



NHILL ANSON NEWSLETTER

Issue No. 15. 28-02-2012

Highlights in this newsletter:

- Nhill Aerodrome Master Plan
- Nhill Aeradio Building
- Feature: Fergus Cloran Story

Nhill Aerodrome Master Plan

Two years ago a committee was convened by the Hindmarsh Shire Council in partnership with the Nhill Aviation Heritage Centre (NAHC) for the specific purpose of looking at the past and present usage of the Nhill Aerodrome and developing a plan for the future of this important community asset. The Nhill Aviation Heritage Centre has been represented on this committee and has been vitally interested in the project.

At the last Board meeting of the NAHC a motion recommending our support of the most recent Master Plan document was sent to the Master Plan Committee. It is anticipated that the document will be presented to Council for approval and will then become publicly available. The Master Plan is designed to be a 'living document' to be regularly assessed and revised according to the need to preserve existing assets and to develop the Aerodrome for the future.

Nhill Aeradio Building

The NAHC has been offered suitable radio equipment similar to that used in the Nhill Aeradio Facility. The building is reputed to be one of the last remaining intact buildings with traces of the towers and power stations still visible. The building that housed the Lorenz transmitter is still intact. It is hoped that this facility will be restored for the public exhibition of an important Aviation Radio Communication and Guidance system in use between 1937 and the mid 1960s.

More information about the Nhill Aeradio Station can be viewed in the Nhill Anson archives, issues 012 and 013. <http://www.westprint.com.au/cgi-bin/dada/mail.cgi/list/nhillanson>



Nhill Aeradio Building as it was when occupancy was given to the Nhill Apex Club in 1979

Feature: Fergus Cloran Story.

A Year In Nhill

By Fergus Cloran

Introduced by his daughter Genevieve Hetherington

My father, Fergus Cloran, was born in Sydney on February 25, 1913. My mother, Margaret Hay, was born in Donald, Victoria on April 10, 1923. Margaret was posted to Sandsmere, 15 kilometres north of Kaniva, in 1943 at the age of 19, having completed Teacher College training in Melbourne. Sandsmere was a one teacher school and the children were aged from 4 to 14 years. She also recalls her first meeting with my father at the Catholic Church at Kaniva. For her, unlike Dad, it was not love at first sight and she thought his name Fergus Cloran was 'very odd'! However, soon after their first meeting when my father was posted nearer to Melbourne, he apparently took up her suggestion to contact her parents who would show him what a great place Melbourne was (even in war time!). Father was from Sydney! When Margaret returned to Melbourne from Sandsmere she found this 'airman' had practically taken up residence at her home! He was obviously getting on very well with the parents!

Fergus Cloran's story about Nhill starts at the end of his rookie course in Tocumwal.

Four weeks after the start of the rookie course, there was the official passing-out parade, and we certainly looked a much smarter lot than when we first arrived. When postings came through a week later, I found that I had been posted to No.2 Air Navigation School at Nhill in Victoria. This was the second time in seven years that I had been sent to a place that I'd never heard of. I learnt that it was a town in the Wimmera, in western Victoria, about forty miles from the South Australian border.

Next day at 4 pm I left Tocumwal by train for Melbourne and stayed the night at Air Force House. Next evening at 7 o'clock I caught the Adelaide Express for Nhill and arrived at Nhill railway station at 2 o'clock next morning. I was driven to the RAAF Station (2ANS) in an Air Force tender and directed by torchlight to an empty bunk in a long tin hut with about 30 beds. I was up a few hours later for morning parade at 8 o'clock and after breakfast began work in the Pay Office. This small section of half a dozen or so was presided over by a genial former bank officer, Flight-Sergeant Davey, correctly addressed as "Flight", but more commonly "Doc".

When things were quiet in the office and nothing could be heard but the scratching of pens or the shuffling of papers, Doc would ask earnestly: "Ever slept with a blonde, Ferg?" "No, Doc."

"Neither could I. Not a blooming wink." And we'd all laugh, including Doc himself, as if we'd just heard it for the first time instead of the twenty-first.

