

## TRAINEE DAYS

### *Notes for a talk at the Cadet School Wake*

Dwellingup, 15 August 1992

by Roger Underwood

I was reminded at home the other night that there is only one good after-dinner speech. This is the one that only lasts six words and goes: "I'll do the dishes tonight, dear!" Luckily none of us has to do the dishes tonight, so I won't bother with that line.

Besides, its a night for nostalgia, and I intend to indulge in some.

Nostalgia, of course, is not what it used to be. We old-timers in the department can remember when a night of memories about the good old forestry days would inevitably end in tears, laughter and a bloody good fight. Nowadays we seem to have dispensed with the laughter. Are they producing an inferior line in rose-coloured glasses these days I wonder?

Never mind, as I said I do intend at least to indulge myself tonight. My association with Dwellingup goes back 34 years to 1958 when I started here in the gang (my first job after leaving school) and my association with the cadet school goes back to when I was unexpectedly appointed OIC Trainees in September 1963, almost 29 years ago.

I remember how this came about extremely well. I had graduated from the Forestry School in Canberra at the end of 1962 and being completely broke, commenced work immediately with the Forests Department. I am proud to be able to say that my initial appointment was actually to the field staff, as no professional positions were available at the time. I was posted to Mundaring Weir for a while and then to Harvey where the famous Bev Campbell was the DFO. Bev was famous for many idiosyncrasies, but mainly for his golfing prowess. He loved his golf so much he would even wear golfing-type gear to work and one day he turned up at the Brunswick plantation on a cold drizzly day wearing high boots, a long artistic sort of coat, and a beret. He carried a parasol-like golfing umbrella to keep off the rain. The cheeky young Forest Guard who was with me asked Bev "did he have any feelthy postcards for sale?" This was a mistake. I laughed loudly at the crack and this was an even greater mistake. The next week I was transferred to Dwellingup and made OIC Trainees. As for the cheeky young Forest Guard.....I never heard of him again.

Because of the Dwellingup fire and other things the cadet course had fallen into a state of informality for a few years preceding 1963. A few ragamuffin Forest Guards like Terry Court and Terry Freemantle had somehow managed to graduate, but there was a terribly high wastage of trained men. Jock Sclater had been the part time ADFO-in-charge before me, and he had written a very telling report which was critical of methods of recruitment and the general lack of commitment to staff training in the Department. This had led to poor returns on investment and some poor output (Terry Court excepted of course). So it was decided that I would become the first full-time OIC/instructor and the first job I was given was to devise some sort of objective and effective cadet recruitment system. I moved to Dwellingup in August 1963 and was given one month to dream up a system and get the whole course organised. My mentor was Frank Campbell, then the DFO at Dwellingup, and my actual boss was Pat McNamara. He was in Head Office and contacted me regularly by letter. Both Frank and Pat were very strong supporters of the "trainee scheme", as it was then known, and were a great help to me in those days.

The approach we hit upon was to recruit more young people than we needed and to put them through a rigorous testing procedure for a few weeks, and then weed out the unsatisfactory ones. By later standards, it was all very crude.....and I'm still not sure to this day that we got it completely right. Nevertheless we ended up with 12 young men, all bursting to be forest officers, and by all appearances they had the brains and the practical capacities to become good foresters. So the two year course commenced.

The overall program was planned to consist of about a year in the jarrah forest at Dwellingup and about a year in the karri country at Pemberton, with two pine planting stints, one at Grimwade and one at Gnangara. The idea was to mix up classroom and field experience throughout. On my first day on the job Pat McNamara ceremoniously handed over the only basic written curriculum available at the time. This was a copy of the Forester's Manual. From there on I was on my own.

In retrospect, I was extremely lucky. The group and I hit it off from the word go and they hit it off with each other. All of the lads had been working in the gangs or the bush before they started with me, and they were all country boys. John Evans came from Kalgoorlie, Wally Edgecombe from Gnangara, John McKenzie from Pemberton, John Sanders from Northcliffe, Charlie Broadbent from Shannon River, Ian Scott from Balingup and so on. Most of them were 19 or 20 and I was only 22 myself, so we came together more or less as friends from the start. Indeed, we built Dwellingup's first basketball court and formed Dwellingup's very first basketball team, playing in the Murray Association. A swag of us played football for Southerners when we were at Pemberton in 1964 and were members of the premiership team that year, beating Deanmill by a point.

This is not to say I did not have to impose some discipline and deal with some problems. I won't even mention the time Ian Scott felled Jack McCoy's favourite jarrah tree to make a TV aerial for the mess; or the time there was a fight in the newsagents which caused blood to run on the magazine rack; or the time Frank Podger came to lecture to us on dieback.....ah, that was a time.

