Chapter 3.

## An Island Fortress.

We stepped ashore in Britain on March 12, 1944, six weeks after leaving Sydney. We were greeted by a sleety shower of rain but on the railway station, women of the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) provided tea and scones with jam and cream. How we enjoyed that little taste of home cooking after so long and we were fascinated by the gentle Scottish accents of all the civilians. We were soon on board a train and heading off into the night.

It was hard to sleep. The rocking of the train was so different from the motion of the ship and we were anxious to see this England which we had heard so much about. We waited impatiently for dawn so we could see the countryside but daylight brought even more frustration. In the cold atmosphere, the smoke and steam from the locomotive hurrying us south hung low to the ground effectively blocking out any view of the countryside. When passing through a town at a speed allowing us to read signs, there was nothing to identify where we were. Every sign, including station names, which could possibly help invading paratroopers identify where they were, had been removed. All that were left were advertising signs and some wit claimed that every town we went through was called Hovis (a brand of bread).

Mid-morning, we arrived at a city so big that it could only be London. The train paused briefly at a suburban station and the stationmaster inquired, "Where're you blokes from?" "Australia", came a chorus in reply. "Haven't seen anyone from there before", was the response. This came as a bit of a shock. It was a surprise that there were Englishmen who had never seen Australians before. As we passed through urban areas it was apparent that every suitable patch of ground was utilised for the growing of vegetables. This was part of the gigantic task of not only feeding the people of Britain but also the massive numbers of troops being built up for the invasion of Europe which must surely soon come.

The train then proceeded to Brighton, on the coast 60 miles south of London. There we disembarked and marched down to the sea front where we were billeted in the Grand Hotel. The room to which I was allocated was on the seventh and top floor - and there were no lifts working. We got ourselves settled in and noted that our air raid shelter was across the road and a wide esplanade in one of the old shops


**Pre-war postcard view of Brighton seafront.**

built underneath. It was important to know exactly where to go as we might be trying to find it in the dark so one of the first things was to familiarise ourselves with our particular shelter. We were astonished by the beach, which was one of the favourite haunts of Londoners pre-war. There was not a vestige of sand - it was all stones as far as the eye could see. It didn't matter to us that it was all fenced off and inaccessible. That was because it was mined as protection in case of invasion. The two amusement piers, which jutted out into the water, looked forlorn as sections had been removed for the same reason.

For a long time, I had wondered what my reaction would be when I first heard an air raid siren being sounded for real. The rising and falling note was familiar on radio and in films but what would be my reaction when it was "fair dinkum"? We did not have long to wait to find out. Just before midnight on the first night at Brighton, the sirens sounded. There was a rush of people down the stairs, most complaining bitterly that the first night they had slept in something resembling a bed for months, their rest should be so rudely interrupted. As we crossed the esplanade, we looked skyward to see any action there may be but there was nothing. By this stage of the war, the major blitzes on England were over but there were still occasional attempts to reach London. Sometimes, frustrated in these attempts, enemy aircraft dropped their bombs on south coast cities on their return trip to France. In fact, we were almost midway between London and Normandy in France.

After breakfast in the mornings, we would assemble in streets or squares leading off the esplanade. Our R. A. F. drill instructors would call us into line with the words, "Right-o youse blokes, get fell in". They were a bit more polite than the RAAF counterparts that we had experienced but that was probably because we were senior in rank to them as we were sergeants and they were corporals. We would then be marched down to the esplanade and then off to various places where training in Morse code, aircraft recognition, armoury and other subjects would continue.

**Self, Bill Burton, Jerry Bouquet, 'Pop' Bullis on parade ground in Brighton.**

As we were billeted in the centre of a fairly substantial urban area, there were opportunities to meet local residents - preferably young and female. The local dance halls were very popular - notably the Regent Ballroom and the Royal Pavilion, the latter built by the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII. One of the first I met was Norma, a Land Army girl. She suggested a trip into the country on the following Sunday. We took a double decker bus to Lewes, a very pretty town with ridiculously narrow streets, on the Sussex Downs. There seemed to be double-decker bus routes along every country road. As we walked, we met Army battalions, each headed by a Scottish piper, on a route march no doubt getting ready for the invasion of Europe which had to come sooner or later.

