Working with the airlines in the Australasia-Pacific region

With my tenure at the new Unisys on shaky ground, I asked former colleagues if they knew of a job opportunity for someone with my skill set. I certainly wanted to stay in the Asia-Pacific area. New Zealand, as a relatively small country, did not present any immediate opportunities other than working with a computer consultancy or setting up on my own, and I was not keen on the latter. Richard Hawkins had left Unisys in Hong Kong and joined the Société Internationale de Télécommunications Aéronautiques (SITA). He had already spoken to SITA on my behalf and advised me to call Ms Irene Legay in SITA’s Hong Kong office.

The SITA opportunity was attractive. I knew the organisation and had overseen its Sperry installations in Bangkok and Jakarta. I knew SITA to be technically aggressive. It used Sperry second-level communication processors, without mainframes, for its communications network, and I had recently liaised with SITA when the New Zealand Defence Department had contemplated a similar application.

After the end of World War II, international telephone lines had been hard to obtain, so the airlines decided it would be to their advantage to pool resources. SITA was set up to control those resources and provide additional services. In the 1980s, as SITA approached its 40th anniversary, director general Claude Lalanne had instructed McKinsey & Company, as consultants, to investigate the strategies that would keep SITA viable for the next 40 years. McKinsey had recommended that SITA set up
a sales and marketing operation — a group of 32 people — to optimise its potential. Until now, the airlines, who were also SITA shareholders, had been creating demand and SITA was providing services on an ad hoc basis. This had been working, and SITA was a 3,000-person-strong company with a turnover of about US$300 million from a diverse product portfolio.

SITA was essentially a communication network company. Its network drawing, which was updated on a semi-annual basis, was an icon in the industry and a prized possession of every airline communications manager who could read it (and understand the acronyms employed). The basis of the network are the 18 message and data distribution computer centres, shown in blue, to which every airline in the world was connected. Older versions of the drawing were distributed to hang in airlines’ boardroom and reception areas.

Figure 11.1: The SITA network circa 1990.

Source: Author’s collection.
Richard had won a job as a regional airlines manager/account manager looking after the SITA business with Singapore Airlines. He also looked after Indian Airlines — which Richard and I knew from our Sperry India assignment — and Ansett airlines of Australia. SITA was seeking additional people to complete the new group, and Richard had recommended me, anticipating that my employment would again be in Singapore. The timing was perfect for me.

I met Irene Legay, the SITA Asia-Pacific administration manager, in the Rockman's Regency hotel in Melbourne. Irene was a very small Vietnamese lady. She was an excellent interviewer. I can remember talking a lot without her asking too many questions. A long-term SITA employee, at the time based in Hong Kong, she was not particularly pleased with the self-aggrandising approach of the first batch of marketeers who had been inducted into SITA. She illustrated her concern with a business card which featured the name of Richard Hawkins printed in a larger font than the name of SITA. Irene was keen to know about my desire to work in Singapore. I sensed apprehension in her question and guessed that the cost of living in Singapore might be a concern. I told her that I would be equally keen to stay in New Zealand, if feasible, or elsewhere. It did not have to be Singapore. She asked if I would be prepared to base myself in Sydney if I was assigned to look after Qantas Airways, Australian Airlines, and Air New Zealand, as account manager. I told her that would be acceptable.

Ms Legay agreed to endorse my application and said she would arrange for me to meet Bernard Leroy, the regional vice president, in either Sydney or Hong Kong. She explained that she and the vice president were still in Hong Kong awaiting a move to the new regional headquarters in Singapore. I was pleased with the interview. Irene said that she would confirm the next appointment with Mr Leroy by telephone, and that I should then call Dave Barker, the New Zealand manager in Auckland, who would arrange the aeroplane tickets. She was as good as her word. I attended a Hong Kong interview which was, I felt, a formality, and agreed with Bernard Henri Leroy — a grey sort of man for whom English was not easy — that I would start in Sydney on 1 December 1988.

I was surprised to be asked to start on this date, knowing that Australians and New Zealanders take their summer holiday during December and January. It is midsummer, schoolchildren are on their long vacation, and an employee taking the public holidays as well as regular leave could have
a really long holiday. But the offer allowed some flexibility in that I could do three weeks work, and then have a couple of weeks off before starting again. Stand-by tickets were supplied by Dave Barker, the implications of which I understood, and I was delighted to have been upgraded to first class on the Wellington–Hong Kong return leg with Air New Zealand.

Mr Leroy confirmed that SITA had never had a designated sales and marketing function, but had a very strong technical and operational infrastructure. The Sydney switching and operational centre was at Kent Street in Sydney, opposite the back entrance to the Sydney Town Hall. I was welcomed to the company by Ms Jan Hyman, the Australia country manager; the three Australian-based airlines were her major customers. SITA listed the annual expenditure of each airline customer and nominal shareholdings in the not-for-profit cooperative were allocated annually based upon the next year’s anticipated expenditure. In terms of ranking, Qantas was SITA’s number 16 customer in the world, Ansett Australia was 32, and Air New Zealand was 25. Jan explained the air-travel ticketing situation. The airlines were shareholders of SITA and on written request, with reasonable notice, their SITA country manager would provide tickets to staff travelling on business free of charge. More often than not, the decision as to whether we were travelling on a particular flight was left to the last moment, but generally the seat would be provided in first or business class. If you were particularly lucky, you might get to travel in the jump-seat just behind the pilot. I was to learn over time that most SITA staff were aeroplane nuts and really did enjoy the chance to travel in the pilot’s cabin.

I was allocated a desk in the open plan office and given an electronic message, sent through SITAtex, the SITA messaging system, that advised that I had been allocated the code ‘SW’ — ‘S’ indicating that I was a member of the sales department, and ‘W’ that I was the 23rd person appointed in a sales role (‘W’ being the 23rd letter in the alphabet). As I was based in Sydney (SYD) and was based in the SITA office (XS), I became instantly recognisable in airline parlance as SYDSWXS. This was a firmly established system that allowed any airline user to correspond via SITAtex or teletype message with a position holder in any airline in any city — so long as you knew the codes. These were published by the International Air Transport Association (XE). It was a system that worked and was used extensively by every airline.
I asked for a copy of the latest bills for the three airlines for whom I was now responsible, and was greatly surprised to learn that copies were not sent to the regional offices. The Australian office of SITA did not have a copy of the SITA products and price list. Was there such a document? Jan believed there was but she had never seen it. So how did we advise the airline of what we could do for them and how did we price it?

I was advised to speak to the local network specialist, Alfie Ma, a Hong Kong–born Australian citizen who gave me a very good idea of the network capabilities and data processing services we were able to offer. Pricing, however, was not his concern. Paris would advise on this. SITA had two data processing centres. One was in Atlanta, Georgia, which specialised in passenger reservation systems, using mainly the UNIVAC Standard Airline System as the base product. The other centre in London specialised in cargo reservation and flight operations systems using software from the IBM stable. This was an interesting mix. For so many years IBM had been the competition against whom I was selling.

