3. A crew assembles: Charlie Crosdale and Jack Palmer

It was Squadron Leader A. D. Carey’s job. The Station Administrative Officer at RAAF Station Laverton initiated preparations on Friday, 9 August 1940 for a flight on Tuesday, August 13 to ‘Convey Minister for Air and five other passengers to Canberra A.C.T.’ Alfred Carey’s Flying Operation Instruction No. 111 advised that the aircraft would be one of No. 2 Squadron’s latest acquisitions, a Lockheed Hudson bomber, A16-97. The captain and crew for the flight to Canberra were to be detailed by No. 2 Squadron’s commanding officer. When their delivery of important people to the capital was completed the intention was that, in the absence of alternative orders, A16-97 should return to Laverton, empty save for ballast and its crew of four.¹

A16-97 was one of the second batch of 50 Hudsons delivered to the RAAF from the Lockheed plant in California. Of the 100 Hudsons in the country at the end of July 1940 two had already been ‘written off by conversion’ as a result of crashes. One was undergoing ‘major repair owing to crash’, and another two had been ‘robbed of various parts’. The last four machines in the second group were fitted with seven passenger seats as well as dual controls. These specially fitted Hudsons were to be dispersed to bases around the country. They would form part of a Hudson squadron reserve at Richmond, Pearce, Darwin, and Laverton, and be available to transport ‘essential maintenance stores and personnel to advanced operational bases’. The Air Board was also hopeful that the modified machines might provide the ‘much-felt need’ for wireless telegraphy school aircraft. When required, and the Minister for Air saw this as an essential function, they would take members of the Cabinet and their entourages wherever and whenever they were needed. Ministerial traffic between Melbourne and Canberra was expected to be greatest. A16-97, the first of the four Hudsons to be furnished with passenger accommodation, was therefore allocated to No. 2 Squadron at Laverton. Received at 1 Aircraft Depot on 20 June 1940 along with eight others, A16-97 was assembled and tested over the next six weeks. It was a sound machine. There was plenty of room for the six passengers in what was the fastest and most comfortable aeroplane the RAAF could then offer.²

No. 2 Squadron was one of the original Australian Flying Corps and RAAF squadrons. Its distinguished past remembered through the lean depression years, it was re-formed as a Citizen Air Force (CAF) squadron at Laverton in May 1937 under the command of Squadron Leader J. H. Summers. Two Hawker Demon aircraft, three officers, and 38 airmen were its starting complement. Johnny Summers was promoted Wing Commander in February 1938 and was succeeded in March 1939 by Wing Commander Alan Charlesworth. The unit had been designated a general reconnaissance squadron in which extended courses in navigation training could be given. By then there were seven officers, three sergeant pilots, and 70 other ranks. The squadron was being re-equipped with the new British maritime reconnaissance aircraft, the Avro Anson. A twin-engine monoplane, the first in RAAF service, with an enclosed cockpit, also a first, the Anson had several unique features. Some had dual controls. All had a cumbersome hand-wound retractable undercarriage. And, as operations over Bass Strait soon established, its range was limited — not least because of maintenance shortcomings resulting from administrative parsimony.

Fred Thomas’s squadron

Three months after war broke out Alan Charlesworth was replaced by Squadron Leader Fred Thomas, a 33-year-old former CAF and Reserve officer. Thomas had been a Melbourne University accountancy student who had served two years in the Melbourne University Regiment when he enlisted as an Air Force cadet in 1926. Taking readily to flying, Thomas topped the course, just beating another bright student, Ray Garrett, whom he was delighted to find at No. 2 Squadron as a flight lieutenant recalled to active duty from his own successful photographic business at the outbreak of war. Thomas’s steady advance in the Service had been matched in his civilian life as he assumed managerial roles in a flourishing family company, W. C. Thomas & Sons Pty Ltd, grain merchants and flour millers. The Thomases had been prominent in Melbourne commercial and social life for several generations. Fred, smart and well-connected, standing over five feet ten inches tall and with what one of his seniors, Harry Cobby, was later to call ‘regimental bearing’, was appointed in 1934 honorary ADC to the recently arrived Governor of Victoria, Lord Huntingfield. Two years later, the link with Huntingfield was extended when the Governor became Honorary Commodore.

3. A crew assembles: Charlie Crosdale and Jack Palmer

of the new No. 21 Squadron to which Thomas, a flight lieutenant since 1932, was posted. Thomas was then the most senior flight lieutenant in the CAF; but the Air Board baulked at the Air Member for Personnel’s recommendation that he be promoted to squadron leader. Officers of equal rank, but higher seniority in the Permanent Force, were awaiting promotion. As a compromise he was granted honorary rank as squadron leader, with no extra pay. In what appears to have been a transient enthusiasm, Thomas applied to join the newly formed 2nd Light Tank Company of the Australian Tank Corps in March 1939 three weeks after transferring to the RAAF Reserve and being promoted temporary squadron leader.5

Fred Thomas, confident in command
(From National Archives of Australia, A9300 Thomas FW)

By mid-1940, under Fred Thomas’s leadership, No. 2 Squadron’s 10 already obsolescent Ansons were mainly engaged in reconnaissance, navigation training, searches for enemy raiders, and exercises in co-operation with the Navy,

5 NAA: A9300, THOMAS FW.
operations which were being taken over by the superior Lockheed Hudsons as they were progressively delivered. Like other similarly equipped units No. 2 Squadron was receiving its allotment of Hudsons at intervals to allow for the maintenance of operational efficiency with Ansons while pilots were being converted to the new type. Dispersing the new aircraft around the country, together with at least one instructor for each unit, using the limited number of trained pilots without simultaneously crippling the pilot conversion program, had challenged headquarters logistical ingenuity.

