



My Story

WGCDR. John Griffiths, MBE (Retired).

Not that he would ever admit it in mixed company, but John was born and bred in Melbourne. A true Baby Boomer, he was born in 1946 after his Dad returned from the War in Borneo but, as he was no great scholar, a Radio Apprenticeship was way out of his reach. However, the first light was turned on, on the playing fields. He vividly remembers one of his school mates telling him about the Air Training Corps and how great it was especially having the chance to fly in a RAAF Dakota on camp. Sure enough, he headed off the next Friday night to the West Melbourne Drill Hall where plenty of old Second World War instructors were teaching all those beaut subjects like Map Reading, Drill, Aircraft Recognition, Morse Code, more Drill and stripping the No 1 Mk 3, Short Magazine .303" Lee-Enfield Service Rifle. The Reserve was alive and well with the staff and blow-ins making full use of the bar to the side of the drill hall. The smell of stale beer permeated the old timbers and the ghost and a few spirits must have gone down with the timbers when the building went the way of the developers.



Early screening tester for pilots (right).

Four great years in the ATC saw John getting a taste for the uniform life. The first General Service Training Camp was held at RAAF Base Ballarat where he learned all those service traditions of Panics, scrubbing, polishing and Emu parades. Unfortunately there was none of the aforementioned RAAF Dakota flying on that GST camp. Back in Melbourne it was on with schooling and Air Training Corps and later he was promoted to Corporal and then, while in year 11 there was an opportunity to apply for the Air Training Corps Flying Scholarship. In hindsight this was such a great opportunity for a free run over the target. The Aptitude tests, Medicals and Interviews were virtually the same as that used for the RAAF Pilot Selection process two years later. What a great opportunity to learn to fly in a quasi Military environment.



RAAF Base Laverton was the home for the Victorian Squadron candidates, many would go on to great service careers including Air Commodore, retired, Dave Leach. Four DHC-1 Chipmunks were beaten into submission by a dedicated team of Argentine Ants, controlled by an equally eager bunch of RAAF and Royal Victorian Aero Club Instructors. The lessons and Mass Briefings were not all that different to what the Australian Air Force Cadets

(AAFC) are experiencing now at bases throughout Australia, still supported by the Chief. The Flying Scholarship in the early 60s enabled the recipient enough flying for their Unrestricted Private Pilot's Licence. That start in aviation made for some long lasting friendships, as is the wont of the aviation family. Bob Williams (left) turned out to be John's Best Man in 1969 after Vietnam and the Aero Club Liaison Officer was SQNLDR [John Laming](#), another aviation legend, still instructing to this day on the Boeing 737 Simulator.



John "Wings" Laming

After the taste of flying, school was rather boring. It was a wee bit too distracting for year 12 studies and John finished up going to night school the next year to pick up Maths and Physics, necessary for pilot selection. He enjoyed the Cadet Under Officer's course at RAAF East Sale and served his last year in the ATC as a CUO. Unfortunately the ATC was only for 14 to 18 year olds at that time. The kids have so much more to give back now with two more years if they wish. To fill in time while waiting for Pilot course selection John worked as a Costing Clerk for Victorian Railways. This was tactically a great move as it reinforced the need to stay out of a civil office job and find that Air Force Career.

On 7 May 1965 he marched in to RAAF Point Cook with some fresh faced cadets, midshipman, Army Lieutenants and a couple of crusty old troops, some of the greatest friends John has in this world today. Not much to see involving Aviation, but plenty of those service traditions of Panics, scrubbing, polishing and Emu parades. Lessons on Drill, English, PT, Aerodynamics, Navigation, Drill, shooting and more Drill. There were lots of fun times with the upending of rooms, room relocations and doubling around the Base. WOFF Ashton always had it in for that Course known as 58 Pilot's Course. But he didn't break their spirit. They were shipped off to Pearce early in 1966 to see if they could break some Vampires. They must have done a pretty good job of it as Paul Rigby had a great cartoon, Per Bicycle Ad Astra. That was the time when the serviceability of the Geriatric Jet was problematic. When the young lad was lucky enough to get a solo it was often disturbing to do a slow roll only to hear the fuselage catch up with the wings some time later as there was a thunk under the floor.

