

MY CIVILIAN WORKING EXPERIENCES

Tony Mumford

I left the RAAF after 29 years of permanent Air Force service because I faced a dilemma common to many service personnel. After all that time, what must come first - career or family? Several factors made me choose family.

Family incentives for leaving included one child about to begin her Year 12 (HSC) and another his Year 10 phase of secondary education. As both had experienced the education systems of 3 different states and one overseas posting, I felt enough was enough where educational disruption was concerned. As a sop to my conscience, I signed up for the RAAF Active Reserve and was assigned to the Reserve Staff Group based at OPCOM. That worked out well.

At age 45 it was too early to retire. So I hunted around for a civilian job. I found that blokes with my background were sought after in certain quarters of civvy street, not because we were outstanding managers or businessmen, but because we were cheap. With an income from DFRDB (commuted) to supplement it, we could accept an initial salary below the customary rate for middle level managers. Of course, if you had any nouse you would negotiate salary conditions to include a review three months after you started employment, the review based on what you had demonstrated was your true worth to the company.

The organisation I joined was at that time Australia's largest electronics company and I was employed as logistics manager in the Barra project. Barra was a Defence contract to supply the RAAF with the sophisticated Barra sonobuoy. My job description included managing the project inwards and outwards stores departments, interfacing with the various sub-contractors supplying parts for the sonobuoy and managing and monitoring a team of technical buyers who actually negotiated deals at the grass roots level with those sub-contractors.

I also, most interestingly, had an additional task. This was flying in RAAF Caribous used when testing the performance of the monthly build of buoys (usually between 400 – 500) as a quality control measure. These tests were done over Jarvis Bay, where a permanent testing range was in place. On a separate run for each, from a special ramp-mounted discharger the Caribou would spew out usually half a dozen buoys, the buoys would activate on hitting the water and the range would monitor signals emitted to see if all was kosher.

The Barra buoy was a valuable addition to Australia's maritime defence – when it worked. Constructing it was like trying to build a quality Swiss watch on a time-constrained production line. The craziest little things could go wrong, requiring an entire month's build to be rejected and reworked after failure on the range. One problem which drove our engineers crazy was a failure which only happened if a certain circlip was inserted in the buoy face down instead of face up. I never knew circlips had a "face". There were many other weird embuggerances, costing time and effort, not to say money to resolve.

After 2 years with the Barra project I was offered another job at a different division of the same company. This involved managing over 70 field maintenance technicians which the company had contracted out to all three services to man workshops in which technical expertise was constantly being eroded by the incessant service posting cycle. It also involved running a small workshop specialising not only in the repair of obsolete or at best obsolescent Defence electronic equipment, but also in the calibration of civilian precision measuring devices. Once again I had a logistics task, that of trying to find spare parts suitable for the repair of that old gear. I trolled the world for them, finding quantities tucked away and forgotten in warehouses in strange places. Fortunately for me, many third world countries still used that superseded gear, maintained by their former colonial masters who had spares to sell.

After 3 years at that division I returned to my original workplace to concentrate on tendering for new large-value Defence projects. This involved keeping both an ear and eye out for operational requirements raised by all three services in Canberra. The company's policy was always to "prime" such projects, usually meaning that we took responsibility to tender for the project, provide our own hardware and system management software and purchase from sub-contractors what was missing to make the required electronic system. Defence invariably required all tendered systems to be built to and to perform in accordance with US mil. Specs.

The next step was to put together a business plan to tender for the Defence project, then justify to senior management the considerable expenditure involved in the customary 3 month tendering process. With a "Go" decision, a team of engineers, risk managers, logistics experts and bean counters came together to undertake the tender process itself.

This last period of my working life in civvy street was the most interesting of all, because I did a lot of world travelling and found myself in Israel many times. The Defence requirement for mil. spec severely limited my options for sourcing supplementary equipment. Only in Israel did I find little problem both in meeting mil.spec and in cost. Furthermore, their equipment was all battle

tested, a huge marketing advantage where Defence was concerned. The Israelis were sharp businessmen, but I found with them that once signed up, to them a deal was a deal. In some other countries, particularly those of our “great and friendly allies”, a deal was a deal only until the first dot of an “i” or the first change of a comma. Then all bets were off and the deal had to be renegotiated. That was very frustrating when you were working on tight profit margins

The next 6 years saw me out of my civvy working life and on to retirement. With one child with an honours degree in speech pathology and another successfully graduated from both ADFA and Duntroon as a military officer with a degree, plus for me a most interesting business experience in civvy street, with a golden handshake when I left, I felt that my decision to leave the RAAF when I did was justified. My only continuing task now is as a volunteer pensions officer with Legacy and the Port Stephens Veterans Network. It is solid work, but still leaves me with plenty of time for boating, camping, fishing and having fun.

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