

AUSSIE SKYHAWK TRAINING

By Commodore John Da Costa, RAN (Retired)



ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

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In January 1967, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) sent me, then a LCDR, and LT Graham "Dusty" King to NAS Lemoore, California, for five months of A-4 training with VA-125 (the Pacific Fleet RAG), plus some special flying and other training. We were the CO and XO designates for 805 Squadron, soon to be established and equipped with the A-4G and TA-4G, special versions of the *Skyhawk* produced for the Royal Australian Navy. We would conduct the first RAN *Skyhawk* conversion and operational flying course.

The "G" model of the A-4 had the avionics, radar, and weapons delivery systems of the A-4F, a 9,300 pound thrust J-52P8A engine, and was wired to carry four AIM-9B *Sidewinder* air-to-air missiles. The missile wing stations were interchangeable with the normal attack weapons fit. The RAN had selected the A-4 as its replacement "fighter" out of all naval aircraft then available and capable of operating from a light (20,000 tons, 24 knots) fleet carrier. The *Skyhawk* undoubtedly had the best all-round capability in both the attack and, with *Sidewinders*, fighter roles.

Dusty and I had similar flying backgrounds – in my case, almost 2,000 flight hours, 1,100 of which were in jets, and 460 deck-landings. Our carrier experience was circa 1950 in the single-engine, two-man (pilot and RIO) De Havilland *Sea Venom*, a subsonic, all-weather, day-night fighter similar in capabilities to the USN/USMC F3D-2 *Sky Knight*. The *Sea Venom* had a dual (air defence and attack) role in our small (one CVS) carrier force. Dusty was a qualified flying Instructor and instrument rating examiner. I was a graduate of the Royal Navy Air Warfare Instructor Course, which was the British

Navy's equivalent of the USN "Top Gun" school. Neither of us had any significant experience in the attack role, however, and we had a lot to learn!



Commodore DaCosta

We came from a small naval aviation community and were quite at home with our one small carrier, a cozy naval air station with two short (7,000 foot) bitumen runways, squadrons of 6-10 planes, and squadron COs of LCDR rank. The culture shock hit us between the eyes on day one at NAS Lemoore! Each morning we traveled 10 miles (so it seemed) just to get from the BOQ to the VA-125 operations area and, on arrival, were faced with a flight line of up to 100 A-4s ready to feed the RAG flying schedule. We almost needed a map to find an allocated aircraft! The field had parallel 14,500 ft concrete runways!

The squadron CO was a four-ring Captain! And the RAG student population was enormous, ranging from ensigns straight out of flight school to those of commander rank just busting to get a piece of the action in Vietnam!

To the Americans, we had strange accents, described by some as "Limey" (which, to an Australian, is about as insulting as you can get!) At first, we experienced colloquial language differences that led to some hilarious social misunderstandings in mixed company. For example, in Aussie English the word "screw" meant to look, and an expression like "Having a screw over the balcony" held an entirely different implication.

But, naval aviators of any nationality are not fazed by unusual situations and, fortunately for us, culture



shock was soon reduced to negligible by the hospitality, courtesy and down-right friendliness the *Skyhawk* community extended to us. I recall, with fond memories, CDR Bob Reynolds, the Operations Officer, and his wife Evie, who took me into their home as though I had been a life-long friend. Other officers and their families also entertained us at home, and we were never without friendly company in the 'O' Club bar. One pilot we met casually in the 'O' Club, who was deploying to Vietnam, handed us his car keys. His simple proviso was that we leave the keys with the club manager before we returned Australia!

I believe that the friendliness and hospitality extended to us was due in large part to the fact that the Australian government were paying our way and we were not just yet another group of US "aid recipients" draining the US taxpayer's purse. The fact that Australia was doing its bit in Vietnam, and was paying cash to have its A-4s built and for our training seemed to be well known to VA-125 personnel. In addition to the good will, we were not "short-changed" in any way. In my view, we certainly got more in training value for money than was paid for by our government.

