

Arthur's Articles.

I left you in my journey of life into the RAAF at 2.00 p.m. on the 24th August 1960, moments after five raw recruits had been attested into the Royal Australian Air Force. We were bundled into waiting taxis and driven across the Brisbane CBD, across the Brisbane River to the South Brisbane Station, the terminal of all interstate trains in the 1950's and 60's.



We were met by an RAAF Movements NCO who profusely apologised that we would not be given a sleeper as we were to alight from this train at Awaba Station (near Lake Macquarie NSW) at 4 a.m. the next morning. I do recall throngs of Life Insurance salesmen from every company in Brisbane surrounding us as we attempted to get on the train, trying to sell their wares. Their brisk activity interested me as either they were tackling us because we had just become wage earners of enormous sums or they knew that a train wreck on the Brisbane to Sydney line was imminent!

If I had succumbed to their salesmanship overtures, I would have had to make further explanation to my step-father on my next return home as he was the senior man in one of Brisbane's leading life insurance companies, and he would have expected that if I needed more life insurance, I would have been obliged to take it out through him.

The train trip to Awaba was unremarkable, and as planned, we arrived at Awaba Station in the early hours of the morning. Sleep had been patchy either due to the excitement of the day or the anticipation of what lay ahead.

On arrival at Awaba Station we were met by a five-ton International truck. The driver likewise apologised that a bus was not available to collect the five of us and our limited baggage. We were invited to climb into the back of the International truck with our luggage.

On arrival at RAAF Base Rathmines, we were met by a Corporal Drill Instructor (DI) with the forceful tones of, "Get out of that truck, you nasty little man!" Oh dear, I wasn't a nasty little man when I left the recruiting centre in Brisbane the day before.

Now my intention here is not to make comment about the issue of uniforms, accommodation, meals or their training methods. Being a Recruit Training Unit, I knew that the main reason I was sent to Rathmines was to convert my civilian thinking into that of a military man. On hearing a command or order in civilian life, it took time to debate the order and the probable outcome on each party before choosing to adopt that instruction or refuse it. While the military way was to react to the order or instruction immediately and without question. The story that went around was akin to the one when you are told to jump, the only question you dare ask is "How high?" I must say that I enjoyed my basic recruit training and I must confess that I believe I walked out of Rathmines three months later, almost in the mould of a 'military man'.



I was amused by the term 'Poolies' and soon found out, as many of you would know, that the 'Pool' was a repository for trainee's waiting for enough members to join them to commence their course. On my first 'Poolies' parade, I was dispatched to the Officers' Mess to wash dixies. "OK, I thought, I've never bashed dixies before. What are the perks?" I soon learnt that although it was monotonous, but it was not too hard work. However, the 'perks' were that the dixie bashers got to eat the left-over food that had been on offer to the Officers of the unit.



That reminded of a comic strip I once read of Bluey and Curly serving in the Army during World War II as written by Alex Gurney. While eating in the Mess hall, Bluey and Curley were asked by the Orderly Officer what they thought of the meal. Curly replied, "Just right, Sir." The O/O snapped back, "What do you mean, 'Just right?'" To which Curley cheekily replied, "Well, any better and it would have gone to the Officers' Mess and any worse and we couldn't have eaten it!" The Officers' Mess had the reputation of good food, and as a perk to the 'Poolie', my dixie bashing introduction to the RAAF, I confirmed Alex Gurney's theory.

The first weekend in the Air Force, all recruits had to work. I worked bashing dixies in the Officers' Mess. Great perks!

Somehow I must have let my liking for the position slip out for a few days ;later, on the morning Poolies' Parade when tasks were given out, I was changed from the Officers' Mess kitchen to the Boiler Room and my task was to keep the boilers stoked with coke to maintain hot water in the showers for the trainees.

A previous guy had been threatened by the trainees that if he let the hot water stop flowing and the boilers went out, they would throw him into the beautiful Lake Macquarie. He took the threat made jokingly, seriously, and never slept causing him to collapse from which he found the door out of the Air Force and not his upcoming recruit course.

I managed a schedule between sleep, stoking the boilers, relaxation, stoking the boilers, taking my meals, stoking the boilers which provided a constant flow of hot water, and I must say, life was relatively easy, and I was never threatened to be thrown into Lake Macquarie!

I began Recruit Course No. 543 after a short while and as I say, revelled in the study, lectures, parade duty, bivouacs, and life was not much different to when I attended Air Force Cadet camps at RAAF Base Archerfield. We were the last course to hold a passing out parade at Rathmines as Course No. 544 finished there but they were not afforded a passing out parade.

After the RAAF handed over the base, it became a Holiday Camp. Except for all the sweat and tears of the basic recruit course, we believed we were in a Holiday Camp. Rathmines was a beautiful place on the banks of the Lake Macquarie, a place I will never forget.

