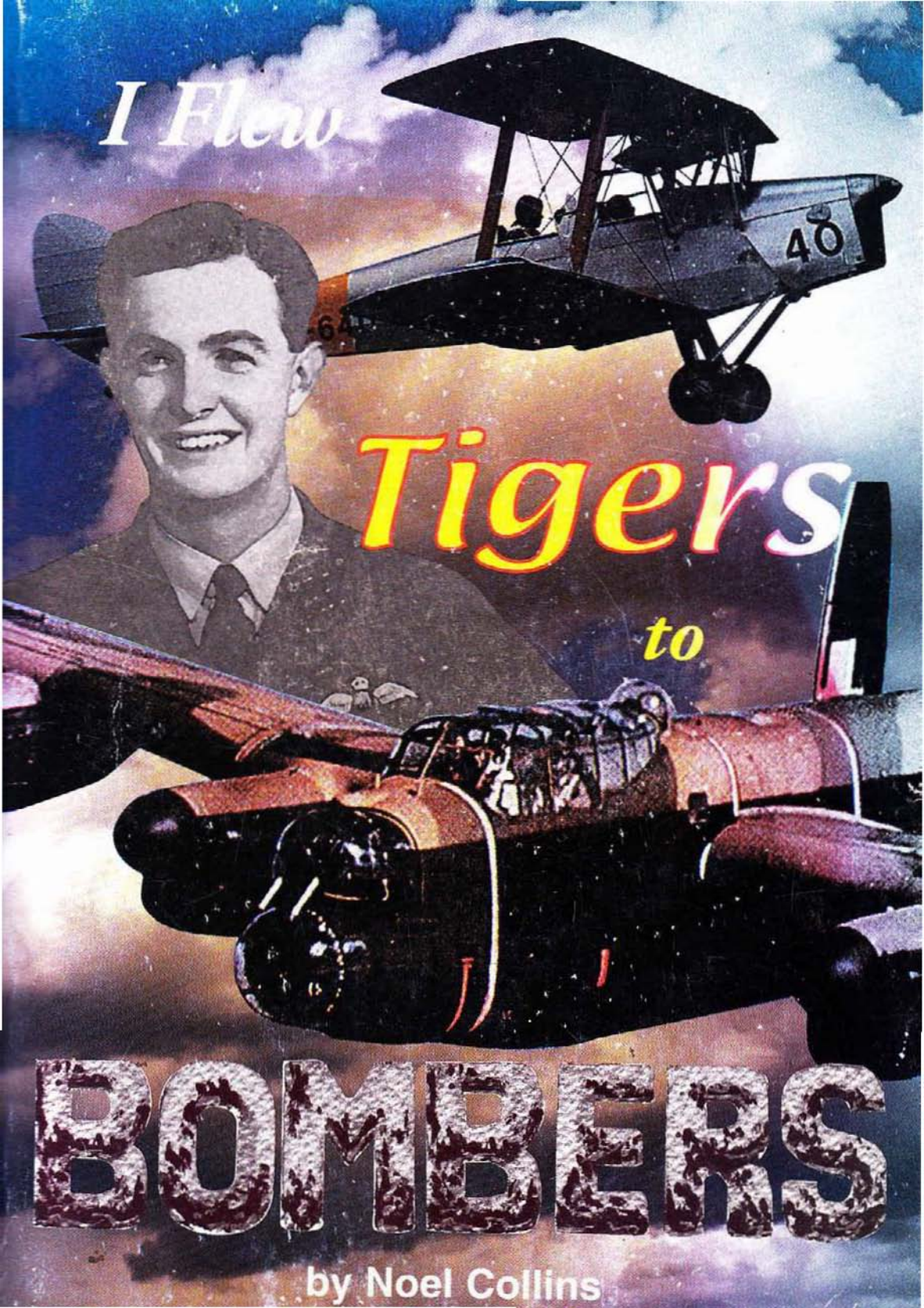

I Flew
Tigers
to
BOMBERS
by Noel Collins

Published by Milligan House
35 Milligan Street, Bunbury
Western Australia, 6230

November, 1999

Proceeds from sales of the publication will go to the
Royal Flying Doctor Service.

Cover designed by Greg Stephen

ISBN 0 9577098 1 1

Printed by Express Print
108 Beach Road, Bunbury
Western Australia, 6230

This book has been converted to an Ebook

With the permission

Of

Lynn Stephen

The Daughter and Executor

Of the Estate of the late

Noel Collins

Sergeant Pilot Noel Collins.

Chapter 1

"We are at war with Germany."

Hearing the Prime Minister make the announcement was my first inkling that World War Two had commenced. A student at Wesley College at South Perth, I was being driven home to Donnybrook for the September school holidays by my father, who was medical practitioner for the district. The *Air Chief* car radio was on.

I finished my schooling at Wesley at the end of the year, then studied Diesel Engineering through a correspondence school - doing my practical time at Cumming Smith Mt Lyell at Picton Junction near Bunbury. I worked there for three days a week without any wages, for the privilege of getting my time in towards my Diesel Drivers Certificate, when I was old enough to qualify. I spent the remaining three working days of the week in the chemist shop where I earned the princely sum of twelve shillings a week ($1.20).

By this time my elder brother Bill had joined the RAAF as a member of aircrew. He passed his entrance exams with flying colours and was hoping to be chosen as a pilot. It had been his ambition to learn to fly since Captain Penny arrived in Donnybrook in about 1930. Flying an old Moth aircraft, Captain Penny took people for joy rides from a sloping paddock on Jim Mitchell's property.

Aircrew personnel in those early days were not selected for positions. Instead, they were lined up and the first ten told they were gunners, the next ten pilots, and so on until all had been given their positions in the aircraft.

Bill was to be a wireless air gunner, and later was remustered to a straight gunner as the wireless course was too long, and he wanted to get into flying as soon as possible. He was posted to the Air Gunnery School at Ballarat in Victoria. While there his fiancee, Trixie Jackson from Kelmscott in WA, went over to Ballarat and they were married. Shortly after embarkation leave he was posted to Bomber Command in England.

By this time I had turned 17 years of age, and had applied to the RAAF to be accepted as a member of aircrew, and to be placed on the aircrew reserve until I was 18 years of age - old enough to join up.

Knowing that I would be required to learn Morse code after enlisting, Mr Coles, the postmaster at Donnybrook, offered to teach me this method of communication.

We made our own keyboard sets and I would ride my push-bike a mile or so to Coles' place, where we'd work together for an hour or more. Under his tuition it didn't take long for me to become fairly proficient.

In a set of twenty-one lessons was a series on mathematics A & B. Maths B was a fair subject for me, but maths A was a real struggle to handle. Mr Bob Duncan, the Donnybrook State School headmaster, was good enough to help me in this subject. I think he had an uphill battle, as my basic grounding had been poor.

I was going out with a lovely redheaded girl, Jeanette Johnston from Leschenault in Bunbury, and we would do the rounds of the many dances within the district. We'd been knocking around together on and off since we were thirteen years of age. Her mother had a small Morris car which she generously used to loan us, if we could scrounge a bit of rationed petrol. My brother Bill said to me before he went away, "Is Jeanette the one who's got the car?" and when I answered in the affirmative he said, "Stick with her brother, she's a bloody good looker, and has the use of a car. You've got it made."

Waiting was the game now. Waiting to turn eighteen. It seemed as if the time for my call-up would never come. My mother of course did not want me to join - one was enough in a family of two boys! - which I suppose was fair enough, but for a young lad hoping to fly, danger did not enter into the equation at this stage.

The fourth of December 1941, my eighteenth birthday, finally came around. I celebrated with a certain amount of anticipation as the call-up papers for my medical examination and entrance exams were due to arrive. Three months later they were delivered to me personally by my friendly Postmaster Mr Coles at the chemist shop where I was working, as he knew I was anxiously waiting for them to turn up.

Enlisting aircrew had to report to ANA House on St George's Terrace, Perth and about ten of us were present for this morning's session. Medical examinations were the first item on the agenda, and what a circus they turned out to be. We were left sitting around in the cold, completely in the nude for about three quarters of an hour, and then pushed, pulled and poked in places I never knew I had; then, after being turned into shivering pieces of embarrassed jelly, we were told to get dressed and go into the examination room for aptitude tests.

The first test was Morse code, where I nearly blew my chances of becoming a pilot. The instructor was very slowly sending out letters in Morse code, and all we had to do was write down what he had sent; such as three dots and a dash.

Thinking I was doing the right thing, I took down everything he was sending in the correct words (as taught by Mr Coles) without any mistakes. After he had checked our work, the instructor asked, "What do you want to be in aircrew lad?"

"A pilot Sir."

"Well you'd better do this test again, and just put down the dots and dashes, as you are likely to be snapped up as a wireless operator the way you handle Morse code."

The day was finally over, and I returned home to await my call-up as a member of the RAAF reserve, pending notification of my acceptance, which I was told would be in the affirmative.

My papers arrived and I was to report to ANA House on the second of March 1942, to be sworn in; then taken to RAAF Station Pearce at Bullsbrook, which was the Initial Training School (ITS) at that time.

When being marched (if you could call it that) to our quarters, verbal abuse was dealt out to us by the other bods of previous intakes. ("You'll be sorry mate." "Yer off yer bloody head joining this mob.") These and many other remarks were aimed at making us feel as lowly as possible, and handed out to all new incoming personnel; we would get our own back when the next course arrived.

We were number 25 intake, and the last to go to Pearce as the orphanage at Clontarf was soon to be taken over by the RAAF as the ITS in WA.

Number 25 Course intake.
Author is second from the right on the back row.

Settling in was a very strange process. I was taken to the store to collect all my gear; first a kit bag to hold it and a strange article aptly named a 'goon skin' which consisted of a boiler suit type of overall in which my body was to be encased for most of the time I was on the station. There was a matching navy blue beret to set off this degrading looking outfit; serviceable for the job in hand was about all it had going for it.

Our hut held about twenty bodies. Each man had an iron folding bed with a very large hessian bag on the end of it; this, when stuffed with straw, became a palliasse (or mattress). The trick was not to fill it too full or it became lumpy, and if not filled enough the wire base on the bed left patterns on one's bum and hips. Being very uncomfortable, some of us didn't get much sleep that first night.

I was introduced to another strange phenomenon while stationed at Pearce. Hanging on the wall at the main gate was a dispenser containing condoms which were free to anyone going off the station. This service was not very well patronised, as (so I was told) the condoms were about the texture of a push-bike inner tube, and using them was like "washing your feet with your socks on," or "eating P.K. gum with the wrapper on," - but they did make good dust covers for rifle barrels.

After introductory lectures and days of marching with endless drills, we were soon on our way to Clontarf Orphanage to take the place over as ITS for the RAAF.

The building, surrounded by a pine plantation, was quite impressive but the remainder of the place was a complete shambles. We were bedded down on an upstairs verandah, which quickly gained the name of "Bug Alley" as the quantity, quality and size of these biting bastards had to be seen to be believed. Eradication of these vermin became our number one priority. After much spraying and dusting (we nearly got rid of ourselves in the process!) extermination and peaceful sleep without bites was achieved.

One of the first things we had to do was to make our wills, and in this we were very lucky to have a solicitor in our course, Gordon Freeth (later to become a Member of Parliament and Sir Gordon Freeth). A queue formed with Gordon sitting at a table filling out our will forms correctly. This was easy for us younger ones: we left everything we didn't have to our parents.

Work began in earnest now with many diverse subjects to study, including aircraft recognition, gunnery, Morse code, theory of flight, maths A & B and aero engines.

I had my usual problems with maths A, and flunked it in my first attempt; fortunately I passed well in all my other subjects, and was allowed another shot at it. Pilot Officer Grace was a maths teacher, and took me under his wing - gave me a concentrated session of maths A, before the exam, and I passed with 80%. He was a great teacher!

Physical training instruction was given by Sergeant 'Rocky' Brooks, an ex-wrestler from Sydney. Rough as they come, he damaged many a body in the name of unarmed combat. We survived.

Route marches were sometimes ordered, and having been a side drummer in the cadets at Wesley College, I was dobbed in by one of my 'mates' and became the drummer on these occasions. During one such march, the air raid siren was heard to go off, and we were dispersed into the pine forest.

After the "all clear" had been sounded, very few of us reappeared on the road until well into the time the march was due to finish. This saved us about four miles marching, but didn't win us any medals from an angry Sergeant in charge who threatened to stop our Wednesday leave to Perth. However, with a wry smile, he relented and let us off. A good bloke Sgt Howe, and very popular with everyone.

The Wednesday afternoon leave pass to Perth was a relief valve from a week of study and physical training, and caused many a hilarious moment upon the return to Clontarf.

After quite a few beers at the Palace Hotel Dive Bar prior to catching the bus home, some of the boys were a little the worse for wear, having slightly over-indulged.

The bugler always played the call to "fall in" when we got off the buses. This day he excelled himself, helped by a few extra jars of Swan Lager, and broke into an outstanding rendition of *Alexander's Ragtime Band.* This drew roars of approval from the gathered faithful, except for the Warrant Officer in charge of the assembly who was not amused!

Calling the offending music maker down from the balcony where he was playing, the WO proceeded to tear a strip off him.

