

CHAPTER ONE

A.S.O.P.A

In December 1948, I was 19 years of age, and I had just spent the year at the Royal Australian Air Force College. It had been a useless year for me. I wanted to learn to fly, but the Air Force wanted me to study, and they taught me: Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and English Literature, Air Force Law, Etiquette and the “Customs of the Service”.

From the classroom, I watched the Flying Training School recruits fly overhead. After only six short weeks of basic training, they were in the air. I would have to wait another for another three years.

Each morning, with the other 21 cadets, I spent an hour on the parade ground, learning to march, and drill with a rifle. Lectures followed, and then, late in the afternoon, sport. Personal likes or dislikes did not matter. We were taught athletics, boxing, cricket, golf, hockey, tennis, squash, sailing, and rugby – almost by numbers. On weekdays, the evening meal was followed by a two-hour study period.

We could do what we liked on the weekends, but we had to be back to attend Church Parade each Sunday morning. That meant we could catch Saturday morning train to Melbourne and spend the day there, but we had to catch the 10.40 pm train back home on Saturday night.

I was the Senior Cadet and President of the Mess Committee. I was expected to set an example, and I was not supposed to buck against the system. I certainly was not expected to be paraded before the Commandant, charged with failing to make my bed hospital-fashion, with having dirty fingernails on parade, with having a dirty rifle etc. etc. A year was enough. I returned to Sydney in December 1948. I was relieved to escape: the RAAF was probably glad to see me go.

In Sydney, I had to find a job, but I had no idea what I wanted to do. I applied for several positions, and I could have had any of a number that were offered, but I did not want to work in an office. A job as a laboratory technician with a paint manufacturer, Jensen and Nicolson, looked different. I accepted it, but it quickly palled. One of my tasks was to check

each batch of paint as it was processed. I stretched deep into the ball mills to take the samples. I tested each for viscosity and cover. I made trial samples of the metallic paints. My face and hands became ingrained with paint, carbon black, aluminium dust, and bronze powder, and I stunk of paint. Six months was enough.

I saw an advertisement for Cadet Patrol Officers for Papua and New Guinea in the newspaper. I thought that if I could get that job, I would see the country for six months, and then I would move on.

The Director of District Services, Bert Jones and two Commonwealth Public Servants interviewed me. Two months passed, and I had just about given up, when a letter arrived from the Secretary for External Territories, Canberra.¹ I had been selected. I would have to undertake a five months course. The commencing salary would be Four Hundred and Eight Pounds (\$806) a year for adults, but, because I was under twenty-one years of age, I would be paid Three Hundred Pounds (\$600)².

On the appointed day, 18 July 1949, I made my way to Middle Head to the Australian School of Pacific Administration. That was a journey. From the family home at Coogee, I could catch a bus or tram to the city, and then change to another bus to cross the Harbour Bridge to Mosman. The final part of the journey was by a non-government bus to the Army establishment at the end of Middle Head.

I had another option; I could ride an auto-bike. My brother and I had each bought one, but, like most things, he had paid for both. The auto-bike was an underpowered cross between a push bike and a motor bike. It simplified the journey, but it isolated me from the others on the Course. Then fate took a hand; I almost went under a moving tram at Taylor's Square. The road was wet, and the bike skidded. It and I were under the conductors footboard sliding towards the huge steel wheels. I saved myself from going right under by kicking against one of them with my foot, pushing myself, and the bike, backwards. I stopped travelling on the bike.

The School buildings were within the Army establishment. One single-storied brick building housed the administration offices, the library, and the canteen. The two lecturer rooms were in a converted engineering workshop, where the overhead-crane gantries and huge roller doors were still in place. Those buildings belied the resources of the School and the quality of the staff.

The books in the specialist library had been selected and assembled by a Mitchell Librarian, and she had spared no expense. There were books on every aspect of Papua New Guinea: Anthropology, Law, Tropical Agriculture, and Tropical Medicine. Some were new; some were collector's items.