Our A-4 RAG syllabus was entirely attack orientated and fully met our needs. Highlights were the "Sandblower" low-level navigation exercises over much of Nevada and the weapons training deployment to NAS Fallon. At the latter place, I was snowed upon for the first time in my life, even though it was in a desert! Since there was no "fighter" phase of the RAG syllabus, special arrangements were made for a one week A-4E/TA-4F deployment to MCAS Yuma for air-to-air gun attacks on a towed banner target, GCI (Ground Controlled Interception) training, and *Sidewinder* firings against parachute flare targets. Our USN instructors for the Yuma deployment were LTs Mike Plattis and Dave Boaz, both of whom had experience in the A-4 "fighter"

role when deployed in CVSSs. (Were also accompanied by a small team of RAN ordnance technical sailors who needed hands-on experience loading and arming A-4 weaponry.)

Having had considerable air-to-air experience in the RAN using gyroscopic gunsights (and thinking



Then-LCDR DaCosta after a snowfall during his 1967 weapons training deployment to the high desert location at NAS Fallon, Nevada. It was the first time in his life that the pilot from "down under" had been snowed upon. (Photo courtesy J.A. DaCosta)

that we were pretty good at fighter stuff), Dusty and I were somewhat deflated. In trying to get shells to hit the banner while using the *Skyhawk*'s "fixed" gunsight, we found that we had regressed to World War I tactics! We also had a problem getting adequate ranging information when firing *Sidewinders* against a stationary flare target, but that problem was later resolved in the RAN by conducting live firings against a heat-source target towed by a drone. Additional extra-curricular training was arranged in the use of the CP-741 bombing computer and in maintenance test flying procedures.

An impressive new (for us) professional concept was heavily dumped in our laps (literally) with our introduction to the NATOPS Manual. Up to that point we had only known aircraft "Pilot's Notes" – small notebook-size publications containing essential



aircraft operating details, check lists, and emergency procedures, that fit nicely into the leg pocket of a flight suit. Much of the material conveniently brought together for aviators in the NATOPS Manual had only been obtainable for earlier RAN aircraft by extensive research. NATOPS was a great advance as far as we were concerned and we were happy with the concept.



First RAN A-4 drivers LCDR John DaCosta (right center) and LT Graham "Dusty" King (left center), on the flight line with VA-125 instructor pilots, LTs Dave Boaz (left) and Mike Plattis. (Photo courtesy John DaCosta)

Our day and night carquals (carrier qualifications) were carried out on USS *Kearsage* (CVS-33) off San Diego. Carquals (and the earlier FMLP – Field Mirror Landing Practice) in the A-4 re-introduced us to the LSO, a deck landing aid that had not been used in the RAN since the advent of the angled flight deck and mirror. Our experience with the USN convinced us that the RAN would be well advised to return to the "batsman" concept for *Skyhawk* operations from our carrier. It offered an enhanced safety factor, particularly at night, since the A-4 approach speed was some 10 knots faster than the aircraft which it would replace. (Re-introduction of the LSO in the RAN was later accomplished with good results!).

I learned two things during carquals. Firstly, the A-4 was an excellent deck landing aircraft despite its

narrow undercarriage. Secondly, through the courtesy of some very understanding instructor pilots after we had completed night carquals – on a particularly black and rainy night with cloud cover down to circuit height, I learned the other use for the safe in an officer's stateroom.

In summary, the A-4 training we received entirely met our needs and set us up well to plan and conduct RAN *Skyhawk* courses in Australia. The only criticism we had regarding our training had to do with the training philosophy of the time and not its quality.

