6. ‘A very sound pilot’?: Bob Hitchcock (II)

Pilot Officer Robert Hitchcock, protected by an honoured pledge, was transferred to the recently formed Citizen Air Force No. 21 (City of Melbourne) Squadron in October 1936. At his interview with the Air Member for Personnel, Hitchcock had ‘agreed voluntarily to have another try’. Away from the harshly judgmental atmosphere of Richmond he grasped at the chance to redeem himself. With the voluntary nature of the arrangement on the record, Air Commodore Nicholl had satisfied himself that a ‘further trial’ was in everyone’s interests. Initially Hitchcock would be under the supervision of No. 21 Squadron’s CO, Squadron Leader Johnny Summers. But Summers left the squadron at the end of the month and was replaced by Flight Lieutenant Robert Dalton. A former fitter, the 29-year-old Dalton — known to his friends as ‘Dorothy’, after the American silent film actress — had risen rapidly from the ranks. Only temporarily in command and preoccupied with providing continuity of flying opportunities on alternate weekends for demanding citizen flyers, he was not the man to restore Hitchcock’s confidence.¹ The sensitive assignment was taken on by Group Captain H. N. Wrigley, the most senior officer at Laverton. Informed of the reports from Richmond and the decision to allow Hitchcock time to overcome his fears, Harry Wrigley sensed there was something that was not being said. Someone, he thought, had been giving an unsettled probationer the ‘thick end of the stick’.

If Wrigley had been curious enough to acquaint himself with Hitchcock’s performance at the Initial Flying Training School he might have wondered what had happened in the next few months. Twenty-seven men had passed out from the course. The average mark for the graduates was 71.3 per cent. Twenty-one-year-old Colin Hannah, later an Air Marshal and Chief of the Air Staff, had been eighth in the class. Hughie Edwards, later Air Commodore with a VC, DSO, and DFC, was seventeenth, closely followed by Dick Cohen, who would finish the coming war as an Air Commodore with a DFC attesting to his outstanding service. These distinctions of course lay in the future. But Wrigley, a school teacher before he was a pilot, could see there and then that Hitchcock had finished in the upper half of the course, in thirteenth place with a score of 73.5 per cent, comfortably ahead of Edwards on 69.7 per cent and

¹ A decade later, as a WCdr temporarily commanding Northern Area HQ, Dalton was assessed by his CO, GpCpt. C. W. Pearce, as needing ‘constant direction and frequent reminders of his duties’. After a general court-martial under Section 4 AFA in December 1944 he lost two years’ seniority as a temporary GpCpt (NAA: A9300, DALTON RFM).
Cohen on 69.2 per cent. Of the young men who went from Point Cook to No. 3 Squadron, Hitchcock had been third on the list. His student tutor Cohen, who later recounted his friend’s difficulties, had failed the final Gipsy Moth test at the end of the basic phase. In the advanced phase he received more pre-solo dual instruction in the Wapiti than the cadet who finished at the bottom of the course. After he successfully went solo, Cohen became overconfident, taking upon himself ‘the task of demonstrating to his fellow cadets that he could be as dashing as they declared they were’. He blotted his copybook by getting caught low flying as a cadet — or rather by being falsely charged and convicted after the one exercise when, tipped off by fellow cadet Joe Godsell that he was going to be watched, he was punctiliously following regulations; and then on one later occasion terrorising the residents of Corowa by diving and barnstorming a few feet above the main street. While Hitchcock was managing to keep his nose clean, Cohen would barely survive the course with, by his own account, the lowest mark ever recorded for ‘Qualities as an Officer’.3

Perhaps, too, Wrigley knew that two weeks after Hitchcock’s accident at Richmond his former course-mate Hannah, now with No. 22 Squadron at Richmond, had written off a Demon in a crash officially attributed to ‘Pilot’s error of judgment’. Hannah had incurred no disciplinary action as a result of his error. He was it seems already marked for higher things as he had been appointed senior under-officer during his cadet course and was soon to become No. 22 Squadron adjutant.4 The official preliminary report on Hitchcock’s accident had actually been less critical. It referred not to pilot error but to ‘inexperience of pilot’. The Air Accidents Investigation Committee had made a similar finding. The treatment of Hitchcock looked all the more disproportionate when set against an accident which everyone at RAAF headquarters would have known about. The man who had escaped retribution after what he characterised in his own log book as a ‘major crash’ in a Demon in August 1935 was the Director of Training, Squadron Leader George Jones. If a man with 989 hours’ flying could overturn a Demon in the middle of the Laverton airfield, was it not understandable that a tyro like Hitchcock might find it hard to quickly master the new type?5

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2 Hoyle, *Sir Hughie Edwards*, p.8 places Edwards thirteenth of 33. Phil Ford, ex St Peter’s College, and Bank of Adelaide clerk, who scored 77.1 per cent, would soon be chastised for ‘low flying whilst on detached duty’ but within a year appeared to ‘realise his responsibilities and is considered to be reliable’ (Ford, Norman Philip 0339 NAA: A12372, R/339/H).
4 NAA: A12372, R/338/P.
5 I was alerted to information about the course and flying records of Hitchcock and his contemporaries by the invaluable research of the late GpCpt. John J. McKenzie summarised in a letter to Chris Coulthard-Clark, 28 Sept. 1999, generously made available by Dr Clark. Preliminary reports of 1936 flying accidents and forced landings are at NAA: MP187/3.
In any event, Wrigley made it his business to see for himself what was going on with the young man over whose future there was a large question mark.

Shortly after he came to me at Laverton, I got him into the office one day. I said to him ‘you seem to be very timid about some aspects of flying,’ and…had a sort of homely chat with him. ‘You want to tell me anything…’, I said, ‘this is perfectly confidential between you and I.’ And he said there had been occasions when he had been a bit scared of flying but he said it had mainly been when he had moved from one type of aircraft to another he had not known about.

Wrigley was a legendary decorated wartime pilot and record-breaking aviator. With A. W. ‘Spud’ Murphy in 1919 he had made the first crossing of Australia from Point Cook to Darwin. They had surveyed the route for the first England to Australia air race. He was also a student of RAAF history and a thinker about strategy and policy. This was the time for the avuncular assurance that only someone of his experience could give. If, Wrigley noted, Hitchcock had:

…timid tendencies…he just wanted a little bit of sympathetic handling to grow out of — he got it. I said ‘well now you are on the station here’ — we had some Demons there at the time — I said ‘What don’t you like?’ And he said ‘Well they are a bit bigger than what I have been used to, and I don’t know that I know as much about them as I ought to.’

If Hitchcock felt under-trained on the two-seater single-engine biplane he was not alone. When the Demon had been introduced in May 1935 the RAAF had declared a policy that no-one could go solo in them unless they first had dual instruction. Policy was one thing, practice another. At No. 3 Squadron there was a shortage of qualified pilots to usher the new charges in. It seems that a single sortie in an aircraft with dual controls was not unusual. Donald Ashton-Shorter, the pilot who topped Hitchcock’s cadet course, and was among those who went with him to No. 3 Squadron, was sent solo after only 35 minutes’ dual instruction. A confident and well-regarded young flyer like Ashton-Shorter could safely be waved through. More experienced pilots like the then Flying Officer Val Hancock, irked by the conversion requirement, might also have got away with a quick circuit of the aerodrome sitting in the back seat of...
the aircraft listening to an explanation from the instructor. But others needed more guidance. And records show that both Ashton-Shorter and at least one more of those who arrived in July 1936 were checked out in a flight that lasted a barely credible five minutes. Their log books were signed by 22-year-old Ronald Hubert Cox, himself a graduate of the immediately preceding course whose promotion to flying officer coincided with their arrival. Cox had emerged from Point Cook nineteenth out of 21 in his class. It was hardly to be wondered that there was some shakiness among the most recent graduates at No. 3 Squadron.

