

# AUSTRALIA'S FIRST ASTROBAT, OR SHOULD THAT BE WOMBANAUT?

By Geoff Schmidt  
("WOMBATS" – 12 Course Wagga Appies)

After being commissioned into the Instrument category, and on my initial posting to 481(M) Squadron Williamstown, I met one of the most unique characters the Apprentice Scheme has produced. He was (then a Sgt) Instrument fitter John "Choppy" Gannell. A larger than life chap, always up to mischief, a super organizer, a great entertainer, and who was probably the most generous individual, I've had the pleasure of meeting.

Later in our careers, Flt Lt Gannell worked for me in HQSC. Suffice to say, AEENG1's social program was robust. (I must add that our "top cover", Wg Cdr Bob Bartram AEEng1, was another quiet, shy, ex appy off #3 Course – Sunbeams). Local pubs, Bell's, Druids, and the Town Hall were venues where the leaders of the Instrument Trade conducted many frank and meaningful discussions. (Getting back by 5pm to lock up the "B" class cabinet was always a challenge). Similarly, "Choppy" was the instigator of the famous "Banksa" BBQ's (1<sup>st</sup> in 1973) which sees an all ranks Instrument gathering on the first Friday in December for a session of wisdom transfer (Sadly Choppy, has left us for the big Clean Room in the sky, but the "Banksas" – now extended to all avionics trades – prevail to this day).

Choppy was a proud Daffodil off No 7 Appy Course (other notables were Les Holt, Terry McGee, Dick Waterfield, Bill Arden and Ernie "Bodgie" Moore). I had always chided Choppy, that there "WERE ONLY TWO TYPES OF APPRENTICES – WOMBATS, AND THOSE WHO WISHED THEY WERE". My catch-cry used to set him going and his revenge on me was usually swift and effective.

To celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the Apprentice Scheme, all Appy intakes returned to Wagga in 1988 and marched up Bayliss St in order, by Intakes – a most impressive sight. After we had "broken off" from our march, I confronted Choppy and (confident of a Wombat win) challenged him to a head count of Daffodils versus Wombats. Well, to my embarrassment the bloody "Daffies" outnumbered us by five!

So over the ensuing years, Choppy was relentless in his gloating of the Course superiority of his beloved 'Daffies'. So a plan to turn the tide back to the Wombats was called for!

Luckily, I had a personal friend who was a pilot Astronaut (as you do) – He did two trips as the pilot on the shuttle Endeavour, and one as the Mission Commander on Atlantis. On this latter mission (11- 31Mar'96), Atlantis docked with the Mir Space Station – and who was a valuable crew member on this mission?

Wally Wombat, no less!

The story continues with an extract from RAAF News (late 1996) written by myself and "journalized" by the famous RAAF photographer and "journo", our own Dennis Hersey.

Suffice to say no other Intake has come back with a matching event to match or better Wally's magnificent feat. The famous wombat figurine (made in Bateman's Bay from compressed oyster shell) resides on Geoff's office wall in Canberra.

To have left one's impression on those who followed is indeed satisfying. *Gluteus Maximus Wombatus* chose wisely, to frolic amongst the Daffodils! - WLA. 'Daffodil'.

## RAAF News article (late '96)

"Burrowing herbivorous marsupials are rarely found anywhere in the Australian bush and then mostly at night. However one of the nocturnal species, one "Wally" by name, has achieved eternal fame by being the first wombat in space.

Wally recently returned to Earth after completing a 221 hour mission aboard the space shuttle Atlantis. And what, one would ask; would a hairy four legged eater of vegetation be doing orbiting the globe, taking up valuable space and oxygen?

Well mission specialist Wally, an official member of the crew, was no oxygen Bandit, but a trained observer studying global vegetation patterns as pertaining to grass eating marsupials.

Other foodstuffs examined by Wally included the Russian cuisine aboard their Mir Space Station, to which Atlantis was docked for five days.

In fact, Wally is no ordinary wombat, but the diminutive three inch long, one inch tall, non-combustible talisman and mascot of retired RAAF engineer, Wg Cdr Geoff Schmidt of Canberra.

How Wally came to be an "Astrobat" was due to mentor Geoff's posting to California in the early Eighties when still in the Air Force. Whilst working on the F111 strike aircraft project at McClelland Air Force Base Sacramento, Geoff met shuttle astronaut USAF Colonel Kevin Chilton's, father, an employee of McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Company in Los Angeles.

Through the family friendship Geoff got to know Kevin, especially when Kevin visited Australia and stayed with the Schmidt's in Canberra. And of course, when Kevin was selected for the NASA space program Wally was recruited, but not before passing the vigorous physical and mental testing so much part of an astronaut's role.

Colonel Chilton, Commander of this particular mission, had this to say about Wally: "He met all the requirements to be a good crew mate. He didn't talk back to his commander and didn't eat any of my food."

But the main reason for Wally's intrepid journey into space originates back in early 1958 when Geoff and another one hundred plus lads between the ages of 15 and 17 years joined the RAAF as engineering apprentices, the 12th Intake, were called the "Wombats", a very close knit group, whose achievements in both the military and civilian life are well known.

Wally's memorable mission into space puts other apprentice intakes on notice...your response to match this Wombat achievement is invited. "



Geoff Schmidt and 'Wally Wombat', a crewmember on the Atlantis shuttle flight STS-76 in March, 1996. Apart from reaching speeds of Mach 25.3, Wally spent five days on board the Mir Space Station.