It was a beautiful Spring day and it was hard to believe that we were virtually in the front line of one of the greatest conflicts in history - with London about sixty miles to the north and enemy occupied France about sixty miles to the south. The illusion was soon shattered by the sound of distant gunfire. To the east, we could see part of the immense balloon barrage which was in place between London and the coast to try to block bombers, flying low to try to avoid radar detection, from reaching London. A few months later, the numbers were increased dramatically as a defence against V1 rocket attacks.

**Eden Brows**

That was one of the few days that the sounds of war were so subdued in the south of England. Soon the sky was filled with the sounds of aircraft assembling for the 'thousand bomber' raids on targets in Europe. By day, Flying Fortresses of the Americans would cover the sky with their vapour trails as they headed east and by night, their steady drone would be replaced by that of Lancasters of the RAF.

The RAAF Padre at Brighton was Squadron Leader David Byers who was related to neighbours back home and knew my family. He was organising a confirmation service at Westminster Abbey and I agreed to act as a witness for one of my mates, Bill Burton. The confirmation was conducted by the Dean of Westminster and after the ceremony he took us into his private quarters and talked to us about the Abbey for some time.

After several weeks, we were given leave and four of us were to be hosted by a Mrs. McInnes of Armathwaite near Carlisle in the north of England. She met us at the railway station in Carlisle in a Rolls Royce and drove us some 16 miles to her property. Her husband, an Army Major, had been killed in action at Anzio in Italy leaving her with four little children. The house was quite large and each of us had our own bedroom. Each morning, there was a cold cup of tea on the bedside table - I never did get to see the housemaid who put it there. Breakfast was available until eleven and then we could go shooting in the forest on the property, fishing or boating on the river which flowed through it - or we could play billiards on the full sized table in the billiard room.

**At Eden Brows: Mrs. McInnes holding Barbara (centre) ,Gordon Flatman (Sydney), Self and Bob Cole (Warrnambool) at rear.**

On our return journey to London by train, it soon became apparent that the couple who shared our compartment were

honeymooners. Three grinning Australians sitting opposite and one sitting beside him did obviously not impress the groom, in particular. As the night went on, Bill Burton announced in a loud voice that he "Couldn't sleep with all these bloody lights on" and, being unable to find any switches, proceeded to remove the light globes. At last sighting, the groom was contentedly nuzzling up to his bride, no doubt grateful for the ingenuity of these Australian airmen.

## London

As Brighton was only one hour by train from London, we had many opportunities to visit the capital. We looked in awe at the utter devastation that had occurred in much of the city - not fully comprehending it, as we did not know what was there before. It was at its worst around St. Paul's Cathedral, which stood almost unscathed in a sea of rubble through which the streets had been cleared to allow the passage of traffic.

A popular song in the 1930's was one sung by Australian Peter Dawson and it went like this:-

"Have you been to London
Are you coming to London
When you come to London
I'll tell you what you must do
Walk down the streets, take in the treats
Do all the usual things
And if your spouse is keen on houses
Why not show her the King's
Walk down the Mall to Buckingham Palace
And there you'll see the changing of the guard"

We took the opportunity to 'do all the usual things' as far as the limitations of wartime would allow. Apart from the fact that much of central London had been blasted out of existence by the German Air Force, anything of value, which was moveable, had been shifted to safer places. Even so, there was much to see and do. It was during a visit to London that I experienced a feeling of *déjà vu*. It was not that I felt that I had been there before but that I was home - that I belonged and that we were Englishmen who had been transplanted to the other side of the world- but we were still English.

