4. Second seat: Dick Wiesener

The clutch of new pilot officers who presented themselves for duty at No. 2 Squadron on Monday, 12 August 1940 exemplified the varied backgrounds and destinies of the RAAF’s wartime officer recruits. All but one appeared to meet the threshold criterion of being under 28 years of age when he enlisted — before war broke out they would need to have been under 26 and unmarried. All must have been found by an examining medical officer to be free of scrofula, phthisis, syphilis, defective intelligence, defects of vision, voice or hearing, traces of corporal punishment, marked varicocele ‘with unusually pendent testicle’, ‘or any other disease or physical defect calculated to unfit him for the duties of a soldier [sic]’. All would be deemed to be of ‘pure European descent’. All would have survived a discreet enquiry to their local constabulary as to their good character, criminal record, or ‘blameless life’ after any serious offences ‘many years ago’.1 Their seniority would be based on the date of their appointment as an officer. If graduated from a course of flying training they would be ranked on the results obtained in the practical tests during the course and the final graduation examination. They would be on probation for six months, after which — if their copy books were clean — they could expect promotion to flying officer.2

The first of the group parading themselves before Squadron Leader Fred Thomas at Laverton was Peter Fowler, of the Sydney earthenware, pottery, and stoneware family. Almost 23 years old, a quiet, slightly prickly character, as his contemporary Bob Dalkin recalled, his reserve was perhaps a reaction to years of ragging about wash basins, toilets, and urinals. After being posted to No. 1 Squadron in Malaya, ‘Chook’ Fowler was to be captured by the Japanese and spend much of the war in a Thai prison camp. William Vyner Duckett White, a hard-drinking company manager, Inverell born, had farmed and been engaged in mining in Kenya, learned to fly in Sydney, and served in Shanghai with the

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1 Air Board Agenda 2714, 5 Feb. 1940, NAA: A4181, 17. Pre-war ‘candidates for entry’ were screened by the Fingerprint Office and the City Watchhouse as well as their local police station; for example, R. L. Peverell [NAA: A9301]. The Secretary of the Air Board was appalled at the suggestion by the Air Member for Personnel that men with recent convictions might be recruited: ‘Can’t we get enough without resorting to these types?’ Within weeks, the War Cabinet had decided that ‘in view of the heavy personnel commitments under the Empire Air Scheme, aliens and British subjects of non-European origin or descent should be permitted, at the discretion of the Air Board, to serve in the RAAF during the war’ (Minutes of War Cabinet Meeting, 29 Feb. 1940, NAA: A2673). Confidential enquiries (Form P/P 35) were made as to whether candidates were ‘sober, honest and respectable’, or were recorded by the Special Branch as members of ‘any Communist organization’ (W. E. Belfield, NAA: A9301, 13041).

2 ‘Conditions of Entry to Commissioned Rank in the RAAF’, RAAF Publication No. 3, revised July 1939. Bizarre as the list of disqualifying conditions might seem, the American authority H. G. Armstrong’s standard treatise, Principles and Practice of Aviation Medicine (1939), stated that candidates for pilot training should be rejected if they had elephantiasis, Hodgkin’s disease, or hydrocephalus. ‘Why’, the Medical Journal of Australia reviewer asked, ‘did he not add leprosy and yaws while he was at it?’ (MJA, 1, 25, 22 June 1940, p.868).
British militia force and Chiang Kai-shek, before returning finally to Sydney. Determined to fly with the RAAF, he put his age down by four years. ‘Dark, handsome and tough, with a shining personality’, as Bob Dalkin recorded after his death, Bill ‘VD’ White was to be the first in his squadron to be awarded the DFC; he too was captured, and executed by the Japanese in February 1942. David Campbell, thinking himself only 15 months White’s junior, arrived at No. 2 Squadron later in the month and remembered a man apparently ‘quite a lot older than the rest’. He especially remembered White’s daily bottle of whisky that may have contributed to the prematurely aged appearance of a man with a colourful past. Campbell himself was a Cambridge graduate and rugby international with a NSW grazing background. He had learned to fly in Cambridge. Joining the RAAF as a cadet in November 1939, he was commissioned in February 1940, and was to end the war as a temporary Wing Commander with a DFC and bar of which he rarely spoke, and to become one of Australia’s most admired poets. The third man was a professional pilot. Robert Nixon ‘Bob’ Dalkin, who had just earned his unrestricted commercial pilot’s licence with the W. R. Carpenter company in New Guinea before joining the RAAF aged 26 at the beginning of 1940, was to serve with distinction north of Australia and in RAF Bomber Command, eventually retiring as an RAAF Air Commodore.

