

## RAAF Base Amberley Oral History Recording

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### George Hatchman

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##### *What do you remember about Amberley when you first arrived?*

I first arrived at Amberley in 1961, probably Easter '61, as a member of the training corp. And I stayed at the air training corp and several businesses were here. But at that time, Amberley was essentially the World War II base from the 1940s era and hadn't changed. I joined the Air Force in 1963, in January, along with my twin brother, Barry, and after training at Wagga Wagga, was posted to Amberley in July, '65.

In July, '65 my appointment, if you'd like to call it that, was as bomb site specialist for the Canberra Bombers at 82 Wing, essentially in the 482 Squadron. And my job was to maintain the serviceability and the accuracy of the T-4 bomb sites to support the Canberra bombing and training programs.

Yeah. When I arrived at Amberley back in '65, Amberley still retained its essence of a World War II base. In those times, of course, there was an awakening that Australia needed more sophisticated aircraft to maintain the defence of the country and there were the concepts of the purchase of the F1-11, the TSR II, and probably other aeroplanes for the RAAF bomber fleet.

##### *What people remain in your memory from that time?*

Well, when I arrived here in '65, I guess, '65, looking back it's under 20 years since the finalisation of World War II and a lot of the senior members of the squadron were actually World War II veterans, and they had a different mannerism to the Air Force we know today. They had that bitter experience, and there was a no-nonsense attitude, the way they went around their business. So we were a bit in awe of them as young lads, and towed the line, but yeah, it's good memories, and some of those characters I think are long gone, still reflect in my mind, and there's no way I can project them to you, but that's the way life goes.

##### *What units or squadrons have you worked with?*

When I was posted in Amberley in '65 I was actually posted in 82 Wing. Now, 82 Wing had an assembly of squadrons, there was 2 Squadron, 1 Squadron, and 482 Squadron. The situation was then, we were internally posted so that I was working for 482 Squadron for some time, as a bomb specialist, but from time to time I'd detach out to the other squadrons maybe for exercises up to [0:02:37.7] or wherever they did bombing exercises to support that bomb site calibration and maintenance role.

***What were the significant events during your time at the Amberley?***

The latter part of the '60s, because the announcement had been made that we would acquire the F1-11s and the base started its first redevelopment program. Over the period of time, we saw major changes to the base initiate. First of all, the Taj Mahal, as we call it, the hangar for the F1-11s was constructed. The F1-11 training school was built - and actually, in reflection later in life, I was the first day student of that building when it opened, built on the old swamp ground out the back of the Taj Mahal, and then 1986, I was posted back to be the warrant officer in charge. So I saw a bit of both, from a young fella and as a mature person's responsibility there.

***Were you here for the introduction of the F-111?***

My introduction to the F1-11 was that back in January the 10th, 1968, 82 were transition from Canberra operations essentially to F1-11 operations. Because of my background, I was a T-4 bomb site specialist at Canberra Bombers, was nominated and initiated training as the bomb site nav computer specialist for the F1-11s. That took me through to the later part of 1969, but in the interim, I was detached for 482 Squadron down to 3AD to initialise the modification and calibration of the T-4 bomb sites for the Canberra's for Vietnam, because of my earlier experience in doing the initial modification. That was quite an experience.

***What memories do you have of other aircraft during your time at Amberley?***

The F1-11, obviously, we trained for it, waited for it, and it never arrived. So with the tremendous amount of manpower energy here located at Amberley, awaiting the aircraft's arrival, there seemed to be a bit of waste of service capability, so we were fragmented and sent away to different units. The married men were retained here at Amberley to work on the interim replacement, which was the Phantom, and I was a single bloke, a little bit more malleable in the Defence concept, was posted off to RAAF Richmond to work on the C-130s. I initially worked on the Canberra Bombers and at that time, I guess that's all there were here.

The Army had 16 LAA, that was the Army Light Aircraft or Aviation Squadron, which later morphed into 161 which relocated to Oakey, but they had the little sue bell helicopters and the Pilatus Porters aircraft and a couple of little bird dogs, which were Cessnas, they used to spot aircraft. But essentially, Canberra Bombers and then down to the ARS, which is the part of the 3OD was the aircraft repair section, they also operated Sabre Fighters in a maintenance sense, they sent them up from the other bases to be repaired and maintained and sent back for use.

***What do you recollect about women working at the Amberley?***

Women in the Air Force back in those times were a little bit different to the situation that the ladies enjoy today. I guess from - I won't say bitter experience, but from my wife's point of view, but from experience - I actually married a WAF. My wife joined the Air Force back in those eras as a clerk and could not enjoy the same privileges or the mobility that the men folk had. As a matter of fact, when they were married, they were expected to leave the service, and that's what happened to my wife, so she lost employment and promotion opportunities.

***Have you spoken with previous RAAF personnel about the Base during WWII?***

I guess at that time, there was a legacy of a new era, and the World War II had a bitter legacy. So not that much of that was passed on. My interest in the base history became when my sister was sent down from Childers to work at Ipswich as a new legal secretary for a gentleman who was to become a legal officer to the Air Force, a chap by the name of Chris Tankey.

I shared a flat with her, and the lady that owned the flat, and we're talking about 1966 or '65, somewhere at that era, her name was Mrs Lowis. And when she found out I was in the Air Force she told me one day over a cup of tea that her dad back in 1911 sold tracks of land in Tweed Heads for £1 an acre. And with that

money, he bought land - what is now a part of Amberley Air Force Base. And that started my intrigue. I never knew her maiden name, so I can't translate to the families that existed here at the time, but she used to tell me about the House of Kisses that used to be at Amberley. And when we talk about the House of Kisses, that was her - she told me that was her girly mind, because the house had Federation verandas with the crosses on it. And she used to try and get me an approximation of it, but I've, sort of, gone through the years wondering about this House of Kisses and where it was at Amberley. I haven't pinpointed that one.

But then, later on in life, I also met another gentleman by the name of Stan McCulloch. Now, Stan lived at Harrisville which is a little hamlet south of Amberley, and he was the curator of the historical museum at Harrisville. Then on a visit one day, and I was taking particular interest in the cadastral of the Willowbank Sheep and Cattle Station, which was broken up in 1890 and sold off - the tracks of land became the first rural subdivision of Queensland. But essentially, RAAF Base Amberley was created from part of that development.