The network products were mainly for the sending of messages — known as Type B traffic — and real-time transaction-based short messages sent from reservation terminals in the airline sales offices to the airline's reservation system — Type A traffic. Both were charged on a monthly connection fee plus a charge calculated from the number of characters sent in both directions. A rate was struck between SITA and the airline community reflecting the location of both ends. As a not-for-profit organisation, SITA expected to charge near to actual costs for all services. The connection cost in Sydney was, therefore, less than the connection cost in Vanuatu, as more airlines would be expected to use the Sydney SITA facility. Logically, the airline costs would be less in Sydney than on an island in the Pacific. Alfie was able to give me a great deal of information and provide me with operational manuals that described the various services in detail. I had to think hard about Alfie's statement that Type A traffic from a terminal into a reservation system was not secure, and might be discarded. This bothered me. I initially thought that Type B (teletype) messaging could be discarded. To illustrate the airline practice, Alfie took me to a local travel agent where we watched the operator set up a travel enquiry on the screen to meet a customer’s wishes and hit the send button. When the operator did not get a response within three seconds, she hit the send button again and again.
'Obviously', said Alfie, ‘the operator only wants one reply, despite the fact that she has sent the message three times. So we discard the two repeated requests. But if an airline manager has taken the trouble to type out a formal message from his desk and send it, he needs to know that we will take the greatest care to deliver it intact.’

That made sense. I had also learned a vital fact: an airline reservation clerk expected a reply within three seconds. This was, in fact, the recognised industry standard response time and a measure of the airline’s competence to handle reservation traffic. Alfie was also able to tell me the names of the communications staff of my three airlines and give me some background about their particular networks.

Jan Hyman had a really good relationship with Telecom Australia, and SITA purchased services from Telecom Australia which were shared by all the airline users. It didn’t create difficulties when rival airlines such as Ansett and Australian Airlines shared facilities. Most airlines actually owned their own networks in their home countries, in order to gain every advantage over their competitors. This was also the case in Australia and New Zealand, and SITA only carried traffic to and from the airline reservation system from overseas. So we only had significant Type A traffic with the airlines that had an international interest, such as Qantas and Air New Zealand.

I exchanged Type B SITAtex messages with Richard Hawkins in Singapore, who confirmed that my airlines were a part of the medium airlines group headed by Harpel Bamrah in the Paris office. He also advised me that Harp wanted message headers sent in a particular format — for example, QF/cargo reservations/request for price variation (‘QF’ is the airline code; ‘cargo reservations’ is the product of interest; and ‘request for price variation’ is the subject). Harp looked after some 30 airlines and used a SITAtex sorting facility to store messages by these headers. SITA people sent a huge number of SITAtex messages, which was a free service for us that really did work. There were times when one could achieve, before the implementation of the internet, the same chat room facilities we now take for granted. SITAtex even offered the facility of searching for keywords in headers. The SITA products in 1988 looked to be excellent and relevant.
As you know, we provide free air travel to SITA staff on business-related trips on request, and we usually agree that you can travel first class when we have the space. I have just been given the figures for this year so far. We have provided to SITA the equivalent air travel for two full jumbos travelling first class around the world. It is too much! How many seats are Garuda Airlines providing? I cannot expect you to make a decision now, but I shall appreciate it if you can reduce the number of seats you take, because they are not really free. As the CIO I am charged a nominal fee for every SITA trip. By the way, welcome to SITA, it is good to have someone in your position to discuss these sorts of issues with. It will be helpful to have SITA’s response before Christmas.’

I discussed this with Jan Hyman before taking it to Harp Bamrah in Paris. Jan had kept good records of the number of seats that she had authorised as the SITA Australia manager. These numbers did not match Ian Riddell’s numbers. It then became obvious. Because Qantas gave such good seats, the astute members of SITA staff were choosing Qantas but were not necessarily flying in or out of Sydney or Melbourne. People were requesting, for example, Qantas seats between Los Angeles and London from the Los Angeles SITA manager, who was putting in the request that was approved by Qantas headquarters, but Jan was not being advised. It seemed obvious that we should try and quench this uncontrollable outflow of Qantas generosity by restricting the use of tickets for travel legs that started or finished in Australia for business that had a direct Qantas
purpose. This was the recommendation that I made to Harp Bamrah when I reported the problem. Jan also made that recommendation to Mr Leroy. It had been fortuitous that Jan and I had been able to work this out sensibly so early in our relationship. Our suggested guidelines were implemented across the company.

SITA internal communications had not been so effective. Jan Hyman did not want a Sydney-based salesman and told me as much. I suspected that she could see herself losing control of the country for which she held the appointment as manager. However, Jan warmed to the idea when I was able to discuss the airline background I had acquired though my Sperry career. I had already had considerable success selling the same software and hardware that was the basis of the SITA service, and she was not going to have to hand-hold me.

By the end of January I had made my visits to see the three airlines. I thought that Qantas communications manager John Kearney may have been listening to Jan Hyman: ‘We do not need a salesman. I will contact you to tell you when we need a service.’ Basic sales school had taught me that the best sales opportunity would come from answering the strongest objection. After we had spoken for about an hour, John and I agreed that he would assist me, as a mentor, for my future activity within the airline. John advised me that he was a SITA director, as the top 25 spending shareholders were invited to take a place on the SITA board. John was the representative of the other airlines in the region as chairman of the SITA Pacific user group. I learned that John’s predecessor both at Qantas and as SITA board member, Bill Swingler, who had taken the position of CEO of the Australian Federal Airports Corporation, would be asking me if a non-airline might be permitted to use the SITA network. John Kearney had not needed any prompt from Jan Hyman to be anti-salesman. He is very technical and knows what he wants.

John walked me around his section. He looked to be in his mid-40s, his hair in a fringe above a somewhat florid complexion, a nose beginning to show the ravages of a passion for fine wines, and a matching moustache. His team consisted of mostly older engineers, and all were keen to discuss their interests and the Qantas use of SITA services. I also learned that John and his team were consulting on network matters to Sabre, the American Airlines computer reservation system, and its entry into the Australian market. Qantas operated its own Australian network, leasing communications lines from Telecom Australia with
built-in redundant paths to ensure that terminal access to the reservation information was always available for the reservation clerk. Qantas was an IBM user, and its reservation software was a British Airways derivative of the IBM original. Qantas used the SITA network overseas. Qantas also used the SITA Aircom Service to be able to send and receive messages to inflight aeroplanes. The application services used by Qantas included the SITA Bagtrac (lost baggage recovery), and Bahamas (hotel reservation interface) systems.