You need to remember that in 1965 Frank Podger was just becoming world famous. He had either just discovered, or was just about to discover the cause of jarrah dieback, and he worked mainly at Dwellingup. I invited him to come in as a visiting lecturer. Frank was pleased to do so, but he had a rather high-brow lecturing style and after five minutes of incomprehensible pathology, one of the cadets leaned back in his chair, took out a cigarette, lit it and blew a long cloud of smoke to the ceiling. I knew Frank, and I gripped my chair. Frank stormed down the room, shouting that he had never been so insulted. The cadet, who shall remain nameless, other than to say it was John McKenzie, ripped the cigarette out of his mouth and flipped it straight through the window and immediately started taking notes. Even Podger was nonplused by this instantaneous response.

Some members of the group had a good line in sly remarks. Another visiting lecturer was Frank Pridham, recently Out of Africa. Frank was advising on selection of trees in jarrah thinning and said he had always applied the rule of thumb "when in doubt, take it out". Someone awoke at the back of the room just at this point, and a soto voice was overheard, "Is he talking about silviculture or sex?"

I'm not sure whether it was the same cadet who was at the back of the bus on a field trip conducted by Barney White. As they drove up the North Pemberton Road, Barney pointed to a field dotted with Herefords. "That's Moltoni's," he said. "Last year Mr Moltoni won top prize in the Royal Show." Came the voice from the back of the bus - "Fair enough, but how did the bull go!"

My memories of the two years with the cadets blur a bit now - but I clearly recollect a general atmosphere of learning, interesting projects, hot scones for morning tea, massive, fatty meals in the mess at night, and good fun and laughter. Some of the interesting and historic projects we carried out included rebuilding the bush telephone line from Dwellingup to Mt George, surveying a new airstrip near Kirup, assessing old Groupie farms at Northcliffe for repurchase, planting some of the first seed orchards at Pinjar, and building the Chesapeake Road down on the south coast.

I can also remember some hard times (especially at exam times), and some grim faces. There was the time when the pipes froze in the singlemen's camp at Grimwade and we couldn't get a hot shower after a day's planting. However, Jock Gilchrist invited us all up to his place for drinks. I always remember one outcome of that night was the fact that even though no rain fell, the office rain gauge was full in the morning!

There were even some tears in those days. However, most of these were in the eyes of various mothers around the South-West as our little team of randy bachelors cut a swathe through one town after another.

Reflecting on it all from a strictly personal point of view, two things stand out. The first is not so much what I taught, but how much I learned. When I graduated from university I knew a bit about forest science, but nothing about practical forestry. This I learnt, alongside the cadets, in those two years and this learning stood me in terrific stead when I became a DFO/District Manager shortly afterwards.

The other thing was the lifelong friendships which resulted - not just with the cadets but with their families over the years. Ellen and I have always felt privileged to have been welcomed into this group. I have also observed with great pride their progress over the years to senior positions. I feel sure that these sort of feelings would be echoed by other cadet OICs over the years.

I would like to end on a serious note.

As you would all know, I have mixed feelings about the end of the department's cadet scheme. On the one hand I am a strong believer in the value of education and for the need these days for young people to have good qualifications which are also transportable. On the other hand, education is not just an end in itself - it is meant to fit us for life. As Helen Keller wrote: "The best educated human being is the one who understands most about the life in which he is placed."

The old cadet scheme had plenty of drawbacks from the viewpoint of academia and the outside world, and in the end it became very costly - but there is no question that it fitted its graduates superbly well for the lives in which they were placed in forestry, in CALM and in many related fields.

Three things above all others sum up for me the quality of the scheme over the years: first, the regular acknowledgement from older district staff that the graduates were "immediately useful" when they started on the job; the second is the number of them who have gone on to senior positions in the department or to university and professional careers, using their cadet training and field experience as a springboard. The third is the sheer quality of management which is carried out by CALM's field staff. Overseas and Eastern States visitors are constantly impressed and tell me so, and I never tire of observing our field staff at work and admiring their initiative and competence in areas as diverse as silviculture and wildlife conservation. Of course there are many factors at work here - but the cadet scheme itself provided the basis for this excellence.

For these reasons, I see our greatest future challenge will be to influence the way replacement courses are set up so as to produce people who are useful, and not simply educated; and to control the recruiting process so we employ people who are practical and hardworking, not just clever, and who are able to fit into our unique working culture.

Finally, it is important not to be melancholy or nostalgic at a wake. We may regret passing times, but we should also celebrate our great successes - and the Forests Department/CALM Cadet Scheme was undoubtedly a great success. However, life and the world is constantly changing and new approaches to everything we do must constantly be evolved. This applies to training and education probably more so than to almost anything else. And a word on responsibility: how the new system works will be as much up to you people, as to anyone else, as the new recruits will largely be in your hands, to be coached, shaped and moulded.

Thank you for inviting me to share my memories with you, and for your positive attitude to the changes which have occurred. To my mind, it is their positive attitude to all things which is the field staff's greatest strength.