The aircraft was still a great machine. Fitted with Long Range tanks it was possible to do a Navex to Albany and back, not bad for a Vampire which without additional tanks has an operational range at economical cruise of just under 2000 klms and when flat out will reach a dizzy 850 klm/hour. They learned Altitude and Compressibility runs and Limited [Panel Aural Null homing and Letdowns](#) – something that was tried on the Caribou in the late 1990's. If you ever have the time, go and sit in one of the dual Vampires around, sit someone in the Right Hand Seat who is a big 7' angry gorilla and try reaching over to tune the ADF. The cockpit was rather comfy and with long legs, an ejection would have been rather dramatic. Hence, good practice Flameout descents.



John's Wings Test Vampire,
now resting at Albion Park.

Eventually his course graduated and then it was into suspense mode while waiting for that important posting. Vietnam was rapidly building up and the RAAF urgently needed Iroquois and Caribou pilots and John claims that is the only reason he scraped through his final and was



given his wings. He was chosen to fly the old Caribou but first off it was down to the Gold Coast and the Army's torture camp at Canungra for survival training. His mate at the time was big Jack Rydstrom, a damn nice bloke who was tragically lost in an aircraft accident many years later. After a flight from Port Moresby on Thursday 1st July 1995, Jack's aircraft (a Civvy Caribou - left) had to divert to Kiunga due to bad weather at it's destination, Tabubil. During climbout from Tabubil the No 2

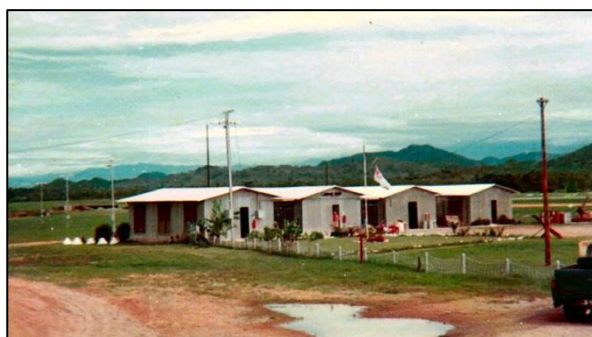
engine failed, then while on approach to Kiunga the other engine also failed. The Caribou crashed into trees, short of the runway.

While in transit to Canungra, John and his mates were talking about and looking forward to days off where they imagined themselves down on the beach surfing, chasing lovely ladies, having the odd cold one with a nice juicy steak and just being Mr Tourist – were they in for a shock. Canungra was the ADF's survival training camp, they spent their first week learning the theory then the next was putting all that theory to practice, they were dropped off in the scrub and told to live off the land and to evade capture as there would be people out there trying to capture them. Not a lot of time to spend in the boardies, on the beach

After their 'holiday' on the Coast, it was back south again, this time to Richmond and 38 Squadron, the home of the brand new Caribou. The RAAF accepted the first Caribou in February 1964 and three were ferried to Richmond, arriving on the 22nd April, 1964. John and 4 mates from his pilot's course joined Tony Fookes, Rick Lundberg, Jock Cassells, Stu McAlister and "Tommy" Thomson arrived at Richmond in August 1966 and were taken under the wing of experienced blokes such as Ron Raymond (right) and Mike Lancaster and shown how to get the best out of the old girl.



Those brand new shiny chocolate brown Caribous were a great workhorse and a great way to learn how to operate in Australia and Papua New Guinea. In hindsight, Vietnam was such a



letdown after learning to operate in the High and Hot Papua New Guinea. 38SQN DetA (left) was a great way for a young team to get to know each other, knowing their limitations both at work and at play. Some of the motor vehicle accidents in Port Moresby highlighted all too well the limitations – but what happens in PNG stays in PNG. After a couple of Detachments to PNG, a time at Rockhampton playing war games with the Army, the odd flood relief fodder drop, overnights at Puckapunyal,

Whyalla and Leigh Creek, most crews learned how to go away together, get the job done and bring the aircraft back in one piece with, in a lot of cases, the Imprest balanced. Always a challenge for a young Boggie. Funny thing about the old Caribou, the harder you worked it the more it seemed to like it.

Vietnam was always the cherry on top. All the young 38 Sqn pilots would regularly check out the board to see who they needed to nobble so they could get a run up North. Conversion course members who had previous experience on other aircraft jumped up the list but John and a few of his mates were off in May 1968, just after TET 68. Arriving into Tan Son Nhut Air Base (Saigon) in the Qantas 707 they were decanted into a USAF C130 and Combat Loaded to Vung Tau. Since then, the tarmac at Saigon hasn't changed that much, the revetments are still there but the plethora of gunships have long gone. So too the stack of empty aluminium caskets.



