



My Story

Neil Handsley

Just Cruisin'

The girl (her name was June Smith) across the City Pharmacy counter in Rockhampton, in April 1959, was very attractive and had a nice voice to boot. She had spotted me from her office (I had popped in to buy a film). She believed I was Allan – my identical twin brother.

“No’ I responded, “Allan is my brother, my name is Neil. I’m in the RAAF and home on leave from my Wings in Malaya. June and Allan knew each other from the old School of Arts dances held in Rocky.



A day or two later I was admitted to Tanarchy hospital for an appendix removal. I asked Allan to get June to visit as I definitely wanted to know her better. On release from hospital we enjoyed some time together and it wasn't long before we became very fond of each other. On my return to Malaya (now Malaysia) we started to regularly correspond over the next two years or so.

“Why am I telling you all this.....?” Upon reflection it occurs to me that meeting June and hoping that something bigger might come of it, I came to realise that I should try to get my wanderlust satisfied before I settled down (married), So, on return to Butterworth, I started to look at ways and means of doing some serious adventure travel. I must tell my readers that my situation was ideal to enjoy the travel opportunities afforded by the joint air forces “indulgence flights” system. Airmen from several friendly forces could travel internationally for just token costs on inter-service aircraft.

So...I saved a little money, pored over maps, talked to people who knew about such things and delved deeper into “indulgence” flights. I gradually formed the idea that I might be





able to get as far as New York, where my brother Don lived and worked. It was just a bit scary to have the Atlas show me that New York was about half-way around the World – an awful long way – especially to hitchhike! I had not seen Don for seven years.

I figured on needing about 12 weeks to do such a trip, given that I would almost certainly have to wait for space (a seat) on some flights during the trip and, of course, time to absorb the delights of each stopover location.

I had a fortunate relief from the time-required problem. On return to Wing in April 1959 the RAAF credited my leave back with an extra week, of hospital time and ten days for “post-operative” leave. I had elected to go straight back to work on return to Base but by saving up 18 month’s worth of recreation leave and adding the afore-mentioned lots, I could just manage the leave I needed to write to Don and Olwyn in New York and tell them “Here I come!” Later, they told me they thought it “quite mad” that I should attempt such craziness! Most of my RAAF mates agreed with that opinion but I was encouraged by other less inhibited friends.



Developing some sort of a rough plan took some time, but detailed planning was impossible because my travel must be opportunistic, after all, I wasn’t going to be able to afford airline tickets.

There was some money in my Rockhampton Bank account, so I arranged to be able to draw on this at the Chartered Bank, Wall St, New York. I changed my Malayan “Straits” dollars into traveller’s cheques and cash in the form of US dollars and Pounds Sterling.

My recreation leave application showed Hong Kong as my destination, this small contrivance was required to avoid having to deposit a huge amount of money to cover the RAAF’s cost in case I had to be repatriated all the way from New York. Clearly a return from Hong Kong would cost much less. I also got a letter from my Wing Commander “The Black Prince” stating that I was on approved travel leave – and words to the effect that assistance from friendly Air Forces would be appreciated. My RAAF identity card and passport completed my meagre paperwork pack.

You know the travel dictum.... “Take half the luggage and twice the money” I packed light, just one small suitcase and a money belt for my humble loot, also my 35mm Pentax SLR camera and spare films.

Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam – Hong Kong.

I caught the weekly “Butt-PF” flight to Changi Singapore. Flights were provided by RAAF, RAF and RZAF aircraft. Overnight accommodation was at the Union Jack Club, just off Singapore’s famous Orchard Road. It was interesting to eat (cheaply) from the street Makan (food)





carts and to see the amazing proliferation of exotic goods in the shops. Closing time was, officially, 9PM, but many stayed open until midnight, a 14 hour trading day.



Next morning the RAF had a big 4-engined Handley Page “Hastings” lined up for the flight to Saigon (Vietnam) and Kai Tak (Hong Kong). The only cost to me was GB£1.6.3 for my in-flight meals. In today’s dollars this equates to about \$2.65. The travel component was free. By the way, the flight meals were surprisingly quite good. I still have the RAF account for the charge!

In Saigon there was only time for a quick look around the city while our RAF “Hastings” was being readied for the next leg to Hong Kong. Lasting impressions are of wide streets and big roundabouts, left hand drive cars with much honking to clear all the small-cart traffic, very French I thought.

Back on the plane and off to Kai Tak airport, feeling relieved that things have gone well, thus far. Although I was generally optimistic, I must admit to having, at the time, a few fears of things going “belly-up” later in the trip.

How exciting it was to get my first sight of exotic Hong Kong, then a vigorous British Colony. As we approached Kai Tak airport we did the infamous “slip” down to squeeze our aircraft between rows of apartment buildings, all with long bamboo poles poking out of every window, supporting their washing and between the rows of taller buildings were thousands of tiny dwellings, densely packed. Of course, the famous harbour looked magnificent as we flew over, with thousands of ships, moored and moving, from giant white cruise liners to humble bumboats and sampans. I could hardly wait to breathe it all in from a sea level perspective.

The local RAF Transport Unit kindly provided road transport to “town” where I found a cheapie, but clean, boarding house called “May Lodge”. It was near the big shops in Kowloon, which is the



China mainland (“New Territories”) part of the Colony. The other main area is Victoria Island, with its distinctive big-business skyscrapers.

Before I left Kai Tak airport for the City I put in a request for a seat on any RAF aircraft “heading north” as I very much wanted to visit Japan, partly because of my considerable interest in the martial art of Ju-Jitsu, however, I realised that the RAF did not have much traffic out of Hong Kong to Japan so I would need to try my luck with the USAF instead. I left my “May Lodge” contact details with their transport office, they said they’d “let me know”. It didn’t fill me with great confidence.



Anyway, here I was in exciting Hong Kong, with so many wondrous things to see and do, of course, I had to stay mindful that I’d need to watch my spending as I had not even completed a tenth of the total distance and not yet one-twentieth of the time allowed.

