5. His father’s son: Bob Hitchcock

In August 1940 anyone familiar with Australia’s recent aviation history would probably recognise the name Bob Hitchcock. Not the 28-year-old Flight Lieutenant Hitchcock who was trained to take the controls of the latest Hudson bombers to be delivered to the RAAF’s No. 2 Squadron. But his father, the tragedy of whose death while searching for Charles Kingsford-Smith’s missing *Southern Cross* had been on every Australian front page and silent cinema newsreel in 1929, and in books and countless articles in the years that followed. Henry Smith ‘Bob’ Hitchcock had perished with Keith Anderson in a futile attempt to find the aviation heroes Charles Kingsford-Smith and Charles Ulm. His name was perpetually inscribed alongside those of some of Australia’s most celebrated aviators.¹

Bob Hitchcock senior was born in Broken Hill in 1891. With his mother and 12 siblings he followed his father Harry in search of work to Adelaide and further west to Kalgoorlie, Perth, and Fremantle. Little is recorded of his childhood. He attended South Kalgoorlie Primary School until he was 12 or 13. His sister Pretoria remembered him about this time occasionally disappearing into his father’s workshop and reappearing with a tiny wooden aeroplane fashioned from a clothes peg. Other accounts suggest a continuing fascination with building model aircraft. Apprenticed as a bricklayer (his father’s trade), Bob — as he preferred to be known — did not complete the apprenticeship. By the time he married Violet Bourne in 1911 his parents had separated and his mother had settled in Perth with the younger children. Bobbie, as many people were wont to call him then, had worked briefly as a barber while hankering after a job that would use his mechanical talent. He found a position as a buggy driver for a mine manager’s family in Kalgoorlie and, when his employer, Ralph Nichols of the Great Boulder Perseverance, bought the town’s first motor car, he took the chauffeur’s seat. Later, according to Army records, he was a ‘labourer’ and a ‘blacksmith’s striker’.

When war came, Bob left Violet and two boys behind in Boulder City and enlisted early in 1915 for service abroad. Posted to C Company, the 28th Battalion, 7th Brigade, he was with the ANZACs at Gallipoli in the autumn. But within a few months he was stricken with bouts of fever, jaundice, and endocarditis. Several hospital stays brought no relief from ‘valvular heart disease’. He had suffered a minor wound but his condition was described as ‘Constitutional. Aggravated by Active Service.’ Poor nutrition and pneumonia from prolonged exposure had severely weakened him. He had hopes of being accepted for the Royal

Flying Corps but allegedly ‘owing to his weight’ that was not to be. Pronounced ‘permanently unfit for service’ and totally incapacitated from earning ‘a full livelihood in the general labour market’, he was shipped home from Egypt in April 1916. His luck was in. By war’s end the 28th Battalion had the fifth-highest casualty rate in the AIF. Further medical examination in Fremantle confirmed the Cairo diagnosis but concluded that Hitchcock was now fit for less-strenuous occupations. He was discharged in May 1916 and awarded a pension of 16 shillings a fortnight. Eventually Bob found work at the Ivanhoe Gold Mine in Kalgoorlie then drove trucks for the Salvation Army Hope Service in Perth. Building on some experience he had enjoyed with the Atlas Engineering Company in Fremantle and occasional workshop repairs in Kalgoorlie, he was to become a largely self-taught but exceptionally skilled and creative mechanic.

Records, recriminations, and rescues

In 1922 Hitchcock found employment as a ground engineer in Major Norman Brearley’s Western Australian Airways, a ‘small & economical’ venture according to Lieutenant General Sir Brudenell White who visited the workshops in April 1923. There Bob would meet two young war flyers in search of work and fortune, Keith Anderson and Charles Kingsford-Smith. His destiny was inextricably linked thereafter with the two men whose record-seeking adventures were to fascinate Australia in the years that followed. Caught up in the enthusiasms of Smithy and Anderson, in 1926 he drew on his slender savings to join them in attempting to start a new air service from Port Moresby further into the New Guinea highlands where gold had been discovered. The New Guinea venture was Bob’s idea. While his two associates were vainly attempting to break the Perth to Sydney flying record, he had done much of the organising and had even secured his miner’s right. Sadly it came to nothing. Smithy, at first keen, was deterred by photographs of the unfriendly terrain. Moving across the country

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4 White diary, 20 April 1923, White MSS, NLA MS 5172/9.

to Sydney with two superseded Bristol Tourers bought from Norman Brearley in January 1927, the three men had thoughts of running a transcontinental air service.

Smithy, Anderson and Bobby Hitchcock with the Marshalls of Smith’s Weekly, Maylands Aerodrome, Perth
(Courtesy of Ian Hitchcock)

Later that year Kingsford-Smith flew around the country in a record-making attempt with a new associate, Charles Ulm, who had displaced Anderson. Hitchcock happily accompanied a disgruntled Anderson and an observer, Charles Vivian, in the second Bristol. Their passenger was the representative of George A. Bond & Co., hosiery manufacturers, with whom Ulm had secured a sponsorship deal.

In the days that followed, Bob was to have a devastating shock. He had given up his job on the understanding that he was to take part in the world’s first east-west trans-Pacific flight. But when it came time to depart for the United States he was dropped from the team to make room for Ulm. Anderson too was eventually dumped. Believing themselves to have been the victims of broken promises, depriving them of places in the epic 1928 flight and the fame and financial reward that followed, both Hitchcock and Anderson had a bitter falling out with ‘Smithy’ and Ulm, now Smithy’s business partner. After prolonged
recrimination and litigation the fractured relations remained unhealed. A 'gentlemen’s agreement' and a cheque for £1000 — repayment of what he had invested in the enterprise — had helped soften Anderson’s pain. Hitchcock was not so fortunate, eventually in March 1929 losing a costly and humiliating court battle over Smithy’s alleged and subsequently denied pledge that ‘on our return to Sydney we’ll pay you a thousand pounds for dropping you out’. The two teams went their separate ways. Bob scratched a living in Sydney with casual work as a mechanic. He boarded in a room at the Customs House Hotel in Macquarie Place. Whenever he could, he sent money back to support the family in Western Australia. In 1928 he and Anderson had set out on their own attempt to fly to Britain in record-breaking time. They got as far as Darwin, where they crash landed their Bristol. Hitchcock’s left leg was badly gashed and the wound, slow to heal, became infected.

On 30 March 1929, Kingsford-Smith, Ulm, and two companions took off from Sydney in their famous aircraft, the Southern Cross, to fly across the continent on the first leg of a round-the-world flight. Meanwhile Anderson, with Hitchcock’s aid, had been secretly planning a record-breaking 24-hour solo endurance flight in his own small aircraft, a Westland Widgeon III, which he had christened the Kookaburra. At the RAAF base at Richmond in New South Wales they were ready to set off when news came that the Southern Cross had disappeared somewhere in northwest Australia. Whatever their differences had been, Anderson — ‘the Dreamer’ as he was known at Mascot — had an abiding affection for Smithy.

While others dithered over the organisation of a search he was sure he could find his old friends. After a whip-around, Jack Cantor, publican of the Customs House Hotel and former business associate of Smithy’s, made up an offer of £500 to defray the cost of a search.

