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.

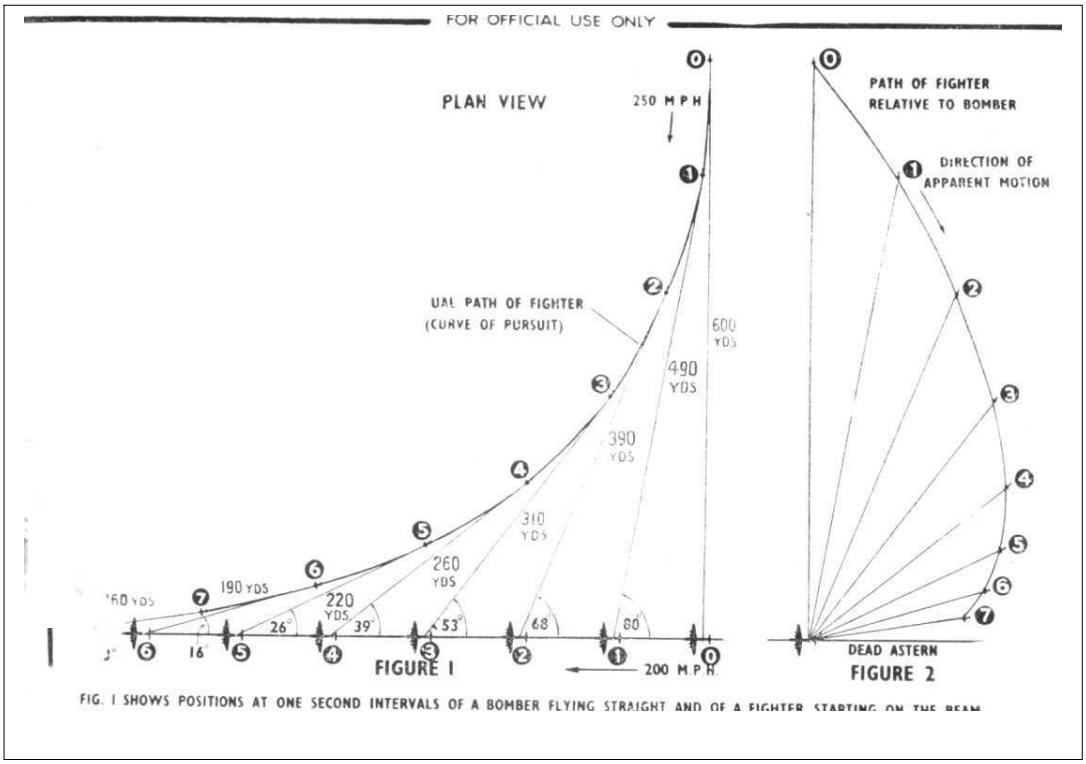
Early in our training, we were sent out in vans fitted with the same radio equipment that we would use in aircraft. We would send and receive messages but the best fun was using the direction finding radio to find our way back to base. We were in the back of the vans with no view outside and the drivers 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'.

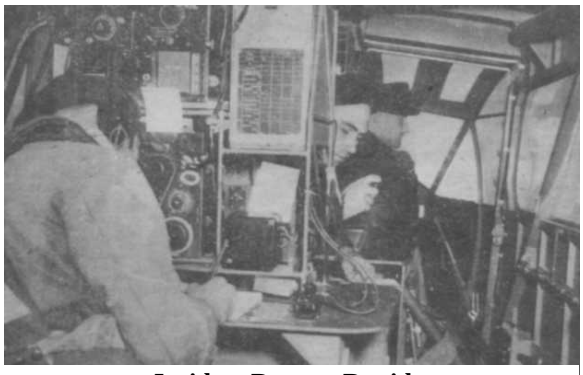
I did find however that my radio signals were getting weaker and I kept turning the volume up. Then my ears began to hurt and soon became so painful that I thought my eardrums would burst. I was getting desperate and had no means of contacting the pilot to get him to climb again until I sorted things 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.

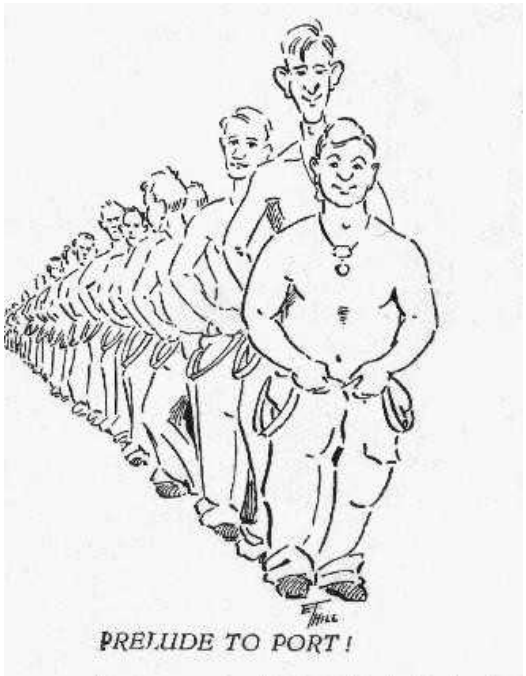
The Luck of the Draw.

Chapter 2.

At sea

After the Nieuw Amsterdam left Australian waters, she headed into a massive westerly swell. As its bow plunged into each huge wave, it would hesitate before it broke through and plunged into the following trough only to repeat the exercise as each succeeding wave followed, 50 metres or so apart. This meant during our walks around the decks, we would alternate between almost running as the ship plunged into a wave, which slowed her progress, and finding each step difficult as she lurched forward into the troughs.

Early in the voyage, we were given do's and don'ts aboard a troop ship. There was no smoking on deck or singing at night as either could attract the attention of an enemy submarine which might be on the surface recharging batteries. If anyone fell overboard, the ship would not attempt a rescue as it would jeopardise the safety of the ship and passengers. The ship changed course about every ten minutes. Lifeboat drill was carried out frequently and randomly. At the sound of a series of blasts on the ship's siren and alarm bells ringing below decks, everyone grabbed their life jacket and raced to their assigned boat station where they remained until checked off.



The days passed uneventfully. A lot of time was spent gazing at the sea as it slid along the sides of the ship, or watching the flying fish. Usually, an albatross or two would be gliding effortlessly alongside the ship. We continued our efforts to sharpen up our Morse code and aircraft recognition. The emphasis of the latter was now more on the aircraft used in the European theatre. There were movies and in the casino enterprising entrepreneurs had just about every form of gambling available. Each day a sweep was conducted on the miles travelled by the ship.

It was at this time that we were introduced to the 'short arm' inspection.

All the troops were lined up on deck and ordered to drop the strides. A medical officer slowly walked along the line inspecting appropriate places for evidence of unauthorised little passengers. There were regular lectures and films on the sexually transmitted diseases which graphically illustrated the consequences of promiscuity. Usually, one or two fainted during these sessions and we wondered whether they had weak stomachs or guilty consciences.

Shortly after six o'clock one morning, the ship heeled over dramatically as she did a tight circle. As we raced on deck to see what was going on, the word went round, "Man overboard". A British soldier had deserted in India and somehow made his way to Australia. He had been caught and was being returned to England in the ship's brig for court martial. As

he was doing his supervised early morning exercise on deck, he leapt overboard. During a brief search, there was no sign of him and the ship got under way again. Ironically, a couple of hours later the ship again deviated - this time to investigate a large rubber lifeboat wallowing in the sea. We passed close enough to ensure that there was no-one lying in the bottom of it. These two incidents put a dampener on the generally high spirits of all on board.