From the earliest days of the RAN, flying training philosophy was based on briefings, trust, and periodic in-flight tests. Once a pilot was assessed by his instructor as safe for solo, he was thereafter briefed for each exercise or mission (or given dual instruction if appropriate) and then sent off to carry out the exercise alone. Except for periodic standardisation checks, in-flight supervision was not considered necessary or desirable. That approach was believed to engender in the student a sense of confidence and an obligation to carry out each sortie precisely as briefed. Our experience was that the trust implicit in such a philosophy was rarely found to be misplaced and, of course, if abused, the transgressor was "jumped upon" very heavily.

The training philosophy in vogue in the *Skyhawk* RAG in 1967 was the opposite. No scheduled flight was carried out, whether by an ensign straight from flight school or by an experienced aviator "student," without the presence of an instructor pilot in the aircraft or in an accompanying A-4. We understood at the time that the philosophy had been handed down "from above" in attempt to minimise training losses of pilots and aircraft. Given our RAN/RAAF training backgrounds, we were perhaps overly sensitive to the direct supervision applied to every sortie. Our concern was not so much that "Big Brother" was watching, but that there was no implied trust that we (and other student pilots) could or would conduct missions safely, as briefed. In any event, we did not transport that RAG training philosophy back to the RAN, and the RAN flying safety record remained excellent by world navy standards.



And so began a long and successful relationship between the *Skyhawk* aircraft and the RAN, prematurely brought to an end by the "paying off," without replacement, of our only aircraft carrier. That relationship resulted in a period during which the RAN possessed, in the form of embarked *Skyhawk* aircraft, the most capable and visible regionally-based deterrent in South East Asian waters (supplementing, of course, the USN carriers which frequently deployed to the area). I am proud to have been part of that story, and, philosophical training differences aside, I have very fond memories of the USN and civilian friendships

made all those years ago. I wish those who share those memories the very best of health and good fortune.

(Ed. Note: After working up and training the first RAN A-4 squadron, Commodore Da Costa went on to command VF-805, the RAN operational A-4 squadron embarked in Melbourne. Subsequently, he served as air wing commander, then as "Air Boss" on board Melbourne. He retired from active duty in 1989 in the one-star grade of Commodore.)

SKYHAWK TRIVIA, AUSTRALIAN STYLE

A little known politico-military circumstance arose in the late 1960s regarding to the Royal Australian Navy's acquisition of A-4G *Skyhawks* and Australia's role in the Vietnam war.

The first RAN *Skyhawks* were delivered in 1967. When the first two Aussie *Skyhawk* drivers (see above) returned to their home turf, they organized and conducted the training of other pilots for their squadron. Simultaneously, a major retrofit of HMAS *Melbourne*, Australia's only carrier, was begun to enable operation of the new *Skyhawks* from her deck. However, it later became apparent that the *Melbourne* retrofit would not be completed until some time after the first A-4 pilot training course was scheduled to complete. The Australian Government made an offer to the U.S.: Australian A-4 qualified (but not yet carrier qualified) pilots would be made available on a short term commitment, to augment shore-based U.S. Marine Corps A-4 squadrons operating in Vietnam. The U.S. accepted the offer and, as a result, the RAN *Skyhawk* training squadron received an unexpected bonus – the same high priority for aircraft spares as was accorded USN and USMC operating in the Vietnam war zone.

As anticipated, the training of the RAN A-4 pilots was completed before the *Melbourne* retrofit. The pilots were ready in all respects and raring to go to Vietnam to get some combat time under their belts, but a diplomatic glitch occurred. By that time, the U.S. government had begun "de-escalation" of the war and had begun withdrawing some American operational units from the combat zone. From a practical, operational viewpoint, sending the RAN pilots to fly with the USMC would have merely been the fulfillment of the earlier obligation, but it was not to be. From the diplomatic view, sending Australian pilots to combat in Vietnam while the U.S. was down-sizing could make it appear that the Australian government had a different policy and was engaged in unilateral escalation.

So, no doubt to the great relief of their families, the RAN aviators stayed home. They were formed into the second RAN *Skyhawk* squadron, somewhat earlier than originally planned and, according to Commodore DaCosta, "trained their pants off" while waiting for *Melbourne* to finish her refit and put to sea.