Wrigley, astute and aware of training deficiencies, seized the moment and took Hitchcock down to the aircraft. ‘I just want you to get into the aircraft and sit in it and fiddle around with everything until you get to know where this is and where that is…don’t hesitate…do anything you like in the cockpit. Get used to it.’ Wrigley recalled doing the same thing with the Anson, a larger, heavier aircraft when the first batch was delivered to No. 21 Squadron at the end of 1936. And he believed Hitchcock had again used the same drill when the new Lockheed Hudsons arrived in mid-1940. Certainly the junior officer responded well to Wrigley’s advice. When he had finished ‘fiddling around’, he was encouraged to start the engines, ‘get the hang of it’, do a taxi around the airfield a couple of times; and then ‘when you are right, you can go off and do a few circuits and landings’.

The practical therapy worked. On 22 December 1936, Wrigley reported that:

Pilot Officer R. E. Hitchcock has shown steady progress and improved flying ability since joining this command.

He has developed greater confidence in himself and now handles Demon aircraft with average ability. Pilot Officer HITCHCOCK shows considerable keenness in his Air Service duties, and it is considered that he will develop into a useful officer.

It was a cheering Christmas present. Perhaps it was influenced by the outcome of the just completed flying training course. Nine cadets had been discharged as ‘not likely to become efficient Air Force pilots’, another had ‘claimed a free discharge within three months of attestation’, one had been killed, and 25 of the remaining 31 graduates were proceeding to the United Kingdom in accordance with an agreement that Australia would supply 50 pilots a year to the RAF.

In this context, with the number of pilots ‘considerably below Establishment’, Hitchcock’s performance looked strong enough to warrant patience and remedial attention.\(^9\)

Hitchcock’s rehabilitation was well under way. At No. 21 Squadron, he is recorded as participating in the full range of the squadron’s activities. He is first noted taking up a Moth in December 1936 to join the search for a Bulldog from No. 1 Squadron, a single-seater all-metal biplane, lost on a meteorological flight over the Brisbane Ranges, southwest of Bacchus Marsh. On New Year’s Day 1937 he was again up in a Moth searching unsuccessfully with CAF Flying Officer John Ryland in another Moth for four men who had disappeared in hilly and heavily wooded terrain near Gisborne. Over the next three weeks he had two attempts at photographing the Barwon Heads golf course from a Demon flying at 3000 and 4000 feet. The resulting mosaic, required by Station Headquarters, proved ‘an excellent job’, the squadron commander reported. It was as close as Bob Hitchcock would get to the club that was the playground of the Fairbairns, Manifolds, Russells, and Curries of the Western District and his wealthy Citizen Air Force contemporaries, the weekend and holiday flyers who constituted two-thirds of No. 21 Squadron’s officer complement.\(^10\)

Although detached observers might correctly assess the RAAF as a negligible fighting force in the mid-1930s, it was, as Bob Hitchcock’s mentor Harry Wrigley had written, ‘most profitably employed for the benefit of the Commonwealth’ in its aerial survey and forest fire-fighting roles. In February 1937 at the Forests Commission in Melbourne, Hitchcock accompanied his CO, Flight Lieutenant ‘Dorothy’ Dalton, on behalf of the RAAF Air Patrol at a Fire Patrol Conference with representatives of the Forestry Commission and Australian Paper Manufacturers. They were there to discuss substitution of ‘a substance called “bitterns” for water for fire fighting purposes, various methods of distributing same and the provision of operational bases nearer the bush fire area’. Further experiments were to be undertaken with bitterns — concentrated seawater with approximately 70 per cent of the sodium chloride removed, high in magnesium and potassium salts. The squadron itself received a visit from the Forest Fire Commission Conference a few weeks later and two of Hitchcock’s colleagues, Pilot Officers Bill Keenan and John Eagerty, gave an exhibition of air-to-ground communication with borrowed portable radio equipment.\(^11\)

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\(^9\) Air Board Agenda 1974, 1979, NAA: A4181, 13; No.1 FTS Daily Routine Orders…Personnel, 6 March 1936, NAA: A10605, 521/3. Only 24 of Deryck Kingwell’s 1935 class volunteered for the RAF; the bottom two graduates drew straws to make up the number (ACdre D. Kingwell, interview, 31 Oct 1981, NLA TRC 1108 Tape 1). It would not have escaped Wrigley’s notice early in Dec. 1936 that the well-regarded cadet squadron adjutant and flying instructor FLt Doug Candy had written off a Moth and extensively damaged his own Avro Cadet by an ‘error of judgment’ in a collision while approaching to land (NAA: A12372 R/327/P).


Several months elapsed before the Air Board reviewed the Hitchcock case. On 25 March 1937, in the light of the recommendation from the Laverton Station Commander, ‘it was decided to take no further action on this Agenda’.12 In December 1937 Hitchcock flew Wrigley from Laverton to Essendon where the Laverton base commander was to officiate at the opening of the Royal Victorian Aero Club clubhouse enclosure followed by a ‘smoke night’ at the Drill Hall in North Melbourne with the Governor in attendance. He caught the attention of a photographer for Aircraft magazine.

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12 ‘Pilot Officer R. E. Hitchcock’, minute by Secretary, Air Board (P. E. Coleman), 25 Mar. 1937, RAAF 59/1/585, courtesy Dr Chris Clark.
His confidence substantially restored, Hitchcock became, in Wrigley’s words, ‘a very sound pilot’.\footnote{AVM H. N. Wrigley, interview, [1977].} Wrigley’s conclusion was justified. Given the number of accidents reported in the next couple of years, Hitchcock’s record appears to have been different more in degree than essential character from that of most of his contemporaries.

The late Group Captain John McKenzie, a former Staff Officer Air Training, made a detailed study of the archives. He concluded:

> Within fourteen months after Hitchcock’s course finished at IFTS, three of the graduates had been killed in flying accidents together with a pilot from the following course who was in one of the aircraft. Accidents caused by pilots from Hitchcock’s course within this fourteen month period resulted in Air Board formally writing off nine (9) aircraft; Hitchcock’s accident to the Demon is not on this list.

What McKenzie’s research points to is a very different story from the one that later gained credence about the supposedly singular inadequacy of Hitchcock. Slips, scrapes, and minor accidents, usually characterised as errors of judgment but sometimes found to be the result of ignoring instructions, were
commonplace. Pilot Officer Cohen, for example, marred a display of aerobatics and formation flying at Somers Camp when the port wing tip flare bracket on his Bulldog struck the starboard elevator of the accompanying Bulldog. The damage was minor and only pride was hurt. Ironically Cohen had been brought in from No. 1 Squadron as it was thought that only one pilot available in No. 21 Squadron was experienced enough to take part in the display. More seriously, Cohen was held responsible by the Air Accidents Investigation Committee for one of a series of Demon accidents occurring within a week late in 1937 that provoked a press and parliamentary clamour. Prior to take-off at Archerfield his ‘faulty operation of the aircraft brakes’ swung him across the path of another Demon that braked violently to avoid a collision, tilted on to its nose, and broke its airscrew. That Cohen, along with Eric Read and Brian Eaton, was one of the RAAF’s aerobatic display team that went on show in Bulldogs around Victoria, Tasmania, and South Australia, puts the performance of Hitchcock’s contemporaries into perspective.\(^\text{14}\)