Durban

A day later, we were advised that the following day we would be disembarking at Durban, South Africa and going into a transit camp for about a week while repairs were carried out on the ship. We were warned of several things. Australians were not popular in South Africa following the exploits of the A.I.F. 6th Division several years earlier. They had done unthinkable things like using the rickshaw boys as passengers and getting between the shafts themselves and having races in the streets. Others had carried a small car up the post office steps and tried to post it home. We were told to always go around at least in pairs because of the "OB's", an anti-British element in the Afrikaner population. We were also warned off Cape Brandy. It was apparently a particularly potent brew.

As we entered the port of Durban the next day, a lady wearing a long white frock and a red hat stood on the end of the pier singing. She was a legend. Her son was missing believed killed but she was convinced that he was suffering amnesia and that one day he would return on a ship to Durban. She believed that the sound of her voice would bring his memory back and for many years she serenaded every ship arriving and leaving the port of Durban.

The camp to which we were taken on the outskirts of the city had not been used for a while. It consisted of rows of brick walled huts with concrete floors. The walls were about six feet high with a big airspace between the top of the walls and the roof. They were surrounded with grass at least three feet high which natives were busy cutting with sickles. On arrival, we were handed Hessian palliasses and told to fill them with the freshly cut grass. I thought the authorities were ignorant if they didn't understand that the fresh grass would sweat. Even so, it seemed better than sleeping on the bare concrete but on the first night I awoke in a lather of sweat. I rolled up the palliasse and used it as a pillow, sleeping on the bare concrete for the rest of our stay there.

Each row of huts was patrolled by an armed guard supplied by the South African army and each hut was required to have one man awake and a light on at all times. This was to safeguard our possessions from residents of the Indian village across the road. One night, a sleepy sentinel saw a black hand come over the wall and feel around for something to steal. He gave a shout and took off after the offender. As he ran down the line of huts, a voice behind him kept calling "Drop". The offender escaped over the perimeter fence and the guard demanded to know why our hero had ignored the call to drop. "I thought it was the Indian you were calling on to drop", he said. "Why did you want me to drop?" "So I could shoot him", was the reply. That was our introduction to the harsh realities of life in some parts of the world.

On several evenings we sat around just outside the camp gate talking to Indians from the village across the road. We were interested to learn about their views of the country in which they lived. It was a new experience to see "Whites Only" signs on all kinds of facilities. We learned that the term 'non-whites' applied to a wide range of

people. The Indians made it clear that it was the Afrikaners, not people of British stock, who kept them repressed. I was not impressed with the future of the country given the obvious hated that existed between the races.

Merv. Holland, Tom Chapman and self with rickshaw boy.

There were many sights and customs that were new and strange to us. Rickshaw boys dressed in elaborate garb of feathers and horns who would deliver a kick like a horse to a bell underneath the rickshaw to attract attention. It was incredible the way they could balance themselves against the weight of their passengers on downward slopes and take enormous strides. We wondered how they were going to stop when traffic lights turned against them. It was a bit of a culture shock to see bare-breasted Zulu women with babies tied to their backs window shopping in the centre of the city.

Merv. Holland had his nineteenth birthday while we were in Durban and four of us dined out for a total price of 16/- ($1. 60). One day, Merv. and I were trying to make a date with two attractive Afrikaner shop assistants. It got me a little annoyed when they frequently talked to each other in Afrikaans and giggled. I thought of a plan and said to Merv, "Wangaratta Mallacoota Yarrawonga". Merv cottoned on immediately and being South Australian replied, "Onkaparinga Malala" and laughed uproariously at his effort. The girls got annoyed when we declined to translate what we had said and the conversation was terminated by mutual agreement leaving two girls astonished to know that Australia had its own language too.

We were a little frustrated by our inability to see African wildlife in its natural habitat, as we were not permitted to venture far from Durban. We were told however that wild monkeys could be seen if we took a tram to Burman Drive. At the terminus, there were some fairly rugged hills covered by thick undergrowth. We thrashed our way through this for half an hour or so without any success. We were still dressed in our heavy blue winter uniforms and the heat and humidity had us all in a lather of perspiration so we decided to call it a day. As we returned to the tram terminus, a family of monkeys was playing happily in the middle of the street.

After eight days in camp, orders came for us to re-embark on the *Nieuw Amsterdam* and I was delighted that we were returned to the same cabins which we had occupied previously. After settling back in to our quarters, we went up on deck to watch proceedings on the wharf. A succession of trains arrived carrying more passengers for the troop ship. There were Tommies from the British army returning from service in India; there were Italian prisoners of war; there were Cape Coloured servicemen; and there was a train load of six hundred Polish women who had endured unbelievable hardships over the previous three years.

Having left Australia with about 2,000 R. A. A. F. personnel, the *Nieuw Amsterdam* was now carrying over 8,000 troops.

Troop Deck Accommodation.

It now required eight sittings to cater for everyone each mealtime. As we left Durban, the lady in white was at her post on the end of the breakwater singing to the departing ship. Our next port of call was Capetown but we had to be content to see what we could from the deck of the ship as no leave was allowed. The rumour was that it was because of bad behaviour by soldiers of the 6th Division, AIF some years before. It is certainly an impressive setting for a city with Table Mountain as a backdrop - the famous 'tablecloth' draping the mountain for most of the time we were there.

Apart from admiring the view, we watched native porters loading stores through a small door low in the ship's side. They carried cardboard carton after carton aboard and there was much speculation as to what they contained. This question was answered when one porter dropped his load and sausages scattered over the wharf. The unfortunate man received a number of resounding smacks across the face from his foreman for his carelessness. It was strange to see a grown man just stand and take such punishment without any attempt to protect himself or to retaliate. He and some of his mates swept the sausages together with their hands, loaded them back into the carton and duly delivered them on board. We all made a mental note not to eat sausages on the rest of the voyage.

After leaving Capetown, a number of us were assigned to gun watch. The *Nieuw Amsterdam* carried a six inch gun on its stern. We were assigned to anti-aircraft guns mounted on the superstructure of the ship. When we completed our radio school, we were told that, as qualified radio operators, we were supposed to be able to operate any radio equipment we came across. This same principle was apparently applied to gunners because we were given no instruction on how to use the guns, or even how to communicate with the bridge if we saw anything suspicious but we were now well disciplined airmen and did as we were told without question.

The Atlantic.

As the ship headed out into the Atlantic, we resumed the shipboard life to which we had become accustomed except that it was now much more crowded. The first night on gun watch I saw in the moonlight what looked like a post sticking up out of the water. I thought, "My God, it might be a U-boat". It was visible for only half a second in the beam of light from the moon on the water and I did not have time to confirm what it was. At first, I thought it might be a pile of some kind. I was on my own and there was no-one to talk to about it. If it was a submarine, it may have been a friendly one anyway. "There couldn't be a pile way out here", I thought but surely someone else would see it too. I simply did not know what I should do in the circumstances. I half expected a torpedo to smash into the side of the ship and it must have been half an hour before I could breathe easy again. I felt ashamed of my inadequacy with 8,000 people relying on the vigilance of those of us on watch and I decided to keep the incident to myself.

(Decades later, I learned that the only physical contact between Germany and Japan at that period of the war was by means of giant submarines. One was sunk in the Atlantic about that time. If the object was such a submarine, neither vessel would have been interested in attacking the other.)

It was not long before the canteen started to run short of supplies but not before I bought half a dozen large blocks of chocolate which was in short supply in Britain. Our resolve not to eat sausages soon evaporated, as the increasingly meagre meals were almost always sausages. There were so many mouths to feed that there were eight sittings for each meal.