An insurance salesman had purchased one of the crash boats that were on standby when Rathmines housed Flying Boats. I recall the number of his former crash-boat was JK-047. This suave insurance salesman would canvas the base after working hours and invite recruits to join



him on a day on JK-047. I joined him one Saturday and we went down the lake to Nelson's Point and watched a regatta down there. Of course, his next visit to those recruits he had invited on his crash boat the previous weekend would be his first 'customers' to hear all the benefits of his brand of life insurance. You guessed it. I had a lovely day on JK-047 but did not succumb to his spiel.



Along the banks of the Lake Macquarie stood several disused hangars. Stories were rife among the troops that one held a famous Catalina Flying Boat. No one had ever seen the Catalina, but stories still multiplied. Years later, I was going to gym with a fellow veteran and we began talking about this mysterious Catalina that was allegedly housed in one of the hangars on the shores of lake Macquarie. During World War II, [Rathmines](#) was the largest Sea-plane base in the southern hemisphere. Was this the last of the 168 flying boats that were based at Rathmines? My gym colleague, Hap Pryor, cast some light on this mysterious last Catalina supposedly in the hangars at Rathmines.

Hap had joined the Air Force two years before me from Adaminaby near Cooma in N.S.W. Hap had been posted to Rathmines to do his basic recruit course. He then moved on to Wagga to become an Airframe Fitter and rose to the rank of Sergeant before undertaking a Warrant Officer Disciplinary (WOD) course at Point Cook. Hap revealed that the front of the hangar that housed the Catalina was open at the end facing the lake. That makes sense, I thought. This Catalina (right) was later towed to Sydney on a barge and is presently on display at the Powerhouse Museum in Darling Harbour.



Access to Rathmines was rather remote. I recall one weekend a group from my course decided to go into Newcastle after stand-down one Friday. One of our course members had been an ice-skater and he was going to demonstrate how easy it is to ice skate to the rest of us inquisitive would-be ice skaters.

We hitched a ride into Toronto Station and took the local train to Newcastle. We arrived at the ice rink but our colleague, on showing how easy it is to skate, did a 180, head to tail, and fell on the ice, splitting his head open. The ice-skating lesson was over and medical assistance was the order of the day. Later that night, we headed back to Rathmines and as there was no public transport running to Toronto or Rathmines for that matter, the group had to hitch-hike back to Rathmines. I never ventured outside Rathmines on a weekend again unless it was the time, I sailed on JK-047 or the one visit to Sydney or the two or three visits home to Brisbane.

Three of us on Course 543 decided to take in the 'big smoke' of Sydney one weekend. We answered a notice pinned on the notice board placed by Rathmines WOD, Warrant Officer Carter. Now Warrant Officer Carter was probably a very nice man, but he had a reputation to uphold and



as WOD of a Recruit Training Unit, he had to be one stepdown from a pugilist in his authority and control of his recruits.

This massive man drove the three of us to Sydney with a Sergeant Drill Instructor as his front seat passenger. They chatted throughout the south bound and the north bound journeys. We three recruits sat quietly in the back seat going down to Sydney and on our return without saying a word to our front seat passengers. We paid the driver for our trip but made sure his path never crossed ours again during our time at Rathmines. As I say, he probably was a very nice man, but he sure had the wind up his recruits.

There was a transport driver, George Dyett, who was at the end of his twenty-year career, with a family in Ipswich, he was posted to Rathmines to see out his career before drawing a pension. George liked to go home to Ipswich every weekend unless he was on duty. Two or three times he took two others and me to defray his travel expenses. In those days our travel time had to include times we lost while waiting for any of the five ferries we had to cross rivers if we went via the Pacific Highway, so we mainly chose to travel the New England Highway.

On the last occasion, on our return journey to Rathmines, George's Ford Prefect Mark Two (probably a 1955/56 model,) began to experience engine trouble just out of Ipswich. It coughed and spluttered all the way to Rathmines, arriving just before parade time on the Monday morning. Somehow the three recruits made it to the parade, but due to the lack of sleep, Monday became a very long day. I never risked a trip home of a weekend after that.



After the RAAF left Rathmines, some of the park was sold by the local council but most of it remains as a recreational area. The New South Wales Government listed the former RAAF Base site as a Heritage Site. The local council holds a 'back-to-Rathmines' event every two years with the next event due in May 2021.

Rathmines holds a very soft spot in my life, being the first RAAF base I served at in my Permanent Air Force career. If you count all RAAF service, it was the second base as I remember RAAF Base Archerfield, during my service as an Air Cadet with No. 15 Flight, when the main road to Beaudesert had to be closed to traffic while an RAAF Lincoln Bomber crossed the road to taxi before take-off.

