The Luck of the Draw.

The story of a teenage airman.

Once a serviceman or servicewoman signed on the dotted line on the day of their enlistment, their fate was out of their hands. In the Royal Australian Air Force in particular, luck played a major role.

My luck held and, in fact, my war service played a major role in opening up a long and happy life but at times I still shed a quiet tear for many of those who enlisted on that summer's day in 1943. Their luck eventually ran out and they did not return. It was one of the most dangerous arms of all the services.

Rookie days.

In Air Training Corps Uniform.1942

Shortly after my eighteenth birthday, I was notified to report to the R.A.A.F. recruiting centre which was situated in a former car sales building at the corner of Russell and Bourke Streets, Melbourne. The date was February 26, 1943. As a member of the Air Training Corp, I already had been issued with a uniform which I was entitled to wear while travelling in response to my call-up. I had volunteered to enlist as soon as I had reached my eighteenth birthday.

Most of the day was taken up undergoing a thorough physical fitness test, including tests for colour blindness. All this was new and strange to me and I thought I had blown the whole thing when I could not produce the required "specimen" because I had taken an opportunity for a toilet break only moments before. When all this had been successfully completed, we were sworn in and given an official number. I was now 430613 AC2 Evans B. J. I soon found that the last three numbers displaced my first name and I answered to 613 Evans.

Air force authorities had previously stated that we would be posted to the appropriate training establishment nearest our homes. We therefore expected that we would be posted to the Initial Training School at Somers on the Mornington Peninsula. It was a big surprise when late in the day we were informed that we were to be sent to No 2 I. T. S. at Bradfield Park on Sydney's North Shore. We were to learn that life in the R.A.A.F. was to be full of these little surprises. A further surprise was to find that we were to travel on Victoria's crack passenger express train, The Spirit of Progress, hauled by a massive streamlined steam engine.

I had never been any further away from home than Melbourne and the prospect of seeing new places right from the start was exciting. We sat back in the well padded leather seats and lapped up the luxury of travelling in this beautiful train. "Bluey" Jones from Warrnambool unfortunately had been sitting on a bar of chocolate that someone had carelessly left on the seat so some time was spent with him lying face down while we endeavoured to scrape it off his trousers. Nobody was very worried about his pants – he probably would not need them again for a long time. (In fact, he was never to need them

again) As I was wearing my ATC uniform, I do not know what happened to the "civvies" worn by most of the new recruits.

At about 11.30 p.m. at Albury, because of the break of gauge between the Victorian and New South Wales railways, we had to change trains. It was simply a matter of walking across the platform to the N.S.W. train on the other side but the change was more than just of trains.

I was unlucky enough to score the very front compartment next to the engine. It was a 'dog box' type carriage and eight men were assigned to each compartment. By this time, with all the excitement of the day we were ready for sleep but this proved virtually impossible. The carriage bounced around so much it felt as though it would run off the rails at any moment. Behind the seat in the corner was a door that opened into the toilet. The unfortunate occupant of this seat found that the door latch was faulty and every time he dozed off he found himself tumbling backwards into the cubicle. To make matters worse, it was in a disgusting state.

Something had to be done about our sleeping arrangements. Two stretched out on each seat, head to toe, two slept on the floor and the two smallest somehow wiggled into the luggage racks. This was working quite well and everyone went off to sleep out of sheer exhaustion. Unfortunately, those in the luggage racks relaxed when they went to sleep and when the train jolted to a sudden stop, somewhere about Cootamundra one fell on to the two sleeping on the seat below and bounced off them onto the two on the floor. There was no sleep after that and it was a dishevelled group that lined up for breakfast at Mittagong the next morning.

It was mid morning by time we reached Sydney and transferred to an electric train that took us over the ten year old Sydney Harbour Bridge to Lindfield where buses awaited to take us on the short final stage to Bradfield Park.

2 I.T.S.

Bradfield Park was home to several R.A.A.F units - the one of most immediate interest was No. 2 I.T.S. (Initial Training School) which was one of several points of entry into the R.A.A.F. for aircrew personnel. Like all new recruits, we were a ragtag lot when we arrived. One of the first activities was to be taken to the stores to be supplied with uniforms (for the great majority who did not already have them) together with other gear, such as kit bags and blankets. We were then assigned to huts, each holding about 30 men. Top priority was given to inserting a white flash into the front of our field service caps to signify that we were aircrew trainees.

