

The Luck of the Draw.

Chapter 5.

Winter Sunshine.

About the middle of January, we were notified that we were to move on again - this time to Jerusalem. The rumour factory got into full gear again and we got the information that we were leaving on the afternoon of January 20 and that it was a thirty six hour journey. This caused some consternation in my immediate circle as this meant that I would be spending my 20th birthday on the troop train and we would not be able to celebrate it. The solution was to start the night before.

Our train was not exactly luxurious. The seats were plain wooden benches without upholstery of any description and we didn't relish the idea of sitting on them for thirty-six hours. We reached Ismailia, where the train crossed the Suez Canal, at about dusk and the locals were trying to flog off boiled eggs and bread. We were getting pretty hungry by then so we took the risk that they would be all right.

From Ismailia, in Egypt, the railway goes north on the Eastern side of the Suez Canal, almost to the shores of the Mediterranean and then across the Sinai Desert to Palestine. It was going to be a long hard night so I used a trick I had learned from many miles of travel on troop trains back home. I always carried a spare kit bag cord so that I could tie each end of a blanket to the luggage racks on either side of the compartment and use it as a hammock. Most of the troops on board were members of the R.A.F. and they watched with amused interest as I rigged the thing up and hopped in - only to have one end slip out so that I came down heavily on the corner of a seat, to the great amusement of the Poms. It hurt, but not to be deterred, I tied it up again, hopped in and was soon sound asleep. It was well daylight when I woke with red-eyed, sleepless people all around.



Our troop train nearing Jerusalem.

Before long, we were passing through the Gaza Strip where Arab farmers were tilling the soil with the most primitive of implements. The wooden ploughs did no more than scratch the dry, barren looking earth. As in Egypt, there were odd combinations of animals, such as a donkey and a camel, pulling the implements. Further along the track, the train passed through vast orange groves that were obviously irrigated and the countryside started to look prosperous. We had now entered areas of Jewish settlement. At one point, the train stopped right in the middle of an orange plantation and very soon everyone aboard was enjoying sweet juicy oranges.

The railway then turned inland and started the climb up the hills toward Jerusalem. The hills were bare and dry with occasional herds of goats and sheep being shepherded by a couple of

Arabs. The photograph shows our troop train on the outskirts of Jerusalem. We arrived there about mid afternoon and were transferred to a pension (a boarding house) where we were quite comfortably accommodated, even to the extent of having a bath, a luxury I had not experienced for some time. The journey had not taken as long as we expected and it was still my twentieth birthday. As soon as we had settled in to our accommodation, we headed off to find a place to suitably continue the celebrations. The night, however, ended on a sour note, as I got into an altercation with an RAF type I had never seen before and my mates had to drag me off and calm me down. It could have been a most unfortunate encounter because he turned out to be one of our instructors. Fortunately for me, he gave no indication that he even remembered the incident.

Because of this incident, I decided that I should cultivate other friendships apart from the group I had been in. I suppose it was because of the Scottish connections I had met while in Britain that I became friendly with a Scottish pilot named Jock Leighton. He was a teetotaller and attended Bible studies. He knew which places we should go to see while we were in Jerusalem. He also knew the Shankly family by repute and that gave us another common interest.

I also received news that I was an uncle for the first time, although I did not know if I had a niece or nephew. My elder sister, Betty, had married Flying Officer Don James who was piloting Liberators in the South - west Pacific area. Don's father, Philip, was Shire Engineer for the Bairnsdale Shire Council prior to the war. He joined the R.A.A.F. and was killed in an aircraft crash in Queensland. Three of his four sons were also in the R.A.A.F. One of them, Ken, was a Spitfire Pilot in the Battle of Britain and a Squadron Leader at age 22 years. It transpired that my sister had a daughter, who was the only niece I was to have among eight nephews.