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7 According to Dick Smith, nurses at Alice Springs hospital had told Charles Eaton, the RAAF officer heading the search for the lost flyers, of a blood-poisoned arm. Fitzsimons, citing no authority, refers to a bandaged right arm. But Nurse Annie Inglis deposed that she treated and bandaged Hitchcock’s leg; and Sgt Eric Douglas, second in command of F/Lt Charles Eaton’s RAAF search party, referred to a bandaged left leg. (Report on Operations in Connection with Search for, and Burial of, Lieutenant Anderson and Mr. Hitchcock’, Apps VIII and IX, NAA: A705, 21/1/84 Pt 3; ‘Final Version of the Search 1958’, unpublished MS, courtesy of Sally Douglas).
8 Milton Kent to Eric Douglas, 19 June 1958, courtesy Dr Charles Eaton.
9 A £500 contract between Anderson and Cantor, requiring private progress reports, was found among Anderson’s papers (The Mercury, 28 May 1929).
Anderson was on the verge of launching a new career with Hitchcock as a roving promotional team for a suit of flying gear designed and manufactured by George Bond. There was another sponsorship agreement with Smith’s Weekly. For Hitchcock the job with the American businessman meant the chance of some financial security for the first time in his life. But a quick telephone call from Anderson and the offer of a fee of £100 changed his priorities. Though still nursing his injured leg, and weakened by blood poisoning, he did not hesitate. They would search for the men they still thought of, in spite of their acrimonious recent history, as friends. Bond, the managing director of a firm soon to be nationally renowned for its ‘Chesty’ Bond brand, had given Kingsford-Smith and Ulm athletic singlets and woollen underwear the previous year for their Pacific flight. Bond had used the endorsements of the famous flyers in his advertising. He was happy to give Hitchcock and Anderson, who had made the first ‘commercial’ flight with his advertising manager in 1927, leave to defer taking up their appointment as company ambassadors. Perhaps unwilling to let it be known how desperately poor he was, on March 13 Bobby had already pawned his only valuable possession, a gold watch and chain.
with a small nugget pendant, for £2.10.0. 10 Jack Cantor had paid £100, to be treated as a loan, covering Hitchcock’s arrears at the Customs House Hotel. The loan probably would have been discharged had Bobby forgone his fee for accompanying Anderson on the rescue mission. Still he could not afford a warm coat; he left Richmond in a shabby woollen suit, scarf, and flying helmet.

The extra fuel tank Anderson had installed in the front cockpit of the *Kookaburra* meant that they could cover the long distances. But to reduce the time it would take to reach the supposed location of the *Southern Cross*, Anderson departed from the safe overland telegraph route and took a shorter course over the Tanami Desert. He could not foresee the navigational error in seven hours flying from Alice Springs with Hitchcock’s second-hand compass — the instrument, poorly adjusted, further affected by the theft of spare parts and tools that had been stowed close to it. Perhaps he should have planned for a mechanical failure, such as a faulty push-rod coming loose, and a forced landing in the desert. Ultimately, not carrying a radio or enough water, or an axe or shovel, sealed the would-be rescuers’ fate. Unable to clear the scrub that surrounded them, they could not take off again or tell anyone of their plight.

The *Southern Cross* and its crew were eventually found, relatively unharmed, though allegations that their disappearance had been a publicity stunt persisted in spite of a subsequent inquiry into the ‘Coffee Royal’ affair that cleared Smithy and Ulm. Anderson and Hitchcock were lost somewhere in the spinifex and termite mounds of the Tanami Desert where they had made an emergency landing on April 10. Hitchcock had repaired the engine, but they could not get the aircraft back into the air. An unsuccessful RAAF search for the missing men led by Flight Lieutenant Charles Eaton resulted in the loss of three out of five obsolete World War 1 D.H.9a aircraft. Eaton’s own plane, A1-1, the RAAF’s first, had caught fire in the air and crash landed at Tennant Creek. Not till April 21 did Lester Brain, an RAAF reserve pilot working for the fledgling outback airline QANTAS, locate the tiny *Kookaburra*. The Sydney Citizens Relief Committee had raised £7000 with which to compensate a reluctant Hudson Fysh of Qantas for the use of an aircraft and Brain’s services. Brain had met Hitchcock and Anderson in Townsville on their round-Australia flight. He could scarcely believe the recklessness of their rescue mission. He knew the Tanami area well, having flown an American gold hunter there a few years earlier. With the benefit of his directions, a group on horseback guided by RAAF aircraft and Aboriginal trackers reached the scene over a week later.11

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10 Believing the watch to have been stolen, the Commonwealth Investigation Department located it three months later in a Paddington pawnshop (*Barrier Miner*, 2 Aug. 1929, *The Mercury*, 3 Aug. 1929).

Eaton’s party, who had themselves been fortunate to survive an appalling journey, buried the two men where they found them. The harrowing final days of Anderson and Hitchcock were partly recorded by Anderson in a diary scrawled on the aircraft’s rudder. Hitchcock’s Bible, found on the starboard wing under which he lay in his underpants and singlet, gave some hope that, as a devout member of the Church of Christ, he had not perished without consolation.

The 37-year-old ‘Air Mechanic H. S. Hitchcock’, as the newspapers described Lieutenant Anderson’s companion, left a widow, Violet, living in Victoria Park, Perth with three sons: Robert Edward (almost seventeen), Albert Leslie (fifteen), and Henry Smith (fourteen, named after his father).

In the words of the Register News Pictorial, Bob Hitchcock’s widow and children were ‘not in good circumstances’. There were also two surviving brothers and five married sisters to mourn Bob. Although there were tensions between Violet and her in-laws, they were united in rejecting the idea of erecting a memorial to the two Kookaburra heroes in central Australia. If there were to be a memorial, they said, far better that it be in Perth, where both men had relatives and friends.
But first the families understandably wished that the bodies should be brought home for re-burial. While arrangements were made for Anderson, it was not at first clear who would bear the cost of repatriating Hitchcock’s body or, indeed, whether it might not be necessary initially for an inquest to be held, perhaps in Alice Springs. From Canberra came the insensitive news that no action had been taken by the Commonwealth government which was awaiting information about the financial position of the families. Nothing would be promised ‘unless it is informed they are in necessitous circumstances’. The Perth Aero Club promptly sent a telegram to the Prime Minister, Stanley Bruce, affirming that the Hitchcock family was in need of assistance. Bob’s brother Stan had already written on behalf of his siblings and parents asking that ‘our hero brother and son’s body’ be brought back to Perth as soon as possible ‘so that we will be able to pay our dear one last respects’.

After a week of deliberation, the Prime Minister’s public service advisers concluded on 2 May 1929 that there was nothing to distinguish this case from many similar ones in which lives had been lost in an attempt to save others. The Commonwealth had not granted assistance previously. To do so now would be to establish a precedent that ‘might be attended by embarrassing consequences in the future’. Government indifference to the plight of the widow and her three sons presumably would be attended only by tolerable embarrassment. If help were to be given from Canberra it would have to be without publicity. These were the same advisers who had earlier issued a press release over the Prime Minister’s name announcing that the government would, if funds from private subscription were insufficient, provide assistance for a search for Lieutenant Anderson ‘and his mechanic’. Eventually, pressed by MPs, especially John Curtin from Fremantle, and shamed by public reaction, the government sent an expedition to exhume the bodies and return them to their families. Anderson was in due course given a magnificent state funeral in Sydney with military honours and an aerial salute. Bob Hitchcock, at his widow’s request, was buried quietly and privately at Karrakatta Cemetery in Perth. Kingsford-Smith had already left for England the day after the Committee of Inquiry had cleared him, his absence never to be forgotten by the Hitchcock family.