Among the most notable of the casualties in the year and a half after the class of 1936 passed out was a university graduate and the star of the course, Donald Ashton-Shorter. Awarded a ‘pass with special distinction’ with a score of 85 per cent, Ashton-Shorter received the sword of honour. Within eighteen days of joining No. 3 Squadron he ‘crashed [Major] (sic) in a Wapiti while practising for a display for Royal Military College cadets. In February 1937, inadvisedly pushing through bad weather between Laverton and Tasmania, he and Gerry Buscombe wrote off their Demons in forced landings in ‘strange and difficult country.’ The Air Accidents Investigation Committee had pronounced the incident ‘an error of judgment…attributed to lack of experience’. By May that year Ashton-Shorter had a total of 190 hours at No. 3 (Army Co-operation) Squadron. Recognised as an officer of great promise — he had won the Mannock Cup for best pilot 10 months earlier — he was probably allowed greater latitude than some of his contemporaries. He had dazzled troops of the 31st Battalion on exercises around Townsville, manoeuvring between trees and a telephone pole to pick up message bags suspended between two sticks six feet high and 10 feet apart. But his skill could not save him when a farewell aerobatic display — at an angle and height contrary to instructions — put a strain on his aircraft that it was not able to take. Pulling out of a dive-bombing demonstration at

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\(^{14}\) NAA: A5954, 869/8; MP187/4/173, 184A; Kingsland, *Into the Midst*, p.36. The Special Technical Committee that examined this incident could not see ‘any reason for the failure of F/O. Cohen’s brakes…other than their misuse by the pilot, or that they were inoperative at the time, owing to failure of the pilot to release the parking cock before taxying out’. For minor accidents involving others from Hitchcock’s cadet cohort, A. N. Hick (fined £10 for damages to his Seagull), N. P. Ford, D. J. Macpherson, B. G. Braithwaite, W. F. Allshorn, T. H. Davies, R. F. Wiley, and W. J. Keenan, see NAA: MP187/3 and MP116/1. For Eric Read’s mangling of a Bulldog and himself in December 1936, see A705, 32/10/1704 and Dick Kingsland, ‘Weather on my mind’, *Canberra Times*, 14 Aug. 1981.
250 feet the Demon’s upper port wing and then the lower wing sheared off. Pilot Officer Ashton-Shorter, already signing his own log book as ‘OC B Flight 3 Squadron’, would not live to fulfil the hopes of those who rated him so highly. Six days after his death his log book was signed by the acting commander of the squadron, Flight Lieutenant Wilfred Compagnoni.

A nice young man with a good future

Uncertain though his beginning had been, Bob Hitchcock survived his own year as a pilot officer unscathed. Almost a year after he had received his wings, having passed the requisite examination and with routine promotion to flying officer imminent, Bob was married to his first and only sweetheart, Olive Beecroft. It was just six weeks since he had taken part in a Coronation ceremonial fly-past of 36 aircraft and a spectacular formation dive over the Victorian Governor’s saluting base. The occasion was capped when he joined a select group of pilots including Flying Officers Jack Ryland and Jack Graham, and Squadron Leader Fred Thomas at a levee at Parliament House and was presented to the Governor, Lord Huntingfield. Memorable as these ceremonies were, they were no more than a prologue to the transformation of his personal life. The wedding on Saturday 26 June 1937 was a big event at the Swanston Street Church of Christ conducted by the church’s celebrated minister, Thomas Henry Scambler. The bride, attended by her 14-year-old sister Mavis, was ‘charmingly gowned in deep creamy satin cut on unusual lines with a deep pleated panel on either side falling gracefully into a train at the hips’. A veil of lace lined with creamy satin was surmounted by a coronet of tiny magnolias. As the couple left the church they passed through a guard of honour of RAAF officers. The bride was handed a model aeroplane as a mascot. The bride’s mother received guests at the afternoon reception held at The Green Door, 229 Collins Street.16

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16 Unidentified press cutting courtesy of Joan Richardson.
Along with Hitchcock family and friends, a flotilla of Olive’s Beecroft and Hoskings relations from Gippsland was in attendance. Bob’s friend Rex Taylor was there with Nancy Darlison (they were to be married in the same church in April 1939). There were other RAAF comrades as well, including Bill Keenan and notably Bob’s new commanding officer, Charles Eaton, who had taken over No. 21 Squadron in May. Ever since he had led the ground party that found and buried the bodies of Keith Anderson and Bob’s father in 1929, ‘Moth’ Eaton had taken a kindly interest in Bob’s affairs. He spoke of him to his own son as a ‘nice young man’ with a ‘good future’. In a squadron photograph of Permanent Air Force members Hitchcock sits comfortably in the front row at his CO’s left.

Among the ‘absent friends’ from No. 21 Squadron not present at the wedding was a fellow graduate from the July 1936 Point Cook Flying Training School. John Eagerty, a Xavier College boy, had completed a diploma of agriculture at Dookie College before he joined at Point Cook. He had lived just nine months after gaining his wings. At the controls of a Bulldog undertaking camera gun practice against a drogue target in March, Eagerty had inexplicably failed to pull out of a dive and crashed to his death in Port Philip Bay. It was the same aircraft (A12-8), supposedly undamaged, in which Dick Cohen had clipped another Bulldog during the display of formation flying at Somers Camp six months earlier. Hitchcock might not have known that Eagerty, who had been transferred to No. 21 Squadron at the same time as himself, had been moved for similar reasons. Classed ‘below average’ as a pilot in his ‘A’ course, Eagerty had no recorded accidents. He had subsequently been ‘very erratic in his flying, very heavy on controls, and dangerous in landings’ of his Seagull V aircraft.

In submitting the adverse report from the Richmond CO to the Air Board, the Air Member for Personnel had expressed the opinion that, ‘although slow in learning’, Eagerty would eventually become a satisfactory pilot. A further trial in a landplane squadron, ‘preferably at Laverton’, had been approved. In his case, though not in Hitchcock’s, the Air Board had made a fatal misjudgement.

On the day of the wedding Bob moved out of single quarters and began to draw full married rates of allowances. Following a honeymoon at Healesville the couple were to set up house in Williamstown. After a year together, Olive became pregnant. A son, Robert Gordon (named in honour of his grandfather, not the headline-making parliamentarian), was born in March 1939. The growth of the infant provided Bob with an ideal subject for his main hobby of photography. Now a family man, taking the customary steps in his profession, his career was settling into a predictable pattern and trajectory.

Over the next few years at Laverton, Hitchcock flew regularly in shadowing patrols and exercises in naval co-operation, bombing practice, searches for lost ‘overlanders’, displays — all the normal duties of a peacetime Air Force preparing for an apprehended war. He spent two months in 1938 with No. 2 Squadron undergoing a navigation reconnaissance course. In Eaton’s No. 21 Squadron he undertook a variety of appointments: member of the fire committee, armaments officer, signals officer, photographic officer, officer in charge of the bar in the officers’ mess (perhaps a little embarrassing for a tee-total Church of Christ communicant though Eaton himself drank sparingly). He was even acting commander of the squadron for a week before Christmas 1937.