Our forebears had brought plants and animals to Australia - they acclimatised to their new surroundings but they did not change into something else so why would we?. Some plants and animals prospered beyond the wildest expectations in their new environment but they still retained essentially the same characteristics. It was strange that this feeling should have manifested itself in London rather than any other part of the country. Perhaps it was because of the familiar names of London streets and landmarks. Or could it be that, as well as passing on physical characteristics through our genes, our forebears also pass on knowledge and experience. At that time, I did not know that my great grandfather, Joseph Evans, came from London.

## North of England

After two months at Brighton, we were posted to Padgate, near Warrington in Cheshire, almost equidistant from Manchester and Liverpool. During parade one morning, a call was made for any accountants among the men. There being none, bank managers were next called. Again there was a blank. A call was then made for bank officers. With some trepidation, I stepped forward wondering what I was letting myself in for as I had only twelve months experience as an office boy in a bank. My duties proved to be in the stores section, filling in the record of clothing issued to men arriving at the station. Many were arriving from training in Canada and America and had to be issued with extra items when they arrived in England. It was certainly not an onerous job and it was the means meeting a number of men whom I knew back home, including Eric Waller who was in the same form at Bairnsdale High School. Whilst at Padgate, we were able to visit the quaint old city of Chester and the beautiful village of Knutsford.

## Invasion, buzz bombs and back to Brighton.

In May 1944, I was posted from Padgate, near Warrington in Cheshire to Whitley Bay, near Newcastle for a school for non-commissioned officers. We were accommodated in holiday homes, about 5 to a house. We were instructed in escape techniques in the event of being shot down over enemy territory. One instructor explained that a length of piano wire with a toggle at each end was a handy weapon. Just loop it over a sentry's head and one yank and his head would be at your feet. I wondered where I could get a piece of piano wire. I wondered even more why any sentry would allow anyone close enough to slip anything like that over his head. On one of the long summer evenings, we were taken some miles out into the country by bus and given the task of trying to get back to town and "take over" certain buildings without being caught by another group that had instructions to stop us. It was quite an interesting exercise and some of the fellows managed to find some remarkable disguises. One disguised as a young woman was embarrassed when he was offered a seat on a bus.

**Self, Gordon Flatman and Ted Ewins outside our 'home'at Whitley Bay.**

It got a bit serious when we had to practise throwing live hand grenades. We couldn't imagine how we would ever be in a situation to require this particular skill but I guess it gave us an inkling of what the infantry did. We went on a number of route marches of some considerable distance and there were always problems keeping pace with the Englishmen. If we were put in front, the Poms got further and further behind and if the Poms were put in front we had to take short steps or we crowded up on them too much which did not please us at all because it became tiring.

On the morning of June 6, several aircraft with black and white stripes appeared over Whitley Bay. We were mystified by this but it was not long before we found the explanation. All allied combat aircraft were so identified on D Day and the invasion of France had begun. Before that day was over 135,000 troops had landed on the coast of Normandy. We all took an intense interest in news of the progress of the invasion as there was little doubt that our futures would be determined by the outcome. There seemed to be little progress in the first few weeks.

At the conclusion of our course at Whitley Bay, we were posted to Yatesbury in Wiltshire. There we learned more about new developments in radio and radar. I also got some practical experience in Proctor aircraft. On one flight, a cat was a contented passenger. It apparently belonged to the pilot and accompanied him on flights. I saw Stonehenge from the air and circled round Salisbury Cathedral. Yatesbury was only a mile or so from Avebury where there is a large circle of huge stones of a similar antiquity to Stonehenge. Our nearest town was Calne - and across the English Channel a desperate battle was being fought for the city of Caen in Normandy.

The drinking song at Yatesbury was,

"A little bit of heaven fell
From out the sky one day
It fell way down in Wiltshire,
Oh so many miles away
They sprinkled it with sergeants from far across the sea
Then camouflaged the bloody place and called it Yatesbury"

After Yatesbury, we were posted back to Brighton. For some reason I was never able to ascertain, I was put in charge of the small group being sent from Yatesbury to Brighton. I was sure I would lose a few in the process of travelling from Paddington to Victoria Stations in London but fortunately all got through O.K. From Victoria Station, the train to Brighton crosses the Thames and passes through Clapham Junction. Near Clapham Junction, there is a single row of houses sandwiched between multiple railway tracks both front and rear for about a kilometre. Two of these had just been hit by a flying bomb. Smoke and dust filled the air and people were searching through the wreckage.