By the time A16-97 was assigned to them on 2 August 1940 Fred Thomas’s squadron had 11 Hudsons, seven of them delivered within the last month. A secret ‘Warstand’ report on August 1 had noted that one of the Hudsons was ‘unserviceable’. If required as reinforcements, five aircraft could ‘move at short notice’ with second pilots, W/T operator, and two air gunners. But lack of armament equipment and spares would render them ‘operationally unserviceable’. Most of the squadron’s Ansons had been returned for use in training establishments. One instructor, Flight Lieutenant John P. Ryland, had been assigned to lead the squadron’s conversion, starting with the CO and the flight commanders. As other Hudson squadrons were being sent for duty in Darwin and Sembawang, Singapore, Fred Thomas could reasonably aspire to lead his men into more hazardous zones. For the time being, however, as the Director of Operations and Intelligence had pointed out to a staff conference at the end of April, Hudsons lacking guns and bomb racks could be regarded only as general reconnaissance aircraft, not bombers. But the unpleasant inoculations for typhoid, smallpox, and tetanus that No. 2 Squadron personnel were all receiving were the promise of action to come. Meanwhile, it was a life of routine operations and training at home.

During the May sittings of Parliament, No. 8 Squadron in Canberra had used DC-3s to provide a weekly shuttle to and from Melbourne, leaving Laverton at 8.15 a.m. each Tuesday morning and returning on Fridays. These arrangements had been requested by the Minister for Air, who evidently expected that a similar service would be provided when Parliament resumed in August. As No. 8 Squadron was preparing to move to Singapore, and the chartered DC-3s it had been using had been returned to their owners, the only operational squadron with a suitable aircraft for a passenger flight to Canberra was No. 2. With a gathering of dignitaries to be carried, the Service would want to ensure a smoothly professional trip. In the previous two months, No. 2 Squadron had

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8 Ron Cuskyel to CH, 15 July 1978.
10 ‘Report of Staff Conference No. 32…’, 30 April 1940, NAA: AA1977/635.
transported the Chief of the Air Staff to Sydney, Cambridge in Tasmania, and Archerfield in Queensland; and the Air Officer Commanding had been flown to Parafield in South Australia. On June 13 and 14 the Air Minister and the Chief of the Air Staff, Sir Charles Burnett, had been flown from Laverton to and from Mascot. In the first week of August, the new Hudson A16-97 had been taken to Canberra by Flying Officer W. P. Heath with five passengers, one of them the Air Minister. Bill Heath was an experienced commercial flyer. Before the war he had served five years in the CAF as an airman pilot (sergeant) while flying for Australian National Airways. Appointed a temporary flying officer at the outbreak of war, he had been mustered for General Duties with No. 1 Squadron before joining No. 2 Squadron on 1 June 1940. Heath would have seemed a natural choice for the next flight to Canberra. But there were other possibilities.

At the end of July there were, according to the No. 2 Squadron Operations Record Book monthly report, ‘five captains fully operational’ on the recently arrived Hudson aircraft. Ensuring that senior pilots could handle the new aircraft was a high priority. The CO and the three flight commanders, Flight Lieutenants Bob Hitchcock, Ray Garrett, and Jack Ryland, had all been converted. Ryland was the first, instructed at Richmond in February and March by Lockheed’s field service representative, L. D. ‘Swede’ Parker. Garrett had also spent several eventful weeks with the respected company test pilot Parker at Richmond and had just completed his training under Ryland at Laverton, passing his final ‘crew’ and ‘full load’ tests on August 3. On August 6, Garrett had flown Air Commodore Harry Wrigley and a crew of five to Adelaide, returning on August 8. Although he had less than 57 hours as a Hudson first pilot, Garrett’s ability and long commercial flying record made him a suitable man to take the flight to Canberra. But his expertise as a Hudson instructor was of more value. Almost every day since July 16 he had been taking a group of pilots up for training in airmanship and emergency procedures.

Bill Heath was a more likely choice for the Canberra assignment. He had a great deal of experience as an airline captain. In 1939 he had been detailed to teach RAAF pilots to fly DC-2s. Though relatively junior in rank, Heath was mature (approaching his thirty-first birthday) and had ferried the group including the Minister for Air to Canberra the previous week. He had accompanied Ryland in A16-32 when the Chief of the Air Staff was taken to Tasmania on July 17. But, even more than Garrett, he had been occupied since his arrival at No. 2 Squadron in

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11 Flying Operation Instruction, [106], 5 Aug. 1940, signed by S/Ldr Thomas, NAA: A11094, 5/6/AIR PART B.
12 NAA: A9300, HEATH WP.
13 No. 2 Squadron Operations Record Book, 1 Aug. 1940, NAA: A1980, 599. In fact four were fully trained as captains; the fifth, 90 per cent trained, was expected to complete conversion on Aug. 4. (‘Service Training Report — Southern Area Pt 1’, NAA: A1196, 37/501/20 Pt 1).
15 Vincent, The RAAF Hudson Story, Book Two, p.248, referring to an unnamed ‘junior officer’, overlooks Heath’s extensive experience as a commercial airline pilot.
putting new pilots through their paces. And since August 3, when he too completed his Hudson conversion with Ryland on the dual-control A16-6 (the first Hudson to be assembled in Australia), he had spent almost every day in second-pilot training in Hudsons working through the airmanship syllabus and occasionally testing engines, instructing on full load flying and use of wireless telegraphy.

‘A very able pilot was detailed…but he went sick at the last moment,’ Sir George Jones recalled.16 Jones, then Director of Training, knew that the Laverton base was in the grip of an outbreak of a debilitating illness — described as a cross between influenza and bronchitis — that was frazzling doctors. Flight Lieutenant Peter Delamothe, commanding the recently opened 200-bed RAAF

hospital, with only four nurses to assist, had his hands full. Heath’s absence on ‘special leave’ without pay ‘in hospital or sick quarters or sick at home’ for 82 days between mid-March and the end of May could indicate fragile health. He is recorded as relinquishing his commission, only to have it re-instated a couple of months later. But if anyone was too ill to fly that day it was not Heath. His log book records that he flew to Mount Gambier with Pilot Officer Bill White and a crew of four, returning the next day. Garrett, Heath’s flight commander, was also detailed to fly to Mount Gambier and Adelaide on August 13. Ryland was not ill. And he was the senior man, apart from the commanding officer, Fred Thomas, who had less Hudson flying experience. Ryland had flown the Chief of the Air Staff Sir Charles Burnett around the country several times in recent months. He had taken both Burnett and Jim Fairbairn to Mascot on June 13 in A16-20 and returned with the Air Minister the next day in another Hudson, A16-21. Nevertheless, for Ryland the conversion of recently arrived pilots was his primary role, a far more effective use of his time than a routine transport assignment. In fact, since spending a day with Burnett flying to Archerfield and Mascot and back on August 2, Ryland had spent most of the next 10 days with a very young and venturesome Pilot Officer, Wilbur Wackett, son of the head of the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation Lawrence Wackett, taking him through his conversion course. On August 13 he and Wackett were on a three-hour ‘seaward patrol’ to Mount Gambier, returning the following day.

