13. ‘A charming boy who would do big things’: Dick Elford

The youngest of the civilians walking across the tarmac on the morning of August 13 was Dick Elford, the private secretary to the Minister for Air. Stricken with influenza, Elford had risen from his sickbed at 508 Punt Road, in fashionable South Yarra, very early that day to be driven to Essendon. Since joining Jim Fairbairn the previous year, Elford had become accustomed to flying with him and his assistant, Murray Tyrrell, in the Minister’s own sleek DH90 Dragonfly. But now the arrangements for travel to Canberra were different. Along with many other private flyers, Fairbairn had handed in his own aircraft for use as the government saw fit. The Dragonfly had been impressed by the Air Force, the Minister deciding it was politically inexpedient to insist on giving it to his friend Eddie Connellan. The machine he had used on a flight around the nation a few weeks earlier, a Percival Q6 Petrel, had been returned to its owners, the Civil Aviation Department. Like other ministers he must now rely on the newly allocated Lockheed Hudsons for transport to Canberra.

The 30-year-old Richard Edwin Elford was embarrassed to be in his well-cut three-piece lounge suit rather than in an Air Force blue tunic or battle dress and cloth-visored peak cap. He was eligible. He was fit. He wanted to serve in the armed forces. He had taken flying lessons to prepare for enlistment in the RAAF. But since he had joined Fairbairn at the beginning of 1939 the Minister had come to rely upon him.

When Fairbairn was sent overseas to negotiate the terms of the proposed Empire Air Training Scheme soon after the outbreak of war, Elford’s duty was to accompany his chief. He knew then that he could not travel as a serviceman as that would render him liable to internment in any neutral countries through which they might have to pass. On their return to Australia, the demands of office were unremitting. So Elford’s personal desire for service in uniform was on hold, indefinitely. In his pocket as he stepped across to the waiting aircraft was the jangling reminder of his servitude, a ring holding 10 keys including those that opened the ministerial safes in Melbourne and Canberra, for whose custody he had sole responsibility.

1 Connellan, Failure of Triumph, p.283.
New lives

Dick Elford was an immigrant. Born in Chelmsford, Essex, in 1910, he arrived in Australia from England with his parents 10 years later. His father Archibald Sefton Elford, born near Exeter into a prosperous merchant family in 1878, was the last of a remarkable cluster of Elfords who studied chemistry at St John’s College in Oxford. Percy Elford, Archibald’s oldest brother, had won an open scholarship to Christ Church, was awarded first-class honours in Natural Sciences (Chemistry) in 1889, was President of the Oxford Junior Scientific
Club, and after a brief spell at University College, Reading, and lecturing for the Shropshire County Council, became a Fellow of St John’s in 1892. After their father, Edwin Elford, died in a railway accident at the age of 47, Percy assumed a special place in the lives of his six surviving siblings (three others had died in infancy). Their mother, born Ann Louisa Fell, had been bequeathed £5514 on Edwin’s death. With income from the Etna Fire Light Company founded by her husband, Ann Elford had sufficient means to move to Oxford. But there would no longer be a governess, cook, housemaid, and nurse to assist her.

To relieve the family’s burdens, oldest daughter Constance had become a governess, and Percy abandoned his chance of a rowing ‘Blue’, cutting short his studies in mathematics to work in the Christ Church chemistry laboratory as a demonstrator under the ingenious experimenter, Dr A. G. Vernon Harcourt, FRS. In an unprecedented record, Percy taught a succession of his brothers, Stanley, Bertram, and Archie, each of whom took additional classes at Magdalen College’s Daubeny Laboratory in the Oxford Botanical Gardens. Early in the new century, after a long association with local technical education, Percy was appointed Secretary to the Oxfordshire Education Committee. He was soon playing a part in national education policy discussions as president of the Association of Directors and Secretaries for Education. He would hold the Oxfordshire post until retiring in 1920 following a nervous breakdown, his condition partly attributable to an exhausting schedule of school visitations and compilation of a vast ‘Domesday’ card index of information about every elementary school in the county, with 3000 annexed photographs.

While Percy Elford was consolidating his authority over Oxford education, Stanley Elford had, at 31, already earned a glowing reputation as headmaster of Cirencester Grammar. He had then topped a field of 70 candidates to become head of the Coopers’ Company and Coborn School, a sixteenth-century foundation in London’s East End that had merged with an eighteenth-century co-educational school in 1891. Stanley had taken early steps in his older brother’s professional domain as an Oxford science master, then as Inspector of Science and Art Schools for Oxford County Council. The Elfords were close and not embarrassed to offer or to accept each other’s helping hand. Undeterred by the misgivings of the Cooper’s school governors, Stanley almost immediately appointed younger brother Bertram to the vacant science mastership at Cooper’s. Undeniable ability, as well as nepotism having taken them so far, the brothers contrived for Bertram to move to Bath School in 1906. Their older sister Constance, like Percy living with their widowed mother, was already a high school teacher in

2 Daily News, 14 Oct.1892.
3 Percy Elford to David and Hugh Elford, 8 Dec. 1949, (transcripts), Elford MSS, courtesy Hugh Elford.
4 John Ireland (compiled and illustrated by Edwin Cuss), The History of Cirencester Grammar School, 1993, pp.68–70, courtesy of Peter Rowe; Colin Churchett, Coopers’ and Coborn School Anniversary History, Coopers’ Company and Coborn Educational Foundation, Upminster, 1986, p.80, extract courtesy of Dorothy Gorsuch.
Oxford. Another sister, Mary, was a nurse. She also soon moved back to live with her mother. Although Stanley had been in business briefly before taking up teaching, only one of Edwin Elford’s sons, John Farley, had followed his father into trade, joining a wholesale velvet house in London as a clerk. By 1914 John was managing a rubber plantation in Ceylon, where he distinguished himself by building over nine years a magnificent mountain-top mansion for his Scottish bride, only to be sacked for the ‘colossal waste of time, money and labor’.5

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*Archie Elford, chorister, 1888*

(Courtesy of Hugh Elford)

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5 ‘Ayr’ became a luxury hotel (http://www.estatebungalows.com/ayr.htm).
Archie Elford, the youngest of the children, had been educated as a chorister at Christ Church school in Oxford until his voice broke at 15, then at Magdalen College Grammar School. Moving to London, he lived with an uncle and worked for five years as a messenger at the Stock Exchange. Then, with Percy’s encouragement, he successfully sat the entrance exam at St John’s and graduated in 1902 with a third-class degree. With the example and assistance of his three brothers putting wind in his sails, he also embarked on a career in education. While still an undergraduate he had been assistant organising secretary to the Oxfordshire Technical Instruction Committee. Posts with the Surrey and Essex education committees led late in 1914 to a divisional school inspectorship with the London County Council. It was not a job for the faint-hearted. In the slums of London, he was told to wear the oldest clothes he possessed, not to take a watch, and only carry enough money for his travelling expenses.

When war came, Archie Elford was rejected four times for active service; poor eyesight and a hernia could not be disguised. Eventually, in March 1916, he was ‘borrowed’ by the Admiralty, finding a niche in the Military Sea Transport Branch and then in the new Ministry of Shipping which took over his department. There he worked on the senior staff of the Director of Transports and Shipping, Graeme Thomson, a precociously gifted civilian administrator.
promoted by Winston Churchill over the opposition of the Sea Lords, and dubbed ‘the greatest transport officer since Noah’.6 Graeme Thomson was an inspiring leader and valuable patron. In April 1918, Archie accompanied Thomson to the USA to assist in organising the embarkation and transport of American troops across the Atlantic to Europe. In his first four months, over half a million men were embarked on British vessels.7 As the war drew to an end he was entrusted with the task of determining the compensation that should be paid to American and Canadian shipowners whose vessels had been lost or damaged after being requisitioned for war service. A colleague on the North American mission was a young maritime communications expert and managing director of Amalgamated Wireless (Australasia), Ernest Fisk. Elford’s final task, in consultation with the War Office, was drawing up a complete shipping scheme for the repatriation of demobilised British and Dominion troops from the various theatres of war.8 His work was recognised with an OBE at the end of hostilities.

