

A Married Accompanied 'Down Under'

By Lt Cdr Duncan Baker RN

In the spring of 1982, I was a watchkeeper on the meteorological bench at the Fleet Weather and Oceanographic Centre (FWOC) in Northwood, eagerly awaiting the arrival of my relief, Lt Cdr Richard Thorn. Interestingly, he had also replaced me in my previous appointment in HMS *Intrepid*. At the same time a certain Argentinian dictator had designs on an additional appointment as 'ruler' of the Falkland Isles.



Lt Cdr Duncan Baker on duty in the FWOC.
Source: Duncan Baker

As it turned out my relief arrived in Northwood as planned. We started the handover on Monday but the following day *Intrepid* was called out of refit for duty in the South Atlantic and my relief went back to the ship. My appointment was cancelled, and I remained as a forecaster at Northwood. As summer passed to autumn, I was back in Old Admiralty Building to see the appointer. A new 'deal' was waiting on the table that I would find difficult to refuse; the appointer wanted me to stay in the Fleet Weather Centre until the end of 1982, and then join 826 Squadron 'B' flight on RFA *Fort Grange*, for a six-month deployment in the South Atlantic in January 1983. The cherry on the top came next.

"Would you like a married accompanied posting?"

"Yes please."

"Then how about two years at HMAS *Albatross*, Nowra, New South Wales?"

How could I refuse? I left the meeting and phoned my wife. The conversation went something like this:

"How did you get on?"

"Well it's another air station, one in the south."

"Not back to Culdrose?"

"No, further south."

"There is no further south."

"There is in Australia!"



Lt Cdr Baker (top left) with 826 Naval Air Squadron en route to the South Atlantic.
Source: Duncan Baker

The silence was deafening, followed by interest, real pleasure and a myriad of questions that would be answered over the coming months.

In June 1983 I flew back to UK via Ascension Island, Brize Norton, Culdrose then to home in Dunfermline, with a month to prepare to leave for Australia in July 1983. This was to be the longest, continuous period I spent at that house and doubtless the most hectic.

The house would be let back to the RN as a 'hiring', so packing meant deciding what was to remain in the house, what was going to accompany us, what would go into store and what would be left with parents. Surprisingly we found that a property owned by a Lt Cdr with six years seniority was considered only suitable for a CPO.

After what seemed a very short period, we were at Heathrow boarding a 'jumbo' for a 'club class' flight to Sydney, where our RAN liaison officer, Lt Cdr Craig 'Jock' Low would be waiting. Sure enough, Jock was there and we became, and still are, great friends. Having squeezed everything into his car we drove the hundred miles south to Nowra and booked into the Parkhaven Motel, very tired but ready to become temporary Australians.



Lt Cdr Baker briefing a visiting Admiral in the Naval Air Station Nowra Met Office.

The next few days were very hectic with the need to find a place to live, furniture, a car, a bank, shops etc., etc. Not forgetting, of course, why we were there. I was to take on the role of Senior Forecaster, HMAS *Albatross* and OIC of the RAN Meteorological School. Settling in was eased by the support from other RN officers serving at Nowra, both aircrew and Air Traffic Control, as well as my new boss, Cdr Ian Bofinger. So, by the time we had moved into our new residence, a rented holiday home, overlooking Jervis Bay we were feeling a good deal more that we belonged.

We were also realising that whilst Australia clearly had huge similarities to the UK it was still a foreign country with its own customs, wildlife, and in many ways, language. We didn't have a 'settee' but sat on a 'lounge in the lounge room' and a 'roast dinner' had been replaced by a 'baked tea'.

However, far more taxing on a professional day to day basis were the differences to be found in southern hemisphere forecasting and a couple of idiosyncrasies peculiar to Australia. I had come to terms with the air moving in the opposite direction around depressions and anticyclones, compared to the northern hemisphere, whilst in the South Atlantic. I also knew well enough that a cyclone was the same as a hurricane or typhoon, just geographically in a different place. What was really different was dealing with the fact that Australia observes the weather in local time. Everyone else follows the convention of using 'Z' or Greenwich Mean Time, so that weather systems can be tracked continuously even when crossing international borders. When you couple this with the time zone changes across the country life becomes interesting, remembering that states north and south of each other may be an hour different or in one case 30 minutes. Your beautiful artistic synoptic chart had gaps, kinks and guesses on its isobars and frontal systems! Observations were also carried out by a wide range of volunteers who had many different occupations and distractions, hence we could not assume that we would get reports during a meal break or overnight.



Loading BT sonobuoys onto an aircraft at Nowra. Source: Duncan Baker

Australia has a huge variety of wildlife, much of which can bite, sting or do you harm. On my first visit to the balloon launching shelter on the airfield I wondered why we had to take a shovel. "To deal with the brown and black snakes." said the met office CPO. The sight of a hand sized huntsman spider on the inside of my car's rear window as I drove to work was initially quite a shock, not to mention a dog sized blue tongued lizard strolling round the garden.

It is only when you start to travel around Australia that you realise how vast the country is. We took all the opportunities we could, to see as much as we could, but still only scratched the surface. All too soon my next appointment was waiting in my pigeonhole and we were homeward bound.

As you will gather the stories emanating from two and a half years 'down under' are myriad and could fill a small book. Spending time working with professionals and experts from elsewhere is an experience from which one can only gain. We thoroughly enjoyed our time in Nowra, learned a lot and made many friends.



Air Day at Naval Air Station, Nowra in 1984.