

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL – 1949

My entry into Air Traffic Control was quite by accident. I had been working in the butchers shop at the East Sale RAAF Base when the twins, Peter and David, were born on 5th April, 1949. They were about three weeks premature, and as we had no idea we were having a multiple birth, I received quite a shock when I got the telegram announcing their arrival!

Travelling back and forth to East Sale was an enormous undertaking. I was lucky enough to get a Compassionate attachment to Point Cook. One day during the Officer Commanding's monthly inspection that he noticed my uniform hanging in the locker room and asked, "Is that your uniform Gibson?" I replied that it was, half expecting a blast for something or other, however was pleasantly surprised when he said, "What is a man with those qualifications and ribbons doing in a butcher shop?"

I told him how I had wanted to get back into aircrew but was a little over the age bracket. He was surprised to know I had been commissioned during the war and we had a bit of a chat over a cup of tea.

I was later summoned to his office and told to take a seat. I mentioned that I would have liked to do the Air Traffic Control course (which was conducted at Point Cook) but they would not accept Signallers, only Pilots, Navigators or new entries with necessary educational qualifications. He didn't say anything at the time but the next afternoon I was summoned to his office.

"Take a seat Gibson," Gp. Capt. Courtney said. "Thank you sir," said I, and picking up the phone he commenced a conversation that, within a few minutes, changed the course of my life forever. "Dept of Air please, ext so and so... Hello George. Edgar here, how are you. George, I've got young bloke here, a Signaller, twelve hundred hours operational, commissioned during the war, wants to do the ATC Course but somehow or other doesn't quite meet the requirements. Like to have a look at it for me? Thanks George." And that, as they say, was that.

Two days later on a Friday afternoon at 3pm (stand down) whilst waiting for a lift at the main gate and carrying an ill-gotten leg of lamb in my case (butcher's overtime), the OC drove up in his car and beckoned me across. I knew that he was going to search my case and that I would finish up doing 28 days at Holdsworth.. Instead he leaned out of the window and said, "There's an Air Traffic Control course starting on Monday morning and you are on it, good luck." I didn't know it at the time, but should have guessed that he was an old Catalina pilot from way back.

E.B. Courtney wasn't the most popular Gp. Capt. in the world but he was caring, and had a sense of humour – as I found out later when I had completed the course and was controlling at Point Cook. He would often rebuke me over the air for moving the "bloody runway" as he was about to land. Wirraways weren't the easiest aircraft to handle! He never failed to ask, "How are the twins Gibson?" whenever our paths crossed on the base.

Number 6 Air Traffic Control Course

No. 6 ATC Course was conducted at Point Cook about July 1949, it was of ten weeks duration, and had two instructors.

Flt. Lt. Bill Wilson, a pilot acting as SATCO at Point Cook did the practical instruction and Flt. Lt. Kel Youle, a navigator, the theory. Flt. Lt. John Gerber, on loan from Cadet College, did his best to brush up our navigation and Meteorology.

The Air Traffic Control organization, being still more or less in its infancy, was somewhat topsy-turvy to say the least! The normal set up being to have a General Duty pilot in charge as SATCO and three or so NCO Air Traffic Controllers on strength, depending on what type of commitment the base had. Airmen graduating from the course were made substantive sergeants.

No. 6 Course consisted of Officers (pilot or navigator) and airmen, and Jack McKeon and I were the first Signallers to be accepted into the branch. It was coincidental that we had also gone to school together and both retired as Squadron Leaders on the same day in March 1975.

Kel Youle was a bit of a character. He had a fine pencil line moustache, was a bit on the 'tubby' side and in general seemed to be a little effeminate... However, this notion was quickly dispelled in the gymnasium in the following weeks when he gave anyone who was interested boxing lessons. He also told us how he and another little bloke on the base, one Flt. Lt. Trevor Lee, also a Signaller, had cleaned up quite a bit of money entering the boxing tournaments on the troopships on the way home from Europe.

Theory instruction consisted of Kel reading the ATC Bible 'AAP 382' aloud, and verbatim, until he got bored, when he would finish up with "Diddledee diddle dee" etc, "Better read that tonight!" One bloke reckoned he answered a question in the theory exam with "Diddle de diddle de," and was marked right – I wouldn't doubt it!

We learned all about obstructions and runways and the "marking thereof", the layout of aerodromes, lighting and illumination requirements, Notices to Airmen, Signal Squares, and the numerous other things that on the surface, have very little to do with controlling aircraft. However, each was as important as the next in the overall concept. It took an Army Sergeant – Sgt. Dean – some thirty years later to come up with a plaque depicting the objectives of air traffic control as six links in a chain, as follows:

Safety - Expedition - Flexibility - National Security
- Economy - Standards - Procedures <SIX OR SEVEN??>

They may not seem to make sense, but put them all into effect and you have the basis for a pretty good air traffic control system.

Being students we had to live in and were subject to all the old fashioned inspections etc. I recall the course having to remain after stand-down one Friday to re-panic? the hut. My particular chore being the urinals from which some non-existent stains had to be removed per toothbrush. A sense of humour was considered an essential quality for the budding air traffic controller!

Foolishly, I thought that having just on 4 years experience as a WAG and having served as a Flt. Sgt. and Warrant Officer before being commissioned in WW2 that I might be exempt from such mundane chores – not so! As I recall I was asked what size toothbrush I would like! In any case the urinals had never looked cleaner. I cant vouch for the prowess of suckers on succeeding courses!