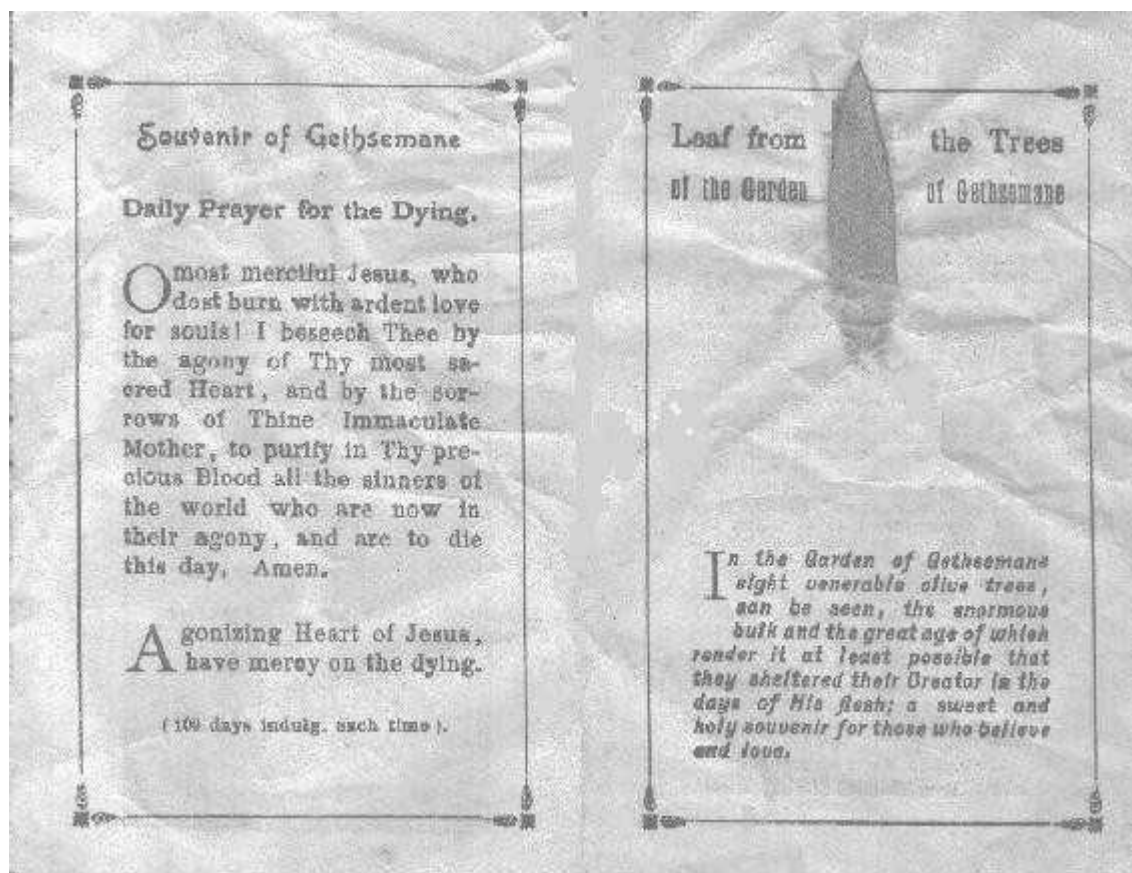
The Holy Land.

As we left the pension the first morning, a little procession of Orthodox Jews was carrying a corpse on a litter (a stretcher) presumably to a cemetery. The Orthodox Jews were distinguished by their round black hats and long black coats with white shirts and long curled sideburns. As the sad, little group walked along the street, Arabs on the footpath greeted it with jeers and laughter, no doubt expressing delight that there was one less Jew in the city. The incident shocked me, as I had never experienced hatred carried to such an extent. Those who pontificate about racial vilification in this country have obviously never seen it in its raw and primitive form.

Within a day or so of arriving in Jerusalem, we took a donkey ride to see some of the sights. Because I was the tallest, I was allocated the biggest donkey, complete with a small boy running behind with a big stick to keep him moving. When I inquired why my donkey was the only one so equipped, I was told, "He is a very romantic donkey". I soon discovered that he took a great interest in the lady donkeys and needed to be reminded of what he was supposed to be doing.

After visiting the tombs of the Kings of Judea, we went to the top of the Mount of Olives from where there is a view over the Garden of Gethsemane of the walled Old

City. We then rode down a narrow steep track called Palm Sunday Way visiting the Church of All Nations and the Garden of Gethsemane.