John Kearney also spoke to me in his capacity as the region’s SITA representative. He requested a course on ‘Reading the SITA invoice’ for the airlines, to be held in Australia. When I got back to the office, Jan told me that the SITA invoices were a common complaint. She did not get copies, but understood they were complicated. I had learned a lot in a single meeting from a company not wanting a salesman, and had acquired a mentor. I had also been subjected to two Qantas meetings where the opening remarks from the customer were initially aggressive but were more rational after a few moments. I initially wondered if this was something that was taught as a Qantas style, but this was not the case. Perhaps it was the fact that SITA had not employed salespeople before, or perhaps the technicians who travelled the world for the company prior to the changes were indeed aggressive. There was no doubt that SITA services were perceived as being expensive. SITA provided services in places where the airlines did not want to run their own facility, which was difficult, hence the expense. John Kearney’s explanation was, as ever, pertinent: ‘SITA hubris needs a good kick in the arse.’

I had no more success in seeing John Englefield at Air New Zealand as a SITA representative than I had done as a Sperry person. As Mr Englefield’s stand-in, Alex McFarlane was pleased to see a SITA salesperson and expressed Air New Zealand’s satisfaction with the service that it received from SITA, singling out the high level of support provided by Dave Barker and his team. Alex introduced me to Greg Ball, the network development manager, and the pair confirmed that as an international carrier it also used the Bagtrac and Bahamas services, and was looking at Aircom and SITA Cargo as additional services. I also learned that the Air New Zealand staff knew, as ex-colleagues from Auckland, three senior SITA people in the Singapore office with whom they were in regular contact.
I met up with Barry Devenish, the Australian Airlines communications manager (data), in Melbourne. Australian Airlines operated a domestic airline and Barry was not a big user of SITA services, although he was spending approximately US$100K per year on each of Type A, Type B, and Aircom services. Australian Airlines paid its subscription to Bagtrac and Bahamas, but did not have much cause to use them. Barry did not get many visits from SITA. He also had a share in the Overseas Fixed Tariff System, another airline network-only arrangement, not dissimilar to SITA itself. What was of immediate interest was the fact that Barry’s boss as computer manager was Bill Chatham, with whom I had worked in the London UNIVAC office in 1965. Bill had been recruited from Rediffusion Television to join Erle Milburn when Erle set up UNIVAC Australia in 1967–1968. Bill was keen to know how my career had taken me to Melbourne. That was not our only point of contact, as Richard Hawkins had been the Sperry salesman who had sold a great deal of equipment to Bill Chatham. It was as if the intervening 20 years had never happened, which gave me an entrance to the management of Australian Airlines. Bill reported to chief financial officer Gary Toomey (who would eventually become the CEO of Air New Zealand and Ansett Australia). Gary Toomey’s boss, with whom he was close, was James Strong, who was charismatic and instantly recognisable. James always wore a bow tie and was lampooned by the political cartoonists about this. He would eventually become the CEO of Dominion Breweries in New Zealand, and then CEO of Qantas. He took Gary Toomey with him to both Dominion Breweries and Qantas. James Strong later moved to be a very successful chairman of Woolworths in Australia, but Gary Toomey has taken a low profile since his retrenchment following the demise of Ansett Australia and the New Zealand Government acquisition of 80 per cent of Air New Zealand. The airline business cycles its managers amongst itself.

I felt I was in control of my role with SITA when, after three or four months, I was invited back to Hong Kong to attend a three-day SITA induction course. There I met and palled-up with Dale Griffiths, who was employed at about the same time as me, and who filled the last place in the medium airlines group based in Singapore. Dale was an ex-manager of an airport in the Middle East, from where he had been recruited by Harp Bamrah. Dale’s assigned airlines included Pakistan Airlines and Air Bangladeshi. If I remember correctly, both Dale and I were awarded 100 per cent in the quiz that concluded the training. Dale was as small
as me, bespectacled and with a typically American confident approach. He generally wore a jacket and tie, but gave the appearance of being on constant lookout for mischief, a man after my own heart.

I first met Harp Bamrah when director general Claude Lalanne convened a meeting of the sales and marketing group in London. The invitations were issued by the sales director, Carl Chaffee, another Paris-based American and a newcomer to SITA. We were asked to prepare a 10-minute presentation to introduce ourselves and our airlines of interest at the start of the conference. That first real introduction to a SITA meeting was a surprise. Carl Chaffee introduced Mr Lalanne, who welcomed us to the company and to the conference. The next item on the agenda was for the attendees who constituted the new marketing group to stand up as individuals and say who we were and state our SITA objectives. At 32 lots of 10 minutes, this was going to be around five to six hours of presentations — it was going to be a long day. Carl said that he did not want to dictate the order in which people would speak, but he did ask for Harp Bamrah to start the proceedings and for me to follow, before the others of the medium airlines group. Harp got up and gave a reasoned, seemingly unscripted account of himself and the ambitions of the team. I followed, and my presentation, which featured a series of 32 mm slides with a fishing theme, was well received. Mr Lalanne obviously enjoyed Harp’s presentation and showed an interest in hearing me. But he stayed for only a couple more of the introductions. I was amazed when it became apparent that I was the only person who had actually prepared material. No one else had made an effort, and it became almost a procession of one liners: ‘My name is Joe Bloggs. I am based in New York and I look after American Airlines and United Airlines.’ We were finished well before lunch. This was very disappointing.

Carl Chaffee came up to me at the conclusion of the session and apologised for putting me on at the front. He said he was grateful that I had prepared material. He had guessed that Mr Lalanne would not stop long, and that my peers would not have prepared anything. Carl commented that discipline was not a strong point of the sales and marketing group.
Note had been made that I had included Southern Cross Distribution Systems in the list of names of airline accounts for which I was taking responsibility. Some of my new colleagues were angry that a Computerised Reservation System (CRS) had been assigned to me as a prospective customer. That afternoon we discussed, in full, the implications of the rise of the CRS in the industry and debated SITA’s response. The CRSs were, by definition, not airlines, although they were owned by airlines. Should we provide a service?

CRSs had evolved from an extension to the American Airlines travel agent reservation system. American Airlines could book passengers on its flights, in and out of the hub-and-spoke regional airports to which they fly in the US. Those passengers would have then needed to go to another airline to get to another hub. American Airlines decided to keep other airlines’ schedules as a part of its information system, and the next step was to charge a (US$6) fee to the airline upon whose flights American had made the booking. To improve the operation, the other airlines sent their latest flight availabilities to American Airlines, who was authorised to book their flights and decrement the inventory of available seats on their behalf. This system developed to the extent that the charismatic CEO of American Airlines announced that the CRS was making more money than the parent airline. The floodgates opened and other CRS arrangements proliferated. The travel agents needed access to a CRS to be able to offer a complete booking service to their travelling customers. Initially, there were two CRSs of interest in Australia. Qantas supported the use of the American Airlines system, Sabre, calling its offering Fantasia. Ansett Airlines and Australian Airlines (purportedly sworn rivals) supported the use of the European-based CRS known as Galileo and set up a joint marketing and distribution company called Southern Cross Distribution Systems (SCDS). These two major rival CRS organisations were operating in Australia — the only country in the world where this situation existed at the time.
Figure 11.2: CRSs in mid-1989. Air New Zealand (one of my SITA accounts) has yet to make its CRS decision.