Dalkin, White, and Fowler were accompanied by Dick Wiesener, a 29-year-old accountant from Sydney, enlisted by special authority nine days after the birthday that in ordinary circumstances would have disqualified him. Making friends with the even older Bill White during intermediate flying training at No. 26 Flying Training School, Wiesener had done his share of carousing and stunting, and waving the wings of small aircraft over family in Edgecliff and Strathfield. He and the others, as well as Noel Quinn and Paul Metzler, had all — to their

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6 ACdre R. N. Dalkin, interview, 18 April 1978, recalled the arrival of the four new pilot officers whose postings are shown in Station Routine Orders No. 98, 2 Sept. 1940, NAA: A10605/8 Box 503, vol. 7/HQ Laverton. Dalkin erred in his later recollection (quoted in David Vincent, The RAAF Hudson Story, Book One, Highbury, 1999, p.152) that Campbell was one of the group arriving on 12 Aug. 1940. Campbell himself recalled arriving ‘a week or two later’ (telephone interview, 24 May 1978). Campbell does not appear in the Aug. 1940 group photograph of officers in Bennett, Highest Traditions, pp.108, 112. R. A. Dunne and N. G. Hemsworth, who are in the photo, were posted as flying officers on 26 Aug. 1940.
disappointment — been posted to the navigation reconnaissance school at Point Cook. Navigational skills, more than ever essential for the RAAF’s newer bomber aircraft, larger and with longer ranges, were increasingly understood to require special training. The days of a lone pilot, sometimes with a jack-of-all-trades observer, were passing. In the United Kingdom in April 1938 it had been calculated that in the previous two years Bomber Command pilots had lost their way and made forced landings on 478 occasions. Just over a year later a senior RAF officer reported that even in daylight flying, above clouds, dead-reckoning navigation could not be relied upon to get an aircraft closer than 50 miles from its destination.\footnote{Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany 1939–1945*, vol. 1: Preparation Parts 1, 2, and 3, HMSO, 1961, pp.110–2.} The establishment of the General Reconnaissance School as a separate unit on 29 April 1940, initially at Point Cook, was a step towards meeting the need for specialist navigation officers as well as enhancing the skills of all of the RAAF’s general duty pilots.\footnote{Tim Coyle, ‘Track Made Good: A history of air navigation in the Royal Australian Air Force and its predecessor, the Australian Flying Corps 1914 to 1945’, PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy, 2006, Ch. 2 is a comprehensive account of developments 1938–40.}

![No. 8 Navigation Reconnaissance Course, RAAF. From left: back row: Pilot Officers Bill White, Dick Wiesener, Bob Dalkin, Tom Skillman, Ron Cornfort; front row: Peter Fowler, Barry Hack, Harold Croker, Noel Quinn, Lin Hurt, Paul Metzler](Courtesy of Geoffrey White and the Australian War Memorial, No. P00946.004)
Demand for Hudson pilots

Although later they were to appreciate the value of their work on astro navigation and spherical trigonometry, maps, charts, sextants, and compasses, the navigation reconnaissance group envied their peers who had been posted direct to flying duties. Some, like Bill White and his wealthy friend Ron Cornfoot, ‘took our flying seriously but the academic side bored us, so we drank beer and played billiards in the mess every night instead of studying’. Like his other drinking companion, Wiesener, White had qualified in accountancy and worked as an auditor. They also had the celebrated swashbuckling miscreant Errol Flynn in common — briefly, before he was expelled, a pupil with Wiesener at Shore (Sydney Church of England Grammar School); and in White’s case as a fellow junior at Dalgety’s headquarters in Sydney whence Flynn had been dismissed after trying to shift blame to the innocent White for the disappearance of £50 from petty cash.

What the happy bunch graduating from the navigation reconnaissance school were probably only dimly aware of was the dilemma that their superiors at Central Area in Point Piper and Air Force headquarters in Toorak were struggling with. The RAAF had to balance the urgent need for qualified pilots to captain and navigate the newly arrived Hudsons as well as meet the demand for general flying instruction. The Air Minister himself had been quoted at the end of 1939 as saying that flying had changed so much since he earned his wings that he was amazed that competent pilots could be trained to fly such complicated modern machines in six months. Jim Fairbairn’s observation had a concerning undertone. On July 2, in the very week Dalkin, Wiesener, and the others began their navigation course at Laverton, the commanding officer of Central Area, Air Commodore Adrian ‘King’ Cole, wrote personally to Group Captain George Jones, Director of Training:

Mr Parker, of the Lockheed Aircraft Factory, tells me, after observing the training and general flying in conversion course at RICHMOND, that it is his opinion that the pilots for Lockheed aircraft should be seeded in such a way as to provide for those whose records show that they

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10 Note by Geoffrey D. White, enclosed with letter to Bob Dalkin, 4 May 1988, copy, courtesy Geoffrey White; John Hammond Moore, The Young Errol: Flynn Before Hollywood, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1975, pp.23–8. According to the boy whose bed was next to Flynn’s, the expulsion from Shore was a result of repeated stealing, not the boasted dalliances with a maid in the coal heap (Kate Riseley [Shore School archivist] to CH, 24 Jan. 2012).
are above the average. In this connection, it has come to notice that some of the pilots posted to Lockheed squadrons have the following endorsements on their passing-out report:

“Weak at instrument flying”

“Generally slow, mentally” &c &c

Cole then alluded to another sensitive issue:

In view of the extreme necessity of saving equipment, it would seem better to employ this type on instructing, where, during the six months they would be so employed, there would be a chance of their picking up leeway in the aspects in which they are weak.