We were a little peeved that everywhere we went they seemed intent on extracting money out of us. I guess that it would have cost a fortune to provide little souvenirs, like the leaf from the olive tree in the Garden of Gethsemane.

A couple of days later, we visited the Old City, entering by way of the Jaffa Gate. It was a different world. The modern part of Jerusalem was much like any other city at that time with modern buildings and relatively clean and wide streets. Inside the walls, the streets were very narrow, buildings virtually meeting overhead. There were masses of people, many of them wearing the garb of their particular religion, sect or religious office.

The city is sacred to Christians, Jews and Muslims, each religion having numerous branches and sects with their own ideas of the appropriate dress. There was such a confusion of buildings, I don't know how any authority could keep any semblance of control. The noise of the bazaars and the smells from numerous and varied foods being prepared was almost overpowering.

Our first destination, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, was about a half mile walk from the Jaffa Gate. Once inside the church, the noise and smells were almost left behind - but not quite. The Church is a large building containing a number of Shrines, each of which were quite beautiful, but in between it was dark and musty. The Church is believed to be on the site of the Crucifixion and the various shrines to mark the sites

of events that took place at that time. After the Church, we visited the various Stations of the Cross, in each case having to go down stairs about ten or fifteen feet. The Jerusalem of biblical times was well below the level of the present Old City, largely because it has been destroyed seven times over the centuries.

A further walk brought us to the Wailing Wall, the most revered place to the Jewish faith. The majority of people there were Orthodox Jews. They swayed backward and forward as they recited their prayers.

From the Dead Sea to the Red Sea.

A couple of hundred yards down the road from our accommodation in Jerusalem, there was a fruit shop with few other buildings around it. Each morning, a tip truck full of oranges arrived and was tipped on the ground next to the shop. It took the juice from just three oranges to fill a glass that cost us about 2 cents. On the other hand, as I mentioned in a letter home, we could expect to pay as much as 5/- (50 cents) for a meal. However, six of us received ten parcels from home at that time and we had a regular banquet from the tinned chicken and beans, sausages, spaghetti, roast beef and peas, frankfurts, etc. followed by tinned fruit covered with reduced cream and condensed milk.

It was in stark contrast to the first parcel I received when I got to England, nearly twelve months previously. It was a round cake tin carefully sewn in calico. I must have been too excited to notice that it seemed extremely light, as my mates gathered round in anticipation. When I finally got it open, to our dismay, it contained only a fuzzy mould. It turned out that my mother, knowing of my fondness for sponge cake, sent me one for my nineteenth birthday when I was in Sydney. It didn't catch up to me for three months.

In an extraordinary city, another extraordinary event occurred while we were in Jerusalem. When we got up on the morning of March 3, 1945, it was snowing. This was only the second time in twenty years that it had snowed there - and for almost all of us, including me, it was the first time we been in snow actually falling, although in my case, I had lived within sight of snow fields all my life.

One of our group arranged a trip to visit the Dead Sea. A fairly decrepit bus with an Arab driver and a youth of sixteen or seventeen who was our translator and guide arrived to pick us up at about 9 a.m. About a dozen of us set out in high spirits and the noise level in the bus was rather high. Soon there was a noticeable silence and the driver kept looking over his shoulder to see why we had all gone quiet.

The Dead Sea.

The reason was in front of the bus. We were heading down a steep mountain road with hairpin bends every hundred yards or so. There were no trees, just a bit of low scrub, and it was a scary bit of road. Jerusalem is a little over 2,000 feet above sea level and the Dead Sea is 1,312 feet below. They are about twenty miles apart in a direct line. Most of the descent is in a relatively short stretch of road. It was rather weird to pass a sign indicating "Sea level" as we continued down this steep hill.

We were all relieved when we made the bottom safely and soon after pulled up at Jericho for some refreshments. It certainly was a barren and uninviting place. It was difficult to see how anyone could live off the land there. We were not there long before a shouting match began between the bus driver and our interpreter and soon half the population of Jericho seemed to shouting and gesticulating at one another. We tried, in vain, for some time to extricate our guide from the mob to find out what was going on. When we did eventually succeed we discovered that the driver was claiming that he had an extra passenger. In fact, the guide had brought his little brother along and none of us had taken any notice. We soon sorted the problem out by agreeing to do a bit in each to cover the extra.