Or when the war news was particularly bad, he'd ask one of us,

"Where are you going for Christmas?" and we'd reply "I thought I might go to the islands", or "Darwin might be nice, or Townsville", or "I haven't been to France for some time."

Ten days, or rather nights, after arriving at Nhill I was given my first guard duty, from 6 pm to 9 pm and from midnight to 3 am with a sleep in the watch-house in between shifts. I was briefed by the Orderly Officer and issued with side-arms (a revolver) which I was to hand over to the relieving guard after being given the password - the usual procedure. By the end of the second stint, at 3 o'clock in the morning, I was glad to hear the approach of the relieving guard. Naturally I challenged him in the approved manner, as taught in training:

"Halt! Hands up! Who goes there?" But the reply came in a most unsoldierly voice:

"O.K. mate, you can go and have a sleep now. I'm taking over from you." I said,

"Stay where you are and give the password."

"I've forgotten the bloody password. Just hand over your revolver and go to bed."

"I will when you say the password."

"But I've forgotten it. Where do you think I can get it. at this time of the morning?"

"From the Orderly Officer."

"But he'll be asleep."

"Then wake him up." At this stage my opposite number put on the old soldier role.

"How long have you been in the Air Force, mate?"

"Long enough to know you don't hand over your weapon to the first one that asks for it. Go and find out the password."

A long quarter of an hour later he was back, this time with the password. The revolver was duly handed over and I retired to my bed, where I was allowed to sleep in till 9.30.

I never learnt whether the Orderly Officer had to be awakened or not, but word of the incident seemed to have got around the Station. I discussed it with the Paymaster and Doc Davey, saying,

"If I'd given it up the first time I'd have been in bed half an hour earlier." They replied,

"And you might have been placed on a charge for breach of security regulations. You did the right thing. Don't forget there's a war on!"

As if we ever could. Sometimes, after a particularly strong rumour - and rumours abounded - of a secret Japanese landing on a quiet part of the coastline, we had to carry our rifles with us everywhere for the whole day: to the office, to the mess, to the canteen. And then there was the gas-mask drill, gas identification, the frequent postings to Darwin and Townsville, which were now theatres of war (Darwin had suffered over fifty bombing raids), and to the islands. These were all constant reminders that there was a war on.

We had a day off (or a stand-down day in service language) each week-end. Half the station were "stood down" on the Saturday and half on the Sunday, and once a month we had a long week-end which included Saturday and Sunday. I seldom remained on the station on a stand-down day. On a single day off I would walk into Nhill after 5 o'clock stand-down, book in at the Commercial Hotel, and indulge in the luxury of a bed with sheets and a pillowcase and the welcome solitude of a room to myself. On "long" week-ends I would go to a neighbouring town. On the first of these I went to Horsham and had my photo taken in RAAF uniform to send home. Another time I went to Hamilton in an old-fashioned charabanc, and for Easter I went to Stawell, staying overnight at the Bull and Mouth and going by bus next day to the Grampians.

Not that life on the RAAF station was all that bad. There was a cinema, a dance-floor, a canteen where you could buy almost anything except a beer (it was a dry canteen), and I could always use the pay office in the evenings to write letters or have a quiet read. And the company in the unit, especially in the Pay Section, was quite good. The Paymaster and the Flight-Sergeant would often forsake the Officers' Mess and the Sergeants' Mess for a quiet drink with us other ranks at a hotel in town.

But it was always good to get away from the restrictions of barracks life and I soon acquired friends in Nhill, visiting the homes of some of the married RAAF personnel who lived in town, the district school inspector, Mr Walker, and Kath Flynn, a teacher who taught locally. I got to know the parish priest, Fr McGrath, who was also chaplain at the Station. Nearer my own age was his assistant, Fr Tom Linane, whom I used to accompany to nearby towns for Mass when I had the Sunday stand-down.

One Sunday when I was on duty at the Station, Geoff Dinsmore, whom I used to teach at Cootamundra, and who was now a pilot attached to the unit, came into the office and asked, "Would you like to go for a flip, sir?"

