

IN PRAISE OF RAAF COOKS

"Food is an important part of a balanced diet." Fran Lebowitz

Introduction

"OPCOM on the line, Sir."

"Thanks."

"Muldy, you've got a Yankee Admiral coming for lunch next Friday."

"Who is it?"

"Sinkpack."

"Ok. I presume the CO of Harold E. Holt has to be invited?"

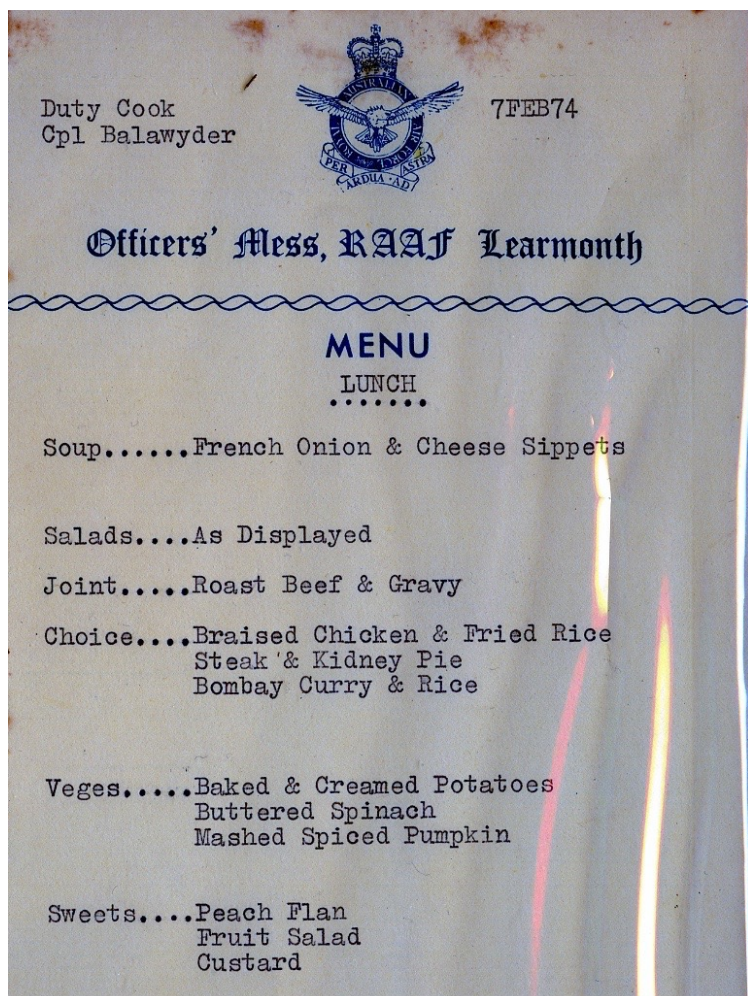
"Yup."

"Ok. Thanks Sir."

In those circumstances, I needed the immediate advice of the Duty Cook, Corporal Balawyder.

Please do note that the RAAF custom of the day was (sensibly) to use the term "cook" not "chef" or "Food Provider". This was because the highest praise one could give of the person dearest to our collective heart, our mother, was that she was a good cook. Not Chef. Not Nigella. Not Lydia's Italian Table. But cook. And so this small tribute is addressed to RAAF cooks and this term will be used throughout in praise and thanks. For eight officers on strength at 5ACS in 1974, here is a sample of a standard lunch RAAF menu.

Does it not bring a mist of tears to your eyes?



It was 1974. I was Acting CO, 5 Airfield Construction Squadron (5ACS), RAAF Base Learmonth, elevation 6 metres, which is situated on the Western edge of 2.5 Square Kilometres of WA desert, adjacent to Exmouth Gulf and 36km south of Exmouth town. We had a strength of about 150 including eight officers. Learmonth was an airstrip which had been extended by the Squadron to allow F111 aircraft operations in case of conflict with Indonesia. In August 1973 the Government announced 5 ACS would be disbanded.

U.S. Naval Communication Station North West Cape, 6 km north of Exmouth town, was opened on 16 September 1967 at a ceremony with the US Ambassador to Australia Ed Clark and the Prime Minister of Australia Harold Holt, at which peppercorn rent for the base for the first year was paid. On 20 September 1968, the station was officially renamed to U.S. Naval Communication Station Harold E. Holt in memory of the late Harold Holt. To the West is Ningaloo Reef.

On 9 January 1974 a joint statement by Lance Barnard and James Schlesinger, the US Secretary of Defense, assigned the Deputy Commander of the base to a Royal Australian Navy officer and gave Australian personnel roles in base technical and maintenance functions.

