



AIR FORCE ASSOCIATION OF VICTORIA BALLARAT BRANCH

Newsletter



August/September 2024

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

We had another very successful “Battle for Australia” ball held on Saturday 31 August. We were honoured to have a few words from Peter Finkelstein RAAF SQNLDR. (See page 3)

It is always greatly appreciated that we have support from our local community by way of prizes donated for raffle. Ticket holders all received a free raffle ticket. Please see the article on pages 2 and 3 for a full list of our generous sponsors.

In an effort to collaborate more fully with other active branches of the Air Force Association, we are pleased to receive and exchange information with Bendigo and Geelong branches by way of planned visits to Hut 48 in October. We are all facing the difficulties associated with an aging and declining membership and seek ways we can provide engagement for our members. I’ll report more fully following these visits, which are greatly appreciated and which we also look forward to reciprocal visits.

On a sad note, we have received news that our immediate past president, Noel Hutchins, who moved to Thailand 2 years ago, is in poor health. We will keep you informed of his condition.

And speaking of sad notes, I apologise once again for the late cancellation of the September luncheon. Sadly, Sue and I had to attend the funeral in Sydney for a close family member.

Peter Dowling

President



IMPORTANT DATES COMING UP

Social Luncheon Tuesday October 8

Guest visit from Bendigo Branch.

Social Luncheon Tuesday November 12

Daniel Harvey’s talk to us about the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation has been postponed from October due to the visit

Christmas Luncheon

Tuesday December 10



Save the date for our 2024 Christmas Luncheon!

Ballarat North Sports Club will be the venue once again, including a wonderful Christmas show performed by Tony Diamond.

BATTLE FOR AUSTRALIA BALL—Saturday 31 August



wen & ware
living



Generous Ballarat Community Sponsors for the Battle for Australia Ball

The Battle for Australia Ball was once again an outstanding success with over 120 attendees. Ann Petty and her team outdid themselves with this year's black and white theme. The Pacific Belles were again the feature of the evening, reprising music of the Andrews Sisters style, to great acclaim.





We were privileged to have a few words from Peter Finkelstein RAAF SQNLDR. Peter is a retired lawyer who when active served as a Legal Officer in the RAAF Reserve for 30 years.

Peter was also a member of AFA Victoria and served as a board member on the RAAF Veterans Residences Trust, which helps RAAF veterans and their families with affordable rental accommodation in Australia's capital cities. His long service to the RAAF and its veteran community is to be saluted and applauded.

Peter is retired and lives in Melbourne with his wife, Julia.



SOCIAL LUNCHEON

AUGUST 13



At our lunch in August, we introduced a small published memoir by Margaret Bennett, a current member who lived at the air base in the years immediately following the closure of the wireless-air gunner school. Following are some excerpts from her recollections.

RECOLLECTIONS

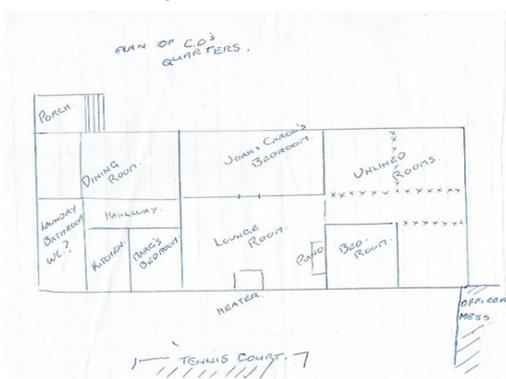


LIVING IN AT THE RAAF CAMP AT 1WAGS BALLARAT

Margaret Bennett

A corrugated iron hut with a tin roof just like all the other buildings on the RAAF base was 'home' for me and my family during my father's posting as Commanding Officer.

Although lined inside with hard-board and carpeted throughout, it was exceptionally cold in winter and very hot in summer. A laundry and shower had been added to one end of the hut and my mother had an electric stove and refrigerator in the small connecting room which she miraculously turned into a 'kitchen' with gay lino on the floor that she seemed to be forever washing. Not even the CO's wife had the luxury of employed home help.



