



The Burnett Story

by Maurice Brearley (1937)

At the outbreak of the Second World War I was nearing the end of the third year of an engineering course in the University of Western Australia. Being colour-blind I was unable to join the Air Force as an aircrew trainee, and having no desire to enter the Army or Navy I decided to take advantage of the exemption from military service which was provided to students of approved technical courses. In December 1941 my degree was completed and I joined the de Havilland Aircraft Company in Sydney as an engineer, fully expecting to spend the remainder of the war in that position.

The increasing tempo of the war in the Pacific eventually made it impossible for me to continue on the path I had chosen, and in March 1943 I decided to try and enter the RAAF for flying training. The difficulties to be overcome were formidable, the major ones being that I was in a "Reserved Occupation" and prevented by law from leaving it without permission, that my engineering qualification precluded me from entering the RAAF as an aircrew trainee, that I was colour-blind and that my father was a Group Captain in the RAAF and (I believed) likely to doubt the wisdom of the move.

Having definitely decided to try for aircrew I entertained no thoughts of failure, but set about overcoming the various obstacles as systematically as possible. I filled in an application to enlist in the RAAF, giving my name as Maurice Burnett, as I felt my own rather uncommon surname was too well known at RAAF Command Headquarters to be retained. Only later did I discover that my new name was even better known there, as the Chief of the RAAF at the time was Air Chief Marshall Sir Charles Burnett, an officer from the British RAF.

To circumvent the Service's inevitable request for a letter of discharge from my previous employer, I stated on the application form that my last place of employment was a monastery for the training of priests (although I am not Roman Catholic) at New Norcia, western Australia, this being based on a childhood recollection of the existence of such an isolated institution. It seemed just possible that the RAAF might refrain from pursuing the matter further if my story of having resigned without permission was believed.

As next-of-kin I named a fictitious uncle who lived at Nyngham Sheep Station (via Yalgoo, WA – 350 miles from Perth). As an additional safeguard I changed my date of birth by a month and a day in case my father (who was then at RAAF Command Headquarters) should see my application form – for I knew his deductive powers well enough to realise what conclusion he would draw from a combination of M.B., the correct date of birth and my future sudden disappearance.

On the enlistment form I gave a my address for all correspondence the home of a staunch friend, Don Trood, who was also as engineer at de Havillands (and later became Manager of a large engineering firm in Sydney). After a few weeks he handed me a letter from the RAAF which asked me to report for a medical and aptitude examination at Woolloomooloo Recruiting Centre. This was a big hurdle, for it would involve a test for colour-blindness.

To prepare for this I persuaded a friend to borrow from the library of the CSIRO National Standards Laboratory (where she was employed) the Ishihara Colour-Blindness Test Book. She and I went through it together and I noted the number she said I should see on each page. The last four pages of the book appeared to me to contain nothing but arrays of randomly coloured dots, but my friend assured me that on each page a continuous line of similarly coloured dots could be seen wending from one side to the other, performing on the way sinuous curves of discouraging complexity. At my request she made tracings of these lines on transparent paper, and over the course of several weeks I memorised them thoroughly, drawing and redrawing them and checking my efforts by superimposing on them the master copies.

The Woolloomooloo examination was memorable for two reasons, the first being the colour-blindness test, which did not go as smoothly as I had hoped. I had erred in deciding to learn the correct answers by reference to page numbers, for the eye specialist held the book at such a distance from me that I could not discern the small printed number at the bottom of each page. Fortunately applicants for admission were tested in pairs to save time; while I was supposed to read a number I should see among the coloured dots on the left page, a fellow-victim did the same from the right page. Being deprived of my intended method, I waited until my right-hand man announced his number, from which I could deduce by inversion of my prepared system the page he was reading (but not uniquely, for there was some multi-valuedness in the inverse transformation): I then subtracted one to obtain my own page number, then stated my own “viewed” number as quickly as possible. The time lag in this process was painfully obvious, and the lack of one-one correspondence caused by the inversion of my code led to some errors. My fellow-sufferer was dismissed from the room, and I was thoroughly grilled. Through the book we went, back and forth at high speed, and my errors mounted up. After a few minutes the eye-specialist accused me point-blank of faking, and asked me to confess to it. Although I had almost lost hope, I would admit nothing.