To make up for a reduced flow of Hudson pilots Cole suggested that a number of first-class pilots, particularly those from civil life who had been posted to instructing, would be better able to successfully fly the more challenging machines. Such experienced men could be relied upon, ‘observing the economy necessary in equipment…to take the extreme care which is necessary on the controls to save petrol consumption and protect the engine’.

Knowingly or not, Cole was about to touch off a paper war at headquarters. He announced that, pending further instructions, he had already ‘arranged’ with Wing Commander Alan Charlesworth to ‘seed the Hudson squadrons’ in his Area and was recommending to Melbourne the alterations in postings that would give effect to his recommendations. Two days later, Cole wrote formally to the Secretary of the Air Board: ‘…it is considered that unless Hudson squadrons are given better material from which to train Captains, the accident rate will increase out of all proportion, or else the squadron will spend an indefinite period on training, in an attempt to produce a qualified pilot.’

Speaking specifically to his own Area’s concern, he said that too many experienced pilots had been posted away, leaving his No. 6 Squadron with only three officers, including the CO, qualified to captain Hudsons. There were three more partly trained, and a cluster of 15 young pilot officers or air cadets with some 100 flying hours each on Demons and Wirraways. Cole accepted the conventional view that the Service should not be producing a cadre of ‘specialised’ pilots. But Hudson pilots should, he argued, be capable and experienced, not young men who had only just finished their flying course. ‘Fundamentally the flying of one type is the same as any other, but it is in the temperament, reliability, and ability to handle modern engines that experience plays such an important part.’

What followed in Cole’s submission was that a number of the men currently employed in flying training were potential Hudson pilots and should be reassigned for this priority role without delay. Five of them should be replaced by
the inexperienced second pilots who ‘after a period on flying training, would be infinitely better material for training on Hudsons’. By taking action as well as minuting his ideas, Cole was displaying the inherent tension in the RAAF’s devolved command structure. If his recommendations were to be followed they would entail closer co-operation not only between Area commands and headquarters but between the Training and Personal Services branches. George Jones, Director of Training, bluntly disagreed ‘that ex civil pilots should be posted to Hudson squadrons and that those who have recently graduated from our own schools should be employed on instructing. One cannot generalise in this way.’ The policy should be that the posting of individuals must depend on their qualifications. In fact, Jones went on in a minute to the Director of Personal Services, sensing an opportunity to expand the influence of his training domain, ‘there should be closer liaison between us in…selecting pilots for different units. I suggest that the proposed posting of pilots might be passed to this branch for comment before issue of Orders.’

A battle for organisational territory was under way. Jones, an introvert, trusting no-one, was not going to have his carefully drawn plans subverted. The Sydney démarché had to be crushed. With a file created, and views invited, branch heads scrambled. Group Captain F. M. ‘Dad’ Bladin, Director of Operations and Intelligence, mischievously pointed out that the Deputy Director of Postings had ‘always shown him his intentions’ about postings from units, and he in turn left postings to units to the good sense of the DPS ‘hoping that pilots were posted in accordance with recommendations from their S. F. T. S.[Service Flying Training School]’. Bladin was confident that if the right people were chosen for the navigation reconnaissance course, from which all first pilots would now be coming, ‘we should automatically get the better class pilots for 1st pilot in Hudsons’. One of Jones’s staff, Squadron Leader Joshua McDonald, head of flying training (and contemporary of Bob Hitchcock at No. 21 Squadron in 1936), dutifully opposed the idea of sending below-average pilots from Service flying training schools to be instructors. The result, he sensibly concluded, would be ‘their poor standard being reflected throughout the service’. McDonald noted that pilots who were selected for the navigation reconnaissance school would not normally get more than 15 hours as a pilot during the course. They would be ‘scarcely more experienced in the handling of an aircraft as pilot, than one who goes to a Squadron direct from the S. F. T. S.’.

Determined not to concede, Jones reiterated on July 26 that no general rule should determine postings. He reminded colleagues that he had asked the Director of Recruiting to appoint as many experienced civil pilots as possible. He agreed that comparatively inexperienced pilots, whatever their background,
should be sent to bombing and gunnery schools, air observers’ schools, and wireless air gunners’ schools before posting to service units, particularly those equipped with Hudsons. But he did not agree that a pilot who had reached ‘a satisfactory standard’ on the locally built Wirraways could not be converted in a ‘reasonable period’ to fly Hudsons. Jones’s conclusion was emphatic:

There is definitely a tendency to over state the difficulties and standard required for piloting this type of aircraft. The only general principle that I can agree to is that our more experienced pilots should be posted to service units, particularly Hudsons, on account of the heavy responsibility involved. It will be necessary, however, to make exceptions to even this rule, and I feel that we must endeavour to hold the balance by giving careful consideration to each individual’s qualifications.