But Stan told me that when he was a young lad he worked with some land clearers by the name of Chesterfield and Jenkins. And he rocked up one day in 1938 or '39, to where they held their stock, because they had cattle and hauling equipment to [0:09:00.3] logs, et cetera. And that was at Deebing Creek, as you're going to Ipswich, just below where the university is. But Stan told me when he reported to work one morning, the boss man called him over and said, 'Stan, grab this axe,' and Stan said, 'What do I want this axe for? It's huge,' he said, 'Son,' he said, 'You're the youngest bloke here, you're going to have the privilege of cutting down the first tree of what's going to become RAAF Base Amberley.' And that's a significant point, that's a start. So that really transfixed me too, and I thought, well, I've met the bloke that chopped down the first tree here, I mean, that's a significant little point.

And in the interim years, because my association with the Base back in 1961 to the current time, I've had over 50 years' association with the Base, and so probably the person with the most generic knowledge of Amberley from its early days in the World War II period and what it was like to the current base it is today. And I've also taken on the role of the community leader for the Amberley and the Willow Bank civil community, so I follow a parallel path in the interests of history of those people that made up Amberley before the Base was constructed, and the first Australians that existed here previously.

I did know one chap, it's a rather laconical [sic] recollection, he was an uncle, that's happened under Sal Coomber. Sal was the original air movement officer here when I arrived here back in the early '60s and he operated out of a little seagull hut at the front of the apron. We look at air movements today and see a massive situation, but all in those days it was just a little hut. But may be telling stories out of turn, but Sal was a young corporal, a bit of war experience, so probably a few bitters behind him, but he liked his tippie of ale and when he had a few drinks he used to get a pugilistic. And one such event, when he'd been mixing with the boys, they carted him back when he was out to it and put him in his bed back at the air movement section, and then grabbed him when he was sound asleep, put him on the back of a little Desoto ute and carted out the other side of the Air Force base in the trees. Sal woke up in the morning with a cow licking his face and had no idea where he was. Yeah, but unfortunate - it's sad, but it was a bit of a comical aspect to it too.

### ***Vietnam War***

I was here Amberley when Vietnam, the conflict, was in operation. I'd actually been selected to go to Vietnam, but with the advent of the F1-11 and my background in the T-4 bomb sites, that was cancelled and I was placed on the F1-11 program for training in 1968. But it is so much as that I had my inter-relationship with developing the prototype, the T-4 bomb site to enable the Canberra Bombers to go to Vietnam.

### ***The work of Amberley during the Maralinga atomic testing?***

No, I didn't have any involvement with the Maralinga Program, the only, sort of, recollection I have was an old Lincoln Bomber that used to be placed over the side of this trip with a big 'P' on it. And that was actually used and was for Maralinga tests, and it was radioactive, so it was a no pass area. But I did meet a gentleman a lot later in life, by the name of Bob Holly and he was in the Air Force, or training to be in the Air Force back in the Korean War days, and he was training to be pilot on the Dakota aircraft. And he spoke to me about one of his friends who were involved with that particular program, and having health problems later. But Bob was a young bloke at the time and in those days until you were 21 you needed your parents' permission to go overseas, so to speak. And when they rang Bob's father to seek his permission to go to Korea, Bob's father quickly said, 'No son of mine's gonna be a mercenary for the government,' and that ended Bob's career. So that's the way it went in those days.

***Do you have any knowledge of collaboration between the RAAF; the US AF and the RAF***

In collaboration, I guess the only thing that can come to my mind is the - first of all, is the integration of the F1-11s in the Royal Australian Air Force, I was involved with working with United States' personnel in the training field from about 1967, I think it might have been, '68. Later on, the Americans at attachments out here, bombing programs which I was involved with. And a lot later on in life, they had an exercise here probably in the late '80s.

And I do remember that because they brought about 20 Humvees with them. And I had a World War II jeep, a little bit of history behind that, and over a mess drink, the motor pool master sergeant found out I had a World War II jeep and he said his dad drove one in Korea, could he have a drive of mine, and I said, 'Well, I don't mind,' and he said, 'I'll give you a drive of a Humvee.' So that found me a couple of hours later out the back of Harrisfield in a convoy of Humvees and after many experiences - well, I probably shouldn't - I could probably tell you about off the record, but I enjoyed the drive. When we went back to the Base, as I lived just off the Base, I invited him up for a drink, and when his Humvee part of the convoy, the rest followed. And I just have that distinct memory of American World War or Wild West movies of the wagon trails, I should say, the wagons circled around the campfire, I found my house with a circle with about 20 Humvees around it. And I always savour that moment, you know. Lucky, they were sworn to drink while on duty, and even though I offered, they were courteous and said, 'No, sir.' But a few cups of teas went around - coffee probably more to the point.

Yeah. But I live on a ridge just behind the Base and they can overview the Base and it's quite a setting, really. The British came - when I was here - the British involvement at Amberley from my experience was back in the '60s, we did have exercises, and I remember the Vulcan Bombers arriving at Amberley with supporting logistics aircraft and flying - or say, training exercises. Apart from that, I had not really any association with the British Air Force.

***Have you experience of the work of Amberley in Humanitarian Programs?***

My only experience of that, I guess, is that I was with the C1-30s in those years, I'd actually left Amberley. And after Cyclone Tracy, I had to transit through Darwin on C1 30s, going through Vietnam. And we stayed in at Darwin and seen the legacy of the cyclone and yeah, it was pretty traumatic.

**The Base Buildings**

***Hangar 76***

I guess later on in life, I've produced a number of children, and my dear daughter, Jaime, was terribly involved with those civilian exercises as an environmental health officer. Hangar 76 was the first hangar built on RAAF Base Amberley. It started constructed circa of about 1940. It actually perpetuated right through to current times, and I think Hangar 76 is going to be one of the casualties of the redevelopment. However, it's got a significant history as far as the Air Force and World War II goes at RAAF Base Amberley.

In 1941 when the Americans were bombed at Pearl Harbour, they then sought to establish a land base in Australia to counter the Japanese invasions. At that time, the American Air Force, I think it was called an Army Air Force at the time, but wasn't USAF at the time. They shipped in numerous crates of knocked down aircraft, the likes of Kitty Hawks and Airacobras and assembled them in Hangar 76. So Hangar 76 basically became the instrument for putting together the American Air Force for World War II to fight in the Pacific.