Eaton thought well of Hitchcock, assessing him in February 1939 as average in navigation, bombing, and air gunnery but ‘above average’ in flying ability. In the language of RAAF form A.18A there was nothing in his flying or airmanship that ‘should be watched’. No-one knew of the incident he mentioned to his younger brother Les when he just missed flying into a freshly erected radio mast in southwest Victoria. If he had been ‘involved’, as the RAAF historian Dr Chris Clark thought, in the collision of two Ansons on take-off from Curry Aerodrome at King Island on 23 August 1938, Eaton’s opinion might have been thought excessively kind. But, as it happened, Bob Hitchcock and his friend Bill ‘Dilly’ Keenan had captained the aircraft on the way to King Island and

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20 Air Board Agenda 1944, NAA: A4181, 13. The Air Board presumably had not been told of the incident in May 1936 when Eagerty lost his way on a cross-country flight in a Wapiti and made a forced landing in Wodonga (NAA: A9300, EAGERTY EJ).

then handed them over to two recently graduated pilot officers. Hitchcock was not mentioned in the official accident investigation files or the reports to the Secretary of the Defence Department and the minister.22

_Flying Officer Hitchcock, helmet, goggles, and intercom lead in hand, with DH 60 Gipsy Moth trainer and trainee, March 1938_  
(Courtesy of Les Hitchcock)

In February 1939 Hitchcock was transferred to No. 1 (Bomber) Squadron and promoted to officer in charge of C flight and O/C photographic section. For six weeks he was temporary commander of the squadron pending the arrival of P. G. ‘Paddy’ Heffernan from the United Kingdom. The promotions of Heffernan to squadron leader and Hitchcock to flight lieutenant were gazetted on the same day, 27 April 1939. They were two of the 10 (sometimes only eight or nine) officers in the unit, with 109 airmen, in charge of 12 Demons, an NA-16 and an NA-33. In mid-1939 No. 1 Squadron won the AFC Memorial Trophy for the best Victorian Service squadron. Only 20 per cent of the marks were for flying and operational efficiency; but in this category, in which Hitchcock’s contribution

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would have been important, they scored 166 out of a possible 200. Heffernan had assessed him at the end of June as above the average for both flying ability and bombing. Intermittently since April the increasingly assured flying officer had been engaged in testing of the two American NA-16 and NA-33 aircraft brought in as construction examples by the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation.

The North American Aviation NA-16-1A (A20-1), flown by Bob Hitchcock seven times between May and August 1939

(RAAF Photograph, courtesy of Gordon Birkett)

When the first three of the new CAC Wirraways, developed under licence from the NA16, were ready for acceptance in July 1939 it was Hitchcock together with Heffernan and one of the RAAF’s top pilots, Squadron Leader Fred Scherger, who joined the CAC’s test pilot Flight Lieutenant Hubert Boss-Walker to show off the new machines to the press and celebrating ministers.23 The RAAF needed good publicity after a year in which five Avro Ansons had crashed with the loss of 15 men. No publicity was given to Heffernan’s opinion that Lawrence Wackett had taken ‘the worst design features’ of the two American NA-16s ‘and called the result the Wirraway’.24

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24 Heffernan in conversation recalled by John Hopton, email message to Aviation Historical Society of Australia, 12 May 2012.
Officers and gentlemen

The normally spare language of No. 1 Squadron’s operations record book suddenly took a new tone in the spring of 1939. Paddy Heffernan noted that his unit was converted to a bomber reconnaissance squadron on August 28 and 29. Their Hawker Demons were transferred to No. 21 Squadron, the Wirraways to No. 12 Squadron. They were replaced by nine Ansons, gathered from No. 22 Squadron, 1 Aircraft Depot, and No. 21 Squadron. ‘This change over,’ Heffernan said, ‘took place during the war crisis and this Squadron was placed in a very precarious position.’ In a frank declaration, Heffernan was to report the next month that the outbreak of war ‘found this unit unprepared for the role it would have to fulfil if called upon’.25 It was not just the change of equipment that left his squadron so vulnerable but the departure of fully trained captains, leaving only three who had completed the navigation reconnaissance course. On August 28, five days before war broke out, Hitchcock had left No. 1 Squadron, assigned to No. 2 Squadron as O/C of A flight.

When Bob Hitchcock arrived at No. 2 Squadron, war fears gripped Laverton. Aircraft were grounded amid an intense period of equipment checking and maintenance. Wing Commander Charlesworth reported at the end of August that the preparation of mobilisation orders had been completed and the squadron was ‘being maintained in a state of readiness for any eventuality’. With 11 officers and 130 airmen, the squadron had 10 Ansons ‘fully equipped

for War Operations’. They began immediately diverging searches to seaward. As no enemy vessels had been sighted after two days, the patrols were suspended. For several weeks two aircraft and crews were placed on standby every second day. Then a system of duty flights in conjunction with No. 1 Squadron and No. 21 Squadron began. Occasional patrols up to 150 miles eastward from refuelling bases established at Yanakie on Wilson’s Promontory and Pat’s River aerodrome on Flinders Island followed in October and November. Under a new CO, Fred Thomas, the squadron also undertook parallel track searches from Mount Gambier to Parafield under instructions from the Central Operations Room. As the months wore on, the search for enemy submarines, raiders, and mine-layers continued, with occasional interruptions to protect 2nd AIF troop convoys.26

The bare formalities of Hitchcock’s service progress are on record. Some, though by no means all, of the evaluations of those whose job it was to judge him and measure him against his peers are preserved. The report on a pupil pilot passing out from an ‘ab initio’ flying training course (Form F/T.4), for example, is missing from his file. So too are some of the annual confidential reports on officers. Thus we are more than usually reliant less on contemporary official judgements than on the later private observations and impressions of those who saw him at work and in the mess. One of the young pilot officers in his flight at No. 1 Squadron was Lindsay Trewren, who made the following observations:

From my lowly position he was regarded as quite a good pilot, having survived the Bulldog, Demon, Anson eras of the Sqdn then finally HUDSons.

He was of smallish stature, quite efficient and had a bright & very likeable personality and very popular with all ranks in the Sqdn, although a little reserved at times.

Never flamboyant or over-confident — in fact quite the opposite — more retiring and quite modest.27

Father Ken Morrison, a popular Roman Catholic priest, knew Hitchcock in the mess at Laverton. Morrison had been commissioned to the RAAF in 1936 to act as part-time chaplain to No. 21 Squadron. When war came, he was called to full-time duty and lived on the base until the beginning of September 1940 (initially, in order to keep him more fully occupied, he was made a cypher officer).28

Morrison recalled Hitchcock as:

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26 No. 2 (General Reconnaissance) Squadron Operations Record Book, NAA: A9186.
...a somewhat rugged person, not big but solidly made, slightly russet in colouring, balding or suggesting that he was going that way. He was by no means a recessive or negative character though could have been something of a loner and not socially successful type.29

David Colquhoun, who was to leave Australia for Singapore as a Hudson captain with No. 1 Squadron in June 1940, remembered a ‘short stockily built pleasant chap who seemed to have a somewhat shy and retiring disposition’. Though he did not know him well, Colquhoun had ‘a vague recollection that Bob was not terribly keen about flying but was following in his father’s footsteps’.30 Clarence ‘Spud’ Spurgeon, a young pilot officer in No. 21 Squadron, noted that Hitchcock ‘didn’t booze much’. Not that, as a very junior 20-year-old, Spurgeon would himself have mixed much socially with a flight commander. ‘I probably would never have spoken to him except on the stairs…hierarchy was maintained strictly.’31 Another colleague who knew Hitchcock better was Deryck Kingwell. Kingwell had arrived as a 20-year-old cadet at Point Cook just as Hitchcock graduated. He was to win the sword of honour in July 1937 and the Mannock Cup as best pilot. Later at Laverton, then a flight lieutenant, Kingwell was chief instructor at the General Reconnaissance School. The Hitchcock he remembered was ‘a quiet good looking chap who mixed well with his fellow officers’.32 As a cadet and young officer, ‘Tich’ McFarlane, later to rise to Secretary of the Air Department and Public Service Board Commissioner, found him ‘not the typical aristocratic Air Force type, the superior type’. McFarlane, a self-improver educated at Scotch College and Melbourne University, remembered a man who was ‘courteous, very generous with his time’. Hitchcock’s good relations with his fellows were perceptively noted by Kingwell, a natural leader who was soon to become the youngest Group Captain in the Air Force.