Reviewing all the documented information about accidents, Jones did not need to be reminded of the dangers of inexperience and lack of vigilance by young junior officers. He knew too that even a seasoned Hudson instructor like Alec Barlow, an ex-Australian National Airways captain and Lockheed 14 pilot with over 7 000 hours flying time, might not always anticipate a lapse of judgment by a pupil. And Jones had the ear of his chief. Overseeing these exchanges, and privy to the internal reports on accidents, had been Air Commodore W. H. Anderson, the Air Member for Personnel. One of his subordinates was to write of Anderson, an outstanding Melbourne Grammar student, artillery officer, AFC and RAAF veteran, that ‘he was slow and so immersed in the minutiae of administration that some important policy matters languished’. The languishing was now over. Anderson concurred with Jones and called for a reply to Cole to be drafted. There was to be no recall of men already posted.

For pilots like Dalkin, Fowler, and White — experienced civil flyers of modern aircraft — and even Wiesener, who was a licensed pilot before enlistment, posting to a Hudson squadron was likely under whatever policy was adopted. Having moved to Laverton on July 4 and completed their navigation assignment with the brilliant 24-year-old Flight Lieutenant Deryck Kingwell and Squadron Leader Dallas Charlton on Friday August 9, they transferred into No. 2 Squadron that weekend and prepared to present themselves on Monday to their commanding officer Fred Thomas. They were all excited about the prospect of getting to know the Hudsons after spending three months in Ansons and previously converting at Richmond in New South Wales on Hawker Demons. None of them had as much as been up in a Hudson. As soon as they arrived, Dalkin said, ‘we all sort of crawled over the aeroplane’.

13 Barlow: Examiner (Launceston), 8 August 1935.
15 The lively exchange is documented in ‘Policy of training First Pilots — Lockheed Hudson aircraft — Posting of inexperienced pilots to Units equipped with’, NAA: A705, 208/1/1533/1–19.
Later, while Dalkin, White, and Fowler were poring over manuals, Wiesener stole a march on his friends. Someone, probably Wilbur Wackett, gave him a ride behind the pilots during an instruction flight.\textsuperscript{16} Nothing he had experienced before had prepared him for the sensation. ‘God, you’ve never seen anything like it,’ he told the other three; ‘the belt in the back when you open the throttles.’ Dalkin later elaborated on Wiesener’s report: ‘He commented on the “tremendous power” available to the pilot on take-off from the two 900 [sic] horsepower twin-row Pratt and Whitney engines; the mass of instruments and ancillaries, the modern layout, the effectiveness of the hydraulic undercarriage, bomb doors and Fowler flaps.’\textsuperscript{17}

‘One of you chaps has got to come with me to Canberra tomorrow.’

After lunch on Monday afternoon, although they had been dispersed into different flights, the four newcomers were together listening to Wiesener recount the joy of the Hudson he had been in that morning, when Bob Hitchcock came into the room. It was time to nominate from among the new arrivals someone to sit in the second pilot’s seat on the flight to Canberra and begin to learn about the Air Force’s front line machine. Bob Dalkin recalled the scene:

I don’t remember ever seeing Hitchcock before that moment…And he came in very smartly. He was a small man. He said ‘One of you chaps has got to come with me to Canberra tomorrow.’ And we all, you know, thought ‘this is big stuff, this is really getting close to things.’ Bear in mind none of us were qualified in any way. But I have always thought that when he said that he knew who he was going to take.

\textsuperscript{16} Wiesener’s presence is not recorded in the log books of Ryland, Garrett, Heath, Thomas or Hitchcock. I have not traced the log book of Wilbur Wackett.

\textsuperscript{17} ACdre Bob Dalkin, typescript ‘The 13th August 1940’, July 1991, courtesy Peter Dalkin, quoted in Vincent, \textit{The RAAF Hudson Story}, Book Two, p.249. The Hudson provided over 1000 hp on take-off; 900 hp at 12 000 feet.
Whatever the impulse — perhaps Thomas had made the suggestion to his C Flight Commander — there was no hesitation: ‘Wiesener, you’d better come. Get your gear.’ Whereupon Wiesener ‘scurried round, got his gear and went off, not with Hitchcock but after him’.18

It seems Wiesener’s glowing reputation as the head of the order of merit in No. 27 Flying Training Course had preceded him. Appearing perhaps a little more polished than the other newcomers, there was more to his background...
than his personnel file would have revealed. He was formerly an accountant with the Sydney office of Sorenson, Purves, and Co. He was married with a son and daughter, and his wife was carrying a third child. Grandson of a German emigrant clockmaker who became a prominent optical, mathematical, and surveying instrument maker; son of a prosperous Macquarie Street eye specialist, Richard Frederick Wiesener was born on the last day of 1910.19 He was educated initially at a small local private school, Strathfield Grammar. Founded in 1917 by a group of Congregationalists with just 19 boys, Strathfield Grammar proudly proclaimed its aim to ‘establish strong Christian character’ and ‘develop a sound physique and a healthy interest in games’, while preparing boys for the Intermediate Certificate examination ‘or for the Intermediate Classes of the Great Public Schools’.