With temporary staff being shed in Whitehall, it was time for Elford to return to his former career path. He found an unexpected opening in the midlands. After a financial scandal and a purge of incompetent council authorities who had not noticed the disappearance of £84 000 over 12 years, he was appointed Director of Education for the County Borough of Wolverhampton in February 1919. This was a challenging appointment for a man of integrity with a reputation for administrative acumen. Graeme Thomson’s reference attested that he had ‘shown very great ability and energy together with organising capacity of a very high order…great tact and adaptability’.9 He won the post against 110 applicants, five of whom were interviewed. It had taken the casting vote of the chairman to break a tied committee. After passing a medical examination Elford quickly set about re-organising schools, developing curricula, and determining salaries and conditions of service for teachers. But within five months, to the regret of the council, he had tendered his resignation. He left the £800-a-year job ‘for family reasons’ at the end of October. The Wolverhampton education committee wished him ‘happiness and success in the new work he is called upon to undertake’.10 But family tradition suggests that no ‘new work’ was in prospect. He was leaving for his health. On medical advice, the smoke and grime of the industrial heartland of England could not be endured. He was worn out from the pressures of war work. Perhaps too he was vulnerable to the influenza

8 ‘Memorandum on General Proposals for Shipping Programme for Repatriation of Troops, Labour, and Prisoners of War’, 15 Sept. 1918, Elford MSS.
9 Thomson undated reference, ts copy, Elford MSS.
pandemic that had taken thousands of lives on Atlantic transport ships as well as millions on land. Whatever the cause, Archie Elford had to seek a change of climate.

While assistant secretary of the Surrey education committee Archie had met and successfully courted Sybil Audrey West, daughter of a hop merchant and champion rose-grower. The couple married in Reigate in 1907. A daughter, Barbara, was born the next year. Richard Edwin (named for the paternal grandfather he had never known) followed in 1910 when his father was working for the Essex County Council. Barbara and Dick, as he was soon known, would surmount several disruptions in their childhood, making and losing friends as their father’s successive appointments took them to new homes. After a bomb crashed through the roof of grandmother Ann Elford’s nearby house in Sydenham, bouncing down the stairs but failing to explode, their own house was packed up, and they were sent to live with their mother’s parents in Reigate. Dick would lose his playmate, Peter Scott, the son of the Antarctic hero whose widow, the sculptress Kathleen Scott, lived a few houses away. Dick’s sister would never forget the excitement before their move:

One day the air raid warning sounded but Mother said we should go upstairs so that if there was a hit we wouldn’t be buried under tons of rubble! We watched the raid over London... We should have felt much worse if we’d realised they were bombing the Admiralty. Father and all the other staff had grabbed the most secret documents and fled to the basement. After it was over it was discovered a bomb had gone right through my father’s office and the one below, exploding on the next floor down.

Both Barbara and her brother went to boarding schools on Reigate Hill. Seven-year-old Dick and his prep school classmates — dressed up in long pin-striped trousers and short Eton jackets, wide Eton collars, and top hats — would join the girls at church on Sunday. His family transplanted to Wolverhampton at war’s end, Dick continued at the prep school. Inured as he had become to new homes and new friends, nothing had prepared him for the adventure that would now take him away not only from friends but from the extended networks of indulgent relatives who could be relied upon at least to make holidays a treat. His parents were drawn to a new life in Australia. ‘Mother had a brother orcharding in Tasmania,’ Barbara recalled, ‘so they decided to try that and through agents in London bought what was described as a 54 acre apple orchard in full production.’ Thus Archibald and Sybil Elford set sail for Melbourne on the Orient liner Osterley, with ‘Master Richard’ and ‘Miss Barbara’ in tow, on 23 January 1920.
S. S. Osterley took Harry Gullett to England in 1916 and brought the Elfords to Australia
(Courtesy of Bernard Malloy)

Archie knew all about the Osterley, which had been requisitioned as a troop hospital ship during the last 18 months of the war. To the ANZAC soldiers it was known familiarly as ‘The Osteralia’. Returned to service as a migrant ship, she was now refitted with accommodation for up to 1000 passengers, 200 in first class. With Archie’s maritime connections they could expect more comfort and consideration on the 45-day journey than most of those on board. Barbara Elford described the departure and the trip:

Only a very small amount of cargo space was allotted to each passenger so most of the furniture had to be sold. This was done in a large hall in Reigate only a week before we sailed. There were a ring of dealers who wouldn’t bid against each other, but one would buy and then they bid among themselves afterwards. It was heartbreaking, the furniture went for almost nothing but had to be sold before we left England. We left two days after my 12th birthday for Australia. In the Indian Ocean near the Cocos Is we struck a cyclone and counted seven water spouts dangerously close. The Captain ordered the hatches closed and all passengers below. Even in 1st class the crowd and heat was bad…We were carrying a cargo of chemicals whose smell began to permeate the ship…just like rotten fruit. How thankful we were when the ship was opened up again…We arrived in Melbourne just before the Autumn race meeting and all good accommodation was booked out…Father finally
found rooms at the old Federal Hotel at the Spencer St end of Collins St. In those days it was described as a family hotel and was a temperance one. A huge building and good sized rooms but we discovered there were bed bugs and had to sit up all night. Next morning Father managed to get accommodation at what is now the Windsor Hotel, a booking had been cancelled. Thankfully we moved and spent a comfortable week there.11

There had been a long shipping strike which ended at the end of our week in Melbourne. They didn’t want to load cargo but filled the boat with impatient passengers. We had the worst crossing of Bass Strait there had been for years, luckily we still had our sea legs but the luggage shifted from one side of the cabin to the other all night and we had to cling to our bunks for dear life otherwise we should have rolled on the floor with the luggage. All our boots and shoes were in a kit bag which a wharfie mistakenly threw on to the deck and it landed in the water never to be seen again. Father was so furious he tongue lashed the careless man. Wharfies weren’t used to being talked to like that but he was so stunned he gave Father a murderous look and backed away. A man in the crowd just near said ‘Well done Mister but you’re lucky you aren’t in the water too.’

Worse was soon to come. Archie Elford, with visions of being a gentleman farmer, had described himself as a property owner on the emigrant ship’s passenger list. For advice on his rural venture, his oldest brother was the person to turn to. Unfortunately, although Percy Elford had published reassuring handbooks on ‘practical school gardening’ and a best-selling guide to the cultivation of allotments, what Percy could not do was guarantee what awaited Archie and his family 12,000 miles from home.

Arriving in Launceston we drove the 16 miles to Exeter in a horse-drawn cab and next day Father went with his brother-in-law to see his new orchard. He had never had any farming experience and was unfitted for physical labour by his bad hernia, so imagine his horror and despair when he found only five acres of the land planted with apple trees which looked in bad shape as the drainage system was blocked, the rest of the property was bush. He realised he would have to sell as quickly as possible and find some office job, cutting his losses. He took his family to Hobart where they rented what had once been a golf club house. The golf club had given up. This was at Sandy Bay which was then a very sparsely settled bit of bush... The children were sent to schools in Hobart and my father looked for work...

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The Elfords were not the first hopeful emigrants who bought land in the Tamar Valley unseen, only to be deceived about what awaited them. With a wife and two young children to support, the 42-year-old head of the family had to seek employment urgently. He was offered the headmastership of the recently re-established junior school at The Hutchins School, Hobart’s leading Anglican boys’ school; but, as his daughter remembered, ‘turned it down as the pay was so bad he said he couldn’t bring up a family on it’. Within three months he found a better paid position in Adelaide as manager and secretary of Standard Salt & Alkali Ltd, overseeing the amalgamation and public share offering of two salt mines. But the saga of misfortune had not yet ended. After renting a house at Walkerville and placing the children once again in new schools, Archie realised, in the words of his daughter, that the salt company was ‘run by crooks’.

Elford had the background for better things. A return to public service or education was possible. However, his experience in shipping and transport opened up more remunerative prospects. At the Admiralty and Ministry of Shipping, Archie had come under the notice not only of Cabinet ministers and top civil servants but of prominent shipowners and executives serving on advisory bodies and negotiating contracts with the government. He could count on the good offices of the former Shipping Controller, Lord Maclay, as well as Sir Thomas Royden, the chairman of Cunard, Sir Kenneth Anderson of the Orient Line, and Sir Graeme Thomson. By fateful coincidence, in late March 1920 the directors of the Australasian Steamship Owners’ Federation had begun to discuss the need for a salaried chairman. Since the federation was launched in 1899 its chairman, who served on an honorary basis, had been elected annually from among its leading figures. The federation founder, W. T. Appleton, chairman and managing director of the dominant coastal steamship company Huddart Parker, had been chairman or president for 11 of the organisation’s first 21 years. During the war, Appleton had been president of the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce and the Associated Chambers of Commerce of Australia. His company had extensive coal interests. Fortuitously for Elford, Appleton was also on the board of Amalgamated Wireless Australasia Ltd (AWA) whose managing director, Ernest Fisk, had haunted the corridors of Whitehall in the recent past pursuing the merged interests of AWA and Marconi. Fisk’s principal wartime and post-war role had been in maritime communications, crucial for the troop convoys from the United States evading submarine attacks. But he had spent time with Elford in North America dealing with claims for payment for loss or damage to ships that had been requisitioned. They had come to know each other

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12 The Hutchins School has no record of the offer, which came exactly a year after an assistant master was promoted into the position on £200 p.a. plus a house, then given a Christmas bonus of £20 (Margaret Mason-Cox to CH, 13 Jan. 2011, email).
13 The Advertiser, 1 June 1920 (prospectus).
well. It did Archie’s career no harm either that he had been acquainted with the Nobel Prize-winning Guglielmo Marconi since living in Chelmsford within sight of the first wireless station.

