

As I Recall

by Alan Emmerson Pt11

“I certify that this motorcar is an exact replica of the car which achieved 132.6mph on the Jabbeke speedway Belgium on 17 May 1949. Wm.Heynes”. So read the brass plaque attached to the passenger side dash board of the 1949 Jaguar XK120 which I bought on graduating from RAAF College in December 1963. It replaced a very nice, sporty but highly civilized 1950 Sunbeam Talbot 90 which in turn had replaced a 1937 Austin 7.

The XK Jaguars were the sports car of choice of the 1950s and 1960s, the world’s fastest production car, and I had bought S/No 52 –for £650. It went like the wind but handled like a truck. Dropping one of the 12inch cast iron brake drums on your toe during maintenance was not a good idea. I overhauled the engine and gearbox and after stripping the body to bare metal, repainted it British Racing Green - with a lot of help and forbearance from my friends. I drove it from Stockton to Willietown more or less daily until 1968.

Today the car might fetch nearly \$275,000 or more. In 1968 I sold it for \$1300 to the first person to respond to my advertisement. I had been posted to 77SQN Butterworth with effect 11Dec68, at two weeks notice.



I don't know why the rush, but I did hear a story to the effect that the EngO I was replacing, Cyril Wetherall, had been there so long his tenure was fast approaching the limits of the Visiting Forces Agreement or some other diplomatic convention.

77SQN, then operating Sabres, had been overseas exchanging unpleasantries with His and Her Majesty's enemies for some time, more or less continuously since 1943 in fact. It was now preparing to return to Australia. You can imagine the state of the inventories. My job there was very straight forward. I signed the pieces of paper that the EquipO put in front of me and provided top cover for the WOE.

The 77SQN ferry to Australia via Denpasar went well enough. There were armed Indonesian soldiers around the perimeter of the portion of the airfield assigned to us. I thought it was a bit rough on one of the local kids, who accepted a piece of ice from our cool-box to suck, and was slapped by one of the soldiers for accepting it with his left hand. Close to our perimeter there was a C47 decorated with engine stands and drip trays and a lone Indonesian mechanic with a handful of tube spanners.

When it came time to return to Butterworth we found insufficient air transport had been allocated. Now until the 1960s, American aircraft were constructed using a very large range of standard hardware collectively known as AN standard parts. (Army Navy there was no USAF until 1947) and we had sufficient of these in the fly away kit for a squadron of Sabres. They were mainly consumables (C class) which were never going to be used by the RAAF again and so it was not such a brave decision to give them all to the man with the C47. so freeing seats for the trip home. His smile was thank you enough.

One of the more interesting sights of Denpasar was the all black Douglas A26 Invader that was the personal transport of the chief of the Indonesian airforce and which he flew himself. On the day of his departure, one engine would not start. Undaunted, he made several attempts to start it by high speed taxi along the runway. Eventually one caught and he taxied back to the end of the runway and took off only to return for a very high speed, very low level, 4,000HP, beat up.

During their stay in Butterworth the squadrons on the Base including 77SQN had employed a number of "locally engaged civilians". There were the Swinging Sisters of Base Squadron whose performance with the short blade scythe was highly choreographed to avoid blood and bone fertilizing the grass while cutting it toe-nail short. Then there were the Engine and Airframe Mechanics and Fitters, the Surface Finishers and the General Hands. Anyone who has seen a Sabre will remember the dozens of labels painted on the skin. These were applied by stencilling. I watched one of these men walk around a Sabre with an armful of stencils casually and unerringly dropping each one in the place it would be required.

With 77SQN gone, the locally engaged civilians had no jobs. We were not allowed to re-employ them as fitters and mechanics. The Mirage was considered by some to be too sophisticated or its bits too highly classified. 3SQN did re-employ two local men whom I remember well, even if I can't spell their names properly. In particular Subramaniam, or just Maniam. He was built like a whippet. If he stood sideways he wouldn't cast a shadow.

The Rolls Royce Avon in the Sabre had an isopropyl nitrate (IPN) fuelled starter, and it had been one of the jobs of the second man, Mr Onions, (rightly pronounced Oh-nigh-uns) to top up the IPN tanks of the Sabres on the flight line. He became known to 77SQN as IPN Onions, using the vegetable pronunciation. He was built like a tennis ball, and always seemed cheerful. Any time I arrived at the hangar Onions would sing out. "Koppee Boss?" To which I would reply "Yu ai Onions" and he would in a flash be pouring white coffee from

a large aluminium kettle. There were those who said it was the same kettle that he had used for IPN. It may have been too.

An idea I inherited from Cyril looked like being the answer to the problem of moving Mirages around in the hangar. Hovercraft were all the rage in the 1960s. Cyril proposed that a simple flat plate placed under each wheel and fed with compressed air would do the job. (50psi x 200 squins x 2 wheels = 20,000 lb) Later on I played with the idea for a while, but I could not figure how to move across the storm water drains at each end of the hangar.

And on the sixty eighth day...

Regular readers will remember that I had said that the Squadron could deploy to Butterworth on 68 days notice. I was not at Williamtown when the order came through, but our armament officer Dave Penna, who was acting in my place, later told me it arrived on 11 Dec 68 and required 3SQN to be on the job at Butterworth on Monday 17 Feb 1969. From then on, he said, everyone just followed the plan. I remember having told him to be sure we made the transit through Juanda (in eastern Java) look clean, quick and efficient, and the arrival at Butterworth organised and tidy. "People" would be watching.

On the Sunday morning I was in the Base Ops Room at Butterworth to monitor the Squadron's arrival at Juanda. The SATCO had arranged for us to hear some of what was going on. OC RAAF Butterworth and his entourage turned up after smoko. Once the aircraft were all on the ground and the airwaves had gone quiet I went for a quick lunch. On my return I could hear arrangements being made for a single Mirage to leave early and land in Singapore. That definitely was not part of the plan. An aeroplane landing short of Butterworth could only mean one thing – a fuel system problem. Now I was nervous.

I joined the previously small crowd which had by now grown to the length of the flight line. The anticipation could be felt. The chocks were set out in readiness. The marshallers were ready. (In the dayglo waist coats the OC disliked. Woops.) There was a buzz when the first aircraft appeared on finals, silence when it touched down, relief when the drag chute deployed, and hearty applause when the CO stepped out of A3-81. Then followed A3-82, parking alongside, then A3-83 and 84. By the time 86 arrived the crowd could see what was happening and there was more applause. When the next aircraft to arrive was out of sequence and parked out of place there was an oh of disappointment, but more clapping when the sequence resumed with a space for a missing aeroplane.

The story had begun a month earlier when HQ OPCOM was able to supply only one fewer Hercs than the number we needed. As a result, there was not a pair of tanks to replace those punctured when Bren Roberts over-rotated on landing at Juanda. Frantic efforts were made to repair the tanks but to no avail, fortunately. Not having been there I don't know the details, but I did hear the word speed-tape mentioned. The aircrew had a better idea. SQNLDR Bob Walsh was to fly the aeroplane to Singapore on internal fuel only. After being towed to the end of the runway, and taking off without afterburner, that is just what he did - 750 nautical miles on less than 620 gallons. That may have caught the attention of those who were watching. And the reason for the "missing" aeroplane? When Bob arrived in Singapore it was raining – really raining. He could barely see the taxi way to position the aeroplane for refuelling and there was no cockpit ladder. He sat there for a long time.