(He still called me Sir - old habits die hard!) I hadn't been up in a plane yet and I wasn't altogether sure that I wanted to make my flying debut with Geoff Dinsmore at the controls because I regarded him as being, well - just a bit wild. But I hesitated only for a moment: he seemed so keen and friendly that I couldn't refuse.

And what an experience it was, that first flight! The plane was an Avro-Anson, an observation and trainer plane, fairly large but with seating for three or four only. Geoff was on a conversion course, getting to know Ansons, and he seemed bent on finding out what this old "Aggie" (as he called it) could do. He probably also had it in mind to give his old teacher a few thrills. Anyway, he went through the whole gamut of stunts from hedge-hopping to something that seemed to me to be pretty close to dive-bombing.

I must say I was very relieved when he levelled out after one particularly acute descent. Then he said: "See that mob of sheep over there! We'll part them!" And he skimmed along over the paddocks towards them so that half of them ran one way and half the other. He had a friend sitting beside him at the dual controls and they were obviously enjoying every moment of it. He gave his companion - who was not aircrew - a turn at the controls and I was afraid that he was going to invite me to "have a go". Altogether, it was an exhilarating experience, and every flight since has seemed tame by comparison. Some time later his name cropped up in conversation and someone said, "Dinsmore? Is he still alive?" But he was, and I'm pleased to say that he still is, nearly fifty years later.

No sooner was I settled in at Nhill than I received word to report to Works Training Unit which was located in the grounds of Flemington Racecourse. I was to be "attached" (i.e. posted for a limited period) to WTU for a month, which was later extended to two. I was dismayed to find that I was once more reduced to sleeping in a conventional Army tent that slept twelve persons, and this in the middle of a Melbourne winter. But there was a saving grace: it was possible to get leave from 5 o'clock stand-down each night till 8 o'clock next morning. After a few nights of tent-life I decided to move into the Federal Hotel near Spencer Street Station at five shillings and sixpence (55 cents) a night. With Sundays off, I proceeded to explore Melbourne, though it was not at its best because of the brownout. After only two nights of the luxury of a proper bed dressed with linen, I was to discover that every Tuesday night was "closed camp", and there was no way anyone could leave. My diary contains the impassioned entry, "The longest, coldest, wettest night of the year". But I still kept my room at the Federal booked for the whole week. During my two months in Melbourne I did quite a variety of things. I spent a lot of time in the Public Library and the bookshops, visited the Yarra Bank on Sunday afternoons to hear the speakers, attended the races at Flemington, strolled around Toorak and the gardens, and saw a lot of films.

By 9th August I had completed six months service and was due for my first home leave. You can imagine how much I was looking forward to this, as it was the longest time that I had been away from home. My application for ten days' leave was approved, and I was reporting to the Medical Officer for his clearance when he drew my attention to spots on my face. He then asked to see my chest.

"German measles", he announced. "It's off to hospital for you."

So leave was cancelled, my kitbag was unpacked, and, instead of spending the next ten days at home I spent them in the RAAF hospital at Ascot Vale.

The day after I was discharged from hospital I was transferred back to 2ANS Nhill where I was to remain till the end of the year. The promised home leave eventuated a couple of weeks later and it was well worth while in spite of the rigours of the train journeys each way. I was

by this time fairly used to the packed trains, with the few civilians looking up guiltily at the accusing signs, "Is your journey really necessary?" and servicemen stretched out everywhere -on the floor, in luggage racks, in the corridors and, only if you were very lucky, on the seats. I found that a luggage rack was very satisfactory, so much better than the floor, where there was always the danger of a heavy service boot landing somewhere on your person as troops made their way to the toilet and back. Changing trains at Albury wasn't much fun either but good humour generally prevailed, especially if you were going home on leave rather than returning to camp.