The lecturer in Anthropology, the Honourable Camilla Wedgwood, was a forbidding woman. She had been a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army Directorate of Research from 1944 to 1945, and she had undertaken considerable field research in New Guinea. She was a daughter of a descendant of Josiah Wedgwood I, the founder of the 18th Century, fine china and porcelain company that bears his name, and her father's great uncle was Charles Darwin. Camilla dressed in heavy tweeds, thick stockings, and brogues. Her gray hair, cut in a severe pageboy style, framed a rectangular, hairy, almost bearded, face, which was surmounted by

an immense square jaw. She sprayed her words from a mouth full of prominent large teeth, and delivered lectures on moieties, endogamy, and “my Manam people” in stentorian tones.

Dr Black, later Professor of Tropical Medicine at Sydney University, told us about tropical diseases and infections. Colour slides and slide projectors had not arrived; he used an epidiascope to project ghastly images of suppurating venereal sores on male and female genitalia, of limbs covered with tropical ulcers and yaws - even one of an African with elephantiasis, trundling his massively swollen testicles before him in a barrow.

Another epidiascope exponent, Territory Agriculturist Bill Conroy, illustrated his lectures on tropical agriculture and food crops tropical crops, with sexless, black and white images of cassava, coconuts, cacao, taro, yams, etc.

David Fienberg punctuated his lectures with phrases like “the white-arsed niggers of Bondi Beach”. It was his task to explain the practical side of our work. It was he who kept emphasizing that it was our role to work ourselves out of a job - to train the local people to run their own country. I wonder whether he ever realized what that meant, or that Independence was only a few years away? Fienberg was on a loan to the School from New Guinea where he was an Assistant District Officer. Years later, as David Fenbury, he was to become Secretary of the Administrator’s Department.

Some of his advice must have been good, but it was on his recommendation that I purchased a pith helmet and a metal cabin trunk, before leaving Sydney. People laughed at that “tiger shooter” helmet. It was useless in rain, and when it collapsed I did not replace it. The cabin trunk was not much better. It was too bulky to be moved overland by carriers, and it was too big to fit in a small aircraft. When I left Kairuku, it was supposed to travel by ship to Port Moresby and then by aircraft to Tapini. Instead it disappeared. By the time it turned up at Kainantu, years later, I had forgotten what it contained. Fifty years later, it wastes valuable space in the garage at Bilgola. But Fienberg was well before his time, with his advice to use lots of sunburn cream, and to wear good quality sunglasses that adjusted to the light.

The lecturer in Government, Jim McCauley, was already quite well known as a poet and, later, became Professor of English at the University of Tasmania. At the School, he focussed on comparative political developments in Africa: Lord Lugard and the Kano, the Rhodesian Federation, and the French colonies.

John Andrews, lecturer in Geography, later became Professor of Geography at Sydney University, and Hal Wooten, the lecturer in Law, became a QC and a member of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Their expertise was wasted on me. I did not know what my job was going to involve or what my future tasks would be. I could not see the relevance of Lord Lugard’s Nigerian models, and I could not understand why I should be learning so much about the differences between the German administration of New Guinea and the Australian administration of Papua.

I attended lectures during the day, and I completed the obligatory assignments, but that was the limit of my involvement. At the end of August, the young tutor in Anthropology, Dorothy Munro—who later became the distinguished Professor Shineberg—awarded my monthly test a score of “zero,” and told me that if I failed another, I would be expelled. From

that day on, I did enough study to ensure that I got good marks for assignments, and that I knew enough to pass the final exams.

The five months passed quickly. We had a full lecture program, and the assignments kept me busy. The only respite was the occasional night out, and, as the weather became warmer, I could escape down the cliff track to Cobblers Beach for a quick swim and lunch.

December was a busy month. I had my twentieth birthday, we sat the end-of-course examinations, and the Principal had a special function to announce the results: fifteen successful, one deferred and five failures. Our elation faded when we were told that we were “urgently required” in the Territory and that we would be flying out of Sydney just two days before Christmas.

We were given a week’s leave to say our “goodbyes”, and to do our last minute “Fienberg” shopping. The war-surplus disposal stores were the cheapest. I bought ex-Navy white shirts, long white trousers, long white socks, “Bombay bloomer” shorts, and, of course, the pith helmet and the cabin trunk.

Our aircraft left Sydney an hour before midnight on the 23rd December 1949.