

YOUNG TEACHERS AT BALGO HILLS – 1969/70

On 1 July 2009, David Heath began his presentation by first reminiscing that he had begun his teaching career quite close to the venue of our meeting – at Rosalie Primary School. He taught there from 1961 to 1966. He observed that life has some interesting twists. While now retired, he still does some consulting work for the Department of Education Services and he noted that one of his superior officers at the Department was a student in the first class he taught. He worked with the Education Department for 17 years, including his stint at Balgo Hills and a further unique experience when, together with his wife, they were appointed as the first expatriate teachers to teach at the Home Island school on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. He later moved to the Catholic Education system and served in the Catholic Education Office before returning to schools as Foundation Principal of Seton Catholic College and later as Principal of Corpus Christi College.

David followed this introduction with a short slide show presentation covering the location, brief history and some of the interesting sights of the area. One of the pictures was a group of students that included a number of children who were later to make significant contributions to the community life of Balgo, including the Balgo Art scene. With tongue firmly planted in his cheek, David claims that he and his wife Marie contributed to the start of this wonderful operation by running night classes for older members of the community, teaching such basic skills as holding pencils and crayons and cutting out.

During the presentation and talk David related the story of how he came to be posted to Balgo. Seeking promotion for the first time he spoke to a staffing officer in the Education Department, stipulating that with two young children the family required a posting with hospital facilities close by. The choices were Cundalee Mission 100 miles north of Zanthus on the trans-Australian rail line (the closest hospital) or Balgo Hills, "...with a hospital on site." Little did David realise, and he suspects that the officer also didn't realise, that the "Hospital" was a nursing outpost staffed by St John of God Sisters, and that the nearest hospital was in Derby, hundreds of kilometres to the West!!!

The story of the family's flight from Perth to Derby in the MMA Fokker Friendship conjured up some memories for many in the audience who had experienced similar, or even earlier "Dove" flights. The next leg, from Derby to Balgo via Halls Creek was perhaps a little more unique. Being late January, and still in the grip of a particularly heavy wet, many of the normal landmarks used by the pilots were indistinguishable, and the first attempt to fly from Halls Creek to Balgo was aborted. At the time Balgo didn't have a navigational beacon installed. However a second attempt was successful and the young Heath family had finally commenced what turned out to be a very happy, if challenging posting.

Experiences abounded, and David related stories of schooling, travel, cattle station involvement and something of the characters who are drawn to such remote places. He acknowledged the work of the Mission personnel, both priests and nuns, and left Balgo full of admiration for these selfless people. However he was saddened by the social dislocation so evident in so many communities resulting from the 1967 Referendum. While he will argue the “rightness” of the referendum and its presumed outcomes, he is very critical of the planning and preparation pre-referendum, and the post-referendum implementation. However he sees the futility of simply criticising, or attempting to return to the past, but admits to great sympathy for those charged with finding contemporary solutions.