side up with both engines still turning but now at an altitude of 25,000 feet. The aircraft was a bit of a mess with the engine cowlings bashed in and the rubberised material on the leading edges of the wings and elevators stripped away by hail. To top it off when they finally got back, Port Moresby was clagged in so they gently descended over the water to almost dot feet on the radio altimeter and sneaked in under the cloud for a straight in approach. They met up with each other a couple of years ago during the last flight of the F-111 and over a few beers recalled their wild ride over the Solomon Sea.



In many ways the F-111 was a revolutionary design and the change in technology from the Neptune and Canberra was a quantum leap. The flight crew comprised a pilot and a navigator seated side-by-side. One of the most important elements in its arsenal of electronics was the terrain following radar which allowed extremely low level penetration of a target safe from the 'eyes' of enemy radar by day or night and in any type of weather. The variable swept wing provided maximum lift at low speeds with the wing forward and minimum drag for high speed flight with the wing swept back. The engine airframe combination enabled a maximum speed of Mach 1.2 at sea level (about 1,200 kms/hr) and Mach 2.5 at altitude (about 2,800 kms/hr).



RAAF/USAF F-111 training group at Nellis AFB, Nevada.

Clarrie is front row second from left and Stu Fisher is in the middle of the back row

In today's Air Force navigators wear full wings and are called air combat officers. It was the F-111 that led to this change of status because with its introduction into the service the navigator was also the co-pilot, electronic warfare officer, radar and radio operator and weapons systems specialist. Unfortunately, when he completed his training in the US the F-111 developed fatigue problems with the wing structure so he and the others returned to Australia in late 1968 - without the aircraft.



Just saying "no!" prevents teenage pregnancy the same way
"Have a nice day" cures chronic depression.

This highly trained group spent a most demoralising 18 months at Amberley begging and sometimes borrowing the odd Canberra from No 1 Bomber Operational Conversion Unit (1BOCU) to try to keep themselves current.



Many of the group during this time either left the RAAF or were posted to new jobs. While General Dynamics grappled with the fatigue problem the Australian Government decided to lease 24 F-4E Phantoms as a stop gap measure. The F-4E training commenced in mid 1970 and for the navigators started at Davis -Monthan AFB, Arizona and finished at the MacDill AFB, Florida. Because these aircraft were only on lease the USAF was in charge of the ferry flights from the US to Australia.

One of the RAAF pilots (Merv Lewis) had a brother-in-law, Philip Chapman (an Australian-born American citizen) who was an astronaut with the Apollo program at the Kennedy Space Centre. The USAF kindly agreed to fly the Australian contingent to Cape Canaveral for a tour of the facilities guided by none other than Phil Chapman. They were given the gold-plated treatment and taken to several places that were out of bounds to normal tourists, such as the lunar module simulator and the vehicle assembly building which housed a fully assembled Saturn V rocket which was being readied for transportation to a launch pad. Phil was the mission scientist in ground control for the Apollo 14 moonshot but never had the opportunity to go into space himself. He resigned from NASA because he strongly disagreed with the Space Shuttle concept.

Another aspect of the training at MacDill which gave him food for thought was the air-to-air and air refuelling phases of the course which were carried out above the Everglades. Clarrie opines that if anything was going to go pear shaped it would probably occur during these phases of training and he envisaged himself wallowing in the swamps and mixing it with alligators and cottonmouths.

Clarrie was fortunate to be selected to ferry a Phantom from the McDonnell Douglas factory in St Louis, Missouri with a USAF pilot. His ferry group comprised six Phantoms and three KC-

135 tankers. The longest leg of the ferry was between Hickam AFB, Hawaii and Andersen AFB, Guam which involved several aerial hook ups with the tankers and a gruelling seven plus hours strapped into the ejection seat. To make matters worse the autopilot never worked from the time of pickup so they took turns at hand flying over the 20 hour journey with overnight stops at George AFB, California, Hickam AFB, Hawaii and Andersen AFB, Guam.



The fabulous Phantom is arguably one of the most successful combat aircraft ever built and the F-4E was probably the best variant. The only downside to his association with the Phantom was the loss of his pilot, Stu Fisher, who crashed into the sea off Evans Head killing himself and stand-in navigator, Bob Waring, while Clarrie was undergoing the Advanced Navigation Course. Stu was the only qualified test pilot in No 82 Wing and he and Clarrie flew as test crew when the USAF crew, assigned to this role, departed Amberley. This was the only aircraft lost over the lease period. (See [HERE](#)).