Unbeknown to the government and to the public at large, Violet Hitchcock had long been estranged from her husband. Although she had let it be thought by relatives that Bob had deserted her and left her destitute, the truth was that she had formed another relationship while he was pursuing business ventures in eastern Australia. News of his wife’s changed circumstances had come to Bob in a shocking way. He received a letter from her doctor asking for his permission

12 Register News Pictorial, 25 April 1929 (courtesy of Ian Hitchcock).
14 Joyce Batty, unpublished memoirs, Been There Done That, Ch. 15, p.45, courtesy of Bob Landt.
for her to have a hysterectomy. Realising the seriousness of the operation he travelled back to Perth by train only to discover Violet at the hospital in the company of another man. A distressed Bob, mindful of his church’s teachings on the sanctity of marriage, would not agree to a divorce. He went back to Sydney.

A photograph of an unidentified dark-haired young woman, found with his Bible near his body, suggests that Bob might have found happiness there. Nevertheless he continued, whenever he could, to send remittances to Violet to support the boys. Les would say in later years that money from his father came ‘seldom’. But, although his income was unpredictable and never substantial, Bob had always done his best to provide for his family. When he filled in his Army enlistment form in 1915, he had struck out the required standard three-fifths allocation of his pay to wife and children and inserted four-fifths. After the war and until his death, Violet had drawn Bob’s partial Service pension of about a guinea a week, as well as the seventeen shillings she was entitled to for herself and the children. Now she faced the prospect of caring for her children with the primary source of funds from an honourable husband greatly reduced.

The will to succeed

Violet Hitchcock could not rely on government to meet her needs. On seeking to collect her family’s pension a week after Bob disappeared, she had been refused his money because she declined to certify that to the best of her belief he was alive. The Repatriation Commissioner had intervened to insist that she receive the money until her husband’s death was proved. It was a short reprieve. And for a widow in Perth there would be no other pension. In New South Wales a widows’ pension scheme (restricted to widowed mothers of children under fourteen) had been introduced in 1926. Western Australia had not followed suit; and it was not until 1942 that the Commonwealth legislated for the nation as a whole. In time Violet found work with the Perth Electric Tramways Office. But a way in which the family’s circumstances could be improved immediately

15 Eaton’s inventory of items found in and around the Kookaburra records these words on the back of the photograph in the Bible: ‘No 233. Madigans Pharmacy, Bondi Junction.’ A second photograph found at the scene was of a child, taken in Hill St, Blayney in March 1929, and inscribed ‘Wishing you the best of luck.’ Bob Muir, the Blayney garage proprietor, had refuelled the Kookaburra free of charge; Dick Jackson, one of Muir’s salesmen, lent Anderson and Hitchcock a leather coat (‘Royal Australian Air Force — Report on operations in connection with search for, and burial of, Lieutenant Anderson and Mr Hitchcock’, NAA: A9376, 48; and see http://www.janesoceania.com/australia_historical_truestories, accessed 31 March 2012).
16 Attestation Paper, 4 March 1915, NAA: B2455 HITCHCOCK H 441. The background to the Hitchcocks’ separation was provided to Ian Mackersey by Bobby’s nephews.
17 The Advocate, 29 April 1929.
was by securing the employment and prospects of the boys. Norman Brearley, Hitchcock’s unashamedly parsimonious former employer, was to recall that Bob was, like many other employees in the company, ‘reliable and efficient, but I knew nothing of their family affairs’.19 Brearley, sensitive to public opinion, had sent up a number of his own aircraft in the search for Bob and Keith Anderson. However, the surviving widow and her sons, none of whom he had met, were not his problem.

Fortunately friends and neighbours rallied to support the bereaved family. The local baker instructed his bread carter to leave loaves at the Hitchcock house every day whether Mrs Hitchcock said she needed them or not. And there was to be no charge. Bob, the oldest boy, born on 19 June 1912, had earlier been taken under the wing of Bob Pritchard, a meat-carting contractor who lived several doors away in Victoria Park. Pritchard had three school-age sons of his own but sympathised with the Hitchcocks’ precarious financial situation. ‘The job was a sinecure,’ Bob’s brother Les, 15 months younger and the inheritor of the seat on the cart, recalled, ‘because all Bob had to do was sit on the contractor’s truck and keep the contractor company and listen to his amateur singing while they travelled between the abattoir and Perth’s butcher shops.’

The diminutive Les (5 feet 6½ inches and 8½ stone), incapable of lifting, let alone carrying, a 150 to 200 pound quarter of beef, was being paid £2 a week for accompanying the meat truck. It was time for Bob to move on.

Employment as a delivery boy with Perth’s Bon Marché department store came first. Then the manager of the Yellow Cab company took him on as a messenger. Harry too was working for Yellow Cabs. The boys quickly showed their mettle in declining to accept their workmates’ proposal to launch a memorial fund in honour of their father: ‘…dad left us mum to look after. We will work and do what he wanted’.20 Happily for Bob, within a short time he was given the chance to exchange his office clothes for overalls. He could therefore properly be described as a garage hand (greaser) when, the day before his eighteenth birthday, he enlisted for six years in the RAAF.21

With his father’s technical prowess as example, and the encouragement of his mother, herself once a keen passenger on flights to the northwest with her husband, he had set his sights on joining the Air Force. Shortly after his father’s death he had asked his local MP, John Curtin, for help. Curtin’s friendship with the Scullin government’s Minister for Defence, A. E. ‘Texas’ Green, MP for Kalgoorlie, may have been crucial. Green had been instrumental in securing

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19 Sir Norman Brearley to CH, 30 March, 9 April 1982.
20 Barrier Miner, 2 May 1929.
21 NAA: A9300, HITCHCOCK RE Unless otherwise indicated, details of Hitchcock’s service record are from this file.
a training scheme for RAAF pilots and in adding to the Air Force’s exiguous complement of aircraft. More important, he earned the gratitude of Air Commodore Richard ‘Dicky’ Williams, the Chief of the Air Staff, for resisting the push, led by the influential former Chief of the General Staff Sir Brudenell White, to end the RAAF’s autonomous existence and amalgamate separate elements with the Navy and the Army.22

Bob Hitchcock was later to tell fellow airmen that his mother had been assured that he and his brothers, who were both to follow him, would be taken into the RAAF when they were old enough. Initially he applied for a cadetship but he was informed that he did not possess the necessary educational qualifications. It was not for want of effort. He had already been motivated to learn carpentry, blacksmithing, tin-smithing, and mechanical drawing. Then at Perth Technical College he had passed a day engineering apprenticeship course. In his free time he was an active member of the Perth Rover Crew. In January 1929, with his friend Les Lingwood he attended an All Australian Scout Corroboree celebrating the centenary of the settlement of Western Australia, including a four-day camp and hike at Dwellingup in the state’s southwest.

The practised photographer Bob Hitchcock ensures the sun is on his face, with friends at Scout Jamboretta, Dwellingup, January 1929

(Courtesy of Les Lingwood)

This was a youth determined to better himself. Finally he augmented his credentials for a Service career during a year as a senior cadet in the Citizen Military Force, 28th (infantry) Battalion, his father’s old unit. John Curtin, who continued to take a close interest in young Bob’s progress, had no hesitation in pulling the strings necessary to ensure that his application to the Air Force was successful. The recruit’s attestation form noted that he was enlisted by ‘special authority’ number AS. 9139 on 18 June 1930.

Past the doorstep of the service at last, like all new recruits Bob Hitchcock was numbered (115), then measured and medically scrutinised in Perth by a military doctor, Colonel Douglas McWhae. Fair complexion, light brown hair, blue eyes, and a small mole right of the lower end of the spine were noted. At 5' 5¾" and 120 lbs, with a 32" chest, he was shorter and no heavier than his puny younger brother. But a five-inch chest expansion suggested vigorous good health. In fact it was testimony to a regime of jogging, press-ups, knee bends, and other exercises prescribed by the American mail-order body-building expert Earle E. Liederman. The results were achieved by adherence to the philosophy and techniques embodied in Liederman’s best-selling illustrated booklet, Muscular Development, assisted by repetitive use of a chest expander. Whatever else he would become, Bob was not going to be a despised weakling.