Whatever was beneath the mask of reserve, maybe lingering uneasiness about his own ability, Bob Hitchcock was making a success of his Service life. He was an accepted member of the flying fraternity. None of those who testified in later years about his personality, vague as their memories might be, connected his shyness and reserve to his past. If they knew, they did not relate his behaviour to the feelings of a boy who might have thought — contrary to the evidence known to his uncles, aunts, and cousins — that his father had abandoned his beloved mother years before he died. They did not speculate on the effect of being thrust into national spotlights as the son of a tragic hero about whom an important truth was never publicly disclosed. The fact was that young Bob, from

30 A/Cdre D. W. Colquhoun to CH, 7 June 1978.
32 A/Cdre D. W. Kingwell to CH, 18 April, 31 May 1978; interview with Fred Morton, 31 Oct. 1981, NLA TRC 1108. Kingwell spoke of being a flying instructor at Point Cook when he knew cadet Hitchcock; but Hitchcock had graduated a year earlier.
the age of 16, was labelled as his father’s son. *The Argus*, presumably primed by an Air Force press release, had singled him out when his name appeared in the list of successful applicants for the cadet course. He knew, as he must have suspected all those who commanded him knew, that he owed his continuing place in the Air Force to compassion, with perhaps a tincture of guilt, over his father’s fate.

Unwisely, he had told some fellow recruits that his mother had been promised that the Service would look after him and his brothers. They knew that his father had died in 1929 because he followed the lead of Keith Anderson, a man of repute but poor judgment, trying to save their friend Charles Kingsford-Smith, a charismatic, courageous but feckless and reckless glory-seeker. It had seemed like the least the Air Force could do. Contemporary trainees recalled hearing that when he arrived in Melbourne by train from Western Australia Bob Hitchcock had spent his first night in the home of the Chief of the Air Staff. Dicky Williams did not routinely provide shelter for recruits. But as the son of a copper miner in Moonta, South Australia, and former telegraph messenger, the abstemious Williams knew what it meant to make the journey from a working man’s world to the officers’ mess.

At Laverton in the early days of the war, Bob remained very much a private man. His fellow flight commander Ray Garrett saw him as ‘a very good type of young man and very popular in the Squadron though of a very shy and retiring disposition.’ Garrett, also a flight lieutenant though some 12 years older than Hitchcock, had been a Citizen Air Force instructor — the only certified CAF instructor in the 1930s — and a commercial pilot. He, like Bob, had lost his father at an early age. As his daughter recounts, Garrett left school at 14 to work at Watson’s and Son, pioneers in X-ray and optical equipment. He studied part-time with Professor T. H. Laby, the dean of the science faculty at Melbourne University:

> He was involved in various projects from importing cars to installing lifts which weren’t very successful so when the Depression came and he was engaged to mum her brothers finally asked him what his intentions were. This is when he decided to fly the Airmail Route in Northern Aust. for Jimmy Larkin to try and earn enough money to get married.

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33 ACdre Sir Raymond Garrett to CH, 26 April 1978.
After their marriage the Garretts lived in his mother’s home in East Kew, where Ray set up a photographic business in the laundry. While running the business Garrett had continued in the active Reserve and was called up at the outbreak of war. Like Bob, Ray lived off the base with his wife and young family. Both Ray and Vera Garrett were Methodists. Like Bob and other Church of Christ parishioners, they were teetotallers and non-smokers. Yet, for all that he made his own way in the world, and friendly as he was with Hitchcock, there was some social distance between the Garretts and the Hitchcocks. Affluent East Kew was a world away from the inner south-western working class suburb of Newport where Bob, Olive, and their little boy Robert had settled.

Bob was probably more at ease with his other fellow flight commander Jack Ryland. Ryland, a year older than Hitchcock, was the son of a Mallee farmer. A Roman Catholic, educated in the country, and then at Xavier College where he was captain of boats and the Australian Rules football team, he had earned a degree in agricultural science while learning to fly and serving in the Citizen
Air Force. He worked briefly in the Victorian Department of Agriculture before joining Ansett Airways in 1937. Ryland had been in the Air Force Reserve from 1938. Called up in October 1939, he was the most experienced of the three flight commanders on Hudsons. He converted both Garrett and Hitchcock in July 1940. Ryland, as David Campbell testified, ‘had no side to him…he didn’t pretend to belong to the Toorak lot’. ‘Tich’ McFarlane, who liked him, would say: ‘nothing terribly brilliant about John, nothing terribly imaginative…but a very solid, sound fellow’.35 In 19 hours dual and check-dual flying as Ryland’s pupil, and a subsequent crew test, learning the particularities and peculiarities of the new aircraft, Hitchcock had come to know the ‘very solid, sound fellow’ well.

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35 A. B. McFarlane, interview, 18 April 1978.
Wing Commander J. H. Glasscock, then a Flying Officer in No. 1 Squadron, remembered Hitchcock early in the war as a popular officer with ‘a pleasing personality’. Ivon Black, later Wing Commander, DFC and CO of No. 21 Squadron, but then another flying officer in No. 1 Squadron, found Hitchcock a ‘likeable fellow’. Professionally, he thought him ‘quite a safe pilot…definitely a cautious type’. But as a single man living on the base Black did not mix much with Hitchcock.36

If Hitchcock kept to himself it was understandable that he wanted to be with his family each evening or at weekends. Reliant on his service pay of £1.7.6 a day he certainly could not afford the entertainment and leisure pursuits that so many of his contemporaries took for granted.37 But there was in any case another element in his life that seems to have eluded his peers and superiors: his church affiliation.

‘I don’t want to seem a snob…’

From his earliest enlistment documents Bob Hitchcock acknowledged that he was a member of the Church of Christ. It was the faith of his parents. But it identified him among an austere religious minority that deplored the ‘tendencies of modern life’. A census of religions in the RAAF conducted in July 1940 found 223 airmen in the Church of Christ and just five air crew. When the RAAF began to appoint full-time chaplains at the beginning of the war it recognised only the four largest groups: Anglicans (49 per cent), Roman Catholics (17 per cent), Methodists (14.5 per cent), and Presbyterians (12.5 per cent). The Church of Christ was one of an undifferentiated aggregation of ‘Other Protestant Denominations’ (7.5 per cent).38 Closest in doctrine and practice to the Welsh Baptists, though with early nineteenth century American roots in Methodism and Presbyterianism as well, the Church of Christ proclaimed ‘no creed but Christ’. Membership of the church followed a public confession of faith. Penitent believers were baptised by full immersion. Congregations were autonomous. There was no priesthood, though those who hoped to serve as ministers were trained in Bible colleges and ordained. Individual churches

37 Standard rate of pay for married RAAF flying officers, inclusive of allowances, in April 1936 was £533–570 a year (Air Board Agenda 1860, NAA: A4181, 13).
38 Peter A. Davidson, Sky Pilot: A History of Chaplaincy in the RAAF 1926–1990, Dept of Defence, Canberra, 1990, p.1/9. The census figures for 18 July 1940 were: Anglican (51 per cent) 7215 airmen, 467 air crew; Roman Catholic (17 per cent) 2642 airmen, 92 air crew; Methodist (14.5 per cent) 2016 airmen, 101 air crew; Presbyterian (10 per cent) 1438 airmen, 119 air crew; Baptist 289 airmen, four air crew; Congregational 207 airmen, 17 air crew. There were 51 Salvation Army in the ranks, 38 Jewish and four Jewish air crew. Of the other faiths, only Christian Science had more than 25 adherents. There were three Mormons, one Mahomedan, three agnostics and two atheists (NAA: A705, 36/1/99).
'called' their own 'preachers'. Their principal belief was a passion for church unity. Each congregation celebrated the 'breaking of bread' every Sunday. Through the rest of the week members were enjoined to temperance; card play and gambling were discouraged; smoking was frowned upon; and they were frequently reminded of the moral dangers of dancing.