Later on, it morphed into a repair facility, and I remember back to the '60s Sabres and Meteors and the odd Canberra squashed in there having various levels of repair and maintenance carried out on them. And in later years, then it morphed into the F1-11 engine overhaul facility, and with the corporatisation of aircraft maintenance, I think TA Boeing had their little foot in the door there too.

### ***Parade Ground***

The parade ground, do I remember the parade ground? In the Air Force you systematically go from being at the bottom of the pile to the top of the pile, along with that comes promotion, and promotion courses. I did my promotion course for corporal here at RAAF Base Amberley. And I distinctly remember the warrant officer [0:18:45.0] at the time getting me a squad of chaps, probably a half dozen airmen, they were positioned in the far end of the parade ground, and I was positioned in the other end of the parade ground up behind the medical section. And I had to carry my voice to control those men a couple of hundred yards away. And I remember, 'Raise that voice, laddy.' And yeah, so it made a bit of mettle of me, and I suppose achieved the aim.

But I do remember that parade ground. Yeah. The saluting station, that was to the eastern side of the parade ground, we used to call it saluting dais. And there was a bit of a casing of a bomb that marked its way in there, painted red, white, and blue, and a bit of chain around the inter dais where the CO would take the parade. And it was always like that except when you had a dignitary, then they'd bring this mobile platform, they made them stand up higher and mightier.

And that was a curiosity, because it did come back as a reflection later on, there was a certain gentleman, he was a secretary to the Minister of Defence, and his name was Sir Jim Killen, or Sir James Killen, so James arrived into here around about the F1-11 era and he was involved in the acquisition. And I was a young bloke on parade, walked past, or marched past, and saluted him in awe. And well, you never got to see people like that sort of stature in life.

But tragically, years later, and it was about 2007, I think the year was, I was asked to visit a veteran in the Wesleyan Hospital in Brisbane, and he was in a shared room. The gentleman was a bloke named Sid Toser, and he was 102 years old, a veteran of World War I and World War II. And I got to talk to him about his World War II and World War I experience, but he had had an injury, and the nurses, after I'd been there about 15, 20 minutes, came and asked me whether I'd step outside while they pulled the curtain and do his dressing.

And I was sitting there, lost in thoughts about old Sid because he had quite a bit of history, and suddenly this lady spoke to me, and said, 'Is your name George?' and I said, 'Yes,' I said, 'How did you know that?' and he [sic] said, 'I was listening to you,' and he said, 'You're in the Air Force,' and I said, 'Yes.' And he said, 'Do you mind coming over to talk to my husband,' and I ...

... said, 'Why's that, ma'am?' he said, 'Well, he was in the Air Force in World War II and I thought you might be able to cheer him up. I said, 'What's his name?' and he said, 'Jim,' he said, 'You probably know him.' I said, 'Jim?' I said, 'I know lots of Jims and James in the Air Force,' I said, 'What's his surname?' 'Killen,' it was Sir James Killen. And I got to talking with Sir James about his war efforts, he was a tail gunner. And later on, about his involvement in the F1-11s and I said, 'Look, James, I remember as a young lad seeing you on the saluting dais, and anyway, here you are,' you know, I said, 'Strange world.'

Anyway, we had probably about 20 minutes of talk before the nurses called me back to talk to Sir Sid. And I had conflict of thoughts there, thinking when I left the ward, I was thinking about Sir James and Sidney, and then this lady called me back, and that was his wife. I'm just trying to think of the Lady - I'll just forget that one. But she said, 'Sir James would like to see you.' And I walked over to Sir James' bedside and he put his hand out, which was quite weak, he gave me his hand, he said, 'George,' he says, 'I really enjoyed our talk and we could have been friends, you know, given another time. But I really enjoyed our conversation,' he said, 'All the best for your future,' et cetera.

And that left me a little bit pumped, but the following day I got a message to say that Sidney Toser had died from his injuries. And when I attended the funeral in Hemmant I was with Mal Brough's secretary and the buzzer went off, and he said, 'George,' he said, 'Just got a message. You ever heard of a bloke called Sir James Killen?' I said, 'Yes, I was with him two or three days ago,' he said, 'He's just passed away.'

So I had the privilege of seeing two men in the twilight of their lives, you know, one gentleman was possibly the last Australian World War II, World War I veteran, although he was in the British Army for World War I, and Sir James Killen, the secretary for the Minister for Defence. So that was a real privilege for a person of my situation and knowledge. Yeah. See him first time as a gentleman standing up, a dignitary, on the saluting dais, and the next, prostrate in a bed just before he died. It was an experience.

### ***Cinema***

Obviously, yes, a lot of years of attending there as a young bloke back in the '60s and watching the cheap flicks, we got a lot in for probably a shilling, whereas - this is before decimal currency. And then later on in life, my wife being a cinema operator, the running of the camera there, and I was running the canteen. And I think the spoils went to the kindly, because later on, when I was posted back here, I became PNC President of Amberley State School and a few other involvements. So I got into the social side of the family life at the Air Force.

But I do remember that, and many of the lectures that went on there. Sad to see that facility go, really, it's a - I think they were carbon-arc ones, and I always used to muse because those days, the films were run on an acetate sifter and if you saw from about five seconds from the end of the reel, this little black dot came up, and for the trained eye, you'd pick it up, and that was the cue for the cinematographer to swap over. But sometimes, the movies, you'd get so engrossed that the cinematographer would forget that. You'd go flick, flick, flick, and I caught my wife out a few times when that happened. Yeah. My little kids are hidden behind, sitting down there, some people trying to knock off the Mars bars, I'd say, 'Child, don't touch that,' you know, 'Put it back.'

### ***Airmen's mess***

When I first came to Amberley in '61 in the air training corp, the airmen's mess is what's now known as the gymnasium. And it was a building that was such that's got the legacy of World War II. And I always remember it because it had big wash tubs as you came in the door. So those days, it wasn't a matter of going in there, sitting down and getting your meal, the knives and forks already collected. You were issued with a pannikin and knives and forks and a plate, and you would have to take those with you to the mess, get your food, or 'grub' as we called it, and sit down, eat your meal, and then when you finished your meal, you'd then be required to walk up to the tubs, there was one tub there for washing off the crude spoils of the vegies and gravy, and the other one to wash it and rinse it. And then you put it in your pannikin bag, we had a little, like, a calico bag, you stuff it in, you go back to your barracks.

