

Educating RAAF Apprentices

By Julian (Jules) Perrin

I've been very fortunate to have the privilege of serving in both the Royal Australian Navy and the Royal Australian Air Force. My time with the Navy started as an apprentice in 1969 and near the end of my time with the RAAF, I was placed in charge of new radio apprentices. So you might say I have seen the apprenticeship battlefield from both sides and have the scars to prove it. The interesting thing I found is that the scams and plots offered by the RAAF apprentices differed very little to the ones we used to pull in the Navy. Not that I was a terror mind you, but you only got into trouble if you were caught. Now I was the boss, so to speak, I could in some ways pre-empt the actions some apprentices would take. This used to frustrate the RAAF apprentices as many actions they tried to pull, I was able to cut them off at the pass. Been there done that, got the tee shirt so to speak.

The first indication, I had, that I was going to work with these apprentices was when my Commanding Officer (CO) called me into his office and told me of my new role. Now, when the CO calls you, it's worse than being called by the Chief Coxswain in the Navy. The CO has the power to make or break your career where as the Chief Coxswain only has the power to break **you**. This makes a big difference, as you get older and wiser.

When I entered CO's office he was smiling. This is not a good sign. He then gleefully informs me that my new role will be to head up the technical apprentices. This cannot be all that bad I thought. Then I remembered the things we used to get up to when I was apprentice and shuddered at the thought. The CO dismissed me with a hearty, "Good Luck". A very ominous sign I thought.

However, there were still a few surprises even for an old hand like me. I would like to tell you about two of these.

I was actually looking forward to the challenge of this new role and it meant I would be working with my old friend Harry (That's another story). All dressed, I proudly reported for duty. Little did I realise I was the one in the firing line.

"Thank goodness you're here," says the Flight Sergeant. "You have a few apprentices to immediately discipline". Here I was on my first day, my first hour even, and I have trouble makers to sort out. I hadn't even had time to touch down and we are off to a flying start.

My mind wandered back to my days as an apprentice. What did we get up to? Drinking underage, going on leave without permission, not cleaning the barracks, failing exams, racing cars up and down the old runway. I tried to remember the punishments that were imposed on us for these infringements. Things like carrying your bedding over the run way and back. Moving mountains of canon balls or just counting the security lights on the base.

Where was I? Oh yes, disciplining apprentices on my first day. What could it be that they did that required immediate discipline?

I didn't get a chance to speak to the Flight Sergeant again before the offending group were marched in. I can honestly say this is an intimidating experience and I was the good guy. The Flight Sergeant is yelling orders, "Left, right, left, halt. Hats off". All this going on in my new tiny office. Now Flight Sergeants who are given this role are not quiet by nature so my ears rang for days afterwards. Anyway, they were there in front of me and the first thing I needed to know was why. The Flight Sergeant then proceeded to tell me the story. To cut a long story short, which is hard for me, it happened that apprentice A, not his real name, was caught defecating off the top of the apprentice block.

Now hold it there and let's look at this apprentice block. The building is three stories high and as the roof is not a public area so there are no handrails. At the bottom of the three story drop is concrete. It was nighttime and cold as it was coming on to winter. Not a safe place to be at the best of times. The fall may not hurt much but the sudden stop at the bottom certainly would.

The act of baring your bum over the edge requires help and that's where apprentices B and C came in. Also not their real names.

When questioned why they would do such a dangerous and silly thing the response was that it was a dare. When pushed, they confessed that they wanted to see whose bombs could make the biggest splat. They called it a "*night-time bombing run*". If another apprentice was bombed, or marked by the fall out in the process, this gained extra points.

I don't know how you would have handled this, but at this point but I needed to clear the room. It would not have been prudent for them to see me laughing. I called the Flight Sergeant in and we tried to calmly discuss the situation but the mind kept wandering to vision of this bare bum hanging over the edge of the building. I am sure that just being caught would have stimulated some action in the bombing department for them to measure.

We agreed that they had in fact broken just about every rule, regulation, convention and practice applying to apprentices. At their age, these guys were just hormones on legs and I am sure they felt ten foot tall and bullet proof. However, it was dangerous and giving them a record was not the best consideration so early in their careers. The alternative was to offer them several remedial options, which they gladly accepted. I am pleased to say that they did keep the surrounds of the block very clean for their period of probation and I didn't have to speak to those three in anger again.

The second incident was, luckily for them, outside of their control.

When each course completes their training, they have a graduation or passing out parade. These parades are special events overseen by dignitaries and invited guests with parents

and friends flying in from all over Australia. Prior to this big day, many hours are spent on the parade ground practicing their moves and perfecting their final march past for the visiting dignitaries. A military band accompanies the parade to ensure the rhythm and pace is maintained during these movements. Bands are crucial for military parades to maintain the correct step for the members and provide pleasant musical interludes during the boring bits, like inspections.

The chosen music needs to be carefully and repeatedly rehearsed and the parade members become very familiar with the music for each action on the parade. The chief choreographer for the entire parade is the Warrant Officer Disciplinary. Normally just referred to as the WOD. (Sounds like “wad” as in “wad” of notes).

On one parade, the apprentices practiced diligently for days to the sounds of a series of tunes. These tunes become part of you and you become accustomed to moving or marching at certain parts of the tune. I am tone deaf and have two left feet for dancing so when it comes to marching, so I have to work even harder at it.

The big day arrives. Uniforms are immaculate, boots shining, swords gleaming and proud parents and friends are lining the parade ground. The parade goes off without a hitch until the finale. The march past being the culmination and pride of place for the entire parade.

Having practiced to the tune of “*The Duke Of York*” as the music for the march past for days. This is it. The big march past. As the apprentices approached the part where they straighten up and do their big thing in front of the dignitaries, the music suddenly changed to the theme from “*Batman*”. For the musicians amongst you, you can pick the beat and it doesn’t matter what the tune is, if the beat is the same, you can follow the beat. That’s why military bands are so good at keeping the step and pace. The trouble is, we are not all the same. Marching music and dancing music, to the rest of us, is totally different.

Reports after the event described it as a “*disco with guns*” or a “*rock and roll salute*”. The truth was that very few apprentices passed the dais in step and even fewer performed the required actions at the appropriate times.

Putting it politely, a lot of the brown stuff hit the rotating air director. Parents were upset, the apprentices were upset, the WOD was furious and the CO wanted answers.

It wasn’t till many years later when I was relating this story to a friend in my Rotary club, who is a RAAF band officer, when he suddenly stopped me and said, “ Before you go any further I must warn you it was me.”

He was the new band officer and eager to show what the band could do, but the apprentices were not equipped to follow. The good bit is he was and is an excellent band officer who is in a prominent position with military bands and has become a noted arranger and composer of music.

What happened to those apprentices? Well, I did see apprentice A, still not his real name, several years later and I am pleased to report that he was doing very well in his RAAF career. Maybe, just maybe, I'd done some good after all.

So next time you see a group of young apprentices, give a thought the chaos they could create.