

Flying Stations

Printed & Distributed by : Glen Hartig, 8 Valerie Close, Edens Landing, Qld. 4207. (07) 3299 6336.
Postal Address: PO Box 36 Beenleigh, Q 4207 - Email: glenhartig@bigpond.com

May The Memories Sail On Forever

Volume : 8. Issue : 3

Jul/Sep. 2010.

AIRCRAFT HANDLERS "LIVING LEGENDS" No. 19



"A Living Legend"

JOHN F WARD R55406 WOAVN 1959 - 1984

I was born the 15th. October 1941 in Maryborough, Queensland. After leaving school at an early age I got a job at a Saw Mill followed by one at the local Flour Mill where I remained until I joined the Royal Australian Navy on the 27th March 1959, I was 17 yrs old.

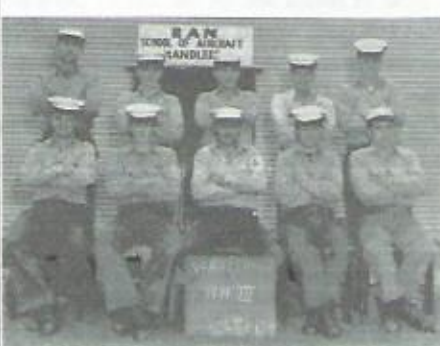
After all the exams, were passed and we were sworn in, it was onto the train to go to HMAS Cerberus. Our first stop was Sydney where we were taken to HMAS Penguin at Balmoral, where we were confined to barracks awaiting our train to Melbourne. The wait was not too bad for most of us as TV was just coming into Queensland and so we enjoyed this chance to watch TV.

The trip to Melbourne was okay at first as we had been joined by a lot of recruits from New South Wales but, the carriages were old and uncomfortable. I remember we put a lot of bags on the floor filling up the space between the seats, two of the smaller boys climbed up into the luggage racks to sleep while the rest of us tried sleeping on the seats and bags.

The biggest mistake the Navy made as far as we were concerned was they caused us to arrive at Cerberus on the 31st March which is of course the day prior to April fool's Day. We were given a very hard time, water bombs, false alarms pipes, false inspections, you name it, I think it happened to us. On top of all this we had our own problems. As we came from different States of Australia we all reckoned ours was the best, this often led to fights. Things did cool down but the old argument about States still goes on and I guess always will.

Being new recruits we were not allowed ashore for the first six weeks. As the six weeks were coming to an end and we were looking forward to a week-end in Melbourne, they hit us with a few injections which of course made it almost impossible to get dressed let alone enjoy oneself. I do not recall a lot about the first week-end as I was too sore, even sleep was impossible.

For several years after getting out of the Navy I was a Blood Donor and loved to tell the story of why I hated being a "W" in the Navy. It was because I always got the blunt needle, the staff at the Blood Bank did not want to believe that the needle was used for more than one person (Never killed us).



Bob Myland, Brian Egan, Graham Campbell, Ken Gillespie, Roy Swinney
John Ward, John Trease, Ron Webb, Ron Frost, Harold Phillips

After our training was completed at Cerberus it was off to HMAS Albatross to do my Naval Airman's Course, followed by the Handlers Course. My first job after completing my AH course was in the Petty Officers Mess, the work was fair but some of the Petty Officers a pain as they would drink until 1230 and then come in for a meal just as we were cleaning up which meant we were late in finishing.

My first of many posting to HMAS Melbourne was in December 1960. Melbourne was docked in Sydney doing a refit, this meant rubbish was everywhere. To make things worse we were not allowed to clean up any mess made by the Dockyard Workers as they had their own cleaners and threatened to go on strike if we cleaned it up. The mess deck was so cramped with so many people living in such a small area. This made things a bit touchy when everyone wanted to get dressed at the same time, trying to have a shower was even worse.

My first bunk on board was four high, it was in 2 Foxtrot Port Mess which meant I slept just under the Flight Deck, which also meant it was both hot and noisy. I must have got used to it as I often missed out on breakfast because I had overslept and being four high nobody could see me. Being so close to the Flight and all the cladding was one of the things I mentioned in my report on being exposed to Asbestos.

My first trip in 1961 included Ceylon, Karachi and Bombay, Singapore, Hong Kong, New Zealand and Brisbane. A few of the above were filthy and smelly; I am glad I went there but will not be planning a return trip.

A story I like to tell people about our trip to New Zealand in 1961 (anyone on that trip will verify it) Up until our visit, the New Zealanders did not drink cold beer, everywhere we went the beer was warm, it did not take long for them to realise that we only drank cold beer and so they did everything in their power to make the beer cold. Another thing I should mention about my first trip is that during our stopover in Brisbane I met my wife to be Denice.

December 1961 I was posted back to Albatross where one of my jobs was the Bendix Laundry (Most readers would know about it) for those who don't it was where you could drop off your dirty washing, have it washed ready for pick up later in the day. The cost was worked out by weighing the clothes after spinning and charges 6d (5c) a lb. the money going to the Supply Officer. (Some via the Jr. Sailors Mess).

