



## WRAAF News



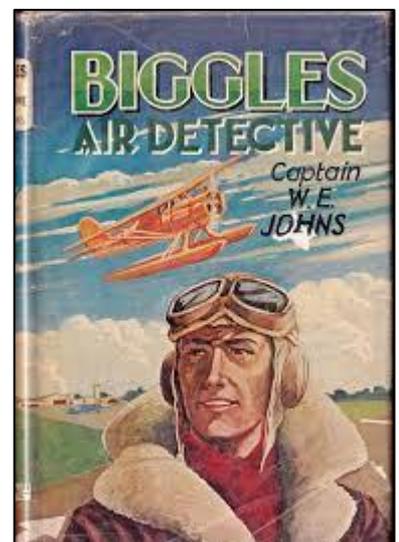
### Life in the RAAF

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When I (Pam Hiddins) was 12, I discovered my brother's Biggles' books. That began my life-long love affair with Spitfires and all things aeronautical, including the Air Force – which, in Australia is the Royal Australian Air Force.

Shortly before my 19th birthday I convinced my father that the best thing that could possibly happen for my future would be for me to leave my position as a stenographer at the University of Queensland and join the Women's Royal Australian Air Force. With Dad's blessing, I applied to join and was accepted into the mustering of "Clerk Medical". Next thing I knew, I was flying off, courtesy of the RAAF, from Brisbane to Melbourne (over 1,000 miles south)

to begin Rookies' [Course No 147](#) with about 30 other young women at RAAF Base Williams, Point Cook, Victoria, the birthplace of the RAAF.



Rookies was interesting, to say the least! Here we learnt all about precision drill and marching; the fine art of spit-polishing our shoes (the aim being to be able to see one's face in them); the necessity of keeping one's quarters not just spotless but so incredibly sanitised that any germs within a mile of our quarters would have run screaming for the hills in surrender; attended lectures on RAAF history and traditions; differing levels of uniform identification, e.g. 1A's (best), 1B's (everyday), Drabs (khakis – for Rookies and general mucking about); the other fine art of polishing brass (uniform) buttons; comparable Australian military ranks across the three services; the privilege of serving our country through the RAAF; and – how to have lots of fun when not on duty!! Well, maybe that last one wasn't really on our lecturing officers' curriculum, but it was certainly on ours. And in the middle of all this was one incredibly enlightening lecture on the 'facts of life'!!



Being the rather strange being that I am, I loved Rookies (well maybe not the obsessive inspections) – we marched everywhere. It was just too much fun!! But I do remember a few of the other girls thinking I was a bit weird because I couldn't get enough of drill and marching.



Just over four weeks later we graduated and to my surprise and honour, I was the Dux of our Course. That night we all boarded a RAAF bus and went into Melbourne's Windsor Hotel for our formal graduation dinner.



I was then posted to Base Squadron Medical Section at Point Cook, only one of two of our course members to remain at Point Cook – the rest being scattered to RAAF bases all over Australia, depending upon their area of expertise or training requirements.

Oh, did I mention learning the fine art of making bedrolls from our sheets, blankets and pillows? No? Well, every Monday, we had to roll our fresh bed linen, blankets etc into a precise roll which was placed at the top of our bed, with the pillow on top. Then, after inspection, we could make our beds. On Rookies, we were expected to strip our beds every morning and remake them – the finished product being tight enough for our Drill Sergeants to bounce a penny on the surface. And woe betide anyone caught taking short cuts! It was a bedroll every day for a week for the culprit!! Trust me, enduring the bedroll routine once per week was enough to keep this particular Rookie in line (but then, there were always ways of pulling the sheets ultra tight without stripping said bed every morning...).

So much for Rookies...life in the RAAF now began in earnest...

Once we had graduated and were members of the Permanent Air Force, those of us now based at Point Cook could watch with a sense of superiority as the next lot of Rookies arrived as raw civilians and departed smartly turned-out Airwomen.