When Bob was 12 years old, a Church of Christ had begun in Victoria Park, Perth. A handful of adherents met at first in a rented library hall. Two years later, evangelists from eastern Australia, the Hinrichson-Brooker tent ‘mission’, had elicited 75 ‘decisions’ and a ‘thank offering’ sum of £300. Bobby Hitchcock, a Wesleyan when he enlisted in 1915, and Violet were baptised by the minister F. A. Youens early in 1926. With the funds raised by the mission a chapel was erected in 1928 and the congregation flourished. In Western Australia as a whole the church had nearly 3000 members in 1930. By 1939 it had fallen to 2600. In Victoria, where the church was strongest, there were over 13 000 members in 1939, a figure virtually unchanged since 1930. Membership was not a matter of nominal adherence. Regular attendance at worship services and participation in family ‘socials’ were expected. It is hard to imagine the young RAAF officer, rugged and fit as he was, not being drawn into local church tennis teams or youth activities, especially the Boys’ Explorer Club, which combined moral instruction and calisthenics. We know that Bob often spent weekends out of barracks in Moreland with the ‘lovely lady’ who knew his mother. It was there that his fellow trainee and pal Rex Taylor had met his future wife. And Olive Beecroft was a constant visitor to the Taylor household.

In 1940, Bob and Olive with their infant son Robert were living in Newport. Although he had previously been a member of the Hampton Church of Christ, Bob now seems to have drifted away from the church. Without a building of its own, the Newport congregation was reporting ‘splendid meetings’ in the Scouts’ Hall. But Bob, having left Hampton to be ‘nearer his place of work’, as the church journal would put it, was not among those present. The Hitchcocks’


41 Australian Christian, 24 Jan., 12 June, 21 Aug. 1940. In July 1940 the church in Victoria counted 23 Explorer Clubs for some 2000 boys aged between 11 and 15. As a young teenager in the mid-1950s, I attended the Church of Christ in Footscray, an adjoining suburb to Newport, where Newport members then worshipped. The Boys’ Explorer Club met weekly in the church hall, making good use of a vaulting horse and roman rings suspended from the ceiling.
two-bedroom weatherboard worker’s cottage at 43 Agg Street, was five minutes’
walk to the Newport railway station through which trains went to Laverton,
Aircraft Siding, and Geelong. Not that most of Hitchcock’s colleagues were
patrons of the Victorian railways. Not for them the weekend rail concession
fares granted to men in uniform from mid-June 1940. ‘The flying people were a
coterie somewhat removed from all other sections of the personnel,’ Monsignor
Ken Morrison recalled, more likely to be seen in a jaunty sports car than a railway
carriage. If they did use the train for return journeys between Melbourne and
Laverton or Point Cook, for an extra threepence they could travel first class.
Someone who had risen from the ranks with a trade background might be able to
afford the first-class fare; but he could rarely hide his origins. If he was a Roman
Catholic he had overcome a double handicap in the selection process, thanks to
the presence among the selectors of ‘Dad’ Bladin (who was married to a Catholic
and was received into the faith after his retirement) and John Joseph Swift, a
medical administration officer with honorary commissioned rank, specifically
chosen to ensure Catholic representation. Those affiliated with the smaller
dissenting Christian churches faced less obvious but no less real discrimination.
According to Monsignor Morrison, Bladin ‘expounded his theory of selection
& made no apology for it’:

…there was a super-abundance of applications and the responsibility
was on the candidates to present themselves in a manner that was
known and accepted by the selectors. Consequently if a lad was in the
cricket XI or the 100 yards at Scotch or Xavier it was to his credit but if
he had the same achievements at one of the lesser known colleges…it
did not mark him so highly.

Within the coterie, ‘the Toorak lot’, as David Campbell recalled them, were a
class apart. These were men with pastoral backgrounds, men from the legal and
medical professions, a handful of commercial pilots, men of business, whose
families had known little of the privations of the Depression. At their head
in No. 2 Squadron was Fred (Freddie to his intimates) Thomas, the affluent
businessman, committee member of the Naval and Military Club, honorary
ADC to Victoria’s Governor, Lord Huntingfield, himself a flying enthusiast. The
squadron’s popular adjutant was a young man about town, well off and well
liked. A few brother officers at Laverton came from the two leading Catholic
private schools, Xavier and Riverview. But more were educated at Geelong
Grammar, St Peter’s (Adelaide), Wesley, Scotch, Melbourne Grammar, Sydney
Grammar, Brisbane Grammar, or perhaps at Fort Street in Sydney or Melbourne
High, Victoria’s premier selective high school.

42 I am grateful to Brian Haynes and Jane Ridley of the Williamstown Historical Society for information
about Agg Street, and to my former Monash University colleague Sid Ingham for his recollections of Newport.
There were rare exceptions. Bill Heath, whose father was a Collins Street doctor, was unusual in having earned a diploma of agriculture at Longerenong College in the Wimmera, a qualification for farmers’ sons. But even he grew up in South Yarra as well as the family farm at Freshwater Creek near Torquay. What Heath really wanted to be, as his RAAF enlistment form described his ‘civil trade or profession’, was an ‘aviator’. He was to learn to fly in Geelong, his ambition undiminished by his father’s Depression misfortunes. As another contemporary with similar status put it, hesitating to express his opinion of Hitchcock to me, ‘I don’t want to seem a snob…’ The unspoken words said it all. If the ‘otherness’ was ever articulated it was in the snooty shorthand of a senior officer’s wife remembered by Paddy Heffernan: ‘N.O.C.’ (Not Our Class). He would not rub shoulders at the Naval and Military Club with his superiors like Anderson, Thomas, and the Laverton base commander and club president, Frank Lukis. Nor was Hitchcock ever completely comfortable with many of his flying peers, or they with him. Although he needed no reminder of the social distance between them, he could see it any morning on the way to work as his train pulled out of Newport station — a four-storey brick flour mill bearing the name ‘W. C. Thomas & Sons Pty Ltd’, his CO’s family firm.

That said, whatever Hitchcock may have felt, Father Morrison who was familiar with the Laverton milieu, ‘never saw anything in the attitudes of his fellow officers, snobbishness, caste, scorn for inferior ability’. While the social barriers may have been barely perceptible to the young priest, he was impressed with a strong professional bond discernible in the mess. ‘The flying course with its attendant training in discipline and intercourse with other people, always put a stamp on those who went through it.’ What Father Morrison had not seen before the war was the subtle condescension, and occasional irritation, of some of the Citizen Air Force weekend flyers. These were the part-timers, driving down for a Saturday night sleep-over, who were learning about reconnaissance, naval co-operation, and bombing. The exercises were instructive but there was more fun to be had in pageants, air displays, and excursions to the Bass Strait islands, often with family friends clandestinely on board.

Until the middle of 1939, as Rollo Kingsford-Smith, nephew of Sir Charles, put it, ‘for officers the RAAF was a combination of a gentleman’s country club associated with a flying club for enthusiastic amateurs’. There was no exact counterpart of the RAF’s No. 601 (County of London) Auxiliary Squadron,

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46 Msgnr K. R. Morrison to CH, 6 June 1983.
the ‘Millionaires Squadron’ created in 1925 at White’s Club by Lord Edward Grosvenor who selected members to serve under him after assuring himself that copious quantities of gin and port would not incapacitate them. London’s aristocratic clubmen lined their uniform tunics with red silk and played polo on Brough Superior motor cycles. But Australia’s elite flyers, though a tad less flamboyant, unashamedly indulged the perquisites of their wealth and status. Thus the hard-drinking Bertie Simms, CO of No. 6 Squadron at Richmond in 1939, would occasionally summon Pilot Officer John Murphy for a ‘few holes this afternoon’ taking him to the golf course in his staff car. ‘Moth’ Eaton was widely believed to have told his pilots to keep their eyes open for trout streams which he could share with his fishing companions Frank Lukis, Sir Tom Blamey, and Blamey’s friend, the businessman Major (later Brigadier) Lionel Lemaire. Eaton’s son Peter remembered how one of his father’s young pilots, ‘Johnny’ Lerew, a Scotch college old boy, sportsman, racing motorist, and civil engineering graduate, told him to ‘jump in the old Wapiti’. They proceeded on a hedge-hopping joy ride, buzzing farm houses at tree height as they flew en route to Geelong where Lerew dive-bombed his girl-friend’s home. Many a young woman, like Dick Cohen’s acquaintance holidaying in the path of one of his meteorological flights, was the recipient of a message from on high with a streamer attached. ‘There was a bombing range on a property at Cressy,’ the meteorologist Allen Cornish recalled, ‘and sometimes Dick would land and taxi to the homestead where we would have morning tea in the Demon.’