One good break was to meet up with two young taxi owners from Mt Isa who were cashed up enough to be travelling on full Qantas round-the-world tickets. They were also staying at May Lodge. We hit it off really well and visited many of the Colony’s most interesting places and events, one being a memorable train trip up through the New Territories to the last station before the Chinese border. We were rudely put off the train and I was questioned about “taking pictures of China.” (We could see the border villages from the train.)

A bit nonplussed to find that there were no trains, or other public transport, heading homeward, “you must wait long time” they said, so we hiked off in the general direction of Kowloon, hot and sweaty on a sultry June day. This area was the real old-world Chinese environment, the only concession to us “barbarians” being the Coco-Cola and beer that were readily available and cheap.

Hiking closer to our destination we found a rattletrap old bus going our way. A slow, bumpy, but hugely interesting ride followed, my camera was working overtime. I had never seen such sights and the smells were even more remarkable. I was wallowing in it!

The “taxi-twins” and I kept up a relentless day and night effort to see and do as much as possible in the time available. They had allowed a week in Hong Kong on the Qantas itinerary.

Impressions of Hong Kong – June 1960.

Teeming people, 95% Chinese, industrious (sometimes frenetic), an intense free-enterprise society. And! – the pungent odours, exotic shapes and colours everywhere. Almost everything imported, every imaginable kind of food, the cheap street food vendors, the wonderful floating restaurants of Aberdeen, specialising in live fish and crustaceans. Frequent trips on the “Star Ferries” across Hong Kong harbour between Kowloon and Victoria Island. The endless shopping and the sport of bargaining with stallholders on prices. Taking the cable railway to the top of “The Peak” on Victoria Island and glorious views to be had from there, in all directions. The busy harbour, junks, bumboats, tugs, ferries, freighters, cruise liners.....you name it.



Very few negatives.....glimpsing the killing of dogs, a delicacy for well-heeled Chinese, a general lack of hygiene (pure filth on some places) and apparently, little compassion for extreme unfortunates.

Yes, overall, Hong Kong (Fragrant Harbour) was quite an adventure.

Adventuring in Hong Kong deserves its own discrete booklet so I shall not go on endlessly, suffice to say that after nine or ten day in Honkers, I wanted to continue enjoying more of the same, but I was starting to feel a bit anxious about finding a service to Japan.

Japan

So I took myself out to the USAF Air Transport office to see if I could sweet talk them into a freebee to Japan and soon, please. The Yanks were intrigued at my travel plans and we hit it off pretty good, so much so that only two days later I got a call to say "Get yer cotton pikker out here, quick smart and I can get you on a MATS DC4 leaving later today".



I was out there in a flash, good thing I travelled light. At the airport I had to personally ask the aircraft commander, a USAF Captain with an unusual American Indian name, if I could get the lift. He proved to be a very decent bloke but was careful to first check my documents, including a passport visa for Japan, before putting my name on the PAX (passenger) manifest. Boy, was I greatly relieved to be on my way again, not wanting to get "behind the 8-ball" time wise.

Our destination was Tachikawa Air Base near Tokyo, but we would have a refuelling stop at Kadena AFB on Okinawa. From my martial arts interest I knew that Okinawa was the birthplace of Karate (meaning "open hands") the inference being "not holding a weapon" and originating from centuries ago when the mainland Japanese cruelly dominated the Okinawans and took all weapons from them. The locals responded by raining their hands and feet (mainly) to become weapons.



Mid 1960 was a mere 15 years from the end of WW2. It seemed to me that the Japanese had not yet fully recovered. The old culture predominated but it seemed ready to meld with all the modern changes coming in. It was so interesting to be literally rubbing shoulders with both cultures, simultaneously.

There were so many things I wanted to experience. I walked miles around Tokyo absorbing the sights and sounds. Even then the pace of life was hectic, at least when compared to sleepy Malaya. I used excellent trains to explore the country, but once outside Tokyo I found almost no English spoken and I had only a handful of Japanese words and phrases. A cheap hotel in Tokyo was pretty exxy, so I stayed at the YMCA with mainly mature American students, many of whom were learning Japanese and taking degrees in Tokyo Universities.

It was interesting to lean about their views on events in Japan. One day I was accidentally caught-up in a huge anti-US demonstration on the [Ginza](#) – but the ten thousand noisy students showed no animosity towards little ole me! The YMCA crew said that the students were mainly “rent-a-crowd” and just having a fun day away from the oppression of their strict study regime. The demonstration was against the USAF for sending the anti-Russian Lockheed U2 “spy-flights”. The Japanese feared Russian missile retaliation against their cities. Seemed reasonable to me!



I very much wanted to experience the “old” Japan, so I jumped on a train to Kyoto, Japan’s ancient capital and absolutely reeking with antiquity. My readers need to realise that, in the 50’s and 60’s travel costs to other countries, out of Australia, were hugely expensive. It was so different from the present day where practically every Aussie you speak to has travelled overseas. In Japan in 1960, I continually looked about to find myself the only Westerner in the crowd. That did not bother me, probably because it added to the sensation of being a part of the culture. I had to continue pinching myself to really believe that all these wonderful things were actually happening to me.

Coming as I did from a county with only about 200 years of Western culture, it was fascinating, even a bit spooky, to be surrounded by revered shrines and temples of (say) thirty generations ago occupying these same places. I felt very privileged to be able to look, touch and smell these treasured things.

In Tokyo I had enjoyed my visit to the “Budokan” – world headquarters of Judo. Kyoto was the home of Ju-Jitsu and I hunted the “Do-Jo” but I was not able to arrange some time on the mats. In old Japan it was not the done thing to just walk-in and participate.

A major delight in Kyoto was to stay for a week or so in a genuine old-world Japanese Inn. I was the only foreigner there and the staff seemed delighted to have me. I was deliciously spoiled with a maid giving me, daily, a wonderful “bucket” bath, then into a fire-heated hot tub for a relaxing soak after each day’s sight-seeing. Initially I was a bit uncertain about the nudity bit, but I came to realise that the Japanese had no Western type hang-ups about nudity. Communal bathing was normal and public toilets (Benjo’s) were genderless all over the country.