John returned a couple of years ago with Ian 'Jake' Jacobsen, reliving the old haunts from Danang to the Delta with some new treats thrown in with Hanoi and Sapa. He was back again in 2013, 45 years ago to the day that he first arrived at Vung Tau.

The year flying in Vietnam was a great experience for a Boggie pilot, plenty of flying during the day, a couple of cheap beers at the end of each day and off flying again the next. The serviceability of the aircraft was always so much better than in Australia. They flew 8 hours or so just about every day of the week and considering the high workload there weren't too many incidents. A few artefacts have made it to the Australian War Memorial including a nosewheel steering wheel with an incoming bullet hole, a windscreen with a bullet hole directly in line with the Pilot's head and there were the odd, outgoing bullet holes. Tommy Thomson and Rocky McGregor were very lucky lads when a mortar shell exploded very close. Tommy was heading for a bunker and Rocky realized that the base was under attack and that it wouldn't have been a great move to stay and see the fireworks. Rocky started moving out and the rest of the crew caught up.



A funny thing happened in Manila – when crews were picking up A4-173 which had been in the shop undergoing a major service, Tommy Thomson was nearly left stranded. A4-173 had

earlier been in a [major incident in Vietnam](#) and as a result the repairs had left a whole lot of butt joints in the nose. Even though it seemed to fly ok, the Manila repairers had difficulty matching the airframe to the plans and this required a longer stay than the Imprest allowed. The crew were on hard tac rations and there was no sign of the aircraft captain (Tommy) when the Diplomatic Clearance Departure time arrived and was about to pass. Then, in the nick of time, around came the police car with the aircraft Captain and his True Love, just in time to say Clear Right.

The Vietnam era did have its lighter moments. John recalls a couple, he says while watching an old Doris Day movie one night, the Base alarm was sounded. Everybody bolted from the safety of the bar to the bunker, except Doc Tebbitt, who decided to stay put and guard the Bar against possible incoming insurgents. He can remember one morning, while still a rather new, wet behind the ears Boggie and flying co-pilot down in the Delta region with the CO, they reached their planned destination only to see a boat going along the strip. John, to the CO's dismay, called up on HF telling Hilda, the MACV, operator that Wallaby 02 would not be landing. Bad move!! John had his back-side kicked from the Delta all the way back to Vung Tau, he was told quite forcefully that he didn't make any decisions, the CO being the CO would do that and any decision whether they landed or not was his – boat or no boat.

While in Vung Tau a lot of the boggies did their promotion exams and this gave them a couple of days off flying. Jack Rydstrom and John completed their assigned papers and as it was warm, had a refreshing beer or two before retiring. However, there was an urgent need to get a Caribou to Phan Rang and Jack and John were the only two pilots available. They reckon it was one of the smoothest and most uneventful flights ever, the landing being one of the best ever done, we don't know what the loady thought of it.



Then it was time to catch the freedom bird, and it was here that they discovered it wasn't the drinking that caused a hangover, it was the sleep. John and a couple of mates stayed in the general vicinity of the bar all night and next morning were as fit as fiddles and reckoned they could have flown the Caribou back to Saigon – no worries. The blokes who gave up during the night and who had hit the sack looked like they had been in a rocket attack.

Back in the late 1960's, communications between Vung Tau and home were not the click and talk facility they are today, the normal method being snail mail postage. While he was away, John's fiancé had been organising a wedding to be held on his return but as expected, the RAAF had an earlier requirement, they wanted him to head straight to Richmond for a conversion course onto the E model Hercs at 37SQN, which had been brought forward a week. John gets out the old pen and paper and hurries off a letter to the father of the bride and to his fiancé explaining that yes she really was marrying the Air Force and this is what happens sometimes. The letter left Vung Tau then went via the great circle route, via Honolulu and Washington and finally reached home. You can imagine the language; thank goodness the groom to be was miles away from telephone contact.

Foreign aid might be defined as a transfer of money from poor people in rich countries to rich people in poor countries.

37SQN was a different operation. All pilots believed that they were cut adrift from Caribou operations rather than being posting back to 38 Squadron as they had been seen to enjoy themselves too much flying the old girl. C130 operations in 37SQN were virtually all long range transport with the majority of flying heading back to Vietnam and Butterworth. Medevacs made for some long nights with about 14 hours flying from Butterworth back to Richmond. The troops coming back amazed all the aircrews. Troops missing limbs were elated to be going home. Many of their mates were going home on Cargo flights.