During their training in the States they were told that spinning the F-4 was a prohibited manoeuvre. Apparently during its early development six F-4s had been allocated to spin testing and all of them had crashed after entering a spin. Most if not all of the test pilots ejected safely. The problem was that the spin rapidly became flat and the aircraft would fall like a leaf with practically no airflow over the control surfaces. During a test flight at Amberley the aircraft was at 25,000 feet when Stu inadvertently induced a high speed stall with the aircraft departing controlled flight and rapidly entering a spin. The aircraft rapidly lost height and the spin became flatter with an alarmingly high angle of attack. The minimum safe altitude for ejection in an out of control situation was 13,000 feet and as they were going through 17,000 feet Clarrie suggested that he pop the drag chute to give the aircraft a bit of nose down attitude. However, Stu persisted with all sorts of combinations of stick and rudder and by the time they were approaching 13,000 feet the gyrations began to ease off. Full control was finally regained at 7000 feet but it was a close run thing.

In mid 1972 he was posted as an instructor to the School of Air Navigation at Sale, Victoria. He was subsequently posted as the navigation instructor to No 1 Flying Training School at Point Cook. After completing this stint he was promoted to Squadron Leader and posted to RAF Cranwell, Lincolnshire to undergo a weapons employment course before taking up a weapons staff appointment at RAAF Headquarters, Canberra. In fact over the next five years he held two separate weapons staff appointments; one in the Directorate of Aircraft Requirements and

the other in the Directorate of Operations interspersed with a twelve month [Staff Course](#) at the RAAF Staff College, Fairbairn in 1979.

Over this time he introduced the MK 84 2,000lb bomb into service and assisted SQNLDR 'Wang' Miller and FLTLT Paul Devine to establish a weapons systems course at the School of Air Navigation. He was also involved with the early testing of laser-guided bomb technology and was the RAAF representative on a tri-service working party which designed and coordinated the construction of a Defence weapons range in the Shoalwater Bay Training Area. He also liaised closely with WGCDR Brian Dirou (right) to establish an in-country helicopter gunship capability for Iroquois Helicopters after their withdrawal from Vietnam. Apparently the gunship modifications which had been carried out in Vietnam did not have the approval of their 'Airships' back in Canberra so it was back to the drawing board for Brian. When his proposal was eventually ticked by the committee system Clarrie staffed through the requirement for the associated weapons package.



On promotion to Wing Commander he was posted to the air staff at Headquarters Support Command (HQSC) as the Command Operations Staff Officer. In this appointment, inter alia, he tasked Support Command transport aircraft, the Roulettes Aerobatic Team and the RAAF Central Band. He was also the RAAF representative on the security task force for CHOGM 1981 which was held in Melbourne.

His next posting was as CO Base Squadron, Laverton and during his time there, he built a swimming pool using base welfare funds and constructed new single living-in quarters for Radschool at a cost of \$3M.

In 1985 he was posted as the sole RAAF Officer onto the Directing Staff (DS) of the Army Command and Staff College at Fort Queenscliff, Victoria.

Prior to taking up this post he completed a three week training course at the Land Warfare Centre in Canungra. He was responsible for the peacekeeping component of the course as well as being responsible for all aviation related aspects. In addition all DS instructed on land warfare strategy, tactics and doctrine up to and including Divisional level. Each DS mentored six students (Major rank) including one foreign student over the college year. In 1985 from a course population of 80 two of his students secured the highest grade of pass (B+) out of a total of seven awarded.

I wasn't planning on going for a run today, but those cops came out of nowhere!



1986 Australian Army Command and Staff course, Queenscliff, Vic.
 DS and admin staff are in the front row. Alex Noble is in the second row in the light coloured uniform.

David Hurley, current CDF, is at far right of second row.

One of these students, Peter Leahy, (right) went on to become Chief of the Australian Army. In 1986 his foreign student was a Filipino (Alexander Noble) who later as a Colonel led a mutiny with the aim of overthrowing President Corazon Aquino and establishing the southern island of Mindanao as a separate state. When the mutiny lost momentum he [turned himself in](#) and his fate to this day is unknown. Clarrie remembers Alex fondly as an above average student and a fit and imposing officer who stood six feet three inches tall and weighed about 225 pounds.



On promotion to Group Captain he spent a short time as the Senior Administrative Staff Officer at HQSC before taking up the Base Commander post at RAAF Base Amberley (under a reorganisation the base command function was separated from command of the F-111 wing).