Starting as an aircraft hand 1 labourer, recruit Hitchcock completed his initial training and obtained a trade certificate. He was awarded a special distinction pass in the storekeepers’ ammunition course in February 1932. Then, with acceptance as an officer cadet in mind, he embarked on the long academic journey to achieve the requisite mathematical and language qualifications. Harry and then Les Hitchcock, who enlisted in June 1938 and July 1940 respectively, heard of Bob’s progress during the next three years. Officers and men at Laverton:

used to take bets and run sweepstakes on just when Hitchcock would crack up or, if not, which of his three major activities he would relinquish. They were (a) his HEAVY job as an AHG [aircraft hand general], stacking bombs, unloading tenders, etc.; and (b) his university studies; or (c) his personal campaign for physical fitness.

There were no sweepstake winners. After three years of part-time study, Bob earned an intermediate certificate at the examination conducted by Melbourne

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23 CPD, House of Representatives, 14 Aug. 1940.
24 The ‘magic words’: ‘Son of late “Bobby” Hitchcock who lost his life with Lieutenant Anderson whilst searching for Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith’ which Tink (Air Disaster, p.133) suggests would have explained Hitchcock’s successful passage through the cadet course to his supposedly puzzled contemporaries were not ‘endorsed’ on his personnel file. They were remarks added in a posthumously compiled record of service [NAA: A9300, HITCHCOCK RE].
University, passing in mathematics and French, and was advanced to a general classification in February 1933. He had worked hard with the aid of the RAAF education officer.  

26 Eighteen months later he was promoted to corporal and mustered as an AC 1 storekeeper in the tool store at No. 1 Aircraft Depot, Technical Squadron.  

27 It was there that Bob met Rex Taylor who was to become for a while his room-mate and his closest friend for the next five years. Rex was himself a fitter destined for a stellar Air Force career. When he arrived in early 1934 he found that because ‘the majority of the other airmen were much older, Bob and I and a few others tended to seek each other’s company’. Bob was ‘a likeable and pleasant fellow but extremely quiet and reserved…even within this relatively small group these characteristics were noticeable. Nevertheless, he remained popular because his inherent honesty and integrity far outweighed any minor shortcomings.’  

Among the Melbourne circle were Len Bacon (later a Squadron Leader and armaments specialist), Ben Kennedy whose 10/12 Harley-Davidson was greatly envied, and Les Lingwood, the friend of Bob’s brother Les, who had attended the Scout Corroboree with Bob in 1929. Lingwood’s brothers-in-law, the Hirons brothers, also welcomed the new recruit. Jack Hirons, sharing Bob’s enthusiasm for photography, would himself soon enlist as an RAAF airman. When Bob had come to Victoria, his mother had asked family friends in Perth who had relatives in the Brunswick district (now part of Moreland), John and Olive Darlison, to look out for her son. He became a frequent weekend visitor at the Darlisons, befriending their two sons and two daughters. When his roommate Rex Taylor joined him there one day he was smitten by the Darlisons’ younger daughter, Nancy. Rex also came to meet Bob’s mother, ‘a kindly and affectionate person’, who was staying with the Darlisons while visiting Melbourne for a national conference of a ‘ladies’ fraternal order’. He was struck by the evident ‘warm and caring’ bond between Violet and Bob.  

28 Never having known his itinerant father well, Bob had drawn even closer to his widowed mother. He would travel back to Western Australia whenever he could. And as a permanent reminder of how much he cared for her, he would fashion the framework for a clock from the airscREW of an unserviceable Tiger Moth.  

26 Dr Richard Hosking, then the RAAF’s only education officer, was attached to No. 1 FTS at Point Cook (Air Board Agenda 1880, [April 1936] NAA: A4181, 13); Chris Clark, ‘Hosking, Richard (1877–1971)’, John Ritchie and Christopher Cunneen (eds), Australian Dictionary of Biography, vol. 14. MUP, 1996, p.501.  


29 Joyce Batty to CH, 7 April 1982. The clock was passed on to Les Hitchcock and eventually the treasured keepsake was presented to Joyce Batty’s son Christopher, who had flown a 50th anniversary flight of the Kookaburra.
While Rex was courting Nancy, Bob met and fell in love with the Darlisons’ friend Olive Blanche Beecroft. He was soon to learn of a family history very different from his own. Olive’s father Wilfred Beecroft, an emigrant from a coastal village in east Yorkshire, ran a small dairy farm at Koonwarra in South Gippsland. ‘It is rare to find a dairy farmer of any kind who is not prosperous’, the journalist and propagandist of emigration Harry Gullett had written in 1914. The son of a farm labourer and a domestic servant, Wilfred had certainly bettered himself in Australia. He had arrived in Australia as an infant in 1887 with his parents, a brother and a sister. Among the youngest of 17 children, one of whom died on the voyage, he moved with his father (also Wilfred) from

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Maryborough in Queensland, to Colac in Victoria, until they eventually settled at Koonwarra in 1899. On a small selection, the Beecroft family built a log house, extended it many times, grew onions, peas, and potatoes, and milked 100 cows.

It was to the tiny township of Koonwarra in 1909 that young Wilfred brought his 20-year-old bride, Olive Blanche Hoskings, the oldest of 12 children from Grantville, the tiny port town on Westernport Bay. Wilfred had also bought a farm and would follow his father in growing onions and milking a small dairy herd. A granddaughter, Joan Richardson, tells their story:

My grandfather was a very short small framed man, very quietly spoken. Aunt Mavis [Olive Hitchcock’s younger sister] once said she had never heard her father swear even having had 5 sons or amongst the roughest of men. I think my grandmother was a strong woman...My father would tell stories of how she rode horses side saddle or bare back, of attending the local women in childbirth, even swimming the horse through flooded rivers to do so (they were unsure when they would see their mother next). I gather being the eldest of a large family my grandmother had practical childbirth and mothercraft skills. (All of us were born at home on the kitchen floor my father would say).

All the children rode horses as soon as they could walk (which was the only way really for them to go to the local store, school, church) although grandma did have a horse and jinker.

Dad [Olive Beecroft’s brother Don] and his brother shared a pair of good boots, so only one could go to a dance/church at a time (although one never wore the boots the whole way for fear they would wear out too soon — you walked barefoot until you could see the building through the trees) — after all there were 3 pairs of feet to still grow into them.