The troops started assembling at the doors into the dining hall as soon as the previous sitting had been admitted. The meals had become inadequate for healthy young appetites. Each table sat sixteen a side and a container holding thirty two rolls was placed in the middle. As the rations got tighter, a race developed to get to a table first and grab a couple of rolls and to hell with the slowest who missed out. Another disadvantage was that those who were forced to sit in the middle were forever passing things like salt and pepper backwards and forwards. Consequently, as the time for our sitting approached there was jockeying for position near the entrance doors. I found to my cost that it was not wise to be near the outside as I was crushed against the doorpost and thought I was going to get a couple of cracked ribs. The whole situation was not to anyone's credit but it served to demonstrate what hunger will do to people.

A break in the usual routine occurred on the day of the "Crossing the line" ceremony. The advent of air travel has almost wiped out this tradition of King Neptune and his helpers coming aboard to initiate travellers crossing the equator for the first time. There was a lot of fooling about like mock shaving and dunking in the swimming pool which was filled for the occasion. The highlight was when an enterprising gang commandeered a high pressure hose and caught officers and several female passengers who were leaning over the rail of an upper deck watching the antics below in a well executed attack from the rear.

Crossing the line.

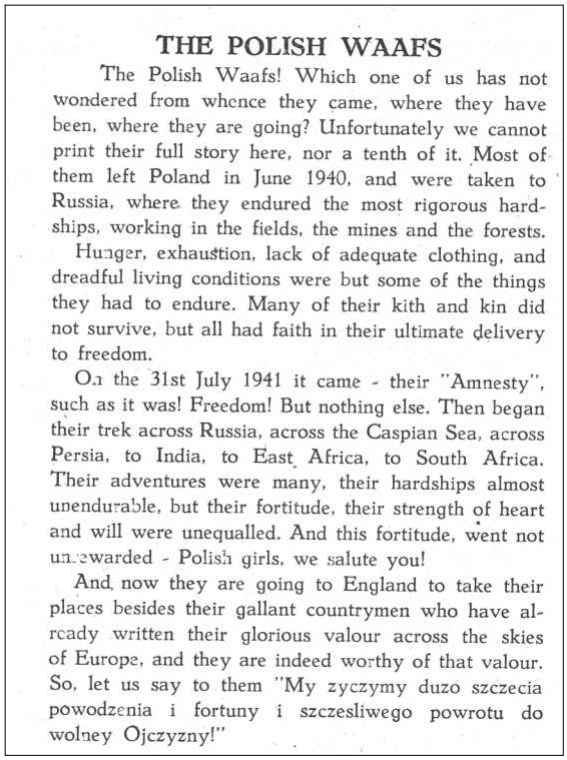
A day or so later, the ship was sailing over a sea so flat that it was unbelievable. It was like glass - without a ripple of any kind disturbing the surface except for the wake of the ship. The shining sea and the cloudless sky seemed to merge so that the ship seemed to be suspended in space. The bow waves diverged evenly behind until, seemingly half a mile astern they broke in a mirror image. We were in the doldrums off the coast of West Africa. We anchored off Freetown, Sierra Leone, known as 'the white man's grave'. This was where the Italian prisoners of war were disembarked by means of lighters. The *Nieuw Amsterdam* was soon surrounded by natives in 'bumboats' trying to sell all manner of things such as fruit and locally made trinkets. One magnificent specimen wearing not one stitch of clothing was soon nicknamed "Sunshine" because he kept singing the well-known song of that name. When he learned that there were Australians aboard, he astonished us by inquiring about Young and Jacksons and whether Chloe was still there. It turned out that he had been a steward aboard a ship but presumably thought that life in Sierra Leone was safer while there was a war on.

Once again, the *Nieuw Amsterdam* set sail in what seemed to be a north-westerly direction. Perhaps it was because the nights were getting longer and colder but the rations appeared to be getting shorter. Someone apparently heard about the blocks of chocolate, which I had purchased soon after leaving Cape Town and offered me four times what I had paid for it. I declined the offer as I was already using them to allay the pangs of hunger. Long before we reached our destination, I had eaten the lot.

I never did find out the cause but one day those of us on gun duty were given extra duties. We think one of our number must have remonstrated with an officer about some of the grievances we had. The extra duties proved to be to carry cases of oranges from deep in the hold up several decks to the galley. There was nearly a riot when we stepped into the galley to be confronted by dozens of trays of roast chickens ready to be served to the officers.

With the pitching and tossing of the ship and other reasons, it was inevitable that one or two cases of oranges got broken and rather than see the contents rolling around the deck, it seemed reasonable to stick them in our tunics - but one of the Dutch ships officers was not very reasonable and a scuffle broke out when he tried to reclaim oranges from one of our party. It was a very serious situation for physical action against an officer at sea in wartime to take place but fortunately we heard no more about it. We did get to keep the oranges.

Towards the end of the voyage, a ship's magazine was produced. It included an account of the privations experienced by the Polish women on board. It was not until the war in Europe came to an end that we began to understand what horrors these women endured to escape almost certain death in a concentration camp.



THE POLISH WAAFS

The Polish Waafs! Which one of us has not wondered from whence they came, where they have been, where they are going? Unfortunately we cannot print their full story here, nor a tenth of it. Most of them left Poland in June 1940, and were taken to Russia, where they endured the most rigorous hardships, working in the fields, the mines and the forests.

Hunger, exhaustion, lack of adequate clothing, and dreadful living conditions were but some of the things they had to endure. Many of their kith and kin did not survive, but all had faith in their ultimate delivery to freedom.

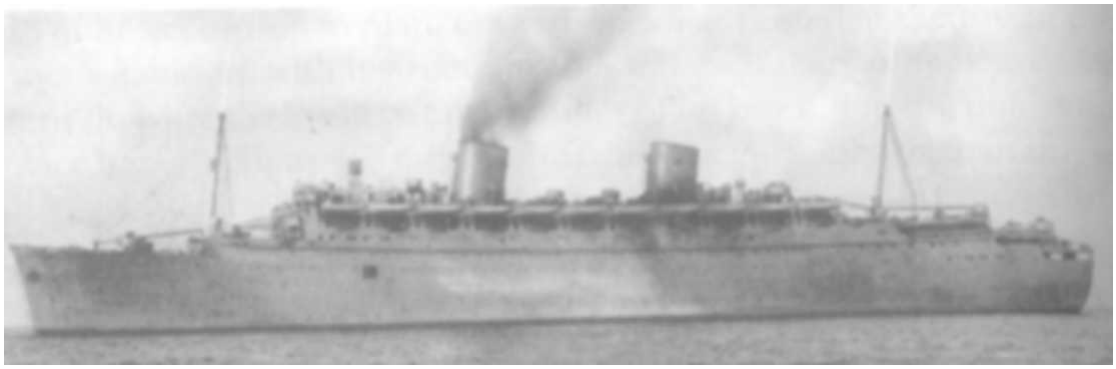
On the 31st July 1941 it came - their "Amnesty", such as it was! Freedom! But nothing else. Then began their trek across Russia, across the Caspian Sea, across Persia, to India, to East Africa, to South Africa. Their adventures were many, their hardships almost unendurable, but their fortitude, their strength of heart and will were unequalled. And this fortitude, went not unrewarded - Polish girls, we salute you!

And now they are going to England to take their places besides their gallant countrymen who have already written their glorious valour across the skies of Europe, and they are indeed worthy of that valour. So, let us say to them "My zyczymy duzo szczecia powodzenia i fortuny i szczesliwego powrotu do wolney Ojczyzny!"

(In the 1980s, a report appeared in the daily press of a woman in Britain being reunited with her father after forty years. It described how the family were being transported to Siberia by train when the father left the train during a stop to look for food. The train moved on before he returned. The woman was not reunited with her father for forty years. Her story made it apparent that she was among these women described as Polish WAAFs to give them some small degree of protection should they fall into the hands of the enemy again.