Finally the specialist turned to the last four pages of the book, saying “This will settle the matter”. My heart leaped, and as casually as I could I traced the convoluted curves whose shapes had tormented my waking and sleeping hours for the last few weeks. My inquisitor was convinced enough to pass me, but doubtful enough to administer a warning remark: “If you have been deceiving me you may end up by killing yourself, for colour-blind people can’t judge heights when coming in to land.” This proved to be untrue, and I never had the slightest difficulty; my defect was only slight red-green colour-blindness, and one wonders how many similar potential aircrew have been lost to the Air Force by the rigidity of this test. Nevertheless I decided that day to admit my failing if I were made a navigator or a pilot of

multi-engined aircraft, lest I should have to read complicated colour-code signals with other lives depending on my ability to do so.

The second incident which made that day specially memorable began when a recruiting officer approached me bearing my application form in his hand. "Are you Burnett?" he asked; I replied that I was, whereupon he said "Then why did you finish your application form by signing it Brearley?" The seconds ticked by while he waited for an answer, but none would come; my brain was absolutely numb. At that precise instant, unbelievable though it may sound, a hoarse voice roared "All you applicants get upstairs for your aptitude test!" The officer with me said "I will see you later about this," and I nodded dumbly. During the test my mind worked overtime; I devoted enough attention to the questions to make a reasonable showing, and spent the rest of the time devising an explanation for my dual name.

I had little hope that the tale which I had concocted would be believed. I explained to the officer that I had adopted the name of Burnett after a shocking family scandal, hinting that violence (and worse) was involved. To my relief and astonishment the officer was more embarrassed than I was, and assured me that the Service had no wish to pry into my past but wanted to give me every opportunity to make a fresh start. He asked whether I had changed my name by deed poll, and I admitted that I had not; whereupon he produced the appropriate change of name application form and a J.P. to witness my signature upon it. After signing it I was not convinced that I had really changed my name, for there was hardly a single item of true information on the whole form I had filled in. I was furious with myself for making such a blunder in signing my application form and so drawing attention to my name in such a spectacular fashion, but my relief at surviving the episode outweighed all other feelings.

Towards the end of that long day we were asked for birth certificate, identity card and a letter of release from the last employer. I explained that my exit from the monastery had been rapid and unorthodox (over the wall by night, in fact) as a result of the breakdown of my religious convictions, and that in my hurry I had left my birth certificate and identity card behind, and naturally had no letter of release. I was told to write and request that the certificate and card be sent to me, and I promised to do so.

Nearly eight weeks passed before I received my call-up notice, which ordered me to report at Woolloomooloo on 19th June 1943. A few days before this I wrote to a friend in Melbourne, enclosing two letters to be posted from there on 18th June. One letter was address to my immediate superior at de Havillands, informing him that I had left for England by ship and would not be returning to work. My unfortunate friend Colin Farrow (1937), with whom I shared a flat in Sydney and who was also an engineer with de Havillands, bravely bore the brunt of the questions about my sudden departure. Although under severe pressure he resolutely claimed ignorance of my whereabouts and divulged nothing. He became manager of a division of one of the largest industrial enterprises in Australia.

The second letter posted from Melbourne was to my parents, who were then in Geraldton, WA, where my father had been appointed Commanding Officer of an RAAF Service Flying Training School. This was a cruel letter, for it simply stated that I had taken a ship to England and would not be writing again for several months, and ended (absurdly) with the suggestion

that they should not worry about the lack of news of me. I was determined not to write again until I had gone solo at my first Flying Training School.

On the 18th June, the day I reputedly left for Melbourne, I packed up and booked into a Sydney hotel for the night. At 8am the next day I reported to the Recruiting Centre, and was asked again for my birth certificate and identity card, and also for my food and clothing ration book. I gave the usual excuse that they had not yet been sent to me from the Monastery. I was asked for them on two more occasions at Bradfield Park Initial Training School, where I spent my first three months in the RAAF, but eventually the requests stopped.

My first day in camp was a mixture of suspense and pleasure. I was delighted to be in the Service, and excited at the success of my scheme, but found my new role and name hard to adopt. On one occasion I stood like a rock while an irate corporal roared "Burnett!" a few feet from me. Eventually it dawned on me that I was the person addressed; when I responded he turned on me and shouted: "With reactions like that you'll never make aircrew!"