Wilfred and Olive Blanche had seven children, five of them boys. The third child, named after her remarkable mother, was born in Leongatha in 1912. She had moved to Melbourne in search of work, probably boarding with an aunt, Emily Musicka. Olive was a regular visitor to the Taylor household. Tall and beautiful, as a young cousin remembered her, she was Bob Hitchcock’s first serious girlfriend, and his last. ‘We were not playboys by any means’, Rex Taylor recalled.31

Air cadet

Barely a month after his twenty-third birthday, six months after he re-applied for a cadetship, Bob Hitchcock was enlisted on 15 July 1935 as an Air Force Cadet, No. 1544. He had been passed fit by Squadron Leader E. A. Daley in March, and attested his willingness to serve for two years in the presence of the commanding officer of No. 1 Flight Training School, Point Cook, Wing Commander H. F. (‘Kanga’) De La Rue. He had confided in Rex Taylor his ambition to ‘endeavour to justify his father’s sacrifice, and untimely death, by aiming to qualify as a pilot through a flying cadetship’. His mother had spoken to the press about how he had ‘abstained from parties and smoking and drinking lest they unfit him for flying’. To have got so far was a notable achievement. He was among 22 candidates originally chosen from more than 800 applicants. There were other men with a trade background who were accepted for flying training but most remained in the ranks and in due course would graduate as sergeant pilots. There was one other conspicuous exception in this intake, Charles Houston, who had also come from Perth. As The Argus reported delicately, ‘Messrs Hitchcock and Houston are employed at present in junior positions at Laverton.’ Bob himself, exempted from the normal education test apart from map reading, had been passed for promotion to sergeant. But his ambition had always been commissioned rank. And if all went well in due course, after successfully completing a short service commission, possibly with the RAF, appointment to a permanent commission. In September 1935 there were just 88 men in the General Duties (aircrew) branch of the Permanent Air Force. As he began his training to join the branch, Bob Hitchcock was on the way with 27 fellow cadets to becoming one of a tiny elite.

Hitchcock’s personal file does not contain the cyclostyled ‘R.A.A.F. Interview Form (for cadetships)’ on which he would have been marked on ‘appearance and manners’, ‘intelligence, accuracy, general alertness, quickness observation,’ and ‘general promise of fitness for service’. Nor are the customary references on file. However, thanks to the ‘Flying Pupil’s Record of Progress’ (RAAF Form P/T 3), which has been retained, we have valuable information about the trainee’s year of instruction. After five years in the Service, with more practical
experience and local knowledge than many of the younger recruits, Hitchcock evidently had some difficulty adjusting to his new status. Class snobbery was rampant in the Air Force. As a former Cabinet minister was told two years later: ‘young pilots of 20 are being taught to look down upon mechanics as belonging to an inferior social caste’. 36 A month after he embarked on No. 18 Flying Training Course ‘A’, the former aircraftman’s ‘Record of Progress’ notes under the heading ‘Qualities as Officer’: ‘Inclined to be of the “old soldier” type, who might be inclined to lead the remainder of the cadets astray. Keeps to himself.’ 37 Possibly a little perplexed by the internal inconsistency in these comments the commanding officer concluded: ‘Must be interviewed in view of these remarks.’ The interview had more than the desired effect. A definite improvement was noted a month later: ‘has lost the “troop” complex…’ But now he was adjudged ‘timid’. By October, though he was ‘improving slowly’ and ‘reliable’, he showed ‘no outward signs of taking responsibility’. It was about this time that a mischievous Bob sent his mother a photograph of himself in the bush in an Earle Liederman body-building pose, wearing only a jockstrap and a smile. ‘Mum thought this unfunny but forgave him as he was the first-born’, the second-born son recorded.

Hitchcock’s instructors and lecturers found him an average pupil, attentive, hardworking, but slow to learn. ‘Thinks slowly’, his instructor, Flying Officer Ernie Hey, commented in March 1936. The contrast with some others in the group could not have been more marked. Robbie Watson from Adelaide, for example, six foot three and over 14 stone, a wrestler, apprenticed as a motor fitter: ‘an above average pilot...of above average intelligence with a fine intellect’, but ‘too many ideas of his own which do not fit into Service life...Has developed a know-all complex. Has been checked.’ Still, the bumptious Watson went solo on August 20. 38 Hitchcock was nearly three weeks behind, going solo on 9 September 1935, and passing the landing test on October 15. Before then his flying was assessed as slightly below average, then average. He was ‘timid’ it was again recorded. ‘Approaching & landing is his trouble’ but then ‘consistent improvement’ was noted. ‘Has good hands & feet. Lacks judgment of distance & height during a forced landing approach.’

The official language described a young man straining to keep up with the expectations of those who were responsible for his training. Gipsy Moths and then Westland Wapitis, obsolete light bombers that were being replaced as frontline aircraft by Hawker Demons, submitted reluctantly to his touch. Some

37 Hitchcock (b.1912) was several years older than most of the cadets: eg. T. H. Davies (b. 1917), R. F. Wiley and E. V. Read (b.1915).
38 Watson and fellow South Australian Phil Ford were flown home on leave when a group of Point Cook flight instructors took seven Moths to Adelaide in Dec. 1935 (The Advertiser, 16 Dec. 1935; www.sealikeglass.com/the-mystery/38-who-is-robbie/164-robert-arthur-mclister-watson, accessed on 1 Oct. 2011).
of his class, like Bill Keenan and Don Ashton-Shorter, were lucky enough to
learn about the Wapiti with Eric Douglas. Sergeant Douglas, who had buried
Bob’s father in the Tanami seven years earlier, was now an AI instructor who
had taught some of the RAAF’s best young pupils like Dixie Chapman, Tony
Carr, Sam Balmer, and Brian Walker.39

In his own struggle for mastery Hitchcock was not alone. Hughie Edwards,
a 20-year-old former office boy and Army private from Fremantle, had the
minimum necessary educational qualifications. He too found Point Cook a
challenge. ‘Chemistry I had never touched, theory of heat, theory of flight,
engineering, signals — all this was black magic to me.’ Edwards had never before
seen an aeroplane at close quarters; they were, he would recollect, ‘contraptions
beyond my comprehension’.40 But his clumsy landings were far outweighed in
RAAF evaluations by his prowess at cricket and Australian Rules football. And
perhaps there was a glimpse of the dash and valour that was to make him a
decade later Australia’s most decorated airman.41

Another fellow cadet, 19-year-old Julius ‘Dick’ Cohen, remembered that Bob
Hitchcock was very tentative, not careless, but cautious:

Half way through the first half of the course, that is about three or four
months in, he told me that his instructor was not very happy with him,
and was considering scrubbing him from the course. And I said: ‘Why
was that?’ And he said he can’t apparently co-ordinate well enough for
my [sic] very demanding instructor.

Cohen asked for an example. The answer was his ‘aerobatic insufficiency’.
Hoping to help, and with the advantage of all he had learned at Randwick
Public School, the selective Sydney boys’ high school, and many nights and
weekends in the NSW Public Library, Cohen tried to teach Hitchcock what he
knew. Cohen himself had been slow to master the elements of flying and, sensing
that he too might be scrubbed off the course, had begun to scrutinise civilian
job advertisements. It was ‘the blind leading the blind’, as he was to admit 62
years later, ‘teaching him the mechanics of a slow roll where the surfaces of the
aeroplane rudder change function…To see me instructing him on the floor of
my room, trying to explain how these change their function as we roll, I think
would have won an Oscar these days.’42

40 Hughie Edwards, typescript memoir, AWM: PR82/193.
42 Sir Richard Kingsland, interview, 19 April 2007, transcript courtesy Geoff Crane; Into the Midst of Things:
changed his name by deed poll in 1947 taking his mother’s new married name of Kingsland. For his wartime
exploits see Gerald Pynt (ed.), Australian Jewry’s Book of Honour World War II, Australian Federation of
Jewish Ex-Servicemen & Women, Netley (S.A.), [1974], pp.7–14.
Dramatically diverting though this assistance may have been, it seems to have made a difference, or at least coincided with improved performance. By February 1936, believing that he ‘is now a cadet whom it would be wise to polish up’, the instructing staff found Bob ‘considerably smarter’. He was trying to understand and overcome his faults, a lack of common sense, they said, and little initiative. What was manifest in the record of progress was that this was a working-class youngster with a simple Christian faith struggling to be comfortable in an environment that was both intellectually challenging and socially unfamiliar.