As a human interest story, my local paper published the extract from the ship's magazine and my brief account of my contact with these people. Several weeks later, I struck up a conversation with a fellow passenger on a train from Melbourne to my home town. When I introduced myself, he asked iof it was me who sent the story to the paper. On confirmation that I was responsible, he exclaimed, "You could not believe what that report did for my family. My wife was one on those women and until that article appeared our children had no idea of what their mother had endured.")

The navigators among us estimated that we were within one day's sailing from the coast of North America when the ship changed course in an easterly direction. Several days later, we awoke to find ourselves sailing up an estuary between low hills with patches of snow on the tops. A Scottish soldier standing near me was singing "Sailing up the Clyde" softly to himself so identifying just where we were. He was returning home after a stint of eight years in the British Army in India. The ship dropped anchor off Greenock and the task of disembarking the large number of troops aboard by lighter began. At last our turn came and as we drew away from the *Nieuw Amsterdam* we saw for the first time what a fine looking ship she was. Our previous views of her had been so close up that it was not possible to see her graceful lines.



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.

Pre-war postcard view of Brighton seafront.

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 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.

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

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.

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.

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.

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Chapter 4.

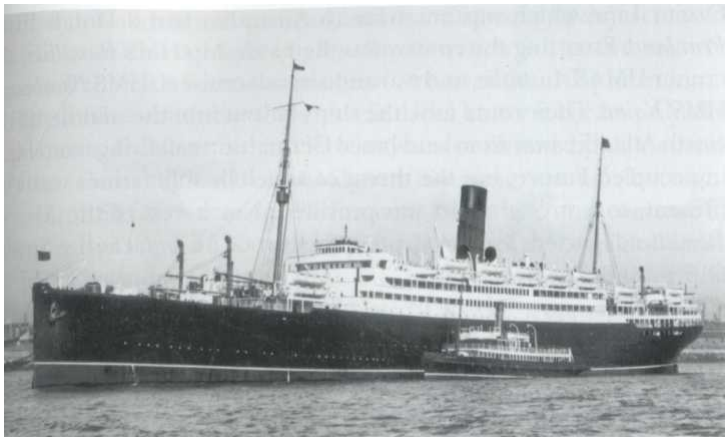
A Mediterranean Cruise....with a difference.

The Franconia gradually developed a list and just as gradually righted itself a couple of times each day while tied to the wharf. If we were served soup at a meal when it was at its maximum lean, we only got about half a bowl which did not please us atall. The entrance to the docks from the river was blocked by a caisson, a concrete structure which was floated into position at high tide and then flooded to block the entrance to prevent the water draining from the dock at low tide. However, some water escaped and the Franconia sat on the bottom as the water receded. Having a V shaped hull rather than a U shape, it developed a substantial lean twice a day.

It was an intensely boring period being stuck on board a ship that was going nowhere. That probably highlighted the excitement when the Andes, a smart looking liner, tied up to the side of the Franconia, which was moored just inside the entrance to the dock. The Andes was obviously preparing to sail on the next high tide and she was carrying hundreds of brides of American servicemen. There were rumours that some of the Franconia's passengers finished up in America but I can not say that was a fact.

We sailed on the next high tide after the Andes. There was a heavy fog and fog horns moaned and bells on buoys clanged as we slowly moved down the oily looking waters of the Mersey into the Irish Sea. It was now autumn in England, there was a nip in the air and fog shrouded the Mersey as the ship moved towards the Irish Sea.

There was nothing to be seen so time was spent playing cards, singing bawdy songs and listening to sailors telling yarns as only Pommy sailors can. Before long, we were into the Bay of Biscay and it lived up to its reputation. Two corvettes, about a kilometre off each bow, escorted the Franconia, but most of the time we could only see their superstructure. As the ship ploughed its way through the mountainous seas, one of my mates said, "I bet they serve greasy pork for lunch today". One look at the greasy pork dished up that day and I raced up on deck and took some deep breaths but was not sea sick. In fact, that was the only occasion that the prospect of being seasick ever crossed my mind.



The Franconia.

We passed through the Straits of Gibraltar in the early morning so we did not see anything of the famous rock but as daylight broke, we found ourselves in the middle of a gigantic convoy. There were ships of all shapes and sizes as far as the eye could see all travelling at the speed dictated by the slowest. About half way through the day, the Franconia picked up speed and soon left the rest of the convoy behind. We sailed close to the island of Panteleria, off the coast of North Africa. A few months previously an allied fighter made a forced landing on its neighbouring island, Lampedusa, and the island surrendered to the pilot.

The eastern Mediterranean was flat and glassy like the Atlantic had been off west Africa near Freetown seven months earlier. The only disturbance to the surface was the wake of the ship with the bow waves breaking about half a mile behind. The Franconia was the same ship that Eric White, a Bairnsdale WW1 soldier, mentioned in his diary in 1915 as passing through the Suez Canal. The gun on the stern to which he referred was used to give the ship's gunners some training as they fired at a target which had been dropped overboard.

It was largely an uneventful voyage and the ship reached its destination at Port Said in Egypt at the northern end of the Suez Canal. Like South Africa, there was a very large workforce to unload the ship's cargo, but instead of the European style of clothing worn at Cape Town, the labourers wore the style of dress common in the Middle East with a type of turban for head gear. Some of us were detailed to ride the 100 mile journey to Cairo on the trucks carrying our kits bags and other gear. After the chilly autumn weather we had left behind in England, the Egyptian sunshine was welcome but we found that travelling in an open truck it was cool enough.

As we set out on the 100 mile drive to Cairo, we took in the strange sights and sounds, and smells, of a culture very different from anything we had seen before. The men were almost all dressed in what, to us, looked like a long nightshirt and wore a turban-like headgear. The women were almost all dressed in black and wore veils that covered their faces except for their eyes. At frequent intervals along the roadside were small shrines where the faithful could carry out their obligation to pray five times a day. Frequently, fellahin could be seen riding along on a donkey followed by four wives and their children on foot, all carrying quite substantial loads. In the towns, there were a few men wearing western style clothes, and their headgear was usually a fez.

As we skirted the Nile delta, we saw the intense agriculture being carried on as it had been for hundreds of years. There was no motive power except for man and animal power. It was not that which surprised me because back home on our farm, we did not have a motor of any description either - not even a motor car. The surprising thing was the odd combination of animals that were being used, such as a donkey and a camel harnessed together pulling a wooden plough. One could imagine the same methods being used two thousand years ago. But there was one thing that was very

familiar to us. The roadside was lined with gum trees. Someone grabbed some leaves and crushed them and we all gathered round to savour the smell of eucalyptus. The buildings in the villages we passed through were of the most basic construction - nothing more than sun dried mud huts. The most striking thing though was the demarcation between the irrigated and the non-irrigated areas. The lush green of the cropped land gave way to dessert sand in a matter of an inch or two. The currency was the Egyptian £, which was divided into 100 piasters, each of which was divided into 100 centimes. A centime certainly was not worth very much.

From Cape to Cairo.

When I passed through the Port of Cape Town nine months earlier, the thought did not occur to me that I might be at the northern end of the continent of Africa before the year was out. A brand of cigarettes was called "C to C' meaning Cape to Cairo but we reckoned it meant Camel to Consumer.

About four hours after we left Port Said, we arrived at our new home, the Heliopolis Palace Hotel. Heliopolis is an outlying suburb of Cairo. The Palace Hotel was in about one acre of grounds surrounded by a wall about 12 feet high. We were now virtually under the control of the R.A.F. as the Australians were far outnumbered by Englishmen.