There were the inevitable forms to be filled in including the listing of next of kin and the making of a will. Then the first of a long series of inoculations began. Some of them, such as the anti-tetanus shots were rather painful. The routine was well established and efficient. The recruits would be lined up at the door at one end of a hut and file past a medical orderly who swabbed the appropriate part of the anatomy with iodine, then the medical officer who administered the injection. It was strange to see the variety of reactions to this procedure among the men. The odd one fainted before he reached the MO (Medical Officer), sometimes causing a chain reaction with two or three in a row keeling over, and some passed out after the event. Poor Bill Burton, from Brisbane, passed out as he walked down the steps at the exit from the hut and went flat on his face. He sported a nasty gravel rash for a week or two.

The smallpox inoculation was known to cause a delayed reaction after about three days so we got this on Wednesday and were given leave at the weekend. Knowing no one in Sydney, I was given the name of a family who had volunteered to host a serviceman on leave. Mr. and Mrs. Taylor and their daughters, Margaret and Judith, of Lindfield were generous hosts who showed me as much of Sydney as they were able. On the Saturday night, the girls took me to Luna Park, an outing I wouldn't miss despite not feeling very well. The next day I was a very sick lad - almost delirious from the effects of the inoculation. The Taylors looked after me as though I was a member of their own family and I was fit to return to camp on the Monday. I spent many more weekends at the Taylor home.

The main entertainment in the camp was 'going to the pictures' but we also got invitations to parties and other functions. On one occasion, I was one of those detailed to attend a nurses' party at the Repatriation Hospital at Ryde. It was not a very great success because the nurses were a bit old for us, most of them being in their mid twenties.

On Wednesday afternoons, a convoy of buses would take us to Dee Why for surfing and on Saturdays we played Australian rules football on a ground in Redfern. Some of us became keen ice skaters - largely because there always seemed to be attractive young ladies willing to assist fallen airmen up off the ice and to allow us to lean heavily upon them for the rest of the evening as we tried to master the art of skating.

We soon began to learn the meaning of discipline as practised by the services. One of the most frustrating jobs in the services must be that of the Drill Instructor (DI). Those at the I.T.S. had the unenviable task of drumming into raw recruits that orders had to be obeyed instantly and without question. They had to teach us to drill and march properly and there was scarcely a recruit who did not question what the hell this had to do with flying an aircraft. It is little wonder that DIs had a reputation for having evil tempers.

Their discipline extended into the huts where blankets had to be folded to precise specifications every morning - one being folded lengthwise and wrapped around the others in a neat oblong package. Boards were inserted in the ends to make them neat and square. Kit bags could not show bulges or hollows so cardboard was pressed into service to make them round and smooth as possible. Every bag had to be lined up on a particular floorboard for general inspection each morning.

Physical fitness was a top priority and workouts in the gymnasium in the hot February weather usually left pools of sweat on the floor, despite the fact that we really did not carry any surplus weight.

We were given all kinds of test such as co-ordination, colour blindness and many others, in the process of determining our most appropriate category. Everyone wanted to be a pilot but at the end of our six weeks initial training, a Category Selection Board (CSB) would decide whether we were more suitable as navigators, wireless operator-airgunners (WAGS), or straight air gunners. Few were put in the last named category straight from ITS and they were mainly drawn from those who did not make the grade at later stages of training. Once our ITS was completed we were to be posted to schools for further training, possibly overseas.

Facing the CSB was the culmination of the first six weeks and I was made a trainee wireless-airgunner and received automatic promotion to Leading Aircraftsman (LAC). We were paraded and told that there were three options available - to go to Canada, to Maryborough (Queensland) or Parkes (NSW). This was despite the assurance given on enlistment that we would be posted to the appropriate training establishment nearest home and for me that was at Ballarat. This did not upset me as I thought Canada would be a good place to spend some time.

There were, however, some other snags. Canadian postings were available only to those over nineteen (which was supposed to be the minimum age for overseas service) and Victorians were not allowed to go to Maryborough, as it was not the nearest one to their homes. As my nineteenth birthday was still about nine months away, my 'choice' therefore was Parkes, where we arrived by train from Sydney on April 29, 1943.