Source: Author's collection.
One of the SITA speakers at the meeting was the reservations specialist of the SITA Atlanta data centre. The subject was raised: should SITA have its own CRS? Towards the end of 1990, SITA had made that decision and Dave Bradford was appointed general manager of the Gabriel Enhanced Transaction System (GETS) Marketing Company. The SITA passenger reservation system was used by some 100 of the smaller airlines, although the world’s largest airline, Aeroflot, did have an interface to Gabriel. (Gabriel was also the SITA derivation of the Sperry USAS*RES system that Sperry had sold to Aeroflot in the 1960s from London, and which Ian Meeker had left the real-time sales team to manage. I knew USAS*RES quite well from my previous work with Aer Lingus and Indian Airlines.) Another ongoing challenge was the extension of SITA membership to customers other than the airline shareholders, such as the CRS and aeroplane manufacturers who had a need to communicate with their customers, the airlines.

These were certainly challenges that were discussed in public, but the answers to them would be decided in private. SITA was very much a French company and its management was thought to be autocratic. Being based in Sydney, as an adjunct to an operational centre, I was very much isolated from the Paris headquarters. This was to change, but not until the next year: 1990.

Late in 1989, Harp Bamrah called a meeting of his medium airlines group in Singapore. This gave me the chance to meet my peers again, along with the technical specialists based in Singapore whose support was available to me.

My Sperry pal of 20 years acquaintance, Richard Hawkins, was enjoying being back in Singapore and had moved two of his vintage cars there — or was it three? He had required special dispensation to import the cars, as Singapore legislation only allowed cars of less than 10 years of age on public roads (with the exception of taxis). Richard was developing his value-added hobby and entrepreneurial skills through his regular cyclic travel opportunities. His business cycle was pragmatic. He took suitcases full of fake watches from Singapore to India, when he visited Air India. There he traded the watches for brass antique manufactured items in the street markets of New Delhi and Bombay — clocks, theodolites, and other surveying and scientific instruments. These he transported to Melbourne when he was due to call in on Ansett Airlines. In Melbourne he sold the antique artefacts to wholesale dealers and purchased vintage car parts with
the proceeds, which he shipped back to Singapore for his own use and that of his aficionado friends. His SITA colleagues soon learned not to respond to Richard’s requests to carry parcels for him, especially car parts. The airlines were providing free travel to us all as SITA representatives and did not appreciate having to carry large items and excess baggage free of charge. I once carried front and rear Triumph bumper bars from Melbourne to Sydney and had to hide them in the SITA office, waiting for Richard to take them to Singapore, unless I was to travel there first. Despite this obligation, it was good to be working with Richard again.

Harp Bamrah would typically call the medium airline group together every quarter to discuss progress, enable some specialist training, and for team building. We were all doing well, the group’s targets were being exceeded, and the concept of a sales-orientated operation was becoming accepted by our customers and also, importantly, by the company. Harp ran his meetings as a report from each of the team with subsequent discussion. As always, the restrictions of relying upon the generosity of the member airlines for aeroplane seats was a hot topic. We analysed the three key words that might prompt the flight manager to allocate a stand-by seat to us, rather than someone else in the stand-by queue. These three words were ‘regional’ — implying a need to travel; ‘airline’ — confirming we were in the airline business; and ‘manager’ — giving us a status. Harp said he did not mind what we had printed on our business cards, and he was happy if we called ourselves regional airline managers if we felt that would assist. Harp also agreed to seek a budget for paid-for travel. Dale Griffith seemed to have particular problems getting to Bangladesh when he needed. During my Sperry travels in Asia, I had always enjoyed travelling Garuda, the Indonesian airline, and did so by choice with SITA. Jan Hyman never had trouble getting me on to Garuda, who took me to Singapore and to Paris in first class whenever I asked.

Although SITA was incorporated in Brussels, Belgium, headquarters were in Paris, and we would often be called upon to go to Paris for a meeting — sometimes a meeting that only lasted an hour. I argued with Harp Bamrah and Carl Chaffee that I had the furthest distance to travel and that a 60-hour return trip to attend a one-hour meeting did not make sense. It was an interesting discussion. ‘The SITA not-for-profit (but certainly not for loss either) mentality was obvious in argument from head office: ‘Travel does not cost SITA anything and you are being cared for — in first class — as well as you could ever expect. Please do not raise obstacles.’
I became very conscious of the unspoken corollary: ‘Your time has no value to us. We almost prefer for you to be travelling than selling.’ This realisation became a real concern for me in my relationship with SITA management and I discussed it many times with various colleagues. It was a prevalent attitude of SITA management.

So why did I stay with SITA? My realisation was that SITA had the most comprehensive single-industry portfolio imaginable. IBM could not match it. The products were of value to our potential customers and were fun to sell. The fact that our customers were our shareholders, and often our competitors, was an additional challenge. Added to this, working not-for-profit was a new experience. As a single business presence in Australia and New Zealand, I was master of my own destiny. The choice of whether to travel, and the extent of travel, was more or less mine. The money was good. I was paid a premium as an expatriate employed in Australia from New Zealand. As salespeople, we were not paid a commission, which was different, but I could live with it. My immediate management and peer colleagues were experienced computer professionals whose company and encouragement I appreciated. New business was immediate. Additionally, my wife and I were enjoying Sydney. We were renting a four-level apartment in Neutral Bay, with a harbour view, and I was able and keen to walk to and from the office, in the CBD, across the Harbour Bridge. Audrey worked in the city as a project manager for NSW Volunteering. The SITA portfolio was also expanding. Flight planning and crew scheduling were obvious additions to the services we would be offering. The sale of SITA Cargo to Air New Zealand was to be significant, as its success opened the doors to other opportunities. Greg Ball, the network development manager, a young New Zealand Olympic sailor, was allocated to look at the use of SITA Aircom. I expected to win that business, and did.

Southern Cross Distribution Systems (SCDS), also known as Southern Cross Galileo, was the CRS assigned to me. It bought network connections and started to install the SITA network for its travel agent customers and would eventually have more travel agent connections than any of SITA’s customer airlines. As SCDS was not initially a SITA member, we contrived to effect a process whereby the early travel agent connections were made in the name of United Airlines.

Richard Hawkins was finding it difficult to schedule regular visits to Melbourne to see Ansett Australia. I had also discussed this as a problem with Joe Girbau, the Ansett communications manager. I had met Joe when
Gunter Stephan called a joint meeting with Ansett and Australian Airlines to discuss their mutual interest in the Aircom service, to which they both subscribed. I had an informal agreement with Joe that if he believed he needed help quickly and was unable to contact Richard, he should call me. Richard and I spoke to Harp Bamrah and Ansett Australia and Ansett New Zealand business was allocated to my care.

Australian Airlines and Ansett Australia, the protagonists in the Australian Government two airline policy, had two tall office blocks almost next door to one another on Franklin Street in Melbourne. Both were maintained to very high standards. Not so the small annex to the Ansett office, whose actual address was Swanston Street and which overlooked the original Melbourne public baths. Joe Girbau had a corner office above the tram lines which was approached through an open-plan office with tightly packed desks on which Joe’s engineers would be working on terminals and other items of communications equipment. The assault course leading to Joe’s office was complemented by nests of cables in the spaces between the desks.