I spent the greater part of this first home leave in Sydney, after meeting Mum at Sydenham Station on her way from Nowra. Ray and Connie were living at a place of Mum's in Denison Road, Lewisham, awaiting the arrival of their first child (Mary) in September. For the last week-end of the leave I went down to Nowra with Mum to see Uncle Austin and the rest of the family there. Though Mum was not really happy about my being in the armed services and, like most mothers, was dreading that I would be posted overseas, she insisted that I wear my uniform to Mass and even to the pictures in order to impress her friends.

All too soon it was time to go back through the long business of getting back to Nhill by a variety of trains, and then it was back to the routine of life in the pay section, relieved only by visits to Nhill and trips to neighbouring towns with Fr Linane. I had the pleasure of my second home leave early in November but after this there were weeks in my diary consisting of blanks or comments on the weather, or how much I'd won or lost on the races - all indications of complete boredom.

And then, in the midst of all this banality came the apparently innocent entry for Sunday 28th November: "Went to Kaniva with Fr Linane, played poker." Now if ever there was a poker-faced expression in my diary it was this one, for it failed to record what was uppermost in my mind, and what was in fact the most important event of my life: I met Margaret! As the priest's car pulled up near the church door, there she was in a group of girls of her own age and looking towards us as we alighted from the car. For me it was a clear case of love at first sight! I can still picture her as she was that November morning, twenty years old, with dazzling smile and large sparkling eyes, and wearing a wide-brimmed picture hat from which tumbled masses of shiny black hair. When I picked myself up, so to speak, I suppose Fr Linane would have introduced us, and I learnt that she was Margaret Hay and she taught at a one-teacher school at Sandsmere, not far out of Kaniva. After Mass I was whisked away by Fr Linane to Loy Hennessy's hotel for lunch, after which we played poker with the publican. Hence the cryptic entry in my diary: "Went to Mass with Fr Linane, played poker."

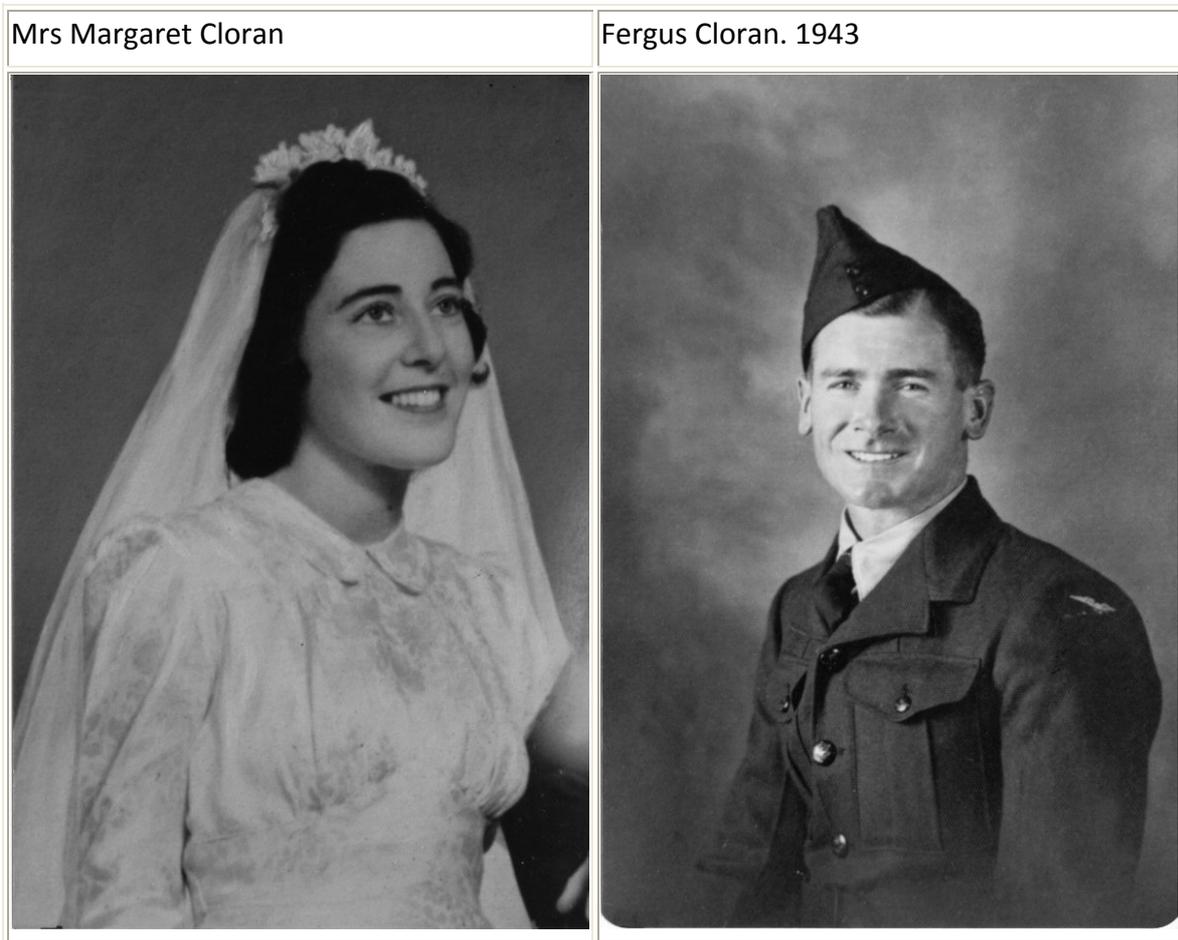
The next Sunday it was closed camp at 2ANS, but a fortnight later I was back at Kaniva and met Margaret again. She told me she was organising a dance at Sandsmere for the following Wednesday night. Of course I went, travelling by train to Kaniva and then by bus to Sandsmere. It was a marvellous opportunity for getting to know each other - truly an enchanted evening. I don't know by what conveyance I got back to camp: probably by walking on air!

