



ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE

Podcast Transcript

In Conversation – 100 Squadron RAAF

Host: SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Guests: WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM, SQNLDR Mark Lees and FLGOFF Kristi Adam

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Hello. My name's Michael Veitch and welcome to this 'In Conversation' where we're going to meet some of the machines of a century of RAAF history and the men and women who keep them going. I'm at Point Cook, the birthplace of Australia's Air Force, just over 100 years ago. I'm standing outside a very large hangar and there's a door in front of me that says no entry, but I've been given special permission to go through that door and I'm really, really looking forward to doing so. So let's go.

Oh, wow. Okay. Yes, this is really something. So in front of me is an array of some brilliant military aircraft. I can recognize a Tiger Moth in magnificent RAAF livery from the Second World War. And over there is, of course, the mighty P-51 Mustang. And there's a bloke standing here, too, and I'm guessing he knows a bit about these aircraft, and I guess he should because he's Wing Commander, Jason Easthope, Easy to his friends or anyone above Flight Lieutenant, the Commanding Officer of what I'm looking at, the RAAF's Heritage Flight 100 Squadron. Easy, great to meet you.

WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM

Likewise, Michael and welcome to Number 100 Squadron, which clearly is the most exciting and unique squadron in the Air Force here at the moment.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Easy, 100 Squadron. What's it all about?

WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM

So 100 Squadron is, well it's actually the newest old squadron here in the RAAF, right because 100 Squadron originally was a World War Two squadron. It came out of Malay Singapore conflict during the war, regrouped in Australia, Commonwealth Aircraft Company started building Beaufort's and then 100 Squadron was formed as part of that regrouping in the country. So then joined the fight. But it was disbanded in '46 after the war, lay dormant all of this time, and then lo and behold 100 Squadron is reformed now in preparation for

RAAF Centenary. It's only a couple of years old now, so it is quite a new squadron. However, as you can see around the hangar here, all of the aeroplanes are older than the squadron itself and when you see our eclectic staff, you'll see that actually we've got a range of ages, just like the aeroplanes here among our staff.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Where did these aircraft come from?

WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM

So the aircraft are a collection that were flown by the RAAF Museum and were also part of the Temora Aviation Museum Collection with the Lowy family. An idea was formed quite a few years ago, where the Temora Museum aircraft would be transferred to Commonwealth ownership operated by the RAAF, and the RAAF Museum aircraft would also be transferred to number 100 Squadron. And now we've got a collection of aircraft under an Air Command contemporary command structure, flying air worthy Warbird aircraft.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Why is it important to you and to 100 Squadron that these aircraft fly?

WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM

Ah, well I've been to many museums over the years and you probably have as well and the best experience at a museum is the interactive part of museums. Where you can touch things, hear things, smell things. Well, number 100 Squadron brings an aviation museum to life. You get to hear the aeroplanes, see the aeroplanes fly, talk to the pilots that just flew them. It just brings it to life. It's a whole other dimension around a museum experience and what it does, is it just takes those who got to see it, to the next step, about either connecting to the narrative, the journey, the evolution of flight, where the RAAF came from. Because clearly, we would not be where we are now, if we were not informed by our history and where we've come from. Well, we get to tell that story in a live fashion and interactive. It just brings the museum to life.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

What's your favourite aircraft, Easty?

WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM

I mean, unsurprisingly, I have to say the Mustang, it's a single seat fighter and I've been a single seat fighter pilot my entire life. So, I've got a real connection with single seat fighter type aircraft. But also it's so iconic, it's well-recognised, but it's role during the war, it just really resonates with my career.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Is it an easy aeroplane to fly?

WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM

Ah, I'd have to lie and say 'no' because I don't want everybody flying it, right? But no, in reality, it is reasonably easy to fly, but that's aero-specific, right? It's a big, heavy machine with a lot of power and if you don't treat it with respect, it will bite you. But there are other aircraft that are quite tricky to fly. But the Mustang, you know, looking at it, looks quite imposing. It's actually reasonably docile.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

The work in maintaining these must be enormous and you guys have to comply with all sorts of safety requirements and (inaudible), I'm guessing? It'd be a constant job, surely?

WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM

It's a regulatory minefield. Actually, because we've got the Civil Aviation Regulations, because the aircraft are civilian registered, but we also operate under the Defence Safety Authority guidelines as well. So we've got an overlapping of both the civilian and the military requirements. So it's quite an overhead, but having said that, you need it. You know, the aircraft are old, they're complex (relatively speaking). The skill sets around to maintain them, are dwindling. So you need to make sure that we've got governance and processes in place to ensure that this endures for generations to come.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Did you grow up as a kid loving old aircraft? Did you make model (inaudible), plastic models of the Blenheim and the Harvard, and all that kind of thing?

WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM

Yes, I didn't make as many models as you'd think. However, my father was a mechanic by trade. So he had a model A and a model T Ford. So I got to tinker on those in the garage when I was really young and just got a connection with old vintage cars and then I got hooked on aviation as a young kid, because I went to an air show. And so, the aviation bites hit me when I was at an air show. Plus, the affinity I had with old cars because of my dad, that joined into Warbirds, clearly, as I got to know the aviation scene.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

You are in the perfect job. You're in the perfect job. As well as the work of being a CO, you're a pilot yourself? To me, you're a bit like the factory boss, you can also go down and spend the day on the production line with the workers once in a while.

WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM

Yeah, absolutely. So the troops obviously keep a real close eye on me, when they see the CO in the hangar with a spanner and a screwdriver. But I love to work on planes, as well as fly them because I fly in general aviation, I own my own aeroplane as well and I just love the Warbird scene. So, clearly rolling up my sleeves and getting my hands dirty is part of it.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

How often do you get to fly yourself?

WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM

I would fly two or three times a week and in fact, I'm doing a display for the RAAF museum tomorrow afternoon.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Oh wonderful. Air shows around the country, do you get people coming up to you? Because so many people love seeing these aircraft fly. Do you get a lot of that love back from people (inaudible)?

WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM

Yeah, absolutely. So I've done air shows in both Warbirds and modern fighters like the hornet and one of the most common things you hear from someone at an air show is 'wow, that's the most amazing thing I've ever seen!' shortly followed by, 'how can I go for a ride?'

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Now, is the Heritage flight always after new acquisitions? I guess that's not up to your (inaudible)?

WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM

Yeah, absolutely. So we've got currently 19 aeroplanes and if I had my way and you handed me your cheque book, I'd have double that in a heartbeat. So there are a lot of aircraft that we would love to bring into the fold and those aircraft have a real prominence here with our history as well. You know, the P40 Kittyhawk is an example, we would love to be flying one

of those. A Beaufort clearly, because we are 100 Squadron, you know there's almost an endless list of aeroplanes that if you handed me money, I would go out and grab them.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

It's been great to meet you Easty, in this very special place, 100 Squadron here at Point Cook. But I've got to ask you, what's more fun, flying a classic hornet or a mustang?

WGCDR Jason Easthope, CSM

That's a really good question, actually I get it a lot. So here's my answer: If I'm standing at an air show on a Sunday sunny afternoon, I'd love to get my leather jacket and climb into the Mustang. If I'm heading downtown to protect the country, hand me the Hornet.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Great answer.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Great insight there from the CO of 100 Squadron. Let's now take a look at just what it takes to ensure that these historic planes are always in tip top shape and ready to take flight and yes, I'm talking some pretty specialised maintenance. Squadron Leader Mark Lees is the Senior Engineering Officer of 100 Squadron and I sat down and chatted to him about the various roles he has in maintaining these magnificent aeroplanes.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Now, I believe you started your career in the 80's, right here at Point Cook, looking after the CT4 and now here you are, at Point Cook looking after the CT4.

SQNLDR Mark Lees

Yeah. I've come full circle after 30 years. Look, it's lovely to come back and it's lovely to be the Senior Engineering Officer. It was an honour to, you know be selected for the position.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

And I'm being completely mean because you've done huge amount of things in the meantime and you're also a commercial pilot yourself, I believe?

SQNLDR Mark Lees

Yes, I am. Yeah, I got the commercial license in about 1993. So we've been a CT4 owner and maintainer and all things aviation for 30 years.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Were you always a vintage aircraft enthusiast?

SQNLDR Mark Lees

Not always, but started flying at sort of 16 and was always into aviation in some way, shape or form. So I got the commercial license, also joined the Air Force as a Maintainer, so I came up through the ranks with the boys.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Brilliant.