The Harold E. Holt USN base had a 24 hour cinema and an air conditioned basketball court and a birthing unit which would have been the envy of Royal Perth Hospital. The Officers' Mess RAAF Base Learmonth was an annex to the sleeping quarters of the CO, Wing Commander Allan Woolley and myself, and was a low lying extensive tin shed secured to the ground by a number of guy wires to stop the building flying away during cyclones. Nevertheless, the brown lino of the Mess floor was kept to a brilliant sheen by mess staff. I guessed we, as the Australian military base where Admiral Sinkpac was landing in his 707 should, and had to, welcome him with a lunch. It would not be a lunch he's used to, like chitlins, red beans and rice, Virginia Ham and corn on the cob. As Fran Lebowitz said " If you're going to America, bring food." 5ACS was going to make sure the Admiral got a meal, RAAF style.

First Helpings

My first introduction to Messes and RAAF food was hot toast I cooked, along with 120 others, at the Apprentice Mess, RAAF Base Wagga Wagga, the morning of Monday, 10th January 1955, when the temperature must have been well over 100 fahrenheit. Toast had never tasted better. We were very hungry 15 year old males offloaded from the Sydney - Wagga Wagga Mail train in the early hours. One or two of us NSW inductees may have grabbed a pie at our 40 minute stopover at Junee Station where in 1947 a 42 road, fully covered railway roundhouse had been built, but most had eaten very little in the preceding 12 hours. We stayed hungry for the next three years. But this was no fault of RAAF cooks.

Rationing Policy

The reason we Apprentices stayed hungry was based on a number of factors. First of all, we were subject to an expert formula of rations of how much we needed to function efficiently, one scoop of mashed potato, not two, at an evening meal for example. Secondly, we had very active training timetables from Monday to Friday, including drill, technical training, PT and scholastic work, with

most of us involved in some sporting activity on weekends, all of which meant our output always exceeded our input. There was only one of our course who was mildly overweight, perhaps half a stone. Thirdly the evening meal was at 1700hrs which meant that by 2000hrs we were hungry again. I had a nightmare, more than once, that a tape worm was emerging from my throat in protest. Finally, it was official policy that we remained hungry so that Maslow's hierarchy of needs were satisfied regards air, water, food, clothing and shelter, but that these were not completely satisfied to ensure sexual need did not rear its ugly head, so to speak. At least not during classes, or on Parade. Thus there was never enough food; accommodations were rudimentary huts housing 16 steel beds, with lino floors, and no heating or air conditioning; and clothing which included WW11 underpants of a wool/cotton mix properly described as drawers and not worn by any apprentice to the best of our knowledge; all of which inhibited desire.

Unintended Consequences

Some unintended consequences of the RSTT rationing policy included the local off base Airport Cafe owners becoming wealthy by providing meals on credit for hungry apprentices; apprentices inviting colleagues home during leave purely to enjoy a dozen scrambled eggs cooked to perfection by one's grandmother; spending most of one's pay on Lobster Mornay at a King Street, Sydney restaurant; Messes being broken into overnight; ASCO base canteen being robbed overnight of cans of peaches and mars bars. Food was a constant thought in the mind of the average apprentice, more even than motorbikes, or cars. Girls were a distant hope, a dream, a song.

However, those of a Scottish background who valued hearty breakfasts, or those from farming communities used to rising early, had an advantage. At 0600hrs when the Apprentice Mess opened, steel vats of milk with eight inches of rich cream atop awaited, with no restrictions on rationing. Nor was there a limit to cereal or bread. So some of us did very well at that meal and started the day "rarin' to go!"

At RSTT we also learned why the Army liked to visit for sport or any other reason - our food was the best of the three services. We also learned that the best posting was RAAF Base Butterworth where Malay, Chinese, Indian, Russian, Thai, Burmese, and all their many regional variations could be had. Dining in became a pleasure, but I remember one night in particular when, because of a VIP guest, special attention was paid to all aspects of the occasion. It was memorable because Pete Spurgin, who had a "condition" which caused him to sleep after two or three pre-dinner sherries, managed to sleep through the toast to her Majesty the Queen and the music provided by a marching band, and most of the excellent courses. It was sad to see Pete Spurgin's beautiful food go to waste.

Flight Line Kitchens

Of course, where the RAAF went on Exercise, so went the cook. Operation High Castor, which was the RAAF's major air defence and strike exercise for 1966 featured No 75 Squadron interceptors together with Bloodhound Missiles of No 30 (SAM) Squadron and number 2 CARU. It was reported that the RAAF successfully defended Darwin against repeated attacks by RAF Vulcans and RAAF Canberra bombers but one participant, Pete Scully, recalls as follows "I'm not sure we successfully defended Darwin against the Vulcan attacks: I

remember how easily they managed to break our radar lock.”