Meals were served in my room, everything immaculate yet simple. In Japan, “less is better”. Meals were small but tasty and exquisitely served. The final account was more than I could really afford, but it was such a wonderful experience that I would not have missed it for anything.

USA

Back on the train to Tokyo and the YMCA, then a keen enquiry to the USAF transport office about flights to the West Coast of the USA. The news was not good. Serious violence had erupted in Africa’s Congo. As several western countries had strong presences there, their Air Forces were busily engaged in repatriating their citizens. I was told that USAF and RAF transport aircraft had a big priority for Congo operations – so “I’d better find another way of getting to the US” they said.

The airfare was unaffordable so I checked out the ship rate with “American President Lines”, it was OK, but I had to take a bunk in the men’ dormitory, right by the big noisy propeller shaft. The voyage was to take 12 days to San Francisco, with a 12 hour stop over in Honolulu en-route. For the record, I boarded the big USS President Wilson (built 1948, length = 609ft, speed = 20kt) on the 8th July, 1960. The fare was US\$315 (I still have the ticket.) Of course, the expense was unwelcome but it was inevitable, and a must if I was to progress my round-the-world adventure.



My shipboard bunkmates were mostly American students, ex Asian Universities. I palled up with a John Gregory, a zoologist and definitely a “hippee”. One of the new sixties’ “flower power” generation. Such was his liberation from old conservative habits that he delighted in telling me that his father, a leading doctor, was travelling first class, whilst his poor son was in “steerage.”



Even so, John Gregory was very friendly and introduced me to several of his mates. There followed many good times, on board, shared with interesting friends in a lively fun atmosphere.

Luckily, the seas were dead calm, the sailors calling it “a millpond”. The eight days to Honolulu went quickly enough, with plenty of facilities to have some fun, after all, this was a holiday for me, as well as transport to a destination. On board a cruise ship is a u-beaut way to vacation.



Approaching Honolulu, it was all picture-postcard stuff, quite beautiful. The ship’s plan was for a 7am to 7pm stopover, so my mates and I hired a car (split 4 ways) and toured most of Hawaii’s “Big Island”, Oahu. The surf on the back beaches was huge, I had never seen such gigantic waves. I was a keen swimmer but there was no way I was taking on that lot. We settled for a quiet restaurant pool and seafood lunch – huge and delicious.

Back on board at 6pm, castoff and heading east for San Francisco. Much excitement in me about all this, of course I didn’t have a clue about how I was going to get to New York, but I supposed something would turn up.

Abruptly, the weather turned very bad, big seas and lots of wind and rain. So many were seasick (not me) that all the dining halls were almost empty. About all one could do, for three days, or so, was to hole-up in the dorm and read/sleep. Fair weather again on the last day and the ship received a group of US Customs’ agents to clear our documents before entering the port of San Francisco later that day. A Customs Patrol boat followed us all the way into the berth in case passengers dropped waterproof packages of drugs overboard for later recovery. In 1960, the USA was suspicious about all traffic from Asia. Imports from China, in particular, were banned. Such was the paranoia of the period.

My American friends had been warning me about what a pack of B’s the immigration and Customs Officers were and I noticed several disgruntled passengers in front of me having their suitcases turned over and messed up.



What saved me was I wore my RAAF Uniform and the Customs Officer immediately spotted the “Australia” flash on my shoulders. Straight away he was very friendly to me, wanting to know where I was travelling to, where I come from, why was I here. Then he told me that his brother was in Australia during WW2 and that he always said how friendly the Aussies were toward him. I was obviously in good hands! Addressing my humble suitcase he queried, “Haven’t got anything in there that you shouldn’t have, have you son?” I replied that “I am just a poor Aussie airman who could not afford to buy anything worth trying to smuggle in”. That seemed to hit his funny-bone. I slipped him a small presentation pack of Australian stamps “for his nephew who saves stamps” – you understand? He put a big chalked tick on my case and I was outa-there!

Outside Customs I met up with my American friends, two of whom were a bit peeved that I had “sweet talked” the Customs Officer into an easy processing. It really was a combo of good luck and managing the situation well. I reflected later that one skill I was learning was “human relations” – and I was to exercise it more and more in the weeks ahead.

Luckily, John Gregory invited me to stay with him in Sausalito, near San Francisco and it was really good to meet his family and friends who received me warmly. I quickly found that Aussies were “flavour of the month” with Americans. They all seemed to know about Australia’s brilliant performances in the Melbourne Olympics (1956), four years previously and Australians were, at the time, world champions in a dozen or so sports other than the Olympic ones. When one of the local Sausalito lot beat me at darts, (a game I did not play) they were cock-a-hoop about it. “Gee whiz, beating an Aussie, that’s cool man”. They were nearly all hippies, more commonly called beatniks at that time. Sweet serene people though.

The San Francisco weather was great (mid-summer) and we cruised all over, seeing the sights in John’s ragtop VW, about the most popular car for young people in that area. I had to spend some time checking-out the several travel options to New York. Chances by USAF air transport were not good, as the Congo revolt was still occupying a lot of their fleet. Quite a disappointment for me.



A bus (coach) trip was the cheapest but would take 4 days and I reckoned I’d be a zombie on arrival in New York. I found an air charter operator using Douglas DC-4s who charged a fair price, so I went with them. The airplane looked a bit beat-up as I boarded early evening and took an awful long time to get to O’Hare airfield in Chicago. It was good fun flirting with the Stewardesses, they were fascinated with my “Aussie accent”.

My suspicions about the DC-4 proved about right as it went unserviceable on arrival into Chicago and the charter operator needed several hours to get us pax into onward flights. Around the airport were travelling groups of Republican Party supporters attending their Chicago convention. I had never seen (in the flesh) such ballyhoo and extravagance. Boy, the Yanks really take their elections (due in November) very seriously, not laid back like us Aussies. Subsequently, it was very interesting to follow the political process in the print and TV media. As brother Don was a sub-editor with AAP he was able to explain all these strange goings on.