Point Cook, in those days, was the home of the RAAF Academy and No 1 Basic Flying Training School (1 BFTS) so there was a lot of basic flying training activity going on.

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To my absolute joy, Medical Section was located directly opposite the airstrip providing a clear view between two hangars to the strip. I had informed the corporal in charge of our Orderly Room that the reason I had joined up was really because I was crazy about aircraft, loved flying, and was rather taken with marching – could have marched around the parade ground all day. Most people thought I was a little strange when I said how much I loved drill and marching as this tended to be regarded as something of a bind by the majority – something to be endured on weekly CO's parades etc.



One morning a Flight Lieutenant wandered into the Orderly Room and, to my surprise, asked if I was ACW Hiddins. When I rather hesitantly acknowledged my identity (wondering what on earth I'd managed to do this time!), he grinned and said,

“I believe you're rather keen on flying? Would you like a flight in a Winjeel tonight? We're doing circuits and bumps with some of the Cadets.”

After I'd picked myself up off the floor, I think my own grin nearly split my face in two. Would I like a flight in a Winjeel? What a question!! One could hardly ask an officer if he was pulling my leg, so I presumed he was serious – and he was.

The Winjeel was an Australian designed and built two-seater trainer used by the RAAF for basic pilot training. After graduating from BFTS, pilots were posted to the Advanced Flying Training School (AFTS) at Pearce, in Western Australia for their introduction to flying jet fighters.

After gaining permission from the OIC WRAAFs (Squadron Officer Dines who was a pilot herself) I duly fronted up at the flight hut after dinner that night where I was greeted by my friendly Flight Louie and a host of other pilots. I was given a brief indoctrination into the intricacies of my flight suit – and my parachute! I was so stunned at having to wear a parachute, and being expected to know how to pull the ripcord etc, (visions of Ginger launching himself off the top of Bergin Ait in Biggles in the Baltic were madly flying through my brain) that I blurted out,

“Sir, are we likely to have to jump out over Port Phillip Bay?”

The room erupted into laughter, and I was told, “I hope not, ACW, I hope not!”



This is one memory that has never faded – a night of flying (even if it was just circuits and bumps) sometimes in loose formation, sometimes just line astern. My pilot very kindly explained the cockpit instrumentation to me, and even, for a few exhilarating moments allowed me to hold the control column while we were flying circuits at a holding altitude above Point Cook.

Because of its operational and training purpose Point Cook, in that era, had a large number of officers – all of whom, of course, had to be saluted by the humble other ranks. Naturally, they were obliged to return our salutes...so my friend, Denise, and I used to return to work after lunch



in the Airmen's Mess via the Officers' Mess. This ensured we could salute (and hence make them return the honour) far more of these exalted beings than normally crossed our paths. (Everyone, including officers, removed their hats / covers inside Medical Section, so the most they ever received in the workplace environment was a respectful 'sir' or 'ma'am'.)



For some reason, which now escapes me, we thought this was hilarious and engaged in our regular detour via the Officers' Mess for several weeks until it became rather old hat – or maybe the novelty wore off. I simply remember that we both thought this was a sufficiently entertaining activity that we would walk a reasonable detour to corner our quarry. I can now imagine how those poor blokes must have been muttering, "Oh no, here come those two WRAAFs again!" Yes, very young and naïve – but it was fun.

Another memory from Point Cook was when Squadron Officer Dines very kindly organised a free flight home for me on a Hercules for the Easter stand-down. That was an experience I will never forget. The Herc left from nearby Laverton RAAF Base (about 10 miles from Point Cook) and flew north to Richmond where we were on the ground for a couple of hours and had lunch there. Then off we went again, further north to Amberley, where we arrived in the late afternoon. Here my parents were waiting to drive me back home to Brisbane. These huge workhorses carried quite large payloads, and the passengers sat in slingback seats along the side of the fuselage. I spent most of the flight praying that the massive pile of equipment in front of me wouldn't land up in my lap if we hit a 'bump'!