There is no evidence that the idea of a salaried position to relieve the Steamship Owners’ Federation chairman was a response to Fisk’s advice about Archie Elford’s availability. If family tradition is to be believed, their luck changed when Archie saw a newspaper advertisement for a job that seemed to have his name on it. His then 12-year-old daughter remembered: ‘The applications were due to close the following day. He rang them explaining his difficulty and sat up all night writing out his qualifications and posting them.’ The real impulse for the appointment of a full-time chief executive was the urgent need to organise a scheme that would meet the Commonwealth government’s desire to rationalise coastal shipping arrangements without transgressing the anti-monopoly provisions of the Industries Preservation Act.

Having rejected the idea of a new amalgamated company, the immediate task for the steamship owners was therefore to devise and manage a workable interstate shipping pool. This was a job for which Elford was uniquely qualified. He was in Australia. He was available. And there were men locally as well as overseas who could vouch for him. In Adelaide he had assisted Thomas McGlew, a ship broker and coal merchant, in a company reconstruction. At least one other prominent shipping executive, John Langley Webb of Huddart Parker, had an interest in AWAs affairs.15 Langley Webb was a close associate of Fisk, having taken a large shareholding and joined the AWA board at Fisk’s invitation in 1917. Other Australian shipping interests, including Burns Philp, and the Adelaide, Melbourne, and Union Steamship companies had shares in AWA.16 Fisk’s endorsement therefore, together with compelling references from Britain, could well explain the exceptionally short time between the decision to advertise the post of ‘Vice-President’ of the federation in June 1920 and Elford’s appointment as ‘Deputy Chairman’ of the interstate shipping combine at £1000 a year five weeks later.17 At last, in what Sir Kenneth Anderson called a ‘distinguished billet’ at the head of a major industry group, with a handsome salary, and growing links with some of the nation’s most influential businessmen, Elford could look to the future with confidence.18

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13. ‘A charming boy who would do big things’: Dick Elford


17 Decisions leading to the appointment of Elford as the Steamship Owners’ Federation Deputy Chairman can be traced in the Minutes of the Federation board, Noel Butlin Archives Centre, ANU, NBAC E217. On Australian interstate shipping interests, see John Bach, A Maritime History of Australia, Nelson, West Melbourne, 1976, pp.308–26.

18 Sir Kenneth Anderson to A. E. Elford, 20 Sept. 1920, Elford MSS.
Class rooms

For the Elfords’ children, a decision about their schooling was critical. The family had rented a small house in Middle Brighton, and Barbara was enrolled as a day girl at nearby Firbank. While they were in Adelaide, Dick had attended St Peter’s preparatory school. As a former educational administrator, Archie was well qualified to compare the merits of local Australian public schools like Melbourne Grammar, Wesley College, and Scotch College. Nevertheless, there was a serious false start. Dick was sent, once again as a boarder, to Melbourne Grammar’s Grimwade House (the junior school). Discovering that the Matron was incompetent, neither making the small boys wash properly nor administering their prescribed medication, the Elfords complained and withdrew their son. Urgently seeking an alternative, they lit upon a resurgent boarding institution southwest of Melbourne.

Geelong Grammar School had long been the school of choice for the graziers of Victoria’s Western District, like the Fairbairn dynasty. Since 1914, when it had opened a splendid building at Corio on a new 262-acre site with its own railway station, Geelong Grammar had become a fashionable boarding option for the
sons of Melbourne’s business and professional elite. Thus in 1921, at the age of 11, Dick Elford was despatched to Geelong. There, initially in Junior House and then in Perry House, he was seen at first as ‘a rather timid or hesitant boy’. This was perhaps unsurprising for an English child, a ‘pom’ detached from all his friends, and now embedded with a company of robust colonial youth, including two Mackinnons and John Grey Gorton.

The Corio atmosphere was ‘philistine and hearty’, a junior contemporary found in 1926. ‘Scorching heat beat down in spring and summer; piercing winds swept across in winter when the place was not petrified in frost.’ Naked dashes to cold showers after a bugle call awakening, unheated dormitories, scorn for dressing gowns, uncompromising emphasis on games, weekly military instruction, would toughen or crush the nervous boy. No wonder, as Balcombe Griffiths, a couple of years Elford’s senior, remembered, the English lad had largely overcome his shyness by the time he left school.

Though undistinguished academically or on the sporting field, Dick was a notable performer in school drama, appearing in a fund-raising production of Frank Anstey’s fantasy farce *Vice Versa* following a devastating fire in 1925. Dick seems to have contracted the acting bug at the same time as his sister. Barbara would progress from understudying in amateur productions to walk-on and bit parts with the Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson touring company. In Brisbane, with cast member and private pilot Norman Shelley at the controls of a rented Moth, Barbara would become the first member of her family to loop the loop. Dick’s interest in theatricals led to an unusual friendship with Tom Judd, the school porter. The stage-struck Judd, whose Cockney father was the school laundryman, had been allowed to sit in on play rehearsals, and even to assist with make-up. The first play he ever saw was *Beauty and the Beast* with Elford and Noel Newman, a prefect three years older than his co-lead and better known as an athlete and superb Australian Rules footballer, playing the young lovers. Judd was to write many years later:

Dick and I were nearly the same age. I was a little older in years but not in any other way. He had been in Perry House and because of my help with the Pastime Club we discovered, that although poles apart as regards class and upbringing, we had something in common: our love

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21 Norman Shelley, falsely rumoured to have voiced some of Winston Churchill’s wartime broadcasts, flew as a ferry pilot in the Air Transport Auxiliary and became a much-loved radio actor. (For an authoritative review of the impersonation myth, see www.winstonchurchill.org.)
of the theatre, drawing and art and we had read the same books, in fact there are a number of books I would never have read if Dick had not lent them to me and insist that we discuss them later.22

Dick had also made a lasting impression on his first house master R. G. Jennings. ‘Jenno’, housemaster of Junior House, was ‘a middle aged bachelor with a mission in life’, recalled Jo Gullett, Harry Gullett’s son, who entered the school in the year Elford left. ‘The mission was to turn the schoolboys under his authority into Christian gentlemen, perhaps rather self-conscious Christian gentlemen, as he was himself.’ For Reginald Jennings it mattered less that one might be an outstanding scholar or sportsman. What was important was the moulding of character.23 If Tom Judd’s testimony is to be believed, Dick Elford was a natural gentleman. Judd’s friend had ‘a good sense of what was right and wrong. He also had an earnestness of purpose and when combined with a very pleasant personality it made him a boy to remember.’ As for Jennings, author of stories of school life, who had also published a three act play, Snappy, in 1919, he was to remember Elford as ‘a boy of whom I held a very high opinion’, especially ‘preparing him for the leading part in a play at school and how really well he did it...I learned to regard him as a charming boy who would do big things.’24 This was perhaps a conventional posthumous tribute, though ‘charming’ has a ring of authenticity.

What we know for certain is that Dick’s time at Geelong meant that his life touched that of many boys and their families whose path he was likely to cross again: Pat, younger brother of Jim Fairbairn; Jim and Pat White, sons of General Sir Brudenell White; as well as Balcombe Griffiths, whose mother had been a bridesmaid at the Whites’ wedding.25 In class, dormitory, and sports field close friendships were forged. Hampers were shared: Heinze [sic] Baked Beans ‘done up in tomato sauce gravy (not too strong)’ might have only ‘one bit of bacon (not pork) just big enough to cover a florin, but the beans were glorious. They make one big meal for two people or a fairly large one for three, you try them’, he urged his mother.