The 10th Anniversary dedication brought home the differences between Air Force members and the Army National Service Conscripts. John went with his neighbour to Canberra and heard that the Army Nashos were in the field one day, back to Vung Tau for a change of uniform and flown back to Australia, farewell, amen. No letting down to get back to normal life. The Air Force members came back to a Unit, back to normal Squadron life, back to OC's Parades and back to normal. OK, there were a few nasties like being labelled baby killers by the ABC but generally, the Air Force looked after its own.

Thank goodness all that has changed – see **Soldier Recovery Centre** [HERE](#)

Celebrating 12 months of marriage, John and bride Lyn were celebrating at the Kurmond Road House (at Kurrajong, up the hill from Richmond) with one bridesmaid when, lo and behold half 38SQN were there so naturally they invited themselves back for a few beers at the Griffio's MQ. Unfortunately, so too did the guitar wielding folk singer who was hell bent on finding some good antiwar songs that he could glean from these newly returned Vietnam heroes. He was not very happy so he started to get into the weed until a couple of the Caribou crew picked him up bodily and told him to find another party.

After 37 Sqn, he was posted to CFS for the Instructor's Course. He had a great time flying the Macchi, boring holes in clouds and then it was back to the Winjeel, the same tough old bird in which he had learned to fly many moons ago. Then it was a case of déjà vu, pack the bags, load the car and back to Point Cook though this time as an instructor not an instructee.

In April 1973, John was involved in his first aircraft accident investigation.



He has always felt more empathy for the poor pilot, he just happens to be the first at the scene of the accident. Winjeel A85-446 was on a training flight in the Ocean Grove area (down near Geelong) and was carrying out a practice forced landing when it went just that little bit too low and left its undercarriage on the far side of a creek. Of course the aircraft cartwheeled and came to a stop all broken but luckily the two drivers were able to relieve themselves of the aircraft relatively unhurt.

After a tour of Winjeel instructing and a short stint as ADC to AOC Support Command AVM Geoff Newstead it was back to 38 Sqn and the old Caribou for Instructing duties. 38SQN was losing two instructors to the Department so Little Chuck Connor and John were posted in. John says that even though he had flown the old girl so often into so many different places and it was as familiar to him as was his own shed, it was amazing just how much you forgot having not flown it for some years. There was a great team at 38, Trev Etheridge, George Bliss, Chuck Connor and Bob Bacchiella all under the guidance of Stan Clarke. A highlight of the tour was the UN changeover to Srinagar, Kashmir. There were also plenty of trips to PNG.

In 1972, 35 Sqn had returned to Australia from Vung Tau, taking up home at Richmond, but in 1976, the Squadron moved to Townsville where it was joined by Iroquois choppers and where with this mixed fleet of aircraft, it undertook army tactical support tasks and civil aid operations, including search and rescue, medical evacuations and flood relief work. John soon followed as Caribou FLTCDR and had a happy and uneventful time except in October 1978 he nearly lost one of his birds. Caribou A4-164 had crashed on take-off at Eliptamin, which is about 300klms SW of Wewak, out in the 'bush' and initially it was decided to leave it there. But with some great cooperation from the Navy with their HMAS Jervis Bay, the old Australian Trader, 12SQN

with their Chinook and AMTDU the aircraft was recovered, sent to Bankstown for repairs and eventually lived a happy life. In 1992 it was finally retired and used as a training aid for AMTDU at Richmond. The tail and wings were removed and are now fitted to A4-173 which is on display at the Queensland Air Museum at Caloundra.

In later years, during his next life as an Aviation Insurance Loss Assessor, John was back at Eilptamin to investigate a fatal MAF aircraft accident. He says getting out of there, late in the afternoon in a non-turbo charged C206 heading for Mt Hagen is another story.

His next posting was to Southern California for a staff position at the USAF Inspection and Safety Center (sic). Part of the job was looking after the health of a fleet of transport aircraft including the T-39, C140, C131, C12,



Caribou and Boeing 737. The other fun part of the job was to fly the T-39 Sabreliner (below) as a Line Pilot getting plenty of flying all over the Continental US. The three Foreign Officers, Canadian, German and Australian always seemed to bid for more flying than the US counterparts. A highlight was the Rex Riley Award programme where

they would take a T39 Sabreliner for a week and drop in unannounced to a whole range of bases to see how they would treat visiting crews. They would lodge a Flight Plan and naturally the Base Ops folk would call their mates to warn them. But, with plenty of options, they would go somewhere else, always having a night in Florida for a nice seafood meal.