Whoever was actually available, on the afternoon of Monday, August 12 the task was assigned to Bob Hitchcock, commander of No. 2 Squadron’s A Flight. Though he would only have learned it after the event, George Jones might have been right in remembering that ‘the only other man available was Hitchcock’. The selection, forced though it may have been, was the responsibility of Fred Thomas. Thomas, when an honorary squadron leader, had first known the then Flying Officer Hitchcock in 1938 as his flight commander in No. 21 Squadron. Hitchcock had completed his own conversion course on the Hudson under the instruction of Ryland three weeks earlier. Thomas had been in the group with him along with Bill Heath, Jack Sharp, and Phil Howson who had just been

17 Joan Delamothe and Brian Stevenson (ed. Tony Delamothe), The Delamothe Story, Boolarong Publications, Brisbane, 1989, p.40; Gay Halstead, Story of the RAAF Nursing Service 1940–1990, Nungurner Press, Metung, 1994, pp.3–4. Sir Hubert Opperman recalled arriving at ‘cold wet Laverton’ that August, and encountering ‘a wide spectrum of human behaviour’ among the drill instructors; while many strict but just applicants were trained and appointed, there also slipped through unwanted flotsam and jetsam from guard house and kitchen’. Humiliation and hazing, ‘diabolical perversity’ by swaggering bullies, was not uncommon. (H. F. Opperman, Pedals, Politics and People, Haldane Publishing Co, Sydney, 1977, Ch. XIII).
18 For Heath’s background: NAA: A9300, HEATH WP.
19 By Sept. 1, one of the squadron’s captains had been ‘placed medically unfit’. (NAA: A1196, 37/501/20 Pt 1).
promoted to temporary flight lieutenant at the age of 21 and was scheduled to leave No. 2 Squadron for No. 6 Squadron in the first week of July. The last member of the cohort was A. B. ‘Tich’ McFarlane who had graduated as a CAF pilot officer in No. 21 Squadron in December 1937 and was now completing a law degree. During the conversion course Hitchcock had nearly 70 hours experience in the type, 49 of them solo practice, before taking the crew test on July 21. Since then he had flown Hudsons almost every day, seven different aircraft, passing on what he knew, and testing equipment. He was, ‘Tich’ McFarlane remembered, ‘an average pilot who flew by the book’.

The chosen

With Hitchcock detailed by his CO as first pilot, and no passengers to bring back to Melbourne, another return path was suggested. Next to his fellow flight commander Ray Garrett, a pioneer of aerial photography, Hitchcock was now the squadron’s senior photographic expert (the former squadron commander Alan Charlesworth, with whom neither Garrett nor Hitchcock had ever been close, had been trained in the RAF aerial photography school). Hitchcock and his crew could go on patrol for two days and undertake a photographic survey of Woodside, South Australia. Such a survey would no doubt have been welcomed by the General Reconnaissance School at Laverton where, according to one of their instructors, they ‘had to use a map of South Australia made on some strange projection for the agriculture department, which showed stock routes and suitable waterholes for cattle’.

An extended period in the air would also give whoever was chosen to sit in the second pilot’s seat of the Hudson an excellent opportunity to become familiar with the aeroplane. So, early on Monday, August 12, a place was reserved for LAC Frank Jefferies, the squadron photographer. Jefferies had flown with Hitchcock several times in Hudsons on similar missions in recent weeks. On August 1 they had been up twice in A16-34 doing oblique and vertical photography. They went up together again on the next two days in A16-9 and A16-80 as well as A16-34. On August 7 they went up twice. But Jefferies, whose twenty-eighth birthday was just three days away, learned later on August 12 that the

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23 Ryland, Service Court of Inquiry, p.37, NAA: A705, 32/10/2739; NAA: A9845, 318/123.
photographic task for the next day had been re-assigned. He was to yield his berth to Dick Elford, James Fairbairn’s private secretary. The minister wanted his principal assistant close by on the trip to Canberra.

In the normal course, Hitchcock’s crew would be a second pilot and a wireless operator; a fitter might be added. For the airmen, being rostered to fly was usually a welcome duty; it brought them an additional two shillings a day in crew pay and the chance to get away from the routine of the squadron. The choice of wireless operator and fitter was straightforward, especially the latter, as each new aircraft became part of a particular ground crew’s family. Among No. 2 Squadron’s other ranks were experienced airmen with pre-war service, like Jack Palmer as well as recently enlisted men like Charles Crosdale. The wireless operator, Corporal John Frederick Palmer (Service number 2130), was born in Maryborough in Victoria, where his father was a farmer. Frederick and Mabel Palmer had moved to the Melbourne suburb of Malvern by the time Jack’s two younger brothers, Max and Laurie, were born in 1914 and 1915. Jack was in his mid-20s, and had previously spent 18 months as a private in the AMF, when he enlisted in the RAAF for six years in April 1936 as an AC1 aircraft hand general. He had been encouraged to join by a friend already in the Service. Ron Curtain, a radio telegraphist, urged Palmer to apply for the wireless telegraphy operators’ course. By coincidence, Curtain was a good friend of Bob Hitchcock, having known him since his early days in the ranks.