Just seven days after the invasion started, one of Hitler's secret weapons, the V1, the doodlebug, buzz bomb, flying bomb - to give some of its names, was launched against south-east England. Over the next few months, 9,300 were fired at England of which about 6,000 reached its shores. They had a distinctive sound - a bit like a motor bike - and you were generally all right as long as the motor kept going - if it stopped, you dived for cover. London was almost back to the days of the blitz with many people spending their nights on the platforms of underground stations. One night, a couple of us, because we had overshot the station where we should have changed trains, found ourselves on the platform at St. Johns Wood Station where hundreds were taking shelter. We were greeted warmly and they were genuinely disappointed when we declined the offer to spend the night sharing the bunks on the platform.

During this stint in Brighton were accommodated in the Metropole Hotel, almost next door to the Grand where we had been accommodated earlier. One morning from the

hotel window, I saw two buzz bombs almost in formation, and at about 500 to 600 feet high and a similar distance off shore, flying parallel to the coast. There had been no air raid warning and I was greatly relieved that the engines kept going. I have no idea where they finished up. One of the methods used by the R.A.F. fighters to bring them down was to fly close enough to get a wing tip under the wing of the bomb and then flip it over. The countryside between London and the coast was now covered by a forest of barrage balloons to intercept these new weapons.

While I was at Yatesbury, an uncle wrote to me about making contact with relatives he had recently discovered in Scotland. He found out about them from a newspaper story about four brothers who had played soccer for Scotland. On my next leave I took the train to Falkirk, between Edinburgh and Glasgow. On several occasions I needed directions to find my way from the railway station to the home of Bob Shankly and his wife, Greta and there was always a small boy handy who seemed to know exactly where I was going. I later found out that young John Shankly had his mates placed at strategic spots to show me the way if I needed directions. Greta was an ardent Scottish Nationalist and seemed a little put out because I was not as familiar with Scottish history as a good Scot should be. Their home was an extremely modest flat and it was just one step from the footpath into the living room. I wondered how it was that I had eggs for breakfast every morning and found that the corner store had provided them off the ration while I was there.

After going to a match between Celtic and Rangers, we went to the family home in Glenbuck, a little broken down mining town in Ayrshire. The town has disappeared now. While there, the youngest member of the family, Willie, who was playing football for Preston in Lancashire arrived by train to see his "cousin from Australia". Willie, or Bill as he was known outside the family, became a football legend and when he died in 1981 a glowing obituary was printed in "The Times". He received an OBE for his services to football and was a guest on "This is your life" on British television.

**With Mary, Nita and Letty feeding pigeons in Trafalgar Square.**

The excitement of Willie being home probably added to the problem, but I had the greatest difficulty understanding what they were saying. They had to speak very deliberately and slowly if they included me in the conversation but they were wonderfully hospitable. After a most enjoyable time with them, I returned to Brighton.

On the overnight train from Edinburgh to London, I met three Scottish W.A.A.F.s who were on their way to a posting in the west of England. As they had never been to London before, they were pleased to have me show them the sights.

I was in London on August 25, the day Paris was liberated and it seemed appropriate that we should join the many Free French servicemen who were celebrating this most historic event. It was certainly a great night. A few weeks later, on another trip to London, a couple of us were having a drink in a pub one evening when there was a heavy explosion not far away. Everyone looked at one another and waited silently for a while, and then we went on enjoying ourselves. A couple of days later, it was announced that V2 rockets were now hitting London. Unlike the V1s, there was no warning. The first hit London at 6.43 PM on September 8, 1944. In the following 6 months, 1,115 hit England killing nearly 2,700 people and seriously wounding over 7,000. It was the technology used in these rockets which led to the satellites and space probes of today. The German scientists who developed the rockets were taken to America after the war to head their rocket development program. The Germans had also succeeded in getting a fighter propelled by a jet engine into action, the ME262, but its flight duration was so short that it did not present a major threat. The Allies were starting to get the upper hand in the invasion of Europe.