SQNLDR Mark Lees

I learned about the trade in Air Force right through to fast jets. And yeah, here I am once again back at Point Cook 30 years later.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Well, look, the challenges of working on this beautiful Mustang behind us, it's an 80 year old aircraft. What are the challenges of working on something so old?

SQNLDR Mark Lees

The biggest challenges we find is the having the data to maintain them. We're very lucky, we have an amazing collection of information, but it's the people that look after them and it's a privilege to watch them maintain these old aircraft.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Well, a lot of love would have to go something, it's just beyond your 9 to 5 job.

SQNLDR Mark Lees

Absolutely. And it is, you know, for a lot of people in the aviation industry that maintain aircraft, there's a lot of blood, sweat and tears that goes into these things. And the pride that they have in everything they do is just incredible and it's an honour to be a part of it.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

They weren't expected to last, were they?

SQNLDR Mark Lees

No, they weren't and that's where we're very lucky and we've got to treat them that way. And we certainly don't fly them in their combat or heavy training roles that we would have done years and decades ago. But, you know, as long as we treat them the right way and maintain them the best way we can, we'll get a lot of years of air worthiness out of them.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

What about parts? I mean, you know, if the magneto goes in one of these things, where do you find a magneto, that's going to suit it?

SQNLDR Mark Lees

It's amazing how many Warbird enthusiasts there are globally and the key to having a fleet is maintainability, and we've got things like the Mustang and the T6 Harvard, the CT4, the Winjeel. Especially in Point Cook, a lot of those parts we can still find.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

It's like an international community, is it?

SQNLDR Mark Lees

It is, very much so. Building those networks around the globe is really key to the success of an operation here, and the same as what they do in Battle of Britain Memorial flight in the UK. It's, you know, we are just custodians of these aircraft on a journey.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Absolutely. And considering we are a far smaller country than the United Kingdom and our Air Force is a far smaller Air Force than the RAF. You really get the sense we're punching above our weight with 100 Squadron, aren't we?

SQNLDR Mark Lees

We are and you know, we are a small team both here and in Temora with 100 Squadron. We operate two separate areas across Victoria and New South Wales. But the teams that we have

are very much tight knit families at both locations, we have good interoperability and we share knowledge, knowledge and resources across not only the two organisations but also our other local partners here in Melbourne and overseas.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

What's easy to work on? A vintage jet or a vintage piston aircraft?

SQNLDR Mark Lees

Look, it would depend on the skill set of those involved. Some the dedicated Mustang guys will say Mustang, those who worked on jets will say jets. I will say a CT4. So you know, everybody is different from what they've grown up with, for ease of maintenance.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

It's interesting that so many of the staff that work here would be so much younger than the aircraft they're working on.

SQNLDR Mark Lees

Almost, yes. Yes and I have some very senior guys and that's where we're lucky because it's not a box changing exercise as the modern aircraft are. It's very much hands on and the original rigging of aircraft and engines and carburettors, it's back to the basics and fundamentals of aviation maintenance. And, you know, we've got a lot of guys coming through and there are a lot of opportunities for people to come through and they've got to learn off the senior guys about the old techniques.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Do you have to rely sometimes on like, you know, old 80 year old wartime manuals and blueprints and things like that, that were made in the factory?

SQNLDR Mark Lees

All the time, all the time and you know, sometimes they're very sparse on information. Other times they're detailed, but that's where we rely on specially because these are civilian registered aircraft. We rely on the expertise of the licensed staff to really have that knowledge and pass that down to the younger generation.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

It's great to know, Mark, that these beautiful aircraft are in such good hands. Let's hope people like yourself can keep them flying for another what, 80 years?

SQNLDR Mark Lees

Well, we'll try. We'll try as long as we're here.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Terrific insight there with Squadron Leader Mark Lees, the Senior Engineering Officer with 100 Squadron, about just what it takes to keep some of these wonderful old Warbirds in the air. Now, finally, I caught up with Flying Officer Kristy Adam Personnel Capability Officer with 100 Squadron, finding out just what it takes to engage with the public and create awareness of 100 Squadrons work with historic aircraft, along with the crucial role of educating and fostering interest in historic aviation for newer generations.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Hello, Kristy.

FLGOFF Kristi Adam

Hi, Michael. How are you going?