This turned out to be a much appreciated balancing act, as the WO and the bugler were both rocking backward and forward, nearly knocking their heads together. The performance brought howls of delight from the crowd and the parade was dismissed, with a few sore heads brewing for the morning.

When we moved to Clontarf, the septic system was in a sad state: the toilets were unusable so a unique alternative was brought into force.

Out in the pine forest poles were slung at the appropriate height between the trees; a trench was dug beneath the poles, and a new toilet facility had been installed in a matter of hours.

This caused much cursing and swearing during night visits if you were unlucky enough to be taken short.

Some nasty types took up the sport of waiting until the poles were in use, then bounced them up and down, hoping some poor devil would fall in. When these blokes were caught, you can imagine the fate that awaited them!

A major disaster was narrowly avoided when the septic system was being rebuilt.

Most of the labour provided for the job was supplied by the trainees waiting to move on to Cunderdin to begin their pilots course, the balance being tradesmen overseeing the work. A wheelbarrow of cement was being mixed by one of the trade blokes on top of a big old septic tank. Suddenly there was a large crack. Down into the mire went the barrow with the poor man doing the mixing following it in.

I have never seen anything move as fast as that bod shooting up and out of that tank. He was quickly hosed down, and shot off to the medics to be disinfected, but he suffered no ill effects.

The big disappointment to us was that about ten minutes before the event, a high ranking Area Officer had been standing on the exact spot where the hole appeared. Not being at all popular in the Force, you can imagine our frustration at his missing this ghastly dunking.

After finishing our ITS course, we were transferred to station duties. You guessed it: fixing septic and toilet systems and any other jobs that needed doing.

We were now anxiously waiting to find out what our future was to be, as the selection board was to designate our next posting as wireless operators, navigators, gunners or pilots.

The big day arrived, up went the names and allocation of positions, also the name of the next training station.

All my wishes had been granted, I was to train as a pilot at EFTS Cunderdin (Elementary Flying Training School) on Tiger Moth aircraft.

Selected to train as Pilots.
The author is on the extreme right of the front row.

Chapter 2

I went home on leave before going to Cunderdin. Donnybrook seemed very quiet after the hustle and bustle of Clontarf, where running between classes was the order of the day and all activities were go, go, go, so it was great to relax and enjoy life.

I played quite a few games of golf with my father, when he could get the time; but as he was the only doctor in the district he was kept very busy.

My girl friend Jeanette was working for Sunnywest Dairies in Bunbury, and we managed to fit in a few dances and parties with me staying at the Johnstons a few times.

We got home very late after one ball, about 4 am, to find Mr Johnston, a dairy farmer, pulling his boots on to go milking. He said to Jeanette, "You won't be much good at work today, getting home this late, or early, whichever you like to call it." All I got was a dirty look, as he marched off to milk the cows. Mr and Mrs Johnston were very tolerant towards us, and did a wonderful job hosting overseas servicemen on leave; mainly sailors when they were in port. Mrs Johnston worked for the Red Cross, finding billets for English submariners, when they came down from Fremantle.

Leave came to an end and I said goodbye to my folks at Donnybrook and caught the bus into Bunbury, where Jeanette met me to take me to the train to Perth.

We said our goodbyes on the station platform, waving to each other until we were out of sight. When Jeanette went back to the car, she noticed my uniform cap on the seat. Knowing that I would be in strife if I arrived without it, she wound up the little Morris, and set out for Picton Junction, where the train would stop for a minute or two.

I was looking out of the window and saw the car arrive at the station in a hell of a hurry. Ginge (her favoured nickname) rushed toward the train, waving my cap in the air, and yelling my name.

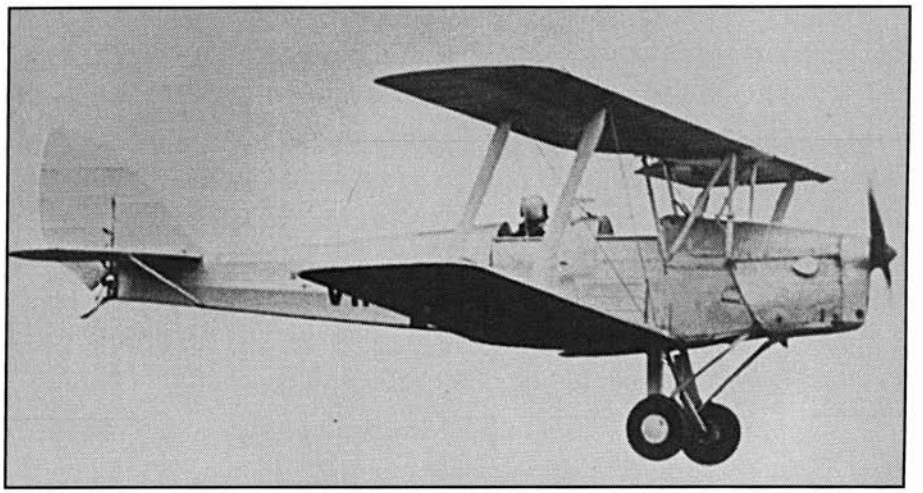
Ginge.

The engine was just pulling out, as she ran along the platform with people cheering her on. I had my hand out of the window, and the changeover was made, amidst much clapping and happy hooting from all the onlookers. A great girl my Ginge!

We left for Cunderdin EFTS on 28 July 1942. This was one of the most exciting times of my life, *I was going to learn to fly.*

The aircraft used for elementary training was the de Havilland 82A, Tiger Moth. This was a wooden framed, fabric covered bi-plane, with front and rear cockpits, and powered by a Gypsy Major engine.

The Tigers, we were told, were very light on the controls, and were to be handled with tender lovin' care, as any heavy handedness was asking for trouble.



Tiger Moth.
(Photo courtesy RAAFA Museum, Bull Creek.)

Cunderdin is a small town in the wheat and sheep country, about 150 kms east of Perth; very flat, excellent for flying training, with plenty of open spaces to put a Tiger down in case of forced landings.

We were shown to our living quarters then taken to the stores section to be issued with our flying gear, which included flying suit, helmet and goggles, and a speaking tube with ear pieces that fitted into the helmet, and which plugged into a connecting tube to the Instructor in the front cockpit. No radios were fitted in those early days.

A dress rehearsal in full flying gear was the order of the day, everyone trying on their suits for size and kidding we were flying all over the countryside in Tiger Moths.

Three heads poked in the door and called out, "You'll be sorry you silly buggers; you'll never learn to fly!" but not even this usual 'new bods call' could dampen our high spirits, and the anticipation of flying.

Having passed all subjects at Clontarf, we were now promoted to Leading Aircraftmen (LAC) designated by a propeller worn on the sleeve of the uniform or shirt. The white flash was still worn in the forage cap, showing that we were aircrew trainees.

Lectures took up a big part of our time now, with new subjects being added to the course, such as airframes, navigation, meteorology and physical training which was high on the agenda.

Flying instruction was behind schedule, as this was the middle of winter, and the weather hadn't been suitable for light aircraft, making a backlog of time for the course in front of us, holding up our start to flying instruction.

The weather cleared at last, and I was allocated my flying instructor. He was Sergeant Jim Benzie, and it turned out that his bark was worse than his bite, but boy, did he have a bark!

It was a strange feeling walking toward the aircraft for the first time; I had never been in a plane before. The only time I had been off the ground was in a lift - not very exciting.

I was shown around the outside of the Tiger and the points to be checked, before getting into the aircraft.

We wore seat-type parachutes, which fitted into a bucket in the cockpit, making a fairly comfortable seat.

Sgt Benzie then went through the cockpit layout of instruments, levers, and knobs; very confusing at this stage, but to become second nature when cockpit drills had been memorised.

This was to be a short flight of about twenty minutes, called a familiarisation lesson, to get the feeling of being in the air, and I feel sure for the instructor to find out what sort of a pupil he had been landed with.

I was helped into the rear cockpit by a groundstaff corporal, who wished me all the best as he strapped me in and showed me how to connect the speaker tube so I could talk to the Sergeant in the front cockpit.

I listened to the calls between the pilot and the groundstaff corporal, who was to swing the propeller to start the engine.

"Are you OK in the back there Collins?"

"OK Sarge."

The motor fired at the first swing, and settled down to a steady note.

I find it hard to explain the sensations I was feeling, as we taxied out to take off. It was pure exhilaration, and I could feel the adrenalin pumping as the anticipation of flying mounted.

My instructor said, "I want you to put your hand on the control column, sometimes called the joy stick; and I mean the one attached to the aircraft, not the one between your legs. Place your feet lightly on the rudder bars, and follow my movements through these controls. When I say 'taking over' take your hands and feet off, and say 'handing over'. Is that clear?"

"All clear Sarge."

"OK. Let's taxi out, and get up into the air."

The wind sock showed us the direction to take off into the wind. There were no runways, just a big grassy paddock with strips visible where other planes had been taking off.

I placed my hands and feet lightly on the controls, feeling the throttle lever moving forward, and the control column and rudder bar pedals being gently handled.

The Tiger Moth gathered speed, the tail lifting off the ground; more speed, and there was a floating sensation, something I will never forget as long as I live - we were airborne! The smile on my face must have been a foot long, and I could see in the instructor's rear view mirror that he too had a grin on his face; maybe a good omen.

After we had climbed to about 1000 feet, Sgt Benzie showed me how the aircraft reacted to the different movements of the controls.

"Collins, I am going to hand the aircraft over to you and I want you to move the 'stick' (control column) gently backwards and forwards; then side to side, and see what the resulting actions of the plane are. Are you ready?"

"Ready Sarge."

"OK. Handing over."

With the words "taking over" I had the controls of an aircraft for the first time.

The Tiger Moth is very light on the controls, and we flew around for about half an hour, so I could get the feel of the aircraft.

One of the first things my instructor taught me was to keep a look out for other planes at all times, as there were plenty of them in the air.

He used to say, "I don't bloody care if you screw your bloody head off, or your bloody eyeballs fall out. Look up, down, port, starboard, and behind you, making sure the air is clear, before you start any manoeuvre, including an alteration of course."

Jim Benzie's bark was at it again, but he sure got his message across. It didn't worry me a bit, as I noticed he usually had a grin on his face after one of his outbursts.

We joined the circuit of the aerodrome on the upwind leg on the starboard side. We kept the strip on which we were to land in view at all times to port.

We turned crosswind to port, at the top of the circuit, and port again onto the downwind leg.

My instructor said, "We now start to lose height to be at 500 feet for the next crosswind turn. This is going to be a gliding approach, without the use of the motor. The aircraft has to be positioned at a distance and height from the landing strip, to put the plane down without using the engine, remembering we have now turned into the wind."

Flying by the seat of your pants is all about landing a light aircraft without power.

Sgt Benzie put the Tiger down with a perfect three-point landing, commonly called 'greasing her on'.

"How was that?" I was asked, as we taxied back to the hangers.

"It was the greatest experience I've ever had Sarge. When do we fly again?"

"If the weather is OK you'll get plenty of circuits and bumps (take-offs and landings) plus other manoeuvres; but the main objective is to get you flying solo, so you have to learn to get it off the ground, and down again, without bending the aeroplane, or yourself."

It was at about this time that I heard about the Instructor's Lament. They used to get truly browned off flying pupils around day after day,

preferring to get a posting to operational duties, especially after a long stint of instructing.

THE INSTRUCTOR'S LAMENT

What did you do in the war Daddy,
how did you help us to win?
Circuits and bumps and loops laddy,
and how to get out of a spin.

I think my instructor had been at it for some time, and was due to be posted to another station, or squadron, in the near future.

I had now become fairly proficient at circuits and bumps, and I was also shown landings with the use of power. This made it a much easier way of landing, as you could use the motor to stop you from undershooting the runway, instead of going around again, as would be the case in a gliding approach.

Pre-take-off and after-take-off drills had to be learned by heart.

Rhymes were made up for remembering these drills, usually of a sexual nature. The perpetrators of these rhymes must have imagined we had sex on our minds fairly often, or a good retentive memory on the subject!

The pre-take-off cockpit drill was: Trim, mixture, pitch, fuel, flaps, sperry (the latter being the name for the gyro compass not fitted in the Tiger Moth, but would be in future aircraft). The first letters of the drill words then were: T.M.P.F.F.S. and the rhyme for same went as follows:

"Tickle Mary's Pretty Fanny For Seduction".

The next call was made immediately the wheels left the ground after take-off; the words being: undercarriage, mixture, pitch, fuel, flaps, sperry; the first letters then were: U.M.P.F.F.S. and the dirty ditty for the memory box went this way:

Up Mary's Pretty Fanny For Satisfaction.

These little rhymes may sound crude and rude but were a great help used as reminders when carrying out cockpit drills.

Lectures took up a big percentage of our time these days, and I often silently thanked PO Grace, from Clontarf days, for putting me right with my maths, as I wouldn't have got anywhere without a good grasp of the subject.

One day we were doing a bit of low flying over some scrub, when a fox shot out of the bush, and took off across a big cleared paddock. Sgt Benzie banked the Tiger around in a steep turn, and took off after the fox at full throttle.

The fox suddenly turned ninety degrees to port, and made for a dry creek bed, with the Tiger Moth in hot pursuit.