In all the recollections of Bob Hitchcock’s character and behaviour, frivolity, spontaneity, and exuberant leisure pursuits are rarely part of the story. Witness Jack Graham, a Cambridge law graduate, who had been put through a complete flying training course at Point Cook in 1932 in spite of his three years with the Cambridge University Air Squadron. Graham joined the new No. 21 City of Melbourne Squadron in 1936. There, where Hitchcock was one of the nucleus of permanent officers, he encountered someone he recalled was considered to be ‘a very over-confident pilot’. Not a man looking for fun but thought by some to be flirting with danger. Flying in formation with Hitchcock, Graham found him ‘taking the most awful risks... very easy to collide in formation especially in the aircraft we were flying then, the Anson which was like a flying cow, sloppy sort of aircraft’.

Graham’s personal experience of this risk taking was only one isolated incident. It could hardly have been otherwise:

We were a very friendly happy mob in the mess at 21 and I don’t recall any sort of people being left out of our activities there. In fact, at weekends — we used to go down every second weekend — arrived down there midday Saturday...and we stayed down to late Sunday and we had a whale of a time...

Quite often we would go down there and find that the permanent people had flown the guts out of the aircraft and they were all unserviceable, and that used to make us mad, naturally.52

Bob’s contribution to wear and tear on the aircraft included an occasional unadvertised diversion to south Gippsland. He would drop parcels into a Koonwarra paddock where Olive’s younger brother, Don Beecroft, was working. On one surprise run he swooped over a group of men weeding an onion field. Flying low over the pine trees straight toward them he was unaware that one of the older workers was a shell-shocked Flanders veteran. As he learned later, the terrified man threw himself on the ground screaming, ‘The Bastard’s got us!’53

This was not the kind of tale to be shared with CAF officers who might take umbrage or seek retribution. Later, when at No. 1 Squadron, his CO Paddy Heffernan was impressed by a quite different side of Hitchcock’s personality. He was not an overconfident pilot Heffernan thought — rather ‘he may not have been a confident pilot’. ‘Although he flew satisfactorily, I never really felt happy about him.’ Heffernan would recall ‘a silly thing’ he did while flying in formation:

I was leading and had my aerial out, some 200 feet of wire trailing below the aircraft. For some reason known only to himself, he decided to change from port to starboard and ended up with the aerial wrapped round his aircraft. He could not give any satisfactory reason for this stupid antic when I took him to task later.

Apart from this, according to Heffernan, his flight commander never did anything wrong: ‘BUT I was always waiting for him to do something wrong.’54 It was this kind of incident, uncommon as it may have been, that could have reinforced Jack Graham’s perception of Hitchcock as a risk taker. Graham, law

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54 ACdre P. G. Heffernan to CH, 20 July 1978.
partner of the recently elected youthful federal MP Harold Holt, and secretary of the Cinematograph Exhibitors Association, may not have noticed or more likely had just forgotten that Hitchcock was not actually at Laverton on many a Sunday. Paddy Heffernan on the other hand did notice:

I knew Bob Hitchcock quite well, he was a pilot with me when I was commanding No. 1 Squadron at Laverton in 1939 and I found him to be a good average type of lad. Not particularly outstanding in any field, but generally reliable and did what tasks were allotted to him. Generally in a Squadron, there are always some lads...coming forward with bright ideas to improve either the technical aspects or flying standard of the unit, but Bob did not appear to be one of this type, maybe because of his somewhat reticent nature. He married early in his career and consequently ‘lived out’ and by so doing I think he missed out on what I would call ‘mess life’. Usually after the day’s flying, we would get together over a beer and have a ‘hate session’ on some aspect of the day’s work, but Bob always appeared to want to get home to his family.

Heffernan gave an illustration. In October and November 1938, while still Chief Flying Instructor at No. 1 Flying Training School, he led a flight of four Ansons from No. 21 Squadron to Darwin to act as the supporting aircraft to three RAF Wellesleys which were about to take part in the 150th Anniversary of the ‘founding’ of Australia after completing an attempt to break the world long-distance record. While they waited at Darwin for the Wellesleys of the British Long Range Development Unit to be serviced, the other pilots (including Flight Lieutenant Peter Lavarack, the son of the Chief of the General Staff, Major General J. D. Lavarack), were untroubled by having to sit around. They enjoyed the free time. But Hitchcock was restless. He approached Heffernan several times with the question: ‘When are we likely to get away?’

‘A serious business’

As early as the end of February 1940, when he was taken for a return flight to Sydney in a Lockheed 12 for ‘Lockheed experience’, it was clear that Flight Lieutenant Hitchcock was going to be one of the early pilots converted to fly the newly acquired Hudsons. This was an acknowledgement of proficiency and aptitude different from some of his peers. Phil Ford, for example, who had been posted as a flying instructor at No. 1 FTS, originally graded by Fred Scherger as an instructor ‘of fair ability’, was about to become Chief Flying Instructor at the

55 ACdre P. G. Heffernan to CH, 7 April 1978; Brook, Demon to Vampire, pp.38-9.
Central Flying School. Considered well above average in flying in January 1940, he would spend less than two hours in a Hudson as a second pilot.\textsuperscript{56} On June 26 Hitchcock began dual instruction with Jack Ryland in A16-6.

![A16-6, the first RAAF dual control Hudson](image)

\textsuperscript{(Courtesy of ACdre Bob Dalkin)}

He went solo a week later. Over the next six weeks Hitchcock gathered confidence in the new Hudsons, going up in eight different machines, practising everything from landings to emergency gear operation. For much of July and early August he put a succession of young second pilots through the routines of landing, re-take-offs, instrument and engine flying, gyro-pilot, single and cloud flying, and flight formation.\textsuperscript{57} Among those who went up with him were Pilot Officer Jim Shackell, a member of the Toorak and Collins House ‘Shackell-Baillieu clan’, and Pilot Officer Stanley Prowd, educated at Scotch College and a pharmacist before joining the RAAF in January 1940. Prowd would be killed almost exactly a year later when he failed to bring a training aircraft out of a spin.\textsuperscript{58} Another of those under instruction was the gregarious 6'3" Canberran Keith Eddison, son of a soldier-settler but with a small farm of his own, styling himself a ‘grazier’. Eddison had been entranced by the Hudsons, ‘beautiful machines, all green upholstery inside with a nice little bunk’ and enjoyed the company of Hitchcock, ‘a hell of a nice chap’.\textsuperscript{59} Eventually flying Beaufighters with No. 30 Squadron, Eddison would die in battle at sea off Lae in May 1943.