22 Tom Judd, Fifty Years Will Be Long Enough! a school porter’s story, National Press, Melbourne, 1971, pp.39–40. Newman, later a long-serving master at the school, was the father of the AFL footballer and television personality Sam Newman.
24 Judd, Fifty Years, p.112; R. G. Jennings to Audrey Elford, 2 Sept. 1940, Elford MSS. For Jennings’ influence, see Weston Bate, Light Blue Down Under: The History of Geelong Grammar School, Oxford UP, Melbourne, 1990, pp.147–50.
25 W. B. Griffiths to CH, 10 Nov. 1981.
Dick matriculated in 1927, with first-class honours in drawing in the School Leaving Examination, and entered Melbourne University in 1928. Enrolled in architecture, he managed to pass only two subjects, graphics and drawing, in his first year. Pure mathematics, natural philosophy, and chemistry proved beyond him. He tried them all again without success in March and December 1929, and finally in March 1930. The triple failure in chemistry must have been a barely fathomable disappointment to his father and uncles, in particular Percy Elford, who claimed that he had been a month away from discovering Argon in 1890 when he was forced to end his research to take up a teaching appointment in Shropshire. Dick’s lecturers had lost patience. In the terse language of the university’s student record, he was ‘reported for repeated failure’. He told the authorities that he did not desire to proceed with the architecture course. But this evidently was not enough. Presumably to guarantee that he could not change his mind and come back, he was formally excluded from the course in May 1930.

What had happened? Lack of application rather more than lack of ability seems the likeliest explanation. There had been distractions. In September 1929 he was elected the architecture faculty representative on the Students’ Representative

26 Percy Elford’s research is summarised in a letter to David Elford, 8 Dec. 1949, Elford MSS.
27 I am indebted to Michael Collins Persse for information about Elford’s schooling and to the Melbourne University Archives for his later academic record.
Council, and became honorary treasurer. Richard Latham, the federal Attorney-General’s son, was SRC president. The brilliant Latham, a dedicated practical joker, was soon on his way to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. Others prominent on the council were the Test cricketer Ted A’Beckett, succeeding Harry Winneke as representative of the law faculty; the medical student, William Fenton-Bowen, who was to become notorious as an abortionist; and the engineer C. N. Edgerton, who made his name on campus as a boxer. Engaging as student politics and innocent undergraduate romps were, the most significant diversion for Elford was the vivacious girl he met at the architects’ ball in his first year. Audrey Edith Basham had just arrived in Melbourne on a holiday trip from Perth. A friend persuaded her to go to the ball. Before the night was out she and Dick were unofficially engaged.

Apart from the understandable hesitations of their parents about such a meteoric courtship, there was another consideration: Audrey was three years older than the 18-year-old university student she had just met. In deference to parental counsel, the couple were to wait until Dick was 21 before they were to marry. Audrey’s father George Basham, a retired bank manager, was ill and would die aged 64 in February 1930. By then it was obvious that Dick had to find employment. In a depressed economy, with construction and house building languishing, prospects for advancement in the architectural profession, even for a graduate, were few. His slightly older school chum and fellow architecture student Balcombe Griffiths was secure for the moment in the fashionable firm of A. and K. Henderson, biding his time before quitting with his friends John and Tom Freeman and Rob Yuncken to start their own practice.28

For Dick a junior drafting position, at the going pittance of five shillings a week, was out of the question. An opening for a cadet reporter on The Argus, Melbourne’s conservative morning newspaper, was more promising. As if to demonstrate the intimate interlocking of the Melbourne elites, Balcombe Griffiths’ boss Kingsley Henderson, along with W. T. Appleton and Sir George Fairbairn, had been among the principal money-men supporting Stanley Bruce before his electoral defeat in 1929.29 Henderson was one of the small group behind the transition of Joe Lyons from the ALP to lead the United Australia Party in 1931, and in a few

29 The Argus, 2 Nov. 1929, p.18.
years was to become one of the financial angels of *The Argus*. The *Argus* was unashamedly the paper of the right in politics: ‘Conservative, free trade; very dignified, stands for everything constitutional, strongly Imperial; circulates amongst society people, commercial leaders, pastoralists, bankers, etc.’, was how a brief for the new Victorian governor characterised it in January 1934. George Johnston, who also started as a cadet in the 1930s, thinly disguised it as the *Morning Post* in his novel *My Brother Jack*: ‘Everything…was deliberately and publicly arranged to suggest dignity, grandeur, omniscience, infallibility and a privileged standing in the community.’ A staid broadsheet appealing to the status-conscious, it sold less than its morning rival, *The Age*. Between them, the two rather self-satisfied morning papers barely exceeded the circulation of Keith Murdoch’s brash tabloid the *Sun News-Pictorial*. But *The Argus* had strong connections with the federal government, and was the favoured recipient of information from Melbourne financial circles.

So Dick Elford began there at the bottom of the journalists’ ladder, the most junior member of the ‘literary staff’, assigned to the motoring section, on the lowest circulation daily paper in the city. Advancement within the business had to be the first objective. His cadetship was a four-year apprenticeship. The *Argus* cadets were subjected to a rigorous regime of training that enriched their general knowledge while it polished their grammar and syntax. Another way forward was a recently launched Diploma of Journalism course at Melbourne University. The diploma could lead eventually to a Bachelor of Arts degree. Still maybe hoping to satisfy waning family aspirations that he would obtain university qualifications, he enrolled in the course. It proved a struggle. He scraped through Economics I and Law affecting Journalism at the end of 1932. But that was to be the end of his studies. Clearly Dick had no appetite for the higher education that his father, uncles, and aunts had enjoyed. Nor, if truth were acknowledged, was he dedicated to journalism. He had talent as a reporter and feature writer; but the newspaper was a means to an end not a vocation.

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30 According to Dame Enid Lyons, Henderson was one of her husband’s two closest friends from 1931 onwards (Dame Enid Lyons, *So We Take Comfort*, Heinemann, London, 1965, p.275). The other members of the group that persuaded Lyons to join the new political grouping were the stockbroker Staniforth Ricketson (head of J. B. Were), C. A. Norris (secretary of the National Mutual Life Association), Ambrose Pratt (former journalist, novelist, and tariff reform advocate, with mining interests in Malaya and Siam), Sir John Higgins (head of the British Australian Wool Realisation Association Pty Ltd, the largest public company in Australia), and Robert Menzies, a leading Opposition figure in the Victorian Parliament (Philip Hart, ‘The Piper and the Tune’, in Cameron Hazlehurst (ed.), *Australian Conservatism*, p.115).


Ambition

Dick Elford’s real ambition was a life in politics. What led him in this direction is unknown. An eighteenth-century ancestor, Sir William Elford, first and last Baronet, was a friend of William Pitt the Younger and had been an ally of William Wilberforce in the anti-slavery movement in the House of Commons. And Dick’s grandfather, Edwin, was related by marriage to the famous Welsh reforming MP, Henry Richard. But all that was in the distant past, and the Elford name — in spite of a lineage traceable back to the thirteenth century — meant nothing in the Australia of the 1930s. If a political career were to be undertaken, some strategic planning was needed. So too was maturity. Dick was no longer a ‘rather timid or hesitant boy’. A prolonged engagement and some career success had changed him. Balcombe Griffiths remembered a transformation into ‘an active and positive personality’. Exposure as a young adult to the banter of the newsroom and the raffish after-hours haunts of Melbourne’s literary luminaries, as well as his father’s more decorous social world, had melted his residual shyness. On his wedding day in November 1931, followed by Griffiths as his groomsman, and best man Dick Latreille of the pastoral company Dennys Lascelles, all in white tie and tails, Dick Elford looked as though he belonged on the steps of the Reverend Dr Archibald Law’s fashionable St John’s Church, Toorak.

Dick’s bride, Audrey Basham, and her two younger brothers Geoffrey and Maxwell had a colourful heritage. Their father had moved from the family’s mixed farming property at Port Elliot in South Australia for a career as an accountant with the Western Australia Bank, first in the goldfields boom town of Menzies, then as manager in the burgeoning Laverton, 150 miles to the northeast. At Laverton he met Alice Byfield, formerly of Hobart, a nurse at the local hospital. Married in 1905 in St George’s Cathedral by the Bishop of Perth, the couple moved to the more established port town of Geraldton, and then in 1920 to Katanning, in the farm belt southwest of Perth.