Ten weeks of moving plastic aircraft attached to a string suspended from ceiling around the room, learning the Manual of Air Traffic Control off by heart and being petrified by the practical sessions in the control tower or mobile control van and being targeted by Tiger Moths (no radio), Wirraways (with radio) and Twin engined Oxfords (with radio that more often than not was unserviceable) and the course was over. I was promoted to Sergeant and posted to Laverton. It was going to be nice to get away from the rat race at Point Cook with about 20 aircraft in the circuit on quiet days, to the relative peace of Laverton.

I had almost finished getting signatures on my clearance from the Point and went in to say goodbye to the SATCO Flt. Lt. Bill Wilson who greeted me with, "Sorry to see you go Sept, how would you like to stay here?" How could I refuse such a request? The postings were changed and stay I did. Bill stayed on for another year and returned to a flying post at East Sale where tragically he and another chap named Wilson were killed in the crash of a Mosquito about a year later.

Air Traffic Control at the Point was something else! One Officer and four NCO'S to man the tower, (Control Van for into wind flying) which had to be changed every time the wind changed, man the URD2A (a loop antenna set up in a Van located at the end of the runway) and when necessary man a satellite drome in a paddock at Little River. Throw in two or three sessions of night flying and an odd turn on the Orderly Sergeants Roster and you have a rough picture of Point Cook in the '40s.

The type of flying prohibited the use of Electric Flares and one of the extra chores between day and night flying, and while everyone else was enjoying the evening meal, I was busy laying the "Toledo' flares into wind. They were loaded onto a trailer towed behind the Jeep and laid at predetermined spots along the runways, grass or sealed.

We had a procedure worked out with the general hand sitting on the trailer and, travelling at 8 knots, he could dispense the flares en route. The next thing was to go back and light the wicks, and for this, a wick soaked in kero and attached to a rod about 2 foot long was used. I understand that at another base they had the bright idea of transporting the flares already lit... Not a bad idea – I believe they did get a replacement Jeep later on!

Once the flare path was down the mobile van in which all the radio apparatus, Aldis lamps and pyrotechnic flares were loaded had to be positioned accordingly a taxi post consisting of three coloured lights positioned alongside of the van and another set of flares laid leading to the tarmac.

On some nights the Wirraways and twin engined Oxfords used the runways while the non-radio and lighter Tiger Moths flew a tighter circuit landing and taking off on the grass. They were controlled by Aldis lamp and in extreme cases by pyros; Green "OK to proceed" Red, "go round" White "general recall". With up to 12 or 16 aircraft in the circuit we certainly had our moments. That it all had to be changed at a moments notice if the wind swung around really kept us on our toes!

If you were really lucky you might be on the tarmac when Padre Dave Byers arrived in his van with the leftovers from the evening meals in the messes, usually about 10 o'clock. Believe me, mince steak on toast never tasted better, particularly on a cold night!

Casually scanning the latest issue of the Air Force News I came across a reference to a celebration for the 200th Pilot Training course, which made me cast my mind back to my earlier days as an Air Traffic Controller at Point Cook in 1949.

As I recall the No.1 Pilots course was either in the latter stages of its training or had just finished. I still have graduation souvenirs (booklet, photos etc.) of No.2 and 3 courses that extended from August 1948 to August 1950.

Control Tower

ATC equipment was a little on the sparse side and, when one finally climbed the 30 foot steel ladder, clambered through a two foot square hatch in the floor, and caught the breath in the ten foot square tower, you were confronted by:

- A huge Aldis lamp suspended from the ceiling
- One normal 'PMG' phone plus one Magneto phone direct to the office, located at the base of the tower.
- A 1930 style upright telephone (cunningly converted into a microphone), and
- One 'Verrey' pistol along with oodles of cartridges; reds, greens and smoke puffs.

All very necessary, particularly when the Tiger Moths were on the program. To enable one to select the correct cartridge in the dark the reds had a serrated base. A series of 'whites' meant a general recall.

In addition to the above one was ably assisted by 7 windsocks and of course, the 40 foot signals square with all sorts of wooden shapes to indicate the various types of activities in progress on the aerodrome. The duty controller was responsible for keeping the information current.

It was essential that non-radio equipped aircraft kept an eagle eye on the square lest they tangle with something out of the ordinary and finish up in a mangled mess on the aerodrome or at least in front of a very irate CFI.

The only other aid available was a loop antenna. Scrounged from some long departed aircraft, this was situated on the roof of an enclosed van situated permanently at the southern end of Runway 35. Inside the van was fitted with a compass dial and a large chrome wheel by which one estimated the 'minima' or otherwise, and with the help of the almighty, which side of the apparatus the aircraft calling may be located. If it happened to rain the water ran down the submarine-like pole and, besides wetting the operator, rendered the whole thing completely useless!

The pattern at Point Cook was to bring the aircraft through the overhead 'null', then turn them onto a heading of 220 degrees and descend them over the coast. Many a controller was taken straight to the Sgts. Mess bar direct from the Van at the conclusion of night-flying – it was not popular shift!

After a three months course at Rathmines I was commissioned for the second time and posted to Japan. The RAAF really cared about their men! Norma had the three littlies to care for, twelve months in a new area in Churchill Avenue, Maidstone and of course in those days we, like most young people, couldn't afford a car. The nearest shops were miles away in Footscray. Nuff said!