

Memories of Schofields & the Schofields Flying Club

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In 1982 I was renting a flat at North Ryde. I had held an ambition for many years to learn to fly, and a work colleague, Janet Dicker, had introduced me to the Schofields Flying Club where she flew. I drove out to the airfield every second weekend for my lesson and enjoyed the pleasant semi-rural atmosphere of this little-known part of Sydney. Flying here was good value for money since without the congestion of Bankstown you got more “time in the air” for your dollar.

One day I thought about my position – “Jon, you are 32 years old and if you are ever going to buy a place of your own you must knuckle down and save a deposit.” The biggest sacrifice I had to make was to give up the flying lessons – although I enjoyed the flying, it was a very expensive hobby. I had flown about 30 hours in all, about 15 of those solo, and was happy with what I had achieved.

Within a year I had scraped a deposit together and had to decide – where to buy? For the amount of money I could afford to borrow I had two choices – either a one bedroom flat in the area I was renting, or a modest house in an outer suburb. A consideration was that I like fiddling with cars and needed decent garage and workshop space. After much debate I decided on the house and thought of the Schofields/Riverstone area that I knew from my flying. I saw Driscoll and Reid at Riverstone and specified a double garage. They showed me a house in Advance Street, Schofields. It had everything I needed and a deal was done. I moved in during August 1983.

A couple of early impressions were the “farming” smells that often permeated the suburb when a market gardener was putting fertilizer on his patch, and the friendliness of the local people – I would be walking down to the shops and would pass a stranger – they would usually say “g’day”. You don’t get that in other parts of Sydney! A few months after I moved in there was a huge storm one afternoon (early 1984 I think) and I arrived home to find the street littered with broken trees. Residents were out in the street comparing notes on damage sustained. Luckily I only suffered a few broken tiles. I believe the Weather Bureau, after investigation, classified this as a tornado.

A quaint local custom that took me by surprise on my first Christmas Eve in Schofields was the Bushfire Brigade’s Santa Claus tour of the streets giving gifts to the children – a wonderful event. I have been told this is a common practice in country towns. Then on New Year’s Eve the Brigade did a raucous couple of laps at midnight with lights flashing and sirens blaring!

A story about the disappearing apostrophe. Many Railway publications, even up till fairly recently, showed the name of the station with an apostrophe i.e. “Schofield’s”. Historically this makes sense, since the name is a contraction of “Schofield’s Siding” as it was originally known, but the official name of the suburb does not have the apostrophe. The station was upgraded around 1990 with much fanfare and I noted that the brand new station sign included the apostrophe. A few days later, perhaps after the Minister had done the Grand Tour, the offending punctuation mark had been painted out. This now left a gap between the two letters and didn’t look quite right. A couple of weeks after that a brand new sign appeared, without the rogue apostrophe!

The local shops haven’t changed much in my time – there used to be a small general store with a

petrol pump opposite the Bushfire Brigade – there are townhouses on the site now. What is now the bakery was then a butcher’s shop.

The bottle shop had much more character in those days. It was still “Alpino Liqueurs” under the ownership of Geatino De Chellis. Geatino won a swag of awards for the liqueurs made in his small brick workshop at Schofields and had displayed them at the Milan Wine Show in Italy. In 1977 he won the Gold Mercury International Award. He remained little known in his own country however. My father recalled seeing him interviewed on the Don Lane show on television – Geatino and Don became quite tipsy sampling the potent brews! I would often take visitors coming to Schofields for the first time down to Alpino Liqueurs to sample the fiery concoctions.

The Flying Club staged some famous airshows in the late 70s and early 80s. These were a remarkable achievement considering the small size of the club. A temporary platform was constructed by CityRail at the airfield to make travel to the shows easier. A legendary incident (which I did not see myself) occurred when British Airways were invited to do a low pass over the airfield with a Boeing 747 during one show. The Captain got a bit carried away and came down to within a few feet of the runway with undercarriage down and flaps extended. A couple of Club members standing right next to the runway reportedly hit the dirt. The Captain was rapped over the knuckles for his exuberance and demoted to First Officer for a few months.

At one show I saw a B-52 bomber which the U.S. Air Force flew over especially from Guam to do a couple of passes over the airfield. Probably the most exciting display I have ever seen at an airshow consisted of about four Mirage fighters staging a mock bombing attack on the airfield. Explosive charges had been set up in the bush at the northern end of the field and were detonated to simulate a bomb strike each time a Mirage attacked. The sight and sound of the Mirages swooping in at 500 knots was unforgettable.

I must mention the Chief Flying Instructor at the Club at the time I was flying, “Kit” Carson, an ex-Indian Air Force fighter pilot who had fought against MIGs in the Korean War. He was a great character and not averse to “bending” the rules a little. I remember him “beating-up” the Clubhouse one day in a Bellanca aerobatic aircraft.

After the authorities stopped all flying at Schofields in the mid-1990s the Club relocated to Bankstown Aerodrome.

Alan Bond’s Swan Breweries Airship was based at Schofields in the mid-1980s and was often seen cruising around. The hangar is of course still there and now has many uses. It is used for T.V. and film production and has housed a practice ice skating rink for an international ice show. The hangar and forecourt were used as a rehearsal area for the opening ceremony of the 2000 Olympics. The hangar construction was innovative – the components of the framework were laid flat on the ground and anchored at one side. Jacks were then used to push the structure upwards in to the curved shape.

Schofields hasn’t changed a great deal in the 23 years I have lived here. The main difference is that many of the older fibro and weatherboard homes have been demolished to make way for larger brick homes and town houses. In coming years the market gardens and paddocks will sadly make way for more houses as Sydney’s insatiable appetite for expansion takes over.