Back at the airline office, I was relieved that they had found me a seat on a regular North West Airlines DC-6 service direct to New York, but not to Kennedy Airport as originally intended by the charter, instead we were to land at Idlewild Airport. At Chicago I had to make a hurried call to Don as he was originally to have met me at Kennedy. *Note: The New York airport had its name changed after President John Kennedy was elected later on Nov 1960.*

Quite a nice flight with North West Airlines and what a relief it was to see Don heading towards me at Idlewild. Smiles all around as I exuberantly shouted to Don..."Good on you Aussie – I'm right here. I've made it."



I was almost exactly half-way around this big old world of ours and feeling elated that I had made it this far. Lots of adventures to recount and subsequently hopeful of more to come. Looking back....a special time in a long and eventful life.

It was great to give my elder brother Don a big hug, I had not seen him for seven years as he and Olwyn had been living in the UK and America for most of that time. They had two children, Jennifer about six and Sarah about eighteen months. They were later to have two more lovely daughters, Elizabeth and Emily, both born in Australia.

Don and family lived in New York's "Queens" district. Don worked in downtown Manhattan Island, not far from its heartland, Times Square.

Again, I "put my name down" for a USAF (or other service) flight to the UK, or Western Europe, but they told me, "It don't look good son". Anyway, not to worry, here I was in the "Big Apple" one of the World's most exciting cities. Don kindly gave me a press pass which eased my way into all sorts of interesting places and events. Also, my usual civvy dress of light blue shirt and slacks was usually as "Air Force" and often gave me free or discounted entry to places of interest and entertainment. It was all a bit overwhelming, gazing up at so many ninety-story skyscrapers. My trusty Pentax camera was running hot, chewing up endless rolls of 35mm colour slide film, which were all the go at the time. Prints were out, slides were in.

Money was running down so I hit the Chartered Bank in Wall Street to see if those "dopey" bank clerks in Rockhampton had sent my US\$250 draft over. I showed the Chartered Bank clerk my passport and (without much confidence) asked him "Do you have any US dollars for me?" He filed through a box of record cards, then glanced up and said, "Yep, it's here son – how would you like it?" It was a big relief, I can tell you and I later wrote to the Rocky Commonwealth Bank to thank them for their good work. I didn't have the guts to tell them about my ill-considered "dopey" epithet.

Olwyn and Don were very good to me, I hoped that I wasn't being too much of a bother since I was out adventuring pretty much all day, every day. So much did I see and do that my New York experiences would take a booklet of their own to make a full record. Suffice to say that forty-three years later, when I see or hear New York images, I usually find myself responding with "hey – I've been there" or "I've experienced that." Such recollections are very sweet and nostalgic, are they not?



Recollections of New York City – August 1960

Phew!...the Big Apple...it was almost overwhelming. Great energy all about, everyone busy and going somewhere. I noted the typical big city complex in that the locals largely avoid eye contact and are a bit suspicious of strangers yet wonderfully friendly and generous after introductions. Again, Aussies seemed to be flavour of the month.

On the streets, a huge yet orderly traffic flow, almost all of it Yellow Cabs. I heard that the company orders them in batches of at least 10,000 per time and the auto factory even puts on a special line for them.

The tallest skyscrapers anywhere, I took photos from the highest, the Empire State building – 92 floors I think. The gorgeous display of flashing neon signs at Times Square and the incredible masterpiece of the huge Central Park. This is not your typical city park, no Sir! New York's is a big as a small town, over 100 city blocks square. Every kind of relaxing facility is there. It sounds like an American boast but they really do have two lakes, "big enough to launch a ship on."



A sightseeing boat ride around Manhattan Island, on board people from all the lands on earth, I was, perhaps the only Aussie there.

Don's press pass got me into the fabled Yankee Stadium in the Bronx to see a baseball twilight double header. The combatants were top teams, the New York Yankees and the Kansas City Indians. I got some great telephoto shots of the game which I greatly enjoyed and at last found



out what a Hershey Bar and Babe ruth tasked like. (Famous American candy bars.) Also, the hot dogs were huge, cheap and delicious.



Around town, cheap fast-food everywhere, thus conserving my precious cache of dollars. New Yorkers, I noted, were hearty eaters. Don and Olwyn's kind hospitality helped enormously and I do thank them for that. Their outrageous journo friends were a delight to talk to, they sure were having a great time in the USA.

Really, I can scarcely scratch the surface here. As the Americans say, "the Big Apple is something else."

United Kingdom.

After three weeks or so I figured I'd better be on my way further eastwards. There had been no offers of service flights so I thought it a good idea to make a personal visit to the big air transport centre at Fort Dix Air Force base in New Jersey to check out possibilities. I took a Trailways coach as the Base was en-route to Washington DC.



At the Base I spoke to the USAF Master Sergeant who was friendly but amazed that I had got "this far with skimpy paperwork." I told him that we did these types of things in a pretty laid-back sort of way in Australia. He'd never heard of Malaya and didn't know "where the heck it is." Trying to be helpful he said he'd see what he could do, so I joined about a hundred others in a big waiting lounge for about three hours. At the end of it, the best they could offer was a ride on a US Navy Neptune sub-hunter/patrol aircraft going to Casablanca, Morocco. A look at the wall map showed me that this was not much closer to the UK than my present Fort Dix location, so I said, thanks, but no thanks. With my tail between my legs I took the bus back to New York.

This was the first time, during the trip, that I felt ill-at-ease about my situation. I was facing more expense with the failure to get free service transport and crossing the Atlantic by ship was going to hack further into my time reserves. Actually, I didn't have any reserves for I counted that it had taken just over six of my twelve weeks to travel only half the distance required.

So it was back to Don and Olwyn's place for a few days to find a reasonable travel alternative. At their place we had a lot of Don's journalist friends dropping in for a yarn and a drink. Journalists are pretty good at both! One wanted me to go on a local TV game-show called "To Tell the Truth" where I was to pretend that I was a kangaroo shooter from Australia. That did not happen because I booked on the "Queen Mary," then the biggest of all passenger liners, for the four-day voyage to Southampton.