As an officer cadet Hitchcock was separated from the 10 airmen cadets on his course, many of them former workmates, LACs and one temporary corporal, Reginald Peverell, who were quartered together while undergoing training. Surrounded by the polished products of Wesley College, Scotch College, or Melbourne Grammar, he could scarcely have been at ease in the dinner jacket, starched dress shirt, and bow tie at the Thursday night mess dinners described by cadet Geoff Hartnell to his mother: after dinner, wine, a toast to the King, and fruit, all adjourned to the ante room ‘where black coffee is served & no one is supposed to talk shop, women or politics’. Cadets were expected to stay for at least three-quarters of an hour, and the talk was in practice mostly ‘shop’. And that was the expurgated version for parents. No hint of what Hughie Edwards would describe as ‘unloosed inhibitions’ at Guest Nights when the throng ‘prompted by Bacchus became real aces’. What went on, and was so challenging to an abstemious church-goer who could not afford to supplement his clothing allowance, is vividly depicted by Sir Richard Kingsland (as Dickie Cohen would become):

On Mess nights we cadets all felt under pressure to excel in boisterous behaviour, in order to demonstrate to each other, and to the staff and instructors, that none of us was a sissy. We used to engage in the usual silly games, ‘cock-fighting’ and so on. Worse than that, we’d risk life and limb by climbing up on the ceiling and over the rafters, at midnight, after we had consumed quite a few beers. There were other dangerous practices, such as having motorcycle races around the block or the oval in the early hours of the morning, at high speed, and all without helmets or protective clothing. Inevitably there were some casualties — never deaths, but certainly injuries.44

43 G. C. Hartnell to his mother, 23 Jan. 1936, Hartnell MSS, courtesy of AVM Hartnell. For the Point Cook regime as experienced by one of the immediately following intake, see Gordon Olive and Dennis Newton, The Devil at 6 O’Clock: An Australian Ace in the Battle of Britain, Australian Military History Publications, Loftus 2001, pp.1–12. For the wardrobe and other requisites (‘including evening dress if in your possession’) to be brought by a cadet when reporting to commence duty, see Secretary, Air Board to N. Ford Jr, 29 May 1935 (Ford, Norman Philip 0339 NAA A12372, R/339/P). On the cadets’ mess in 1938: Rollo Kingsford-Smith, I Wouldn’t Have Missed it for Quids, self-published, Exeter (NSW), 1999, p.17; R. Kingsford-Smith, telephone interview, 15 March 2009.
Amid all this roistering Hitchcock was, it was observed, ‘very quiet and reserved. Keeps apart from other cadets.’ His practical instructors had reported at the beginning that he worked very well but was ‘inclined to be shy’. If aeronautical theory was taxing his brain, and solo flying was testing his skill and courage, staying awake during Wing Commander Fred Knight’s Friday afternoon class on ‘Discipline and Law’ was another big challenge. What the instructing staff, including the redoubtable Sergeant R. J. Parker, observed in class and in the air, Bob’s peers experienced in the mess. Their language was identical. Colin Hannah, another contemporary, found him ‘very quiet reserved and studious’. By contrast Hughie Edwards, who had arrived from Western Australia as a gangling loner, would shrug off his Methodist inhibitions and forge strong friendships with fellow cadets Joe Godsell and Dick Cohen. Edwards was soon enjoying weekends in their company, even ‘holding up the bar’ at the Hotel London in Elizabeth Street. On one unforgettable occasion Edwards, Godsell, and three other miscreants (Tom Harvey, R. K. Hedrick, and B. G. Braithwaite), transgressed by carousing in a bedroom after a guest night and earned themselves seven days confinement to barracks. For their mess mate Bob Hitchcock, a communicant member of the Church of Christ, both the crime and the penalty were nigh unthinkable.

Graduate blues

Hitchcock’s personal file does not contain the ‘Report on a Pupil Pilot on Passing out from an "ab initio" Flying Training Course’ which would have provided full details of his examination performance and his evaluation by the commander of the Cadet Squadron, ‘Dad’ Bladin. We know, however, that he was awarded his flying badge on 16 June 1936, discarded the cadet’s white band around his cap, and was posted along with seven of his fellow graduates to No. 3 (Army Co-operation) Squadron at Richmond in New South Wales. There he emerged as a pilot officer on 11 July 1936. Others in the class of 1936 at No. 3 Squadron were Pilot Officers Gerry Buscombe, Don Ashton-Shorter, Phil Ford, Bill Allshorn, Thomas Davies, and Geoff Quinan. Seven of their cohort: Wally Williams, Harry Daish, Robbie Watson, Alan Sisley, Alan Pitfield, Tom Harvey,

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and Hughie Edwards embarked for the United Kingdom for a two-year spell in the RAF. Colin Hannah, assessed as above the average ‘particularly in powers of leadership and command’, went to No. 22 Squadron.

At No. 3 Squadron the new pilots would in theory be learning dive-bombing and gunnery, assisting with anti-aircraft gun co-operation, and undertaking photographic reconnaissance and survey, mostly the latter. As the neophytes began their lives as operational flyers it was not long before Hitchcock came to notice. Rex Taylor told the story that his friend ‘celebrated his graduation by putting an aircraft across the Geelong Road fence on his first flight on his first posting’. Unfortunately Taylor appears to have conflated an accident eight weeks after Bob’s arrival at Richmond with another rather later incident. The official records show that on 10 September 1936 Pilot Officer Hitchcock was at the controls of a Demon (A1-10) that came to grief on landing. Hitchcock emerged unscathed but his companion AC1 E. S. Banks suffered abrasions and shock as the aircraft swung to port and turned over, landing on its nose and causing extensive damage to the airframe and tearing the reduction gear from the engine.

It seems that there was real concern about the new pilot’s flying. As Dick Cohen remembered hearing from friends in No. 3 Squadron:

…it was common knowledge that Hitchcock had been taken off flying and it was recommended by his flight commander and squadron commander and Group Captain Cole that he should go off flying… And I thought that this would probably save his life, because he was apparently so appallingly bad.

47 ACdre (Sir) H. I. Edwards VC etc., Australia’s most decorated airman, retired from the RAF in 1963. H. C. Daish also stayed with the RAF, becoming a key member of the Photographic Development Unit flying reconnaissance Spitfires, then CO 27 (Beaufighter) Squadron in India, retiring as a Group Captain in 1954 (Dennis Newton, A Few of ‘The Few’, Australians and the Battle of Britain, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1990, pp.22–3, 117–8). A/g S/Ldr W. C. Williams relinquished his RAF commission in March 1943 and re-joined the RAAF until discharged in 1946. F/O T. F. Harvey (Sch. of Air Nav., No. 23 Trg Grp) relinquished his commission because of ill-health. F/Lt A. L. Pitfield, in a Fairey Battle of 88 Squadron attacking the pontoon bridges at St Valery in June 1940, was shot down from the ground and killed. P/O R. A. McL. Watson crashed and died on a night training flight in bad weather in Jan. 1937. WCdr A. F. M. Sisley was killed in Aug. 1944 in the crash of an RAF No. 550 Squadron Lancaster, on a mission to bomb a V-2 rocket store (www.ww2chat.com/biographies/5833-raf-australians-wing-commander-alan-francis-moir-sisley.html). Much of this information is drawn from Ann Brech’s splendid website www.sealikeglass.com (accessed 1 Oct. 2011).