"I really think that fox enjoys these chases," said my instructor.

"Not half as much as your pupil!" I replied, with a laugh. "That was great!"

We climbed to 1000 feet, and headed for the 'drome, and I'm sure my stomach would have taken longer to settle down had I not known that Jim Benzie was one of the best Tiger Moth pilots to be found.

I had a hell of a surprise one occasion when flying dual with Sergeant B. We took off one morning, climbed to 1000 feet, then levelled off, heading away from Cunderdin, instead of doing our usual circuit and bump to start the day.

"We're going to pay a visit today, if all goes well, and this is strictly between you and me. The Chief Flying Instructor would have my guts for garters, if he found out. OK?"

"OK Sarge." I said, having no idea what the hell he was talking about.

The aerodrome was well behind us when we flew over a large farm house at 300 feet, and then circled around the house twice.

A lady came out of the house, waving a white piece of cloth, and went back inside.

"See that smoke coming out of the chimney? That gives us wind direction and strength."

I woke up then, knowing that he was going to put the plane down on the smooth home paddock for some reason.

"Is there anything wrong?" I asked.

"No, nothing could be better, you'll understand when we've landed."

The plane was put down with his usual immaculate three point landing. He taxied between two big sheds and cut the motor. The farmer and his wife came out.

"You're just in time Jim. They're just out of the oven."

I was introduced, and we sat down to the biggest feed of delicious freshly baked scones I had ever tasted.

'Ask no questions, you'll be told no lies' seemed to be the order of the day here, so I applied that rule, and the matter was never mentioned again.

It was at this stage that Sgt Benzie was posted, and my new instructor was Pilot Officer Fred Chaney (later to become a Member of Parliament, and also to receive a knighthood).

PO Chaney was quite different in his attitude to instructing, quietly spoken, but firm. He was able to transfer his knowledge and handling of the aircraft in a manner I could assimilate much more easily.

One morning after a couple of circuits and bumps, I was taxiing to the end of the runway and turning crosswind as usual, when PO Chaney said to me, "Just hold it there Collins, I think it's time to have a crack at this on your own."

He was sending me solo!

"Do you feel confident enough to take her for a circuit?"

"Yes Sir."

He must have been confident in my ability, as he was already out of the aircraft, with the front control stick in his hand, and his parachute slung over his shoulder.

"Just keep on doing as you have been for the past seven hours of dual, and you'll be OK; you're quite ready to go solo."

It's hard to explain the feelings of an eighteen-year-old, in 1942, about to fly solo for the first time.

I must say there was a certain amount of tightening of the gut but also exhilaration, and a sense of achievement. I had soloed in just under seven hours of dual instruction.

Taxiing to the take-off point seemed like ten miles, but I was soon there, turned crosswind, and did my pre-take-off drill, which was by now second nature, thanks to our dirty ditty.

Having searched the sky for any approaching aircraft, and finding none, I turned onto the strip, into wind.

Moving the throttle steadily forward, and controlling the Tiger with stick and rudder pedals, I felt the usual rise of the tail, and with the throttle fully forward, and a gentle pull back on the stick, I was airborne.

I knew PO Chaney would be watching me like a hawk as I did my circuit and landing, which was to be a gliding approach. All was going well as I made my crosswind turn, ready for my final turn into wind and landing.

Coming in, I appeared to be a bit high so I put the nose down slightly to lose a bit of height, but not to increase air speed.

I crossed the fence a little high and fast, but managed a good landing, with only one slight bump.

"Holy bloody fires of hell man (a Jim Benzie expression) I've gone solo, and both aircraft and self are in one piece!"

Advanced flying on Tiger Moths was now in full swing, with aerobatics being one of my favourite routines.

I was very lucky as I was never airsick at any stage in my flying so far, but had seen other blokes go through hell when they had started aerobatics. Some of these unfortunately had to give up flying altogether, but most managed to overcome the problem, going through torture doing so.

The hardest manoeuvre for me to perform in aerobatics was the slow roll; I kept losing it halfway through, and I could see my instructor was getting cheesed off about it.

One morning PO Chaney said, "After take-off Collins, I want you to climb to 3000 feet, and we'll do slow rolls until you get it right.

This is the only problem you have with aerobatics, and we're going to fix it now!"

"Yes Sir," I said, and began climbing to the required height, the minimum for a work-out.

Doing a roll in a slow moving plane takes plenty of work on stick and rudder controls; for instance, when you are on your back the stick works in the opposite direction, and co-ordination between the control column and the rudder bar is essential.

After a few practice runs I had the hang of the manouevre, and my instructor said, "OK Collins, you're doing the rolls well enough now. Get it into your head, hands and feet, and keep it there. Now take us home. Put her down gently, I think we've both had enough rolling around for one day."

Instrument flying training, under a canvas hood, was one of the most unpopular facets of learning to fly.

It wasn't the flying itself; but the hood over your head. It created a small, smelly little cavern to sit in with little ventilation; quite unpleasant, especially if someone had been airsick in the cockpit; you couldn't poke your head out and the stench hung around for days.

The instructor's patience was truly tried teaching 'blind flying' as it was called. The bloke in the front seat would call out. "Are you bloody blind? What are your instruments telling you? Keep your eyes open! Lift your left wing! Look at your airspeed! Watch the compass! Your compass! You're turning in bloody circles!"

The lecture room was getting plenty of attention, we were being taught many relevant subjects including navigation. This was the first time I had heard the word 'computer'.

On this small instrument we would set wind direction and speed, magnetic course and airspeed, move a couple of dials and up would pop our true course and time of arrival; a very smart little piece of equipment.

A couple of cross-country exercises were next in line. These being set out on a triangular course, we had to land and check in at each turning point, then take off to the next touchdown, and then home. This was a navigation and map-reading exercise which we all

enjoyed. Everyone, that is, except a couple of bods who got lost, and had strips torn off them when they eventually got home, nearly out of fuel, after picking up the railway line and following it back to Cunderdin.

Our time at EFTS was coming to a close, with final exams looming for our many different subjects, all of which had to be passed with a minimum of 65%.

The final flying test was taken with the Chief Flying Instructor, who at the time was Squadron Leader Thorpe.

His nickname was 'Scrubber'.

To be scrubbed as a pilot meant that you were written off in that job, and sent on to some other position in aircrew. You can see from the nickname that he was pretty tough in the final flying test. It didn't take many errors to hear the drastic words from the front cockpit, "Let's go home lad, I'm afraid I have to scrub you. Your flying is not up to the required standard."

One morning PO Chaney called me over and said, "Collins you're going up for your test with CFI Thorpe this morning. You'll be taking off in half an hour. I want you to relax, and be your normal self. If you fly the aircraft as you've been doing for me, you'll be quite alright."

We had done circuits and bumps, night flying, and I had no problem going solo, but the CFI didn't test us on that. It was left to the instructor to get us to the solo stage.

It's hard to describe that half-hour I had to wait before the test: my guts were in a knot, and I had to have a couple of nervous pees. This took quite an effort, being in full flying suit, and the instrument in question took a bit of finding!

The CFI, Squadron Leader Thorpe, came into the crew room a few minutes later, calling out, "LAC Collins let's go and check out your flying lad. It's a great day for it."

To me it seemed anything like a great day, as this tall, rather gaunt looking officer, with the reputation of being a hard taskmaster and the nickname 'Scrubber' didn't in any way throw a feeling of calm over one.

"Righto lad," said the Chief. "Get her in the air, fly straight ahead to 500 feet, then do a climbing turn to port, then to starboard, coming back onto this course to 2000 feet, and level out."

I could see he was watching very closely every move I made.

There was only one bad remark from the front cockpit. "Keep your port wing up, you tend to fly with it a bit low. Not a bad fault, but we might as well get it right from the start."

I'm sure that wing did not go one inch below the horizon for the remainder of the test!

To me the CFI did not appear to be the big bogey he'd been painted. Procedures had to be carried out correctly and smoothly. Luckily I had settled down by now, quite enjoying the flying, trying to forget who was giving me instructions from the front, and concentrating like hell.

Aerobatics caused a bit of a laugh at one stage.

I was asked by the Chief to do a loop for him. After I'd gone through the procedure, he said, "That was a little bit sloppy Collins. I'll take over and do one for you, tightening the loop up somewhat."

"Handing over Sir."

"Taking over."

I left my feet on the rudder bars, and my fingers on the stick, very lightly, to follow him through the movements.

Putting the nose down to get the speed to the required 110mph, I noticed that the Chief went through to about 115mph. He then commenced the loop by pulling the stick back to take us over the top.

I'm afraid he was over generous with the stick movement, and tightened the loop so much that the g-force (force of gravity) nearly blacked me out, by draining the blood from my head.

Inadvertently, I said aloud, "Shit that was tight."

"Sorry about that; I went a bit too far the other way."

I could hardly believe my ears, Scrubber had apologised to an LAC. I had expected a telling-off for my outburst; the Squadron Leader did have a heart after all.

"Let's get on with the rest of the aerobatics. I want you to do a stall turn, climb back up to 3000 feet, and execute a slow roll."

I thought the word 'execute' was a poor choice of a word for me when speaking of doing a slow roll. My practice with PO Chaney, however, had paid off and, much to my relief, I went around without a hitch

The remainder of my test appeared to go fairly well, as I had no stern words from up front.

"Let's go back to base now Collins. Join the circuit and gently put us back on earth."

I joined the circuit on the upwind leg, went around, doing a gliding approach as instructed, and to my satisfaction, and probably the surprise of the CFI, I greased on a great three-point landing.

Taxiing back to the dispersal line not a word was said and I had no idea how my performance had been evaluated.

As we left the aircraft and walked back to the huts, the Chief said, "That'll be all for now Collins," and disappeared into his office.

It was over!

I had been on my final flying test on Tiger Moths, and I think I had made it through.

I was also anxiously waiting for the results of my final examinations.

These results were posted up on the board a few days later, and I was relieved to see that I had passed all subjects, with an average percentage of seventy.

Flying tests by CFI Thorpe kept us biting our fingernails for another couple of days.

Different grades were allocated for passing the flying test, and I was hastily scanning the list to see how I had done.

There it was near the top of the list: LAC Collins 'A.A.' - I had been rated 'above average'.

The people responsible for this top result were of course Sgt Jim Benzie and PO Fred Chaney, who had guided me through the many difficulties of learning to fly a Tiger Moth.

Some of our course went into the pub in Cunderdin, on a short leave pass, to have a few beers to celebrate. There was no wet mess for lowly LACs!

Chapter 3

Leave was now the order of the day, and were we glad to have the break, having been hard at it at Cunderdin for three months, with only a couple of short leave passes.

But first the posting to Service Flying Training School (SFTS) was to be advised. There was always some bloody thing to be waiting for in this outfit, especially if you were about to go on leave.

Having been rated 'above average' on Tiger Moths, I was hoping to be posted to a single engine aircraft SFTS but this was not to be.

I was one of five WA trainee pilots and Geraldton was the usual destination for twin-engined Avro Anson training, but we were being sent to Mallala in South Australia.

The five strays were: Harry Hale, Frank Beaumont, Len Morley, 'Sainy' Rees and me.

While on a short leave, Ginge and I went to a dance in Bunbury, at the Lyric Ballroom.

I was returning to base next day, so when we arrived home in the little Morris, I asked, "Will you wait for me till I get home after the war?"

"Are you asking me if we can become engaged?"

"That's right," I said. "Will you marry me darling?"

"Yes I will, but you'll have to ask our parents before we can become engaged. I'll wait for you to come home."

We were both so very happy that I said I would write to Mr Johnston and my father as soon as I returned to Cunderdin.

Ginge worked at Sunnywest Dairies and I used to write to her there, the PO Box number being 47. Their home Box number was 40.

When I wrote to Jeanette's father, Mr HD Johnston, asking for her hand in marriage, I mistakenly addressed it to Box 47, Sunnywest.

Her uncle, Mr HF Johnston, just happened to be the secretary of Sunnywest, and duly received my letter. He called Jeanette to his

office, and when she saw him holding the letter, she recognised my writing and went as red as a beetroot, guessing what had happened.

"I am sure this letter was intended for your father Jeanette. I think you'd better take it home to him."

When I was told of this big faux-pas, I felt a complete idiot, but I was assured many people had a good laugh at my expense.

The CO at Cunderdin sent for me before I left and gave me the news that my brother, Bill, was missing on operations over Germany. He cheered me up a bit, by telling me there was a good chance Bill had baled out, and become a prisoner-of-war, as was the case in many such circumstances.

My father had taken the news fairly well, but Mum was very worried about me becoming a pilot, as we were a two-son family, and the prospects for one at the moment were grim.

We said our goodbyes to the rest of the blokes on the course, and went on leave at last, with orders to report at Perth Railway Station, in two weeks time, for our trip to Mallala.

Ginge and I spent as much time as we could together this leave, as I wouldn't be getting home from South Australia until I'd finished the course at SFTS.

I went into Bunbury and spent time with the Johnstons, and she managed to take a few days off from work and stay with us at Donnybrook.

We had one hilarious episode after a dance at the Lyric. One of our party had managed to get hold of a bottle of port wine, and duly swigged merrily along, until he was violently ill.