The skies over England were full of aircraft day and night. As the R.A.F. returned from the nightly attacks on targets in Europe, the United States Air Force took up the attacks by daylight. There was always the drone of high flying planes and, during the day, the sky was criss-crossed with vapour trails.

For a few days, there was very intense activity. At a high altitude, there appeared to be hundreds of bombers heading east while at very low levels, DC3 aircraft were each towing two gliders which looked as big as the planes towing them. I did not realise at the time that the aircraft were on their way to one of the most famous actions of the war in Europe. In an attempt to prevent the Germans blowing up vital bridges over the lower Rhine, the Allies planned to use airborne troops to capture them. The action has been dramatised in "A Bridge Too Far". About 2,000 aircraft were used in the attack. The DC3s and gliders were flying low to avoid detection by German radar. Less than an hour after passing over Brighton, the men they carried were in action in Holland.

It was at this time that I met June. We only went out together a few times before she joined the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRENS) but we corresponded until the end of the war. (On a visit to England twenty three years later, I called at the flat where she had lived with her mother in Portland Road, Hove. I felt that this was highly unlikely. A small boy answered the door and I asked him if a Mrs. Bedford lived there. To my astonishment, she recognised my voice before she could even see me and called me upstairs to the flat. By sheer coincidence, she was visiting her mother for the first time in 30 months. She lived in Croydon with her husband and 5 sons and one daughter and I returned with her to meet the rest of her family. We have since exchanged emails. Elaine and I stayed with her on a visit to England in 1977.)

My next move was to be sent "on attachment" to 460 Squadron at Binbrook, in Lincolnshire. Here I caught up with my brother-in-law to be, Jim Kitt, who was serving with 463 Sq. at neighbouring Waddington. Just over twelve months before, we had been learning Morse code together at Parkes in New South Wales. Jim could not hack the process of learning Morse code and remustered as a straight gunner (ie. an Air Gunner as distinct from a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner). He eventually completed 43 operations and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross as a member of an elite Pathfinder Squadron. (Both Jim and my sister were on the staff of Bairnsdale High School for many years.)

I was in a strange situation at Binbrook. I did not know what being on "attachment" meant and I don't think anyone else did. I had not done operational training and was not a member of a crew but they apparently thought it was OK for me to do a couple of trips in a Lancaster. On the first one, I was assigned the mid upper turret. After take off, I took a look in the wireless operator's area and was intrigued by the array of wireless and radar gear. I could see that I still had a lot to learn. I was back in the turret before we crossed the coast of England and could clearly see coast from The Wash to the Humber. Unfortunately, I was not briefed about the trip and was not adequately dressed for the freezing temperatures we experienced. I concentrated on trying to keep my hands and feet warm as I was sure I was going to suffer from frostbite. I was never so relieved as when I was able to leave the turret for the comparative warmth of the wireless operator's area as we returned to base.

It was at this time that whoever it was who made such decisions, decided that they could manage the campaign in Western Europe without me and decided that I should now be posted to the Middle East. I was sent to Morecombe, just north of Blackpool in Lancashire to await suitable transport. After a couple of weeks, we were conveyed to the Liverpool Docks where several thousand, mainly R.A.F., personnel were lined up for hours to board a troopship. It was quite something to hear such a large Choir singing "Why are we waiting" over and over to the tune of "O Come All Ye Faithful". It later became apparent why they were in no hurry to get us aboard - it was over a week before we sailed. Meanwhile we were not allowed ashore. What's more - there was no nonsense about non-commissioned officers not being assigned to troopdeck accommodation.