48 Hannah, Colin Thomas: Service Number 0338, NAA: A12372, R/338/PH.


50 NAA: MP187/3, Box 1, reference courtesy Dr Chris Clark. A search by Leslie Weatherall reveals no reference to E. S. Banks in the control records for casualty reports (A2408, 32/3, subject registration booklets for the Department of Air correspondence files [CRS A705, 1922-1960]; Casualties Airmen, 32/3/1 to 32/3/815). Banks, like Hitchcock a member of the Church of Christ, appears to have been discharged from the RAAF and re-enlisted in June 1935 [NAA: A9301, 205436; A10605, 78/1]. A1-10 was damaged beyond repair on 19 Dec. 1936 when the engine failed at 8000 feet (www.adf-serials.com/2a1.shtml).

51 Kingsland, interview, 3 April 2007, transcript courtesy Geoff Crane.
Wilfred Compagnoni, then a flight lieutenant in No. 3 Squadron and acknowledged as ‘a highly qualified flight instructor’, would recount how serious matters were. ‘After spending quite a few hours with him I realised that he would not make a pilot. It would have taken many hours and patience to make him even reasonably safe in an aeroplane.’ Although the exact circumstances are unclear, Compagnoni was to recall that Flight Lieutenant Bertie Simms, temporarily in command of No. 3 Squadron, had told him to do what he could with Hitchcock. It was an unwanted brief from an officer not known for his patience.52

With the squadron reduced to one flight as a result of reorganisation of the Richmond base, Compagnoni had been the station signals officer for a year while nominally commanding the inactive B flight. Given the command of A flight in April 1936, he was charged with Hitchcock’s further training. ‘After spending many sessions with him trying to get him to approach and land,’ Compagnoni said, ‘he came in downwind one day and about 30 miles too fast and tried to put the aircraft down.’ The result, summarised in a table of accidents prepared for the Director of Training, was a ‘slightly injured’ aircraftman and an ‘extensively damaged’ aircraft that had swung and overturned.53 It was too much for the flight commander, himself a talented and exacting flyer who had just won the annual bombing competition at Laverton on behalf of the squadron as well as the NSW aerial derby in a Demon the previous year.54 He reported that he was not prepared to continue. ‘We were paraded to the Station Commander and he said that he would report the matter.’

On 10 September 1936 Pilot Officer Robert Edward Hitchcock was charged with ‘Neglecting to obey an order in that he did land Demon A1-10 contrary to orders’. Notwithstanding the vagueness of the charge — was he acting contrary to a specific order or a standing order by landing downwind and too fast, or to a signal from the ground to go around again? — he was reprimanded by the Station Commander, Group Captain Adrian Cole MC DFC, and forfeited one day’s pay. Hitchcock was badly shaken by the whole experience. Found wanting by ‘King’ Cole, a wartime ace and one of the RAAF’s founding fathers, his confidence in himself as a pilot was shattered. Cole had been the CO at No. 1 Aircraft Depot when the fatherless recruit joined the Air Force five years earlier. Perhaps Cole had never been happy about the way in which the young tradesman had been foisted upon him. Was this a problem that he had long predicted, and an opportunity to rid the Service of someone whom he believed should never have been admitted in the first place? Someone who certainly should not have been allowed to advance into the ranks of the cadets.

54 Compagnoni’s activities are documented in No. 3 Squadron Operations Record Book, NAA: A9186, 1; his personnel file in the A9300 series; Air Board Agenda 1898 [June 1936], NAA: A4181, 13; and Derek Roylance, Air Base Richmond: The Story of the RAAF base on the Hawkesbury, RAAF Base Richmond, 1991, p.47. His foresight as Director of Signals in 1938 in preparing specifications for Australian production of radio equipment is documented in Hall, A Saga of Achievement, p.285.
‘King’ Cole reprimanded Hitchcock and recommended his termination

(ELLISON MSS, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA MS1882/7/216)

Whatever Cole’s motives, Hitchcock felt that he had been unfairly treated. Intimidated as he must have been in the authoritative and assured presence of Cole, towering over him at 6’ 4 1/2”, it was Compagnoni whom he held directly responsible for his misfortune. His flight commander, whom he could look directly in the eye, was just two years older but five years his senior in the Service. From an Italian-Danish immigrant farming family settled at Wondai, 150 miles west of Brisbane, Compagnoni had moved to the city to complete his high school education before enlisting in 1930. He had done well in the RAAF and had recently been granted a permanent commission. Twice in the past few months he had been temporary CO of the squadron, and he was soon to begin a succession of staff and command appointments.
As retired Group Captain Compagnoni was later to admit, Hitchcock ‘pointed the bone at me. I was on his back.’ But there was no hint that Compagnoni might bear some of the responsibility for the novice pilot officer’s poor performance when the commanding officer at Richmond forwarded an adverse report to the Air Member for Personnel. Air Commodore Hazleton Nicholl, an RAF officer on exchange with the RAAF’s Air Commodore S. J. Goble, recommended to the Air Board that Hitchcock’s probationary appointment be terminated with effect from 9 October 1936. Nicholl’s submission was terse and damning. Hitchcock, he wrote:

...is reported to have stated that he knows himself to be incapable of piloting Demon aircraft successfully, in spite of the fact that he was warned that such a statement might affect his future employment in the Royal Australian Air Force. He has had 15 hours flying on this type.

The Station Commander, Richmond, recommends that he is temperamentally unsuited to become an efficient pilot. After examination of this officer’s training reports, I accept this view, and concur with the recommendation.

A Hawker Demon over Port Melbourne: an aircraft Bob Hitchcock thought himself incapable of piloting
(The Jack McNally collection, courtesy of Wendy Coultas)

Normally, the Air Board might be expected to endorse such an unequivocal recommendation about the fate of an individual officer. It came from a respected and responsible Board member. ‘Daddy’ Nicholl was an RAF veteran. Allowed into the Royal Flying Corps at the late age of 33 through the influence of the
GOC, his relative Sir David Henderson, he had served in a series of post-war senior training and personnel posts. Yet when the Board met on 29 September 1936 they were not of a mind to agree with their British colleague. With Dicky Williams, now an Air Vice Marshal, in the chair, supported by Air Commodore W. H. ‘Mucker’ Anderson, it was decided ‘to defer consideration of the A. M. P’s recommendation for the present’. The deferment formula was in character for the ‘nice’ but habitually indecisive Anderson who was seen by one of his senior staff as generally ‘loath to take disciplinary action’. It was no doubt a surprise for ‘King’ Cole, who would have expected his old friend and fellow Naval and Military Club member Anderson to endorse his judgment. It was a face saver for Nicholl. But the CAS would have had the decisive voice. Williams knew very well who Hitchcock was and had made some enquiries of his own. He might well have caught a whiff of concoction about a disciplinary charge being brought against a young pilot whose accident was by no means unique. He was not persuaded that Hitchcock was a lost cause. If he could not be saved, then he would at least be allowed a more dignified exit than an involuntary termination.

In a minute paper prepared nearly six months later, P. E. ‘Johnnie’ Coleman, the long-serving Secretary of the Air Board, recorded the thinking underlying the decisions that were taken:

The Board noted that P/O HITCHCOCK obtained better than an average pass at No. 1 F. T. S., and in qualities as a pilot was awarded 68%, also that the crash in question, due to a bad landing, was his first in the service. In ordinary circumstances, an officer with a similar record would be given another chance before considering the serious step of terminating his appointment. Pilot Officer HITCHCOCK has stated, however, that he does not wish to fly Demon aircraft, and it is contrary to the policy of the Air Board to force an officer to continue flying if he has lost his nerve.