That was the end of the Nhill-Kaniva phase of the courtship, because just a few days later school broke up for the Christmas holidays and Margaret returned home to Melbourne. As for me, 2ANS Nhill was shut down as a unit on 9th December and was replaced by an Armaments School. I was attached to this new unit till the end of the year before being posted to RAAF Station Laverton, one of the Air Force's largest establishments.

And where did I go for Christmas? After Christmas Mass at a little town named Goroke, I accompanied Fr Linane to a really tiny place called Lillimur. We had Christmas dinner at

the local pub, which was called "The First and Last", because it provided thirsty travellers with the first drink in Victoria if you were driving from South Australia and the last one if you were travelling the other way. We were guests of the publican and his wife, the Collinses and, after a traditional Christmas dinner, we sang "Little Town in the Old County Down" around the piano while the chooks wandered unhindered through the homely lounge. In the hotel yard the family cow was at a trough enjoying the beer left over from the slop tray - and thriving on it. Altogether it was a warm and memorable experience, that Christmas Day at "The First and Last". The day after Christmas was a Sunday and, after another Christmas Dinner in camp, I went through the process of being cleared from RAAF Station Nhill and left for three days leave in Adelaide before taking up my new posting at Laverton.

It was my first trip to Adelaide. I arrived there by the Adelaide Express at 9 o'clock in the morning and booked in at the Richmond Hotel in Rundle Street. I went to Jim Scholefield's place for lunch - Jim was an airman friend from Nhill - and went out to Glenelg to see the old Proclamation Tree. I travelled to Melbourne on the Overland Express and took up my new posting at RAAF Station Laverton, halfway between Melbourne and Geelong. On New Year's Eve after stand-down I went into Melbourne, had a look at St Kilda in the evening and slept at Toc H, a servicemen's centre in the city. And that was the end of 1943.



COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE

The first week of the new-year was a dull one for me. On New Year's Day I went to the races at Flemington, a sure sign that there was nothing much else for me to do. The truth is that Margaret was out of town on a holiday with a former Teachers' College group. However, the courtship was resumed with vigour on her return. In the three weeks of January before her return to Sandsmere we went out and saw and did everything we could in wartime Melbourne. We went walking and cycling together and we swam at Elwood

and Brighton Beach. One Saturday night we went to a dance at Coconut Grove accompanied by my friend Kevin Murray and Margaret's friend Joan Feiss, now Brennan. After taking the girls home, Kevin and I got back to the Federal Hotel, where we were staying, at 4.15 in the morning. Nevertheless I was out to Caulfield only a few hours later to go off cycling to Elwood where we had a swim. I capped off the week-end with tea at Margaret's place. The next Saturday night, after taking Margaret to the races at Moonee Valley, I stayed the night at Hays, probably for the first time.