Jack Palmer had been educated at Coburg Primary and Coburg High School. For eight years he had been employed as a ‘letter carrier’ in the Postmaster General’s Department. Striving to improve his prospects he became a salesman, first with the clothing manufacturers Thompson F. Davies of Flinders Lane and, in the year before he enlisted, with the Standard Insurance Company of Market Street. Having decided to join up, for 12 months he attended night classes in wireless at Melbourne Technical College. Privately he was practising Morse and studying the standard textbook, *The Admiralty Handbook of Wireless Telegraphy 1931*. He impressed the recruiters and was set on the path he had chosen. In July 1937, having obtained a 76 per cent pass in No. 3 W/T course, he was re-mustered and posted to No. 21 Squadron at Laverton depot as a freshly minted wireless operator. ‘Average, should make a good operator,’ his commanding officer’s report remarked, concluding that he was not suitable to be an instructor. Trade-tested for the rank of LAC the following month, he scored an 82 per cent pass. ‘Appears to have studied the work,’ was the bemusing assessment signed by Wing Commander A. W. ‘Spud’ Murphy, President of the Trade Test Board.

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26 John Bennett, *Highest Traditions: The History of No 2 Squadron*, RAAF, Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS), Canberra, 1995, p.112, citing Jefferies’ written memoir. It had been known since Aug. 9 that there were to be six passengers but it seems to have been hoped until late on Aug. 12 that there would be a vacant seat for Jefferies.

27 Sqn Ldr Ron Curtain to CH, 1 Dec. 1982.
Palmer had married Ron Curtain’s sister Sheila at St Margaret Mary’s Roman Catholic Church, Brunswick North, in May 1939. Jack and Sheila, now living in Gardiner Parade, Glen Iris, had first met four years earlier when he was the local postman and friendly with Ron and her other brothers. Sheila was the eighth of nine surviving children of John and Ellen Curtain. Jack Curtain, a no-nonsense stolid senior police constable in Donald in the Wimmera at the time of Sheila’s birth, had retired on health grounds in 1915. His last posting had been as the sergeant in Coburg and there the family stayed. Jack’s oldest son, William Basil ‘Bas’, after defying his anti-British parents and volunteering for the Royal Australian Navy as soon as he turned twenty-one, had continued to serve in the fleet reserve after the war as an engine room artificer. When his time expired he had followed his father into the Victoria Police. Like many of their co-religionists, Jack and Bas Curtain found the police force a congenial employer for Roman Catholics.
In a family that traced its history from the Irish famine in Limerick to the Ballarat goldfields and the Eureka rebellion, Sheila Curtain and her siblings were enveloped in fiercely anti-monarchist sentiment at home. Their father, though Australian born, had an unmistakable brogue. Her brother Bas seemed destined to be caught up in the 1923 Melbourne police strike. Though he stayed home in bed during the most violent confrontations, he was one of the hundreds expelled from the force.28 A marked man, there was a note on his file that he was never to be re-employed. As Jack Curtain’s health continued to deteriorate, the younger children, especially Sheila, increasingly looked to their older brothers for guidance and support. The second son, Cyril, had become a successful country solicitor, and eventually a partner in the Melbourne legal firm of McInerny, Williams, and Curtain. But respectable as his professional life was, Cyril had married a committed Irish republican, Helen Butler. His wife's brothers had been in the famous St Patrick’s Day march in 1920 when Archbishop Mannix was escorted by 14 Victoria Cross winners mounted on grey chargers.29 Cyril and Helen Curtain’s house at 17 Howard Street, Kew, a stone's throw from Robert and Pattie Menzies, was a salon for visiting Irish celebrities, Catholic luminaries, and clergy.

It would not have taken long for Jack Palmer to be immersed in the republican passions of the family that was embracing him. The Christian names of two of Sheila’s brothers, Daniel Mannix Curtain, born in 1917, and Robert Emmet (who died as an infant the year before), bespoke their parents’ fervent Irish nationalism. Helen Curtain and her sister Rita O’Brien thought nothing of embarrassing their lawyer husbands and less resolute cousins and nieces by remaining firmly seated in cinemas when the national anthem was played. Sheila Curtain herself, known as ‘Bub’ even after younger children arrived, was tall, attractive, and sociable. She had passed the Merit Certificate and at thirteen began work as a junior shop assistant at the Mutual Store in Flinders Street. Later she moved to the lingerie department of Buckley and Nunn, the fashionable emporium next to Myers in Bourke Street. By 1940 she had found a job with the Air Force in Collins St as a comptometer operator preparing RAAF wages and pay records.

Sheila was an independent young woman, especially popular with her nieces who vowed to emulate her elegant smoking as soon as they were old enough to be seen with cigarettes. Protected though she was by a phalanx of brothers, Sheila somehow contrived to see Jack at church dances and weekend trysts in the city. Romance blossomed. It was a love match. Fortunately, the tall, rangy,

29 AWM: POI383.018 for a composite photograph of the VC winners, the Archbishop, and John Wren, the reputed organiser of the ride.
quietly spoken Palmer impressed all of the Curtains with his sincerity. If their sister loved Jack Palmer, that was good enough for the Curtain brothers. But his willingness to ‘take instruction’ and convert from the Anglican faith to his fiancée’s Catholicism undoubtedly helped his cause. Sheila and Jack would marry proudly in front of the altar, not as a mixed-marriage couple at the side or behind the altar, or even more ignominiously in the sacristy or an adjacent presbytery.30

Jack Palmer’s prospective brother-in-law, Bas Curtain, a fitter and turner whose skills were at a premium, had joined the Air Force in 1924. He had previously been sacked from two jobs when his ‘striking’ past as a plain-clothes policeman had been discovered. Afraid that the same thing would happen with the RAAF, he was assured by Squadron Leader Frank McNamara VC, his new CO, that his involuntary severance from the police force would not be held against him. ‘Dilb’ McNamara was well aware of Curtain’s record. He shared the Curtains’ Irish Catholic heritage but as a serving officer he had refused to take part in the VCs’ escort to Dr Mannix in 1920. A notoriously bad pilot, McNamara had his own reasons for encouraging the young man. It was said that when he appeared on the tarmac with a set of flying goggles ‘mechanics disappeared like snowflakes in the Sahara’.31 A mechanic who owed him a favour was more than welcome. Ron Curtain had followed his older brother into the RAAF four years later, accepted into the first wireless operators’ course.