We cleaned him up at a horse trough in Victoria Street and set off home with him in the Mighty Morris.

A mate and I walked him up to the front door not knowing what the reception from his mother would be.

He gave a wonderful performance and standing upright, said to his mother. "Gee Mum, I feel crook. I've got a hell of a belly ache. I think I've got appendicitis. I've been sick."

"Thank you boys for bringing him home. It's alright dear. You hop on the bed, and I'll ring the doctor staight away."

This was going to get out of hand. We knew the cause of his 'illness'. As it was just after midnight, we didn't think a doctor would be too pleased at being called out, so we took the car around the corner, and sneaked back to hide behind some bushes, so we could witness the outcome.

Fifteen minutes later the doctor's car arrived, and he hopped out bag in hand and disappeared into the house. All was quiet in the stillness.

Suddenly the doctor's voice, loud and indignant, boomed through the open front door:

"Your son is drunk Madam. You have called me out after midnight, to a case of common drunkenness."

He stormed out of the house, into his car, and left in a spray of gravel.

We crept back to the car, took the others home, then drove out to Ginge's place at Leschenault.

The time came to leave for Mallala. My father did not have any babies due to be delivered, so he and Mum drove me to Perth to meet the other four bods at the railway station.

We left for Kalgoorlie where a troop train was being assembled to cross the Nullarbor Plain, to Port Augusta, and on to Adelaide.

Naturally no grog was allowed onto the train, but Aussies, well known for their ingenuity, already had plans in place to overcome this unwelcome hurdle.

Arrangements were made with a willing publican to line some fruit cases with paper, then stack in bottled beer, leaving room for a couple of layers of fruit on top.

The method for cooling the bottles next day, was to wrap them in toilet paper, wet it, and hold them out of the window. Evaporation did the rest.

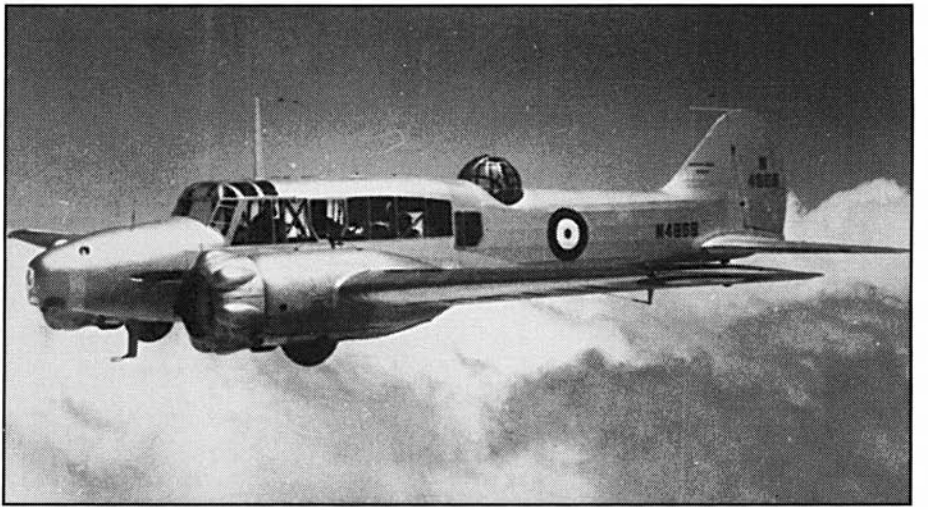
We all dobbed in a few shillings, and a list was held of each person's share of the booty. Beer at this time was about one shilling

and six pence (15 cents) a bottle and on our income of around 65 cents a day there wasn't enough cash for wild parties on the trip.

The train was made up of vans, cattle trucks and a few carriages; we were the lucky ones and scored a carriage.

For meals the train would stop, everyone would pile out and eat beside the tracks. The poor bods in the cattle trucks had it very rough; they reckoned the trucks all had square wheels.

Eventually we arrived in Adelaide and made our way to Mallala by train.



Avro Anson.

(Photo courtesy RAAFA Museum, Bull Creek.)

Chapter 4

The Avro Anson was the introduction to twin-engined flying for most pilots. The first Anson flew in 1935, and the last civilian type ceased operations in 1992. Eight thousand Ansons were built, and 1028 served in the RAAF, more than any other type in the Force's history.

The engines consisted of two Armstrong Sidley Cheetah 7 cylinder radials, with a maximum speed of 200mph.

Changing from Tigers to Ansons was really quite a let-down as it was the end of any aerobatics; most exercises done straight and level, or 'stooging' as we used to call it.

The 'Aggie' (our affectionate name for the old girl) was an aircraft that was very kind to the trainee.

When bringing the aeroplane to the point of stall, all it would do was to shake the hell out of us and gently sink a few feet, and repeat the process. There was no spin or any other bad habit to contend with.

The worst job, when flying the Anson, was to operate the undercarriage. This had to be retracted, and lowered, by winding a crank handle; 120 turns to bring it up, and the same number to get it down.

The hard part was to hold the control column steady with your left hand, wind like hell with the right, and try to stop the aircraft behaving like a constipated kangaroo.

Naturally the instructors never had a problem with this exercise, as they always had the trainee pilot to do the job for them!

Another annoying habit of the twin-engines was when the motors were not synchronized. This would cause an irritating noise: wow-wow-wow-wow, and if it wasn't corrected, by adjusting the throttles to have the same number of revs on both motors, my instructor would yell, "Collins do you want to drive me bloody crazy? Adjust those yodelling engines, or I'll have you in the Sergeants' Mess washing dishes for a week!"

The Aggie wasn't as sensitive as the Tiger to handle, but having a wheel on the control column made one feel as if one was more in charge of the aircraft.

After we had gone solo, two trainees were teamed together for cross-country exercises and bombing practice; the latter at low and high levels, using smoke bombs to register the accuracy.

The groundcrew used to play a dirty joke on us aircrew bods, when we were in pairs. The aircraft had a built-in pee funnel with a tube that connected to a metal outlet built into the bottom of the fuselage, which pointed to the rear of the aircraft, to take the waste into the slipstream.

These heathens would turn the outlet toward the front of the plane, into the slipstream, and after a slight pause, you'd get your own back all over you. A check underneath before taxiing out for take-off was a very wise move.

At this stage of our training, lectures were taking up a large part of our time as was instrument flying in an aircraft simulator, known as the Link Trainer.

This machine was operated by instructors who devised devilish manoeuvres to outwit poor unsuspecting trainee pilots. I don't know of one pilot who can honestly say he enjoyed Link Trainer instruction.

Low flying was the joy of every pilot. The sensation of speed was so much greater at low level.

The minimum height for authorised low flying was 300 feet, but it was much more of a thrill at 50 to 100 feet, and I must admit that this altitude was more often used than the correct one.

One day I was doing low flying over St Vincent's Gulf, at about 70 feet, when a flock of seagulls suddenly appeared in front of me. I heaved back on the stick, scattering the birds and giving myself one hell of a fright.

On the way back to Mallala, I noticed that the port engine was overheating, so I throttled it back as much as possible, reaching the 'drome OK.

I taxied back to dispersal, and reported the overheating to the groundstaff mechanics, who had a look at the offending motor.

Much to everyone's surprise, four well-cooked seagulls were found stuffed into the engine nacelles, reducing the air flow to the air-cooled cylinders.

This matter had to be reported to the powers-that-be, so I needed a good story to tell to the CFI.

Sure enough about an hour later, my instructor told me I was wanted in the Chief's office, at the double.

Knocking, walking in smartly, and throwing my best salute, I said, "LAC Collins reporting Sir."

"Right Collins. I hear you have picked up some birds in the engine nacelles of your aircraft. Is that correct?"

"Yes Sir. It was four seagulls."

"Collins, I have been flying over St Vincent's Gulf for some time now, and have never seen seagulls at 300 feet. In fact I have never seen them at that height ever. You wouldn't have been under 300 feet, would you?"

"I may've been a few feet under at times, certainly not more than 50 feet or so, but I think I have the answer to the birds' unusual height Sir."

"Do tell lad. This will interest me greatly. Anything that flies has my full attention."

"After the gulls had scattered, I turned around to see what had happened, and noticed two eagles that were still forcing the birds up higher. One was just diving on a damaged gull. That was the last I saw of them Sir, as it was then I noticed the port motor was overheating, and headed for home."

"That, Collins, is one of the most interesting stories I have ever heard, in relation to birds, and who am I to doubt your account of the happening, as I wasn't present at the performance, and no other aircraft evidently saw the incident, as the pilots say they were not in the area. You're dismissed."

Throwing another parade-ground salute, I marched out of the room, thanking my lucky stars I had a good imagination, and a Chief Flying Instructor who had a sense of humor, as I swear I saw a slight smile on his face, when he said I could go.

The other bods were surprised to hear that I'd got away with the episode, without a strip being torn off, and told me I should be on the stage after that performance!

Another pilot was not so lucky, when he came back to the 'drome with a small branch of a pine tree caught in his under-carriage, which had not been fully retracted.

I was told that the CFI said to him, "Don't you dare try to tell me pine trees grow to 300 feet. I gave up believing in Jack and the Beanstalk stories, many years ago."

He was given a tongue-in-cheek reprimand, as all pilots have cheated when low flying. Many were lucky not to be caught, even Chief Flying Instructors.

It was at this time that my family was relieved to be notified that my brother Bill was alive and a prisoner-of-war in Germany.

The heat at Mallala at this time of the year - December - was quite overpowering, especially in the cockpit on the ground, with the sun beating in through the perspex. The metal buckles on the parachute harness became so hot they couldn't be worn.

Getting the Aggie off the ground, in the hot rarefied air, was quite a problem with the lack of lift. A hell of a long run was needed, with maybe two or more attempts to get her off the deck, using plenty of flap to 'push' the plane into the sky.

Coming in to land was just the opposite. The old girl would float and float, so one had to creep in over the fence, hoping the wheels would touch the ground and leave enough room to complete the landing. If no luck with that it meant an overshoot and doing it all over again.

Night flying was a big part of our training now. It was exhilarating to fly in a cool breeze and smooth clear air, without the air pockets and bumps that were present during the day.

My father was born in Adelaide, and my grandparents and aunties were still living there. We had a few days leave over Christmas, so I spent some time with them, being shown the city and the beautiful Adelaide hills.

During other breaks we used to go down to the city for a few days. The Hotel Australia was the favourite watering hole for the boys, mainly because it was the nearest one to the railway station. The YMCA was a good place to put the head down for a few hours, after a visit to the movies, and sometimes a dance would be held for service personnel on leave.

A couple of my so-called mates would put a spoke in my wheel if they saw me have more than two dances with the same girl.

They would go up to the young lady and tell her that I was

engaged, and my fiancee was a green-eyed redhead, who would have her guts for garters if she was told of any goings-on.

Then one of the buggers would move in and take over, gaining from the hard work I had put in.

The day of truth came, as the results of the final written exams for our lecture subjects were to be announced. My only slight worry was navigation. The ship-interception exercise was tough. We had to 'fly' at different heights and cope with wind changes at each level; and the ship changed course many times.

I managed a pass with 68%, and all other subjects were OK.

The final flying test was next, and I went into this feeling fairly confident, as I'd had no problems with my instructor or any of the procedures. This was the big one to gain my wings so there was some natural apprehension, plus a bit of gut twisting, before the test.

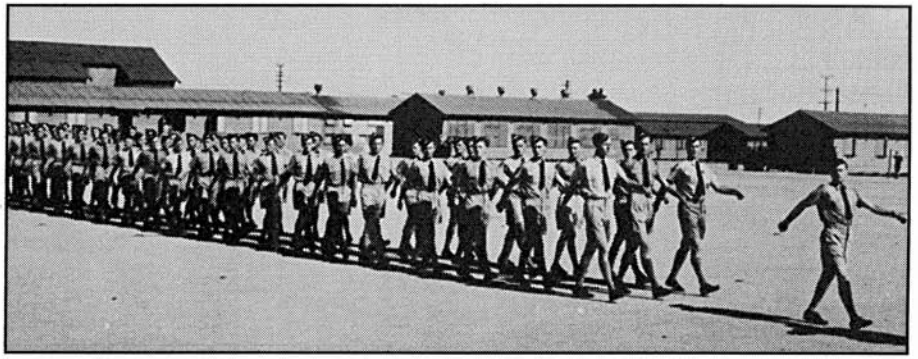
All went well; the usual leaks were about, and I heard through the grapevine that I had passed the test and would gain my wings.

Official notification came out in a couple of days, and there was much celebration for us five West Aussies as we had all earned our wings.

We went before an interview board, to be selected for a commission as Pilot Officer or Sergeant Pilot.

We had passed wing tests, Mallala, South Australia.
The author is second from the right.

At the end of my session I was told that I was considered too young to receive a commission, and passed out a Sergeant Pilot.



Wings Parade, Mallala, South Australia.

The big day of the parade for the presentation of our wings arrived. My grandparents and one of my aunts had motored to Mallala for the occasion. Seventy-two new graduates were to have the pilots' wings pinned onto their chests by Area Officer, a Group Captain.

When it came to my turn, he stuck the pin into my left tit drawing blood.

I exclaimed, "Shit that hurt."