And then I was there in '70-, well, the - sorry, in the late '60s, they then built the new airmen's mess across the road, right. And then we started eating there, and that was absolutely fantastic. And of course, that's morphed, that's now been demobilised or demolished, and the new airmen's mess is now off base - well, within the base boundaries now, but to what was then off base.

No. It's the whole mess concept's changed. The messes were individual, with individual kitchens and staffing. Now they have a centre kitchen and cooking staff and the wings are out for the officers' mess, the sergeants' mess and the airmen's mess. But going back to those early times, adjacent to the airmen's mess on the western side was also the sergeants' mess. And that was demolished and rebuilt up behind the [0:06:28.1] area. And I do have a rather laconic memory of that.

### ***Sergeant's Mess***

Before the sergeants' mess, or the second generation sergeants' mess, was built, there was a little bit of a gully there, and we actually had the New Zealand Air Force technicians train with us and spend some time at Amberley. And I remember one chap wanted to drive my mate's car. Now, I had a Vauxhall Cresta, which had the gears in a certain sequence, and my mate had a Zephyr which had reverse where first was on my car. And he'd driven my car and then got in my mate's car, and he said, 'Have a drag,' along the base here, mind you. So we floored the cars, and to my surprise, I went forward and my mate's were buggled, he went backwards and ran into the ditch. When I used to go to the mess, I used to think, 'God, this is sitting over where this vehicle rolled.' No one was hurt, just pride, yeah.

### ***Base Hospital and Hospital Ward***

I've got two good memories, like, I guess I had an operation done on me at the operational room at the very front of that. And I spent a number of days in the old ward there. One time I was servicing a casella barometer when I was dealing with bomb site checks, and I'd put too much pressure and the mercury flooded over and I was trying to scrape it off the bench, and I had a piece of paper on the bench trying to scrape the mercury, and the paper slipped a little, and the mercury flipped up my mouth, like, I feel it going down my tunnels of my tummy. And they sent me down to Medical, and all they said was, 'Keep on drinking milk, laddy,' and I spent a day or two there and I wasn't the worse, so they sent me back.

But because of my association with the bomb site, I was promoted young, I was a corporal at the age of around about - the age of 20, in charge of the section. And the air crew had come back, a bit anxious off a bombing sortie, and said, 'Our bombs are going off target, can you [0:08:35.0] it?' And I thought, 'Well, I have to check,' because I'd just done the bomb site. So I was pretty good, like, I could go with a screwdriver on my ear, out in the Canberra Bomb, and fiddle around.

And then when I got there I realised a component had failed. So I said, 'Well, I'll take the bomb site out and fix it up for you,' they said, 'How long?' and I said, 'Give us half an hour, I'll it all going for you.' Well, I got back to the section and the component I was after I had run out, so I rang up 3OD which was the overhaul facility and I said, 'Look, my name's Corporal Hatchman, I'm fixing up this bomb site, the aircrew are waiting for it, I need this particular component straight away,' I said, 'If you can get one out for me, I'll send one of my troops out and you have it outside and he can pick it up and should be back here in 10 or 15 minutes.'

About 20 minutes later, and this phone call from 3OD, they said, 'Corporal Hatchman?' I said, 'Yes,' they said, 'We're waiting for this troop, we've got a bloke outside waiting for him.' And I said, 'Well, he should be there by now,' and he said, 'No sign of him.' So I got this young chap and I said, his name was Phil Gobly, this bloke, I said, 'Phil, you get down on your bike,' I said, 'Head down, bum up,' I said, 'Get down there and get this part and look for Ray Crosly,' which was the chap I sent down there originally, 'And if he's there, tell him he's in strife, but you get that part back.'

Anyway, Phil was down and back in a few minutes, I've got the bit and I'm fitting it into the computer and getting it ready and I got it into the aeroplane, then I came back and my attention was to Ray. And I said, 'Phil, did you see anything of Ray?' and he said, 'No, but I saw his pushbike.' And I said, 'Where?' he says, 'It's outside the old gymnasium,' what it was called - those days we called it the mess, the old airmen's mess, 'And it was all crunched up.' And I said, 'Well, get down there, have a look around,' I said, 'He must have been hurt,' I said, 'See if you can find him, will you?' Anyway, down goes Phil, he comes back with this bike,

he was riding a pushbike, it was 'whi, whi, whi,' the whole wheels were going wobbly, and I said, 'Did you see any sight of Ray?' he said, 'No.'

So then I rang up the RAAF hospital here on the Base, I said, 'Look, my name's Corporal Hatchman, I sent a gentleman, IOC Ray Crossly to do a job for me and he hasn't turned up. I've since sent down troops to look for him and they can't find him. Do you have him in hospital?' because I have [0:10:48.7] he may have been hurt. They searched the wards, about five minutes later, they came back and said, 'No, we don't have a Ray Crossly here,' I said, 'Are you sure?' and they said, 'No.'

So then I thought, 'Well, this is serious.' So I went and saw my OIC and said, 'You'd better go onto the Military Police.' So I rang up this Military Police, I said, 'This is Corporal Hatchman, of 482 Squadron,' I said, 'I'd like to say one of my men has gone missing.' I mean, you hear that in World War II, but I actually said, 'One of my men - I'm reporting one of my men has gone missing.' Well, that set up a whole Base search for this gentleman, two hours they searched this Base, and no sign of him, not an absolute whisper of the bloke.

About that time I got a call from the Medical section again, he said, 'Are you Corporal Hatchman?' and I said, 'Yes,' he says, 'You were looking for IOC Crossly,' and I said, 'Yes,' he said, 'We've got him here in hospital.' I said, 'Well, look, I rang up two hours ago,' he said, 'Oh no, he's just come in.' And I said, 'Where did you find him?' he said, 'Down the dump.'

Now, what had happened was it was one of those summer days, or it was deep summer, and we had a violent thunderstorm come through and it blown down gum trees, and the next morning you had the gardeners out with their two tonne tip trucks and they were shovelling the gathered trees into the back of the tip truck. Ray had gone down, head down, bum up, like I said, and hadn't seen the truck, and ran into it - the back of it. His bike's gone underneath, he's catapulted into the back of the truck.