The Curtain brothers were close to their sister’s fiancé. They could well have known of the single blip on Jack Palmer’s General Conduct Sheet — five days confined to barracks, awarded by Squadron Leader Charles Eaton for ‘conduct to the prejudice of good order & Air Force discipline’. Evidently, Palmer had not appeared one morning in April 1938 ‘at his place of parade appointed by his CO’ and ‘failed to open W/T watch with Richmond’.32 As a W/T operator Palmer’s duties were not confined to operating and maintaining aircraft radio equipment. He was required to run signals office watches on ground point-to-point links and watches with aircraft, and maintaining and tuning transmitters at transmitting stations. He could even be asked to work on a telephone switchboard at weekends.33 There were still a very small number of qualified

operators; so a failure to turn up on time could have significant consequences.\textsuperscript{34} Apart from this one episode, the result perhaps of an entirely understandable boisterous night out away from home, his sheet was clean. By the time of his marriage Palmer was assimilated into the Curtain family; they were all what Father Ken Morrison, then the Roman Catholic chaplain at Laverton, called ‘practical Catholics’.\textsuperscript{35}

Finding Jack Palmer on the same plane as Bob Hitchcock was no surprise. They had served together in No. 21 Squadron, with Palmer frequently accompanying Hitchcock as junior pilots were put through their ‘airmanship’ paces on Ansons. In October and November 1938 they had both been part of a team that flew to Richmond, Brisbane, Charleville, Cloncurry, and Darwin to meet the much publicised RAF long-range development flight. In the ‘sociable seating arrangement’ of the front end of an Anson, the pilot’s seat was not separated from the rest of the crew; and the fuel gauges were positioned closer to the wireless operator than the pilot. As the historian of the aircraft cockpit puts it:

The pilot could check these gauges only by craning round to the right. Near the end of a long flight, when fuel was at a premium, the fuel gauge selector button would be surreptitiously pressed by the anxious wireless operator or even by the navigator. Peripheral vision being very acute, the pilot was usually made aware of his crew’s concerns.\textsuperscript{36}

Hitchcock and his wireless operator saw eye to eye. In October the following year, Palmer was promoted LAC (W/T Op) and attached to Station HQ at Laverton. There he was one of a team responsible for manning the recently installed Marconi-Adcock direction-finding station. In addition to guiding Air Force machines, the Laverton DF station passed bearings to the civil airliners flying into Essendon at night from Adelaide and Sydney. They assisted the RAAF aircraft carrying out reconnaissance and, as fears of German raiders grew, convoy protection over Bass Strait. Five months after war was declared — and now a corporal — Palmer was posted to No. 2 Squadron. On 22 July 1940 he was one of 11 men who went up with Hitchcock to practise full-load flying in Hudson A16-32. Two days later he flew with Hitchcock to Richmond and Canberra. They returned from Canberra to Laverton via Wagga on the same day. On August 10, Jack Palmer celebrated his twenty-ninth birthday.

\textsuperscript{34} At the beginning of Aug. 1940, No. 2 Squadron reported 11 fully trained W/T operators available for crew work; a month later they admitted that after work on operations three required more experience (NAA: A1196, 37/501/20 Pt 1).
\textsuperscript{35} Msgnr K. R. Morrison to CH, 6 June 1983. I am grateful to John Foley for information about the Curtain family; and to the family history website www.shermanjungle.com/_curtain_website.
‘We were moving Mum’

Joining Palmer on the morning of 13 August 1940 was another 29-year-old, Aircraftman Charles Joseph Crosdale (Service number 6673), mustered as aircraft hand mechanic. Vital parts of the nearly pristine A16-97 were in Crosdale’s care, although on this trip he was as likely to spend time loading and unloading ballast, emptying the Elsan dry chemical toilet, perhaps serving coffee and sandwiches and collecting sick bags, as assisting with re-fuelling, servicing, and minor repairs. Born in Merriwa, in the Upper Hunter Valley of New South Wales, in November 1910, Charlie Crosdale was the second-oldest in a Catholic family of 17 children. He was to grow up sturdily amid a forest of relatives. His paternal grandfather, twice married, had 15 children, Charlie’s father George being the eldest. George Crosdale had been a coal miner at the Maitland Main Colliery until his retirement. Charlie and his older brother Sidney both followed their father into the mine when they turned 16.

Charlie Crosdale, cycling medallist
(Courtesy of Alice McDonald)
When George opened a garage in Congewai, about 18 kilometres southwest of Cessnock, Charlie joined him and had his earliest experience of motor repairs. He was later to describe his six months there as an apprenticeship. When George Crosdale was bankrupted in 1925, Charlie had to look elsewhere for work. A job as a conductor with Rover Motors, a private bus company, followed until he was laid off and replaced by a younger man. Mostly unemployed thereafter, he could truthfully tell the RAAF recruiters that he had been running his own business. He had work a couple of days a fortnight as a lorry driver, and as a mechanic based in Paxton, a private village sub-divided in the 1920s by the East Greta Coal Mining Company, seven kilometres closer to Cessnock. With his spare cash he bought books, moving on from the study of motor mechanics to the theory of aircraft construction. He was fascinated as well with Aboriginal art, and explored the Watagan Mountains by the Congewai Valley, finding a number of cave paintings. For fun, he also swam in local creeks, paddling down them when they were flooded in a canoe he had made himself. He was a competitive cyclist. For a faster and noisier thrill he raced motor bikes at the speedway track in Newcastle.
From the mid-1930s, Charlie Crosdale’s gaze had been firmly on the RAAF. He repeatedly sought to enlist, but his qualifications never matched the vacancies. Finally an open door was glimpsed early in 1939. He had undertaken a trade test and, at 5’6” and 10 stone, with a 36” chest and three inches of expansion, he was certified as medically fit in June 1939. To his disappointment, however, he failed to meet the standard required for mustering as a ‘fitter driver motor transport’. The president of the RAAF Selection Board at Victoria Barracks did nothing to alleviate the sense of failure. He wrote: ‘…it is not possible to give any detailed information as to the reasons for your being unsuccessful.’ The applicant was not to know that he had failed the practical test as a fitter and scored only 10 per cent in the theory test.

