

## **Robert Edward Hardwick**

My name is Robert Edward Hardwick and I was born at York in Western Australia on 3 September 1925. Coincidentally, Australia declared war on Germany on my fourteenth birthday that being 3 September 1939. I well remember my late father saying on that day, 'Don't worry Bob, you won't have to go as it will be over long before you are old enough to be in it'. No doubt he was using his experience in the Great War of 1914-1918 in coming to this conclusion. At this time of my life I was still a schoolboy attending Wesley College in South Perth as a boarding student.

My father's name was Sydney Edward Earle Hardwick and he was a soldier in the Tenth Light Horse Regiment of the A I F from 11 January 1915, seeing active service at Gallipoli, and later in France as a member of the Australian Army Service Corps until discharged on 23 March 1919.

To the question 'What did you do in the war' I supply the answer in three parts.

Firstly, as a sixteen year old boy employed as a telegraph messenger in Northam by what was then known as The Postmaster General's Department, I was called on to perform a man's job by way of acting postman. The dire shortage of manpower due to the exigencies of the war meant that very few men were available to perform this work, they having either volunteered or been called up for service. Unlike the present times where 'posties' scoot around on motorcycles, in my time the deliveries were carried out on very heavy pushbikes.

Secondly, on 17 March 1942 when aged sixteen and a half years, I was provisionally enrolled in No. 5 Cadet Wing of the newly formed Air Training Corps, an auxiliary of the Royal Australian Air Force. This required a commitment of two nights each week in classroom activity where some basic aeronautical subjects and Morse telegraphy were studied and/or practiced to prepare youths for entry into full service. In addition part of each weekend was involved in drill and physical training exercises.

Thirdly, on 4 December 1943 I enlisted for service in the Royal Australian Air Force following my third call-up, my service number being 441688. Call-ups number one and two were negated due to the P M G Department exercising its right to retain employees under the Manpower Regulations that were in force at the time. I had attempted to resign from my permanent position on the second cancellation, but the postmaster said 'You can't' and promptly tore up my resignation letter. My eventual release to enlist was only secured by the kind intervention of a relative of my father who was high enough in the postal service to swing the deal.

There arises the question as to why did I enlist. My father and two of his brothers were in the A I F during the Great War. All were at Gallipoli and later in France. There was a strong family tradition of answering the call to defend our nation and my father's close involvement with the Returned Soldiers League during my formative years further led me down that path. Also, I had a burning desire that I might learn to fly.

My training in the RAAF was that required to become a pilot under The Empire Air Training Scheme. This training was undertaken entirely within Australia. The various places where

this training took place are set down below.

Aircrew initial training was carried out at No. 5 ITS (Initial Training School) at Clontarf in Western Australia. Here an intensive course of classroom work was done on such subjects as navigation, meteorology, armaments, theory of flights, aircraft and ship recognition, physics, mathematics, telegraphy and of course Air Force Law so that one could not plead ignorance of requirements under it. Outside the classroom there were periods of drill, physical training, unarmed combat and practical experience handling and shooting firearms. During the whole time at this unit, each trainee was under the eagle eye of the squadron psychology officer, who would eventually make recommendations as to where one would finish up, either pilot, navigator, bomb aimer, wireless operator or air gunner.

My posting to a flying school took place on 2 March 1944 where I arrived at No. 9 EFTS (Elementary Flying Training School) at Cunderdin. Here our ground studies were further refined and we were introduced to flight in the now famous aircraft the Tiger Moth. These were open cockpit aircraft requiring the instructors and pupils to wear flying helmets and goggles. Instructors turned out in full flying suits and flying boots but the pupils flew in overalls and shoes, or sandshoes, in case they got a dose of 'big headedness' or overconfidence.

The next posting was to No. 4 SFTS (Service Flying Training School) at Geraldton on 2 July 1944 and here I stayed until completion of the course on 21 December of the same year. Here we were introduced to twin-engine aircraft in the form of the Arvo Anson. The Anson was first in service in The Royal Air Force around about 1930 but by the time that World War Two had come about it was then obsolete as a combat unit but found its niche as a worthy trainer. On completion of the course in December those of us who had managed to stay on course graduated as pilots, were awarded our 'Wings' and in my case I was promoted to sergeant. About six out of the twenty-four blokes who completed the course gained commissions and were made Pilot Officers.

On 21 January 1945 I was posted to Aircrew School at Watsonia, a suburb of Melbourne. I had heard it said that this was meant to be a hardening-up school for aircrew. There was no flying, plenty of drill, cross country running, guard duty, kitchen duty and the like, as well as token study periods. Being now members of the Sergeants' Mess, those of us who had not yet had much experience with alcohol suddenly found ourselves in a steep learning curve. During the war the RAAF messes were 'dry' except for officers and sergeants, I don't know whether this still prevails today. I am now of the opinion that the sole purpose of this school was to knock out any cockiness that might have been occurring in the minds of the newly qualified pilots.

On 12 February 1945 I was posted to No. 6 SFTS in Mallala in South Australia where flying duties were resumed. Mallala station was adjacent to a small village of that name situated about 37 miles north of Adelaide surrounded by many miles of flat terrain in every direction. In the first instance I embarked on a refresher course in flying in Arvo Ansons during which advanced skills in navigation, formation flying, night flying, aerial photography, bombing (on the bombing range) and simulated air-to-air gunnery were honed. This was followed by a conversion onto another aircraft type in June 1945, namely, the Airspeed Oxford. This

conversion consisted of 20 hours of flying, some day and some night, in a craft that was somewhat more difficult to fly than the Anson.

In June I was promoted to the rank of Flight Sergeant. The system of progression as a NCO pilot was that after six months as a sergeant one was automatically elevated to flight sergeant. After another year, subject to survival and no accumulation of 'black marks' one became a Warrant Officer. So, it can be seen by this that there was nothing special about my promotion other than a pay increase of one shilling a day.

By the time that July 1945 had arrived it became evident that the war was getting close to its end. My last flight was on twenty-fifth of that month, once more in an Anson. It was shortly after that when all personnel were assembled in the station gymnasium and addressed by the administration, probably the CO, and told that due to a surplus of trained pilots anyone who elected to do so could be transferred to the reserve. I elected to go down this path and not long afterwards found myself on a troop train heading west to Perth. I was transferred to the reserve on 15 August 1945 where I remained subject to recall on ten days notice until finally discharged completely on 28 March 1947.

At the end of my stint in the RAAF a great feeling of disappointment was experienced by me in having given so much of my time in the hope of seeing active service. This hope was stymied by the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan. With the benefit of hindsight now in my mind as a mature adult, I realise that I was perhaps very lucky not to have gone into combat. It is interesting to note that I returned to life as a civilian just over two weeks before my twentieth birthday which in my mind gives food for thought on the level of responsibility found in similar aged youths of the present era.

Despite the disappointment just mentioned there was a consolation prize in the fact that I did learn to fly. At the time of my transfer to reserve my Flying Log Book showed that I undertook a total of 450 flights either as a pupil or in command amassing in all 411 hours flying as a pilot.

After service life I returned to work with the P M G Department first at York, then sundry other places on the relief staff before entering the first Postal Training School in Perth in 1946. On completion of the school I was posted to Gwalia as acting postal clerk but eventually found life in the postal service not to my liking and in April 1948 I resigned to launch myself into a completely new career in public accountancy.

As this essay is not intended to be a life's story it would seem appropriate to end it here.