2 W.A.G.S.

Parkes was known as No 2 WAGS (Wireless and Gunnery School) although it concentrated almost exclusively on instruction on wireless operation. We had to learn the very basics of how wireless transmitters and receivers worked. Such subjects as radio wave frequencies, heterodyne whistles, radiolocation and the like were quite interesting. We had to learn how radio frequency waves acted as carriers and audio frequency waves were superimposed on them and how circuits resonated to specific wavelengths and valves then extracted the audio waves so that they became audible.

It was learning Morse code that caused the most hassles. 'Dahs' and 'dits' came to dominate our lives. We were even taught to write again because it was absolutely vital that every figure and letter should be read and transcribed correctly. Virtually every message was in code and a V being mistaken for a U, for example, could be disastrous.

For a brief period, my sister's fiancé, Jim Kitt, was seated opposite me as we laboriously transcribed letters and numbers churned out endlessly in Morse code. Jim was a few years older than me and found the task of learning Morse code to the required level of efficiency too difficult. He remustered as a "straight" Air Gunner, ie., not a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, which shortened his training by about six months. He went on to serve in the famous RAAF 464 Squadron flying Lancaster Bombers from Waddington in Lincolnshire. He flew 43 missions, many with the famous Pathfinders, specially trained crews that identified the targets for following aircraft. They did this by dropping identifying flares. They were regarded as the elite crews in Bomber Command. He attained the rank of Flight Lieutenant and was decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Soon after arriving at Parkes, I called on the Manager of the local branch of the Union Bank, as I was an officer of that bank for twelve months before enlisting. Bill Hunter was very helpful and hospitable. I was invited to a meal and met his wife and four daughters. Margaret was eighteen, Dorothy was sixteen and there were two younger ones. I got along famously with this family, so much so that when the two older girls wanted to go to a Ball in the town, their parents agreed provided I took them.

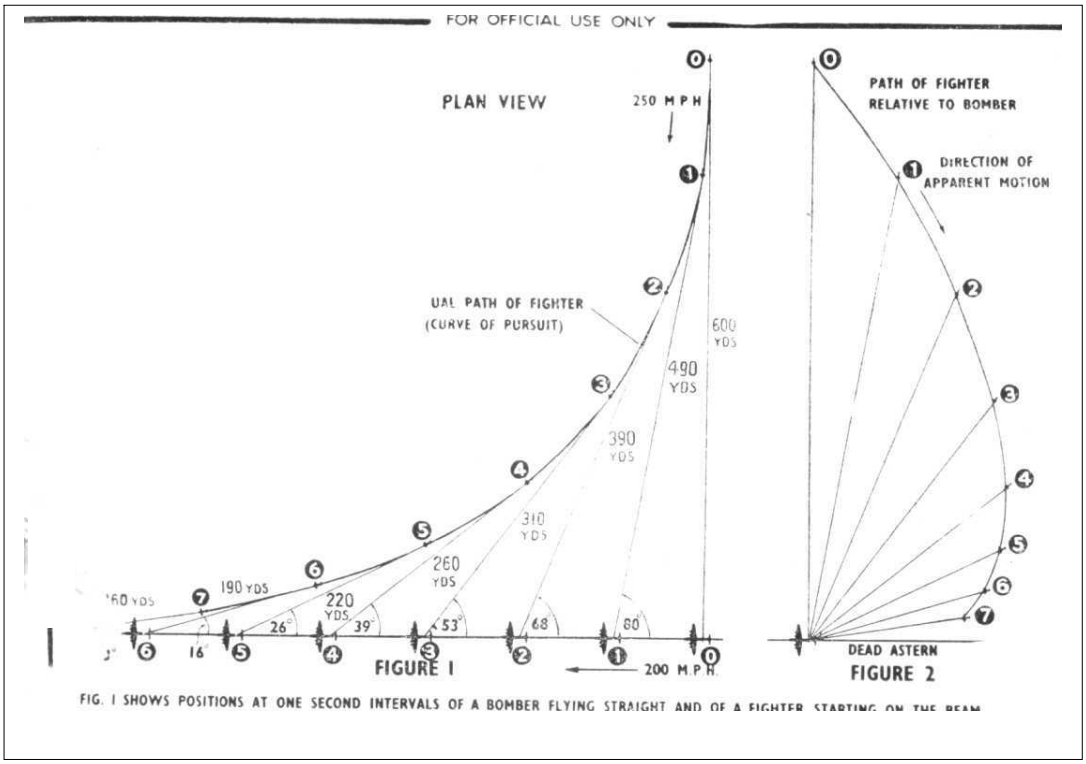
Early in our training, we were sent out in vans fitted with the same radio equipment that we would use in aircraft. We would send and receive messages but the best fun was using the direction finding radio to find our way back to base. We were in the back of the vans with no view outside and the drivers had to try to keep as close as possible to the direction we indicated. This sometimes meant cutting across country, through back yards and the like.