Would you believe it, two days before sailing date a crew strike cancelled the trip. The best option then, since time was getting on, was a BOAC (now British Airways) ticket to Prestwick, Scotland. The drama was still not finished as, whilst waiting in the pre-departure lounge, BOAC cancelled the "Britannia" flight due to a serious fuel leak in the aircraft. It was off to the bar and free afternoon



tea whilst they sorted 108 of us on to other flights. As it turned out I got an upgrade to a Boeing 707, faster than the turbo-prop Britannia.

Then there was the 6½ hour flight across the Atlantic, far below. Prestwick, Scotland was windy and very cold, despite it being mid-summer. I still have a copy of the ticket, dated 6 August 1960, but it does not show the fare paid. I'd guess about US\$250. Being a jet engine specialist, I was interested to note that our BOAC Boeing 707 was fitted with the Rolls Royce Conway turbo fans, most 707s carried the American P&W JT3-D engines.



Since my grandfather on my mother's side was Scottish (Dundee)) I definitely wanted to spend some time in Scotland, yet I needed to be mindful that I was a wee bit short of time. So, it was off to Scottish Omnibuses to book a ticket to London but first I was to enjoy three or four sightseeing days in and around Edinburgh. Oh, I could feel my Scottish genes pulsing away. The weather was fine and the locals very friendly, more so than the conservative English, me thinks.

On hearing my accent and noting my colonial manner, it was dead easy to strike up conversations, a fine way to learn about the country. It was not unusual for friendly Scots to ask if they could share a café table. Interestingly, some thought that my accent was not "exactly Australian" and I explained that I did not speak "Strine" – the rough dialect, such as "Ow yer goin' mate – orright?" Yuk!

The all-day bus trip (a worn old Bedford) took all day to do the approximate 400 miles to London. There was lots of time on secondary roads and I found it interesting to see, up close, some of the Scottish and English lifestyles as we slowly trundled through village byways. There it was, what initially looked to be a rough and boring trip turned out to be a pleasant and interesting something else. Another nice bit of philosophy for me to tuck away, "Things are not always what they seem."

At this point in my story I must tell my readers about my little plan to post local stamped envelopes, from each place I visited, back to myself at RAAF Base Butterworth, PW, Malaya. The idea was to have, at the trip's end, a chronological record (per envelope franking stamp) of all the countries I had visited during my round-the-world hitchhike.



Back at Butterworth the plan was for my room-mate, Noel (Bruiser) E to intercept this mail at our hangar pigeon-hole mailbox and take it to my room locker for security. Later in this story I shall tell of how this plan was thwarted, but with no blame on Bruiser. I can add here that my little lurk was necessary to avoid others knowing that I had progressed well beyond my “nominal” destination of Hong Kong. What a big surprise I was in for.

In London a friendly cabbie (are they all Cockneys) found me a cheap boarding house in Westminster. This location was very handy to lots of places that one must visit. The landlady, also a Cockney, observed that “we don’t get too many colonial gentlemen” and seemed preoccupied about “what night would you like the bath sir?” Shock horror when I told her that Aussies showered every day. She replied “Cor, sir, you can’t do that, too much washin ain’t good for ya, dries out your skin, it does”. I soon ascertained that a tanner (six pence) fed into the bath heater would give me some warm water each time.

In general, affordable café meals were rather small and bland but I soon got so busy “seeing the sights” that I often clean forget my evening meal, especially as the sun did not set until after 9.30pm. With very early sunrises to boot, the days were the longest I’d ever experienced. I figured that I could allow myself two weeks or so in England and most of it would have to be around London so as to stay in ready contact with the UK Air Ministry. I had found that it would not be helpful to hang about RAF Transport bases in the hope of informally catching a ride toward Malaya.

My visit to the RAAF office at Australia House on Fleet St, home of the London Print Media barons, was almost a disaster. Whilst asking about what documents I would need for an indulgence flight to Singapore I was accosted by a rude and pompous RAAF Wing Commander who was very unimpressed that “I appeared to be in London illegally and that I could be in big trouble”. I sidestepped that confrontation pretty smartly. Ouch!



Looking around for someone a bit more helpful, I met a nice English assistant lady who, at my earnest request, typed up an MC-8 travel authority and better still, got someone to sign it. That did not completely meet all the formal document requirements, but it was (I hoped) going to be a big help. Yet again, I was learning how to wangle things.

In New York Don had given me a London contact who “could be helpful”, a senior chappie in the media business. Our meeting was very friendly and he was keen to know about my “hitchhiking adventures” thus far. Keen as mustard, he wanted to print the story, with a photo. I was flattered but dare not accept as it would not be helpful to advertise what I was doing. My contact expressed disappointment but understood my situation.



There was another media opportunity (a TV commercial where they wanted a young Aussie male) an offer made directly to me in Australia House. I had to refuse it of course, for the same reason. Also, it might have been a 'con' job.

Again, I was told that Congo demand was restricting RAF Transport Command flights to Asia. I decided it was no good sweating about that and surely better to just enjoy myself in one of the greatest cities in the world.

My funds were fast retreating, but I found ways to do all the touristy things yet stay afloat. My RAAF identity card got me discounted entry to interesting places and much fun could be had just walking around that great city. Visits to casual corner pubs were always likely to produce lively repartee as this Aussie took it up to the POMS. It was always good fun an one could make an English pint of ale last a fair time.

All those wonderful sights I had wondered at, as a boy, from far-off Australia to SEE them. I wanted to touch and smell too, all my sense excited! Of course, the City and its environs were just too vast to do it all – but by golly, I gave it a good shake.

During my second week in London I started to hope that the Air Ministry might call but they did not, leaving me on the edge of a bit of anxiety going into my third. As I was really enjoying London life I maintained the pace doing my touristy things every day and night.