George Basham traced his ancestry from Xenophon Basham, a Hammersmith butcher transported to Tasmania in 1814 after being found with a forged £5 note in his possession, serving time in the hulks, escaping, and having a death sentence commuted. Xenophon was clearly a man of some resource, as he was followed to Hobart shortly afterwards by his wife and four children. By the 1840s there were Basham children and grandchildren in South Australia. Audrey’s grandfather, Charles Abraham Basham, purchased the broad acres of Pleasant Banks stretching from Port Elliot to Middleton in 1856 on his return from the Bendigo goldfields, where he and his brother had made money crafting cedar gold boxes. George, the second son and sixth of Charles’ eight children, had cash if not gold dust running in his veins. He had bought an interest in the
Hotel Australia in Laverton as well as making his own way as a successful and well-connected bank manager. With his uncle and cousins running a Guernsey stud, his father the creator of the ‘Basham Black Mammoth’ grape, and a Basham history of dairy production, flour milling, and farming around Port Elliot, the convict stain had been well and truly erased.33

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Audrey and Dick, wed at last

(Courtesy of Hugh Elford)

33 Annie Basham and Melody Cartwright have generously instructed me on Audrey Basham’s ancestry. ‘A family history of Xenophon Basham and descendants’, an essay by Judy Johnson, is held in the library of the Society of Australian Genealogists, Sydney.
If the Bashams had risen from convict forger to bank manager (sleeping with a revolver under his pillow) in three generations, the Elfords, twentieth-century immigrants, had long-established claims to gentility. Descended from the Elfords of the hamlet of Sheepstor on Dartmoor, the family traced their ancestors back to the late thirteenth century and beyond. They had the right to bear arms. Sir William Elford Bt, MP for Plymouth, a banker, was a Fellow of the Royal Society and a talented amateur artist, one of whose paintings graced the royal apartments at Windsor. Although his company crashed spectacularly in the 1820s his descendants were proud of their name. Dick Elford wore a signet ring bearing the crest with a demi lion rampant over the family motto adopted by Sir William: Difficilia qua pulchra, variously translated as ‘To be honourable is difficult’ and ‘Things that are honourable [or beautiful or excellent] are difficult to attain.’ Now established in a smart South Yarra apartment, a member of the Australian Club and the exclusive residential Peninsula Country Golf Club in Frankston, Archie Elford moved in the same circles as the Grimwades, Harold Clapp, G. J. Coles, Herbert Brookes, and the conservative party leaders Stanley Bruce, John Latham, and the coming man, R. G. Menzies, and their financial backers. As chief executive of a shipping cartel that operated with official blessing, A. S. Elford was frequently in the news for his negotiations with the Waterside Workers and the government. But it was evidence of his family’s aspiration if not their arrival in Melbourne society when The Argus social notes on 6 January 1930 recorded the return of the Elfords to their Toorak Road home after spending a few days at the ‘millionaires’ golf course’ in Frankston.

Archie Elford had briefed the young barrister Robert Menzies, and first appeared with him in the Commonwealth Arbitration Court in 1925 when they attempted to get the unruly Seamen’s Union deregistered. Menzies, though possibly blackballed in previous years because of his lack of a war record, had been elected to the Australian Club in 1931. This was a connection that could in time be useful for the Elfords. But Dick’s more immediate need was financial independence. Through the City directors who sat on the Steamship Owners’ board — men like James Kelso of McIlwraith, McEacharn; David York Syme of the Melbourne Steamship Co., a director of the National Bank of Australasia, and a fellow member of the Australian Club; and J. Langley Webb of Huddart Parker and chairman of the Commercial Bank of Australia — Archie could help his son

34 ‘A Brief History of the Elford Family of Sheepstor’, St Leonard’s Church, Sheepstor, n.d., Elford MSS.
36 John Pacini, It’s Your Honour: An Account of the First Fifty Years of the Peninsula Golf Club, [1975], p.17; for the ‘so-called millionaires golf course’, Lord Wakehurst’s diary, 31 Oct. 1937, Wakehurst Papers, NSW State Library ML MSS 6347 1 [5].
to embark on a lucrative course in commerce or finance. With his friends on the Court of Directors of the Royal Humane Society, and associates in the 1928–29 Industrial Peace Conference, friends of the Prime Minister like the flour miller W. C. F. Thomas and the Collins House powerbroker R. W. Knox, he could open many other doors. Archie Elford made no secret of his political views, notably his hope in mid-1932 that the New South Wales governor would intervene and end the premiership of Jack Lang.39

The path for Dick might not be rapid but it would be steady. He and his adoring wife Audrey would be a team, sharing the burdens and rewards of a modestly prosperous middle-class family life. In due course, with a secure home base, a sound business reputation, and carefully cultivated connections, they would be ready to move forward if and when a political opening presented itself. A cautious approach had much to recommend it, especially as The Argus, respectable newspaper though it was, was going through troubled times. The company lost money in 1932 and, with classified advertising shrinking, there was no revival in sight. With this in mind it seems that an attempt was made to mobilise friendly forces on Dick’s behalf. Foremost among them, and as respected as a referee could possibly be, was the Commonwealth Deputy Prime Minister, Attorney-General, Minister for External Affairs, and Minister for Industry, John Latham. Latham had come into the orbit of Dick’s father as retained legal counsel to several shipping companies, and then as the Bruce–Page government’s moving spirit in industrial relations disputes and legislation affecting the maritime industries. A courteous formal relationship with the minister was deepened by the furnishing of private information on waterfront conditions, and warmed by assurances that the shipowners had no wish to embarrass the government, even when they were alarmed about the impending Maritime Industries Bill in 1929. After the formation of the Lyons government, Elford sought Latham’s private guidance on contentious issues such as the Queensland government’s move late in 1932 to force volunteers off the waterfront, an action that Elford hoped was ‘ultra vires the Constitution’.40

As a young barrister, John Latham had contributed articles to The Argus at a penny a line, and had been a correspondent for the London Standard. He knew newspapers, and had almost certainly authorised the provision of intelligence information that underpinned a series of Argus articles on communism in May 1933.41 Now, in March 1934, he recorded that he had known ‘Mr R. E. Elford’

39 Sir Kenneth S. Anderson to A. S. Elford, 1 May 1932, Elford MSS.
40 Elford to Latham, 3 Jan. 1933, Latham MSS, NLA MS 1009/1/2958. Elford’s correspondence with Latham in 1929, including ‘personal and confidential’ exchanges about the ‘“red” and highly undesirable element’, is in Latham MSS NLA 1009/36 and 39.
for seven years, since Elford’s university days in fact, when his own son had been President of the Students’ Representative Council. Elford was a man ‘of attractive personality and he has displayed great energy and ability in his work as a journalist’. Moreover, Latham attested:

I know he is entrusted by his newspaper with assignments usually reserved for men of much longer experience, and I am assured from a well informed and independent source that his progress in the journalistic profession has been unusually rapid, whether judged from a standpoint of the work with which he has been entrusted or of the salary which he is now paid.

Latham had ‘no hesitation in recommending Mr Elford as an intelligent, well informed and energetic young man’.42 With this sort of support, a new arena was probably only a few interviews away. But an unexpected turn of events a few months later brought another option.

In December 1934, following the sudden death of Lauchlan Mackinnon, principal proprietor and general manager of The Argus, Archie Elford was entrusted with responsibility for managing the newspaper interests of the Mackinnon estate. As a member of the council of management he became, in effect, a director of The Argus and Australasian company. The unforeseen assignment lasted for the next three years until new owners led by Robert Menzies’ business partner, Staniforth Ricketson of the stockbrokers J. B. Were, took over what was a commercially ailing property.43 His father’s position affording him some protection, if not patronage, Dick could adopt a more audacious strategy. He presented Audrey with a choice. If they were to put all their resources into developing his career, staying with The Argus and riding out its financial uncertainties would give him flexible hours to widen his circle of useful acquaintances, and pursue other interests and opportunities. The polo, racing, and riding to hounds of the Mackinnons, the Fairbairns, and their Western District pastoralist neighbours might be beyond his reach. But he would have enough money for smart clothes, entertainment, perhaps tennis and squash, and even occasional hospitality. Meanwhile Audrey would stay in the background, thrifty and frugal, taking care of the children — twins Hugh and David born in February 1933 — until her husband ‘came good’.

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42 Latham testimonial, 6 March 1934, Elford MSS (copy, Latham MSS, NLA MS 1009/1/3561). Seven months later Archie Elford was a member of the organising committee led by Prime Minister Lyons for a dinner honouring Latham on his retirement from politics — ‘one of the greatest tributes ever paid to a public man in Australia’ (The Argus, 11 Oct. 1934).