When we reached the Dead Sea, we had a race to see who would be first in. I was first changed and raced along a low jetty and dived in. I immediately wished I hadn't. It was like diving into acid and the salt water burnt my eyes, nose and other sensitive parts of the anatomy. One can literally sit in the water and read a book. Swimming is difficult because feet tend to wave about in the air instead of kicking under water. It was uncomfortable when we got out because there was no shower to wash the salt off and we rapidly became encrusted with it.



In the Dead Sea.

After this experience, we went to the River Jordan and walked across the Allenby Bridge into Trans Jordan. We were pleased to get back to our accommodation in Jerusalem to have a good bath to get the salt off our skin and out of our hair. After that we went to the Y.M.C.A. for a good feed and to play some billiards.

It wasn't hard to wangle a few days leave so that we could visit Tel Aviv. We stayed one night only and it did not leave any lasting impression. Our hotel was right on the waterfront and the Mediterranean was as placid as a millpond.

I was posted to 75 O.T.U. (Operational Training Unit) at Shalufa, Egypt on February 23, 1945. That meant another long train trip retracing our journey across the Sinai desert. As the train crossed the border between Palestine and Egypt, I guess we were back in Africa. When we reached Ismailia, after crossing the Suez Canal again, we

turned south along the western side of the canal. As the train passed slowly through Ismalia railway station, an Arab youth jumped on board. Nobody took much notice as he wandered through the train. Suddenly he grabbed a haversack and jumped from the train. As he grabbed, an RAF airman grabbed the other strap – and got pulled out of the train for his trouble. They landed in the sand so they escaped injury but there was no emergency cord to pull and no way to stop the train. The last I saw of him, he was chasing the Arab over the sand dunes but I was very apprehensive of his chances of survival. I never did find out what happened to him.

He was a member of the R.A.F. Regiment, which was a section of the R.A.F. that guarded R.A.F. installations. As we left our unfortunate colleague behind, the train continued on past the Bitter Lakes and stopped near our destination at Shalufa. It is a small town a short distance from the Suez Canal and about nine miles north of the Port of Suez.

Between the railway line and the airstrip ran a "sweetwater canal". This canal ran from the Nile River, near the city of Zagazig, to the Red Sea near Suez. It was built to provide 'fresh' water during the construction of the Suez Canal. Along its banks, just about every device for lifting water was being used, except motor driven pumps. There were odd combinations of animals plodding around in circles turning waterwheels; there were men lifting a bucketful at a time with a stick used as a lever and tipping it into a channel; and some using an Archimedes screw. Two men cranked this contraption for hours on end. It was a cylinder about eight feet long with a spiral screw inside. With the lower end in the water and the top over the bank of the canal, it lifted a continuous trickle of water. Where there was no irrigation, there was just sand.

The Eastern Desert.

After being shunted from place to place for over twelve months, first to England in Europe; then to Egypt in Africa; to Palestine in Asia; and now back to Egypt, at last I had reached the stage of becoming part of a crew fully trained for action. Equal numbers of pilots, navigators, wireless operators and air gunners were assigned to each course at the Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.) and given a couple of weeks to sort themselves into crews. Jock Leighton, a Scotsman with whom I had become friendly in Jerusalem, was among the pilots and I expected that he would invite me to join his crew. It was accepted practise that the pilot initiated invitations to other potential crew members.

One of the first lectures we were given was a warning of the dire consequences of drinking the water or even falling into the 'sweetwater' canal. If any of us were so foolish as to do this, we would have to be hospitalised for a course of injections to combat the many diseases known to be in the water. One of these was bilharzia the effect of which the Medical Officer described as "...like pissing barbed wire". As one of us pointed out to the M.O., there were thousands of locals drinking water from the canal, washing in it, swimming in it and it was their only source of fresh water. (Nobody told us that it was also our only source of fresh water but in our case it was heavily treated). The M.O. said that only a small percentage of the local population survived beyond five years of age by which time they developed immunity.