Flying Officer I.R.W. Burke, Flight Lieutenant R.F. Lowery and Pilot Officer K.I.Semmler in Darwin, 1966, being served by unidentified Sergeant.

The outstanding Flight Line Kitchen I can recall was the one established at No 75 Squadron RAAF Base Butterworth in 1968. It was approved on the basis that aircrew needed the facility as squadron operations didn't fit with the Officers' Mess mealtime schedule. Additional benefits included not needing to change out of flying suits to dine.

The cook in charge was known simply as "Cookie" and was a local of Chinese background. His steak sandwiches and especially his cheese omelettes became the stuff of legend.

CINCPAC Comes to Lunch

"OPCOM on the line, Sir" "Thanks, Corp"

"Yes, Sir?"

" Got everything organised for next Friday Muldy?"

"Yes, Sir."

"We're sending a Group Captain pilot to hold your hand."

"Jeez. No need for that. Everything is under control."

"Muldy, do you know who CINCPAC is?"

"An Admiral?"

" He's Noel Gayler, the Commander in Chief of Pacific Command. He was awarded three Navy Cross medals as a World War II flying ace. He's Commander in Chief for military forces and elements in the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, Southern Asia, and the Arctic. He's got his own 707 and eight guys of your rank to iron his uniform, write his messages, etc, etc, so don't feel put out

we're sending you a Group Captain."
"No Sir. Thanks, Sir."

"Get me Cpl Balawyder on the phone."

"Muldoon here Corp. Can we bring our normal monthly Friday seafood lunch forward to next Friday? Catering for thirty?"

" Yes, Sir. But I'll have to speak to Flying Officer Fellowes to do an early run to the prawn factory."

" Go ahead. And well done."

5ACS had an "arrangement" with one of the then two large prawn factories operating in Exmouth Gulf. This came about following a cyclone where (at least) three prawn trawlers had been beached and they needed the help of our plant to refloat the trawlers. Below is a photo of Wing Commander Woolley (middle figure) CO, 5ACS, assessing the progress of that task regarding one of the trawlers. Will the tide complete the job?



Moreton Bay Bugs, Banana, Tiger and King Prawns, Coral Trout, blue trevally, goldspot trevally, queenfish, spangled emperor, milkfish, giant herring, tarpon, cobia, and sweetlip, pink snapper and spotted crayfish (Rock Lobster) formed the basis of the spread. Admiral Gayler, it was reported to me by a Lt Commander aide to the Admiral, had never had a finer lunch in his career. Not to be forgotten, he said.

From the ninth most senior military officer in the world at the time, could there be greater praise?

A Final Year

I was living-in at HQOC in 1978, otherwise known as Lapstone, or Glenbrook. My office was the bridal or honeymoon suite of the hotel HQOC used to be. The dining room of the Mess had double glass doors that opened onto the manicured lawns, Frangipani tree and water feature of the grounds of the building. Fruit juice, four or five cereals, kidneys, bacon, eggs three ways, coffee or tea was the standard breakfast. It was a step up from toast at RSTT in 1955 but still in the tradition. And by all accounts the catering school at RSTT in the 1950s was an outstanding facility that served the RAAF, and later, as its graduates moved into civilian life, Australian society, very well indeed. In 1979 I bid the RAAF and that life farewell.

Old Ways

Some civilians or staff of the Department of Finance may suggest that the quality of food and the way it was served in the RAAF in days past was inefficient, privileged, and excessive. There are economic theories to back up their argument. Indeed, these theories reached an apogee in the case of the USA and its involvement in the Iraq war where privatisation in and of the military covered not only food, and other like services, but also former soldiers recruited by Companies and employed in "security operations". By 2006 there were 100,000 civilian contractors working for the US Department of Defense in Iraq.

New Ways

One of our sons served in the RAAF and served at Tindal and in Iraq and at RAAF Base Amberley. Because of accessibility to well equipped gyms, and good food, over his ten years RAAF service, he went from 80k to 120k and remained fit and not overweight. In the Green Zone in Iraq, Friday nights were "lobster nights" and because lobster was a problem being not popular with US personnel, our son was one among other Australians who helped the US personnel out of their difficulty. Maybe the "new ways" do work.

Conclusion

The old ways were great whilst we had them, except perhaps our rate of pay per diem. But that said, let's say hail to Cpl Balawyder, Cook, and his colleagues - bless "em all!

Ian "Muldy" Muldoon