Heliopolis Palace Hotel.

We had to start to adopt the words and ways of the British in the Middle East. "Tiffin" was the word that applied to morning tea and it was a fairly rigidly kept ritual. "Talla heena" was Arabic for "Come here" often preceded by "Ishma" meaning "Hey You". "Mafeesh falouse" meant "I haven't any money". "Wahid, Etneen, Talleta", etc. meant "One. Two, Three" etc. "Dhobi" was laundry and a "Dhobi wallah" was a laundryman. We did not have to do our own laundry or make our own beds or keep our rooms tidy. Our house boy did all this kind of work. He was about seventeen and already had two wives who, he said, were working hard to help him pay for a third. The reasoning was that the more wives the less work there was for each of them.

We were not exactly welcomed with open arms by the bulk of the population. A couple of times we were hastily issued with a revolver and five rounds of ammunition when it was feared the hotel was going to be attacked but fortunately nothing eventuated. In fact, Egypt was not, at that stage, at war with Germany. That did not occur until six months later, just days before the war in Europe concluded.

We were excited about the prospect of seeing Cairo. A tram to the city ran along the street at the front of the hotel. As we went through the front gate on our first venture into the city, we were besieged by hordes of youths selling a great variety of goods, such as trinkets, leather goods, watches, their sisters, No. 1 French girls, to name just a few. Some of the most persistent didn't look more than 10 years of age. They would have been aware that there was a new bunch of servicemen at the Hotel and were out in force but they were as persistent and annoying as Australian bush flies all the time we were in Cairo.

It was, no doubt, in part because of the "wares" mentioned above which were so vigorously promoted that there was a much greater emphasis on health and hygiene in our lectures. The water supply was very suspect but, to everyone's relief, it was safe to drink beer. Soft drinks were also reliable. We all knew, of course, that germs could not survive in spirits. We were treated to films, in glorious technicolour, of the effects on various parts of the anatomy of sexually transmitted diseases. A couple of fellows fainted during the films and there was much conjecture on whether they were extra sensitive or whether they had guilty consciences. It was not uncommon for several to faint when we were receiving injections. Sometimes, two or three in a row would pass out. There were quite a few diseases for which we had to be immunised so there was a fairly regular parade for that purpose. Some of the worldlier wise claimed that there was now a new drug that fixed these complaints up in no time at all. It was called "penicillin".

After travelling about half a mile from the Hotel, the tram into Cairo changed character. Down came the pole and up went the pantograph and it became a light rail vehicle with its own right of way and covered the six miles to Cairo Railway Station in very quick time. There it reverted to a tram and travelled sedately along the city streets to its terminal.

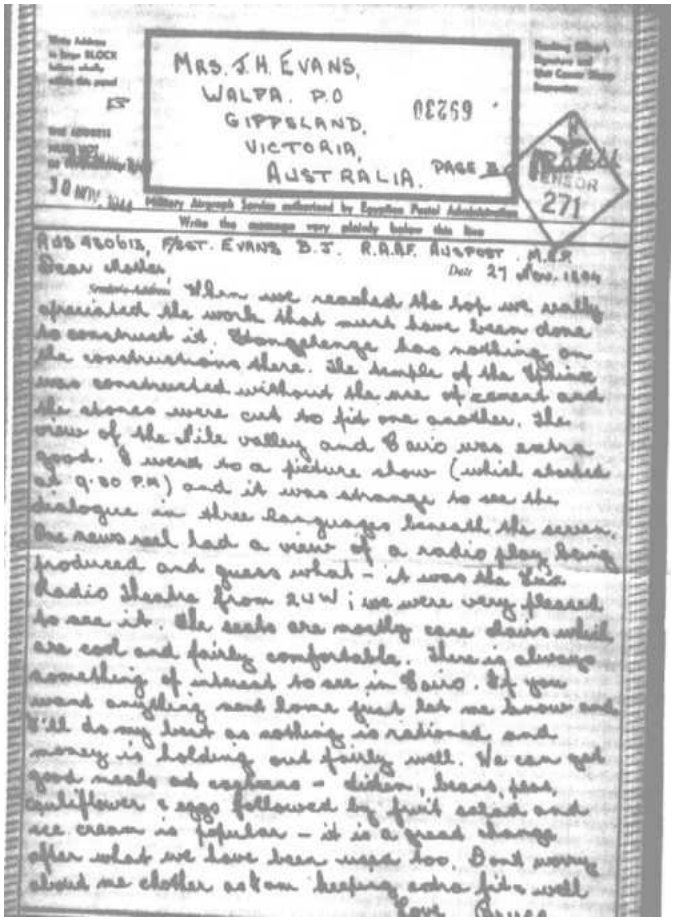
The first impression of the city was noise. Every driver seemed to be constantly blowing the horn, probably because there were great numbers of people walking on the streets as well as the footpaths. Mixed up with the traffic were donkey carts and all kinds of vehicles. Even the tram conductors used whistles sounding like party whistles to communicate with the drivers. There were bars and clubs for the entertainment of the troops and they were strictly classified. There were some "For Officers Only", others "For Non- Commissioned Officers Only' and still others "For Other Ranks Only". Some clubs and bars, as well as whole areas, were "Out of Bounds". We soon found that "hostesses" who were perpetually thirsty and would, apparently, do anything to persuade someone to buy them a drink, inhabited the clubs.

There were also large numbers of beggars on the streets, many missing an arm or a leg or two. The legless squatted on a square of wood with a caster at each corner and propelled themselves along with wooden handles. It was said that many of these were mutilated at birth by their parents to give them an edge in the highly competitive life of begging. One girl of about sixteen regularly got on the tram while it was waiting at the terminus and displayed the stump of her amputated leg while whining for "baksheesh". It was hard to ignore the poor unfortunates but we would have been perpetually bankrupt if we gave in. The wait for the tram to move off was usually full of interest. It was right in front of a bar and it was not uncommon for a brawl to break

out in the bar and spill out on to the street. If servicemen were involved, British Red Caps (Military Police) seemed to appear from nowhere.

Naturally, one of the first things we wanted to do was to see the pyramids which were on the opposite side of Cairo from Heliopolis. On the way, we had to cross the Nile, the world's longest river, with its Arab dhows and their distinctive sails. After having a look at the Sphinx and several temples nearby, we took a close look at the Pyramid of Cheops. In fact, we climbed 450 feet to the top - and it was some climb. The photograph taken at the top is very fuzzy but some idea of the size of the stones used to build the pyramids can be gained. We climbed up a corner of the structure as to go straight up the side was too steep. The top thirty feet was removed years ago to build a mosque in Cairo. I don't know how they got the stones down again. I presume they just levered them over the edge and let them go. The whole experience was a bit mind numbing. We knew very little about Egyptian history but no one could view these massive structures without being overawed by the skills and effort that had gone into the construction.

A very fuzzy photo taken on top of Cheop's Pyramid.


MRS. J.H. EVANS,
WALPA. P.O
GIPPSLAND.
VICTORIA,
AUSTRALIA.

CENSOR 271

Military Airgraph Service authorised by Egyptian Postal Administration

Write the message very plainly below this line

A visit to Cairo Museum was also a high priority. There we viewed the fabulous relics recovered from the tomb of Tutankhamen some twenty years previously. This Pharaoh's mummy was inside three coffins which in turn were inside three sarcophagi, each of which were covered with gold and inlaid with precious stones. The outermost one was about four feet by four feet by seven feet long.