Dick’s preference was obvious; and Audrey acquiesced. So this was the plan, ‘an arrangement’, as Audrey described it with a tinge of embarrassment 40 years later. To the extent that their carefully rationed means would allow, Dick would live something akin to a playboy life. His social circle would embrace old school chums, the junior members of the Mackinnon clan, his architect friends like Balcombe Griffiths and their wealthy clients, Dick Latreille of Dennys Lascelles, journalists like Archer Thomas of The Herald and the flamboyant left-winger Rupert Lockwood, the rising society solicitor Max Ham, the ex-Geelong Grammarian and aspiring artist Russell Drysdale, and the dashing bachelor MP for Fawkner, Harold Holt.44 On rare occasions, noticed in The Argus ‘Life in Melbourne’ columns, Audrey would also come into her own — acting as a ticket secretary and then committee president, for example, when Dick and a group of old boys from public and grammar schools’ associations organised an ‘Alma Mater’ ball and other functions to raise funds for a boys’ ward at Prince Henry’s Hospital.45

The Elford plan also included taking work seriously. At The Argus Dick was at first taken under the wing of Edgar Holt, one of the younger men already making their mark on the paper, along with the Deputy Chief of Staff W. Shelton Smith, and Clive Turnbull. A poet, and a major presence in the literary pages, Holt was assigned to ‘keep an amiable eye on him’ by the editor, Roy Curthoys.46 Within a short time of joining the paper, ‘Richard Elford’ had stories appearing over his own by-line. Initiation pranks for college freshmen, the prospect for the Victorian ski-ing season — he could turn his hand with a light touch to whatever was required.47 By the time Curthoys, opinionated and volatile, fell out with the owners and left in 1935, Dick was securely established.

From late 1937, Argus staff came under the supervision of the dynamic Sydney journalist Errol Knox, who had enlisted as a private in the AIF, was commissioned and served with No. 3 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps, and ended the war as a temporary major attached to the Royal Flying Corps staff. Appointed as managing editor to turn around the paper’s faltering fortunes, ‘Knocker’ Knox had edited Who’s Who in Australia 1933–34 and another edition in 1935 in which Archibald Elford now appeared among his more famous friends. Other contemporaries of Dick at The Argus included Bob Menzies’ sister, Belle Green, working for the board of directors in ‘a public relations capacity’; and in the newsroom the senior feature writer, film reviewer, and novelist Erle Cox; Bill Brennan the veteran chief leader writer (whose brother Tom was a junior United Australia Party minister); and Erle Cox’s son Harry, deputy chief of staff, who went on to assist in the paper’s Canberra parliamentary gallery from 1933, and would share tales of the turmoil and conflict in the national capital before moving on to be news editor at the Sydney Daily Telegraph. Elford himself brought along the talented Melbourne University student journalist Geoffrey Hutton to work for £2 a week under the stern tutelage of Roy Curthoys.48 It was a good school. And, as the paper was revamped in the late 1930s, with news on the front page, rising circulation and advertising revenue, Dick Elford settled into a comfortable routine.49

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47 The Argus, 14 March 1931, 4 June 1932.
48 ‘Isabel Alice Green née Menzies’, Latrobe Library MS 10741 Box 957/4; Dow (ed.), More Memories of Melbourne University, p.36.
An auspicious embrace

At last, his spurs earned, Dick was beckoned towards one of the political doors he was hoping would open. One of the people into whose orbit he had inserted himself was James Fairbairn, the flying MP for Flinders. He had perhaps first met Fairbairn through Fairbairn’s younger brother Pat, one of his contemporaries at Geelong Grammar. Allan ‘Jiggie’ Spowers, an Argus director, was a prefect and captain of boats at Geelong when Fairbairn was there. Spowers and Fairbairn and their wives moved in the same social circles: polo tea parties, vice-regal balls, racing carnivals. Spowers, Osborne Fairbairn, and Jim Fairbairn himself had seen something of the young journalist on the committee of the Old Geelong Grammarians’ Association which Elford had joined two years after leaving school and remained on ever since. He was, it was said, a keen and useful committee man. In mid-1938, Fairbairn invited him on an adventure. They were to fly to New Guinea together in August, ostensibly to undertake an aerial survey of the Salamua-Wau road but with another agenda that emerged on return: to challenge the choice of Salamua over Lae as the capital of the mandated territory.50

The Argus gave Elford leave of absence. It was to be a determining event in the young journalist’s life. A more intimate environment than the cockpit of a small plane is hard to imagine. Sharing the dangers of the air through rough sea crossings and blinding storms, navigating with official maps that did not show many ranges and peaks of over 1000 feet, the two men learned that they really liked each other.51 Great excitement followed when Fairbairn’s arguments against Salamua led to Cabinet repudiating the decision of the Minister for Territories, Billy Hughes, and considering Fairbairn’s proposal that the administration of Papua be merged with New Guinea. So it was not a great surprise when early in 1939 Fairbairn, raised to the Cabinet in the Menzies ministry as Minister for Civil Aviation and Minister assisting the Minister for Defence, asked Elford to become his private secretary. Dick did not hesitate.

The appointment as private secretary to the new minister reflected both professional and social acceptance. The Fairbairns, Victorian Western District aristocracy, were socially exclusive. Mere public servants and business acquaintances did not readily get past the ex-RAN petty officer manning the lobby of Alcaston House at the top of Collins Street, the seven-storey apartment building designed by A. and K. Henderson, where the Caseys and the Streets also had flats. Still less were invitations proffered to the Fairbairn estate at Mount Elephant. The gregarious Fred Scherger, for example, then a 35-year-old Wing

50 Sydney Morning Herald, 8, 23 Aug. 1938.
51 The Mercury, 13 Aug. 1938.
Commander and RAAF Director of Training, whose ability their father greatly admired, was never seen at home by the Fairbairn children.  

A career officer, graduate of the Royal Military College, Duntroon, too young to have flown in the Great War, the diminutive Scherger was ambitious and well-connected. One of the RAAF’s most respected pilots, he was Chief Flying Instructor at No 1 Flying Training School, Point Cook, when the Minister for Defence Vic Thorby (prompted by the Prime Minister Joe Lyons) authorised the school being placed at Dick Casey’s disposal to enable him to qualify for his pilot’s licence.

Fairbairn and Elford take flight together, August 1938
(Courtesy of Audrey Elford)

The Chief of the Air Staff gave Scherger the task of instructing the Treasurer. In the 1937–38 Christmas holidays the instruction that had begun at Laverton was continued at the Caseys’ Berwick property in southeast Victoria; there Maie Casey, now an enthusiast after early misgivings, joined the class. Scherger remained friendly with the appreciative Caseys. He played golf with Fairbairn whenever they met at the Barwon Heads Golf Club. The minister later confided to his teenage son Geoffrey that he would have promoted Scherger to the top of

the RAAF if he could. But he had to tell a crestfallen Scherger in 1940 that he must yield his position to a more senior man, one of the Great War generation, because he lacked ‘weight in the top councils of the service’. 54

Relative youth was not a handicap for a ministerial private secretary. The right old-school tie and social graces in any case compensated for much that might otherwise be deficient. Dick Elford’s journalistic colleagues had appreciated his ‘quiet courtesy and unfailing bonhomie’. As the Geelong Grammar magazine, *The Corian*, was to put it 16 months later, Elford had qualities to impress an older man: ‘a keen sense and acute mind, good judgment, and a strong sense of right and wrong, together with a real though not oppressive earnestness of purpose…a natural pleasantness of manner’.55 Perhaps, too, Jim Fairbairn was able to confirm his assessment of Elford’s character and ability from his uncle Sir George, a former Senator and Victorian Agent General in London, who was a director of The Argus and Australasian Ltd. George Fairbairn, as trustee for the Wilson family, *The Argus*’s original owners, of course knew Dick’s father from his days as the Mackinnons’ trustee. As President of the Victorian National Union in the early 1930s, the main financial backer of the United Australia Organisation, George Fairbairn’s influence reached into the deepest recesses of the conservative political heartland.56 Scattered through the network of relatives and business associates, the Melbourne and Australian Club establishment, the Collins Street mining and financial magnates, there would be many people who could vouch for the sociable Dick Elford.

Dick was in fact in demand. Sir Keith Murdoch was contemplating offering him a post on the Melbourne *Herald*. And just two days after he had accepted Fairbairn’s offer, Dick Casey, appointed as Minister for Supply and Development, made a similar proposal. Casey had just relinquished the Treasury portfolio and, by mutual agreement, his private secretary, Colin Moodie, a graduate clerk from External Affairs, had returned to a better-paid departmental post. Moodie had not enjoyed the demands of the private secretary’s post: hours lingering around Parliament House, Sunday summonses to the minister’s home, an ambience of political intrigue from which as a career public servant he felt he should be detached. Elford’s pedigree and commitment were different. He had known Casey’s wife, Maie, for several years. She, and their mutual friend Russell Drysdale were fellow students at George Bell’s Melbourne art school. Ethel Spowers, sister of *The Argus* director, Allan Spowers, was another of Bell’s Contemporary Group circle. Maie, as well as her husband, and her brother Rupert were avid flyers, with a newly built airstrip on their ‘Edrington’ property near Berwick. Much as he welcomed the chance to work with Fairbairn, Elford regretted the

54 ACM Sir Frederick Scherger, interview, 2 Sept. 1978.

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missed opportunity to join the entourage of the more senior party figure. It was more than a co-incidence that Elford’s bosses at The Argus had backed the campaign for Stanley Bruce to succeed Joe Lyons, a bid led by Casey, whose ill-judged support for Bruce and subsequent lame candidature of his own, cost him whatever confidence the successful Bob Menzies might have retained for a declared leadership rival.