Parkes can get very cold in the winter months and some of the men took to wearing the issued quilted inner flying suits to bed at night. Orders came that this practise was to cease. The cold tended to require a dash to the latrines during the night and before drifting back to sleep, one would hear the mutterings and restlessness of the other twenty odd occupants of the hut. We had never heard of stress but the crash course in learning Morse code certainly put us all under a considerable strain. We were also conscious of the rather short life expectancy of air gunners at that period of the war.

Despite the pressure of our training, guard duties had to be undertaken periodically. Two of us met briefly at the corner of a hanger one dark night while on guard duty and as we exchanged a few words I noticed a small white object move slowly out from a building about fifty yards away, pause and then slowly move back again. We watched in apprehension while this

activity was repeated several times before plucking up sufficient courage to go and investigate. We found that a long thin rope was hanging from the control tower for the purpose of hauling up messages. One such message had been left tied to the rope and a slight breeze was slowly moving it out and back to the base of the control tower.

Life at Parkes was fairly hectic. In addition to our radio work we had to do aircraft and ship recognition. It was very important to be able to recognise an aircraft instantaneously as it would be necessary to be ready to defend ourselves if it was an enemy and it was equally important not fire on a friendly aircraft. Having identified an aircraft, air gunners had to memorise each aircraft's wingspan. This was necessary because the gunner calculated the distance of an attacking enemy plane from an aircraft by the amount it filled the ring sight. Obviously, at the same distance, a larger aircraft filled more of the sight so it was necessary to know the relative sizes of aircraft. Having estimated the distance, allowance then had to be made for the movement of the aircraft by aiming an appropriate distance in front of it. The attacking aircraft, of course, had to cope with the same factors and because they had fixed guns, the aircraft had to fire at a point ahead of the target aircraft. This meant that it had to fly on a "curve of pursuit" which provided a couple of crucial points where they were easier to hit.



Aircraft recognition was taught with the use of plans, photographs, models and slides. As proficiency increased, we were tested by flashing slides of perhaps just the tail of an aircraft on a screen for a second or less. A blink of the eyes at the wrong time and it could be missed altogether.

We had two DIs (Drill Instructors) with the unlikely names of Corporal Skull and Corporal Corpse. The first was soon dubbed "The Screaming Skull" for reasons that need no explanation. The second was known as "Stiffy" and seemed to be able to get the result he desired without constantly yelling and screaming at us.

Despite the activity, we did get some time for social life. Four of us were invited to a party at Jemalong Station near Forbes. We took the motor train from Parkes and were met at Forbes Railway station and driven to Jemalong. There we met the people who were to put us up for

the night. My hosts were the manager of the Union Bank at Forbes and his wife. Their daughter who was engaged to be married accompanied them. My mates and I felt a bit left out of things as we knew nobody there and it was a pretty lively party. We were all non-drinkers but someone suggested a gin squash would not do us any harm. After it went down, we were sure that it hadn't and that another wouldn't do any harm either. Neither did the others we had.

In the small hours of the morning it was time to return to Forbes. Car lights were restricted to narrow slits of light about six inches wide by about half an inch high as a blackout precaution. It was soon apparent that the Bank manager and his wife were devoting their entire attention to watching the road ahead. I decided that I would do a little reconnoitring in the back seat and found that I met very little resistance. The journey passed very quickly and pleasantly and we arrived at the bank in Forbes.

