

A LONG IF UNREMARKABLE CAREER IN AVIATION – Jack Smith

The story of my post RAAF career begins in July 1986 when after 23 years and 2 months I left the service. As it eventuated my subsequent career kept me in close contact with the Australian Defence force, especially with the RAAF.

The catalyst for my leaving the service was a posting from HQ Operational Command at Glenbrook to HQ Support Command in Melbourne, which came at a bad time for relocating my family interstate. At that time Hawker de Havilland in Sydney was primed for involvement in producing the locally designed Wamira turbo prop trainer for the RAAF, plus assembly of Sikorsky Blackhawk and Seahawk helicopters for the Army and Navy respectively. Prospects for the company in defence work looked good, and they wanted a Defence Marketing Executive. I applied for the position, and with a 23 year RAAF background I more or less fell into the job. After discharge from the RAAF on a Thursday, I started with “Hawkers” at Bankstown on the following Monday.

My timing was not good. The Wamira project was cancelled, Blackhawk assembly fell behind schedule, and Seahawk assembly moved to Melbourne. Licence production of the Pilatus PC-9 trainer substituted for the cancelled Wamira project, with agreement from Pilatus to produce the PC-9 for any other customers in the Australian region; no sales eventuated. I soon realised that I was going nowhere and was not cut out to be a “spin doctor”. After 12 months with the company, I started shopping around for a flying job, but being 45 years “old” didn’t help. Fortunately, for me, Lloyd Aviation Jet Charter had recently won an Australian Defence Force Training Support contract and was expanding the scope of the tasks performed. The company was seeking former fighter or strike pilots to fly Learjets based at Naval Air Station Nowra in support of ADF exercises and operational training. I applied for and gained a piloting position in May 1988, and this was the start of a second career with various companies which continued until December 2013 on both the ADF Training Support Contract, and later the Electronic Warfare Support Contract.

The ADF Training Support Contract was initially a 3 year contract, later expanded to 5 years, and was open to competitive tender for renewal. All personnel employed on the contract were able to flow seamlessly from one contractor to the next with no detriment to pay or conditions when contractors changed, an event which occurred twice in the 1990’s. During my time on this contract (1988 -2004), 4000 - 5000 hours annually were flown in support of the ADF, overseas defence forces plus other miscellaneous customers. RAAF tasking comprised about 55- 60% of the total, RAN tasking 25-30%, the remainder for Army and a range of miscellaneous defence related tasks. When defence tasks permitted, civil passenger charter, plus aeromedical evacuation and thermal imaging (infra-red) tasks were flown in specially configured aircraft.

Without going into detail, representative tasks performed for the ADF and Defence Science and Technology Organisation (DSTO) were as listed below.

RAAF

- Provision of aircraft for Air Defence Controller Basic training and Continuation Training
- Tactical (manoeuvring) radar targeting (threat simulation) for the Tactical Fighter Force (TFF) and the then F-111 Strike Force
- Participation in TFF strike/escort multiple threat exercises
- Participation in RAAF Air Defence Exercises (simulated strike role)
- Target towing for TFF air- to- air gunnery and air-to-air missile shoots
- Provision of aircraft for radar systems calibration trials, and participation in other trials as required, including evaluation of the Jindalee Over The Horizon Radar
- Occasional VIP tasks for Service Chiefs and politicians

RAN

- Target towing for surface-to-air gunnery and close-in -weapons systems
- Very low level (50 ft/15 mtrs) threat simulation for ship strikes
- Provision of aircraft for radar and weapons systems calibration
- Provision of aircraft for “new ships” acceptance trials
- Range clearance for medium range surface-to-air missile shoots

ARMY

- Target towing for surface-to-air missile shoots
- Simulated strike on air defence missile sites

DSTO

- Provision of aircraft for weapons development programmes and inert weapon release clearance trials
- Provision of EW configured aircraft for Hornet radar upgrade trials

In addition to the ADF, other military forces exercised with during my time on the contract included the following:

- The Royal Navy
- The US Navy
- The US Marine Corps
- The Royal New Zealand Navy
- Canadian Forces (Navy)
- Royal Malaysian Navy
- Republic of Singapore Armed forces (Army and Navy)
- Japanese Self Defence Force (Navy)

- The French Navy
- The Netherlands Navy

The geographic scope of tasks was very wide. Within Australia operations were frequently conducted from most of the RAAF bases, including all the base bases - Learmonth, Curtin and Scherger. Other airfields were also used as bases for tasking, both military and civil. Locations that come to mind include Port Lincoln, Woomera, Albany, Geraldton, Port Hedland, Karratha, Mount Bunday, Gove, Rockhampton, Bourke and Broken Hill among others.

International locations included Whenuapai, Auckland, Palmerston, Whakatane, Wellington and Christchurch in New Zealand, Butterworth, Kuala Lumpur, Kuantan and Johore Bahru in Malaysia, Korat in Thailand, and Paya Lebar in Singapore. More remote areas included Christmas Island, Cocos Island and Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, Norfolk Island, Noumea, Santo-Pekoa, Guam and Wake Island in the Pacific Ocean. Other occasional destinations were Port Moresby and Madang in Papua New Guinea, Biak and Jayapura in New Guinea, Dili in East Timor, and Honiara and Kirakira in the Solomon Islands.