"Sorry about that lad," he said, moving on to the next graduate without a falter, much to the amusement of the blokes either side of me.

There was great anticipation as we were about to be inducted into the Sergeants' Mess. This holy of holies had only been known to us in the past as a place to wash dishes, as punishment for wrongdoings committed in the air or on the ground.

We were made welcome in the Mess by the Warrant Officer in charge, but it seemed strange to be mixing socially with the people who had been our instructors, both in the air and on the ground. Most were quite congenial towards us but a few still considered us a lowly form of life, or 'sprogs' '(new to the rank) in the slang language of the RAAF. This didn't worry us five West Aussies as we were looking forward to going home on leave and were anxious to know what our next posting would be.

I went down to Adelaide for a few days leave, said goodbye to all my relations and had a celebration party with a few of the boys. I wasa very inexperienced drinker in those early days, so the consumption rate was well down, which was just as well as I couldn't afford to spend much on grog.

When we returned to Mallala The Five Westerneers, as we were known, were advised that we were going home on pre-embarkation leave, but there was no indication of our overseas destination.

The trip across the country by train was as boring as ever, more so this time, as I had not been home for so long, and was longing to see Ginge and my family again.

My parents met me at the Perth railway station, and we stayed at the United Services Hotel on St George's Terrace. We returned to Donnybrook the following day after making a stopover in Bunbury to see Ginge, and arranging to come in and stay with the Johnstons in two days time.

As it was embarkation leave, Jeanette was able to get some time off from work and come out to Donnybrook for a few days.

There was a dance on in the hall that we all went to, and a friend of my parents, Thelma Port, was sitting with them when Ginge and I went out during one of the breaks, with her cousin and partner who had come with us.

We had a quick drink, and a smooch in the car, then went back into the hall looking all innocent.

Thelma turned to my mother and said, "You know Lu, I was never quite sure which girl was Noel's, but I am now. Look at his jacket; it has to be the redhead."

Ginge was wearing an angora top, and the damn fluff from it was all over my uniform coat. The old dears didn't miss a thing.

Leave ended all too soon, and we were to cross the Nullarbor once more, but this time with better accommodation, having the rank of sergeant, and pilots' wings up. I was told it cost about 5000 pounds ($10,000) to train us this far, so they would want to look after us.

My mother, father and Jeanette came to see me off at the station once again. At this stage I had no idea where I was going but did know it was overseas.

We all said our emotional goodbyes but Frank Beaumont, whose wife had presented him with a son a short time before, didn't want to let go of his wife and child. My father and another chap had to grab him and shove him through an open window as the train was moving from the platform. I waved until the train rounded the curve out of the station, and all of my friends and loved ones disappeared from sight, not to be seen for some years to come.

Chapter 5

Once more we did the dreaded crossing of the country by train, this time heading for Ascot Vale, near Melbourne, to No 1 Personnel Depot, where servicemen were issued with their gear, and filled in time before receiving embarkation orders.

We were taken on sightseeing tours, including a visit to the Bryant & Mays match factory, and three of us made a short documentary on the virtues of cheese as a health food at the Kraft cheese factory. My mother and father were shown this film by the picture show operator in Donnybrook at a later date, much to their surprise.

On 16 April we were transferred to No 2 Personnel Depot, Bradfield Park, Sydney, and four days later embarked from Brisbane, still not having a clue of our destination.

The ship we were to travel on, *Klipp Fontein*, had been launched in Norway just prior to the outbreak of war and was still on her maiden voyage, not being able to return to her home port because of German naval activities and Nazi occupation of their country.

She was a ship of small tonnage, diesel powered and fast.

We got underway in the early hours of the morning and upon going on deck, found we were being escorted by a destroyer, which gave us a comforting feeling.

This ship looked majestic, sweeping to port and starboard of us, then going forward to the horizon, and dropping back to clear the rear, checking for submarines.

When we checked on the third morning out the destroyer had left us and we were on our own, making a dash for the United States of America, through the dangerous waters of the Pacific Ocean.

The food on board was American and took some getting used to, especially the breakfasts. Having had the usual Aussie fare of bacon and eggs, steak and eggs, etc, it was an eye opener to be handed a tray with compartments containing olives, fruit, a heap of pancakes and maple syrup. Very tasty, but I wondered how long it would last as packing.

I asked one of the cooks if it would be possible to have a meal of steak and eggs some time. He was a nice bloke and said to me, "How the hell do you cook that buddy? I've never heard of doing that. Steak OK, but eggs with it?"

We were given duties of aircraft and submarine watch on the bridge of the ship and I quite enjoyed this job, as it made me feel I was doing something useful, instead of sitting on my bum all day.

It was great to watch the ship ploughing through the waves, sending spray way back along the foredeck, shaking her head and pushing through another roller.

In some fairly heavy weather Frank Beaumont and I went forward to the bow area, to get the thrill of the pitching motion, but that didn't last for long.

There was a blast through the loud speaker, "Will those two stupid bastards up in the bow report to the Captain on the bridge on the double!"

I have never had such a 'balling out' before or since the one handed out by the skipper of that ship. Quite rightly he pointed out that if a big wave had come over the top the least we could expect was broken bones, or at worst, being washed overboard.

Frank and I, duly humbled, ears ringing and red in the face, slunk off to a quiet corner and suffered in silence.

Keeping a lookout at the stars, the navigators on board assured us that we were taking a big sweep to the south, this being confirmed by the cold winds sweeping across the seas, making life miserable to go on deck.

Being a trainee diesel engineer, I asked the Chief if it would be possible to go below and have a look in the engine room. He checked with the captain and permission was granted for me to be taken on a tour by the Chief Engineer himself.

I have never seen an engine room to meet the standard of cleanliness and efficiency, as that in the *Klipp Fontein*; a woman wearing a white evening gown could have danced in that area and never had a smudge of oil or grease to worry about.

The big diesel powered away with a magnificent rhythm of sound, as only these great engines can; the brass gauges and copper pipes gleaming, as was the huge bulk of the entire motor.

"Is it OK to tell me what the top speed of the ship is? She seems to move along at a good speed?"

"No. I'm not supposed to tell you that she'll do 27 knots, and will cruise at 20 kts comfortably day after day."

It was no wonder we didn't travel in convoy, or escorted, as the only way a submarine could get us was to lie in wait. They would never catch us having that turn of speed.

We were now punching into heavy seas heading north east.

The little ship was making good headway, considering the weather conditions and the swells rolling down the deck on the starboard side.

There were quite a few casualties with sea sickness, but I was one of the lucky ones, never having been sick on the water or in the air; a great asset for keeping in good health on these voyages.

By now we knew that we were to dock in San Francisco harbour, and were looking forward to seeing the big cities of America.

I was on lookout duty on the bridge a couple of days later, when I yelled out, "Aircraft approaching off the starboard bow. I think it's a Yankee Catalina flying boat."

The plane slowly increased in size, until the unmistakable features of the Catalina could be distinguished. We commonly called the aircraft 'The Flying Ruler' because of its narrow, but very large wing span.

The aircraft came in low over the ship, giving us a friendly wave of its wings, and then flew off to do a sweep of the ocean surrounding the ship, fading into the distance, then returning to do it all over again.

After some hours, another Catalina arrived to take over the patrol, the first plane using its Aldis (signalling lamp) sending out the message, "Welcome to the USA. Bon voyage. We are watching over you."

We were never without air cover for our last three days, until we were safely in port.

We sailed into San Francisco harbour; something I will never forget: the sight of the mighty Golden Gate Bridge with its huge spans, a great engineering structure of its day.

This reminded me instantly of the words of the song.

San Francisco,
Open your Golden Gate,
Don't let that stranger wait -
Outside your door.

We sailed under the bridge and tied up alongside the wharf where we were immediately welcomed by the American people, who remained friendly for the duration of our stay in their country.

We didn't have time to see much of the city, as we were told we'd be catching a train the next day to travel across America to New York.

Because the American people had many friends and relatives in Australia on leave from fighting the Japanese in the islands to the north, or in transit to the war zones, and had been told how the Australians were so good to their troops, they went out of their way to make sure that we were given the best time possible.

We set off by train from San Francisco. What a difference from crossing Australia in cattle trucks, with sit-up seats for beds.

The best Pullman coaches were the order of the day, the beds fully fitted out with sheets and pillowslips, and each coach had its own coloured porter to look after your every wish.

These men were helpful and considerate in every way, spending some time exchanging the difference between American and Australian slang. The Americans back home had a small book of Aussie slang words, and their meaning in their own language. We could have done with one in reverse as we were to find out at a later date.

The food on the train was first class, and cigarettes and cool drinks were all duty free, costing us next to nothing.

Our trip took us through Sacramento and Reno, to Salt Lake City, where we were to have a few hours break and, to our dismay, a march through the streets.

Before leaving home, some of us noticed that the Yanks were avid collectors of the kangaroo penny, so on the off-chance, we each gathered together a bag of these 'brums' and polished them well in the hope of selling them, or using them as barter coins.

The kangaroo and the koala were about the only things most Americans knew about Australia, except that many thought the natives were still hostile, and some were even surprised to see that we were white skinned.

The pennies were well received, and I made quite a few dollars from my bag, getting up to five bucks for one 'brum'.

The march through Salt Lake City was quite an hilarious turn-out. We were dressed in our summer uniforms of shorts, long socks, short sleeved shirts and slouch hats, and noticed the locals viewing us with strange looks on their faces, the reason being (we found out later) that they had never seen men in shorts before, and were quite shocked to see us showing bare thighs.

The march got under way with the small band and the Transport Officer out in front, and the main body in a column of threes bringing up the rear.

As the march progressed the last three would drop off, and this continued until the band, the officer and about six of the column were left in the march.

We escapees' luck ran out when a 90 degree turn was made and the tail of the marchers was missing.

A couple of Military Police and officers scouted around and eventually made some sort of order out of chaos and the march continued, but a much shorter version than originally planned.

The reprimand given to us march dodgers was a half-hearted affair and no one took the escapade seriously.

Our journey continued on through Cheyenne, Denver and Omaha, where we crossed the great Missouri River, which flowed south to join the mighty Mississippi, south of St Louis.

We continued east to the notorious city of Chicago. I say notorious, as the most I had heard of the city (as presented to us back home by

American movies) concerned gangsters, gambling, prostitution, extortion rackets and the like.

We had managed to buy a few boxes of white and coloured chalks along the line, and in bold printing along the sides of the coaches we wrote the following cheeky message:

RELAX AMERICA. THE AUSSIES ARE HERE TO SAVE YOU!!!

The only problem with this message was that very few Americans had a clue who or what an Aussie was, and when we changed the word to Australians, it didn't appear to make any difference.

One bloke asked me, "Say guy, what's this Orsie you got written there? Is it a sort of God?"

When I tried to explain that we were Australians it became too much and he walked away scratching his head looking back at me as if I was nuts.

Chicago, to me and many of my mates, was just awe inspiring. 'Everything is big in America' appeared to be true; the height of the buildings left me gaping, and we could only see what was in sight from the railway station.

From Chicago, the train pushed on to Pittsburgh. Along the way we had to get used to hundreds of railway crossing warning bells, which went off all day and night.

On to Philadelphia, and then to the end of our immediate journey - Pennsylvania Station, New York.

We had completed a great train adventure, coast to coast across the United States of America, San Francisco to New York, and I enjoyed every day of it.

Our destination upon leaving New York was to be camp Miles Standish north towards Boston.

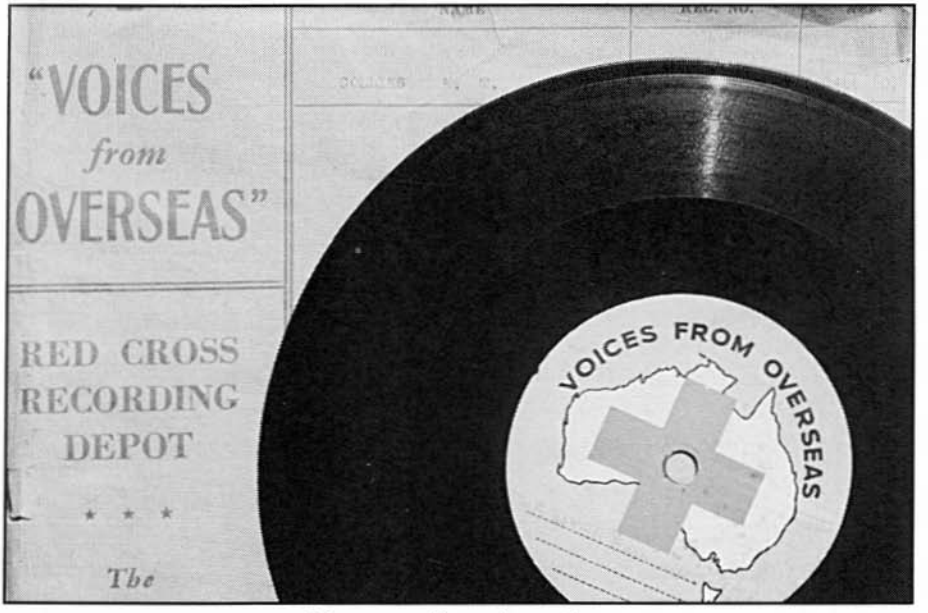
Miles Standish was a huge staging camp, with thousands of troops waiting to go God-knows-where, everyone trying to guess where they were going.