By mid-week I was REALLY hoping for the phone to ring, I even called the Air Ministry to remind them that I badly needed some action – and soon, please.

After three weeks in London, I was definitely behind my time plan and with little hope of RAF transport to (or towards) Singapore, I reluctantly booked on the BOAC jet (DH Comet) service departing on the coming Thursday. This would get me back to work at RAAF Base Butterworth just in time to avoid the heavy drama of becoming "ACH-Willie" – absent without leave, serious stuff.



The Big problem was that I didn't have enough money left to pay the hefty airfare. I cabled Don in New York for help and he paid for my air ticket at the New York Office of BOAC. I greatly appreciated Don's assistance as I would otherwise have been in quite a pickle.

So, it was back into RAAF uniform (the best way to travel) and I jumped aboard the airline bus to London Heathrow Airport. My humble and rather more battered suitcase, checked in, through departure checks and into the big waiting lounge.

Shortly before boarding I was startled to hear on the PA system that there was a call for me. Oh Lord, what now? I didn't really want a setback at this late stage. It was this toffee gent from the Air Ministry calling....and "did I want a seat on a RAF Britannia transport going from Lyneham RAF base to Changi in Singapore on Monday morning?"



Whammy! My poor brain went straight into fifth-stage afterburner. The Air Ministry chappie wanted an answer now, so I had to decide very smartly. The easy option would be to politely decline the Air Ministry offer and take the BOAC Comet flight - heaps more expensive but it would at least get me back to work on time. The RAF flight would certainly consign me to the dreaded "AWOL" category.

Being basically an optimist, I had a personal rule that, when facing a dilemma, always choose the more difficult option. There is great personnel satisfaction in, after the event, having "given it a go." Of course, there is always a price to pay if one makes the wrong choice. So I thought...to heck with it, I must take the RAF flight, I will be AWOL but I will also save the very expensive BOAC airfare. The Air Ministry bloke told me what I needed to go to get on the RAF flight.



Looking back on these events I tell myself that I was a proper dill for not choosing eh easy option. Showing you a list of problems I immediately faced will serve to help make my point.

- Can BOAC get my suitcase off the Comet straight away?
- How much will the flight cancellation fee be?
- What's the best (cheapest) way to get to London's Victoria Station?
- Where will I overnight in Swindon, on my way to RAF Lyneham.
- At Lyneham will my dicey paperwork pass muster with them? Will they know that I should be at either Hong Kong or RAAF Butterworth. What are the consequences?
- As I'm travelling "indulgence status" will I be bumped from my seat by a higher status person
- How long will the RAF flight take to get to Singapore? What if it's late. PROBLEMS.....PROBLEMS.



Oh well, nothing for it now but to try and solve these issues, one by one. That Friday night at Swindon I had the worst headache of my life. The stress build-up had just peaked, so I thought - bugger it, I'll just do my best and take what comes.

At this point, and getting ahead of myself, I already had the first four of my listed issues resolved:-

- Yes, they got my bag of the Comet, albeit incurring a delayed departure
- I sweet talked the BOAC customer relations clerk into treating me as an RAF member, which allowed a full fare refund. I knew that Don would be happy. I also inferred that the Air Ministry had "ordered" me to RAF Lyneham. Sure it was sneaky, but it didn't hurt anybody.
- I got a freebie ride in a BOAC crew bus to the train station at Victoria.
- At Swindon I watched a Second division soccer game in heavy fog on cold concrete seats and found an OK cheapie local Bed and Breakfast.



Things were looking up by breakfast, but I feared that I would be "found out" during the RAF's stringent PAX pre-departure checks at Lyneham. On awakening the next morning I was immediately aware that it was make-or-break day and that, as from 8.00am this day I was, indeed AWOL and I had yet to travel about 8,000 miles to my final destination. An even more jolting shock then hit me, I was serving in an active service location and the military can court martial, even execute, idiots like me who go AWOL. Of course, I reasoned that surely they would go that far, would they? It wasn't DESERTION, was it?

At the flight processing centre I looked around for a possible ally who might help me get around my paperwork (mainly) deficiencies. As good fortune would have it, again I found (a jolly little

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Corporal) in the office who was very friendly and said that he “liked the Aussies”. I took a punt and confessed my deficient paperwork situation and the fact that I was on the wrong side of the world. The RAF Corporal’s response...”Gees mate, potentially, you could be right in it”,,,,but he’d see if he could help out a bit.

I then got caught up in the safety checks, dinghy drills and such like. In those days the RAF was notorious for such formalities. Very pukka! My little Corporal mate (Tich) wangled another signed document for me which, he assured me, would ‘grease’ my way through the pre-flight formalities.

It was with tremendous relief that I was finally listed on the passenger manifest. I bade a grateful goodbye to Tich and gave him most of the few English pounds I had left, in appreciation for his invaluable help. I must record that he didn’t ask for any reward.

Homeward Bound

The Britannia is a big 4 engined (Bristol Proteous turboprops) cargo and troop transport. Today the load was 29 PAX and the rest cargo. Although I was hugely relieved to be on my way, and it was the last big flight leg, I was shocked to learn that this was NOT a direct flight (ie: fuel stops only) to Changi, Singapore. Instead it was a crew training flight, “When do we get there” I queried, “on Thursday or Friday:” they said. My God, it was only noon Monday, I was already half-a-day AWOL, four more to go.

On a positive note, the weather was excellent and the flight smooth. Once across Western France and at our cruising altitude of 21,000 feet, we could see five countries at the one moment, each so small by our Australian standards. Later in the flight we passed directly over Rome, with the 1960 Summer Olympic games in full swing, down there. One could clearly make out the Olympic Stadium as there was no cloud and little ground haze.

Then a course change to take us out over a very blue Mediterranean Sea, towards our first flight destination, El Adem RAF Base in Libya. We over nighted there, on the RAF base. All around us were poor Arab encampments with rough tents seemingly made of patchwork fabrics of many colours, It was scorchingly hot and dry as a drover’s throat. Nearly all the Arabs I saw looked in poor health, many with fly-borne diseases such as trachoma.



