

A family of pilots -- Thanks to a Rathmines Catalina flight

The Avondale "Spotters" and the Catalina Flights

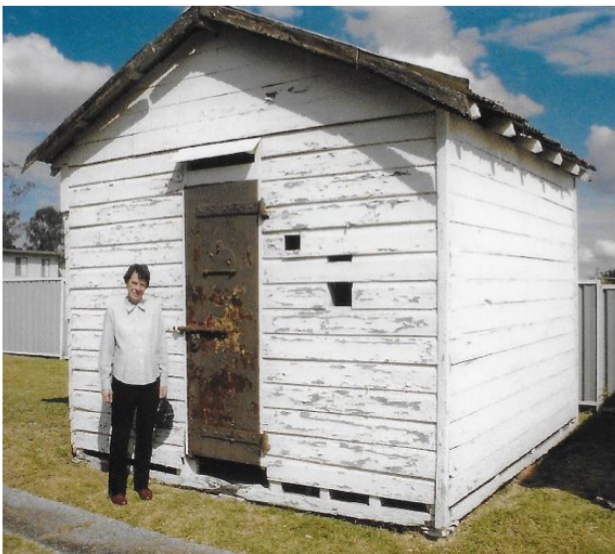
A personal memoir - Story Don Wilson

During World War II Australian authorities decided to monitor all aircraft movements. The Japanese were "island hopping" towards Australia so observation posts were established to report aircraft traffic. The plan was to help detect enemy aircraft in Australian skies. Avondale College participated and a small shed near the water tower was used for the purpose. It was "manned" by volunteers – mostly wives of College and Factory employees including my mother, Daisy Wilson. Some Cooranbong community members were also involved.

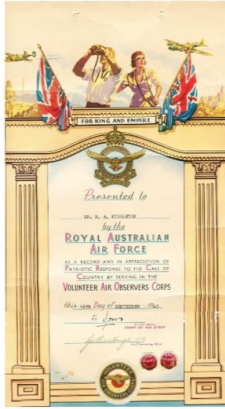


Avondale water tower. Spotter Hut was at right edge of photo (photo credit David Jones)

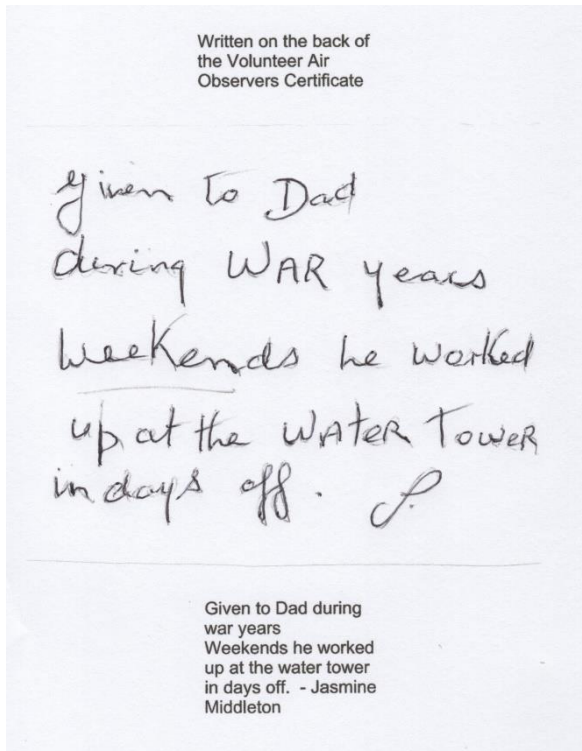
The hut was only about 2 metres in its greatest dimension, and I remember visiting it a couple of times when Mum took her 4-hour shifts. It was sparsely furnished with binoculars, two picture rolls (one with allied aircraft and the other with enemy aircraft) a small table, a chair, and a telephone with a direct line to Sydney.



MORISSET
SPOTTING
SHED About .2k
east of Morisset
Train Station per
kind favour Julie
Ward (pictured)



Spotter Certificate earned by Gus Middleton at the Avondale Spotter Hut. Per kind favour Alan Fisher Archivist for Sanitarium Health Foods



Note on back of Gus Middletons Air Observer Certificate written by his daughter Jasmine (a classmate at Avondale Primary School) per kind favour Alan Fisher

The spotters were required to report any plane they could see – with estimates of type, altitude, and direction of flight. There were some funny stories of responses from the man in Sydney – especially to the new recruits who were “learning the ropes.” Responses like:

- “What do you mean – it’s an odd-looking plane?”
- “You say its thousands of feet up, could you hazard a guess at how high?”
- “Madam, do you have any concept of where North, South, East and West might be?”