It took several airgraphs to write home about our activities in the first days in Cairo. One of these is reproduced. The airgraph was the fastest way to write home. The original was written on an A4 sized page and then microfilmed. When the film reached Australia, it was enlarged to about the size and quality of the example. There was a quicker way to communicate and that was by cable. A three number code was

provided for a series of sentences, and you sent the numbers which were transposed into telegrams back home. Consequently, telegrams had a sameness about them all. Although in my letters I say that there is always something of interest to see in Cairo, by time Christmas came a month later, we were becoming extremely bored because the hotel was a transit depot not equipped for training. We did not have the money to keep on sightseeing or going out on the town. We learned that "They also serve who only stand and wait". Consequently, boredom led to a great deal of drinking. In fact, we played cards most of the day and drank most of the night.

On Christmas Eve, I was assigned to guard duties at the main gate from 5.30pm to 9.30 PM. This was the time that the houseboys, gardeners and other labourers were leaving to go home. An Egyptian overseer frisked them all as they left. One must have had something he was not supposed to have because the overseer started yelling at him and then started slapping his face. The fellow just stood and took it without any attempt to protect himself. I thought to myself that a couple of hundred years ago, that was probably how my forebears were treated.

I was getting pretty toey as my time on duty dragged on. My mates were getting a big start. As soon as I was relieved, I headed for the Sergeants' Mess. On the way, I met one of our lot with a bottle of cherry brandy in one hand and a bottle of tomato sauce in the other. He was taking a swig out of each bottle alternately. I knew then that they had indeed got a big start. I don't remember much about the rest of that night but I was ready to catch transport taking the Aussies into the Australian Embassy for Christmas drinks at 9.30 on Christmas morning.

As we celebrated Christmas 1944 at the Australian Embassy in Cairo, we did not imagine that a month later it would have a whole new significance for us. The photograph below taken outside the Embassy shows the rear of the truck that transported us from Heliopolis, with horse drawn gharries that plied as taxis in the background. It was usual to haggle the fare down to about one tenth of the driver's first quote.

Outside the Australian Embassy. 25/12/1944.

By time we returned to the Heliopolis Palace Hotel for Christmas Dinner, we were in very good spirits. The main door to the hotel was accessed by a flight of about a dozen steps. At the top was a small car obviously man-handled there by a number of men who had overindulged. In the dining room, all decked out for the imminent start of the dinner, several others were trying to persuade a donkey to sample some of the nibbles. This state of affairs continued more or less constantly through to the New Year of 1945.One night, in a smoke filled, dimly lit night club, we were entertained by a genuine Turkish belly dancer. The whole scene looked like a shot from the film "Casablanca", complete with fez wearing gentlemen of sinister appearance.

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.

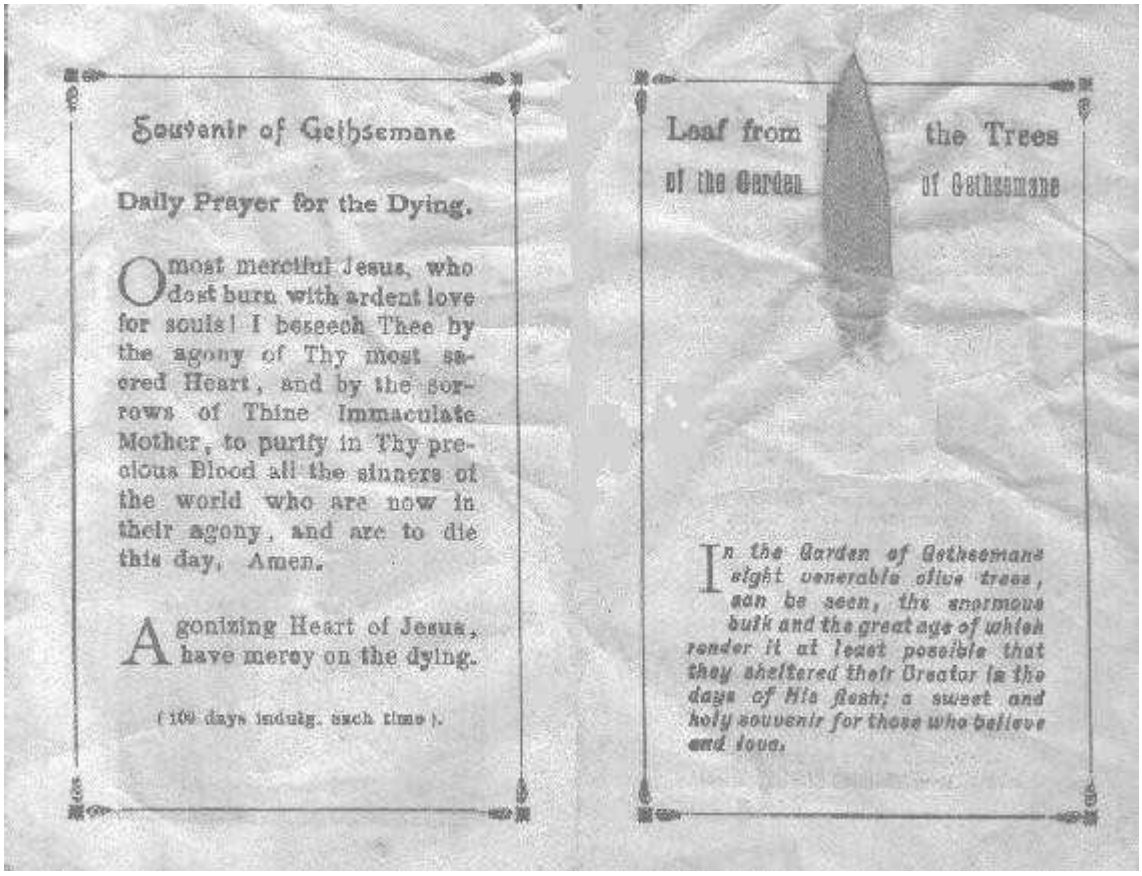
The Holy Land.

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.



Souvenir of Gethsemane

Daily Prayer for the Dying.

O most merciful Jesus, who dost burn with ardent love for souls! I beseech Thee by the agony of Thy most sacred Heart, and by the sorrows of Thine Immaculate Mother, to purify in Thy precious Blood all the sinners of the world who are now in their agony, and are to die this day. Amen.

Agonizing Heart of Jesus, have mercy on the dying.

(100 days indulg. each time).

Leaf from the Trees of the Garden of Gethsemane

In the Garden of Gethsemane eight venerable olive trees, can be seen, the enormous bulk and the great age of which render it at least possible that they sheltered their Creator in the days of His flesh; a sweet and holy souvenir for those who believe and love.

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 dob 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 traintrip 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. Onlv 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.

The 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 180^0 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."

The crew.

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.

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 altimetre 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.

The long wait.

Then suddenly the war in Europe was over. While people in other places celebrated with dancing in the streets and wild parties, it was very quietly celebrated in our camp near Cairo. We knew the war was only half over and there was a long hard job to be done to defeat Japan. For our crew, it made the loss of our mates only six days before even more poignant. Only one more flight - only six more days and their lives would have been spared.

The posting to Italy was now redundant and we discussed where we might be sent next. We thought that it would probably be Burma. I did not exactly relish the prospect but it seemed to be the most logical place. Then the Australian government ordered that all Australians in the European theatre of war return home. No doubt that it was a good political decision at home but it seemed stupid to me that after all we had been through over the past few weeks, our crew was now to be broken up. Even if our training was not appropriate for operations in the Far East, or the Baltimore was unsuitable, it would not have taken long to retrain or convert to another type of aircraft. Now, I would have to start from scratch again and train with a completely new crew.