It was the month of Ramadan during which Muslims are forbidden to eat or drink during the hours of daylight. As sunset approached they could be seen with their eating utensils at the ready, waiting for the firing of a cannon that signified that they could start eating. Long into the night we could hear the beating of drums, probably as accompaniment for dancing by the men, and the continuous high pitched wailing which typified Arab singing.



Course 46, 75 OTU, RAF. Egypt. Optimistic group at the start of OTU training. I am in front row, right. Behind me is Gordon Latter-Stapley, next right is Jock Leighton. Dave Elder is the tallest in back row. Alex Fines is fourth from left at rear. "Titch" Osbourne in in the middle, front row.

Only 12 of the 20 survived the course.

We were introduced to the Baltimore aircraft and the type of operations we were to carry out. The Baltimore was manufactured in America specifically for the R.A.F. It was a twin engine attack bomber with a crew of four - pilot, navigator, wireless operator/air gunner and air gunner.



This painting by talented artist, Aircraft historian and friend, Jim Prendergast, was presented to me on the occasion of 25 years as a Member of Parliament. Even the number of the aircraft is accurate, being taken from my flying Log Book.

The aircraft we were to operate were armed with four fixed .303 machine guns in the wings, two .5 machine guns mounted in a mid-upper turret and four .3 machine guns mounted in a rear facing hatch in the floor of the aircraft. All these guns were Brownings and were similar in all respects except their size. Although the difference in calibre between the biggest and the smallest was only .2 of an inch, the .5s looked four times as big as the .3s. The "Baltie" could carry up to 500 lb. bombs to a maximum of 2,000 lbs.

We were to be trained in Night Armed Reconnaissance (N.A.R.). The idea was to patrol enemy territory at night to endeavour to prevent the movement of troops and supplies under the cover of darkness. Other aircraft kept roads and railways under surveillance during the day. As N.A.R. aircraft patrolled enemy territory, the radio operator observing the ground to the rear through the hatch, watched for signs of a convoy turning its lights on again after having stopped and put out their lights as the aircraft approached.

If such a telltale sign was seen, he immediately dropped an incendiary bomb and gave the pilot an estimate of the distance back he suspected there was a convoy. The pilot then turned 180⁰ and the navigator used the burning incendiary bomb to calculate when the aircraft was over the convoy, which would have turned its lights out again. At that point, the wireless operator dropped a parachute flare that lit the countryside up and revealed any target, which then would be attacked.

At this time, the Allies were maintaining a "Line of Interdiction" across the full width of Italy creating a zone in which all road and rail bridges were destroyed and kept destroyed. An observant fighter pilot noticed one day that the railway lines south of a bridge which appeared broken were still shiny, indicating they were still in use. That night, a Baltimore crew dropped a flare over the bridge and found that the Germans had a movable section that they put in place at night and removed during the day. Suitable steps were taken to end this practice. As the Baltimore had fixed guns in the wings, it was obvious that it would be attacking ground targets, and at night. It certainly was not designed to attack other aircraft.

As I came to understand the aircraft and the role we were expected to play, I began to realise that, as much as I liked and respected him, I did not want to crew up with Jock Leighton. I did not think that he was as active and quick in response to emergency situations as this type of flying would require. Those were my own private thoughts because obviously others with vastly more experience than I had decided that he **was** suitable pilot material. I racked my brain for some logical reason, or even an excuse, for saying "No" when he inevitably invited me to join his crew, but there wasn't any. I couldn't say, "Jock, I don't think you are cut out for this type of flying."

There was not one logical reason to decline an invitation from him. At times, I hoped that he had similar ideas about me as the time drew near for a decision to be made and he had not asked me. I was becoming obsessed by this problem and found it hard to concentrate on the lectures. During a toilet break between lectures one morning, a wiry little Englishman invited me to join his crew. I did not ask him any questions, such as where he had trained, how many hours flying he had, whom he had picked as navigator. I tried to accept as casually as possible to conceal my immense relief that someone else had asked me before Jock. I stammered out some weird reply and felt that I made a mess of it and that he would already be regretting his invitation. An hour later, at the lunch break, Jock did ask me to join his crew and I was able to say in all honesty that I had expected him to ask me but when he hadn't, I had no reason to decline the invitation which had been offered.



The crew.

Before the end of the day, my new skipper had collected his crew together and we all moved into the same tent.