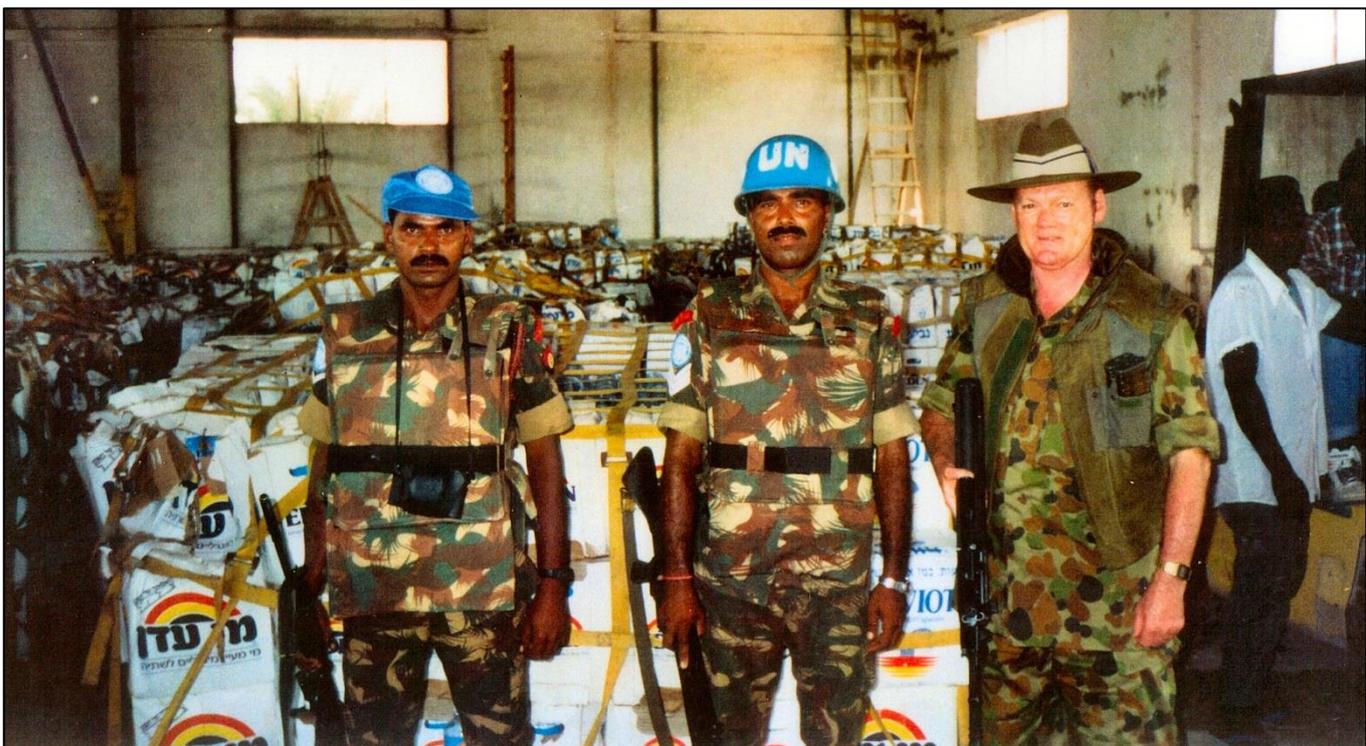


Amberley was and still is the largest RAAF base and during the first Gulf War, in order to protect the F-111 asset, he formulated and exercised a Base security plan in consultation with the Queensland Commissioner of Police and the Ipswich Mayor which covered all relevant jurisdictions in the event of an incident. This was a timely initiative because a group of expatriate Iraqis attempted to gain unauthorised access to the Base and were subsequently tracked down by the QLD Police. As a result heightened security was ordered for all operational bases and the Amberley security plan was issued as a model to all and sundry. His proudest achievement during this time was negotiating the purchase of buffer land which doubled the size of the base. This acquisition which cost \$4M protected the Base from urban encroachment and gave it super base potential which is currently being realised.

While at Amberley, he managed to spirit some free time away from his busy schedule, to pass on a few batting tips to a budding young cricketer.



His next posting was as the Director of Personnel-Airmen (DPA) and he could not have chosen a worse time to take on this poisoned chalice. When he arrived on posting the RAAF airman and airwoman force numbered some 18,000 personnel and he was directed to reduce this number by 3000 over the three year term of his posting. To achieve this aim his management tools included natural wastage, reduced recruiting and voluntary redundancy. As an added burden he was required to implement the restructure of the airman technical and non-technical workforce which resulted in the disbandment of nine musterings and the displacement of 600 airmen and airwomen. To these he offered either retraining or voluntary redundancy and against strong opposition from above he argued and won the right for these members to retain their rank if they decided to remuster. He met all of the mandated target reductions in spite of receiving a stream of anonymous hate mail and for his troubles he was made a Member of the Order of Australia.