Then followed a bleak period of six weeks when I didn't see Margaret at all because she had returned "to the bush" - as we used to describe country service in little places like Sandsmere. I had to console myself in the week-ends with such activities as swimming in the Melbourne Baths or attending Sunday afternoon concerts in the park. I even accompanied some friends from Laverton, an engaged couple (Ted Schurmann and Vicky Riddles) on a hike to St Helena, where there is an historic church with strong associations with Napoleon's island of exile.

The story concludes with this information from Genevieve Hetherington, the daughter of Fergus and Margaret.

Gradually their relationship flourished and they were married in Melbourne in November 1944. After five years living in Corowa NSW after the war, (Dad had requested Albury to teach, so as Margaret was not too far from her parents in Melbourne) they moved permanently to Sydney where they had another 50 happily married years and produced five children. We are scattered from the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, to Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. We have heard stories of their early courtship in Nhill and environs throughout our childhood. Three of us have been to Nhill on two separate occasions and were interested to see the remains of the RAAF Base, the Commercial Hotel where Dad would sometimes seek refuge from the camp 'to sleep in sheets', and seeing the church where they met in Kaniva which looks very unromantic!! The exact whereabouts of the Sandsmere school totally eluded us, as not surprisingly Sandsmere was more a district than an actual place, as it is still? Mum talks about how she was also Postmistress at the school and that across the road from the school there was an old wooden hall where dances were held regularly with airman coming from Nhill, including Fergus! She said these were big family outings - cars from everywhere, the girls would be dressed up in their finery and even young children were included. It doesn't look as if any dances would be held in Sandsmere today!!!

Sandsmere School about 1948



Sandsmere School was removed in 1951



Acknowledgement

John Deckert, on behalf of the Nhill Aviation Heritage Centre, would like to thank Genevieve and Catherine, daughters of Fergus and Margaret Cloran, for this great story relating to Nhill, for the photographs of their parents and for their patience while waiting for photos of the Sandsmere School to be found.

Web Site.

The Nhill Aviation Heritage Centre web-site has been in limbo for several months. Two skilled volunteers have made several recommendations for the development and improvement of the site and it is hoped that visitors will notice changes in the near future.

www.nhillavaiationheritagecentre.com.au

Keep watching. It is hoped that more information will appear soon.

Membership of the Nhill Aviation Heritage Centre

This newsletter is free to anyone interested in the Nhill Aviation Heritage Centre and any of its projects. However, this newsletter is also the only way the committee has of easily sending reminders to those who wish to support our cause by being a member.

Memberships run for a financial year and are \$30 per person. Payment can be made by cheque, money order or internet transfer. Confirmation of payment will only be made if an email address is included with payment or if a notice of payment is made by email to the treasurer:

treasurer@nhillaviationheritagecentre.com.au

A message to our supporters

Do you have a friend who would appreciate receiving this free newsletter? Just click on FORWARD and type in as many email addresses as you like then click SEND.

This newsletter is free. However, support for this important historical project is greatly appreciated and comes in many forms including phone numbers and email addresses, contact details of former WWII trainees, parts for the Avro Anson and general memorabilia, photos etc. as well as donations of cash and labour. Although it is our intention to recognise and acknowledge this assistance through the newsletter, specific details will not be published.

New email addresses are constantly being added to our list. If you do not wish to be part of our group then please contact admin@nhillavaiationheritagecentre.com.au and make your request known.

Persons who wish to make comment about the Nhill Aviation Heritage Centre or any other related issue should also contact admin@nhillavaiationheritagecentre.com.au. Such comments may be published in future newsletters if considered appropriate.