Tuesday’s leg was to be to the big port city of Aden, another RAF base, on the shores of the Red Sea. At that time Aden was a British Protectorate and capital of Yemen. We were billeted into a RAF run hotel in Central Aden, right next to a very smelly goat slaughterhouse. Close-by were Arab shops selling the usual dodgy cameras, binoculars etc. I had some fun, verbally jousting with the cheeky Arab shopkeepers, business was slow. They called me “Ned Kelly”. Who said Arabs were not with it? They picked me for an Aussie even before I spoke. There was also time for a quick visit to the Med for a swim in the incredibly salty water, I floated like a cork.



In typical British military fashion, there was the Airman's beach, the Senior NCO's beach and the Officer's beach. I thought we all looked about the same in our swim togs! We passed across deserts still littered with the debris from WW2, burned out tanks and trucks, rusting fuel drums and walls still showing shell holes. The only signs of modernity were the British inputs, but the brits told us that most of their efforts were frustrated by local religious (Muslim) beliefs and historical mistrust of Western motives.



The next morning, Wednesday, we were off on the long leg to Gan Island, a tiny spot due south of Bombay and stuck remotely out in the Indian Ocean. Arrival was around 1.00am Thursday. It was one square mile of practically nothing. This was just about the worst moment of my trip, when the loadmaster told me that I was "off here at Gan", bumped on the last major leg. Announced the loadmaster "four duty PAX for Changi and only three seats available. Sorry LAC Handsley, but your indulgence status means you have to give up your seat to essential duty personnel." This was a crushing blow, but "rules is rules" as they say. When I enquired about the next plane to Singapore, I was told it could be two weeks or more, the bloody Congo problem again. Wot a bastard! Anyway, the loadmaster said I should get a snack at the Base NAAFI (canteen) and 'something might turn up.' Short of kidnapping a passenger and tucking him up a coconut tree, I could not imagine what such a "something" might be.

But I wasn't going to just throw up my arms and give in, after all, right through this long trip I had managed to wangle good outcomes from dramas, so I got myself, plus suitcase, back to the aircraft well before scheduled boarding time, to see what magic one might weave. I saw the co-pilot doing his pre-flight checks and approached him for a friendly chat. Would you believe it, he



was a RAAF flight Lieutenant on loan to the RAF and was quite surprised to meet another RAAF member at such a godforsaken place – and time.

The only thing to do now, I decided, was to confess my AWOL situation honestly and perhaps my desperate flight might encourage someone to bend the rules, somehow, to find me a seat, any seat! The flight Lewie understood my problem, said that he had not heard my “confession” and told me to hang about in case he could do something for me. Later with my heart racing, I waited near the cabin boarding steps so as to hear the Loadmaster read out the names on the PAX manifest.

With great delight and surprise my name was last on the list and I scrambled, happy and relieved, into the last seat. I was so afraid of the possibility of an error that I just shut-up and put my seat belt on. Just let anybody try and get me out, now!

During the flight, the Aussie Co-Pilot came by for a chat and of course I thanked him warmly for being able to find me a seat. He confided that he had moved his spare navigator forward to the crew rest bunk from the seat I was now occupying. God bless him for his thoughtfulness. It really saved my bacon. I had never considered myself a generally “lucky” person, but by golly I had certainly received my share on this adventure.

It was still dark as we took-off, a long non-stop flight to Changi Singapore. I was very relieved and happy to be finishing on a good note, of course, I still had to major problem of being AWOL to overcome, but there had been so many times, this trip, that I had solved problems I decided to just be completely philosophical about the final outcome. The main things was that I was nearly home and I had almost achieved my ambition to, alone, hitchhike around the world. Also, I was in good health, albeit almost broke (moneywise).

Tired, but elated, I was back at Changi Airfield. I called Malayan Airlines for a DC-3 ride to Penang Malaya. This was a “milk run” with half a dozen stops between the two major ports. Interestingly, the only “ticket” I had purchased before the trip started, was the one I was using now. I arrived at Penang airport about noon on the Friday, now four and a half days AWOL.

AWOL and Facing the Music

Hastily changing into fresh uniform “dress of the day”, I headed to my squadron hangar. I hoped to duck-in quietly and find my Warrant Officer Engineer, “Happy” H and spill my confession. Happy was one tough old cookie, but he was also fair.

However, this neat plan was thwarted by the Squadron painter, Jack P spotted me entering the hangar and bellowed to all and sundry...“Handsley’s back, Handsley’s back”. Then he looked wistfully down at me and said, “Gees mete, are you in the shit”.

At that moment I really feared the worst but decided to stick to my plan to tell the truth and hope for the best. Jack’s outburst brought Happy hurrying out waving a sheet of paper and really gave me an earful. The sheet proved to be the original of my travel leave application and he ranted about “You were supposed to remain in Honkers, what were you doing in Japan, America, UK and the Middle East etc etc, he really gave me a serve.

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My first shocked thought was, “how the heck did he know where I’ve been” but first he demanded an explanation. I will explain this first matter shortly. I gave “Happy” a short and painfully honest description of where I’d been, why I went there and emphasized that I really had tried very hard to overcome my service-transport problems, especially the unexpected four-day duration of the RAF Lyneham-Singapore flight.

He seemed only slightly mollified and then told me he’d have to parade me to the Engineering Officer and also to put me in front of the big Chief, Wing Commander KC (affectionately known as Black Prince). Going on, Happy said “I’ve a bloody good mind to put you on the Duty Crew this weekend” Seeing my chance to impress, I jumped right in with “I volunteer Warrant and I’ll volunteer for the next weekend as well. I owe you 4½m days”. He thought about it for a moment and knocked my sox off by saying, “No you won’t”. Me “Oh won’t I? what then will I do?” Him “You’ll have the weekend off and go over to visit your friends on Penang Island and tell them about your trip.”



Well, needless to say I was shocked, fearing the worst! Gosh, my good old Warrant Officer Engineer had shown his softer side and by so doing really impressed me. What a surprise.