The next move for our group was easy to establish, as we had been issued with winter uniforms, and it was only a quick trip from

America to England on one of the big troop ships. As soon as we had started the trip across the USA it became pretty obvious we were headed for the UK.

We were given leave to go to New York, and this is where I met that wonderful lady Nola Luxford. She looked after Aussies going through the big city, and how she and her helpers found the energy to keep going I'll never know.

The first thing Nola did was to take me into the recording room, and cut a disc to send home to my parents. These records were made of a soft material and were played with a bamboo needle on the gramophone (record player). I had naturally made part of the message to Ginge, as this was the first opportunity we had to get any letters away to Australia.



Message from America.

The next day we were taken on a tour of the Empire State Building, the tallest skyscraper in the world.

The elevator driver asked us, "Do you guys want to go up to the top normal speed, or express? And where the hell is the location of Orstriolia?" as he looked at the name on our shoulder flash.

When we explained where home was, and that there were

thousands of Yanks there, he, like all the other Americans, couldn't do enough for us; like phoning ahead to make sure the bar was open so we could get a beer after having a good look around.

That ride to the top was more frightening than any flight I'd ever had in an aircraft. The bloody lift took off so fast, the force of gravity took over, nearly sitting me on my bum on the floor, and putting my guts somewhere down where my testicles should have been.

The lift operator had a sly grin on his face when he said, "That was a pretty fast take-off for you guys was it? Hell I thought you would've been used to that. We'll do a more gentle landing when I take you down."

Walking out on to the observation deck, we stood in cloud which was moving through with a fairly stiff breeze and I swear I could feel a gentle swaying. I found out later that this was actually happening, and was allowed for in the construction of the building.

The cloud cleared, and I took a look over the edge, wishing to God I hadn't. Motor cars were about the size of small beetles, people like ants, and I had this crazy desire to jump.

Being scared of heights seems unbelievable for a pilot, but in an aircraft I found it exhilarating to be up there looking down at the earth; the expansive vision was part of the thrill of flying.

Gathering together the butterflies in my stomach, I went into the bar with the other blokes and had a couple of quick beers, pleased to note that a couple of them were the same strange colour of grey as I presumed myself to be.

With half a smile, the liftman returned us gently to the ground, wished us all good luck, and hoped the war would soon be over and we could all go back to our homes.

I went into one of the big department stores to buy some clothing and silk stockings to send home to my mother and Ginge as I knew they were impossible to purchase in Australia.

When the salesgirl worked out where I came from, she became all excited; as it turned out she had just received a letter from her boyfriend in Perth WA who was on leave from combat in the islands, and being well looked after by a family in Fremantle.

She rushed off to find the departmental head, and brought him back to meet me.

"See the Sergeant gets what he needs Linda. I will sign for the goods and postage. Those Australians are doing such a great job looking out for our boys down there we can't let them spend any of their own cash in our store."

Once more the generosity of the American people was brought home to me with this gesture. I'm sure the Aussie storekeepers didn't go this far with their goodwill toward the Yanks.

New York taxi drivers, most of whom appeared to be of Italian extraction, were a breed unto themselves. The first thing we had to get used to was them driving on the right-hand side of the road, which was bad enough, but I'm sure when the drivers knew who we were, they decided to show us how good they were at their job.

My bloke took off like a bat out of hell, dodging between trams with the clearance of a cigarette paper, trying to pass everything in front of him and winning most times at the other drivers' expense frightening the living bloody daylights out of them, and doing the same to his sweating passengers in the back.

Arriving at our destination, I turned to look at Tom, my mate alongside of me, "You look as white as a ghost."

"Just take a look in the front mirror, and see what a fine shade of off-white you are yourself."

The taxi driver looked around and, much to our disgust, he began to laugh long and loud, but we changed our attitude when he announced, "I wasn't going to charge you guys anyway, but for the show you've given me, and for the job you're doing, please take this five buck note and buy yourselves a couple of beers on me. Good luck fellas." And he was off with a squeal of tyres, and a wave through the side window.

The tireless Nola escorted us to first class night clubs, all at no expense; she had the happy knack of getting us to the right place at the right time.

The first night we were taken to Billy Rose's 'Diamond Horseshoe'. There were about six of us in the party and the head

waiter seated us at one of the best tables in the house, not far from the stage.

I'd never seen such a fabulous set-up in all my life; no expense had been spared in the decor: thick carpets, fine furniture and quite a large dance floor.

Nola introduced Billy Rose to each of us and he said, "The place is yours tonight you guys. Everything is on the house, so have yourselves one hell of a good time at the 'Diamond Horseshoe'."

We proceeded to do just that, after thanking him for his generosity, which he brushed aside with a wave of the hand, saying, "My pleasure, you guys deserve it and you're a hell of a long way from home; as our boys are in Australia."

Wonders would never cease; we had found someone who actually knew where we came from. He went up further in our estimation!

We'd been seated about ten minutes when Nola said that we would very likely be asked to join other people at their tables for the evening, and to go ahead if we wanted to. The staff would watch over us and she could have a night off.

Sure enough, a few minutes later I was invited to join the table behind me as a guest of the gentleman and the ladies. The remaining five soon received similar requests and a good night appeared to be developing.

I sneaked a look at the table I was to join and had a most pleasant surprise. There was a man and a woman, in their late thirties, and an attractive blonde, about my own age, apparently on her own. (Let this be true I said to myself.)

The older couple, who introduced theselves as Andy and Jenny, were married and the young blonde was their niece, who was celebrating her twentieth birthday. Her name was Cindy.

I asked her if she'd like to dance.

"I'd love to, but I'm not a very good dancer. You'll have to prop me up a bit and lead me."

That was the understatement of the year. We moved slowly around the floor to the rhythm of a slow foxtrot, with Cindy snuggled in to me and not the slightest space between our two bodies.

She was much shorter than me and with a dress cut low in front there was an exciting view down 'happy valley'. The view was not the only thing getting excited either, as blushing like a schoolboy, a stiffness came between us, and as Cindy must have felt it I apologised for the intrusion.

"Don't let it worry you. It certainly isn't worrying me; in fact it's encouraging. It's a good measure of better things to come."

I knew that when the next dance came around, I would be expected to dance with Jenny, and prayed that my 'joy stick' would return to normal, and behave itself, as it had been 'a long time between drinks'.

All went well for the remainder of the party, but Andy said at about 12.30 am, that they would have to leave as he had a heavy work load the following day.

I think he must have seen my lip drop, as he quickly pointed out that Cindy had her own flat. He insisted on giving me ten dollars for a cab fare to see her home.

We had a couple more dances and, after thanking Mr Rose for his wonderful hospitality, headed for home.

On arrival at Cindy's flat, I asked the cabby to wait, but she said, "No. Pay him off Noel. Come up and have a Scotch and coffee."

The drinks went down very well, and so did everything else, and I finished off the great night with brunch at about 11 am, saying goodbye to the lovely Cindy, and getting back to digs at the YMCA about 12.30, where I met up with some of the other bods just having lunch.

I had questions fired at me, about how? when? and where? but I don't think answers were necessary from the smirks on their faces and my contented looks.

Tom, Roy and I wandered around the city for the afternoon and took in a movie, again not being allowed to pay our admission, nor for the slap-up meal we had afterwards. We still couldn't get over this 'Australians do not pay' gesture, but we were certainly not complaining.

The following day I went with a group on a tour of the famous

Rockefeller Centre. It is absolutely huge and too grand to attempt to describe.

We watched a show put on by the equally world famous Rockettes dancing team. I've never seen such a long line of high-kicking girls in perfect unison and a selection of beautiful legs that would be the envy of any of the Hollywood stars. The whole show was an absolute winner.

That night I was off to 'Leon & Eddies', another leading night club in New York, which was on a par with the 'Diamond Horseshoe', and through Nola Luxford, a good time was had. (Not as good as last time, but you can't win 'em all.)

I was to return to camp the following day, and was quite happy to do so to have a rest for a couple of days; the pace in New York had been very fast.

I thanked Nola and her team for looking after me in New York as she was to do for many hundreds of Australian aircrew to follow us.

Two days later, our group was given a further 48 hours leave. We had heard a rumour that there was something wrong with our ship, as we had already spent a long time in the USA and being impatient to fly again, wondered what the hell was holding us up.

Our camp wasn't far from a town called Taunton, and Roy and I decided to head in that direction for the short break.

The watering hole for the Aussies was the Taunton Inn, where we had lunch and a couple of beers at the bar then sat in the lounge with a drink and a smoke.

Two ladies came from the dining room and asked if they could join us, as they had never spoken to Australians before.

They were a very attractive mother and daughter, although it was hard to tell who was which.

After chatting for a while, they asked if we'd like to go home with them for the evening to Providence (wherever that was) and we both said "yes" at the same time.

The mother's name was Jill, and the daughter Leonie, who said she would drive us to camp tomorrow where we were due back by midnight.

The vehicle was a fluid drive sports Chrysler convertible which belonged to Leonie.

We were rolling along in this beautiful machine without a care in the world, Leonie driving, and Roy and Jill in the back, when the wail of a siren sounded behind and a police car pulled alongside waving us over.

I could see the policeman eyeing off our uniforms and shoulder flashes, trying to work out who the hell we were.

The hood was down on the convertible, and Leonie looked coyly up at the patrolman, "What's the matter Officer, I wasn't speeding was I?"

"No lady, you weren't speeding, but according to your registration plates you are too far from home. Have you any authorisation papers for the trip?"

Everyone was restricted in the distance that could be travelled outside their own precinct, because of petrol rationing.

I said, "Gee Officer, I hope these young ladies are not going to get into hot water over us. We are Australian airmen in transit at camp Miles Standish, and they rang the camp to see if two Aussies would like to visit their home for a couple of days. To help out with the mileage we caught a bus into Taunton, and met them there. I'm sorry if we've caused any trouble."

The cop took a long hard look at the four of us and said, "Well I haven't heard a better one this week, and the ladies are looking after our visitors, so OK, this time I won't book you."

Looking the cop straight in the eye I said, "Oh, by the way officer, the girls have been generous enough to offer to drive us back to camp. Could you possibly see your way clear to give them authorisation to travel to Miles Standish."

Looking rather stunned, the patrolman said, "I don't know if our boys in Australia are getting away with things like you're suggesting."

"I can assure you they are officer, plus a bit more."

He pulled out a pad of forms and filled one out for Leonie. "I must

be nuts, but good luck to you guys. Take good care of the girls," he said driving away with a wave, and a big smile on his face.

We eventually turned into a wide driveway, with a magnificent two-storey house standing well back in the grounds of a large estate, surrounded by trees and beautiful gardens.

Jill's husband, Conrad, was a well-to-do stockbroker, and also had something to do with the American war effort. He made us very welcome.

Leonie had her own small flat in a wing of the house in which she and I were served dinner by a young lady, Mary-Lu, who was companion-housekeeper to the family.

Roy and she ate with Leonie's parents and we all met after dinner to have a port wine and to say goodbye as Conrad was leaving in the morning for business in New York, and Jill was to accompany him.

Sleeping arrangements appeared to be no problem, as after the four of us had a nightcap and a yarn for a while, Roy and Mary-Lu said goodnight and wandered off hand in hand, while Leonie and I returned to her flat for the night.

The girls took us on a sightseeing tour the next day, and back to camp Miles Standish in the evening, dropping us off at the main gate where there were plenty of wolf whistles for the girls, and "lucky devils!" for us, with which we heartily agreed.

The next morning the loudspeakers came over with news. "Attention all RAAF personnel. All leave is cancelled. No person is to leave camp. All gear is to be packed ready to leave at an hour's notice. I say again..."

All good things must come to an end. I had a wonderful time in the USA enjoying the exceptional kindness and generosity of the American people.

Chapter 6

We returned to New York the following day, and were immediately taken by bus to the harbour where a most amazing scene unfolded before my eyes.

On the right-hand side of the quay was the great British liner, *Queen Elizabeth*, a magnificent sight to see with wisps of smoke curling from her huge funnels.

Also to be used as a troop carrier, and in sad contrast, on the left-hand side of the wharf was the unforgettable sight of the recently launched massive French liner *Normandie*. Lying on her side, half submerged, she had been accidently set on fire.

The area surrounding the *QE* was a seething mass of American personnel about to board, with the usual yelling and shouting, "Let's go! Let's go you guys! Let's go! Move it! Move it up front!"

I became very tired of this call when the Yanks were around.

The column of men boarding appeared to be never ending, and we were told later that 19,000 drafted American infantry were being packed into the ship.

We boarded by a different gangplank, and were given quarters with two-tiered bunks, which we found out later were the equivalent of first class hotel accommodation. The Yankee privates were camped on the stairways and in any nook and cranny they could find.

Describing the mass of humanity this ship was carrying is difficult to put into words. Just imagining the amount of food that must be on board, and had to be prepared, was mind boggling.

We had toilet facilities close to our quarters, but how the other thousands were provided for I had no idea, and didn't want to know.

We didn't get much sleep that night because we felt the movement of the ship getting under way and, as our quarters opened onto the deck, a few of us watched the busy tugs manoeuvring the mighty ship to the middle of the harbour.