My skipper was Flight Sergeant Gordon Latter-Stapley, aged 23 years, married to Mary, known generally as "Stap". Despite his aristocratic-sounding hyphenated name, he came from a modest background. His father was employed by the authority supplying water to the town of Tonbridge in Kent. Our Navigator was David Elder, 6 feet 3 inches, who was a London Bobby from Hammersmith. In a period when ballroom dancing was very popular pastime, the Hammersmith Palais was among the biggest dance venues in the world. Dave was often nostalgic about the good times he had at the

Hammersmith Palais. Our gunner was Alex. Fines, a bank clerk, from Kensington, London, and aged 19 years. It did not seem at all remarkable that three men from in or near the biggest city in the world should be teamed up with one from a small farm, 12,000 miles away.

In the adjoining tent was Jock Leighton and his crew. We usually went and talked to them when we got sick of our own company. Jock's wireless operator was Robin Pritchard from Bulawayo in Rhodesia and his gunner was 18-year-old English lad, "Titch" Osbourne. "Titch" was a great little fellow, always cheerful and smiling and we became close friends.

For the first couple of weeks of the course, the pilots did a conversion course to learn to fly Baltimore aircraft while we leaned about the Bendix radio equipment which we had to operate and the handling and use of pyrotechnics. We also spent time on the firing range where we gained experience in operating a gun turret that was mounted on a truck. The sound of .5" machine guns firing about six inches either side of one's head is pretty awesome when there is no other sound to mask it. We also did trap shooting with shotguns to gain experience in shooting at moving targets. Air to air gunnery was not easy as the object was to hit a moving target from a moving platform.

An attacking aircraft had to aim at a point a decreasing distance in front of the target aircraft to have any chance of hitting the target. This meant that it had to fly on a course called the "Curve of Pursuit". To the gunner in the aircraft under attack, the enemy plane would start its attack from a point level with its target when it would bank, first toward its target then away slightly to attain its curve of pursuit course.

At this point, the gunner could aim point blank but immediately after he had to adjust his aim by an amount depending on the distance to the aircraft. The only way to judge this distance was by estimating the proportion of the ring on his sights the aircraft took up. That is why we had to be able to identify enemy aircraft and know their wing spans instantly. There was no time to look it up in a book.

The gunner also had to give the pilot directions on evasive action in the event of an attack. The aim was turn our aircraft to tighten the curve of pursuit and put both pilot and attacking aircraft under greater stress. It also put stress on the aircraft and crew under attack as this sometimes meant flying on a cork screw course with violent changes of direction. We had to learn these procedures and later in the course, to practice them with fighter aircraft, both being armed with movie cameras instead of guns.

We also received training in the use of night vision, as our operations would be occurring mainly at night. We learned about visual purple, which is the process by which one's eyes gradually become used to darkness but disappears in an instant in light. It was demonstrated to us that sideways vision is better in the dark than forward vision. This was done by standing us in a circle just within range of a medicine ball suspended from the ceiling. All of us were wearing night goggles. As the ball was swung towards us, the one directly in line would stay still and take the blow on the forehead, while those on either side would duck their heads. When moving around in the dark even now, I still look slightly to the side of the direction I am going.

Before making our first flight, we practiced getting aboard a life raft by jumping into a swimming pool in full flying gear and climbing into a raft. As we were moving to our next lecture, we paused to watch another crew boarding an aircraft for their first flight together. The pilot climbed into the cockpit over the wing and the navigator climbed up a ladder into the nose cone. The gunner and wireless operator gained access through the hatch in the floor of the aircraft. This required getting on hands and knees to crawl under the fuselage because it there was only about two feet of clearance. The pilot and navigator were each in separate compartments without any physical contact with the rest of the crew being possible.

The navigator had emergency controls if the pilot became disabled except that he had no means of lowering the undercarriage in the event of an emergency landing. As the nose of the aircraft was a perspex cone, the navigator had a great view of what was happening but there were times when it must have been a very frightening experience. After we watched the crew boarding this aircraft, it took off on a training flight down the Gulf of Suez.....and never returned.

