



## **AS IT HAPPENED**

**BY**

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### **FROM TIGER TO STRATOJET**

This story begins in the 1930s when young J.S. Wilson built model aircraft kits costing two shillings, sold them for two shillings, then bought another kit for two shillings. No Murdoch or Packer here, just a happy future aviator.

Most weekends were spent cycling from Paddo to Mascot. It will always be Mascot regardless of the length of runway and fancy terminal buildings. Tin sheds and a wire mesh fence was all that was needed for a young boy to lean on and dream of the future.

Then 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939 and Hitler made his first mistake - the second for him occurred exactly 12 months later when J.S.W. attended the recruiting office in Sydney. The original category classification was Observer or Air Gunner Only with height 63" in brackets and signed by one E.C. HEFFERNAN, Flight Lieutenant. Luckily, I didn't see this until 50 years later through courtesy of Freedom of Information. However, a much more enlightened gentleman, Squadron leader A.H PENNINGTON reviewed the classification and the future of the RAAF, and of course J.S.W. forever changed.

My first flight in the RAAF occurred on August 23, 1941 (R48-91) instructor Sgt RENTELL, flight time - 45 minutes. First solo September 2, 1941 after 8.50 dual. Graduated 6 March 1942. A posting to Central Flying School, Camden and after an unwelcome stint on Avro Trainers, I became QFI on April 5 1942.

The last flight on 'Tigers' was on April 9 1951, (A17-735). From August 1941 to April 1951, I had flown a total of 1200 hours in the DH82, and was well versed in the operation of the hydraulics, pneumatics and electronics of that gentle little aircraft. P.S. I also had a working knowledge of the purpose behind the landing and flying wires, but as far as flying one accurately, that's another story.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, life went on as normal. Interspersed with decreasing numbers of Tiger hours, were increasing numbers of hours in assorted types. Then one day in 1956, returning from Laverton, I could have been mistaken for a VIP flight with 'you know who' on board. I couldn't have done anything wrong because in the 2<sup>nd</sup> pilot seat was the O.C. Group Captain Douglas and he was smiling!!!! Anyway, the welcoming committee, at least two (2) in number, stormed the aircraft and my old drinking mate Montgomery in the fore, exclaimed 'WILSON YOU'RE OFF TO WICHITA'. Where the hell

was Wichita? Luckily, an American exchange officer was able to fill in the details. I gathered from his description that it was some place in the centre of Kansas that would have made Giles look like New York on the 4<sup>th</sup> July. Taking it all in my usual nonchalant manner like 'you bloody beaut' we adjourned to the mess to discuss the matter in a more relaxed and disciplined manner. After a few beers, I thought there was something I had forgotten. Of course - there were to be three others accompanying me so I rang Pauline. She had already heard the news, and in between her bouts of tears, I tried to explain to her where Wichita was - my explanation only made matters worse, so I left my friends to celebrate my good fortune, and found my way home.

On 5<sup>th</sup> April 1956, we took off from Mascot - no fence this time - in the most beautiful aircraft of all time, the Constellation. First class treatment, beautiful hostesses, not flight attendants, our two girls wearing hostess hats and handing out barley sugar and a front seat in the cockpit for me during the approach to San Francisco...where did all those aircraft come from?

From San Fran to Wichita in a ground hugging something or other with stops at what seemed to be every ranch on the way - sheer pride kept my breakfast where it was supposed to be. Then Wichita in a snow-storm and to be met by a USAF major who naturally became a very good friend of the family. Incidentally, among his many decorations were the DFC (English) and the AFC (English). Deposited in a motel in town, we were introduced to those cornerstones of American civilization - TV, Captain Kangaroo and Mickey Mouse. Next day, we acquired four wheels and a duplex apartment, whereupon I left the family and proceeded to McConnell Air Force Base where I was to spend the next two years. McConnell incidentally was named after Alan Ladd the film actor. Sorry, joking - McConnell, a Korean ace was killed testing an F-86 and Ladd took his part in a movie.

McConnell Air Force Base home of the 3520<sup>th</sup> CCTW (Combat Crew Training Wing). Welcomed at the main gate by an immaculate Air Police Sergeant whose salute created a sonic boom. Where were all those general hand guards I knew so well and their laconic wave as the 'Boss' drove through? The Base defies all description so I won't describe it. On one side the USAF, on the other, Boeing turning out B-52s, and on the western end, a Cessna factory creating an endless supply of light aircraft to add to the explosive mix of B-47s, B-52s and T33s.

The USAF tarmac held about 100 B-47s, the aircraft I was to fly for the next two years. My first impression of the B-47 was 'It can't fly'!