Joe and his team had all been at Ansett for a decade at least. Joe would always include his technical lieutenants in discussions. This was a good team. Joe was insistent on talking the issues out and making sure that his team was working towards the same stated goals. Initially, I worried about the amount of time this always took, but it was not just Joe. The Ansett organisation itself was fragmented. Joe wanted his efforts focused. We talked about the ramifications of the use of CRS right through, from the initial sales call to the check-in and post-flight analysis. Joe’s network obligations were going to be quite different under the various scenarios we discussed.

When I was in Auckland, I called on Ansett New Zealand in Grafton Road. It had an enormous problem with the SITA service we were providing. The SITA network was closed down from the Paris headquarters once a week for necessary software upgrades. This was done at 2.00 am in Paris on a Tuesday morning, the time of minimum disruption to European and US airlines, but which caused maximum disruption to Ansett New Zealand. At this time, it was expecting the down-line load of the latest passenger manifests from the CRS for a mid-morning flight from New Zealand to Australia, and it was a peak time for New Zealand domestic flights. This was eventually resolved through a service level agreement I was to negotiate between SITA and the airline.
After perhaps nine months with SITA, I was asked to go to Paris to speak to the boss. Mr Lalanne acknowledged the increase in business from Australia and New Zealand and said that he was considering creating a new SITA region to be based in Sydney.

‘Do you think you should be the new region vice president?’

This was unexpected. I realised that Mr Lalanne did not want to give me too much thinking time.

‘Mr Lalanne, I am very flattered that you should even think of me for the role. I do wonder if I am the correct person, as I do not have an airline operational background. That seems to me to be a prerequisite.’

I was warming to the theme.

‘Another prerequisite seems to be an Air France background.’

Mr Lalanne, smiled, offered a Gallic shrug of the shoulders with open hands, stuck out his lower lip, and commented:

‘I see you are a pragmatist. I thank you for that. I will keep you advised of our plans.’

I talked over the interchange with Harp Bamrah. He had not known of the planned change of status of the Sydney office, but did not expect it to affect our personal relationship. He and I went out for dinner that evening to put the world to rights after a few beers with colleagues in the bar under the office. It was all very civilised.

The appointment of Jean-Paul Schittenhelm as vice president and general manager of the new Australasia and Pacific region of SITA did not come as a great surprise. Jean-Paul was tall and tanned, with a somewhat foppish wave of hair that fell over his eyes, but always well dressed in suits that fitted. I thought him a typically flamboyant Frenchman. His English was heavily accented but he was confident in his use of the language. He was a proud triple-bypass heart operation survivor, which apparently had not slowed him down at all. He looked very fit. I had seen Jean-Paul around Jan Hyman’s office on a few occasions and knew that he was the ex–Air France regional director who had been based in Sydney for perhaps 10 years. Jean-Paul’s approach to Alfie Ma and me was a quiet one. The three of us met over lunch, and Jean-Paul stated that he had been working towards the development of the new region, and that he
was keen to remove those staff he perceived to be regional staff from the Australian Operations Centre, where Alfie and I were currently guests. He then disappeared for a couple of months.

Jean-Paul was very excited when he reappeared in the Kent Street office. He had found the new regional office premises. We were to take over the offices of Banque National de Paris in Pitt Street. It was contracting and moving to George Street. We also took over the bank's furniture, which included a great deal of wood panelling in most of the offices, along with matching boardroom suite and individual office suites. It was obviously second hand, with awful pink carpeting, but it suited Jean-Paul. It all looked expensive and suited his persona.

We planned a formal opening for the Sydney-based SITA region for February 1990 and I was given a free hand to organise the opening function. I had not known it was possible until I approached them, but we were able to hire the north wing of the Sydney Opera House. It was a magnificent venue overlooking the harbour, and we partied through early evening and dusk. We were able to use this event to announce that SITA had negotiated two highly significant deals with the Australian Government: a formal not-for-profit recognition for the SITA regional office, and the creation of SITA as a New South Wales Government research and development grant–aided organisation. Senior federal and state politicians were on hand to announce these developments.

We had perhaps 200 guests at the opening party — mostly Qantas representatives and their spouses, but we also had SITA regional managers on hand to talk to the press. The notable absentee was Mr Leroy, the Hong Kong vice president. Our new region had been carved from his area of previous responsibility. The opening party was deemed to have been very successful. In some minds the location and expense may have endorsed a charge of SITA arrogance. It was reported to me that Messrs Ian Gay and Julian Hercus, senior Qantas directors, had asked John Kearney at the end of the function, ‘OK, Kearney. What do these bastards want and how much is it going to cost us?’ We eventually won Ian Gay over as a supporter, but it took a few months.
At the event, both Jean-Paul and Ian Gay delighted in telling a particular story about Ian travelling first class on a Qantas flight. The flight steward asked the gentleman seated in front of Ian if he was a Mr Gay? He was. Ian leant forward and told his fellow passenger, ‘I’m a Gay as well’. The steward could not help himself: ‘Whoopy doo! Are we going to have a great flight!’

One person I had been pleased to be able to invite to the February 1990 opening of the SITA Australasia-Pacific region at the Opera House was Peter Butler. Peter had been the Sydney-based Sperry airlines manager for the Asia-Pacific region during my time in Singapore. He came to Singapore just the once, although he impressed with his keenness and knowledge — he had also impressed Jan Hyman as the only one of the supplier hardware people who understood airline protocols. Peter Butler was now the chief information officer of TNT and I was keen to sign him up as a SITA member. We had a meaningful discussion at the party and I kept in touch subsequently. His problem with SITA was that he saw the mainstream airlines as competitors and he was a committed private network fan.

Figure 11.3: The north wing of the Sydney Opera House. What a great place for a party.
Source: Author’s collection.
The new region was launched in February 1990, which was a bad year for the world with the First Gulf War. The war had a really dramatic effect on the airlines. People stopped travelling. The days of big airline profits were gone. But this created many new opportunities for SITA. There were SITA offices everywhere operated by airlines and SITA employed the technicians that understood the business. I was able to talk to Greg Ball of Air New Zealand and suggest to him that the next time a terminal broke down in Los Angeles he ask SITA to fix it rather than send an Air New Zealand engineer from Auckland, carrying a spare terminal on the first-class seat beside him across the Pacific and back. The timing was perfect. It was not only Air New Zealand, of course. The same argument in some form applied to all airlines. SITA established a for-profit subsidiary called Information and Telecommunications Services (ITS), set up worldwide for just this opportunity. The competition to ITS was commercially
tough, as a large number of the airline terminals in use were produced by Memorex-Telex and Westinghouse, who had their own support infrastructures. ITS was a reseller of computer hardware and software.

