

Chapter Ten - My Next Staff College

I have always been interested in education, my own and in the process itself, and I must say that the Air Force was not backward in that field for over my thirty-one years of service I spent over six as a student in various places, as well as about a dozen more as a trainer of others. So the posting to Canberra was not an unusual or unexpected event.

Very soon after arriving there we took over a rented house in Downer, one of the then far northern suburbs. This house was small but much more comfortable than any of the other seven we'd had in the less than seven years since our marriage. Downer was said to be a long way out but in those days Canberra wasn't very big and it was easy to get from A to B. Andrew, when he reached age four, started at the Cotton Street Kindergarten just around the corner so he could find his way (often) back home when he got bored. Little Richard was two and our dear little new baby Johanna Lisbeth arrived in June 1964 at the Canberra Base Hospital and we five people, plus dog Susie, settled down as another happy family in the Nation's capital.

The first difficulty we students with families had was the Staff College's very silly rule that we, all men in our thirties and forties, had to "live-in" on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday nights. This was apparently so that we would study and discuss weighty things with one another, but what it really amounted to for many of us was some extra drinking as work was done quickly and it was still only nine p.m. and the bar was still open so we discussed things there, didn't we? But after some months the "living-in" rule became more and more ignored and we went home in the evening.

There were 24 of us on the course and about six or eight teachers, called Directing Staff or DS, headed by a Commandant whom we rarely saw and an Assistant Commandant who was Geoff Newstead, my acquaintance from Manby and by now a group captain and very interested in our progress he was too. The great bulk of lectures were by visitors whose names and topics I can now hardly recall. One day, though, we had a talk from a Brigadier McKay who was the Army's Director of Operations I think. He horrified us all by saying that to him the Caribou (we'd just sent six to Vietnam) was nothing more than a three-ton truck. Well! The only other speaker I remember was a high-up civilian intelligence person (I shan't mention his name) who told us that there was no way China would have a nuclear weapon for years and years and probably more years. That lecture was in May 1964 and the Chinese exploded their first bomb in the October.

We lived in four old cold huts each with seven rooms and a communal bathroom-toilet space at one end. I was lucky in that my five student colleagues in this slum were Eric Walker, Jake Newham, David Ingall, Bill Simmonds and Wally Smith. You already know something about the first four and Wal soon became a new friend. He had been an engine fitter and then a flight engineer in the RAF during the war. He then migrated to Australia, became an industrial engineer and joined the RAAF as an engineer officer. I think Wal was one of the first on our course to become a group captain which he was later as CO of our RAAF School of Technical Training. So each of us in that hut knew things others did not and we'd all had different experiences, but we cooperated well, gave helpful hints not always appreciated by the receiver, and managed to outwit our resident DS fairly often. He had the seventh room where he occasionally stayed overnight.

It was not easy by the way to get a place on Staff College for as well as applying one had to be selected and even before that there was the Staff College Qualifying Examination, the "Q", to be studied for in one's own spare time. When I did the "Q" in 1960 one had to pass all three papers at the one try. One or even two passes could not be carried forward to the next attempt. For my own attempt which I sat in London there were 124 candidates and only 27 full passes. A ridiculous arrangement which delayed or even denied some very effective and often very busy officers a place on the course which was considered a pre-requisite for promotion past squadron leader rank. The rules had changed by 1964 so that people could qualify by passing one subject at a time if need be but there was still no assistance, it was all home-study from old texts.

A similar situation occurred with Officer Promotion Examinations, the "B" to be eligible for flight lieutenant and the "C" for the jump to squadron leader. Although the all-at-once rule did not apply to these there was no training offered, it was all done at home and in one's spare time, and busy people and those who may have needed just a little help were often left behind. This did not change until around 1980 when Russ Law, a friend of mine from Iwakuni days and my immediate predecessor as OC Laverton (see Chapter 19) became responsible for all individual training and education in the RAAF and promptly abolished the existing system and introduced proper attendance or correspondence courses to replace the B, C and Q so that people were actually helped and mentored as they studied their profession. Well done, Russell!

One part of the course was that we all had to prepare and give lectures. My main one was on Pakistan and so I, at least, learned a great deal about the history up to 1964 of that unhappy country. And we all had to write a thesis, really just a long essay; mine was on future national defence. The most illuminating exercise was to study and report on some recent significant event. My syndicate was Warren Stickley a pilot, Bill Longmuir an administrative officer, Alan Reid an equipment officer and myself. Our topic was the British-French-Israeli intervention in Egypt in 1956. Having been influenced by what we had been told eight years earlier we were quite astonished at what we discovered as we dived into the documents now available to us in the Staff College library and elsewhere. Our report took the form of a mock UN Court with Warren as judge and the rest of us as lawyers for three of the participants. Billy Longmuir played the Egyptian. At the end I think our fellow students and even the DS should have been convinced, as we four were, that the intervention was immoral and quite illegal as well as being a complete flop and that British-French "outrage" over America pulling the rug was ridiculous as well as spurious.

We also went on several excursions, the one I remember most being to view the great Snowy Mountains Scheme construction. Apart from those highlights I often found the course very dull with, to me, several quite unnecessary features such as the emphasis on writing, vocabulary and even spelling. Surely students who could improve on these things could have been given individual help as they would have been in all the schools where I have taught.

Original or unusual ideas were not encouraged. It was Bill Simmonds who first drew a broken white line down the centre of his black air force tie to signify that we were "middle-of-the-road" men. But there was one feature which really enraged me. This was that a student thought by the DS, or maybe by only a couple of DS, as not likely to complete the course satisfactorily could be told, even on the last day, that he would not be recorded as having completed the course. So no psc after their names in the Air Force List and, in those days, hardly any chance of being promoted. One can accept that someone may be punished if

he or she does something criminal or very negligent, and there are laws for that, but to punish someone with many years of sometimes very distinguished service, and who has jumped many hurdles just to get to staff college, merely because he or she does not meet the expectations of a couple of DS was, I thought, iniquitous. We lost one student from our course that way and I had a couple of close friends who suffered the same fate later on but they, I'm pleased to report, stayed in the service and were promoted, So, well done those men!

Staff College was to finish just before Christmas and we were all waiting, and hoping, for a good next posting. I can't remember now what I was hoping for but one day I was told to report to Air Force Headquarters in Canberra. There I was interviewed by the Minister for Air, Mr. Howson, who needed to replace Alan Esler who'd had been Personal Staff Officer to various Air Ministers for four years. Alan told me that Ken Janson had already been interviewed but he had refused point-blank to take the job. So I was the next one offered up.