Towering above me (not difficult to do), with an elongated bubble canopy on top of two fragile-looking swept-back wings, six engines hanging precariously below the wings, the main undercarriage in tandem under the fuselage and two spindly outriggers from the outboard engine; a typical equipment officer project. To see one flying was even more disturbing, plumes of smoke from the engines, and in the circuit a parachute trailing from the tail section. This was termed a drag chute to allow high RPM to be maintained during approach, to allow reasonable throttle opening on an overshoot or touch and go landing. The brake chute was deployed on a full-stop landing.

No time for sightseeing - the USAF in typical fashion wanted to get their newest recruit into the air. First, ground school for two weeks - it seemed as though we covered every rivet and nut and bolt in that time. Two flight manuals, each about three hundred pages had to be read, emergency situations word perfect, interspersed by tests every few days. Reminded me of some of the conversions to RAAF aircraft. The mustang, that's the one

with the pointy nose, get your pilot's notes from the library. The Canberra slightly different... Wing Commander 'Gel' Cumming in the left-hand seat, J.S.W. right in a jump seat - no controls. 'Gel' demonstrated a series of barrel rolls, and on return to Amberley, said 'Jim, you've got half an hour to get this thing off the ground and back in one piece' which I did as instructed.

Sorry for the memories - back to the USAF. Ground school and tests completed, then to the simulator. The last simulator I had flown was the Link Trainer, but this was something different. An exact version of the B-47 cockpit, fully instrumented and controlled to cover all emergencies. Two weeks and 32 hours later I had every emergency and instrument procedure thrown at me. Now for the real thing...

First, the morning briefing - the base operated on a 24 hours daily basis. Early morning start 0400 to 1200, then 1200 to 2000, followed by the night sortie 2000 to 0400. Flight time was four hours with the remainder spent on pre-flight and post flight briefings. At the completion of this phase a piece of paper saying that I had successfully completed the 'Transition Phase of the Aircraft Commander in the Medium Bombardment Jet B-47. If you thought that was it, spare a thought for J.S.W. As they say on TV there was more to come. Next was a move to the back seat from where you could see bugger all. A reminder of my Wirraway days. Nevertheless, after another 32 hours and another piece of paper I was now specialising in the Upgrade Phase for Advanced Flying (Medium Bombardment Jet B-47). In other words, I was a flying instructor in a B-47 - a job I remained in for the rest of my two years on exchange with the USAF.

The B-47 was the first of the big jet-bombers, the prototype flew in December 1947 and the first one for SAC was delivered in October 1951. A total of 1400 were delivered from the Boeing factory across the field from McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita, Kansas, my home for two years. Not an easy aircraft to fly, it had several vices that needed to be carefully handled. Aileron reversal, a situation created at high speed when application of aileron created a wing twisting situation and banked the aircraft in the opposite direction. The faster the speed, the worse the situation.

Another that comes to mind was the 'compressor stall' which occurred frequently if you even breathed on the throttle in the over-shoot - immediate reduction in power was the answer, followed by an even slower throttle advancement...the drag chute helped by providing a high power setting on the approach. The redeeming feature was that if the outboard engine stalled the gyroscopic effect usually tore the engine from its mounting, thus reducing the effect of drag, of course, other problems were introduced which defy description.

Landing speeds had to be mentally calculated each circuit, allowing for fuel usage. As the approach speed and stalling speed were only a few knots apart, this led to a situation where the calculations included a few for mum and the kids. Runway length was important and there wasn't much left on most take-offs. Part of the pre-flight briefing was devoted to the calculation of take-off distance/speed and although we had 12000 feet of runway, there wasn't much left on a hot Kansas day. The B-47 was the only aircraft I had flown, or was to fly, where the second pilot read off speeds at every 1000 foot marker, with an abort distance calculated. Although not normally used on training flights, a water injection system was available to provide increased power. As an aside, when a B-47 visited Australia, the then CAS (AM Hancock) was offered a ride. As they were to take off from Amberley on a hot Queensland day, it was decided to use the water on the 10,000 foot runway. The CAS was briefed where the control switch was, and to operate it on the command of the USAF pilot, however, somewhere on the way, the system was not

brought into operation, and the story goes that the aircraft was seen passing Cairns still at 100 feet, with a very irate USAF pilot in the rear seat, and a highly bemused CAS in the front.

An interesting exercise was introduced during my stay called 'toss bombing' where the aircraft would fly relatively low at maximum speed allowable, then initiate a looping procedure at a set 'g' and at a certain pre-set point of the loop, the bomb would be released automatically and continue on its own trajectory while the aircraft completed the first part of the loop to about 10,000 feet, roll over and fly in the opposite direction.