FROM THE PRESIDENT

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The further away we get from it...the better it was.

Chubby Checker taught us to twist while Sue ran around in a town without pity. Being away from home we watched for Mr. Postman and learned the mashed potato. We played a game called "Horse" and cheated in another called "Smoke." The Four Seasons sang about Sherry and told us to walk like a man. No more IBCOODs for the AOCs, but NAVCADS and MARCADS still had bed checks. Every parking lot on Mainside was sprinkled with new Ensign and Cadet CarQual cars, mostly convertibles. Mine was a robin's egg blue Triumph TR-4 which would take half of my pay for the next five years to resolve. Big girls didn't cry, it was 1962, and I learned to fly – the Navy way! I was fortunate that Summer. I had a choice – Meridian or Whiting. Since Meridian was air conditioned, I loaded all my stuff (including the TR payment book) in the car, slipped on my aviator sunglasses, and followed the afternoon sun westward toward the next step in my journey to Navy Wings of Gold.

"Flop..chop..prop..110 drop" gave way to "220 drop the gear, flaps and place your hand ON the tailhook handle but don't push it down." Tailhook! Wow! I was getting closer. The T-2 Buckeye's 250 knots blew the T-34's 110 to the land of Oz – and TACAN with DME made VOR obsolete. "Fly the ball to touchdown" was the first real indication that there might be a carrier deck waiting out there somewhere with my name on it.

That was 35 years ago. Recently, I motored to Meridian where I got to re-live a part of that rite of passage. Part of the *Skyhawk* Association "adoption" of VT-7, the last active duty Navy *Skyhawk* squadron, is a commitment to present an A-4 trophy to each VT-7 "Student of the Month" during the graduation-winging ceremonies. Mine was the honor to present the first such award. The Association intends on doing this for as long as the Scooters are in the pipeline and over the Northern Mississippi skies. Reliable word has it that the TA-4 will be in the flight training business into the next century.

A return NAS Meridian. Today, the base has a few more admin buildings but the hangar at the ops area – still more than a stone's throw from the BOQ – is the same.

VT-9 is gone, replaced by VT-19, but the passageway outside the VT-7 ready room is the same as when we crowded around the black-and-white TV set to learn of President Kennedy's embargo of Cuba. Back then, it seemed like the prelude to World War III. The squadrons were put on "alert," in case the stuff hit the fan, but we students couldn't quite figure out what kind of combat we could muster with the T-2. Growl a lot, I guess. (Little did we know then that we'd later put the Scooter to that use for real.) Meridian was where I really learned the basics of our profession and the student pilots today at VT-7 are doing the same – in the *Skyhawk* – and they really like our little lady. She's not an arcade game like some of her newer, sophisticated cousins where, if the RNav pack isn't humming on startup, the flight is canceled. The Scooter doesn't even have a RNav pac and it's reassuring that at least part of pilot training still consists of the pilot looking at a strip map, looking through the windscreen at what's below, and matching the two. Remember? At every turn what the *Skyhawk* has going for her is generations of carrier pilots who were better pilots for having strapped her on. If you're willing to travel to Meridian and be part of one of the monthly events, give me a call or send an E-mail. We'd like to have SA representation there regularly from now on. Boom Powell was our rep for the March winging and says he had a blast! Experience for yourself the thrill of a return visit to the TraCom as a representative of the *Skyhawk* Association. Make your own sentimental journey "back to the future" of carrier aviation.

Bravo Zulu, over and over again, to **Bud Southworth** who designed, organized, and brought to life our *Skyhawk* Association web page (see below). Being on the Internet will publicize our organization and carrier aviation, and function as an Association membership recruiting tool. Already, it's generated interest from Argentina, Australia, and New Zealand.

