

Memories from a long Air Force career

Three passions and a lucky penny: an autobiography. Eric Stephenson. Canberra: Air Power Development Centre, 2008 (x + 160 pp, \$15.00 + \$3.75 handling fee). ISBN: 9781920800291.

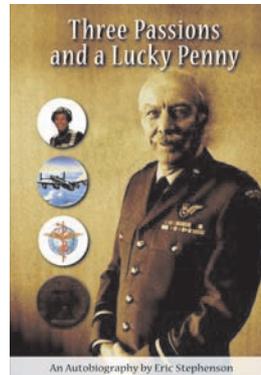
“I AM A ‘GEORDIE’ from Tyneside in north-east England” is Eric Stephenson’s breezy introduction to an autobiography recording his careers in both the Royal Air Force and the Royal Australian Air Force.

The book evolved from Eric’s participation in the Office of Air Force History’s oral history program and was prepared from a series of interviews conducted by Dr Chris Clark, the RAAF Historian, with Eric and his wife Freda during 2006 and early 2007.

In 1941, Eric volunteered for war duty and commenced air crew cadet training. As a navigator, he was posted for operational duty with 207 Squadron (Lancaster). A week before Christmas 1943, tasked for a night photographic mission as part of an area bombing raid on the south-western suburbs of Berlin, Eric’s aircraft was struck by fighter fire, demanding crew evacuation. Arriving much the worse for wear, Eric’s years of war captivity centred on Stalag Luft III — the same prisoner-of-war camp made famous in the 1963 film *The great escape*.

In describing camp life and his medical duties at the camp lazaret, Eric observed that, despite all the experiences of death, active duty stress and injuries suffered by the captured air crews, in a camp for over 10 000 Allied prisoners the number of cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) “could be counted on the fingers of two hands”. Eric offers his sensible views on this apparent anomaly, when compared with today’s higher frequency of PTSD among deployed personnel.

Repatriation and service discharge allowed Eric to marry the love of his life, Freda, who today remains one of his three passions. During



his midwifery term (delivering 40 or more babies in a 3-week stint!) at King’s College Hospital, London, a senior female consultant commented, “You have very nice hands, good for midwifery”. Obstetrics or not, after graduation in 1951, Eric undertook the arduous duties of a doctor in rural Norwich. A change of direction and a long sea cruise saw Eric and Freda, a trained kindergarten teacher, arrive in Melbourne in 1955, where Eric embarked on his RAAF service.

The book’s strength and interest lie in a carefully constructed narrative, full of anecdotes and character descriptions to foster reminiscences, which include the important developments within the Air Force Health Service between the 1960s and 1980s that culminated with Eric’s tenure as Surgeon General Australian Defence Force from 1980.

This enjoyable, well written and informative autobiography by a truly memorable Air Force doctor is thoroughly recommended to a wide readership and not just to the vast numbers of military history devotees.

The book was published in June 2008 as a soft-cover indexed edition containing many photographic plates. It is available online from the Air Power Development Centre at <http://www.air-force.gov.au/airpower> or from Ms Drury on (02) 6266 1084.

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