One of the wireless exercises I was given was a 'fix' which required the use of the long trailing aerial. I had to transmit a coded message which would be picked up by three radio stations, one in Cyprus, one in Lebanon and one in Egypt. I then had to send a continuous signal for ten seconds while these stations 'took a fix' on our aircraft and where the lines of the compass bearings intersected was the location of our aircraft.

Few wireless operators had successfully completed this exercise and I was determined to succeed. On my radio equipment were several red lights, some to signify my equipment was switched on and one that came on when another member of the crew wanted to speak to me if I was not on the intercom.

We were already flying under some stress because the cabin lights had fused and the navigator was doing his calculations with a torch held under his chin. Flying over dessert at night meant there were no landmarks to check our position and we depended on Dave's navigation to get us back to base.

As I started to send the continuous signal, my intercom light started flashing. I reckoned it could wait but it continued to flash urgently. Annoyed at this interruption, I abandoned the wireless exercise and demanded to know what the hell was going on only to be told by the skipper, "There's a fire up the back." I looked around for this fire but could find nothing. It turned out that the long trailing aerial was shorting on the fuselage and every time I pressed the Morse key it caused a spark. Alex reported this to the skipper, who could see a only a little of the rear of the aircraft through a small window over his left shoulder and all he could see was the red glow from my radio equipment. As soon as I stopped transmitting the spark stopped and so did my attempt to get a 'fix'.

That was not the end of the excitement of that night. As we were approaching the landing strip, I noticed that the skipper had his engines revving a bit more than usual. We touched down pretty hard and Dave yelled, "Oxygen" implying that we had bounced so high that we needed it. Stap was not impressed by this slur on his flying but explained that when he lowered the landing gear, a light came on to signify it had

locked in place. He decided to unscrew the cover to give some light into the cockpit but succeeded only in losing his night vision and couldn't see his instruments. He decided to approach at a lower angle and higher speed so that he would have a better chance to go round again if necessary. Under the circumstances, we all agreed that it was a good landing.

On one daylight exercise, we were returning to base when Alex called over the intercom saying, "It's raining in here". He had left the gun turret and was sitting on the floor behind me. There was a roar of laughter from Dave. He had been using a tube in his section of the aircraft for the purpose for which it had been installed and the slipstream had caused the urine to run along the belly of the aircraft and up through the hatch where Alex was sitting.

A Dramatic Turn of Events.

Towards the end of April, the training intensified with two trips a day - usually one starting between 6 AM and midday and the other starting between 9 PM and midnight. At 11 PM on May 2, 1945 we were waiting in the Operations Room to take off for our last night exercise to complete the course. It was air to ground gunnery at night which was a bit dicey. Flares were arranged in a large L shape and the pilot had to attack them with the fixed machine guns in the wings, along the long arm of the L, while the gunner raked the shorter arm with the .5 machine guns as we flew by. My task was to use the four scatterguns through the rear hatch. This was the only practice run of this kind scheduled before we were to be sent to an operational squadron so it was an important exercise. The time set for take off passed but that did not worry us unduly as there were often delays in getting an aircraft ready.

At about 11.15 PM, the Duty Officer came in and told us to go back to our tent - we would not be flying tonight. Stap asked him, "Why? What's up?" expecting to be told that the aircraft was unserviceable or something of that nature. The Officer said, "The aircraft you were to use has gone in (crashed). The whole crew has bought it (been killed)." "What happened?" we asked. "The pilot apparently found himself overshooting as he tried to line up the flares", the Officer explained. "He banked too steeply and when he tried to correct, he turned the plane on its back. At 500 feet, they didn't stand a chance." "Who was it?", Stap asked. "Jock Leighton", was the reply.

We didn't say much as we walked slowly back to our tent. I suspect that I was more shaken up than the others were because they did not know how close I came to being a member of that crew. (About 25 years later, on a visit to Broken Hill, I chanced to meet Harry Keenan who was on the trip to the Dead Sea. He was now Town Clerk of the City of Broken Hill. He nearly passed out when he recognised me as he was sure I would have been in Jock's crew).