Aside from the military aspects of the contract, some of the more challenging civil tasks included aeromedical evacuations, and infra-red imaging surveys in Australia, the south west Pacific region and Indonesia. The aero medical evacuations usually seemed to happen out of hours and at short notice, requiring an aircraft to be configured, flight planning to be done, and transit to a major city, usually Sydney or Melbourne, to pick up a medical team before proceeding to the required destination. In addition to the Learjet, Westwind aircraft were later used on these tasks, the Westwind being roomier and better suited to the aeromed role. Learjets were used for the infra-red scanning tasks, and were configured with the Deadalus infra-red scanner for this role. Some of the more unusual infra-red imaging tasks were scanning schools of salmon (in conjunction with a fish spotting light aircraft) to determine the size of fish stocks for the CSIRO, scanning to determine the extent of an underground coal fire for BHP, scanning native bushland to determine the health of trees for the New Zealand Forestry Authority, and scanning the Freeport Goldmine in Irian Jaya to determine the source of leakage in a tailings dam, 12000 ft above sea level. This last task was carried out at dawn, and I recall the great beauty of the rising sun reflecting off a glacier 13000 – 14000 ft above sea level, and only about 4 degrees south of the equator.

As a penance for my sins I was appointed to manage the contract from July 1996 until the end of December 2000, a task vaguely similar to running an Air Force squadron, with both flying and management tasks fully taking up your time and more. After four years and six months in the manager's position, retirement started to beckon, and I handed over the reins in order to make the transition to retirement, and to reclaim my life. The transition period lasted until 2004 when I finally stepped away from the ADF Training Support Contract.

I failed my first attempt at retirement, as Raytheon Australia asked me if I wanted part time work as a pilot on the Electronic Warfare Support Contract in November 2004. After refreshing on the Learjet I started work for Raytheon in January 2005. The tasks, although not as varied as those on the ADF training Support Contract, were still quite challenging. Tasks included working with F-18s in multi aircraft strike escort scenarios for the RAAF, simulated maritime strikes, usually in conjunction with strike aircraft, for the RAN, and EW trials work with Navy ships. The EW Learjet was highly modified for the role and carried one or two EW Systems Operators in the aircraft (the all-important guys in the back) to perform their “black art”. Areas of operation were similar to those on the ADF Training Support Contract, ie throughout Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia.

Apart from the work on the Raytheon EW Contract, I was also asked to do the occasional Learjet ferry flight. Two major flights were to deliver a Lear 35 from the west coast of the USA to the east coast of Australia, and then a Lear 35 from China to Maroochydore for a major service. The trans-pacific ferry flight was straight forward, but the latter task was a “most interesting” exercise in dealing with the Chinese bureaucracy. Before leaving Australia, I had been assured that all approvals to take the aircraft out of China were in place. After my arrival in China, it transpired that the Lear belonged to the Peoples’ Liberation Army. The aircraft had been temporarily placed on the civil register to allow the “foreign devils” to crew it, and all necessary approvals to take the aircraft out of country were not in place. After many in-country and international phone calls, and much hassle to resolve the situation, I received a phone call at about 1 AM on the planned morning of departure from an official in the Chinese civil aviation bureaucracy. This gentleman was very helpful and told me in a cultured English accent that all the paperwork was now in order and we could depart. There was a further hiccup later in the morning with flight plan approval, and more phone calls. However, our helpful Chinese “minders” very heatedly argued the issue with ATC officials who finally relented and approved the flight plan. I was later asked to ferry the Learjet back to China on completion of the servicing, but I declined the offer as I had a New Zealand trip planned for the projected dates of the ferry flight; New Zealand was a far more attractive proposition. Other ad-hoc tasks I performed aside from the part time work on the EW Contract included towed target development trials for Air Affairs Australia , and some towed target check and training in for a Malaysian company who operated a Lear 35 in that role.

I continued working part time on the EW Contract until the end 2013. I made the decision to retire (again) in September 2013. I had just turned 71 and was at a briefing in Williamstown for a major East Coast Air Defence Exercise. Looking around the room, I realized that my sons were older than the squadron pilots present, and I was old enough to be the father of the squadron CO’s, and perhaps even the OC. I said to myself “enough is enough you old fart”, and told Raytheon that I would be pulling the plug in December. I performed my last flight at age 71 on the 5th of December 2013, almost 54 years since my first solo flight in a Chipmunk at age 17

on the 16th of December 1959, not a record for aviation longevity, but not a bad innings overall.

Do I miss flying? Yes and no. I miss the feeling of freedom associated with flight, but I don't miss all the baggage that became associated with the trade over the years. These days I keep myself busy with voluntary work, and honing a few artistic skills with pencil and paint. Would I do it all again? **YES!**