Mark your calendars and plan on attending our annual get-together at the Nugget Hotel in Sparks (Reno), Nevada, in September. We'll have a *Skyhawk* suite and we're planning a super program, with at least one Sierra Hotel guest, for our "AOM" luncheon on Friday, 5 September. Details will be forthcoming in the Summer issue of this newsletter. See you there!

AN ANNOUNCEMENT

The *Skyhawk* Association now has a new, simpler Internet WEB SITE address:

<http://www.Skyhawk.org>

Drop by for a visit. To ensure an orderly transition, the old address: www.cnw.com/~Skyhawk/index.htm will remain active until August 1997.



AN A-4 WITH FOLDING WINGS?

Well, yes and no.

The design of "Heinemann's Hot Rod" took into consideration stowage on board carriers. While folding wings were technically feasible, they were deemed unnecessary because the *Skyhawk* already had an inherently small "footprint." The added weight and mechanical complexity required for a wing-folding system were an unacceptable trade-off for the additional deck space gained.

No folding wing A-4s were produced by Douglas but three stricken and gutted A-4As were modified for public relations purposes, one each at NAS Lemoore, NAS Jacksonville, and NART Atlanta. Normally, they were displayed with gear extended, sitting on the ground, but all three had folding wings and vertical fins for overhead and side clearance during ground transportation by flat-

bed trailer. The vertical fin fold line is clearly visible in the upper photo of the Lemoore bird which,

at various times, was painted either white, as shown, or in a dark blue "Blue Angel" color scheme.



At left is the NAS Atlanta version used by the Reserves as a recruiting enticement.

The eagle-eyed reader may note that there is a difference in the placement of the wing folds. The break on the Atlanta variant is located inboard of the inboard wing spoiler, while the Lemoore fold occurs farther outboard, approximately at the inboard edge of the wing slat.

When the folding wing *Skyhawks* were created and their active life spans are undiscovered. Anyone who can shed further light on these unusual variants, feel free to drop a line to Ye Ed.

(Photos courtesy of Harry Gann.)



COMING DOWN THE PIKE. The Skyhawk Association annual "AOM" (general membership meeting) will take place on Friday, 5 September 1997, at the Nugget Hotel in Sparks (Reno), Nevada. Our get-together will "piggy-back" with Tailhook '97. The luncheon will be our "main event." It will feature some general business (election of directors) and a noted speaker (TBA). Attendance at the luncheon will be by pre-paid reservation. Our latter day "admin ashore" (the Skyhawk hospitality suite at the hotel) will be open for socialization and relaxation at appropriate times from Thursday through Sunday morning. Mark calendars and watch for further details in the Summer issue of this newsletter.

DUES REMINDER. Note the month/year printed at the upper right corner of the address label on this newsletter. That's the date we have in the data base, through which your annual dues are currently paid. Please make a reminder note on your calendar. Also, to keep things friendly, you'll be sent a post card reminder shortly before your dues-due date. Membership questions? Recent change of address? Ideas for newsletter content? Contact Captain Hook at the return address on this newsletter, by telephone at 619-435-2335, or by E-mail: caphook11@aol.com.

COMMUNICATE? Five of the seven members of the Association Board are on line for E-mail: "Whizzer" White (President) - a4pilot@aol.com; Jack Woodul (Vice Pres.) - 105622.1422 @compuserve.com; Wynn "Captain Hook" Foster (Secretary) - caphook11@aol.com; R.R. "Boom" Powell (Treasurer) - 76463.2151 @compuserve.com; and Tom Brown - tfbIII@webtv.net. If it's about the Skyhawk Association web page, contact Webmaster Bud Southworth - skyhawk@cnw.com. The Association official snail-mail address is 770 "F" Avenue, Coronado, CA 92118-2130.