A Duty Crew is a small team of ground engineers, one from each mustering group (airframe, Engine, Electrical, Instruments, Armament and Radio) whose job it was to look after all aircraft visiting Butterworth from other bases. Owing to the unusual range of aircraft types handled, it was always quite an interesting job. So, my WOE paraded me to my EngO who wanted an expanded report from me, further to what I’d given to Happy. Thankfully my EngO didn’t seem terribly unhappy with me but said the matter would have to “go higher” for a decision on what punishment would be appropriate. In the meantime. I could resume normal duties.

This I did and each day I waited for the dreaded axe to fall. Occasionally I unofficially heard little snippets of gossip about what was going to happen. Unknown to me at the time, there was fireworks going on behind the scenes, more later.

All my squadron mates and the mob living on Penang Island (the married members, commonly called the “brown baggers” and their expatriate families) wanted to know about my trip, so I became quite adept at telling the story. I could now understand how it became common knowledge that I was in this country or that. To prevent this, I had arranged for my roommate “Bruiser” to grab my inward mail as it arrived into the hangar pigeon holes. Sure, this worked fine for the early part of my trip at which time Noel (Bruiser) and half the Squadron flew off on temporary duty to Singapore for defence exercises with friendly Air Forces of the Region. Thus my adventuring was there for all to see. I learned later that the story went around the whole Wing. When I got back, just about everybody seemed to know where I’d been.

In any case, that plan had worked in the one desired way, I had a full set of stamped and franked envelopes, one of those big, garish, lacquered Chinese-style albums. With them is a motley collection of air, sea and bus tickets plus picture postcards, luggage tags and such like. Whoever inherits, please look after them – as I have.

Well – on the base, life returned pretty well back to normal, and I waited, still to be told my fate. I figured that if they were going to court martial me, they would have done so already. Still, I was



certain to face a formal charge. The normal expectation would be something like...21 days CB and 28 days loss of pay! I would just have to cop it sweet and resigned myself to it.

A little while later we had a big "Wing" BBQ. No 78 (F) Wing comprised of No 3 (F), No 77 (F) and 478 (M) Squadrons. I was surprised to be grabbed by the Black Prince and formally introduced to the most senior officers there (I knew them already) but I was pleased at the courtesy. I was introduced as "the young airman who'd just returned from a solo round-the-world hitchhike." The rankers seemed amused about the whole thing and I was made to feel more like some kind of minor hero, rather than a naughty boy who had bucked the system.

The only explanation for such benign treatment that I could think of, was that I knew I had earned a good reputation for my work and had been in the Wing for more than five years (RAAF Williamtown and Butterworth). Also, I had become one of their top guns for troubleshooting problems on our Sabres. To boot, I loved service life and always looked to an excellent standard of dress and bearing. Such were our traditional values of the time, that this behaviour was well respected. To be honest, I think it still counts today.



At one stage I was interviewed about the "return airfare deposit" that was a must for inter-service indulgence flights. Although I was not aware of its significance at the time, I happened to mention that, on my England-Singapore RAF flight (the Britannia), I sat next to a RAAF Flight Lieutenant who was a Stores Officer from Richmond. He was returning from recreation leave in London. When I remarked to him that "it must have cost you a packet to put up the money for a return airfare" the officer replied that "if you know the system there are ways around such things" and that he "didn't have to put up a cracker". It didn't occur to me then, but that bugger should have had to give up his seat for me at Gan Island, where I had been nearly stranded. This is because the indulgence flights rule is that "lower ranks get priority over higher ranks." The principle rests on the idea that officers are more able to afford commercial rates, than airman ranks are.

Anyway, time went on and nothing was ever said about any action being taken against me. I can tell you that it was a huge relief, but I could scarcely believe it. On the positive side I had many a slap on the back with a "good on you mate" and I'd heard that my trip was inspiring others to have-a-go themselves. All my colour slides of the trip were really good and squadron slide-nights went on for months. There was no TV in Malaya at that time.

I continued with my intense interest in Ju-Jitsu and earned my black belt ni-dan (second dan) from my Master, Kam Hoe (fifth dan). This gave me a tremendous lift in self-confidence supplementing the feel-good feeling that had come out of my travel adventure.



Post mortem.

You will be relieved to know that my tale is almost told, only one significant post-mortem item that needs to be added, as it sheds light on what went on behind the scenes at Butterworth, but was unknown to me at the time.

In April 1961 I was posted to the RAAF School of Technical Training, at Wagga, as a Corporal instructor in the Engine Section. Shortly after arriving there I was approached by a corporal who said he “knew who I was, the one who’d nearly been court martialled in Malaya”. So I asked him about his own knowledge of events. It turned out that he had been an administrative NCO with RAAF Butterworth Base Squadron – at the time.

His story was that his Commander, a Squadron Leader by rank, wanted to seriously discipline me, but was vigorously opposed by the “Black Prince” who outranked him. However, it looked like I was in for the chopping block until like manna from heaven, the situation was saved by my previous report to the “Prince” about the aberrant Australian Flight Lieutenant who paid no “return form London” fare deposit – and I did (from Hong Kong). According to my new-found corporal contact in Wagga, the Prince was able to argue that it would be incredibly embarrassing to the Air Force should it become known that they had crucified a poor airman (who had at least TRIED to do the right thing) whilst letting an officer get away with it. He posed the question, “Do you want to see a Commissioned Officer Court-martialled too?”

As one can imagine, this must have been a compelling argument and the vindictive squaddie had to back-off. They also must have known that, had they just charged me I was bound to offer the same potentially embarrassing information as a defence. So, there is was, I had fallen on my feet, yet again.

And there endeth the tale of my big adventure out of Malaya, around the world in thirteen weeks. I hope you have enjoyed coming on that trip with me and that, if you are young enough, it might fire your imagination and encourage you to live your own dreams. My creed has always been, “Live your life in full colour.”

After too many beers, my mate asked if he could crash out on my sofa.
I had to explain to him that I'm married now, so that's where I sleep



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