I had not thought too much about ITS up until this point in time, although rumour had it that ITS was the mechanism used by SITA management to pay itself big wages. Our shareholders, the airlines, did not want SITA staff paid more than their airline equivalents — the fees that senior SITA managers took from ITS were not declared to the airline shareholders. It was with knowing glances that the news of Jean-Paul’s and Beth Jackson’s appointments to the ITS Australia board was greeted by the more experienced of the office staff.

I developed a report for each of the airlines of my interest; for example, ‘SITA: A vendor profile from an Ansett Australia airlines perspective’. We had so many services, effectively covering all (or most of) the airline’s operational areas that very few people knew the full scope of where we were helping. In the report, I described each SITA service and reviewed the degree of participation by the airline along with my personal expectation of its future interest. I found it a most useful sales tool and regularly updated my set of personal objectives with the airline. I also circulated this document to interested SITA operational staff.

One morning Jean-Paul came in to my office.

‘I think that marketing [Alfie Ma and myself] need an assistant to help you with proposals and when you have visitors to the office.’

I replied:

‘I had not thought of that, Jean-Paul. I do not think we really need anyone. Having a PC on the desk has meant that we do our own typing these days. I do not think we could keep anyone busy enough. Besides which, Alfie and I spend a couple of days every week travelling. What did you have in mind?’

He looked me in the eye knowingly.

‘I think it would be good to have a young woman about the place. She could make tea. I shall be happy for you to make the selection. She might be blonde and have big tits.’

Yuk. I did not say anything to him. It would not have been worth it.
I had half forgotten the suggestion until one day when the girl on the reception desk rang through to say that Nancy Leon was in reception and was hoping to speak to me. Nancy Leon was a beautifully presented American who was married to a Frenchman. I let her talk. She had just completed her MBA on the effect of CRSs upon the travel agent. I asked her if she had a background that included Jean-Paul Schittenhelm. Nancy had worked for him for several years as a marketing consultant when he had been a Sydney-based Air France director. This was too good to be true. I invited Nancy to take her coat off and sit and talk. She did. I had to have a quiet chuckle. Nancy was perceptive and asked what she had said or done to amuse me.

‘Nancy, I will always be totally honest in a business context. I can see that Jean-Paul is keen that we employ you. I also note that you are a blonde, but not quite the shape Jean-Paul anticipated.’

Nancy was terrific. She was not offended by what I had said. She also laughed when I described to her the attributes Jean-Paul had asked me to look for in a marketing assistant. I also told her that she was far too qualified to be a marketing assistant.

Jean-Paul had finessed a decision from me, and I had learned more about his approach. Nancy joined us and took the office between Alfie and myself. Nancy’s office soon underwent a major expensive overhaul to her specific instructions to make it more to her liking. She was immediately an effective member of the regional team. I asked her to take over for me as the marketing representative for the weekly Key Performance Indicators (KPI) session convened by Jean-Paul that looked at his perception of the management aspects of the region, except for ‘sales’, the responsibility for which stayed in Paris. After about two months in the job, Nancy announced that she was off to Paris for her induction course. That made sense as well.

I had a telephone call at home the day that Nancy got to Paris. It was Harp Bamrah.

‘Who is this Nancy Leon woman? She has walked into my office to announce that she is the new sales manager for the region. I have told her that she is not. Representing SITA at a sales level requires a particular approach and skill level that she has not demonstrated to me. I would not have called except she has also seen Claude Lalanne. He has asked me to find out what is going on.’
I said nothing to Jean-Paul. Nancy got back a week later and was most apologetic. She said that Jean-Paul had briefed her to see Messrs Bamrah and Lalanne and discuss with them the role he wanted for her in the region. I realised that in Jean-Paul we had a man working his own ambitious agenda, an agenda he was not necessarily going to discuss with his colleagues. Another common feature of his style to date was that he had employed two very attractive women, Beth Jackson and Nancy, both of whom were blonde and formidable in a business sense.

Nancy was an American with a passion for skiing. She had met her French husband Pierre when they were both ski instructors in Switzerland. Nancy’s French was excellent. The mother of two boys, she and Pierre bought a million dollar mansion on the seafront at Balmoral, where they moved when Nancy joined us. Pierre’s business was the importation of European ski clothing into Australia, although rumour had it that Nancy’s family had provided the capital to buy the mansion. Nancy took over in a sales role looking after the Pacific airlines. She was a high-maintenance traveller and could not leave the office without burdening herself with a heavy load of sales documentation and the gifts for the airlines she thought appropriate.

Jean-Paul was married. His wife was Sonia Brookes, a very visible Sydney personality who fronted a local pop group and was the focal point of their videos. Sonia also appeared regularly as a model and cover girl for the fashion magazines, as well as being an artist and author. She was a most striking woman who was exhibited by Jean-Paul whenever he had the opportunity. Sonia accompanied us on an Overseas Fixed Tariff System meeting in Hong Kong. I got to the airport in good time to put my name on the stand-by list to be met by Jean-Paul and Sonia who already had their first-class boarding cards and were promenading the Qantas check-in area in order to be seen by as many people as possible.
Jean-Paul and Nancy having declared their hand, we needed to find an additional responsibility for Nancy. She was not computer literate but was an enthusiastic user of SITAtex and SITAfax. Nancy learned to effectively demonstrate these products and we had a constant stream of people associated with the airlines, or needing to communicate with them, coming in to the office to see her. One drawback was the requirement for our users to join SITA. Joining was expensive. However, if an airline was prepared to host the third party user, and that user was prepared to have a SITA address using that airline’s code, we could add them to the network. We were early pathfinders with this approach, although we knew that plans were being drawn up to extend pseudo-membership to airline-
related companies. This was a line that Richard Dorey, the regional small airlines manager, had been promoting for some time with the smaller airlines.

Jean-Paul now produced another rabbit out of the hat. He had employed John Englefield from Air New Zealand. John moved to Sydney with his wife, daughter, and son, and it was a different John Englefield that arrived, now free from under whatever weight was holding him down at Air New Zealand. John had become quite gregarious and took one of the empty offices on the sales side of the building to share space with Alfie, Nancy, and me. John’s appointment was not specific, but he had been hired to be the eventual project manager of the Common Use Terminal Equipment (CUTE) 2 implementation at the new Sydney International Airport. John knew CUTE, as Air New Zealand had flown in and out of Honolulu and Los Angeles airports where early CUTE were installed. The airline wanting to use those airports had to use the check-in system provided by the airport, which was CUTE. The same regime would apply at the new Sydney International Airport. We had adopted a two-pronged approach to the Sydney CUTE project during the sales phase. I was selling to Bill Swingler, the (ex-Qantas) Federal Airports Corporation CEO, and Nigel Dickson was working with the steering committee representing the 36 potential users of the check-in system. Qantas was the airline that would be the most affected by the introduction of CUTE, as it logically carried at least 50 per cent of all passengers through the airport.

Suddenly, SCDS was one of SITA’s biggest users. The figure below shows a cartoon I used at one of Harp’s sales meetings. My sales target for the year had been something like 250 new network connections. SCDS alone had ordered over 2,000.