Irrespective of the immediate political consequences, there was a lesson to be learned from a particular enthusiasm Fairbairn and Casey shared. The two ministers had a unique bond. Elford could not fail to be impressed by the passion for the air displayed by both his new chief and the ‘figure of glamour’, the immaculate ‘Ronald Colmanesque’ Casey. As Casey was to write some 18 months later: ‘Australia is one of nature’s flying countries’.57 If Fairbairn was the better-known aviator, Casey had his own early flying stories. His first was paying £5 to spend 10 minutes aloft near Paris in 1911. In 1917 he was attached as an observer to an Australian squadron in France and went up in several military machines.58 He had started flying lessons in England as long ago as 1929. But, after a few months, his instructor ‘killed himself by running into another machine in the air, so that I am at present subject to certain domestic pressure to give it up’.59 The domestic pressure had abated by January 1938 when Casey bought Simple Flying for Simple People: notes for the use of A-licence pilots by one of them, Nancy Lyle, who happened to be the first woman to fly across Bass Strait.60 Although Audrey Elford did not know it, Dick himself was soon to begin flying lessons. But first, traditionally farewelled by his Argus colleagues with a wrist watch suitably engraved in recognition of nearly a decade of service, he had fresh realms on land to make his own.

The political world

People in political and public service circles quickly warmed to Dick Elford. On the new stage, with her boys at school, and an additional allowance supplementing her husband’s salary, Audrey could begin to entertain more expansively in their Punt Road home. Cocktail parties for visiting friends on successive evenings in late August 1939 found their way into The Argus social page. ‘The rooms

57 ‘Notes to assist in the preparation of scenario for “March of Time” of Australia’, attachment to Casey to Sir Keith Murdoch, 5 Sept. 1940, Casey MSS, NLA MS 6150/2.
were decked with hyacinths, violets, daffodils, and blossom. The hostess wore a frock of misty blue woollen striped with red and white, with a wide belt and buttons of white patent leather.’ Many in Melbourne and Canberra of course knew Dick’s father as the principal representative of the employers in the shipping and waterfront conflicts of the last decade and recently as a member of a Commonwealth government defence co-ordination committee advising on the requisitioning of mercantile vessels in time of war. Dick soon became a popular member of the coterie of younger ministerial private secretaries. Cecil (‘Peter’) Looker was friendly. Looker had come from the Prime Minister’s department as Casey’s third choice when Moodie departed and Corby Tritton declined. Keith Waller, a Melbourne University history graduate and career External Affairs officer seconded to Billy Hughes’ staff, was among those who introduced him into the close world of Canberra society. Dick made friends wherever he went, Waller said, ‘one couldn’t help liking him’. Though his university career had been brief and unremarkable, Elford was embraced by the clique of graduates recently recruited to the Department of External Affairs. The group included Waller’s Scotch College contemporary Pat Shaw, Colin Moodie, Tom Eckersley, and Peter Heydon who had been at Fort Street High School in Sydney with Looker. Heydon’s Sydney law background, joviality, and quick intelligence had impressed Bob and Pattie Menzies on a five-and-a-half-month overseas trip in 1938. As External Affairs liaison officer with the Defence Department in Melbourne in the first few months of war, he was to see much of Elford, along with Geoff Street’s Toorakite assistant, CMF Captain Garry Armstrong, in the ante-rooms of the War Cabinet.

‘He was a most attractive fellow’, Keith Waller recalled of Fairbairn’s private secretary. ‘I don’t think there was any great profundity but he was tremendous fun and a splendid person to spend an evening with — bit of a womaniser but that’s forgivable in youth I suppose.’ Waller’s verdict was echoed by the distinguished RAAF officer Air Marshal Sir George Jones, then a Wing Commander and Assistant Chief of the Air Staff. Jones saw Elford at close quarters for many weeks crossing the Pacific aboard the Matson liner Monterey, then travelling across the United States, and in Ottawa for a month from mid-October 1939. Temporarily gazetted out of the RAAF and travelling in mufti so that the neutral Americans would not be obliged to intern him, Jones accompanied the

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61 The Argus, 21 Aug. 1939; 1 Nov. 1938.
64 Sir Keith Waller, interview, 21 June 1977.
Minister to assist in negotiating the Empire Air Training Scheme. Fairbairn’s private secretary, he remembered with a twinkle, ‘was a nice sort of a fellow. He got on well with people, particularly with the girls.’

Elford was indeed attractive to women. Nor was he afraid to pitch his cap in dangerous territory. The Minister’s wife, Peggy Fairbairn, encouraged his attention, pursued him, according to Audrey Elford. What especially irked Audrey was the way in which Peggy’s 15-year-old son Geoffrey, home from school, was charged with delivering messages from his mother. For his part, Geoffrey was at pains 39 years later to affirm that the initiative came from the other direction. Elford wrote poems and sent them to his mother. She was ‘charmed’ by Elford’s attentions. His father, he said, was not worried about the relationship. In answer to a question that had not been asked, he volunteered that there had been no affair.

Whatever the truth about the young Dick Elford and Peggy Fairbairn, known in her family for sensitivity about her age, it clearly did not bother her husband. Scarcely a day passed when Fairbairn and Elford were not in each other’s company. The friendship that had been forged in the air over New Guinea and strengthened as the uneasy months of peace in 1939 turned to ‘phony’ war, was to be tested by another extended period of travelling intimacy. When the Menzies government decided to join with the United Kingdom and the other Dominions in launching an Empire Air Training Scheme it was natural that the Civil Aviation Minister and Minister assisting the Minister for Defence, Fairbairn, should be sent overseas to negotiate the terms. The small team accompanying the Minister was just his private secretary, Wing Commander George Jones (Assistant Chief of the Air Staff), and C. V. Kellway, Finance Member of the Air Board, who joined the mission in New York where he was Acting Assistant Trade Commissioner. For Elford it was an eye-opening trip, ‘one to remember for the rest of my life’, as he told his mother on his return.

On the long sea voyage across the Pacific, the Minister and his private secretary had weeks to relax and restore their bodies and spirits. There was good company, and they enjoyed it. The journey was broken to collect the New Zealand delegates. Then in Fiji, on October 19, the Monterey paused long enough for a party of 28 to be entertained by the Governor, Sir Harry Luke, at lunch followed by a vocal concert in aid of Red Cross. The highlight, according to the host, was the ‘admirable rendering’ of the ‘Song of the Flea’ by the Australian baritone Alfredo Luizzi, the 1938 Sun Aria winner and a protégé of Marjorie Lawrence, en route to the USA to further his studies. ‘There were also a lot of parties in

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67 R. E. Elford to Sybil Elford, 31 Jan. 1940, Elford MSS.
various cabins’, Elford and Fairbairn’s travelling companion Jones remembered. The Prime Minister’s friend F. B. ‘Tim’ Clapp and his wife, Jane, were also on board. Clapp, who headed General Electric in Australia, was going to New York to supervise the ‘expediting of orders for defence requirements’ in association with a proposed British Purchasing Mission. Although his appointment had been kept confidential — he was travelling incognito as were the Air Minister’s party — Clapp’s identity was no secret. And it soon became apparent to Fairbairn and his group that there would be much to be gained if Clapp could join them in Ottawa to meet the various British, French, and Canadian representatives at the air conference.  

For Elford, more than his well-travelled companions, landfall brought both delights and disagreeable surprises. ‘After the luxuriant growth and colour of the tropics,’ he reported to his mother, ‘Los Angeles with its timber frame houses and apparent lack of civic pride which allowed much dirt and many eyesores to disfigure the landscape rather appalled me.’ Even Hollywood was a disappointment. But the trip was, after all, official business. As Australia had placed an order for 100 of the Lockheed Corporation’s latest Hudson bombers, the Lockheed factory at Burbank and several other big manufacturing plants on the west coast were on the official itinerary. Francis Clapp, as ‘Special Business Consultant, Commonwealth Government’, reported to Menzies that he had accompanied Fairbairn’s party to the Lockheed works where the president of the company had shown them all that was to be seen. They found that the last machines for the initial British order of Hudsons were being cleaned up and that production of the Australian order was about to begin at the rate of two a day.