In the tent next to ours, Jock's tent, two officers from Headquarters were already packing up their belongings. It annoyed me intensely. What the hell were they interfering with their things for? I felt like telling them to leave them alone - maybe there has been a mistake and the crew will be back. It seemed like an intrusion into their privacy - but they no longer had any privacy. The harsh reality was that it made sense that this should be done immediately, before others decided that they could help themselves. I looked at my own gear and wondered would the same happen to it one

day. We did not get any time to mourn the loss of our mates or even to attend their funerals.

Someone found a couple of bottles of beer which we drank before trying to get some sleep because we were scheduled for a 2 1/2 hour exercise at 6 o'clock the following morning for some gunnery exercises over the Red Sea. When we reported for the flight we were informed that our night air to ground exercise had been rescheduled for 10 o'clock that night.

While we were resting during the afternoon, the events of the previous night were in all our minds. Stap said to Dave, "You've got an altimeter in the front. How about you calling out the heights as we attack the flares so that I can concentrate on flying the aeroplane?" Dave thought that was quite a good idea. The previous night we were more apprehensive than before most flights because there were obvious dangers in aiming an aircraft at the ground even in daylight - and they were much greater at night. A few years before, like most lads of the time, I was fascinated by air to ground attacks such as shooting up trains or enemy forces. But they were by agile, manoeuvrable fighter aircraft - and in daylight. While the Baltimore was a reasonably smart aircraft, it was no fighter and apart from the flares, there were no other lights to help.

It is difficult to judge distance without anything to use for comparison. One night, Alex reported a green light to the right of the aircraft. He estimated it was a long way off because we were not leaving it behind. If he had looked to the left, he would have seen a red light because they were our own navigation lights. It was the only time they had been used.

This night, the tension was intense. We knew that our lives were very much in the hands of our skipper. One small lapse in concentration or error of judgment would be all that it would take. It was in Stap's hands alone just how close to the brink he would take us. There was no question of backing off and just going through the motions of the exercise because the "moral fibre" of aircrew was under scrutiny also. "Lack of moral fibre" meant a dishonourable discharge.

As we approached the flares, I was prone on the floor, my head towards the rear of the aircraft, my guns at the ready for the brief moment that the flares would be visible to me as we raced over them. I listened to Dave's voice on the intercom calling the height. "1000, 500, 450, 400, 350, 300,". As we got lower so Dave's voice rose, and as the aircraft shuddered from the wing mounted machine guns fired by the skipper, Dave was screaming. "Pull out, you silly bastard". Then very hot shells from the gun turret above rained down on me as Alex opened up with the .5" machine guns. There was incredible noise with the machine guns above and the shells falling all over me, while I was firing four .3" machine guns out of an open hatch in the floor of the plane, wide open to the roar of the engines and the whistle of the slip stream. It was like all hell had broken loose but soon it was all over and 50 minutes after taking off we touched down, our operational training completed successfully.

No one commented about Dave's outburst. After all, he was right in the nose of the aircraft with nothing but perspex in front of him and it was, without doubt, a most hair-raising ride. Stap unwittingly added to the tension by saying, "I hate to tell you

this, Dave, but there was something wrong with my intercom and I didn't hear a word you said". Dave delivered him a withering glare but said nothing. Stap was the skipper and we had total trust in him.

Early the next morning, the 12 of us who remained of the 20 who started the course were off back to Cairo, now fully trained for active operations. One crew was lost on their first flight and one on what should have been its last night flight of the course.

We ventured into Suez only once while we were at Shalufa and decided it was dirtier, smellier and noisier than Old Jerusalem. The village of Shalufa was just a dirty, smelly, unhealthy place into which no person in his right mind would venture. About the only outside interest was to watch ships passing through the Suez Canal, easily seen from the camp. It was strange at first to look across the desert and see a moving ship. There was an optical illusion that made them appear to be above the level where we were. We had no regrets at leaving Shalufa.

After we completed our operational training on Baltimore aircraft at Shalufa on May 5, 1945, the crew was posted to a transit camp in the desert just north of Heliopolis. We were told that we were to be posted to 454 Squadron operating in Italy. It would be a few days before transport would be available so we tried to relax and catch up with letter writing etc. Letters were so important to us but it was often difficult to fill up a letter with news. Our letters were censored and we were not supposed to give place names or other clues to our location. It is very hard not to do so when we were in places like Jerusalem and Cairo.