It seemed that the RAAF was an impossible dream. Charlie Crosdale had previously enquired about the possibility of joining in the photography section, then as a draughtsman or even as a sign writer, if such posts existed. There were 62 separate mustering categories but he could find no advertised vacancies for which his qualifications were compelling. If he could not get into the Air Force, he contemplated seeking employment with the new Commonwealth Aircraft Factory at Fisherman’s Bend. Failing that, he wondered about the transport bus service. But, just as all looked lost, hope was revived by a letter from the Secretary of the Air Board on 2 August 1939 advising that he would be placed on the waiting list of applicants considered suitable for entry to the Air Force as an aircraft hand. With RAAF recruitment in New South Wales suspended but due to be resumed in September, he looked forward to an early change of fortune. Frustratingly, it was not till December, and the nation was at war, that Charlie was called again for interview. Like many thousands of applicants, he simply had to wait while the RAAF Directorate of Manning developed the machinery to cope with a massive influx of ground crew recruits.\footnote{Gillison, \textit{Royal Australian Air Force 1939–1942}, pp.68–9.} In the interim the conditions of service had changed and he was obliged to indicate his acceptance of the revised terms. Instead of a weekly wage of £3.19.4 he would be entitled only to five shillings a day, with an extra three shillings a day if he were married and another shilling per child. Charlie did not hesitate.

There was one last hurdle. Unlike the Royal Australian Navy which offered free dental treatment to recruits to render them fit for service, the RAAF obliged them to become dentally fit at their own expense. Nearly 17 per cent of recruits in Melbourne, thought to be typical of all centres, had been rejected on dental grounds in the first two months of the war. Very few of them were willing to pay for or could afford the required treatment.\footnote{Air Board Agenda 2634, [Nov. 1939], NAA: A4181, 17. Dental health requirements for RAAF applicants were eliminated in May 1940.} Thus, having also furnished certification from a Newcastle dental surgeon that he had ‘all necessary fillings
and prophylactic treatment’ and was ‘dentally fit for enlistment’, Charlie Crosdale entered the Richmond (NSW) depot as an ‘aircraft hand mechanic’, enlisted just before Christmas ‘for the duration of the war & up to 12 months thereafter’. His older brother Sidney was to enlist seven months later.

What Charlie Crosdale knew, though probably most of his fellow mechanics did not, was the extent to which his presence among them was a result of political influence. By early 1940 RAAF recruitment literature carried a warning that representations from members of Parliament or ‘influential citizens’ would be regarded as ‘an indication that the candidate lacks confidence in his own merits’.39 Yet, had it not been for two of the ministerial passengers about to board his Hudson on 13 August 1940, the frustrated volunteer might still have been waiting to be called to service. For two-and-a-half years he had sought entry to the RAAF. Letter after letter in his own hand found a home on Department of Defence files. He had been aided in his quest by a man who had known him since he was a boy, Rowley James, the ALP MHR for the federal seat of Hunter. James had concluded that the only way for constituents — even one as ‘honest, sober and industrious’ as he averred Charlie Crosdale was — to be called up to the glamorous Air Force from his severely depressed coal mining region was to use their political connections. At Crosdale’s request, James had repeatedly approached Geoff Street, the Minister for Defence. Charlie’s local state MP, the union leader and deputy leader of the New South Wales Labor Party, the bullet-headed Jack Baddeley, added his voice.

There was enormous inertia to overcome. Street’s officials ensured that the courtesies were observed; the minister kept James, a pugnacious political opponent, abreast of developments in his constituent’s case. Minutes passed back and forth between the Secretaries of the Air Department and the Air Board. The Air Member for Personnel’s initials were spattered across an ever-growing file. Eventually when Street’s friend Jim Fairbairn became Air Minister he referred the matter to him. It was all that was necessary. Fairbairn had actually flown Street, with James and another Labor MP, to Cessnock, Singleton, and Newcastle in May 1939.40 Ever the optimist, James had hoped to persuade ministers of the strategic value of developing Cessnock aerodrome. He did not help his cause by appointing himself navigator so that he could hunt for his own chimney pots at Kurri Kurri. Over-shooting Cessnock by seven miles compounded the merriment of the mission. Happily, James’s advocacy for his eager constituent was more successful than his aerial navigation. As was noted on Crosdale’s file, he was ‘Enlisted under instructions from Air Board’. The Director of Recruiting, Harry Cobby, had personally signed the ‘important’ cypher message on 19 December 1939 directing his enlistment. Australia had been at war for three months.

40 The Argus, 24 May, 3 June 1939; Sydney Morning Herald, 31 May 1939.
Like many others entering as ground crew, Charlie Crosdale had aspired to fly with the RAAF. In fact since leaving school he had been ambitious to work in aviation in any capacity. He had approached both the famed Charles Ulm and the Qantas company without success. While picking up such work as he could in and around Paxton as a motor mechanic and lorry driver delivering logs to a sawmill near Newcastle, he had two main diversions. He had passed the Leaving Certificate at school — the only one of his family to do so — and studied mechanical engineering for a year with the International Correspondence School. With an aptitude for drawing, he had earned 16 commercial art diplomas at the Art Training Institute in Melbourne as well as two certificates from the Australian Sketching School in Sydney. He was a talented amateur artist whose pictures, mostly pencil sketches, won him awards in art shows as far afield as Wollongong, Newcastle, Bega, Tamworth, and even the Sydney Royal Show. His works adorned his parents’ walls. His drawing of a magpie won a prize from the Gould League of Bird Lovers and was featured on one of the League’s membership cards. He was proud as well of his caricatures of Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith and Australia’s courageous cricket captain, W. M. Woodfull.