As Fairbairn and his team were aware, final negotiations were in train for Australia’s payment to Lockheed. Under America’s recent neutrality legislation, title to the aircraft had to pass to the buyers on American soil. This entailed that final transfer of funds must occur on delivery at the factory or warehouse not on the ship, a technicality that occasioned considerable teleprinter traffic between Defence and Treasury officials, the Air Board, the Commonwealth Bank, and the Prime Minister’s department.  

Clapp had told his brother Harold, general manager of the Aircraft Construction Branch of the Commonwealth Department of Supply and Development, that Lockheed had 6800 employees, of whom 600 were draughtsmen; ‘he can figure out for himself what he is up against’. Harold had been given the task of supervising the assembly of the Bristol Beaufort

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69 F. Clapp to Menzies, 16 Oct. 1940, NAA: A5954, 713/1. Neither the Clapps nor the Fairbairn party appear on the ship’s passenger list.

bombers the government had agreed to build. When the delivery of Beauforts was delayed because of British needs, he was soon to be a key player in the Hudson program.\textsuperscript{71}

From the west coast there followed an overnight trans-continental flight to New York, a train journey to Ottawa, and a month ensconced in the turreted magnificence of the Château Laurier hotel with offices next door in the Canadian House of Commons. Elford and his colleagues worked hard but managed some recreational escapades as well, including trips across the river to Hull, the French quarter. In spare moments, at the suggestion of Harry Gullett, Dick despatched a series of 12 cables and collected photographs for use in Department of Information publicity. Out of pocket — ‘the Lockheed pictures alone cost him two very expensive lunches’ — he had to wait until June before receiving what a departmental official described as a ‘meagre and long overdue’ 10 guineas honorarium. An ever-miserly Commonwealth Public Service Board had sought ‘further particulars’ of the material supplied. Dilatory (nine weeks from provision of the information requested) and circumlocutory (the Victorian Public Service Inspector referred the matter to Canberra for decision), the Board finally had ‘no objection’ to the proposed special payment.\textsuperscript{72}

When an agreement on imperial air training collaboration was finally sealed, there was time for the Minister and his private secretary to explore New York. Then an island-hopping flight to Lisbon by Pan American Airways trans-Atlantic clipper with an initial unplanned five days in Bermuda, ‘where there are no motor-cars and people take life very calmly’. The delay was supposedly caused by inclement weather at Horta in the Azores. When they finally arrived at Horta after flying all night, they picked up 18 Germans. Refuelled, they flew on towards Lisbon only to encounter a severe electrical storm. By what Elford admiringly described as ‘a fine piece of navigation’ they managed to find the Azores again before retracing their path to Lisbon the following day.

Four days in Lisbon were enjoyable but for the ubiquitous ‘German intrigue’, a reminder of why Elford — like George Jones, who had temporarily gazetted himself out of the Air Force — was not allowed to be in uniform. There had been earlier evidence of German intrigue. While in New York, Fairbairn was informed that a Nazi agent under surveillance had received a clumsily coded cable from London advising him of the date of the Air Minister’s departure. The cable was traced to a waiter in a London restaurant who had overheard a British minister talking indiscreetly.\textsuperscript{73} The original ‘inclement weather’ it seems may have been the excuse for a cautious change of flight plan. From Lisbon there

\textsuperscript{71} F. Clapp to Menzies, 5 Nov. 1939, Menzies MSS, NLA MS 4936/579/4.
\textsuperscript{72} ‘Missions from Australia — Mr Fairbairn to [Canadian] [sic]’, NAA: SP112/1, 353/3/1.
was one more stop, at Biscarrosse in France, before arrival at last in England at Southampton. The contrast between perpetually damp, wintry London and the springtime Melbourne Elford had left could hardly have been greater. At the heart of the Empire he found a city of sandbags, blackouts, rationing, gas masks, and a pervasive sense that there was to be a very long war. There was much to see in a short time — the War Office, the headquarters of Fighter, Bomber, and Coastal commands. Crossing the Channel through pelting rain in a fast French steamer with a destroyer escort, there was a visit to advanced units, conversations with Australian pilots, and a day in ‘the biggest fort in the Maginot line’. Back to Paris, thence to Marseilles to join an Imperial Airways flying boat for the journey home. To complete the tour, there were brief inspections of war preparations in Egypt, Palestine, Iran, and Iraq. Siam and the Dutch East Indies were the last ports of call before Australian landfall.

Back in Canberra and Melbourne early in the New Year, Dick Elford was now a connected and effective insider. He was well liked by Air Board and departmental chiefs, Fred Mulrooney and Mel Langslow. He would liaise and gossip with friends in uniform at RAAFHQ, such as the lawyer, Jack Graham. After a long day in Parliament, he would carouse in the company of Artie Fadden, who had led a group of Country Party dissidents appalled at Sir Earle Page’s attack on Menzies’ war record and was to become Minister without Portfolio in March 1940. Among the ministerial staff, Dick had become especially friendly with ‘Peter’ Looker, who, since the departure of Casey to Washington, had been assistant private secretary to the Prime Minister. ‘We were all bearing the heat and burden of the day’, Looker reflected 36 years later. He himself was enjoying the company of a stenographer in Fairbairn’s office, Jean Withington, whom he was later to marry. Another sharing the heat and burden, and Elford’s companionship, was J. R. (Bob) Willoughby, a political organiser who had come from Adelaide as private secretary to one of the Prime Minister’s key political associates, George McLeay, leader of the government in the Senate and successively Minister for Commerce and Minister for Trade and Customs.

Like Elford, many of the younger men in the Cabinet entourage chafed at being prevented from joining the armed services. Fred Shedden vetoed his assistant Sam Landau’s attempt to get into uniform. Dick Randall, a Treasury research officer attached to Percy Spender, had undertaken flight training but a defect in his left eye was keeping him out of the RAAF.74 Also determined to get away was W. S. Bengtsson, secretary to the Minister for the Interior. Dick’s friend Bill Bengtsson, formerly a Victorian public servant and draughtsman with militia experience, presented himself to the RAAF’s No. 1 Recruiting Centre in Melbourne in June 1940.75 He was soon on his way. Garry Armstrong, briefly a

75 W. S. Bengtsson, Attestation Form, Personal File, NAA: A9300.
colleague at *The Argus*, who had been assigned to Geoff Street’s staff from the Department of Defence, was gone in July. Armstrong, a law graduate and CMF captain, had been despatched to the minister’s office on the day he was about to be interviewed for a short service staff course at Duntroon. Street, who knew of him socially, wanted the bright young officer to take on the tasks for which the ‘precise and accurate writer of minor letters’, his private secretary Percy Hayter, had little aptitude. When war came Armstrong was told he could join the AIF if he produced a suitable replacement as assistant private secretary. It took nine months but he finally found Hugh Bathurst whose ability, and status as an AIF volunteer who had been medically discharged, made him acceptable to Street.76

Charming, but still hoping for a uniform rather than tweeds
(Courtesy of Hugh Elford)

For Dick Elford there was no release from the Minister’s staff. Where Fairbairn went, so must he. With the House of Representatives sitting in August 1940, it was once again a schedule of shuttling between Melbourne and Canberra. There were shoals of constituency correspondence to attend to, requests for autographs and souvenirs, appointments to arrange, untimely callers to meet, unwanted callers to deflect, research for speeches to be gathered, official files

to be digested, catnaps for the Minister to be organised during late night parliamentary sittings, instructions to be transmitted to the Chief of the Air Staff and the Secretary of the Department of Air. And on Monday evening, August 12, at 8.25 p.m., just before he left Century House after a ‘friendly pee’ in the men’s room with John Harrison of the public relations staff, a telephone call conveying another disturbing accident report to be followed up. This time it was about the disappearance of one of the new Hudson bombers, apparently crashed into the sea off the Queensland coast.77

It was less than a fortnight since news of the death of two young pilots in a training accident in the Blue Mountains had greeted the Air Minister on his arrival in Melbourne at the end of his trip around Australia. Two more airmen had been killed, one of them an instructor, when their machine crashed near the Narromine flying training school on August 8.78 Tragic as they were, such deaths had become almost routine as the RAAF strained to produce the new generation of flyers the war demanded. However, a Hudson vanishing without trace was something Dick’s chief would want to know about as soon as possible the next day. ‘John,’ he told Harrison, ‘I’m sorry, I’ve done you out of a trip. I’m going with the boss tomorrow.’79

On a bleak morning, when he would rather have been in a warm bed nursing his influenza-racked body, it was therefore an early call for Dick Elford, a drive out to Essendon, and the prospect of an hour and a half in the air to be endured before work would begin again in earnest at Parliament House.

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77 NAA: A705, 32/10/2759.
78 The Argus, 2, 9 Aug. 1940.