The gardeners hadn't seen him and they've just kept letting the trees in, or the debris, and they've driven off and crunched his bike up, and gone down the dump at the back of the Base and tipped him out, and not knowing. They've done several trips down there, and it was only the fact that the drivers aren't allowed to smoke - in those days you weren't allowed to smoke in the vehicles - so this - and they used to call them 'durries,' and this driver got out, thought, 'This is my last run, I'll have a durry before I go back to work,' you see, and he was having this cigarette and heard the, 'Ooh, aah,' groans, and he's got a hell of a fright, he could see this bit of a hand protruding through the trees. And went down and there's this Phil, this IOC Crossly. He was badly concussed, they brought him back, he was in hospital for several days but recovered. But yeah, it's quite an experience to say, 'One of my men's gone missing.'

He was really, I mean, if the gentleman hadn't stopped for the cigarette, it depends on the concussion the gentleman had, he may have come to and got through, walked out. But he may not have. There might have been other waste dropped on him or whatever, you would never know, you know. And no one would have ever known what happened to him. And I did write about ghost stories of Amberley, about the Min Min lights that existed here.

When Amberley was established, it was built on the swamp, and they had horrendous rains and it just culled operations, and then some of the first airmen came here, said it was rather than going to an Air Force base, it was a bit like going on a fishing trip, you've got these rudimentary barracks and you're virtually camping.

So to give the Base some ambience of all weather capability, they denuded the hills of Willow Bank of the top soil and carted it down here. So I often say to people the history of Willow Bank is associated with Amberley because of it's in at Amberley Air Force Base.

But that swamp was particularly bad at the front there because the alluvial soils were washed down by the heavy rains off the Amberley hills, where the school was, and make a big mud puddle. And also that was a road that deviated south to Warwick.



But in later years, when they rebuilt or extended the power station base, I got a call from then Wing Commander Steinbeck to say that about six foot below the ground they'd found the remnants of an old corral, of a post, and did I know what's for. And I said, 'Well, that's where you used to hold the stock when they extracted them from Sandridge Crossing.' So Amberley had a bit of history back then, and it was actually called Sandridge, but then the Cullotts lived up the hill on the left-hand side, and I have the cadastral of where they lived, and they named their property Amberley after their hamlet area in England, because south of England, there's a little ...

[end of recording]

## RAAF Base Amberley Oral History Recording

24 September 2015



**Denis Dogget**

**Warrant Officer (Retired). 23 Squadron Association**

***What do you remember about Amberley when you first arrived?***

I arrived here about 1966 after completing my rookie training and my technical training at RSTD. And I came here for eight months as a mechanic and I worked on Canberra aircraft down in 3OD. I've had four postings at Amberley in my career. After my eight months in the field at Amberley I went back to do my fitters course and I was lucky enough to get posted back to Amberley. I come from Brisbane, so that was quite handy. And in that instance, I was working on Sabre aircraft at 3AD, we were doing the main overhauls on Sabres. And I was there for three and a half years until I got posted to Malaysia with the Malaysian Air Force. We were teaching their training - or their troops how to maintain the aircraft.

Well, I really enjoyed it, there was a lot of history there. There was an old Lincoln that was parked out the back of the Base there, and the fire section used to go out there and spray it with water and I managed to go out there and take some photographs one day, and about two days later I looked out and it was on fire. The fires burned it to the ground, so I was lucky to get those photographs, which I've still got.

***What people remain in your memory from that time?***

But there was a lot of history here with the old hangars and so forth. Well, there's a lot of the guys I've worked with here that are still around, and with the museum we've managed to get established a lot of those guys, we found them, and they've come back, and they're working still with us. So it's nice to see them and they're a great lot of guys. Naturally, there are some that aren't with us any longer, but ...

***What units or squadrons have you worked with?***

I was in 3AD for three turns, right, the last one being the F1-11s. And I arrived there in '76 and I stayed there until '82. And so I did the six years on F1-11s and I enjoyed that immensely. They were a very hard aircraft to work on. We ended up in the tanks, naturally, which is pretty confined, but they were a great aircraft, and I think they served Australia really well.

***What were the significant events during your time at the Amberley?***

I love aircraft and especially the vintage aircraft, and a couple of the air shows here I volunteered to assist with some of the - like the RAAF museum when they brought their aircraft up, I would stay back after work and help those guys and get bits for them and do things for them. And even went for a few flights in some of the aircraft while they were doing their training for the flying display, and about a week after that was finished, one of the bosses called me up, and he said, 'I want you down at the Air Movements Terminal.' I

said, 'Yes, sir,' I said, 'What for, sir?' you know, he said, 'Well, for all your effort you've put in over the air show in your time after hours,' he said, 'I've got you a ride in the Catalina.' And that was fantastic, you know. So there was about 10 of us in the back of the aircraft down and I'll never forget that flight. It was beautiful, you know. Yeah. Very slow aircraft, but we went for about an hour, I suppose, down all Brisbane and around the countryside and then come back and landed. Absolutely beautiful.

***Were you here for the introduction of the F-111?***

I missed the aircraft arriving, I was at Williamtown at that time. But I got posted up here after, they'd been here about two years. So I went straight onto the sealant section, and then we started doing the aircraft E servicing. It was a nice aircraft, but you know, like, quite difficult. Yeah, I worked on Canberras, as a matter of fact the Canberra that's parked outside, 125, was the first aircraft I ever worked on, so the first of, you know, live aircraft. And I was lucky enough to find it up here and we managed to, sort of, bring it into the museum and then restore it. And yeah, so we've still got it.

***What memories do you have of other aircraft during your time at Amberley?***

Sabres, yeah, the Sabres, like I said, I enjoyed the Sabres. When I went to Malaysia, after about 18 months I then transferred back onto Canberras from Vietnam to do the Ds and Dakotas. So I had the Canberras and Dakotas to work on up there, and that was great also.

***What do you recollect about women working at the Amberley?***

Back in those days, WAAAFs were in orderly rooms, medical sectioned, just the normal things for that time. But over the years, they've now got into photography and into transport, even into aircraft maintenance and now we've even got some navigators and pilots. So things have changed over the years, you know. That's Amberley, that's here happening right now.

***Have you spoken with previous RAAF personnel about the Base during WWII?***

One of the sergeants we worked with, he was in Korea, and he was on Meteor. Now, the Meteor aircraft, as most other aircraft, has a micro-switch on one of the under carriage legs, so that when the aircraft is on the ground you can't fire the guns. But they had to bring this aircraft into the hangar in Korea to do a quick job on it, and it required jacking the aircraft. So Des happened to be in the cockpit and he decided to have a little fly, and he pressed the trigger, and the guns went off and blew a hole through the wall. But yeah, he'll never forget that. But that was one instance that - yeah, yeah.