Like many banks, the residence was above the bank itself. Owing to the lateness of the hour, everyone was soon off to bed and I was soon sound asleep. Before long I was wakened by an urgent call of nature and to my horror realised that I had no idea where the toilet was. I opened the bedroom door and peered down the passage and the doors were all closed. There was no indication which was the door to the toilet. I thought I might scare the daylights out of them if I started snooping around, or even worse, what happens if I try a door and it is of one of the other bedrooms, especially if it belongs to the daughter? I found that the window opened on to a balcony over the footpath so, after listening as long as I could for any sound of human activity, I found relief over the balcony on to the road below.

A running debate developed in the hut I shared with about twenty others between a Sydneysider named Richardson and me about the virtues of city and country. It became quite acrimonious at times, as it was quite apparent that he regarded rural people as second class citizens. There was a Commonwealth election in the offing (at which I registered my first vote at age 18 years) which probably added fuel to the fire and he was a keen supporter of Labor. I had nothing but contempt for him when he stated one day that he had already deliberately failed a pilot's course and a navigator's course and intended to do the same with the radio course. He intended to see the war out if he could by prolonging any training as long as possible.

It was October before we actually got off the ground for our first flight. The aircraft was a Wackett - a very small two seater. It was a great feeling as the wheels left the tarmac and I knew we were flying. There was little time to enjoy the experience though because I had radio exercises to do.

I was deeply engrossed in this activity for some time when the pilot half turned in his seat and raised his ten fingers in the air. There was no means of communication between the pilot and trainee. I had no idea what this gesture meant and racked my brains as to what might be expected of me. As the pilot remained calm and collected, I was grateful that apparently it didn't mean 'bale out'.

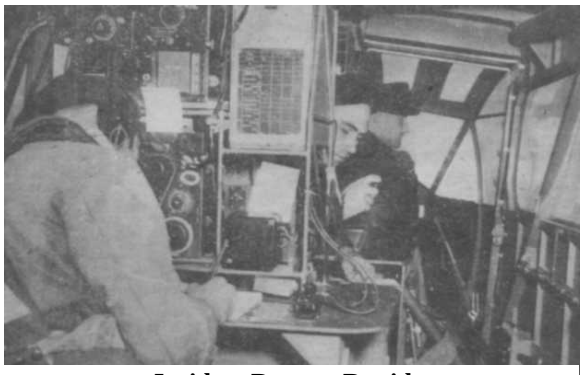
I did find however that my radio signals were getting weaker and I kept turning the volume up. Then my ears began to hurt and soon became so painful that I thought my eardrums would burst. I was getting desperate and had no means of contacting the pilot to get him to climb again until I sorted things out. Suddenly I remembered the advice, "hold your nose and blow". The air being forced back into my inner ear was even more painful and caused a high pitched whistle like kids make with a balloon. The radio nearly deafened me as my hearing suddenly returned.

The ten fingers had signified that we had attained an altitude of ten thousand feet - eventually reaching 11,100 feet. We soon learned that some of the pilots who flew us were frustrated fighter pilots and others were bored with the routine of flying wide-eyed rookie wireless operators, commonly known as ‘erks’ within a short radius of the base. I happened to strike one who was endeavouring to break the altitude record for Wackett aircraft. We were not supposed to go over eight thousand feet without oxygen and these aircraft were not even equipped with it. My problem arose from the fact that having reached this height, I did not realise that he had put the plane's nose down in a fairly rapid descent as I was engrossed in my radio work and trying to find out why it was fading out. From that day, I have had to ‘hold my nose and blow’ even descending a mountain by car.

A Wackett.

Another pilot amused himself by finding a mob of sheep in a paddock with a gate open to it. He would then fly backwards and forwards until he had shepherded them all through the gate. Others would take off and fly in a dead straight line for half the time allowed then turn and fly straight back again. One of my mates tried to concentrate on his work while his pilot engaged another in a mock dogfight. When he asked permission to reel in his long trailing aerial, his pilot gasped, "Is that still out?" For low frequency work, a trailing aerial, 150 feet long and weighted down with a couple of sinkers, was wound off a drum in the aircraft. This was the wireless operators duty. Permission had to be obtained from the pilot before reeling it out or reeling it in. This was done by sign language in a Wackett but in this case, the pilot had forgotten that it was in use.

Our course provided for two flights in a DH Dragon Rapide. These were like a twin-engined Tiger Moth and were relicts of the early 1930's. They were nicknamed the "percolators" as it was almost certain that we would "perk" during these flights. These aircraft carried two trainees and an instructor and true to the prediction, I was airsick. It was the only time I was ever the victim of motion sickness and I was utterly miserable. I felt that if I were told to jump out, I would do so willingly.