She moved slowly forward; the *Queen Elizabeth* with her cargo of thousands of irreplaceable highly trained fighting men headed for the open ocean.

Once again I was lucky to be to be given submarine and aircraft watch on the bridge wing of the ship, and it was while on this duty that I was told the delay in America was due to problems with the stabilisers in the *QE*. They still hadn't been fully repaired but it was imperative that the ship sailed immediately.

One morning during watch duty, I saw what I believed to be a partly submerged submarine, and yelled to the officer of the watch, "Submarine on the port bow - 10 o'clock."

All hell broke loose on the ship after the officer took a look and pressed the emergency alarm. The ship swung away to starboard, increasing speed, with the fairly calm waters creaming down the sides of the hull and a turbulent wake streaming out behind.

This manoeuvre carried on for a good three minutes, when the call came over the air, "All personnel return to normal duties. Emergency is over."

The lookout in the crowsnest, way up on the mast, had called down that the "submarine" turned out to be a dead whale, belly up, giving the appearance of a sub.

I imagined myself being bawled out for making such a stupid mistake, but just the opposite was the case, as the officer said, "Well done Sergeant, better to be sure than sorry. Yell like that any time you even think there is something out there."

The next day the North Atlantic turned on one of its notoriously savage storms.

Again I was on watch, in heavy wet-weather gear, strapped to the bridge rail to stop me sliding around in the huge rolling action of the ship.

One of the sailors said to me, "She's not usually as bloody minded as this. It's them bloody stabilisers that ain't workin' proper that's makin' 'er roll 'er guts out; mark my bloody words. She's a Queen she is, and bloody behaves like one when she's treated right."

The defence of his beloved *Queen Elizabeth* was outstanding. One would have thought he was talking about Her Royal Highness. This sailor had been aboard since the ship was launched and his pride was justified and to be admired.

Looking up at the crowsnest while this violent rolling was going on was frightening to see. One would swear the cross tree was going to touch the water to port, and then with an agonisingly slow roll, she would pick herself up and go through the same procedure to starboard.

My stomach still held me in good stead but the number of people seasick, with about 20,000 on board, was mind boggling as you can imagine.

This foul weather continued for another day and a half.

The ship and most of its passengers were a complete mess, with the stench of disinfectant throughout, and some of the troops wishing they were dead; many looking like they already were.

The *QE* was unescorted on her dash across the Atlantic, and one of the officers told me she was expected in Scotland six days after leaving New York.

As with our previous sea trip, the greatest fear was that of a German U-boat pack intercepting us. What a prize we would make for them, if they managed to sink the *Queen Elizabeth*.

One afternoon the ship began a series of course alterations: word was about that the Captain had been advised that a convoy had been attacked to the north of us, and that evasive procedures were being taken to reduce the risk of being intercepted.

Nothing eventuated as a result of this action, thank the Lord, and the *QE* sailed on; I noticed that her speed had increased considerably.

I was awakened early the next morning by the sound of aircraft engines roaring overhead, and rushed out to see the wonderful sight of a big Sunderland flying boat, completing a low level pass over the ship.

The plane circled the great *Queen Elizabeth* signalling on the Aldis lamp, "Relax. We've got you covered. Welcome to Scotland."

Although the feeling of relief was great, there was no relaxation in the vigilance and security throughout the ship. As one of the crew pointed out, "We're not quite there yet, an' I don't count me bloody chickens with these sneaky bastards of submarines hangin' around, until we're tied up."

The Sunderlands stayed with us until we were just off the entrance to the harbour at Gurock, in north west Scotland, then gave a last low pass, a waggle of their huge wings, and were gone to carry out their vital role of patrolling the dangerous seas around the coast of the United Kingdom.

We disembarked on the third of June 1943, and were immediately taken to the railway station, where the local ladies of the Red Cross plied us with mugs of hot tea and slabs of sticky bun (without the icing or butter but very welcome to the hungry horde).

We boarded the train and were on our way to Personnel and Despatch Centre at Brighton on the south coast of England, arriving the following day to await postings to our next destination as yet unknown.

Chapter 7

I had about a month to wait for my next posting to come through. Aircraft recognition classes were held fairly regularly until I could pick out German planes very quickly, both in daylight and night situations.

From the lower deck of the Brighton promenade we practised clay pigeon shooting out to sea. This was to keep our co-ordination and reaction speed up to standard, and was a great sport, with bets being laid on the side.

I was billeted at the Grand Hotel which, together with the Metropole, was taken over by the RAAF for the duration of the war.

Both hotels were on the waterfront, and there were constant flights of different aircraft across the English Channel. During the daylight hours, vapour trails of American Flying Fortress bombers could be seen high in the sky, heading for targets in the occupied countries and Germany.

Night would bring the ever-increasing roar of aero-engines, as streams of British bombers flew over to drop their devastating loads on the many targets assigned to them.

On the other side of the coin, some nights the distinctive sound of German aircraft could be heard on their way to bomb London, or other industrial targets or ports.

The towns of Brighton and adjoining Hove were, in peace time, very popular tourist and holiday resorts. The Brighton Pier, which reached out to sea in front of our hotel, was famous for its amusement parlours and food stalls; all closed now and looking very run down.

The beach (if one can call a mass of small stones reaching to the water's edge a beach) was sealed off from the ocean by steel stakes, barbed wire and warning signs, advising that land mines had been laid in the area as defence against a possible invasion by German forces.

Pubs in the vicinity were always of interest to members of the armed services, and in Brighton and Hove the astounding number of 500 watering holes was available to be checked out.

Of course this very important survey could never be completed, but we made a good assault on this task during the time spent in the area.

'The White Lion' was the favoured ale house for my mates Jack, Tom and I. It was a small pub opposite the Clock Tower which was in the centre of a roundabout at one of the main intersections in Brighton.

We became good friends with the publican and his staff, and had many a pint and a yarn there. In the evenings someone would attack the piano and a sing-song would develop, with the dirty ditties becoming a little dirtier as time went on, until Reg, the publican, asked us to tone it down as he didn't want to lose his licence.

Everyone would reduce the volume for a song or two, and then the build-up would start again, with a repeated plea from Reg to cut the racket. This went on happily until closing time at 10 pm.

The pubs in England were totally different to Australia. Mum and Dad, blokes and their girlfriends all joined in together, and in most cases there was a piano for all to gather around for a good old time sing-a-long.

One evening Jack and I went to the White Lion to have a pint; the place was pretty crowded and two young ladies asked us to join them, where there were two spare seats.

This request wasn't hard to accept, as they were a couple of good looking girls, the younger, Norma, a blonde, and Jackie a few years older, a vivacious brunette.

Norma asked, "Is it alright to ask you how long you have been in England, or shoudn't I ask you that?"

"I don't think it would help the German war effort if they were to find out that Jack and I only arrived a few days ago, and have no idea how long we will be in Brighton."

After a couple more drinks Jackie said, "We're going to a dance at the Hippodrome. Would you like to come with us? It should be a good show. I believe they have a good band."

"Yes, come on, let's make it a foursome," Norma said. "What time do you chaps have to be back at your quarters?"

"We're on a 48 hour leave pass, and don't have to check in until midnight tomorrow. How about you Jack? Are you OK to go?"

"That sounds great to me."

Jack, being about three years older than me, partnered Jackie, while Norma took my arm and we set off for the dance.

The Hippodrome was a huge dance hall, with two bands operating, and the music was practically non-stop.

The servicemen there were American, Free French, Dutch, New Zealand, South African, Canadian and British, and the place was fairly rocking with the jitter-bug in full swing, and only just enough room to dance.

About 10.30, Norma asked if we'd like to go back to her place and have supper. Her parents had gone away for a few days and left her a roast of beef and there was plenty left for the four of us.

I didn't realise until then how scarce food was in England, and the rationing so severe. Roast beef was like eating gold, and I said that Jack and I didn't want to eat her rations, but objections were brushed aside, so off we went to catch a tram to the beef banquet.

After our meal, washed down with a couple of beers, I said to Jack, "We'd better get going mate, or there'll be no trams to catch, and I don't feel like a walk back into Brighton. It's about two miles back to the pub."

"Oh you don't have to go," said Norma. "We have two beds, and I think you've missed the last tram anyway, so let's have another drink, and you can tell us more about Australia."

When the time came to 'hit the sack', there were two beds alright, but she'd forgotten to mention that they were both of the double variety.

I must have looked slightly stunned, but Norma said with a cheeky grin on her face, "Now we can't have two men sleeping together can we, so you will have to bunk in with me, if you don't have any objections, or I can make up a bed on the sofa."

"No. Don't go to all that bother. I'm sure I won't snore and keep you awake."

Having sorted out the sleeping arrangements to everyone's satisfaction, we retired just after midnight.

I was to be hanging around Brighton for a further three weeks waiting for a posting and although the company was great and the activities varied, I was anxious to get flying again as it had been over four months since I'd been at the controls of an aircraft.

Movement orders were issued at last, and I was sent with five other pilots to EFTS at Carlisle, on the Scottish border, to do a refresher course on Tiger Moths for two weeks.

Chapter 8

Being able to work out in a Tiger again, doing aerobatics after stooging around in an Avro Anson, was a great way to get my hand back in.

After being checked out with an instructor, we were given a pretty free rein where we flew, subject to a flight plan being submitted for the general area of operation in case of trouble.

Flying over the Lake District of England in the middle of summer; winding through the hills at low level, with a panorama of colour unfolding below and changing movements on the surface of the lakes was a sight never to be forgotten.

Our idyllic lifestyle was brought to an abrupt end a couple of days later when a number of trainee navigators arrived to practice map reading from the air, with us as their pilots and instructors in this exercise.

This experience eventuated in being humorous, frustrating, humiliating, and outright bloody dangerous at times; trying to cope with flying the aircraft, knowing exactly where we were at all times, and pointing this out to these poor bods, some of whom did not know where north was, let alone where we were, as they had never been in small aircraft before, while being bounced around in a Tiger Moth was not the best of conditions for learning map reading.

We named these poor unfortunates The Herrrrrck Club, this being the revolting heaving noise they produced when being air sick. The pilots always flew from the rear cockpit. We told the navigators this was because if there was a crash, the engine would be forced into the front cockpit, and the pilot would be saved. Some even believed it!

These Club members were instructed what to do if they felt the queasy feeling coming on up in the air.

I would say to them before take-off, "I will put the aircraft into a steep turn, and you heave out the side we are turning. This way no one will cop the lot, and the aeroplane will be kept clean."

Coming in to land one day, I saw a chap running across the grass

with a bloke chasing him, and taking swipes at him with his helmet and goggles attached to the speaking tube.

I was laughing so much at these antics, I had to open up the throttle and do another circuit, as my concentration on landing was gone.

When I did get the plane down I asked one of the groundstaff chaps. "What the hell was that circus all about? I nearly pranged the Tiger watching that pantomime."

"Well, the nav yelled he wanted to upchuck, so the pilot threw the kite into a steep turn to port and the stupid bloody clot heaved out the starboard side, and the pilot copped the lot. Then to make matters worse, when closing down the motor, the pilot revved up the engine to clear oil from the plugs, leaned out the side to turn the switches off, and would you believe, the silly twit poked his head out the same side and let drive again, and a second serve was handed out to a very unhappy man in the back seat."

"I hope he doesn't catch him until he's cooled down a bit, or there may be a murder in the camp!"

Still wanting to practise aerobatics, I would ask the navigators if it was OK to do a few, and if they said yes, I would try one, usually a loop, see how it was received, and if the bloke could not handle the manoeuvre, straight and level was the order of the day.

I didn't want to put the poor devils through any more torture, and me the possibility of being on the receiving end of the inevitable resulting upheaval.

Taxiing back to the Flight Office after landing from a solo flip one afternoon, I saw the incredible sight of an aircraft wheel, with a piece of undercarriage attached, bowling across the grass in front of me.

Before I could shut down, the duty officer came running over and said, "Get into the air Collins. That chap just going around again has hit a windsock pole and lost a wheel, and I don't know if he is aware of the fact. Get in close and signal somehow, so he understands the position. There are no other planes in the air, so take off from here."

I quickly turned the aircraft around, gave it full throttle and climbed away in a chase after the damaged plane.

The pilot of the other Tiger must have felt the impact when he hit the pole, and seeing me climbing up to intercept him, realised that there was a problem, so he reduced height and changed course to meet me.

I flew alongside him as close as I dared, held the stick between my knees and my arms in the form of a circle. Then with my arm in the air with one finger extended, I pointed under the Tiger to the undercarriage.

I repeated this until he stuck both thumbs in the air, indicating the message had been understood.

I went ahead and landed, parking out of the way, and waited to see how he handled the emergency landing.

I now knew that one of our Aussie pilots was at the controls, bringing the aircraft in to a copybook precautionary landing.

When the plane touched the ground, he immediately realised which wheel was missing, and applied opposite rudder and aileron to keep the wing from touching the ground.

With the Tiger slowing down, a gentle ground loop to starboard with the motor stopped, prevented damage to the aircraft, except a minimal amount to the wing tip when it grounded.

This was a great piece of flying, and no blame was attached to the pilot, as the bare pole without the windsock was declared a hazard as it was so hard to see.