***Have you spoken with previous RAAF personnel about the Base during WWII?***

Most of them have retired, although they were still out in civilian street and you did bump into them from time to time. The real estate agent who sold us our house, he was in the RAAF. And he was in the occupation force which went to Japan. And he gave me a map that he took off the wall of a flying boat base. And the map was of Australia with all Japanese names on it and all the towns and all the train lines and main roads. And I've still got that.

***Base buildings***

***Hangar 76***

I've had to work in and out of it over occasions. But that hangar during World War II was an engine repair section for Merlins and Radials. So I suppose you can say it's a shame it's got to go, but I suppose that's progress, you know.

***Parade Ground***

Yes, I have worked - marched on that parade ground on several occasions. And yeah, so yeah, it's got some memories there too.

### ***Cinema***

Yes, I used to go to the cinema when I was single, living on Base. We'd go down there once a week or so forth, and yeah, so it's a great old building. And in those days you could get a pass to come on the Base and walk down to the cinema. And it was cheaper than in town. And yeah, there were some good shows on.

### ***Sergeant's Mess***

Well, I was a sergeant and warrant [0:16:41.7] when I left. I didn't use the very early mess here, I didn't arrive until '66. But they were well established and going earlier than that. I believe there was a strong room built for other purposes after it was used as the mess, you know, after its use. But I can't be real sure about that.

### ***Base Hospital and Hospital Ward***

Other than just going down for your normal check ups and occasionally you'd go down with a cold or a sore throat or something, but nothing drastic in there, yeah.

### ***Bellman Hangars***

I came back in '90 as a warrant officer to 23 Squadron, and I'd come from Wagga previously, where we'd recovered some Boston remains out in New Guinea, with the aim to make two aircraft, one for the RAAF Museum and one for the PNG government museum. But that was being done at Wagga, but that, sort of, fell through, and I spoke to my CIP about it wasn't being done, and he spoke to the chief of the Air Force and the end result was if you can find a place for it at Amberley we'll move it to Amberley. So we actually moved into Hangar 340 and as a part of the Air Force was, sort of, trimming down in numbers, I managed to get about 28 guys, tradesmen, that would have been posted away somewhere else attached to the project. And we had a really good workforce and we did the two aircraft in about two and a half years. So it was a great effort and a great result.

### ***Lysaght huts – silver city***

Well, back in the early days, back in '66, '67, I was here, there was Army guys living in some of those quarters. And some of the buildings, 101 was a storeroom later on for the Black Hawk, but that wasn't until '88. But we had one of those buildings for storage for the museum, which we gratefully accepted when it was empty and filled it.

### ***Starter cartridge Stores***

I know there was one on the Base, I didn't know its exact location. Yeah. But they were a cartridge used to start the Canberras. Even the F1-11 had them. But they were always used at the air start mostly. But yeah, I don't know its location.

RPS

## RAAF Base Amberley Oral History Recording

24 September 2015



**Nev Comerford**

**Flight Sergeant (Retired). Avionics/ Instrument Technician.**

**Volunteer. Amberley Aviation Heritage Centre**

***During what time did you work at Amberley?***

When I first came to Amberley I was an instrument mechanic. Finished initial training, came out to No. 3 aircraft depot in Building No. 76. Spent about approximately 11 months there, went back to Wagga for training, after training there to do our fitters course, came back to Amberley again in 1967 to 16 Army Aviation Regiment. Spent ...

Approximately a year at 16 ALA and was posted to Richmond in September, 1968, spent 10 years at Richmond on Hercules. Was posted back to Amberley in 1977. Came back to No. 3 Aircraft Depot. From there went to No. 482 Squadron. And then eventually when One and Six Squadrons were reformed went onto F1-11 aircraft then. Spent a few years on F1-11 aircraft. Was posted back to 3AD, No. 3 Aircraft Depot. And eventually in 1987 was discharged from the Air Force.

It was very exciting actually because it was the first base I was posted to, as far as an active base. A very lot smaller than what it is now. Actually, since then - it's the third main gate that's opened now, as far as the expansion is concerned. At Amberley we -- when I first got here, we were in what I think was H Block, it's H Block there, which we thought that was a really good one there. Just the number of people that, you know, you get to know. The swimming pool, the cinema, all of those things you'd go to. And then on weekends and that, off down the Gold Coast or somewhere like that. So the perfect life for a young fella.

***What were the significant events during your time at the Amberley?***

In the old time at Amberley, yes, there was a few. There was a couple of aircraft crash landings. We had a Sky Hawk crash landed with a big bed of foam. I actually - when we were over in [0:01:59.7] I've done exercise, I got to fly in an F1-11, which was just memorable. It never happened again. Just did so many things, you make so many friends, it was just one of those ones - posting to the Army Aviation Regiment, we now have friends there that are now working with us again at the Heritage Centre, which you've just done some interviews. So yeah, there's just a lot of highlights, but they're all just special memories.

***Were you here for the introduction of the F-111?***

I was in Richmond when the 1 11s arrived. What I remember about the 1-11s arriving, they came over Richmond and did a very low pass and did a dump and burn. And everybody hit the ground, thought something was going wrong. And I thought, I'd love to work on that aircraft, and eventually I did at Amberley.

***What memories do you have of other aircraft during your time at Amberley?***

Well, when I was first here, I did mostly in the instrument section area, working on the instruments out of the Sabres, out of the Canberras, out of the HS7-48s, basically we were an overhaul depot for those things. Did a short time working on the aircraft down here in the old hangars and the Sabre and Canberra Hangar before I was posted back for training. Then came up, worked with the Army on the fixed wing aircraft, whether the Cessna 180s and the Sioux helicopters.

And I was there when the first Pilatus Porter arrived. We were on duty crew, we knew the aircraft was coming in, didn't know the exact time, and we heard this funny sounding aircraft taxiing in, and someone said, 'It's coming in here, quick.' So we all had to put our equipment on and get out there to marshal it in. But the Swiss pilots, they knew what they were doing, they just taxied straight up, turned in, parked as if we weren't there. But no, that was fairly exciting. The first base they had in Australia, yes. One of the things about the Pilatus Porter was that they had long range fuel tanks for 44 gallon drums, they had them installed in the back. It's a pity we didn't keep them, but no, they were, you know, that's what they had for coming through, but they were painted with civilian markings because of the fact that, you know, the wars and things were on, and they were neutral, so we had to bring the aircraft out here that way. Beautiful aircraft to work on too.