\textsuperscript{56} Ford, Norman Philip 0339 NAA A12372, R/339/H.
\textsuperscript{57} WCdr Sam Wood recalled that as a second pilot he really knew more about Hudsons than his ‘skipper’ Hitchcock but his name does not appear in Hitchcock’s log book (Mike Hayes, \textit{Angry Skies: Recollections of Australian Combat Fliers}, ABC Books, Sydney, 2003, p.70).
\textsuperscript{58} NAA: A9300, SHACKELL JB; \textit{The Argus}, 4 Aug. 1941.
\textsuperscript{59} E. K. Eddison to M. L. Eddison, 1 April, 16 Aug., 1940, ACT Heritage Library, Eddison MSS 19400, 194016.
Herb Plenty, previously put through his paces in Ansons, would later say that he sensed that Hitchcock was not relaxed in the cockpit. But Plenty acknowledged that unlike some instructors he was not an arrogant person: ‘he was a gentle type of bloke…he’d coax people along’.  

If Hitchcock was a little on edge it might have had something to do with his mounting realisation that he was one of a diminishing few. His brother Les would recall a letter around this time saying that ‘there were only a couple of the boys left and that he now regarded flying as a serious business especially as another of his mates had just “bought it”’. What made for an even more serious attitude were missives about flying discipline emanating from on high. ‘An unsatisfactorily high accident rate’ was disclosed by the analyses demanded by the Chief of the Air Staff. Burnett let it be known that the loss of an aircraft was serious because it meant ‘the loss of six or more pilots who might otherwise have been trained’. Moreover accidents undermined public confidence in the Air Force. Concern at headquarters was being communicated to every unit of the Service. ‘An atmosphere must be created by all grades of commanders,’ the Air Member for Personnel had enjoined, ‘in which any departure from orders, no matter how slight, is regarded as an indication of inefficiency and entirely reprehensible.’ ‘Mucker’ Anderson ruminated a few weeks before No. 2 Squadron began to receive its Hudsons:

It has also been noticed that practically all pilots are still under the impression that their flying ability is centred in and judged by their landing of the aircraft. Modern technique for landing does not demand constant special practice and after the completion of a conversion course, there should be no need for pilots to spend complete periods on practising landings or forced landings unless the Squadron Commander is of the opinion that a particular pilot requires landing practice, and in such cases the particular practices should be specially ordered by the Squadron and not the Flight Commander unless the Squadron Commander is of the opinion that the Flight Commander is sufficiently experienced to assume the responsibility.

Bob Hitchcock’s own flying may not have been flawless. He did not hide his fears as well as some. He had no old school tie. He was never the life and soul of the mess. But in 1940 Hitchcock was a maturing and respected flight commander, trusted with the training of able young men on the most challenging of the RAAF’s aircraft, and happy in his work. Though still showing the benefit of his youthful exercise regime he could not completely hide the ageing signs of

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61 A. L. Hitchcock to CH, 10 Nov. 1977.

baldness under his peaked cap. The cheeky if occasionally wistful curiosity of his first days in uniform had long since given way to an earnest dedication to the profession in which he was determined to succeed. Never afflicted by the devil-may-care disposition so common in the Citizen Air Force he would take seriously the AMP’s advice that ‘the cost of each hour’s flying in a modern type of aircraft is very high [in a Hudson it is approximately £25 inclusive of depreciation, fuel, etc]’.63 He was an officer moulded in a modernising Air Force that was growing bigger and faster than any of its senior leaders had imagined it could.

If all went well in the coming months of Air Force expansion it might not be long before Hitchcock had his own squadron.64 Although the Air Board had decreed otherwise, he might still harbour the ambition along with other short-service officers that he might join the shrinking group of General Duties permanent officers.65 In the meantime he had taken a crucial step towards bridging the social distance that separated him from too many of his colleagues and superiors. There was a new bond, transcending rank, with Ray Garrett, Harry Wrigley, Charles Eaton, Alan Charlesworth, and others. In December 1939 he was initiated as a Freemason in Verdon Lodge No. 395 in Williamstown. The Lodge, in Electra Street near the Beach railway station, was now the place he would be found on the second Thursday evening of the month. Brother Hitchcock, demonstrating sufficient merit in his oral examination, passed to 2nd Degree in February and was raised to 3rd Degree on 4 March 1940.

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63 Inexplicably I have lost this reference.
64 Eric Lansell, from the immediately preceding cadet course, had been promoted temporary S/Ldr at the beginning of June, a fatal accident in Tasmania evidently long since forgiven (see Chapter 24, ‘Cockpit Secrets’, particularly footnote 52). Hitchcock’s own contemporary Donald Macpherson had also been acting S/Ldr from June.
65 The Air Member for Personnel’s recommendation 9 Nov. 1939 that around 50 officers appointed to short service commissions before May 1938 should join the 78 permanent officers among the 436 General Duties officers was rejected by the Air Board. The Board decided, evidently without reference to the Air Minister, to defer granting permanent commissions for the duration of the war (Air Board Agenda 2620, NAA: A4181, 17). ABO N.98/40, 8 March 1940: ‘It has been decided for the time being not to effect transfers of members from the Citizen Air Force or from members appointed or enlisted for the duration of the war to the Permanent Air Force.’ (NAA: A705, 163/1/177).
On the evening of 12 August 1940, the home-loving Bob Hitchcock was sleeping on the base at Laverton. Before retiring, he took time over a cup of coffee to talk to two of the new arrivals at No. 2 Squadron, Bob Dalkin and Bill White, about the Hudsons they were due to climb into the next morning. For these pilot officers, junior in rank but with years of flying experience, it would be familiarisation flights at first, prior to a decision being made about whether or not they were suitable for conversion. At first they were to go up in the second seat but without dual controls.

So stretched was the squadron for converted Hudson pilots that Bob Dalkin was assigned to fly with 19-year-old Pilot Officer Wilbur Wackett, who himself had only about five hours since going solo in a Hudson. Dalkin, who went on to be an outstanding Hudson pilot, would never forget his first time on August 13. Wackett, son of Wing Commander Lawrence Wackett, manager of the Commonwealth Aircraft Factory, had been told by his own instructor Jack Ryland that he was to practise stalls and recovery ‘under the hood’:

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66 Wilbur Wackett’s personal file indicates that by the time of his death in 1944 he had acquired over 400 hours as a Hudson captain although his form P/P 64 omits to mention that he had flown Hudsons at all (NAA: A9300, WACKETT WL); Lawrence James Wackett, Aircraft Pioneer: an autobiography, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1972, pp.206–9. For Wackett’s intrepid survival after crash-landing at sea, swimming for nine hours, and crossing the Papuan Peninsula from north to south, see Mark Johnston, Whispering Death, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2011, p.164. Leon Kane-Maguire, Lost Without Trace. Squadron Leader Wilbur Wackett RAAF. A Story of Bravery and Tragedy in the Pacific, Air Power Development Centre, Canberra, 2011, was published after this book was drafted.
He handled the aircraft competently enough. He was a very young and brash young man. Anyway he’d done his homework as you sometimes do especially on instruments...He got to the stage where the aircraft wasn’t completely in a stall. He’d done about 20 minutes of this and was a bit fed up with it, and he suddenly said ‘Oh I’ll make the damn thing stall’ and with one hand he swept the curtain to one side and with the other pulled the stick right back...the next thing we were in a spin.

Dalkin was pitched forward out of his jump seat and ‘disappeared down the front’. By the time he managed to claw himself back, the aeroplane was still spinning. Wackett had been thrown forward and was still trying to sort himself out. Dalkin took the initiative and put on one-third throttle, then half throttle. They came out of the spin at about 2000 feet and ‘went back very white faced, and landed’. It was a chastening experience; something to enliven an after-dinner session in the mess with his friend Dick Wiesener after he returned more sedately from Canberra with Flight Lieutenant Bob Hitchcock later that day.

67 Dalkin, interview, 18 April 1978.