I trust I have rekindled many happy memories of RAAF Base Rathmines for some of our readers, but if I have stirred up unpleasant memories for some, I do apologise but I will still report, sixty years after the event, I liked Rathmines and the memories I hold of my four short months there are very comforting.

In late November 1960, having passed out from Number One Recruit Training Unit as a fully militarised model of a 1960's airman, (or was it the opposite of 'model' which is 'a horrible example?') I headed south by train for my next adventure, to RAAF Base Ballarat, to Radio



School where many RAAF members of that era were trained, either at the School of Radio or its predecessor, the RAAF Wireless Air Gunners' School.

Memories of RAAF People Who Influenced Me

One of the people who most influenced my almost twenty-six-year RAAF career was John Rossiter. John was a Squadron Leader Navigator when posted to Hong Kong as the Commanding Officer of Base Squadron Butterworth (Detachment A) as well as Commander, Australian Forces Hong Kong.



John Rossiter (C.O.) enjoys a relaxing Unit Hawaiian Night in Hong Kong

I arrived at Base Squadron Butterworth (Detachment A) in April 1972 when Squadron Leader Graham Perske was the C.O. Graham was replaced by John Rossiter in 1973. John took a keen interest in the Unit's Rugby Union team, the 'Koalas'. The Unit did not attract sufficient Rugby players so the Koalas opened their ranks to British civilians and anyone who wanted a run of a Sunday afternoon, either on the hard surface of the Happy Valley football ground in Causeway Bay or the slightly grassier field at the British Military Hospital on the mainland. John was pleased to accept the position of Patron of the Koalas.

In Hong Kong, I studied at the British Ministry of Defence's Chinese Language School at Lye Yue Mun, just at the top of the hill from the Shau Kei Wan tram terminus. My commitment to the classroom at Lye Yue Mun was, to say the least, 'part-time'. I had a tutor three days a week and the rest of my study time was private study at home.



I found an outlet in the Unit's Rugby Union football team, the 'Koalas'. On Sundays when the team would play any team that chose to play against us, I ran the line as a referee.



I began writing a weekly two-page sheet, appropriately called 'The Gum Leaf', and told the world of this great Rugby Union team in Hong Kong that would take on all challengers, along with weekly tit-bits about the members and their wives.

The newsletter had a wide distribution. Many football teams swallowed the bumf of our supposed prowess. We played teams from the visiting ships such as HMAS Paramatta. Scores may not have reflected our greatness being in the fifties to the Koalas score of nil! But we always boasted that we won the drinking competition after the game. We played military teams from Singapore,



the French training ship, the S.S. Forbin, (a genuine sailing ship,) and local British Army teams all with a similar result. Koalas – nil, but the after-match drinking competition was always ours!



The 'Koalas' in action at the British Military Hospital field in Hong Kong

With encouragement from our members, I commenced writing an end-of-season glossy "Gum Leaf" magazine. I made an appointment with the Manager of Rothmans (cigarettes) Hong Kong who agreed to meet me at the exclusive Hong Kong Club. I boldly bound into the Hong Kong Club at this gentleman's invitation and laid my plans to publish a glossy magazine, on the line.

Thankfully, the Manager of Rothmans saw an opportunity to 'get his word out' and agreed that if he could have the full back page to advertise his product, he would pay all publishing expenses for us. We went to print. Mr. Rothmans was very generous to our extraordinarily unworthy Rugby Union team. We had the name. Shame we couldn't win a game! Behind all the organisation going on behind the scenes was our Commanding Officer and Patron of the Koalas Rugby Union football team, John Rossiter.

At football season's end, we held a break-up party in the China Fleet Club in Wan Chai. Meadows Freight, a local Hong Kong company owned by an expatriate Australian, a great supporter both on the field and financially of the Koalas, provided Four and Twenty pies and Fourx beer from Sydney. A great night was had but nine months later, ten of our Koalas members' wives gave birth. Our daughter, Paula, was one of those babies. We all agreed that it was something in the Aussie pies or the beer! I also used the night to launch my glossy 'Gum Leaf' magazine.



After the release and ready acceptance of the glossy 'Gum Leaf' magazine, John called me into his office one day, and commented on the glossy magazine I had produced. He asked me why I wasn't an officer? I made a disparaging smart remark, although inappropriate, to my



Commanding Officer. John insisted he would like to write me up for a commission. I left Hong Kong with John Rossiter's best wishes in November 1974. On the 5th March 1975, I was commissioned as a Pilot Officer.

I never met John Rossiter again. Nevertheless, forty-five years later, I can say "Thank you John Rossiter for the faith you had in me to write me up so well that I did gain my commission."

I've always pondered the fact if it was because of my linguistic skills that saw me commissioned or was it because I produced the glossy 'Gum Leaf' magazine in 1974? I'll never know but can only guess! "Go Koalas! Go Koalas! Go Koalas!"