I lived in terror of meeting somebody who knew me, and for the first three weeks I did not dare to leave the camp during the weekends when we were allowed to do so. Eventually I could bear the restriction no longer, and took the train to the city late on Saturday afternoon. Colin Farrow and I met like conspirators in the bar of a hotel in Woolloomooloo, where I felt reasonably certain that I would not be seen by anyone who knew me. I did not visit any of my old haunts while at Bradfield, and was impatient to be posted to the country where I would feel more secure.

Towards the end of my stay at Bradfield I learned to my relief and delight that I had been selected for training as a pilot, and that Narrandera, NSW, was the Elementary Flying School to which I would be sent. It was not long before I went solo in a Tiger Moth, and with relief I wrote a long letter of explanation and apology to my parents. In it I admitted the whole story, and begged my father to let things take their course, which in typical fashion he readily agreed to do.

While at Narrandera I had my first encounter with someone from my other life. While marching in a conspicuous position at the head of a platoon (because I was the tallest trainee on No 42 Course) I passed a 43 Course trainee who was an old school mate. We had not known each other very well at school, but I saw him staring hard at the name tag sewed on my "goonskin" overalls. I stared right through him, and repeated this treatment when I encountered him in the canteen. However he approached me and said; "The name tag on your goonskin may say Burnett, but I know damn well you are Brearley". I had no choice but to take him into my confidence and beg for his cooperation. He readily agreed to say nothing. This incident was repeated a few months later, with similar happy results, when I encountered at Uranquinty another Western Australian, then a Squadron Leader.

At Narrandera I worked hard, and to my enormous relief I learned in December that I had been selected for fighter aircraft. The posting was to Uranquinty, NSW, near Wagga Wagga, where I trained on Wirraways. By now I was mad about flying, and desperately anxious to avoid discovery and to earn my wings. A few weeks before the course ended, in May 1944, my

father wrote to me and pointed out that if I were offered a commission on getting my wings, it would be unwise to accept it under an assumed name. He suggested that I should wait until a few days before the Wings Parade, when all decisions would have been made about the results of the flying and ground subject tests, the award of commissions and future postings, and that I should then approach the Chief Flying Instructor and Chief Ground Instructor and confess all. With some misgivings I did this. They were at first completely incredulous, but very soon assured me that the Air Force would not deprive itself of a fully-trained pilot by handing me back to industry.

A day or two later my father, who had since been appointed Commanding Officer at Tocumwal, NSW, flew to Uranquinty to see me. Having been one of the lower forms of life in the Air Force for the previous ten months I was much more in awe of the gold braid on his cap and the four rings on his sleeves than I had ever been as a civilian. He soon put me at ease, and I could tell that he was pleased by my success in the flying course.

At Uranquinty the necessary steps for the resumption of my old name were quickly arranged, and I was able to attend the Wings Parade and receive my commission as Pilot Officer under the name of Brearley. My father attended this parade, and when it was my turn to receive the coveted wings he was asked by the Commanding Officer to make the presentation to me. That moment was one of the great highlights of my life.

After a further two months training on Kittyhawk fighters at Mildura I was fortunate to receive a posting to an operational unit. I joined 77 Squadron in Dutch New Guinea early in September 1944, a little over 14 months from the time when I first entered the Service. After a year of active service the war ended and I returned to Australia.

While awaiting my turn for discharge from the Service, which eventually occurred in January 1946, I was attached to the Test and Ferry Unit at Laverton, Victoria. There I flew numerous types of aircraft new to me, including Spitfires, Mustangs, Boomerangs and Oxfords.

My time in the Service taught me much that I would not have learnt as a civilian. Among the most enjoyable aspects were the co-operation and genuine friendliness which I found in almost everyone with whom my Service experience brought me into contact. Though often referred to as "The Scrubbed Monk" by my fellow-trainees ("scrubbed" being the current slang for "Failed in the course"), I was always aware of and grateful for the spirit of comradeship which welded together the members of a flying course and of a squadron.

My unorthodox entry into the RAAF could not have succeeded without the unselfish assistance of numerous staunch friends. The venture would not have continued but for the understanding and co-operation of my parents, who doubtless suffered much – but in silence. I shall always be grateful to them for their support on this and countless other occasions.

Maurice Brearley (1937)