LOOKING FOR SOME GOOD SKYHAWK READING? Check out Volume 4 of "Wings of Fame, The Journal of Classic Combat Aircraft" at your local book store. The publication, a slick, high quality booklet, is from Aerospace Publishing, Ltd. of London (published in the U.S. and Canada under license by AIRTime Publishing of Westport, CT). Volume 4 contains the first of a two part story titled "Douglas A-4 Skyhawk Variants" – 20 pages of text and color/b&w photos, written and compiled by our very own Harry Gann (Skyhawk Association Historian) of Huntington Beach, CA. The *Wings of Fame* booklet is a bit on the pricey side (\$19.00) but well worth the investment for anyone seriously into *Skyhawk* history and detail of the many variants.

RECORD CORRECTION - A BIT OF HISTORICAL TRIVIA. For many years it has been generally accepted and reported that the 15 October 1955 speed record over a 500 kilometer closed course, set by Navy test pilot then-LT Gordon Gray, was flown in A4D-1 *Skyhawk* BuNo 137814. That's how the event was recorded in two otherwise prestigious and oft cited reference publications, Rene J. Francillion's *McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Since 1920: Volume I* (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Md., 1979, 1988), and Peter Kilduff's *Douglas A-4 Skyhawk* (Osprey Publishing Ltd., London, 1983). Thus, when Harry Gann's richly illustrated essay appeared in *Wings of Fame* (see above), there appeared to be a minor discrepancy. Gann reported that the October 1955 *Skyhawk* speed record was set in BuNo 137820. Obviously, a mistake somewhere in the equation. Who was right?

Ye Ed fired off a note to *Skyhawk Association* member Gordon Gray and asked if he could shed light on the matter. The response was a photo copy of the pertinent page in Gordo's Aviator's Flight Log Book. Harry Gann was correct. Gordo's log book shows that the October 1955 *Skyhawk* speed record was set during a 42-minute flight in YA4D-1 BuNo 137820. Actually, Gray did several bits of fast flying in mid-October of 1955. Three days prior to setting the official speed record, he did 620 mph in a F9F-8 *Cougar* during a familiarization flight over the 500 meter closed course. On the following day (Saturday, 13 October), in YA4D-1 BuNo 137820, he made a second closed course fam flight and pegged the airspeed indicator at an unofficial 703 mph. That flight resulted in a rudder failure that required a hasty over-night patch-up. On Sunday, 14 October, Gordo flew BuNo 137820 twice again and twice clocked 685 mph. The second flight on 14 October flight resulted in a wing tip failure and yet another hurried repair job. Finally, on Monday, 15 October, he went for the gold and achieved the officially recorded speed of 695.163 mph – in BuNo 137820. The 15 October 1955 *Skyhawk* speed topped the then existing record of 649.46 mph, held by a USAF North American F-86H *Sabre*.

WILL THE REAL BLUE ANGEL PLEASE STAND UP!

The Blue Angels flew the A-4F *Skyhawk* for 13 years (1974-1987), longer than any other aircraft to date. During that time, 18 different specially-configured A-4Fs (and four TA-4Js) cycled through the inventory of Blues equipment. One of the A-4Fs flown by the Blues was BuNo 154180 and everyone knows that 154180 is on display as Blue Angel #1 in the atrium of the National Museum of Naval Aviation at NAS Pensacola, right?



Recently, however, an eagle-eye *Skyhawk* aficionado out in the field noted a discrepancy. At the other end of the country, a *Skyhawk* on display at the Museum of Flight in Seattle, Washington, also painted in Blue Angel colors, bears BuNo 154180.

What gives? A clone? Two Skyhawks with the same BuNo? Sorry, no real mystery here. It's probably just that, back when it came to selection of ex-Blue Angel birds for display purposes, the Seattle Museum had a head-of-the-line chow pass. According to the records of the Pensacola museum, the Blue Angel #1 *Skyhawk* on display at NAS Pensacola is actually A-4E BuNo 150076, cosmetically altered and repainted for display as 154180. The real 154180 (photo above) is in Seattle. The only obvious difference between the two 154180s is the center line drop tank on the Seattle display. If memory serves correctly, the Blues didn't carry tanks during public flight demonstrations.

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