We had 5 days leave before being sent our separate ways. We decided we would go to Alexandria the next day. We enjoyed relaxing on a Mediterranean beach. We decided to lunch at a classy sort of restaurant where we could dine on a terrace overlooking the sea. We all ordered spaghetti. In due course, the headwaiter arrived and laid out warm plates on our table, then a waiter arrived with a large silver tray of spaghetti balanced on his fingertips. Unfortunately, as he lowered it to commence serving, he lost control and the whole lot landed on Dave's bare thigh. Dave shot out of his seat like a rocket and, in a few well-chosen words referred to the waiter's promiscuity, his size, his colour and his parentage while the rest of us roared with laughter. Fortunately, the spaghetti was not hot enough to do any real damage but Dave had a red thigh for a few days.

Desert Storm.

A few days after we returned to camp, the others received their postings. Stap was assigned to flying senior officers to many places including Tristan Da Cunha, one of the most isolated places in the world, in the South Atlantic between South Africa and South America. Dave went back to England and was demobbed from the R.A.F. because he was a policeman. Alex went off to Khartoum, Nairobi and Mombassa before flying to Ceylon. From there, he was in action in Burma and the Gulf of Siam.

I was now back with other Australians as we waited to see what was to happen to us. Some of my new mates had not been to Alexandria so I agreed to go back there with them for leave. The evening before heading off, we stayed in camp instead of going into Cairo like the great majority on the station. Just on dusk, a large cloud rolled in. It was constantly lit by lightning. We stood outside our tent to watch this spectacular show for about a quarter of an hour when rain sent us inside. Soon it became a regular

deluge and the tent started to sag. Desperately, we tried to keep guy ropes tight to prevent it collapsing under the torrential rain. It seemed to be about half an hour before it let up and we breathed a sigh of relief that we had kept the tent habitable. A short while later, two of us decided to see if there was any water in a wadi (shallow depression) about 50 yards from our tent. We took a torch, as it was pitch dark. All around were tents in various stages of collapse and there would be some cursing and swearing when their occupants returned about midnight.

There was no water in the wadi and we walked back towards our tent. I heard a strange hissing sound to our right and, flashing the torch in that direction was astonished to see a broad front of water a few inches deep moving through a line of tents towards ours. We ran to the tent to warn the others and lifted all our gear on the ground onto our bunks just as water started to come in under the tent flaps. The sand on which our tents were pitched was loose and soft so the water quickly gouged around the tent pole, the tent pegs, under the flaps, even around the legs of our bunks. We were soon engaged in a desperate battle to keep our tent and all our possessions intact. The water got to about seven or eight inches deep and was moving fairly fast. Somehow we managed to keep the tent upright but in a very unmilitary like state of disarray. We concluded that water must have become dammed up behind a sandbank that eventually gave way and released the torrent of water upon us.

Next morning, ours was the only tent in our section left standing. There was scarcely any sign of where the others had been because the water had virtually excavated the sand around any solid object, which then fell into the hole and was promptly covered by sand. Men were wandering around looking for some clue as to where their tent might have been. They would have all lost precious letters from home, photographs, souvenirs etc. and were a sorry looking lot. Any service gear was replaced that day. One told us of his experience coming back to camp on the tram-cum-light rail the night before. About half way along the high-speed section, the line goes under a road and the tram raced into about five feet of water in the cutting at high speed. "There were sparks flying and women screaming", he said but apparently no casualties

Later that day, we went to Alexandria on leave. At the end of May I finally got posted to a transit camp which was the first step on the journey home. I was not at all impressed to discover that it was back at Shalufa. It was not the same place where we did our OTU. This camp was at the end of the airstrip from which we operated. A Squadron of four engined Liberator Bombers now occupied the base. I don’t know what their duties were but several took off every morning at about 6.30. They roared over our camp only a few feet above us and we would curse them for waking us, and turn over and go to sleep again. That was until some idiot pilot decided to cut his engines - and every tent was empty in a flash. One morning, a couple of Egyptians were working on the flue of the cookhouse when these planes were taking off. A pilot spotted them and came straight at them. I am sure that if they hadn’t jumped the slipstream would have blown them off the roof.

The month of June dragged by. We had no parades, no lectures, no inspections - and no indication of a boat home. There were plenty passing down the canal but there were all filled to capacity with the sick and wounded, the ex-prisoners of war and others from Britain with a greater claim than we did. We filled our time reading, playing cards, swimming, going to the camp picture shows, and trying to write letters

when we had nothing to write home about. As time passed, the writing on my letters home got increasingly large as I tried to fill up an airletter home. Previously, I had written as small as possible to get as much in a letter as I could but now there was simply nothing that I had not written home about before. I wrote about the films I had seen, the books I had read, even hands I was dealt playing bridge.

Stop and go.

Finally, near midnight on July 1, we were all lined up on the parade ground to be transported to Port Tewfic to board a troop ship for home. An important announcement was made over the loud speaker. There were six non-commissioned officers more than there was space for on the ship. The six most recently promoted were to be left behind. I had been promoted to Warrant Officer on June 6. It was hard to be cheerful when saying good-bye to a group of fellows all excited about going home. I had been in close contact with them for a couple of months. My deep-sea gear had to be retrieved from the truck on to which it was already loaded. We could only take a haversack of personal gear on board with us and the rest of our gear went in the hold of the ship (called deep-sea gear) which was to be delivered to our home addresses.

The Egyptian summer was now starting to get really hot. Temperatures exceeded 1000 every day. We seldom wore much more than shorts and were becoming the same colour as the locals. Occasionally someone would try to get a cricket match going but it was pretty futile as the ball stopped as soon as it hit the sand. A few football matches were arranged but as some played rugby league, some rugby union, some soccer and some Aussie rules, it generally degenerated into a rough and tumble. At times, we went for a swim in the Bitter Lakes. I was sitting on the end of the jetty one day when some character pushed me off. My feet slipped down a barnacle-encrusted pile, severely lacerating the soles of both feet. The high salinity of the water stung like blazes but probably contributed to a fairly quick healing. I did hobble about for a few days though.

There was no difficulty in getting a leave pass to go to Cairo although we were always worried stiff that a boat might suddenly materialise while we were away. We needn’t have worried. To get to Cairo, we hitched a ride about eight miles to the Suez - Cairo road and from there hitched a ride to Cairo. It was 90 miles but we knew that any vehicle heading along that road was going to Cairo because there was nothing but desert in between. Usually, we scored an Army truck but sometimes we were lucky enough to travel in something more comfortable. In Cairo, we would stay at the New Zealand Club until our money ran out and then return to Shalufa. During one such visit, we watched the results of a British election as they appeared on a ticker tape machine. It seemed unreal that Winston Churchill, our hero and we thought the poms' as well, should be defeated.

There was an empty space next to our tent where a couple of fellows used to play tennis. It was not big enough for a full size tennis court but they played there for hours every day. There were frequent heated arguments over whether a ball was in or out. The problem was they had no net, no rackets and no tennis balls. We couldn’t work out if they were putting on a great act or if they were really going "troppo". We were even more intrigued when several others brought chairs along and sat and watched

them. (Many years later, the character, Klinger, in the television series, M.A.S.H., portrayed the same sort of behaviour in a desperate ploy to get himself sent home)

The heat, the dust, the flies and the sheer boredom, added to the uncertainty of how long we would have to wait, was taking a toll on all of us. One evening, an Australian woman came to give us a talk about things at home. I think most turned up for the novelty of hearing the voice of an Australian woman. It was getting a long time since we had gone to a dance or taken a girl to the pictures or even talked to an English-speaking girl. After this lady had told us about the state of things back home, someone said it sounded good and asked if we might be allowed to migrate there.