Dick Wiesener and his fellow students — 100 were enrolled along with him by 1919 — enjoyed the environs of the splendid mansion ‘Llandilo’, built in 1878 by the eminent consulting physician Sir Philip Sydney Jones. Jones had died in 1918; his property was sub-divided, and the new school bought his house on one of the highest points in what were then Sydney’s western suburbs. As the school prospectus shamelessly confided, ‘Many cultured and wealthy people’ had followed Jones, son of the founder of the Sydney retail emporium, to Strathfield. Seven miles from the ‘enervating moist sea-air’ of central Sydney, ‘Strathfield became, and remains, one of the leading residential suburbs.’ The school was just 12 minutes’ walk to the junction of four suburban railway lines, and a stopping place for country trains. Trams from surrounding areas passed close by. Thus it was convenient and safe for boarders, and day boys could ‘avoid the dangers of changing trains or of passing through the City’.

Offering tuition in English Grammar and Literature, Latin, French, Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, History, Geography and Elementary Science, at eight levels, and meeting the extra-curricular expectations of the city’s mercantile elite, must have demanded a great deal of the five teachers who assisted Strathfield’s principal proprietor and headmaster. F. F. Wheaton, who had earned his B.A. (Syd.) as an evening student, began each day with prayers and scripture readings. His school provided for football, cricket, tennis and swimming, as well as a physical culture class with Robert Rae Turner, a partner in the rapidly growing Bjelke-Petersen Bros School of Physical Culture. A music tutor was available. All pupils had 15 minutes of exercise and drill every morning; and older boys like Dick fulfilled their compulsory military training requirements as junior cadets. At £5.15.6 per term for tuition for students over 12, and six

guineas for the Intermediate candidates, it was a barely viable enterprise. The boarding option was terminated after three years and the school was bought by nearby Trinity Grammar in 1926, losing its separate identity six years later.

Strathfield Grammar’s records have not survived. All we know of Dick’s brief time there is that he competed in heat three of the under-14 100 yards handicap in the fifth annual sports meeting in 1923. More auspiciously, at the same meeting, competing in the under-14 220 yards championship, was a young member of the neighbouring Beale family, a son of Ronald Matthew Beale, scion of the Sydney piano and sewing machine manufacturing firm.20 Dick was soon to meet and be smitten by his school friend’s sister, Elizabeth Joan, a pupil at Meriden, Strathfield’s private school for girls. Betty Beale, as she was then known, was tall and fair-haired with two long plaits. Always full of fun, her friend Betty Kessell remembered, and a good tennis player, she knew Dick’s own sisters, Mollie and Betty. They too were Meriden girls, and their youngest sister Patricia would follow. By 1924 there were so many Bettys in one of the Meriden senior classes that it was agreed that some of them would change their names. Betty Kessell became Bettina. Betty Beale became Joan. As they grew older, past and present Bettys, their friends, brothers and brothers’ friends enjoyed weekend tennis parties on family courts, afternoon teas, and dancing to gramophone records.

Agreeable as the after-hours and weekend company was, Dick outgrew the Rev. Wheaton’s establishment. To complete his schooling he moved in 1924 to the more prestigious Sydney Church of England Grammar School on the North Shore. Mysteriously, his new school’s register records that at that time he was a ‘ward of E. C. Mackay Westhoven Bancroft Ave Roseville’. Both his parents were alive and Edward Mackay’s identity has proved elusive. Neither school archives nor family memory provide an explanation for the wardship. But it was not uncommon for boys at Shore, as the school was familiarly known, to live out. As Bancroft Avenue is just around the corner from Roseville railway station it would have been a convenient place to board and travel to North Sydney station. Conceivably, Dick’s parents had left him with a guardian while travelling overseas, his father having completed his medical course in 1923 and been appointed to an honorary post as an ophthalmic surgeon at St Vincent’s Hospital.

At Shore, Dick encountered some of the brightest boys in Sydney. The school had recently appointed Leonard Robson, a 28-year-old mathematics master from Geelong Grammar, as its headmaster; and the young broom, a Rhodes Scholar with an MC earned as an AIF lieutenant, was sweeping out moribund

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20 I am grateful to Alison Field, Trinity College archivist, for information about Strathfield Grammar School; to Diana Tilley-Winyard (archivist), Bettina Gowing, and Anne Cooke, Visions of Parnassus: Meriden’s first 100 years, Meriden School, 1997, for details of Meriden in the 1920s; and to Welwyn Petersen and Kate Riseley for material from Shore Archives.
masters and himself taking the senior maths classes.\(^1\)

Under the guidance of enthusiastic new staff, Dick was to compete with the gifted classics scholar Tom Dunbabin, who would become Reader in Classical Archaeology in Oxford, a Fellow of All Souls, and a decorated wartime intelligence officer and resistance leader in Crete;\(^2\) Laurie Fitzhardinge, a historian and versifier whose heart was to be in ancient Sparta but who was chosen by ex-Prime Minister Billy Hughes to write his biography; and the brilliant mathematician and physics student David Myers, whose glittering career in electrical engineering would culminate in his appointment as the first Vice-Chancellor of Latrobe University. Between them these four carried off most of the school prizes in their final year, with Fitzhardinge and Dunbabin scooping the major state awards in the Leaving Certificate examinations.