A passageway went the entire length of 'Hacienda' as we later affectionately called it. Aged 18, I had a room of my own next to the kitchen, just big enough for a bed, a desk, and a cupboard. Next to this was a lounge room complete with a lounge suite and our piano and beyond were two more rooms, one shared by my two younger sisters – the other was the bedroom for my parents who were constantly attending official camp functions most evenings. Each room in our hut had one window looking back into the camp with a good view of the water tank just down the road. The tennis court opposite offered a slight feeling of normality to the place. I used it when we had chance, but study took up a lot of my time as I was attending Ballarat teachers College. (A Teachers Training Course took only one year to complete in those days compared with four to five years at present). My two younger sisters were at primary and secondary school in Ballarat.

There were several other children of RAAF personnel living in similar quarters and those who attended school, along with myself, were driven each morning to our respective schools by the transport driver in his 'Tender,' a large truck with a cabin up front and a covered tray behind. The younger children who travelled in the back were especially pleased if Bud Foley was the duty driver. He was a very cheerful fellow and whenever he had to collect pies and pasties for the camp canteen as well as children from school, you can guess where a few hot pies ended up without the CO hearing about it. Bud and his wife lived in Ballarat and had a long association with the Air Force Association here. (Bud turned 80 in 1997).

After school, on holidays and at weekends the children on the camp would make friends (or enemies) and play together. Certain places were off-limits for them, so they naturally dared each other to go there. Fortunately, the hangars and the aircraft were quite a distance from the camp and no child was ever caught there apart from my own youngest sister who distinctly remembers a stern admonishment from Corporal Vizard who saw her climbing backwards out of a window.

The guardhouse and gate also provided great fascination for my 8-year-old sister who would sneak out through a small gap then march boldly up to the guard on duty and demand to be let back in. She also caused a stir in the airmen's canteen one day (where she was allowed to be) by pushing a soggy icecream wrapper into an airman's pocket. The children had no special playground but rode their bikes around and made their own fun. I remember some excellent mini-concerts complete with sets and costumes that the children would put on usually in some family's lounge-room.

Sergeant King, the MO (Medical Orderly) was responsible for the SSQ (Station Sick Quarters), another long iron-clad hut with an office and surgery at one end, sick wards in the middle - the last of which was the VD (Venereal Disease) ward - and his own family quarters at the far end for his wife and three children. His daughter Gwen, still living in Ballarat in 1996, told me her dad hid her new bike in the VD ward until Santa Claus could put it by the Christmas tree that year.

At 18 years of age, I was allowed into 'town' on the Saturday night airmen's bus, usually to be dropped off and picked up at the dances at the Masonic or St. Pats. There was also a dance hall on the camp where the airmen could invite local girls - there were always trainee nurses interested in attending these. Once a week the camp dancehall became a picture theatre for anyone on base who wanted to attend.

At Christmas time the hall was also the venue for the Christmas tree and party and a local committee decked it out accordingly. Other buildings in this vicinity served as a post office, a church, a fire station, and a dentist. All were tin huts of course but meticulously appointed for their special function.

It was inevitably I suppose that I should fall madly in love with one of the airmen. He and I managed to see a lot of each other but my hopes and dreams were dashed to pieces when he was posted to NSW and wrote to tell me he had

decided to marry his fiancée after all. So much for my first love who failed to mention he was already engaged!



Concert Hall and

While the children played happily their parents were able to mix socially, mostly at night. I don't know what went on in the airmen's mess, but I attended many happy functions in both the Sergeant's and the Officer's Mess where these gatherings often took place.

My father created a very happy liaison with the people of Ballarat. He gave them the utmost cooperation at civic functions and included them in return invitations to functions at the RAAF base. When he was posted to Melbourne, a civic reception was held by the then Mayor Cr WE Roff at which my father said in closing:

"I am sorry to leave Ballarat, I have made many loyal and dear friends. Ballarat is a wonderful city that has everything one could desire. I only hope it gets a university before long." (It was nearly 50 years before that happened!)



1952 - At the Ball held when Wing Commander James Reynolds was relieved of his position.

Front: Carol (sister), Margaret, Freda (mother), Joan (sister)

Back from left: John Bennett (husband), John Reynolds (father)



1 WAGS REPORT

Sponsored by APCO Alfredton



The new FEATURE STORY on the website honours the four RAAF crew of 32 Squadron A16-201 Lockheed Hudson.