Visible in this preamble was a wordless rebuke to those who had recommended termination: the unforgiving Compagnoni and Simms, and their too readily acquiescent if not complicit superior, ‘King’ Cole. Cole should have known better. As a member of the Air Board until May 1936, Cole would have been aware of the Board’s rejection of a recommendation by the Air Accidents Investigation Committee, following the death of Air Cadet N. L. Chaplin in April 1936, that

56 Hewitt, Adversity in Success, p.3.
57 Air Board Agenda 1945, NAA: A4181, 13. Coleman is often referred to as ‘Johnny’ but he is ‘Johnnie’ in a letter from his senior colleague Mel Langslow to Sir Frederick Shedden, 27 March 1944, copy, NAA: A5954, 1568/6.
consideration be given to abolishing aerobatics for pupils early in their flying courses. Perhaps he had been influenced by testimony that Chaplin had thought he was losing his nerve, although it was a structural failure that led to his death. Chaplin’s parachute had failed to open, or possibly become entangled in his machine when he lost control and attempted to bail out. Within days, another cadet, Leslie Clisby, had parachuted from his own Moth, abandoning it in flight, evidently not appreciating that his loss of control was occurring because he was in the slipstream of the aircraft ahead of him in formation.58 Certainly Cole had seen recent evidence that the flying training course for Air Cadets which Hitchcock had passed was fraught with obstacles and stumbles that could lead to discharge from the Service.

In the immediately preceding course to Hitchcock’s, four cadets had indeed been discharged, one was killed, and two had deferred because of illness or injury. Brian Walker, better known in later years as ‘Black Jack’, hospitalised after a major crash at Echuca in October 1935, missed his final exams and was not awarded his Pilot’s Flying Badge until February 1936. Court-martialled the following year, he lost six months’ seniority.59 One of Hitchcock’s immediate predecessors was appointed with one day’s loss of seniority as a disciplinary measure for low flying endangering the public, and another was discharged from the Permanent Air Force for two similar offences and ‘most undesirable tendencies’, with a recommendation that he be appointed to the reserve as a sergeant.60 From his own class, a cadet with several years military experience was released at the end of the course, ‘services no longer required’, having spent twelve days confined to barracks for, ‘to the prejudice of good order and discipline’, obtaining bottles of beer from an officers’ mess steward and consuming them, contrary to orders, in a bedroom.61 By implication Hitchcock, with a ‘better than average pass’, was someone worth persevering with. He could be given another chance.62 It was agreed that he should be interviewed in Melbourne by the Air Member for Personnel. If the AMP thought it necessary,

58 NAA: MP187/4, 160, 161. ‘The accident was due to structural failure in the port lower front spar on the out board side of the interplane strut…reasonably attributed to faulty technique in the execution of a loop.’ S/Ldr F. M. Bladin of the Cadet Squadron had testified to the Coroner that Chaplin’s crash was due to mishandling of the aircraft by the pupil doing the loop rather than to a structural defect. Re Clisby’s ‘completely wrecked’ Moth: NAA: MP187/3; MP116/1 vol. 6. By May 1940, when he was shot down and killed, RAF F/O Clisby DFC was credited with bringing down at least 14 enemy aircraft (Lex McAulay, ‘Clisby, Leslie Redford (1914–1940)’, Ritchie and Cunneen, eds, Australian Dictionary of Biography, vol. 13, pp.445–6).
59 NAA: A9300, W ALKER BR; NAA: A10605, 521/3.
61 After becoming a Lieutenant in the Militia and rejoining the RAAF in July 1941, the former cadet’s probationary appointment was terminated a year later (NAA: A9300, HEDRICK RK).
medical advice would be sought. Following this, Nicholl would make ‘a further recommendation as to whether Pilot Officer Hitchcock should be given a further trial with another unit or be allowed to resign his commission’.63

The message that came back to Richmond about the Air Board’s decision was relayed to Compagnoni by Cole. Recalled by Compagnoni many years after the event, the story showed signs of subtle editing. The impression Cole seems to have created was that his advice would have been followed by the Board were it not that there was ‘a political direction that Hitchcock was to be taught to fly…The Minister had directed that we were to persist with him.’64 The inherent improbability of this self-serving explanation does not seem to have troubled Compagnoni.65 The UAP Defence Minister in 1936, Sir Archdale Parkhill, had not been a minister at the time of Hitchcock’s father’s death in 1929. He might not even have known of the assurances given to the Hitchcocks by his Labor predecessor. True he had been deep in negotiations over Kingsford-Smith’s trans-Tasman commercial ambitions during 1935; and when Kingsford-Smith disappeared in November, this time forever, the events of 1929 were once again resonant in the headlines. Moreover, Parkhill had visited No. 3 Squadron during Hitchcock’s first week at Richmond to view the Squadron’s ‘normal routine’. But there is no evidence to suggest that he knew anything of Hitchcock or that a junior officer’s possible severance from the Service was brought to his attention a few months later.

Nor is there any reason to suppose that the Chief of the Air Staff would have needed a reminder of the special circumstances surrounding Hitchcock’s presence in the RAAF. ‘King’ Cole, too, almost certainly knew Hitchcock’s background, having known of him since he arrived at Laverton from Western Australia in 1930 under the protection of Dicky Williams. No renewed ministerial direction was necessary to ensure that Bob Hitchcock would get a second chance. He was not one of Cole’s private school, golfing, and clubland chums. But, whether Cole

63 ‘Pilot Officer R. E. Hitchcock’, minute by Secretary, Air Board, 25 March 1937, RAAF 59/1/585, copy courtesy Chris Clark.
64 GpCpt W. G. Compagnoni, taped memoir, cited in Coulthard-Clark, The Third Brother, p.206; Clark interview, 6 Jan. 2008, courtesy G. Crane. Compagnoni’s recollection that Allan Walters, as his flight commander, recommended Hitchcock’s termination cannot be correct as Walters was at the RAF Staff College and Navigation Reconnaissance courses between Nov. 1935 and June 1937, and then CO of 22 Squadron. Walters became Director of Staff Duties at Air Force HQ in June 1939. Compagnoni had been temporary CO of No. 3 Squadron for five days in June 1936 and a week in Aug. 1936; he was posted as Director of Signals at HQ at the end of May 1937. (NAA: A9300, COMPAGNONI WG; Ray Funnell, ‘Walters, Allan Leslie (1905–1968)’, Ritchie and Langmore (eds), Australian Dictionary of Biography, vol. 16, pp.482–3; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allan_Walters).
65 In June 1937, the Chief of the Air Staff rejected as ‘dangerous’ the finding of a Court of Inquiry into the death of Donald Ashton-Shorter presided over by Cole. The court had concluded that by disregarding standing orders the pilot had placed himself ‘not on duty’ (‘Pilot Officer D. Ashton-Shorter. Criticisms by Brother’, NAA: A705, 32/10/1785).
liked it or not, the Scullin government’s commitment to the Hitchcock family endured because it was entrusted to a decent and compassionate Chief of the Air Staff.66

66 Cole’s career is well summarised in a Wikipedia article, ‘Adrian Cole (RAAF officer)’, and more blandly in Brian Eaton, ‘Cole, Adrian Lindley Trevor (1895–1966)’, Ritchie and Cunneen (eds), Australian Dictionary of Biography, vol. 13, pp.459–60. His reputation, embarrassing behaviour (‘irregular conduct’) at a RAAF officers’ mess general meeting, and consequent removal as Air Member for Personnel in Dec. 1944 are documented in a top-secret file (NAA: M2740, 259). For AVM J. E. Hewitt’s report of USAAF General Kenney’s comment, ‘that man is a fool’, see Hewitt’s ‘Diary for my daughter Part II Sept 1939–December 1948’, p.97, Hewitt MSS, AWM: 3DRL/4141; this passage is omitted from Hewitt’s Adversity in Success.