When he left Shore at the end of 1927, shortly after his libidinous rascal contemporary Errol Flynn was expelled, Wiesener had topped Form VIb and had passed seven Leaving Certificate subjects, with first-class honours in English and second-class honours in Physics.\(^3\) Having beaten David Myers for the school Physics prize, the second-class honour would have been a disappointment. Yet it may have been that Dick’s competitive motivation was diminished as he had already determined on a non-academic future. Unlike his clever peers he did not go on to Sydney University. Instead, in a step that might have puzzled those who did not know his family connections, at the age of 18 he took up a five-year apprenticeship in Wollongong as an electrical fitter. In this step he would have enjoyed the support of his headmaster who had declared that ‘the national prosperity depends more than ever before upon a high level of efficiency and endeavour in productive industrial and commercial life’.

Transferring after three years to special electrical welding work, Dick was employed at Australian Iron and Steel’s Port Kembla steelworks. His introduction to AI&S was through his mother, Wilmot, daughter of Charles and Emily Hoskins. His maternal grandfather was the founder of AI&S. His uncles, Cecil and Sid, were joint managing directors of the AI&S enterprise, owner of mines, quarries, and foundries as well as the iron and steel works, and employer of over 3000 people. The company, possibly the largest private company in the

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\(^3\) When Wiesener filled in his application for the RAAF he remembered only six Leaving Certificate subjects but doubled his number of first-class honours.

nation until it went public in 1928, was hurt by the Depression. Its reliance on government contracts made it especially vulnerable to the collapsing economy of New South Wales. Yet even when fortunes were low there was always a place for a talented nephew in the family business.25

Dick had worked his way up from the shop floor but was evidently on the fast track to promotion. He was sent away for two periods of six months in the United States investigating steel pipe plants and new processes in the steel industry. But he had other ambitions. Port Kembla’s grim environment and industrial strife held little appeal. By the time the family company was acquired by BHP in 1935 his heart was set on marriage, moving back to Sydney, and becoming a chartered accountant. He and his childhood sweetheart Joan, who had been born a day before him, were engaged late in 1933 and married in March 1935. Their first son, Richard Antony, was born in July 1937. Margot Abbey followed in November 1938.

Dick soon passed the intermediate examination and final law examination of the Chartered Institute of Accountants, and joined the firm of Halberg, Parsons, and Anderson as an audit clerk. After further experience with Smith, Johnson and Co., he moved as a fully-fledged cost accountant to become an audit clerk with Sorenson, Purves. There he became close to Ray Purves, the head of the Sydney office of the firm, who was only six months older than his new recruit. Meanwhile Dick had served three years in the Militia (19th and 34th battalions), reaching the rank of corporal. But like so many of his generation of independently wealthy professional men he also caught the flying bug. He was one of the earliest applicants under the pre-war civil air reserve plan. He had earned a civil ‘A’ pilot’s licence a few months before joining the RAAF as an Air Cadet in January 1940 (Service number 607). Beginning at Mascot in No. 28 Flying Training Course A with C Flight, No. 4 Elementary Flying Training School, he completed his Service flying training with No. 22 Squadron at Richmond and was awarded a Distinguished Pass with a score of 85.14 per cent.26 He was granted a commission as a pilot officer on probation in the Citizen Air Force on 4 May 1940.

The generally available record of Wiesener’s training told a story that culminated in brilliant achievement. But before passing out at the top of No. 28 Flying Training Course A he had some inglorious moments. On his arrival at Mascot on


26 AOC Laverton to Secretary Air Board, 9 May 1940, NAA: A705, 208/17/44. Wiesener’s name is consistently misspelled in the course reports. The score is given elsewhere as 81 per cent.
9 January 1940, he was taken into the care of W. E. Clarke, an instructor with Airflite (Training) Pty Ltd. Sixteen cadets under the command of Squadron Leader Alfred Ellis had been distributed between the Royal Aero Club, the Kingsford Smith Air Services Co., and Airflite. Six more went to Newcastle Aero Club. Subsidies to aero clubs having been abolished, cadets were being trained (unprofitably it was claimed) for £2.12.6 an hour. Clarke noted that his new pupil already had 25 hours solo but had not previously been in a DH82 (Tiger Moth). It was soon apparent that Dick’s skills were only ‘fair’ at best. And he was suffering from air-sickness, for which the remedy was more spins. Allowed to go solo after seven hours, he was given a progress test after 11 days. Flight Lieutenant George Coleman, the chief flying instructor, was unflattering:

Thinks very slowly and not very deeply. Generally an erratic and inconsistent pupil who will have to be watched carefully & prevented from developing wrong conclusions in his rather unusual train of thought. Reactions slow. Progress to be watched carefully.