One of the peculiarities of service life in those days was the requirement that all clothing – from the smallest item to the largest – was required to be folded or hung in a precise and totally inflexible routine. Woe betide anyone whose underwear drawer was yanked open on inspection evening and whose "smalls" were not precisely folded and lined up according to the RAAF law governing all aspects of how thou shalt maintain thy wardrobe! Funnily enough, to this day, I still fold my undies in this same manner!! At a reunion some years ago, a group of us were discussing the aspects of service life that each of us had taken into civilian life – and without exception (amidst much laughter) everyone, male and female, confessed we still kept our clothes exactly as we had learnt during those years.

We were given a uniform allowance (covering all items – including stockings, socks, handkerchiefs, underwear) and our service number and name had to be clearly marked on each item. We were expected to maintain the exact number of items we were originally issued with. It was really 'WRAAF aware' if anyone, come a surprise uniform and kit inspection, whose clothing



didn't measure up. Many of us sat up in bed after lights out, stitching name tags on the tops of stockings by torchlight, hoping the hut NCO wouldn't notice and come barging in. Of course, if we all kept everything up to scratch all the time, it wouldn't have been an issue – but where's the fun in that???



After six months, I was transferred to No 6 RAAF Hospital at Laverton RAAF Base (still in Victoria). Life here was quite different and rather more formally structured. At Point Cook we had smartly walked, as individuals, to work following morning roll call. At Laverton, however, we formed into a unit squad after breakfast and marched, under the command of the ranking NCO, to our workplace. I think there were between two to three times as many female service personnel at Laverton as there had been at Point Cook – and it was also a much bigger base. The Hercules were flying regular runs up to Richmond and on to Amberley. A few Mirages, based at Laverton, were also flying in that era. This was also the home of the RAAF Radio School and there was a large RAAF Apprentice School housed at Laverton – all in all, a much larger base than Point Cook.

There were also some USAF blokes stationed there. I remember one of my friends married one of the Americans. David and I attended her wedding in the RAAF Chapel on base. I know her name was Mandy, but I can't remember her fiancé's name. I sometimes wonder how it all worked out and if they are still together in the USA somewhere, or whether they settled in Oz.

In September 1965, The RAAF put on a two-day Air Show at Laverton and all personnel were on duty. A Caribou from 38 Sqn at Richmond performed an air drop as a spectacle for the people below.



We had a wide variety of entertainment provided on base. There were various clubs (accessible depending upon your rank), a cinema which usually showed most of the recently released films; the licenced base 'Boozer' or 'Beery', which was accessible to service personnel only; the various Messes – Airmen's, Sergeants' and Officers' – which provided us with three good meals a day, seven days a week. We also had Squash Courts, Tennis Courts, Volleyball, and Water Polo teams, and various other sporting teams such as Basketball, Netball, Women's Cricket, etc. And, of course, there was the ever-popular canteen (ASCO) where we could buy just about anything we needed – it was really like a mini department store cum-supermarket-cum-coffee shop – and was a great meeting place, as well as offering an alternate eating place in lieu of the Mess.

As my boyfriend, David (an electrical and instrument aircraft engineer apprentice with TAA), lived in Melbourne I spent most of my weekend leave at his home. His parents had assured my own parents that they would look after me on their behalf, after all, I had moved over 1,000 miles from home and, whilst my parents gave me their blessings, it was not without some misgivings for I was their youngest child and only daughter (my brothers all being quite some years older than I was).

When I was based at Laverton, David would come down to visit me one night a week and we would have dinner in the canteen with two other couples and then all go to the cinema as a group. Afterwards, he would walk me back to the Barracks where we would say a somewhat public goodnight as the RAAF powers-that-be were very concerned with ensuring we were all well chaperoned in this era!! Then he would ride back up to Melbourne (on his Vespa motor scooter) to his parents' home.



When he came down to pick me up for weekend leave, he drove his MGTD, a classic car that we dearly wish we still had...