Unfortunately, on several occasions, the fuselage rotated and the wings didn't or vice versa. The exercise was discontinued. The weakness in the main spar was solved by fixing a large slab of metal to the main spar, no doubt doubling the take-off distance, but also stopping silly manoeuvres, lengthening the life of the aircraft and as a secondary consideration, quite a few of the aircrew.

As a matter of morbid interest, There were more fatalities in the training programme of the B-47 than any other aircraft in the USAF inventory. As a result of this problem, we were restricted to rate one turns at high level, and 30 degree bank at lower levels plus speed restrictions. As this period 1956-58 was during the so-called Cold War period, and the B-47 was the mainstay of the SAC strikeforce, the problem was not widely spread, so to prevent the information from reaching the Russkies, every time it was discussed by the aircrew, I was sent home. This meant a stop at the Officers' Club on the way, until my fellow pilots arrived whereupon I was kept fully informed of the situation. Another incident occurred during my stay although not connected with the B-47 was the stoush between the combined forces of Britain and France against the Egyptians over Suez. The US Fifth Fleet on holidays in the Mediterranean were getting toey and issued statements like 'We are ready to fight, but who do we fight'? This, no doubt, hit the diplomatic circuit in Washington, and the word was sent to bases entertaining exchange officers. As a result my flight commander called me in and said 'Jim, I like you, the boys like you, the girls like you, the bar stewards like you, but I have been ordered to tell you that we may be on opposing sides'. So, as an officer and gentleman, I handed in my ceremonial sword and proceeded to the Officers' Club where I hoped that I would be interned for the duration. At least the bar stewards would still like me. The incident was obviously resolved because the next day everyone liked me.

Another interesting exercise was inflight refuelling. At that time, the only aeroplanes available as refuelling tankers were the Boeing KC97 which had a considerable difference in height and speed operational capacity to the B-47.

It doesn't take much of an imagination to visualise four piston engines going flat out ejecting piston rings, while the receiving aircraft was hanging on the stall in line astern formation. The whole procedure reminded me of another form of coupling when this long thrusting proboscis extended from the rear of the tanker and made what I thought was a rather rough connection. As in other more pleasant forms of coupling, you relaxed, kept your hands on the throttle, adjust for the movements of the tanker, assume you are being towed, and enjoy the occasion.

Those of you who have seen 'Strategic Air Command' with Jimmy Stewart (name sounds familiar) may have thought the security aspects were overdone apart from silly June Allison running all over the tarmac these were quite factual. On one occasion, while acting as second pilot in a T29, with about a dozen passengers, we were diverted to a SAC base in California. After convincing quite a few people on the ground that we had no

alternative, we were given permission to land. On landing, we were surrounded by a flotilla of vehicles, two of which had .5 machine guns mounted on the vehicle and actually manned by air police. After taxiing to a remote part of the airfield, we were ordered to disembark. My one thought at that time was how long is a life sentence in Alcatraz'?? We were lined up outside the aircraft still under cover of the armed vehicles while surrounded by armed guards. The officer-in-charge came over to me and said "Squadron Leader Wilson, step this way" - as I was wearing a USA flying suit, it was obvious that he had a fairly good idea who was on board. It also helped that he happened to be one of my ex-students at McConnell. Not another thing was said to me, but the rest of the crew and the passengers were put through the wringer for about half an hour. We were then ordered back on the aircraft and stayed there until we were cleared for take-off. No-one would speak to me for the rest of the flight.

Another incident occurred when as aircraft commander in a B-47 landing at a SAC base in New England there were no problems until after landing, and on departing the aircraft, I became aware of the presence of a very large black air policeman with a very large gun, who seemed to become attached to me. As normal I reported to operations whereupon I was informed that Colonel So and So wished to talk to me. The conversation went something like this 'Who the hell are you, and what the hell are you doing here?' It was almost a rank, name and number situation. I convinced him that I wasn't about to steal a nuclear armed B-47, and his final words were "Get the hell off my base and don't come back until you are ready to leave" I didn't have the heart to tell him that was my intention from the start.

Apart from this rare occasion, I was treated with the utmost hospitality and some respect in that I had managed, as an outsider to get one of the plum jobs in the USAF.

After two years of flying the B-47 six engine jet bomber I was posted back to East Sale to fly - of all things - the Vampire.

As a sequel to this story it was in 1962 when the Americans were trying to unload some B-47s to us as a replacement for the Canberra I got a mention in Parliament as having flown them and subsequently was called in to see the CAS. Air Marshal HANCOCK didn't waste any words or offer me a cup of tea, but straight out said "In operations, would you prefer the B-47 to the Canberra?" Not having flown either in operations I still had no hesitation in selecting the Canberra as the much better aircraft from a purely flying basis, and in doing so, stuffed my chances as the first C.O. of a B-47 Squadron in the RAAF. I still think I did the right thing.

And so ends this sorry saga.