Inside a Dragon Rapide.

On November 15, 1943, I completed the wireless course and a passing out parade was held to present our badge which was a fist holding a number of thunderbolts. It was worn on the upper sleeve. The parade was a full dress affair such as had been held every Monday morning. Although there were grumbles about the weekly parade, I think most enjoyed it. There was something exciting about all the station personnel assembling on the parade ground, the call for "Markers" and then "On the marker, Fall in" and "From the right, number". Then the markers lined up each rank – "up number three - back number five" as the airman referred to shuffled smartly forward or back - and so on until he was satisfied the line was perfectly straight. Then the cry of "front rank steady" before dealing with the centre rank and rear rank in a similar fashion. Then the reporting through the officers, "All present and correct, Sir". The parade finished with the entire station personnel marching around the parade ground, saluting the Commanding Officer as we passed.

We were well trained by time the passing out parade came round. The unit commander, Squadron Leader Reynolds, was not the most popular man on the station. He was known to accuse men unable to grasp Morse code as being ‘cowardly’. He did this to one airman on our course who happened to be wearing three small pale blue vertical stripes on the cuff of his tunic. This was to signify that he had three years of active service overseas to his credit. In fact he had been in the army in the North African campaign and had remustered to aircrew. As he said, he was sick of being chased around by aeroplanes and decided he would prefer to do the chasing. The Commanding Officer was neither qualified as aircrew nor had overseas service.

In the photograph, I am five from the left, rear row. The photo illustrates why some Drill Instructors were at pains to point out that we were supposed to walk under our Field Service caps, not beside them.

Of those in the photo, at least six failed to return. For two of them, the Australian War Memorial has no record.

After presenting our badges, the C.O. addressed us. His opening words were, "In six months time, half of you will be dead". His words shocked us. It was a grossly insensitive comment and did him no credit. It was not that we were unaware of that fact. We knew only too well that the active service life expectancy of aircrew in general and air gunners in particular, was not very long. There was a kind of sick joke circulating which made the point that, after an operation over enemy territory, while other members of the crew left an aircraft over the wing, or through a hatch, the rear gunner was hosed out.

2 B.A.G.S.

The graduates from No. 2 WAGS at Parkes were sent to No 2 Bombing and Gunnery School (No 2 BAGS) at Port Pirie in South Australia, despite the fact that there was a similar school at Sale in Victoria, only 40 miles from home. Port Pirie had the distinction that not only did the railway line go along the main street, it also had provision for three different gauges - five feet three inch to Adelaide, three feet to Broken Hill and four feet eight and one half inches to Western Australia. Passengers boarded the train in the middle of the street.

The aircraft used for our training were old Fairey Battles that had been frontline aircraft at the beginning of the war. They carried two trainee gunners at a time. The machine guns we used were Vickers Gas Operated guns that were obsolete in active service as was the radio equipment at Parkes.

They were mounted on the side of the rear cockpit and to operate them we stood head and shoulders out of the aircraft. We wore old style leather helmets and goggles. The force of the slipstream caused the lapel of my dungarees to vibrate rapidly against my cheek making it quite sore but nothing I tried seemed to rectify the problem.

There was a hatch about two feet wide by four feet long in the floor of the aircraft but in some of them the cover was missing leaving just an empty space. This caused some scary moments during one particular exercise called a relative speed shoot. This involved our aircraft passing a drogue towed by another Fairey Battle at about fifty miles an hour while we fired at the drogue. In order to get as many passes as possible in the time, our aircraft, after passing the drogue, would do a steep climbing turn, then a stall turn and dive back to the level of the drogue by which time it was ahead of us again. This was much like the manoeuvre fighter aircraft perform in dogfights.

During this manoeuvre, we were subject to forces several times the force of gravity as the aircraft changed from level flight to commence its climb, whilst in the stall turn we became almost weightless. To communicate with the pilot, it was necessary to crawl up the fuselage, straddling the hole in the floor, touch him on the shoulder and give a thumbs up or thumbs down signal depending on the message we wished to convey. If he happened to be pulling into a climb or out of a dive, our bodies would be forced down over this opening with nothing but five or six thousand feet of air underneath. During the near weightless period, we feared we would lose our grip on the fuselage and float out the hole. The position was not helped by the fact that we did not wear parachutes. We wore the harness but the packed parachute was in a bracket inside the fuselage and had to be clipped on the harness if required. Obviously, if someone fell out they did not have a parachute.