Three hours and 40 minutes solo flying later, Airflite’s chief flying instructor found the pupil’s ‘Judgement in landing not too good. Turns uncertain. Sideslips ditto. Unless improvement very soon, recommend cease flying Solo Practice.’ The instructor persevered, recording slow improvement and ‘indications of absorbing previous lessons’. But he adjudged the cadet ‘Generally erratic…will fly well one day & bad the next.’

Flight Lieutenant Coleman did not mince words. He judged that Wiesener’s ‘airmanship is bad’, recording that he had always been ‘a difficult subject’ for his instructors. As a pilot, Dick was awarded 67 out of 100: ‘a free & easy outlook…prevented him from being higher than below average’. It was not that he did not try. But he was ‘adversely affected by possessing what he considered more than average ability at other pursuits’. Elaborating, Coleman commented that Dick was a ‘good type’ inclined to be overconfident. Possessing an ‘uncanny, retentive memory’, he had secured the highest points in the ‘progressive paper’. But to the evident irritation of the instructors he did not ‘apply the same attentiveness’ on the parade ground as he did in the lecture room.

While highlighting his faults, the final assessment from the flying training course acknowledged that with discipline Dick would ‘probably make a good officer’. Attention needed to be paid to ‘improvement of general bearing and outlook’. There was perhaps a hint of resentment in the character assessments of the self-confident scion of a prosperous upper-middle class family. Dick’s service pay of 21/- a day (including 2/- ‘flying margin’ and 5/- dependants’ allowance)

27 Inexplicably, the record of Wiesener’s flying training course is attached to a file of the Committee of Adjustment ‘for the purpose of dealing with the public and private effects’ of the personnel who died on 13 Aug. 1940 (NAA: A705, 53/1/739, viewed on 12 Dec. 2012).
was a welcome income supplement. But he and Joan had other financial resources. Dick’s grandfather, Theodore Frederick Wiesener, had left Goslar in Lower Saxony with his brother in 1869. He made a great name in Sydney as an entrepreneurial master craftsman, most renowned for the design of the internal workings of the Sydney Town Hall clock.\(^{28}\) Wiesener’s instrument-making business in George Street was across the street from Gowings, the drapers, and next door to W. Abbey & Co., boot and shoemakers. T. F. Wiesener had married his neighbour’s daughter, Annie.

Dick’s father, Frederick Abbey Wiesener, had stood aside when the world war ended to allow his younger brother George, discharged from the AIF, to take over the family firm. Frederick established himself instead in an optometry practice. Successful as he was, he was not satisfied by the professional limitations constraining optometrists. With medical qualifications finally achieved at the age of 46 he became a fashionable ophthalmologist and ophthalmic surgeon. It was perhaps a tribute to his mother’s Abbey ancestry that he appeared in university calendars as ‘Abbey-Wiesener, Frederick’. Sometimes there was a comma rather than a hyphen. In either case it might have deflected some of the lingering wartime ‘lies & calumnies disseminated by competitors’ that the family had suffered. (Rumours that their proprietary company, registered in 1910, was an enemy business, flew in the face of the fact that its co-director, Frederick’s 35-year-old widower brother, had enlisted in the Field Ambulance, contributing a fully equipped motor ambulance; and had served in motor transport and supply columns in Gallipoli, France, and Flanders for four years, earning a mention in despatches, promotion to sergeant, and a Meritorious Service Medal).\(^{29}\) It certainly did Frederick no disservice commercially to be listed in *Knox’s Medical Directory for Australia* as the first name in the book. Neither he nor his son seems to have used a hyphenated form in official documents.

If Dick was only a hyphen removed from a craft and merchant background, the Beales were also ‘in trade’. With a business employing over 500 people, theirs too was a recent urban fortune rather than a landed inheritance. However, following the triumphant showing of their wares at the Wembley Exhibition in London in 1924, Queen Mary had bought a Beale piano. This was a coup, commercially valuable, but also conferring a social cachet that could not be ignored in the outer reaches of the Empire. By the mid-1920s, although Joan’s grandfather Octavius could be an embarrassment with his extreme views on racial and eugenic themes, the Beale family had scaled the heights of Sydney society. Joan’s parents, Ronald and Gertrude Beale, were the object of local


\(^{29}\) NAA: A1 1917/17660; NAA: B2455 WIESENER WG.
curiosity and envy as the owners of a croquet green, though it was no match for the miniature zoo with a peacock, monkeys, and other exotic denizens on parade with Dick’s grandfather, Charles Hoskins.