December 1962 I was posted back onto the Melbourne remaining there until March 1963 then back to Albatross. In July 1963. I was back onboard the Melbourne as a Leading Seaman (Hangar Duties). Meanwhile after a long distance romance Denice and I were married on the 28th. Sep 1963 in Brisbane. We now have 4 children and 7 grandchildren.

After the wedding we flew to Sydney as I had to be back at work on the Monday we did not have a honeymoon as such even though we did get to see the sights of Sydney. Harbour Cruises, Trips to Bondi, Manly, the Zoo and many other interesting places during our time in Sydney.

On the 8th Jan 1964 I was posted from HMAS Melbourne to 817 Squadron (Wessex Helicopters). When I arrived at the Squadron they were looking for volunteers to go on to the Melbourne as advanced party and get the accommodation ready for the rest of the crew, as Denice was still in Sydney I was the first to volunteer, I was on the next train back to Sydney. Our stay in Sydney was not to last as it was during our work-up that we had the collision with HMAS Voyager (10 Feb. 1964). Because of the accident I was no longer required to be on-board so I was sent back to Albatross, Denice followed later.

Another trip I did appreciate was the trip to America in 1967 to pick up the Skyhawks and Trackers visiting Hawaii, Vancouver, San Francisco, San Diego and Los Angeles which included a visit to Disneyland & Universal Studios. Part of this trip was replayed in 1974 when we returned to America to pick up the Chinook Helicopters.

Vietnam

On Friday the 13th Dec 1968 I was informed that I was to be part of the crew to go to Vietnam in September 1969. I really do not remember how I felt I guess it was a mixture of shock and disbelief. The next 9 months was taken up with training for our deployment, this included 3 weeks at Canungra Training Camp in Queensland. I think that may have been where the "Biggest Loser" got the idea from to use the Commando to help people lose weight.

On our arrival in Saigon, Vietnam we were checked off, and then had to wait & wait in the stinking heat. I felt things had to improve but I was to be wrong. Our plane, a Caribou, was old and very noisy; we had trouble finding places to sit as it was also filthy. The plane landed in Long-Binh and we were loaded onto trucks which were filthier than the planes, we stood all the way to our camp which was called Bear-Cat and was located about 34 miles north of Saigon.



My position up there was as the Operations Petty Officer which meant I spent most of my time checking and updating statistics and gathering information and aircraft availability for the next day's operations. Most of this work only took a couple of hours and as we did 12 hour shifts we had quite a bit of time on our hands before the next big rush would commence around 0400 when the Platoon Sergeants would come in and find out the crew requirements for that day His job was to wake the people he required including the Pilots. The next rush commenced around 0500 when the aircrew would arrive and get their briefing on the day's operations. The next hour went very fast as there were lots of checks to be done. Apart from the start and finish of the shift the rest of the night was rather boring. It was during one of these times that I was to have a rather daunting experience.

I had not been in country long and was not aware of certain routines and so I was working away about 0200 when I heard a noise going on outside my building. I looked around for a weapon but none was to be found, I did manage to find some sharp pencils, I do not know what I planned to do with them, maybe kill myself. The noise died down and then I heard someone walking on loose gravel and they were coming towards my building, I grabbed the pencils and waited for the person to show his face, he did and he also had slit eyes, I went pale but started to relax when I looked down at his hands and saw all he had was a piece of paper, he was a Korean and had just filled one of the water tanks up and wanted me to sign his paper to say he had done the job, I signed but only after breaking most of the lead in the pencils, I guess I was not as relaxed as I thought. We got a pistol and a rifle for Operation after that.

Our group of Australians were lucky as none of them were killed, however there were five RANHFLV personnel killed overall. (Many have died since including some of our crew). The Yanks were not so lucky; they lost quite a few even during my tour. Our tour did not have any Australian's killed, however we did have quite a few wounded, some quite serious.

On my return to HMAS Albatross in September 1969 I was once more posted to the Training School where I stayed until being posted to VC724 Squadron (Skyhawks). I spent many years on VC724 apart from being posted there as a Petty Officer I was also posted there as a CPO and then later as a WOAVN as the Squadron Administration Officer.

It was during my last posting that the Government sold the Skyhawks & Trackers leaving a lot of people out of a job, me being one of them, and so on the 14th October 1984 after completing around 25½ years my time in the RAN came to an end, and so I and my family retired to Brisbane.

Other duties I was required to carry out during my time in the Navy were Training School Instructor, I/C Control Tower Maintenance, 723 squadron, VC 724 Squadron 725 Squadron, VF805 Squadron, 817 Squadron).

My first job on retirement was working for the AMP Society in the Maintenance Section doing all sorts of odd jobs (Almost like being a handler again). I did not get along with a few of the fellows there as they felt that I thought that I was still in the Navy and kept telling them what to do. (Civilians, no initiative).

I spent about 18 months there before taking up employment with the Queensland State Government in the Land Court. I remained there until my health got the better of me and so I retired on the 21st March 2006.

My time now is spent doing Genealogy, R.S.I., Lawn Bowls and travelling mainly to visit our family our youngest son lives in Canada with a young family. Of course there are always the odd jobs around the house that have to be done.

To all the Handlers out there that I have worked with or have known during my time in the Navy or have met since, it has all been a great pleasure and I wish you all the best for the future. Regards John Ward