Fairey Battle with trainee air gunner..

We were treated to a spectacular but frightening bit of flying when two pilots decided they would do some unauthorised fancy flying. Our apprehension was increased by the knowledge that five had been killed in a collision between two aircraft the previous month. After flying in close formation which made it look as though the other aircraft's propeller was about to chew into our wingtip, they flew on alternating zigzag courses, which made it appear the other aircraft was swinging from side to side like a pendulum- one moment on our port side, the next on our starboard. Then they changed to a similar manoeuvre on a vertical plane so

that the other aircraft was fifty feet above us, then fifty feet below, each time the wingtips nearly touching as they passed.

On December 11, 1943, the course was successfully completed. We were presented with a half wing brevet with the letters AG to signify that we were qualified air gunners and removed the white flash in our field service caps as we were no longer trainees but fully qualified wireless-airgunners. We were also promoted to the rank of sergeant - some were made officers. We now had only to complete a course at an Operational Training Unit (OTU) before being posted to an active Squadron. On these units, we would be trained on the aircraft and using the equipment we would use in action.

2 E.D.

The new Sergeant – 18/12/1943
On Final Leave.

I was posted to No 2 ED (Embarkation Depot), which was also at Bradfield Park where I had done my initial training. Before reporting there, I was given Final Leave. It was a strange period with all my family and friends trying to be as normal as possible yet knowing that this might well be the last week I would ever spend at home. At the end of my leave, I said my 'goodbyes' without too much emotion, as we were not a very demonstrable family, and caught the train to Melbourne. It was the usual slow journey taking anything up to eight hours.

In Melbourne, I met my elder sister, Betty, who confided in me that she had decided to marry her long time boy friend, Don James, who was an RAAF pilot. Then I took the train to Sydney once again. Whilst changing trains at Albury at about midnight, I was surprised to see my brother, Max, who had cycled 50 miles from Mulwala where he was employed in munitions production. He did this although he had no firm details of the time I would be there. It must have been dawn before he got back to Mulwala.

Life at the Embarkation Depot at Bradfield Park was rather more relaxed than during our training period at our Initial Training there. We were, after all, now Sergeants and had a little rank and could join the Sergeants' Mess. It was, however, a hive of rumours. Almost every day, someone would have seen a troopship in the harbour or someone else knew someone who knew where we were going. Christmas came and went - I was the guest of a couple whose names I cannot remember but the husband was a pilot in World War 1 and his wife was a sister of Ronald Coleman, a Hollywood movie star.

On New Years Eve, several of us went to Bondi and the trams were so crowded that we could not get aboard for the return journey back to the city and walked all the way. There was just a mass of people at Kings Cross and the trams could hardly battle their way through. To "shoot through like a Bondi tram" was a colloquial expression. Instead of catching the last train from Wynyard back to camp as usual, we caught the first one in the morning.

I celebrated my nineteenth birthday in the Sergeant's Mess on January 21st. 1944. We continued trying to improve speed and accuracy in receiving and transmitting Morse code and honed our aircraft and ship recognition skills. We were kept busy but we did get time to go swimming in the nearby Lane Cove River on the hot summer days. One week after my nineteenth birthday, I was swimming on my back when I bumped into someone who promptly pushed my head under water. I came up fighting only to be met by the laughing eyes of a very attractive young lady. The situation demanded a change in the tactics which had flashed through my mind while I was under water. We swam together for a while before leaving the water and sunning ourselves on a rock. I discovered that her name was Jenny and that she had joined the WAAAFs (Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force) only a few weeks previously. All too soon, she said she had to go as she was due to go on duty. I plucked up courage and invited her out. She readily agreed and we arranged to meet at the main gate at 7 p.m.

I arrived at the gate at 6.45 and waited impatiently until 7 p.m. - then 7.15 and 7.30. At 7.45, I gave up and caught a bus into Chatswood and consoled myself with a feed of steak and eggs. As I was returning through the main gate, the guard stopped me and asked whether I had been waiting at the gate earlier in the evening. When I replied that I had, he said that the WAAAF I had been waiting for had arrived about 5 minutes after I left and had been very upset that she

had missed me. She wanted to meet me at the arranged time the following evening. I looked forward eagerly to the date.