***What do you recollect about women working at the Amberley?***

Mostly, the women working at Amberley when I first arrived here were either in the orderly rooms or in medical area. When I was actually working on F1-11s, we had a couple of young ladies actually working as tradespeople on the aircraft. That would have been in 1979, around about the late '70s. Very good, it, sort of, put a bit of decorum into the fellas. But no, it was good to see, you know, women actually taking part in the technical side.

***Have you spoken with previous RAAF personnel about the Base during WWII?***

Yeah. I spoke to a few people, mainly people when they come out here to the Heritage Centre on our open days, people will tell you about, you know, when they were Amberley at such and such a time, like, in 1942 or something like that, and the Lincoln Bombers that were all parked around and all that sort of thing. Some good stories that come from those people.

***Vietnam War***

Well, Jim Topping and I, with the Army Aviation were all prepared, ready, had the injections, everything to go with the Army over to Vietnam and the signal came through from the Air Force saying no more Air Force people will be going with the Army. That was when they posted us out, I was posted to Richmond then.

***Do you have any knowledge of collaboration between the RAAF; the US AF and the RAF ?***

Basically, at Amberley the only collaboration I've had is with the Americans when then F1-11s were introduced, they were in various training roles and things like that. With the Hercules, though, but that's not Amberley, so - but no, when visiting Air Forces come out on exercises and things like that, people at exercises - we really didn't have a great deal to do with them, but it was basically helping them out in, you know, if they needed any help with anything.

***Base buildings***

***Hangar 76***

Hangar 76 was my original one. In Hangar 76, basically opposite Fire Flight Headquarters now, in that little corner is where I first started. And now, with the Heritage Centre, I'm working in my own little instrument section, probably 200 metres away from that now. So it's turned the full circle.

### ***Parade Ground***

The parade ground's got some fond memories. We did - with the Army Aviation, when the pilots graduated, we had a Wings Parade. They didn't wait until they all graduated, as soon as one graduated we had a Wings Parade. And I can remember the WODs that, you know, that parade ground was sacred, and now they just use it as a car park. I quite often look at that and think, 'My God, those old WODs would be turning in their graves.' Sometimes, when you hop out of the car, you think, you know, this was sacred ground once, and now look at it. And from what I've heard, all of that is going to be all hard stand for the new battlefield lifters, air lifters.

### ***Cinema***

Went to the cinema quite often. One of the ones, memorable ones, I can remember about the cinema was, I brought the kids when I had kids, brought them out here to see Crocodile Dundee and they loved it. And they really loved that one there. And I said, 'Dad used to come to this when he was only 20,' but that was a long time ago.

### ***Airmen's mess***

When I was young and fit, used to do a few things in the gym.

### ***Base Hospital and Hospital Ward***

The hospital, yes, I did have some experiences there. I actually was having allergy injections. And they gave me the wrong dose, and of course I reacted badly to it. And they decided they were going to put me in hospital, so they put me into one of the wards, and when they were going to let me out of the ward, I just said, 'That's okay,' I said, 'I've got to get back down to my section because I'm riding the motorbike today and I've got to get my helmet and that.' No, can't ride a motorbike. So I had to get my wife to come out and collect me. No, not too bad memories. You'd have to go up there for the normal injections and all that sort of thing.

### ***Bellman Hangars***

So that's where everything happened in there, and the ones where Army Aviation was basically the first ones I worked in there. Apparently they're all going to go. Now, they're taken over by that. And then when I came back out with Dennis Doggett, when he was running - yeah, started off the Heritage Centre. Came back out to basically the place. But yeah, just hope that they keep the Bellman Hangars and re-erect them somewhere else if possible. But apparently they don't meet the standards now. Well, what we'd like to do, really, is those ones down there, is bring them up and put them in here between these hangars and just make one big long hangar out of it. But I think because of the current standards - they don't come up to the standards.

### ***Headquarters - Former School of Instruction?***

The first lot of clearances when I came in there to get clearances, and sort of, a very intimidating building. Now it's Fire Flight Headquarters, but yeah, no, went in there a lot of times. I actually had an experience there with an Army officer where we had our flight line with ALA, we had painted lines and on the aircraft side was non saluting and on the other side it was a saluting area. And I happened to be walking out past there, and one of the Army officers that had just come from Duntroon expected me to put everything down and salute him. And he called me back and said, 'Don't you salute officers?' and I said, 'No, not if I don't have to,'

and walked away. And when I got over to our duty crew hut, he was still standing there looking. I remember that as clear as a bell.

***Starter cartridge Stores***

Yeah. I have two starter cartridges all chromed for yes - you take the firing mechanism out and had them all chromed and they're nice, they make very good drinking mugs.



RPS

## RAAF Base Amberley Oral History Recording

24 September 2015



**Mick Corkery**

**Warrant Officer (Retired). Class 2. 2<sup>nd</sup> Combat Engineers Regiment**

**Volunteer. Amberley Aviation Heritage Centre**

*What do you remember about Amberley when you first arrived?*

Yes. When I first came to Amberley I came as a fitters mate to await a trade test as an engine fitter. I first arrived at Amberley on the 4th of August, 1967, it's a date that sticks in my mind, having come from Sydney to Ipswich. And then we've stayed here until we moved out in October, '74 I think it was. But in between times, I had detachments and postings overseas, but we always came back to Amberley.

*What people remain in your memory from that time?*

Yeah. Lots of identities of all ranks, actually, from private to colonels. But I suppose the one sticks out in my mind the most would be Colonel Robinson, PM Robinson. He was our workshop commander. He was a very hard, difficult man, but he was - because I later learned, as I got promoted, that he was actually an educator, he always did things that made us think and to learn. And yes, I really appreciated him after he left, actually.

*What units or squadrons have you worked with?*

Well, the squadrons I worked at Amberley - I was actually posted to 1 Div Army Aviation Regiment, and that morphed into a unit called Fire Base Workshops. And then we'd be sent out to the various flights. I served in several flights, I served in 161 regi Squadron, 162 regi Squadron, 163 regi Squadron. A short detachment to 173 General Support Squadron, and 183 regi Squadron in PNG. Well, I had 18 postings in my 20 years in the service, fortunately most of them were aviation, they were all good postings.