The [Sabreliner](#) really was a geriatric jet, no autopilot, no antiskid and no weather radar, but it could get along very well with those F86 wings. There

was some great training at USC and at Arizona State University with aircraft mishap investigation and aircraft crash survival. But all good things must come to an end, John was aware that the posting to follow was back to Canberra. The Directorate of Air Force Safety was a very busy place then with several Mirage major accidents together with helicopters, both Air Force and Army. This set the scene for John's next career in a few years time.

After Canberra he received a command posting. It was time to head back to Lae in Papua New Guinea but this time to take over from John Harris as Commanding Officer Air Transport Squadron Papua New Guinea Defence Force. With six DC3s and four Nomads and a great team of RAAF, ARA, RAN and PNGDF instructors and tradesmen, John thoroughly enjoyed the



challenges of a command in a foreign country. Hearing charges in tok pidgin was something the CO's Short Law Course didn't prepare the new CO for. He says he had some of the finest PNG pilots and engineers thanks to the outstanding expat training team. What did concern him was when an Australian would ask how he gave a PNG national a captaincy. John would always say that he had to be happy to have his wife and kids fly in the aircraft with that pilot in command anywhere in the country. To that end, they often did.

A highlight, or low light, was the Mutiny. The troops were unhappy. The ground crew, mostly qualified as LAEME, were not getting any specialist pay and the pilots were getting the same as their infantry brothers. So, one Wednesday morning a deputation paid a visit to John's Office. 'Sir, we are going on strike' Well after John heard their story a meeting was set up downstairs in an hour where he advised them that it's not called a Strike in the Defence Force, it's called a Mutiny and now that he was aware of the Mutiny he would be the one that would go to the cells if he didn't do something about it. He said that the buses would be coming to take the men to sport or the cells after the meeting. The men, true to their word, stood by their guns so off they went to the cells. John had to break the news to the Commander, Brigadier General Ken Noga that he didn't have any aircraft to fly. The next day was the handover parade in Port Moresby so John fronted up in his trusty little Nomad and caught up with all other COs and XO's, Infantry, Engineers, Maritime, etc.



All were very happy that the Mutiny was quelled in a very amicable manner and that it wasn't them facing the music, as they said, 'Can you imagine how I would get on, a Sepik locking up my Highlanders, there would be Pay Back'. After looking at the possibility of helicopters for the Squadron, the PNG Government decided on buying three IAI Arave aircraft (right), a fixed wing aircraft, somewhere between the Caribou and DC3 for performance and



load carrying. John was awarded the MBE the next year. Was there a connection? Posting time came around again and John was posted back to the Directorate of Air Force Safety, or so he thought. A C130 was passing through Lae on a PNG trainer and the aircraft captain said, "That was a shame to hear that your posting has been changed" John was rather interested to find out a bit more about this so he called DPO to see if they knew more than he did. 'Don't worry', he was assured, "We will find something for you in Canberra". That's great, all the end of year postings have been filled so you get what's left over. This was the straw that did it for him and he started looking for a career that would give some stability for his children in high school. He was interested to see if he could put to some use his aircraft accident investigation experience.

In May 1987 he left the RAAF and took on the position of Queensland Manager for Airclaims, an international company of Aviation Insurance Loss Assessing, Surveys, Valuations and maintenance planning. Not long into the job, he was out in the field investigating mostly light aircraft, but everything from Airships, gliders, Ultra Lights, Turbines, to wide bodies. Locations varied as well, mostly in Queensland but also in New Guinea, Solomons, NT, WA, NSW, Victoria and South Korea. There were many and varied accidents from fuel starvation to mid-airs, gear up landings, gear down landings on water, fires, golf ball strikes, hail strikes, bird strikes, lightning strikes. The pic (left) shows the outcome of a Mooney approaching to land over a golf course