Charlie Crosdale, yearning to go solo

(Courtesy of Alice McDonald)
As soon as he could afford it Charlie had begun learning to fly. An aero club had been formed in Newcastle in 1934 and from 1936 had assumed responsibility for flying training in country towns to the north and northwest. The RAAF did its bit to encourage the local enthusiasts. In May 1937, No. 3 Squadron at Richmond sent three Hawker Demons to the Cessnock Aero Club to put on a display of formation flying, ‘message picking up’, and aerobatics. Exciting as the thought of emulating the daring Air Force pilots was, the costs of flying lessons were a dispiriting hurdle. Jack Palmer had also started flying lessons in Melbourne but had to give up as his funds ran out. As Jim Fairbairn, the MP for Flinders, was to tell the House of Representatives in June 1937: ‘It is most disconcerting to me every week or two to be asked by some young man if I know of a cheap way of learning to fly. I am unable to give him any advice.’ The fact was that the government’s subsidies to the aero clubs were spread thinly and, in Fairbairn’s estimation, some 75 per cent of the pupils were learning ‘for the sport of it, just as they join golf or tennis clubs’.41

Over four years Charlie Crosdale had managed only 20 hours and 50 minutes dual flying time with the Newcastle Aero Club. As Rowley James pointed out to the Minister for Defence, because of conditions prevailing at Cessnock Aerodrome he had been unable to undertake training there. Nevertheless he had been close to going solo when he ran out of cash. With some help from his mother he had spent £200, more than he could expect to earn in most years.42

Interviewed at RAAF Station Richmond in 1938, Charlie had been assessed by the ‘Staff Officer Administrative’ as a ‘very good type of applicant — exceptionally keen to become a member of this Service’. He ticked all the boxes. He played tennis and cricket, was a cyclist and swimmer. He would serve anywhere and, in the language of the interview form, would ‘sleep in barrack room’ and ‘rough it’. He had no police record and needed only a week’s notice to present himself for duty. It was, he said, his life’s ambition to join the Air Force. All of which earned him a score of 75 per cent.

On 16 September 1939, the RAAF Recruiting Centre in Melbourne forwarded C. J. Crosdale’s file to their Sydney counterparts. Impressed by his keenness and his partial training as a pilot, they had placed him on a waiting list for enlistment as a mechanic six weeks earlier. Charlie Crosdale’s flying aspirations necessarily were on hold. But he could reasonably expect that his time had come when war was declared. He had not allowed for the congestion and memory lapses of bureaucracy. It was to take another political intervention, and another interstate transfer of files, before he was called up a week before Christmas.

41 CPD, House of Representatives, 14 Aug. 1940, p.377; minutes, forms, and correspondence in Crosdale’s RAAF Record of Service, NAA: A9301/2.

42 Instruction at the Victorian Flying School was £8 an hour (J. D. Balfe, War Without Glory: Australians in the air war with Japan 1941–45, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1984, p.15).
Many others were still waiting to be summoned. A few days later, Jim Fairbairn was to appeal to young men not to be disheartened if they were not called up immediately. The war would go on, the Air Minister assured them. It was ‘only tripe’ to suggest that Germany would ‘crack up’ before long.\textsuperscript{43}

After a brief period at Richmond, Crosdale went to the Engineering School at Ascot Vale Showgrounds in Melbourne for four months. Then, after passing yet another trade test with a score of 68 per cent, he was sent to No. 21 Squadron at Laverton, re-mustered as a flight mechanic in May 1940. Finally he was posted as aircraftman 1 to No. 2 Squadron on 4 July 1940.\textsuperscript{44} In that month the Minister for Air announced that the number of men serving or being trained as fitters in the RAAF had increased four-fold since September 1939. There were now 2048 fitters on duty and another 2828 at the Engineering School or technical schools. The total was greater than the entire strength of the Air Force, including officers, cadets, and airmen, when war began.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{A/C Crosdale under instruction, with S. Graham and Gipsy Major at the Nicholas Building, Melbourne Showground, April 1940}

(Courtesy of Alice McDonald)

\textsuperscript{43} Canberra Times, 3 Jan. 1940.

\textsuperscript{44} Biographical information about Palmer and Crosdale, The Argus, 14 Aug. 1940; Manning, ‘Air Disaster at Canberra’, Stand-To, Jan.–Feb. 1962, pp.6–22; Coronial papers, NAA: A1378, P8903; RAAF Record of Service, Charles Joseph Crosdale, NAA: A9301/2; Cessnock Eagle, 16 Aug. 1940.

\textsuperscript{45} Jane’s All the World’s Aircraft 1940, p.28a.
Three days before starting in Melbourne in January 1940 Charlie Crosdale had married Rita Pearl Ling. Rita was from the tiny township of Ellalong, a few kilometres down the road from Paxton. She was one of six children of Benjamin and Mary Ling. ‘Everyone seemed to know each other from one village to another,’ as one of Charlie’s younger brothers, Norman, and his wife Jan remembered. Rita’s brother Mervyn had married Charlie’s sister Cecilia (known as May) in 1932. Her own honeymoon was short; nothing could impede Charlie’s progress now that he had at last achieved his ambition. The Air Force made no provision for the travel of airmen’s families or the removal of their furniture and effects. So the new bride had initially remained behind in Paxton, staying with her parents-in-law. But soon a happily pregnant Rita had found accommodation in Princes Street, Newmarket. By the end of April, with no relatives in Melbourne and his wife experiencing ill health, Charlie was granted permission to live ‘off station’.

At last the obstacles that had delayed Charlie Crosdale’s enlistment and impeded his progress seemed to be surmounted. He had been determined to wear his country’s uniform and his mechanical talent was now finding expression in servicing the RAAF’s most formidable new aircraft. His wife was receiving £4.4.0 a fortnight, with another £1.0.0 per fortnight due to be paid for the child on the way. Charlie’s service record was impeccable. There was not a single blemish on his general conduct sheet, on which ‘Cases of drunkenness (in red ink)’ and punishments awarded were routinely entered in the columns provided. He was fit, well behaved, and chirpily in his element. ‘He was like a boy who got a toy he really wanted,’ a fond sister recalled. To another sister and brother-in-law, May and Merv Ling, he had written on Sunday, 28 July 1940: ‘I am in No 2 Squadron now working on those big Lockheed Hudson bombers. They have 14 cylinders twin bank radial each motor. They have 2 motors 28 cylinders and boy say do them [sic] hum and go.’