SCDS was owned by Ansett Airlines and Australia Airlines, who were rivals for the domestic market. Qantas was supporting the American Airlines Sabre CRS through its CRS Fantasia. I never gave up trying to sell Fantasia the SITA network. In my opinion it was an inevitability. Qantas was an airline operator, not a network operator. However, there was to be one significant decision before that could happen. The four largest regional airlines — Qantas, Australian Airlines, Ansett Australia, and Air New Zealand — initiated a joint-operations company that was to be known as Travel Industries Automated Systems (TIAS).
The four airlines managed the operations company, with the general managers of SCDS and Fantasia reporting to the TIAS board. Marketing was to remain competitive. One reason for the establishment of TIAS was that, despite Australia being the only country in the world with two CRS systems, the CRS owned by the Asian airlines had opened up its doors and was appealing to Asian travel agents to join their network. CRSs increasingly became the modus operandi of every airline. The CRSs were able to offer full booking facilities for the airlines in that CRS, which in turn had connectivity to the other CRS systems around the world. It became a matter of expediency that airlines use their CRS to the full, and eventually the airline’s reservation system accessed the CRS database rather than its own database. The implications were that the airlines became obliged to keep their records on the CRS database as accurate as possible while the CRS had the requirement to tell the airlines about bookings it had made on the passenger’s behalf. The CRS also had to provide a full passenger name record (PNR) to the airline to enable it to achieve passenger check-in and flight departure control. The CRSs also catered for hotel and car hire. CRSs were very big business, and the IBM-hosted hardware systems installed at Sabre and Galileo were amongst the biggest computer systems in the world. The development of new CRS software caused a worldwide crisis in the availability of programmers who could program in IBM in the interactive programming language of TPF (Transaction Processing Facility) and PL1 (Programming Language 1).
The CRSs charged US$6 per PNR and a percentage fee for the booking of hotels and car hire. As a PNR was created for every segment of a passenger’s flight, flights from Melbourne to Canberra, and Canberra to Sydney, for example, would contain two PNRs, and the CRS would thus charge a $US12 booking fee. Eventually, both SCDS and Fantasia would develop the portfolio to include other events and local tours as extensions of service opportunity. CRSs were a subject in which I became proficient, and I was able to find my way around the airlines to advise them on the impact of CRSs upon their own operations. With the advent of CRSs, every airline was under pressure to make a decision as to whether to be in or out of CRS. If it agreed, it would join the grouping of choice as a partner or participant. As a partner, it might share in the CRS profits. As a participant, it would pay the US$6 per PNR to the CRS. If it was not a participant, the CRS did not acknowledge that the airline existed and could not make flight bookings on its behalf. Effectively the airline becomes a partner of one CRS and participant in all.

The increasing use of CRSs was not readily understood by all departments in the airlines. From the ever increasing SITA invoice, they were aware that they were spending more on international traffic, but the implications of CRSs, which was a marketing decision, were not being discussed with the network departments. Marketing was riding high with increasing sales, but the network departments were being hit with ever increasing bills — for monies they had not budgeted.

As CRSs became the mechanism adopted by airlines, it required quite sophisticated background accounting procedures. The local travel agent makes a computerised booking, prints the tickets (in the days before e-ticketing), and collects the traveller’s money. The money is sent to the bank settlement plan, where the payment for the air travel is paid to the carrying airline/s. Regardless of the number of airlines, each will need to pay the relevant CRS for the booking — nominally US$6 per flight sector. Should the travel agent also have booked a hotel, a similar network has been established by the CRS. The marketing interface between the CRS and the travel agent is the local marketing company, who will have negotiated the fees for making the CRS available and online to the travel agent. In the below diagram, the CRS is shown to be Galileo, and the local marketing company is Southern Cross Distribution Systems, whose distribution (communications) network is provided by SITA.
Such was SITA’s commitment to the airline business that services such as the bank settlement plan, the inter-airline clearing system, and the hotel commission clearing system were being continually updated. The ambition of the local marketing company was to be able to expand its product range to encompass every event and attraction associated with a destination and charge the appropriate booking fee.

Harvey World Travel became a SITA member. One of its directors, Doug Norton, a travel agent in his own right, was a great believer in Harvey World Travel taking advantage of the network that was being developed by SITA on behalf of SCDS which would eventually encompass all the Harvey World Travel agents. If the network was there, why should Harvey World Travel not use it for its own purposes? Doug Norton was an individual, not only in his thinking but also in his country tweed style of dressing, most often in a beige raincoat and a tweed pork-pie hat, which he would doff in the presence of a lady. Under the hat was a bald head and a sharp intellect. We never knew when he would appear in the office or at events. I liked him. I am not so sure that the management of Harvey World Travel or SITA liked him, as he was a great boat-rocker. His ideas sounded unreal and impractical, but he had thought out most of the objections that would be raised. He tormented the life out of SCDS to
provide services. SCDS loss was SITA’s gain, and Harvey World Travel paid its fees and became a member. It never did get much use from the network, but it was not from want of Doug Norton’s trying.

The Federal Airports Corporation (FAC) also joined SITA. Its CEO, Bill Swingler, had used SITA when he was the computing boss at Qantas. His vision was not dissimilar to Doug Norton’s. His customers were the airlines and he needed a secure network to talk to them. He was also planning the new Sydney International Airport and was already committed to implementing CUTE. There was no other way to accommodate the 36 international airlines who were effectively seeking their own check-in lines. Bill is a big man who gives the impression that it will take a lot to deter him from his set course. He asked me to work with a diverse FAC team to optimise use of the SITA infrastructure. Mr Swingler eventually became frustrated by the length of time this team took to report back to him and took SITAtex connections to help prove his point.

Mr Swingler telephoned to ask me to join him for a meeting of the Gourmet 13 Club, which he described as an industry luncheon club. I asked if I could bring Jean-Paul, and he and I took a taxi to the international airport at Mascot where we met up with club members in the restaurant upstairs. We paid our contributing $50 each and enjoyed a five-course menu served with paired drinks. The other guests were mainly the general managers of the airports controlled by the FAC. It was a most convivial occasion. Jean-Paul became increasingly uncomfortable as the party became boisterous and the pronunciation of his name became totally English, and was eventually abbreviated to ‘Jean’. He stood to remonstrate ‘My name should be pronounced as “Jon Pol”. My family name, I know, is difficult. You will not remember it. You will think: what is his name? You will say “shit” and “hell”, because you will not remember. But you are half way there: “Schittenhelm”. My family name comes from the Alsace in France.’ I had heard that explanation many times before, but it was too late. He was ‘Jean’ until we left the party, worse for wear, in the late afternoon.