*What were the significant events during your time at the Amberley?*

Significant events at Amberley were the day the first Porters arrived. They were a major increase in Army capability when we received the Porters. Prior to that, we had the Cessna 180s which are just a light commercial aircraft, but the Porters - we actually felt that we actually had a decent aircraft when they arrived. Well, the Pilatus Porters is a short take off and landing aircraft, it's an eight seater, it can carry eight troops. It has remarkable flying characteristics, very slow, but can land in twice its own length and take off in twice its own length. It's just an amazing aircraft.

***Were you here for the introduction of the F-111?***

The F1-11s, yes, I remember when they arrived, there was great excitement around the Base. It was a huge event when they first arrived. Yes, it was an amazing sight. As for problems with the aircraft when they first arrived and I really couldn't answer any of those questions because I was Army Aviation. But I don't remember seeing any problems with them, no.

***What do you recollect about women working at the Amberley?***

Women at Amberley. Back in the '60s there weren't many at all. I don't remember any female service personnel in the Army. There were quite a few in the Air Force, though, nurses, dental assistants, clerks, most of the headquarters units had them, drivers, that was about it. I don't remember any major problems. They used to keep them in the WAF Barracks, which was down from the boozers - cordoned off, yes.

***Have you spoken with previous RAAF personnel about the Base during WWII?***

Older people here in my days was - the Base commander, actually I just can't - his name slips my mind at the moment. But he was - sorry, his name was Derek Kingwall, he was the Air Commodore at the time. He was a liberator pilot from World War II and he used to come down to the hangars and quite often talked to the blokes about his experiences. He was a nice man.

***Malayan Conflict***

The Malaya conflict, no, I did serve a short term in Malaya, but that was after the conflict. I was only there on a short detachment, but I didn't have any real involvement with Malaya at all.

***Vietnam War***

The Vietnam War, yes, I was posted to Vietnam in April of 1970. And I served with 161 regt Squadron over there.

***Do you have any knowledge of collaboration between the RAAF; the US AF and the RAF ?***

Collaboration with other forces, we had a lot of visitors in those days, a lot of RAF aircraft arrived here. Most came down from Malaya. We had a few American Air Force come in, they were mainly transport missions. There was a small American station here on the Base, I think they were a communications unit, and once a week they had a supply aircraft that would fly in.

***Have you experience of the work of Amberley in Humanitarian Programs?***

Humanitarian programs, no, not as such. We were involved with flood relief in '74 and down the Gold Coast, we spent a couple of days filling sandbags on the Gold Coast trying to stop the beaches from eroding.

***Base buildings***

***Hangar 76***

Our three hangars are the ones nearest the picture theatre. There's one on its own, and the actual numbers of the buildings, I'm not sure of.

***Parade Ground***

The parade ground, yes, I have many memories of the parade ground. The first Monday of every month we had the Base parade. And our unit was quite different, actually, we also had - although being an Army unit, we had Air Force and Naval personnel with us, and I didn't know in those days, but we had actually three different types of drill movements. So the first couple of parades were quite interesting.

***Cinema***

The cinema, yes, that was quite an interesting place. They used to show movies twice a week, if I remember rightly. And the best thing about the cinema was we had a lot of civilians who would come out to the cinema and watch the movies. So there was an opportunity to meet young ladies.

#### ***Airmen's mess***

The airmen's mess, yes, I have a lot of experiences of the mess. It was a very popular place in our day. As for the sergeants' mess, it was the first mess I got promoted to sergeant in, actually. But I wasn't there long enough to enjoy it, that was in October of '74. And that was the same month we left to go up to Oakey.

#### ***Base Hospital and Hospital Ward***

The Base hospital, I had two visits there. I had to get a clearance for a detachment to Malaya, which I mentioned earlier, and the dentist found out that I had still had my wisdom teeth, so he decided that he'd rip them out that afternoon. And apparently I bled a lot, so they stuck me in the hospital for the weekend, which was quite unfortunate, because I had a date with my girlfriend on the Friday night and I had no way of contacting her. And then on the Monday they sent me off to Malaya with a mouthful of cotton wool.

#### ***Headquarters - Former School of Instruction***

The headquarter building, we didn't have much involvement with the headquarter building. It was only when we marched in or out, and we had to go to the WOD's offices was about my only involvement with that building.

#### ***Lysaght huts – silver city***

Silver City, yes, that was our headquarters for quite a while. We had our vehicle workshops in there, our auto room was in there. We also had our repair parts store, were there, and the pilots' training rooms were there as well. And just after Vietnam, they built another set of huts behind it which are now gone, and they were our accommodation buildings.

#### ***Starter cartridge Stores***

Starter cartridge stores, no, we had nothing to do with those, that was mainly the Canberras.

## RAAF Base Amberley Oral History Recording

24 September 2015



### Jim Topping

#### Volunteer. Amberley Aviation Heritage Centre

***What do you remember about Amberley when you first arrived?***

I was an electrical fitter. About the end of '61, the beginning of '62. No, no, no, I did it in two weeks. The second time I came back in '63, a hell of a lot smaller than what it is now. Another RAAF Base.

***What units or squadrons have you worked with?***

16 Squadron, which was the Army unit, 3AD, and then I went to Wagga, then I came back 482, then went to Wagga, come back to 3AD.

***What were the significant events during your time at the Amberley?***

Only the Canberra that went in over the paddock is about the only that sticks, the rest is pretty straightforward and humdrum type of existence.

***Were you here for the introduction of the F-111?***

Yes, I was - a lot of noise. They didn't agree with the books, they were all wrong, well, supposedly. I arrived in '72, I think, and I worked on them for four years.

***What memories do you have of other aircraft during your time at Amberley?***

You know, the Porter, the Sioux, the Cessna. Yeah, that's about it.

***Base buildings***

***Hangar 76***

'76, I think was down the Headquarters Hangar. I don't know whether that's going or not.

***Parade Ground***

'Get off my parade ground,' now they use it as a car park.

***Base Hospital and Hospital Ward***

I've been down there a couple of times, never admitted to anything, but coughs, colds, and sneezes.

***Bellman Hangars***

I can't remember the numbers, but we had three hangars at the 16 Squadron eventually, and from there down, yeah, I won't mention the name of the place [0:20:03.7]. That's about it.

Silver city, yeah, they were put up when I was at ALA. They turned them into various stores, bloody, Army Cue stores, you know, that type of thing. And they eventually became hobby huts and ...

[end of recording]