The next day was like so many before it with the usual crop of rumours, when about noon an order was issued for a special parade at 2 p.m. We were informed that all leave was cancelled and that anyone on leave (those who lived in and around Sydney) would be recalled immediately. Parades were called at about four hourly intervals all through the night and at about 7 a.m. a long line of double-decker buses pulled into the camp. By 8 a.m., we had all been marshalled aboard the buses and the long convoy moved slowly towards the main gate where about one hundred of the station staff stood waving goodbye. There were many tear stained faces among the WAAAFS, particularly among the older ones who had probably done this many times before and knew that as many as 50% of the waving and smiling men on the buses may not return.

Then, standing almost in the exact spot that I had waited the previous evening, I saw Jenny anxiously scanning each of the buses as they went slowly by. She spotted me almost simultaneously although the chances were much less than 50% that she could pick me out of hundreds of men dressed identically, as she could see only one side of the buses. Her face lit up and she half raised her hand to wave when her emotions took over and she dissolved into tears. How I wanted to hold her, reassure her and comfort her - but the bus moved relentlessly forward and as it gathered speed as it cleared the main gate, I could see her moving away from the group still crying. I struggled to control my own emotions. The other girls had been weeping for all of us, but she was weeping especially for me. It was almost as traditional as a young man going off to war that there was a girl waiting his return. Many of my mates had a girl's photo in their wallets but I had none.

I did not know her surname, her service number or her unit. These and similar details were the things one found out about as friendships developed. In the brief hour or so that we had been together, we had not exchanged this information and there was no way that I could ever make contact with her again.

The excitement of the occasion soon pulled me out of the depression that momentarily overcame me. The convoy of buses moved over the Harbour Bridge and down George Street during the morning rush hour. Turning left, we headed to Woolloomooloo and the convoy drove right on to the wharf. As we debussed, all we could see of the ship was the massive grey side and we had no idea what she looked like. We soon found that she was the pride of the Dutch merchant fleet, the *Nieuw Amsterdam* of 38,000 tons.

I was lucky enough to be allotted an outside cabin shared with two others. Most had six or eight occupants. We were soon lined up on deck as the ship made her way down the harbour late in the morning. Shipping movements were kept highly secret for security reasons but it seemed that everyone in Sydney knew about this one. Every vantage point was lined with waving people and every ferry seemed to be crowded. It was frustrating to be forced to stand strictly to attention when our instincts were to wave back. When I said as much to my mate beside me, the officer in front of us said, "We are not going on a picnic, you know." The date was January 27, 1944.

As we cleared the heads, we were dismissed and could start to become accustomed to life aboard ship. Top priority was given to noting which way the ship was heading. Was it east towards the United States or Canada or north towards the southwest Pacific theatre of war? A little to our surprise, she seemed to be heading south. As we settled into our cabin, Bill Burton returned from a reconnaissance of the ship. He had found the canteen and we didn't believe him when he claimed that a carton of 200 American cigarettes cost just two shillings and six pence (25 cents). This proved to be true as we were introduced to duty free shopping.

The following day, we identified Wilson's Promontory and islands in Bass Strait and later found ourselves at our first port of call - Melbourne. There, another train load of airmen

joined the ship, which set sail again later in the day. Out into Bass Strait again, the ship headed west.

Several days later the navigators among us estimated that we were off the south west tip of Australia, heading into the Indian Ocean. Late in the day, a large troop ship escorted by a cruiser could be seen through the gloom many miles south. The cruiser exchanged signals with the *Nieuw Amsterdam* by means of Aldus lamp. The radio operators kept their hand in by reading the messages from the cruiser, which were meaningless as they were in code. The last eight letters, however, were not and it was apparent that the cruiser had been advised of the personnel aboard our ship for it read - dah dah dit, dah dah dah, dah dah dah, dah dit dit; dit dah dit dit, dit dit dah, dah dit dah dit, dah dit dah - which spelt out G–O–O–D L–U–C–K. A rousing cheer went up followed by silence. It seemed that everyone felt that message was the final break with our homeland and now we were on our own.