Bill Swingler telephoned the next day to ask if I wanted to join the Gourmet 13 Club as a regular member, as it had a spare membership. I suggested that he invite Jean-Paul. Bill replied that membership invitation had been discussed after Jean-Paul and I had left the restaurant and that ‘that was not an option’. I declined the offer. The luncheon had not been gourmet — it had been gluttony.
Jetset Travel is based in Melbourne, with a distinctive black-glass office on St Kilda Road overlooking Albert Park. At this time, Jetset was jointly owned by the Melbourne Leibler family and Air New Zealand. I called David Clarke, the Jetset CEO, to see if he might have any interest in using the SITA network for his increasing number of franchisees. David Clarke had a reputation of being a hard man, but I found him agreeable enough. David Clarke’s ambitions were personified by the name of the database that was being constructed by Jetset: ‘Globedom’ did not leave much to the imagination.

Another non-airline member of SITA was the New Zealand Meteorological Service — Te Ratonga Tirorangi. Its New Zealand office delivered weather information to Pacific airlines and had an interest in providing weather details to the SITA London data centre in support of the flight planning, weather and Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) services (alerts to pilots of potential hazards). Using the SITA infrastructure was decidedly cheaper than its office leasing private circuits from Telecom New Zealand. It was also of interest to me that Ric Godenho, a colleague from my brief flirtation with Unisys New Zealand, had been appointed manager of sales and marketing to the office. With a SITA connection he now had access to, and could sell, Southern Hemisphere weather details to the South American market.

Compass Airlines arose from the controversial 1989 airline pilots’ strike in Australia. Bryan Grey, who was ex-Ansett, was putting the new airline together from his Victorian farm using his four sons and a daughter and his own media profile to promote the new enterprise. He was looking for an initial A$50 million to float the new airline. Here was the chance to get SITA in on the ground floor. Compass was logically a prospect of Richard Dorey of the small airlines group, based in Singapore. Richard gave me a free hand to work with Compass, as he was already grossly overworked and had no real interest in visiting Australia. I spoke to Bryan Grey on a regular basis, but was too late to influence his thinking for a reservation system. He had signed up with the Sabre CRS and it would use one of its connections to the Eagle Farm, Brisbane Reservation Centre that Compass was implementing with the assistance of the Queensland Government.

I am sure that this narrative will have given the reader a hint as to the pervasive nature of the SITA network in the airlines’ operational infrastructure. Compass duly took a few SITA connections — not
many, but we were pleased to win them as a customer. The youngest son, Andrew Grey, was appointed administration director. He and I worked well together and SITA was on a number of occasions able to provide connections that Compass had not previously considered — such as to its caterers and Bagtrac, the baggage recovery service. I travelled Compass when I visited Andrew Grey in Brisbane. It was a good airline, with the friendly staff it used as a brand image. Bryan was beaten, however, by the deep price cutting conducted by Ansett and Australian Airlines. The A$50 million float was not big enough to fight that level of aggression from the established airlines. It was a pity. I had become a Compass shareholder at the float, so I was as keen as anyone to help it to succeed. I did not get financially involved when Compass II was mooted by another Australian entrepreneur.

Gunter Stephan and I became involved in the initial planning for two other start-up airlines in Australia. If Compass could get up, we were confident that Transcontinental Airlines of Australia would also fly. Managing director Alex King had been a chief pilot with Ansett, and operations manager Dennis Cahill also had an Ansett background. These were senior technicians setting up a new airline, based near the Tullamarine Airport in Melbourne, and we took a wide-brush approach with them regarding reservations and flight operations. We constructed a matrix of discounts from standard charges — the more SITA services they took the greater the level of discounting. Transcontinental ordered a new fleet of aeroplanes from Boeing, but never achieved the level of financial backing to get off the ground. We also talked with AAA Airlines, which was based in Kings Cross, Sydney. AAA was just playing — although it cited an impressive list of airline executives behind the venture.

Harp Bamrah’s group were active on many fronts. We met quarterly, most often in Paris, where we were joined by an attractive Frenchman, Patrice Durand, who spent a lot of time in New York and always had good tales to tell of his adventures. Another newcomer was the young, tall and sophisticated Arshad Siddiqi, who moved to Karachi to look after the group’s airlines in the Middle East.

During one meeting in Paris, Harp invited us to visit him at home at Auvers-sur-Oise, an area of inspiration for some of the most famous of the paintings of Vincent van Gogh, and we visited the gravesites of Vincent and his brother, Theo, at the nearby township of Méry. Harp’s wife, Laraine, an English girl, was very gracious and we had lunch in their large farm-
style kitchen. Auvers is a delightful village, perhaps 90 minutes from Paris. It suited Harp, who was at ease showing us around. We ended up by the canal in Auvers and were sitting, talking and enjoying a wine when we heard a splash. Richard Hawkins, ever the showman, had stripped down to his underpants and was swimming across the canal. During a sumptuous meal that evening in the village inn, Harp asked me to keep an eye on Richard. He was acutely conscious that Richard’s swim had been through water of a doubtful quality.

Jean-Paul’s region was increasingly successful. Revenues were going up because of CRS, the uptake of travel agent connections through SCDS, our success in selling data processing products, and our membership uptake from travel-related service providers.

In mid-1992, SITA made an organisational 180 degree turn. Regional vice presidents were given responsibility for meeting SITA’s sales targets. For three-and-a-half years, I had been reporting to Harp Bamrah in Paris. Initially, Jan Hyman, as Australia country manager, and then for two years Jean-Paul Schittenhelm as regional vice president, had an administrative responsibility to support my selling efforts. This was a huge change. It was
a time of soul-searching. Richard Hawkins left SITA and returned to Sperry in Sydney. Harp Bamrah moved to London to work more closely with Carl Chaffee.

I had to think about the enigma that was Schittenhelm. He was the first boss for whom I could have no respect. His agendas were personal. He had amazed me at the end of a one month SITA-sponsored exhibition of his wife’s paintings in the Ramada Renaissance Hotel. We were attending the cocktail party when Jean-Paul instructed me to ‘buy a few paintings for the office’. He said he would approve the cost via an expense report, which could be submitted to him. I told him I could not. I shall never know the circumstances that induced a colleague to buy several of the paintings that were displayed on the sales area walls. Jean-Paul understood marketing and public relations, but not the implications of some of his public pronouncements. SCDS was installing more and more new network connections than any other SITA region and our unit costs were low. It was an in-house key performance indicator that should have stayed in-house. But Jean-Paul announced to our user conference that each new installation was costing US$25. The fact that our users were paying a minimum of US$280 per month for that facility meant nothing to him, and I was left to explain what looked like a discrepancy in our not-for-profit status. Jean-Paul was skilled at saying the wrong thing when he strayed into technical areas — and what we were doing was always technical.

When my second two-year contract with SITA was due for renewal on 30 November 1992, Jean-Paul did not renew it. I had been expensive because I was paid as an expatriate New Zealander, and I had probably served my usefulness in the region. I had no regrets. It had been great fun. I had been my own master, working at my own pace, with a really super portfolio of products and very well paid.

After the early 1990s, the internet caused the ultimate downfall of the SITA network. Networks became ubiquitous and online services were available to everyone, without a requirement to pay membership fees for network privileges.