Once again, at Laverton, I found myself working in 6 RAAF's Orderly Room – this time in Casualty / Outpatients – where I would greet the patients and organise their appointments with our Medical Officers.



Another responsibility of this job was that of reminding pilots and aircrew that their annual medicals were due. It always surprised me how some reasonably high-ranking officers would balk at attending their medical – always “too busy to do it this week, LACW. You’ll just have to schedule me in for another time.” After a while I became quite accustomed to politely responding along the lines of “Well, sir, I’m sorry, but the MO has asked me to remind you that he’ll be forced to ground you if you don’t get this done by Friday”. Amazing how quickly they’d find time then – and often with a laugh and a grin when they’d report in.

It was whilst I was based at Laverton that my wonderful civilian, David, (but still an Aircraft Engineer) proposed and we celebrated our engagement at the base Christmas Party which was held in the Airmen’s Mess. I was spending my weekend leave at his parents’ home, and I wore my new ring for the first time that night. We received many congratulatory greetings from friends and colleagues of all ranks that evening.



The following year I was again posted to another Victorian operational base – this time to RAAF East Sale, a base in the eastern Gippsland region. This Queensland girl (born to sunshine and surf beaches) spent my two years in the RAAF serving on bases in Victoria – where it was cold



and wet much of the time! East Sale, the home of the Navigational School and Central Flying School (CFS), was a smaller base than Laverton and much friendlier. Our WRAAF Officer had actually been my Drill Sergeant on Rookies, prior to receiving her commission – she was young, very popular with all the WRAAFs and a lot of fun, but also held our total respect and trust. I found her to be very supportive through a couple of difficult times.

East Sale was the coldest place I'd ever been up to that time in my life. We could see snow on the mountains in the distance during winter, and the morning temperatures dropped below freezing on more than one occasion.

Now I was in charge of the Medical Section Orderly Room and found I enjoyed the responsibility. This was also a great base for any aircraft lover. The Vampires (soon to be replaced by the Macchi) were still in service with CFS and this was also the home of The Telstars, the RAAF aerobatic team. Watching them practice was part and parcel of everyday life.

Another highlight of serving here was occasionally spending some regular time, of an evening, in a Link Trainer – then considered the latest in training technology for future pilots. I saw one recently in an Aviation Museum and was vastly amused at its simplicity compared to contemporary simulators. I remember crashing several times, before I got a handle on the manoeuvres being thrown at me, much to the amusement of the Flight Sergeant in charge.

Then there was the Sunday evening when all those in our hut were all obviously rather bored. We started raiding one another's bedrooms – wrapping one girl up in her bedding to create a makeshift bedroll which was then securely fastened with cords. We carried her across the road to Medical Section where we deposited her on the front landing, rang the evening bell and hightailed it back to our quarters. Not satisfied with that little prank, we decided to wrap a Mini Minor, belonging to one of the female officers, up in toilet paper. Fortunately, she was a good sport...



The next evening, when 'Madam' (as we titled our WRAAF Officer-in-charge) arrived at our hut to conduct her weekly inspection, she expressed some concern as to whether it was really safe to be entering our premises. Our hut corporal, in turn, expressed considerable surprise at this. She showed genuine interest in asking for the details, declaring she couldn't imagine that any of 'her' girls could have possibly been responsible for such goings-on, while we stood by our doors with extremely straight faces. The good Section Officer said "Really, corporal? I could hear the noise from my bedroom. Right up until Lights Out!" So much for maintaining anonymity!

During my two years serving in the RAAF, I passed my exams for promotion both to LACW (Leading Aircraft Woman) and to Corporal, however, in that era women were obliged to resign when they married, so I was discharged before being promoted to Corporal. Although I married a civilian, he was also an Aircraft Engineer with Trans Australian Airlines – one of our two major domestic airlines at that time – and so I simply moved from a military aviation environment to a domestic aviation environment, and it was many years before I truly appreciated the privilege I've had of 'living my aviation dream' – both in the RAAF and in civilian life.