"Outgunned and Outclassed" is adapted from an article by Michael John Claringbold as published in 'Flightpath' magazine Vol 28 No.2 Nov 2016-Jan 2017 Yaffa Media Pty Ltd Sydney.

Compiled by Steve Larkins, Dec 2016

Virtual War Memorial

On the 22 July 1942 Lockheed Hudson A16-201 was shot down by nine Japanese Zeros near Popondetta in Papua New Guinea. The Hudson was on a solo reconnaissance operation when chased and attacked by the Zeros. The four crew of 32 Squadron were:

- Pilot Officer Warren COWEN Pilot
- Sergeant Russell POLACK Gunner
- Sergeant Lauri SHEARD Gunner 1 WAGS Course 15
- Pilot Officer David TAYLOR Navigator 1 WAGS Course 16.

They gave a distinguished account of themselves, so much so that 55 years after the incident, one of the Japanese pilots, none other than top Japanese 'Ace' of the war, Saburo Sakai, who was one of the pilots involved in the destruction of this aircraft, lobbied the Australian Government to present Cowan with a posthumous award for his actions that day. During 1998, Saburo Sakai wrote a letter to the Australian Department of Veterans Affairs,

recommending Cowan for a medal, stating: "I recommend that Pilot Officer Warren F. Cowan be posthumously awarded your country's highest commendation. I have encountered many brave pilots in my life, but Warren F. Cowan stands alone." The request was rejected on procedural grounds.

Their mission was as dangerous as any during World War 2, and more than 80 years after coming down in waters off Papua New Guinea, the crew of a Hudson Bomber are being remembered and celebrated for their heroism.

In 2023 Governor-General David Hurley announced posthumous Gallantry Decorations for six airmen lost in WW2 including the four aviators of 32 Squadron who died engaging with the enemy



eighty-two years ago.

"Instead of fleeing, they turned their aircraft to dogfight with the enemy but were eventually shot down near Popondetta. They are all being awarded posthumous Medals for Gallantry for their heroism and sacrifice for our country. The Battle of Milne Bay followed the next month, an important turning point in the war in the Pacific."

Zero ace honours his foes
A Japanese pilot is paying tribute to four Australian airmen who fought off his pack of Zero fighters over Papua New Guinea in 1942, writes Bob Piper.

JAPANESE wartime fighter ace Saburo Sakai is planning to create his own special award for bravery to the captain and crew of an Australian bomber he helped to shoot down over New Guinea in 1942. He feels it is something important to contribute as part of the healing and reconciliation process between our two countries. Sakai, now 89, recently contacted the Minister for Defence Industry, Science and Personnel, Bronwyn Bishop, in Canberra, for a posthumous award to Pilot Officer Frank Cowan and his crew of Hudson A16-201. When this was denied by the Australian Government, because "no provision exists... and there is no evidence", he decided to create his own special Japanese citation. The opportunity for a major public relations exercise and act of reconciliation between the two countries has, then, apparently been missed - especially unfortunate when it is remembered that Sakai's Zero aircraft is on display at the Australian War Memorial, he has been the subject of countless stories, books and a movie, and is a folk legend throughout Japan. In July 1942 Sakai and his squadron of Zero fighters encountered a lone Hudson over the Buna beachhead. When attacked it amazingly turned and, with all guns blazing, scattered the astounded Japanese pilots. In an unforgettable feat of skill and bravery the Hudson crew engaged in a dogfight until overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers, they were shot down in flames over the jungle. The episode is still vivid in Sakai's memory. When Royal Australian Air Force Hudson A16-201 disappeared in mid-1942 all thought of it and its crew had become just another victim of marauding Japanese fighters, until aircraft fire and the cloud-enshrouded peaks of P.O. Pilot New Guinea. The lone Lockheed bomber, belonging to 32 Squadron, then based at Fort Moresby, was and one of the unit's many regular but dangerous armed patrols in Papua New Guinea.

Continued on Page 4



Pilot Officer Warren Cowan



Janet Bates - IWAGS Co-ordinator