Royal patronage of the Beale company, a priceless business advantage and a feature of their newspaper advertising, could not fail to be noticed in fashionable circles. Politically, more discretion was called for. Through both of their families Dick and Joan were connected to the smoke-filled rooms of conservative politics. Dick’s uncle, Cecil Hoskins, had been an executive member of the All for Australia League, the movement that in 1931 had brought together Joe Lyons and other ALP defectors and dissident Nationalists. Membership of the League by their employees was strongly supported by the AMP Society on whose prestigious board Hoskins was an influential member. Hoskins was chairman of the Consultative Council, controlling conservative political purse-strings in New South Wales, and was an early member of the United Australia Party into which the All for Australia League merged along with the National Party. Critical ‘unity conference’ meetings were held in the AI&S boardroom. Octavius Beale had been a vocal advocate of conscription in 1916, a pillar of right-wing politics and Masonic affairs in New South Wales. Joan Beale’s uncle Rupert was also active in the All for Australia League. Although there were radical suspicions of Hoskins family involvement in the leadership of the anti-communist paramilitary New Guard in Wollongong, no such activities have been documented.

Ronald Beale, one of 10 children who survived their father, was fully occupied in the offices of the Beale family business. He succeeded as head of the company on his father’s death in 1930. In a little-known collaboration in Sydney with the Marks Motor Construction Company, the Beale piano workshops had produced in 1933 a prototype car body of Queensland pine and walnut, glued under pressure with aircraft casein glue. The chassis was integral to a venture to produce an Australian car, largely financed by the recently knighted Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith, to be called after his famous aircraft, the ‘Southern Cross’. Like many of Smithy’s business schemes, notwithstanding the initial support of well-known Sydney business and political figures like Sir Charles

30 Strictly speaking, the AFA and the National Association ceased to exist after their members joined together in the new party in April 1932 (C. L. A. Abbott to J. A. Lyons, 19 Nov. 1931; J. P McDonald to M. M. Threlfall, 24 Jan. 1933, Lyons MSS, NLA MS4851, Box 1, folder 8).


Marr and Richard Windeyer KC, it struggled for lack of capital. Dick Wiesener did not need the connection with his fiancée’s family to be fascinated by the celebrated aviator whose disappearance and presumed death in 1935 ended the motor vehicle project. But it is easy to believe that he would have seized any opportunity to be in the great man’s presence. For an eager young flyer there could be no more desirable company.

**Pilot officer**

When Dick went down to Melbourne in May 1940 in his new uniform as a pilot officer, Joan stayed back in Sydney in ‘Endymion’, their rented Ethel Street, Burwood home, awaiting the birth of their third child. Her parents lived just across the road. It would be time to decide where the growing young family might live when Dick had completed his training and the baby was born. Anticipating some leisure, Dick had taken his golf clubs and his Zeiss camera. But now the Service adventure was gathering momentum.

Making his first serious flight in a Hudson with a cabin full of brass hats and Cabinet ministers was the beginning of what promised to be the RAAF experience Dick Wiesener had been hoping for. He had seen the Hudsons being put through their paces at Richmond and for the last month or so in the air above Laverton. He had felt their power in a short flight and had regaled his friends with the thrill of it. Dalkin, White, and Fowler already knew him as the best mind among them. They all had a lot more serious flying time than his 87 hours 40 minutes (less than half of them solo). But when they needed guidance with mathematics and trigonometry, it was the former engineer and accountant they turned to. When the class passed out together from the navigation course on Friday August 9, he was the only one of 11 graduates awarded a ‘special distinction’. Bob Dalkin was to recall Dick Wiesener, only a few years older than some of the others in the group, as almost a father figure to the unruly knockabout types on the course with him. ‘Although,’ Dalkin admitted, ‘we were a bit hard to control.’

Perhaps feeling that it would be sensible to spend some more time with the manual and charts, and get a good night’s sleep, Wiesener did not show up in the mess on Monday evening. Anticipating some navigational chores when he sat next to Hitchcock in the morning, he borrowed Dalkin’s brass divider before turning in. He did not join the others for a drink. Peter Fowler, who

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34 E. Joan Wiesener to CH, 19 Sept. 1977.
35 No. 8 NR course, NAA: A705, 208/14/58.
had been told he was to fly the next day to Mount Gambier and Adelaide in another Hudson with Ray Garrett and the photographer Frank Jefferies, had also retreated to prepare himself for taking the second seat. ‘We always had a couple of beers, we always had dinner, and it was the custom if you went flying,’ said Dalkin. ‘I talked to Hitchcock that night, I think with White, over a cup of coffee, and I remember we were quizzing Hitchcock about the aeroplane and this sort of thing.’

Next morning, as Dalkin and the others were wandering down to morning parade, A16-97 was already in the air. Charlie Crosdale was perched in the cabin, with Jack Palmer attending to the wireless apparatus in his cramped niche immediately behind the pilot’s seat, and Dick Wiesener alongside the pilot in the cockpit. Bob Hitchcock was in command and about to display for the most distinguished passengers he had ever flown just what his powerful new aircraft could do.

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36 Dalkin, interview, 18 April 1978.