Another month dragged by and news came of the Americans dropping a bomb equivalent to 20,000 tons of TNT. "Another American exaggeration" was the general opinion. American involvement in the war was regarded with a great deal of cynicism. Most of us saw America as profiteering from the war while Britain, which had been the dominant power, was being brought to its knees financially. In the nineteen thirties, the U.S.A. followed an isolationist policy wiping its hands of any responsibility of what was happening in other parts of the world while Britain tried to follow the role of an international policeman. It was not unusual to hear someone reciting to himself in the nasal twang of Roosevelt, "England wants guns, England wants tanks, England wants planes. England shall have guns, England shall have tanks, England shall have planes. At a price. At our price." We felt that the United States was forced into World War 2 only by the attack on Pearl Harbour.

Beginning of a New Age.

We read in the newspapers about this startling new weapon - the atom bomb. Then another one was dropped and suddenly the war was over. We were dumbfounded. Because of the stubborn resistance of the Japanese, it seemed that the war could go on for another twelve months at least as island after island was recaptured. While the rest of the world went mad in celebrating, we got two warm bottles of Canadian beer and an extra 50 cigarettes - and nothing else was different from the weeks and months before. We sat under the stars drinking our beer in what must have been the most low-key celebration of victory in history.

Even the meals were monotonous - bully beef and cucumber day after day - and I hated cucumber. There was also plenty of watermelon but some character claimed the locals bored holes in them and added water from the sweetwater canal to make them heavier. It was, no doubt, untrue but it was very off-putting. One day, an announcement warned us not to drink the water because the treatment system had broken down. Half a dozen reported sick on the strength of the announcement bearing in mind the warnings we had been given about the "Sweetwater Canal". It was later announced that the fault had been discovered before any of the untreated water reached the camp. Nobody drank water anyway.

For a brief time, another Bairnsdale lad was in the camp. I went to Bairnsdale High School with Ian Redenbach. He became a fighter pilot. We were on the same transit camp at Padgate in England for a few days. I later bumped into him in Cairo before he was posted to Italy. He was shot down and became a prisoner of war for a matter of hours and spent a short time at Shalufa on his way home. I later met and married his cousin.

Another boat - another false alarm.

This time the captain said that he only had troop deck accommodation and he had been criticised on an earlier voyage for not providing non commissioned officers with cabins. We would have cheerfully slept on the deck to get out of Shalufa. At times, we walked along the narrow track through the farms along the sweetwater canal, across the bridge near the village to the Suez Canal and went through the motions of thumbing a ride from passing ships. The people on board used to look at us dumbly as though we were some sort of curiosity. Walking along this track one day, an Egyptian farmer conjured up a spit like I have never seen before or since, and deposited it at our feet as we passed. This gesture was more eloquent than words.
One night, I was rostered for duty in charge of the guard. Although the war was over, armed guards patrolled the camp perimeter at all times. The locals were not averse to pinching anything they could get their hands on. A detachment of twenty four R.A.F. Regiment personnel were paraded at the guard house and it was my job to call the roll, march them to the armoury and issue them with rifles and five rounds of ammunition and allot the time and post where each was to patrol. Someone handed me the roll and I marched out briskly to emphasise who was in charge, ordered the group to attention and started to call the roll. As soon as I looked at it, I knew I was in trouble. There was not a name on it I could pronounce - they were all Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, etc. with unpronounceable names. This took the wind out of my sails a bit but I got round it by counting them - to some amusement in the ranks. I then marched them to the armoury and issued the rifles and ammunition.
After I had allocated all of them to the roster, there was a short time before I had to set off with the first party to relieve those on duty. A little fellow came to me and nervously asked me in very broken English if I could change his time to earlier in the night, as he had never done guard duty before. He looked as though he was in his thirties and I told him that that was the way the names had come out and that I could not start shuffling them around now. He then started to put the clip of bullets in his rifle but his hands were shaking so much he couldn't manage it. He asked me if I would do it for him. I thought, "Hell, what might this fellow do when I march up to him in the middle of the night with his relief guard". I took the clip of bullets and put them in my pocket and told him he would be doing duty with an empty rifle. This seemed to make him happier and I reckoned that his main problem was handling a loaded rifle.

The End in Sight.

On October 2, 1945, the R.A.F. put on a dinner for the last of the R.A.A.F. in the Middle East. There were only sixty of us remaining at that stage. Among those who signed my souvenir menu was Ron Jary who enlisted on the same day as I. His number was 430623 and mine was 430613. He signed my copy of the ship's magazine on the Nieuw Amsterdam on the way to England. We returned home on the same ship and were discharged on the same day. Tragically, he was a victim of the massacre at Port Arthur. Another at the dinner was Peter Ross-Edwards but it was twenty years before I met him for the first time.

(On April 9,1945, 430653 F/O W. Forrester was killed when his aircraft crashed at Foxton, England when returning from a raid over Germany.)

Finally, on October 13, 1945, we boarded the Stirling Castle at Port Tewfic. As we went on board, one of our group said, "Crikey, look at all the white men." Those already on board, even having come from the English summer, were pale and pasty faced compared with our lot. After almost twelve months of Egyptian sunshine, we were as tanned as it was possible to be.

At 10 AM on the first Sunday in November 1945, the Stirling Castle arrived at the Sydney Heads on a perfect Spring day. Hundreds of yachts, cruisers and boats of every description met us and escorted us up the harbour to the hoots and whistles of every ship in port and the cheers of thousands of people. It was an unforgettable homecoming. Overnight, we travelled by train to Melbourne and, through pouring rain but cheering people, drove from Spencer Street Station to the Exhibition Building where our families were waiting to meet us. My mother was a bit uncertain about what changes had taken place in her younger son, whom she had not seen for nearly two years. With produce brought from the farm, a magnificent welcome home dinner was waiting at my Aunt's home in Caulfield. I got less than half way through the first course and, although the last thing I wanted to do was to disappoint them, I could eat no more. My stomach was not conditioned to large meals.

My first night in a normal bed was not a resounding success either. I awoke feeling like something the cat dragged in. I slept on the floor, then on a mattress on the floor for a week or so before I could cope with sleeping in a bed.

The next day, I returned home on the train and the end of an extraordinary experience. I was still two and one half months short of my twenty first birthday. For a long time, I was very mixed up emotionally. I felt that I had enjoyed a "Cook's Tour" when so many had suffered so much. The first person to greet me when the train reached Lindenow Station was Andy Wilson, a mate since childhood, who had been a Prisoner of War of the Japanese for 3½ years. The dangers and frustration and the inconveniences I faced paled into insignificance compared with what he and his mates had to deal with. I rarely missed writing home at least every week and was disappointed each time the mail brought no letter for me. The prisoners of the Japanese were three and a half years without letters or any communication with their loved ones and they had to endure starvation, abuse, and physical violence. Death was never far away.

Although I joined the RSL as soon as I got home, it was several years before I attended an Anzac Day march because I did not think I was entitled to share the plaudits of the public with people with that kind of service. Eventually, I came to understand that that was not what Anzac Day is about. No one asks what you did in the war. Once you enlist, your fate is in the hands of others – often it is the luck of the draw. While the exploits of a very small number become legendary, it is not what one does, but the act of serving one's country in time of war that creates the special bond between ex-service personnel. For those who served together in the same unit, naturally the bond is stronger. Those with whom I had the closest bond lived 12,000 miles away and there was little prospect that I would ever see them again.

I have had no contact with my fellow Baltie crew members over the years except that I have been fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to visit Stap and Mary at home in Tonbridge in Kent on two occasions. When he bought himself a car after the war, he had to take his father to drive it home - he did not have a driving license. He has not flown in an aircraft since the war.