He had felt the ‘hum and go’ of the Hudson’s Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp 1050 hp SC-3G engines in the air. ‘I went to Geelong on Tuesday in mine. We went down the bay Port Philip and then flew across the bay to Geelong back down the coast home’ through heavy clouds. ‘Hell the scene was wonderful up above them.’ Flying at 3500 feet most of the way at 180 miles an hour, as he told his mother two weeks later, they could see the Ford manufacturing plant at Geelong where the British Fairey Battle light bombers were being assembled. He had flown over Melbourne: ‘small from the air I know every inch of it Mum’. The new Hudsons were being put through their paces and Charlie delighted in telling the family of his flights in A16-97, which had arrived at Laverton on August 2:

46 ‘Conditions Governing Enlistment, Promotion, Re-Muster, Transfer and Discharge’, RAAF Form P/P 30, revised Nov. 1939.
I was up photographing with the photographers in my plane on Monday [August 5].\textsuperscript{47} We were taking photos of all the petrol dumps from 6000 ft to 2000 ft. Clouds were fairly troublesome but they secured them all I think…

When we were coming down from photographing the pilot said hang on I am going into a vertical dive and hell we were moving. He pulled out at 300 m. p. hour. We were moving Mum.

With Bob Hitchcock at the controls of A16-34, they really were moving. Not as fast as Alec Barlow and his crew who had ‘swooped down on Ceduna at over 330 mph at about 300 feet and scared the devil out of the town’.\textsuperscript{48} But definitely pushing the aircraft. At 6500 feet the Mark I Hudson’s recommended cruising speed was 220 mph; maximum speed was supposed to be 246 mph. The air speed indicator was calibrated to 300 knots (345 mph) but the highest diving speed to which the aircraft had been tested in Lockheed and official trials was 295 knots (339 mph). The Mark II Hudsons, those numbered from 51 to 100, already had enhanced performance; they were faster, carried more weight; had a higher service ceiling, and a greater range.\textsuperscript{49} When Crosdale was not being exhilarated in the air or undertaking his normal duties on the ground he was exercising some of his other talents. ‘I am doing all the jobs of signing and drawings and draughtsman here when they want them.’ The squadron leader had discovered his artistic ability. In the intervals between official tasks he found time to do a drawing for his father of a miner with a gas mask. He took photos of the planes he was tending but was cautious about sending them to his younger brother Douglas, known to all as ‘Tiger’, who wanted to show them to his Air League friends. If caught, Charlie said, he could be court-martialled and imprisoned for five years. ‘Tell him if I send them not to say where he got them but do you think Mum it’s worth the risk?’

No such fear inhibited him from sending up a lamp to his parents, He had intended to use it for photography but realised that it would make a good reading light if his father rigged it up on the bedroom wall. ‘I will draw up a little plan how it works. You will not need to get up out of bed to switch the lamp off when it’s fixed up.’ Best though that no-one mentioned where the lamp came from: ‘It’s off a Hudson Mum. Don’t let on.’ His mother could also look forward to receiving a chrome-plated butter knife made from a .303 bullet shell. It awaited only engraving. ‘It’s wonderful all the machines to work with. I have made myself a nice kit of tools for my plane. You would think they were bought.’

\textsuperscript{47} Hitchcock’s log shows a series of photography sessions in August with Crosdale aboard on the seventh, not Monday the fifth.
\textsuperscript{48} Charles Learmonth diary, quoted in Charles Page, 	extit{Wings of Destiny: Wing Commander Charles Learmonth DFC and Bar and the Air War in New Guinea}, Rosenberg, Dural, 2008, p.64.
On August 13, Charlie Crosdale was about to take to the air again, this time with some of the most famous and powerful men in the country. He had been laid low for five weeks with the new strain of influenza and bronchitis that had swept through the Laverton base defying medical remedies. He was clearly suffering, as he told May and Merv Ling, from exposure to the ‘cold bleak wind howling in…straight into our hangars from the direction of Ballarat and by hell we know it’. But he was determined to take his place that day. On Monday night he finished a long letter to his mother, ‘it’s 8.30 and I have to work in the morning’. If he was lucky, his cough would not keep him awake and he would travel down to Laverton refreshed to begin the preparations for the trip to Canberra. But he had not counted on the premature arrival of his first child. In the early hours of Tuesday morning, Rita’s labour began. He took her to Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital in the city, the hospital established by women and run by women. Should he leave his wife there with no family to support her? Would he in any case be able to make it to the base in time?

Rita Crosdale had no doubt what her husband’s priority should be. As she later told her sister-in-law, she said: ‘Look, you are so intent on going on this important flight with all those ministers, you go. I’ll be alright.’ With mixed feelings the anxious father-to-be rushed to Laverton. There his best friend offered to take his place. But there was no time for the necessary change of clothes, approval, and paperwork. Joining Jack Palmer, the wireless operator, in a greatcoat over his Air Force blues to keep out the chill morning wind, Charlie was to climb aboard and complete the final checks before confirming that his aircraft, A16-97, was ready for the flight.50

50 Biographical information about Crosdale, The Argus, 14 Aug. 1940; Manning, ‘Air Disaster at Canberra’, Stand-To, Jan.–Feb. 1962, pp.6–22; Coronial papers, NAA: A1378 P8903; RAAF Record of Service, Charles Joseph Crosdale, NAA: A9301/2. C. Crosdale to Mrs G. Crosdale, 12 Aug. 1940, Crosdale MSS. I have silently inserted punctuation where its absence would be distracting. Mrs R. McDonald to CH, 6 Sept., 14 Oct. 1977, 24 May, 7 June, 27 June 1978. I am particularly grateful to Charlie Crosdale’s brother and sister-in-law Norman and Jan Crosdale for compiling genealogical information, and to his sister, Alice McDonald, for allowing me to see and copy family letters and photographs, and for her recollections of her brother’s employment history.