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Good, thank you. So, you're so much younger than anything in this hangar, even the more reason-

FLGOFF Kristi Adam

That's why I am hanging around here! Is because it does, it makes me feel really young, even though I'm about to turn 40. The aircraft around here have been around for a lot longer.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

What kind of person does it take to be so enthused about these old aircraft?

FLGOFF Kristi Adam

Anyone that's got an interest in aviation would appreciate what we do here. But also, too, I think it's someone that has a bit of a bit of knowledge and a bit of appreciation of our history as well. Once you know, a lot of the stories behind these aircraft and you know about the people that were serving with the aircraft at the time and the operations, it just puts a completely different spin on standing next to one, or even sitting in one, or watching one fly.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Have you found the interest from the public in these older aircraft, growing over the years?

FLGOFF Kristi Adam

Absolutely, and I think that younger generations now look at a lot of aircraft, especially like the biplanes and things like that, and wonder how? How is that something that we took to a war? How does it fly? And that's something we're really hoping that 100 Squadron can bring to the public and especially to younger people, teaching kids about how the evolution of our capability worked and how far we've come and they can learn by seeing it firsthand.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

100 Squadron's doing some interesting things in reaching out to the public. I was told that there are these fabulous interactive displays where you actually can have a Q&A with a pilot as he's about to take off and then he does an aerobatic display over your head. Wonderful!

FLGOFF Kristi Adam

I find that the interaction is really important. It's one thing to see an aircraft fly overhead, but being able to talk to the pilots that are flying the aircraft that can tell you exactly what it's like. It's, you know, a really important part to understanding. And we've been at air shows and starting to get the pilots out on the ground and talking to people. Everyone is interested in these aircraft in some way, shape or form when they're at an air show, they're often a highlight as well. And I think talking to the pilots gets people, lets people resonate even more with what our mission is and what we're trying to achieve.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Well, a huge milestone for our Air Force a couple of years ago with the 100th Anniversary, it was a bit it was a bit upstaged by COVID, unfortunately. But we're still in that time, aren't we? Where, you know, we have 100 year old Air Force, one of the second oldest, one of the oldest in the world, I think the second oldest in the world. They're still debating that on whether we are or not, but you know, that's a really proud heritage to be part of.

FLGOFF Kristi Adam

I think so, and I think when we look at the age of Australia itself and then the age of our Air Force, we realised what a huge part our Air Force has in national identity. And the Air Force was there for so many key moments for Australia and so were these aircraft. So keeping 100 Squadron going, I think is a huge opportunity for us to share that national identity sort of part of it and keep it going to get the younger kids interested as well, and to teach them the stories and teach them about the aircraft before we don't have people who were there, left to tell us about it.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

Do you just want to see more and more aircraft in 100 Squadron being fixed up and taking to the skies?

FLGOFF Kristi Adam

Oh, 100%. I'm in charge of finance in the Squadron and I often wish that I could pull some more bunnies out of the hat for the CO because yeah, I think both him and I would love to fill these hangars with as many different aircraft types as we could. We are limited in as far as human resources here to maintain them as well. I'm sure that the others might have mentioned that we are a small team. To give you an idea, we have less than ten permanent Air Force members in the Squadron and we have, you know, we have a Logistics Officer with no supply staff underneath him. He's sort of a one man show in that sense and so it is a very, very small team keeping this many aircraft going. So, I think that if we were to ever expand, we would maybe need to look at that.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

So it's a real collection of a bunch of fascinating individuals, 100 Squadron, isn't it?

FLGOFF Kristi Adam

Oh, we are very eclectic and the one thing that we do have in common, so from different backgrounds, different ages and performing different roles in the Squadron, we are all very passionate about what we do and we're very enthusiastic about getting the message out there and getting these aircraft out there to engage with as many people as we possibly can.

SQNLDR Michael Veitch

I'd like to extend my gratitude to our guests today who shared with us their knowledge, experiences and passion from 100 Squadron, Wing Commander Jason Easthope, Squadron Leader Mark Lees and Flying Officer Kristi Adam. Let's hope between them they can continue to keep some of these wonderful aircraft of our Air Force heritage in the air for many years to come.

And thanks to you too, for listening, hope you can join us again. My name's Michael Veitch, and this has been 'In Conversation' from the Royal Australian Air Force.