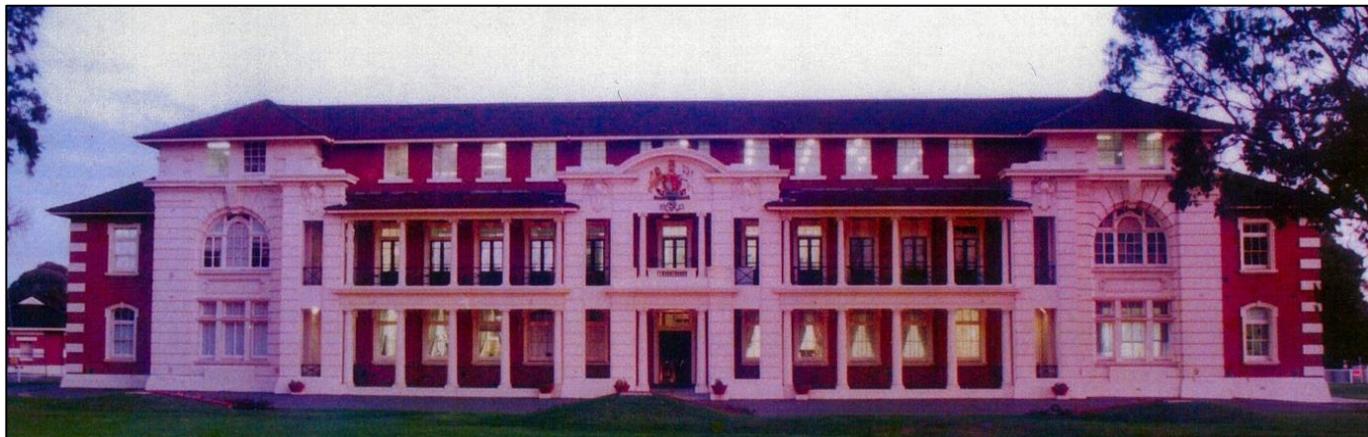


With Indian soldiers who were guarding UN stores at Mogadishu Airport.

The only break he had as DPA was a visit to Somalia to discuss future posting options for RAAF personnel based at Mogadishu. Although he was provided with an SAS bodyguard he was required to carry arms at all times and at one stage had to duck for cover as hostile fire zinged a little too close for comfort. In retrospect he contends that at this time Somalia was the most dangerous place on earth and probably still is.

The '[Blackhawk Down](#)' incident occurred the month before he arrived in the country. The United Nations Operations in Somalia, UNOSOM 1 and UNOSOM II, involved 20,000 US troops and a further 20,000 from 25 other nations but failed to bring the country under control. The operation commenced in 1992 and ended in 1995 at a cost of six billion US dollars.

On promotion to Air Commodore he assumed the appointment of Head of the Defence Centre-Adelaide.



This was a tri-service command, and an Army Base Administrative Support Centre (BASC) was imbedded in the Defence Centre which meant that the majority of his staff were Army. Although some of the ARA units within South Australia did not come under his command he did have disciplinary powers over all of them which had been delegated to him by the Chief of Army. In this post he was the senior Defence Force Officer in SA and represented the Chief of the Defence Force in the Australian Central Region and acted as the senior liaison officer with other Federal and State Government Departments in relation to Defence matters including requests for Defence Force emergency assistance.

During this period, (Australia Day 1995) he was appointed as a "Member of the Order of Australia". (AM).



Receiving the AM from Dame Roma Mitchell, Governor of South Australia.

In this post, he also had overall responsibility for the administration of the Woomera Township which supported the Joint Defence Facility at Nurrungar.

His Admin duties necessitated visits and discussions with USAF Generals at Space Command in the US. On one such visit with [Dr Ron Huisken](#) (below) from Strategic and International Policy Division, Canberra, he was shown through the nuclear bunker deep within Cheyenne Mountain which is located on the outskirts of Colorado Springs.

The closest to perfection a person ever comes, is when they fill out a job application.



Clarrie with Dr Ron Huisken at the entrance to a nuclear bunker in the Cheyenne Mountains.

In an interview with the editor of RAAF News just before his retirement he was asked what was the single most significant change he had observed over his 35 years of service in the RAAF. Without missing a beat he replied that nurses could now get navigators pregnant.

During a speech at his farewell dinner on 28 November 1997 he made the following comment:

'I leave the Service with a great feeling of satisfaction in the knowledge that the RAAF and the ADF owe me nothing and I trust I don't owe too much in return'.



Clarrie and his lovely wife Karin who migrated from Germany as a child and spent her formative years in the Snowy mountains where her father worked as a surveyor. Sadly, she passed away in 2009.



A proud dad with his three daughters, (L-R:) Chris, Anita and Debbie.

The trouble with Sunday drivers is,
they don't drive any better during the week.

Clarrie says he often gets asked, “What do you do, how do you fill in your time, now that you’ve left the Air Force??



“Air Force??” says Clarrie, “what Air Force??”

There were these two blondes who went deep into the woods searching for a Christmas tree.

After hours of sub zero temperatures and a few close calls with hungry wolves, one blonde turned to the other and said, "I'm chopping down the next tree I see. I don't care whether it's decorated or not!"

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