During the early years at the Avondale Primary School, I would, at recess, watch Tiger Moths and Chipmunks flying overhead and wish I could be up there. I have a vivid memory of being in Grade 2.

One morning, the teacher called us to attention and made this announcement: *"The war is over and you can all go home now."* Months later the RAAF base at Rathmines offered reward flights in a Catalina PBY aircraft to thank the "spotters" for their many hours of voluntary service. At that time there were very few cars in Cooranbong and petrol was strictly rationed so the problem of getting the spotters to Rathmines was solved by my Dad (Bill Wilson, Factory Manager) offering to take a factory truck. Some may remember the old Fargo. All the roads were unpaved, very dusty and corrugated. The group of about 25 just sat on the floor / bed of the truck (because I was just 7 years old, I was in the cab with my parents) Everyone was excited because this would be the first flight for most, if not all, of us.

We were stopped at the gated entrance to the Catalina base and had to present papers before the gate swung open for us. On the base we were divided into 3 groups and discovered "our" Catalina was already floating in the bay. The first group was ushered into a patrol boat (shades of PT109) and delivered to the blister window on the side of the plane. I was surprised to find there was no seating, so just sat down on some coils of greasy yellow rope!

When the engines started the noise was deafening. Next, I noticed that I could no longer see out of the blister window. This was alarming as I wondered if something had gone wrong and we were submarining our way to the bottom of Lake Macquarie. It was a pleasant surprise a few moments later when once again I could see out the window and observe the water a few metres below. The previous opacity was caused by prop wash – the propellers forcing spray over the windows.

After we were airborne, I decided to explore the interior of the plane. I remember climbing through a bulkhead and a short time later was surprised to find two airmen on high seats above me. They were in uniform and the 1st Officer (right front seat) seemed quite surprised to see a little kid aboard. He reached his long arm down and lifted me up on his knee so I could see out the front. We had a marvellous flight over much of Lake Macquarie, Morisset, Avondale College, SHF Factory, etc. The co-pilot asked me who owned the factory. I gave him a 7-year-old answer, "The people who built it!" Dad and I were able to get a second flight by joining the 3rd group.

This experience, reinforced by reading Biggles books, kindled a strong desire to become a pilot. Dad asked me near the end of high school what I wanted to be. Thinking I was clever I said, "Maybe a factory manager." He looked disappointed and said, "Oh, I hope not." So, then I told him the truth, "I want to be a Flying Doctor." He said, "Sounds good to me as long as you do the doctor part first!"

Well, I followed his wish in this regard because I was busy with medical school (University of Sydney) and then surgical training. However, while getting extra surgical training at Loma Linda University I drove by a Southern California airport and saw a notice: "Introductory Flying Lesson – only \$5.00." I could resist no longer! My instructor was Gary who got me my license, became a lifelong friend, and was best man in my wedding in the Loma Linda University Church.

We became a flying family. Three of our children are certified flight instructors and two of them are A&P qualified (Airframe & Powerplant mechanics). Only 1 works in aviation - Merilyn is Vice President and Operations Officer for Dream Flights. Her brothers are busy with medical and dental careers but still love to fly. Ron talked his mother into taking lessons; "if you fly with Dad, you need to be able to land the plane if he ever needs help!". The aviation legacy flows on "unto the 3rd generation". Ron's oldest son already has his pilot's license (obtained in the kit plane –Kit Fox- his father, uncle and aunt put together in our garage while they were in high school. It's still in the family and flies regularly, 35 years later. Ron is teaching two of his other children to fly and Merilyn is teaching three of her children and also her husband! The 1st officer on the Catalina had no idea of the consequences of welcoming a 7-year-old into the cockpit!

Every year on ANZAC day there is a service at the RAAF base Memorial Park in Rathmines – *organised by the Rathmines Catalina Association*. It's been my privilege to attend several of these solemn occasions – to honour those who served, patrolled our coast lines and helped protect us. It was at great cost: 66 of 168 Catalinas were lost along with 329 airmen.

Joining a cardiac surgery program at St. Helena Hospital in 1980, I first rented planes to make follow up visits to patients. Unfortunately, sometimes there was not a plane available when I needed one, so in 1985 I bought a used Piper Saratoga which served well for 8 years. The Piper dealer offered a good trade and Ron and I picked up a retractable gear model at the factory in Florida. Merilyn and I picked up the plane currently in use in 1999. Using the plane to make follow up visits all over Northern California (and to attend continuing education programs) has provided tax deductions which have helped make it affordable. Many patients have appreciated being seen at their local airport rather than having to drive long distances over narrow winding roads.