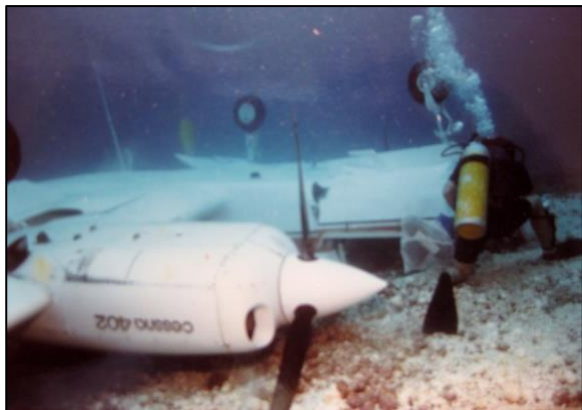
when a Slice caused a Nose Landing Gear to unlock and collapse. That's what you call a freak accident. There were Ag accidents, helicopter accidents, engine failures and sadly a double engine failure with his dear friend Jack Rydstrom in Caribou Serial Number 13 near Kiunga PNG.

Getting into and out of the accident sites was always a challenge. Very rarely do aeroplanes consider the investigators when they crash, and there were many occasions when he had to get to the site by winching, walking, climbing, wading, boating and/or flying. As time went by, the hills got higher, the bush thicker, rivers faster and deeper and at times he says you would be sitting in your office and waiting for the phone to ring. His car boot was always packed with gear to handle any of the above situations or to attend a board room or the General Manager's offices.



The Rabaul volcano eruption was an interesting time. 'Go to Rabaul'. 'Rabaul is a disaster Zone' "Don't worry, you have wantoks, you will get in, somehow". It was a surreal Rabaul that John was faced with as he rounded up the volcanic ash covered Bell 206, Squirrell, Islander, Cessna 402, Cessna 206. The helicopters survived much better than the fixed wing aircraft and they were shipped back to Lae where they were washed down and sold on behalf of Underwriters.

There were always surprises. One accident he investigated was a Cessna 402 which went off the end of the runway and ended up upside down in water. John was there with David Inau, an ex PNGDF pilot and a PNG DCA aircraft accident investigator. They were sitting and chatting and having a think about what caused the accident, when a local came up, resplendent in all native attire and mumbled, “No gut. No gut.” The local pointed out that the aircraft had made a



straight in approach, he didn't overfly and check the surface wind and as the local said, “Nobody would land to the North West at this time of the year”. David and John both looked incredulous with that comment and the local offered the fact that he was an off duty weather forecaster from Moresby.

A later accident at Eliptamin brought him back to the Caribou accident site to see the remains of a Cessna 206 which had ended up against the hill. The excitement for the day followed. Leaving Eliptamin heading to Mt Hagen late in the afternoon in a non-turbo charged Cessna 206 with 5 adult males on board with build ups on the ranges was not a position that John was overly excited about. Finally landing at Mount Hagen, the sky was dark, and so too were all on board. John often found aircraft accident sites where he would expect fatalities and yet there were no injuries, sometimes too he saw accidents where the folk should not have died. When your time is up.



He came across a Winjeel while visiting a Cadet Unit at Mildura. Naturally he was interested in looking the cockpit to check the serial number. Yes, it was 446, the ghost of Ocean Grove.

In 2004 the time had come to leave aviation insurance game as the company was downsizing and closing offices. Now it can be very difficult trying to get back into the workforce at 58 and after writing copious letters, responding to advertisements where the job was obviously already filled, he became despondent. The realization was then; it's easier to get a job if you have a job. So he spent six months in the retail sector as a Workplace Health and Safety Officer then a further six months in the metal trades also as a WHOSO - at least it was a job.

Then he saw that the Australian Air Force Cadets were advertising for the position of Officer Commanding 2 Wing AAFC. Well they were looking for someone younger but they gave John an invitation to come in for an interview. Seven years later he has finally retired from what he considers an amazing time. He was very lucky serving in the Active Reserve until he was 67, visiting virtually all



of the AAFC Units throughout Australia and participating in RAAF Safe Audits, HAZCHEM Audits, Flying activities and working with 7,000 dedicated Cadets and staff.

The staff are mainly volunteers who give of their time for a mere honorarium. The youth being turned out are far better than those who went before and John is sure that many of them will finish up as CAF, CDF, Prime Minister or whatever they see as their challenge. Cadets are achieving. They have been going on to succeed in the Defence Force and other worthwhile careers and John is most grateful that he had the opportunity to serve.

John is now the Director of the Air Cadet Alumni and the web address is:

<http://www.aircadetsalumni.org.au/>