In January 2023 I had the opportunity, along with friends Don Bain and Lester Devine, to inspect a Catalina being restored in Beresfield near Newcastle NSW. That day I stepped inside a Catalina for a nostalgic revisit after an interval of almost eight decades.

Our family has been blessed with safe, useful, and enjoyable flying over many years and we thank God for it. As I arrive at 3000 hours of Pilot in Command (PIC) time I am so grateful for the Catalina flights at Rathmines. The pilots and support crew there deserve our respect and profound gratitude for their service to Australia in our time of need.



Painting "Touchdown Lake Macquarie" by well-known Australian artist John Bradley



Catalina flying over the Rathmines Catalina Memorial Park (photo credit www.rathmines-catalina.com)



Don Bain in Chipmunk at (long gone) Broadmeadows Field, Newcastle, NSW



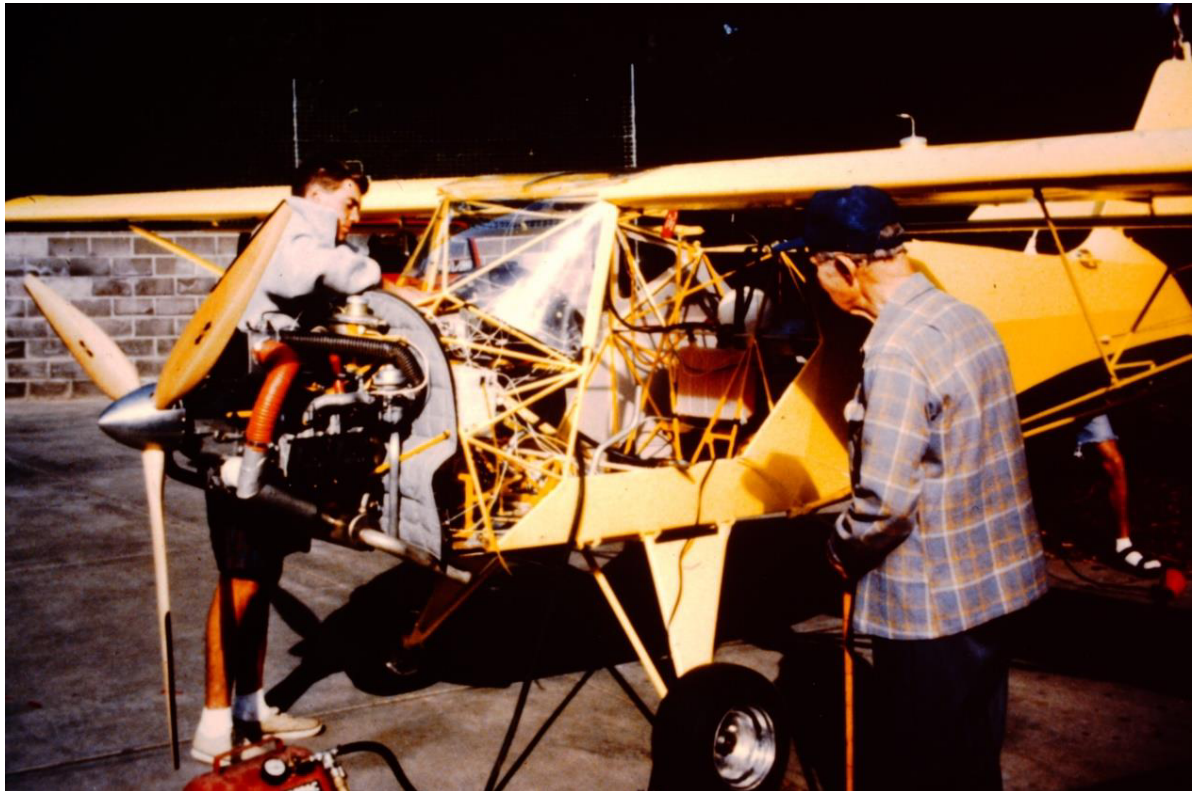
Picking up a Piper Saratoga at the factory in Florida



Post-surgical check-up on the wing!



Kit Fox construction in garage



Kit Fox construction nearing completion - early 90's



First Grandchild to earn a pilot licence - in the Kit Fox built by his father, uncle and aunt when in high school



Grandson flying Kit Fox



Son Ron teaching daughter to fly

Nostalgic visit inside the Catalina restoration (Catalina restoration photo credits Lester Devine)



Inspecting the interior from the tail cone – Capt Anderson Standing by.



Don Bain and Don Wilson chatting to Qantas Captain (rtd.) Bill Anderson, President of the Rathmines Catalina Association





In flight over Northern California coast April 2023