Night flying circuits and bumps were next on the agenda, and as the United Kingdom was on double British summer time, (and as darkness did not fall until about 11 pm under normal hours) it didn't get dark until about 1 am.

To fill in time after supper, we used to go to the Sergeants' Mess and have a game of darts, playing for a packet of Smith's crisps and a soft drink.

One bloke completely forgot about night flying, and was downing McEwens Blue Label Lager (the nearest we could find to Aussie beer) when his name was called that his instructor was waiting to take off.

Sucking peppermints to sweeten the breath, and scrambling into his flying suit, he made his way to the aircraft.

The take-off and circuit went fairly well, until the final approach.

About 50 feet from the ground, he started to reduce speed and gently pull back on the stick, getting the aircraft into the position for landing.

"What the hell are you trying to do?" yelled his instructor. "Kill the bloody two of us?"

He landed the plane and taxied in.

"Sorry about that Sir, I was feeling crook, and my judgement was a bit out."

He was shaky on his pins as he climbed out of the plane and the instructor took a good hard look at him. Nothing further was heard of the matter but the words, "Don't ever let it happen again," were clearly received.

I was given a map-reading exercise one afternoon flying with a navigator who didn't have a very good reputation for map- reading.

We were to cross the northeastern tip of the Solway Firth, north over Gretna Green (famous for runaway marriages) then to a turning point of my own choosing (which the nav had to find from his map) then back to base.

One of the basic rules impressed upon me at Cunderdin and Mallala, was to take note of a prominent landmark leaving base, such as a road or railway line, and remember which way to turn to bring you back over that marker, then back track home.

All went well until we had just passed Gretna Green, when a heavy mist and low cloud rolled in. I knew the main railway line north to Scotland was east of us, so I wasn't worried about getting lost.

I said to the navigator in front, "I'm going to lose height over the water of the Solway to get below this weather, and I'll want you to give me a course to fly to meet the north-south railway from Carlisle."

"OK Skipper," he said, as I began to let down through the murk, and came into clear air at 300 feet over water, with visibility at this altitude not too bad.

"Righto Nav, give me a course to meet the railway and we'll follow it home to base."

I couldn't believe my ears when he said, "Turn due west Skipper onto 270 degrees," as we were well west of the line already.

However, I carried out his instructions, duly set my compass ring on 270, and flew along for about 3 minutes before I said anything.

"I don't know what you think the range of a Tiger Moth is, but if we had enough bloody fuel, and kept on this course, we'd finish up on the east coast of Canada."

Suddenly he yelled out, "Steep turn to port," and knowing what that cry meant, I hastily carried out the turn, as he lost his lunch over Solway Firth.

The weather was getting worse as I headed due east to pick up the rail line, with my map reader in the front seat not at all interested in the proceedings.

Luck was on my side as I dropped down to 200 feet. Out of the mist emerged a beautiful big black locomotive, hauling a string of goods wagons, heading south to Carlisle.

Dropping right down, and alongside the loco, I saw both the driver and fireman waving, so I waved back, pointing to the south to let them know I was staying with the train.

The rain was bucketing down by this time, and I was very glad to have a good leader to follow in such lousy weather.

I found the 'drome, and flew low over the field, getting a green flare to let me know it was alright to come in and land.

No fancy circuits this time. I did a 'split arsed' steep turn into wind, put her down within 20 yards of the time-keeper's hut, taxied in and cut the motor with a sigh of relief.

Wet as a shag, I crawled out of the cockpit, and headed for a hot shower and then to the Mess for a bottle of Blue Label - maybe two.

I had only two weeks at Carlisle flying the Tigers, but I enjoyed getting in the air again flying such a great little plane.

Postings to our next units were coming out, and I was selected as a trainee fighter pilot going to a Fighter Advanced Flying Unit at Calveley.

Chapter 9

Not having a clue where Calveley was, or what type of aircraft I would be flying, I asked and was told by one of the instructors that it was down south and east (he thought) but he did know that the aircraft were Miles Masters Mk1 and Mk2.

I was still none the wiser as I'd never seen them, and being a trainer they were not on any aircraft recognition charts.

Having ten days leave before being due at Calveley, I went down to London and on to Brighton to renew friendships there.

I arrived at AFU Calveley on 10 August 1943, to commence flying on Miles Master MK2 single-engined fighter trainers.

This aircraft was low-winged, had a large radial engine which looked as if it weighed a ton or more, and proved to be difficult to keep its head up when getting near the stall position.

My instructor was Sgt Slowcombe, who flew Spitfires in the Battle of Britain and, as you can imagine, was one hell of a good pilot.

He took me up for my first familiarisation flight and, as I thought, the aircraft was heavy to handle, needing a fair amount of nose-up trim.

This did not deter my instructor from throwing the Master about in an exhibition of aerobatics that was thrilling to fly through.

Learning to do a stall-turn in this aircraft (usually a simple manoeuvre) I likened to leading an unwilling bull through a small gate. When climbing vertically to the point of stall, if the rudder was not kicked over quickly enough, she would drop the nose and flick into a vicious spin before you could do anything about it.

Getting out of that spin was a busy exercise in itself; quite hair-raising at the first attempt.

Sgt Slowcome was a very patient instructor, and I went solo in average time, having gained confidence in controlling the behaviour of the aircraft, especially during aerobatics.

Air-to-air and air-to-ground gunnery was naturally a most important subject at this stage, both in theory and in practice.

The Miles Masters were fitted with camera guns in the wings and it was our job to make hits and shoot down another aircraft flown by an instructor.

The films were then developed and shown to the trainee, pointing out the good and bad deflection shots of the exercise.

The roles would then be reversed and we would become the targets trying to escape from the enemy.

In the early encounters, these dog fights were very one sided; raw trainees up against seasoned fighter pilots. They did let us get a few bursts in now and again - I really think they were being generous.

The Tannoy system gave forth one morning, "All pilots please gather near the control tower. All pilots to the control tower."

When we were all there, the CFI told us the Aussie twin brothers that were on course were going to give us an exhibition dog fight. They were considered to be the best of the trainees, gaining top marks both in the classroom and in the air.

The two Master 2s took off in formation, climbing well over 3000 feet, the minimum height for aerobatics. It was a beautiful clear morning and the aircraft could be seen very easily.

They were having a terrific workout, with us cheering them on even though they couldn't hear or see us.

Suddenly there was a deathly silence. Then I heard, "Oh shit, look what's bloody well happened! One of the tail units has fallen apart."

Sure enough, what appeared to be parts of the rudder and elevators had broken away. The aircraft flipped over to the nose-down position and headed for the earth like a rocket.

Everyone was muttering, or yelling, "Bale out! Bale out! Get out of there!"

It was all over very quickly; no parachute opened and the plane hit the ground with a sickening thud in soft ground behind the hangars.

The force of the impact had driven the engine and cockpit into the earth, shearing the wings off, leaving them behind above the ground.

The twin brother came in and landed, and was met by the CFI as he taxied into dispersal. After about 10 minutes walking and talking, he took off again, flew around for a while, then came in for a perfect landing. That took real guts. He carried on with the course as usual, this being his wish.

When the aircraft was retrieved from the ground, it was evident that the g-force had kept the pilot pinned to the rear of the cockpit, making it impossible to release the cover, or pull the harness pin, as his hand was still in the handle.

All of us were made to take up a plane for a 15 minute flight as soon as possible, to maintain our confidence and to keep us busy flying. It took a couple of days for the course to settle down again, then it was back to more flying, shooting down, and being shot down by camera guns.

The Miles Master 2 was very similar in appearance to the Focke Wolfe 190 German fighter, and because of this we had been warned not to wander out to sea, as crossing the coast coming back could be very dicey and we did not have IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) fitted to these training aircraft to let our ack-ack gunners know we were friendly.

A trainee and target plane were having a good battle above cloud cover and as the war games finished the instructor called up on radio giving a course to fly to Calveley.

Instead of turning onto that course and slowly losing height, the pupil decided to dive through the cloud and then head for home.

When he broke into the clear at about 2000 feet, he discovered to his dismay that he was over the sea, and would have to cross the coast over our hostile anti-aircraft gunners.

I was in the Flight Office when he came in, as white as a sheet, and shaking. "Those bloody ack-ack guns opened up on me when I accidently crossed the coast. There's a bit out of my bloody wing tip missing. Boy, will I be in the shit!"

I don't know the end to this, as it wasn't long afterwards that I, along with others, was posted once again (much to my disappointment) back on to twin-engined aircraft to begin training up

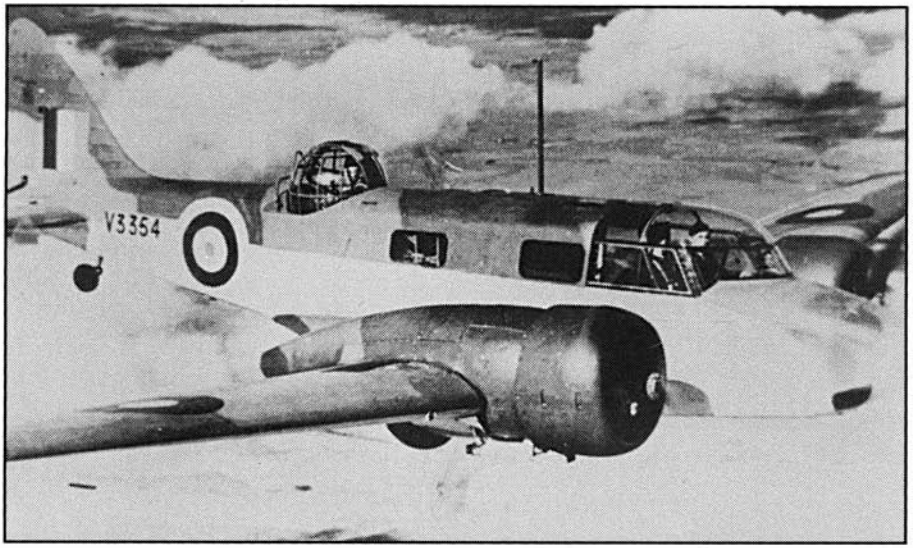
to four-engined bombers. I wanted to fly Spitfires: single-engined fighters.

However, there had been a big increase in bomber losses at this stage of the air war, and crews were desperately needed to man the Lancasters and Halifaxes.

At the other end of the scale, fighter pilots were not in such great demand.

Chapter 10

I was posted to Kidlington on 30 November 1943, to do a course flying Airspeed Oxfords, practically the same as I had done at Malalla back home on Avro Ansons. Hell, this was going to be a bloody boring period of flying!



Airspeed, Oxford.
(Photo courtesy RAAFA Museum, Bull Creek).

The Oxford was a twin-engined aeroplane, a little larger than the Anson, powered by two Cheetah Mk 10 engines; a nippy little aircraft but she also had some bad habits.

She had a swing on take-off that had to be controlled promptly and fairly heavily; and the stalling situation was dramatic as she would drop a wing, flick into a spin very quickly, and take some effort to get back straight and level.

I had a very pleasant surprise when allocated my flying instructor. I knew him.

Pilot Officer Austin Lee and I had been called up on the same intake back in Western Australia. It was great to have an Aussie instructor.

Blind flying under the hood, and night flying took up quite a lot of our air time, with day and night cross-country exercises filling the log book regularly.

Taking off under the blind flying hood was difficult because you had to contain the aircraft's swing and the correction had to be done on instruments alone.

The village of Kidlington wasn't very far from the city of Oxford, with its many beautiful old buildings, which so far had escaped any attention from German bombers.

There was a great little pub within cycling distance of the aerodrome, the 'Wheatsheaf', which we were allowed to visit in the evenings fairly frequently, to have the odd ale and a sing-song around the piano.

The pub closed at 10 pm as usual this evening, and I hopped on my bike, doing a Hubert Opperman sprint on the way back to base. It was freezing cold, with light snow falling.

Still going at a good bat, I came level with the gate and the guard box, yelling to the sentry, "Sergeant Noel Collins, pilot."

This was usually enough to go through without stopping, but this bloke must have been 'cheesed-off' with the weather, or his girlfriend knocked him back last night.

He shot out of his sentry box, calling out, "HALT. Stop and be recognised."

I received such a shock I jammed on both the brakes, not noticing there was a thin sheet of ice covering the bitumen. The bike shot out from under me and I landed on my belly with my face on the ice, sliding forward at a good turn of speed; my head finishing one foot short of ramming into the flag pole.

I picked myself up, blood dripping off my chin, turned and faced the sentry, voicing my displeasure at his raucous call.

"You bloody stupid loud-mouthed bastard," I yelled at the top of my voice. "Didn't you hear me call out name and rank? What else do you want to know? When I went to the bloody toilet last? You frightened the living daylights out of me!"

I could have sworn I saw a slight smirk on his face, and I don't believe I really blame him, as it must have been quite a sight to witness such an ungracious belly landing.

"Sorry about that Sarge, it came out before I knew I was saying it. Is your face alright? You're bleeding quite a bit; better go see the medic and get it attended to."

The doc was not too pleased at having a late patient, with a self-inflicted wound, but when I explained that I was taking a nice girl to the station dance in a few days time, he said he'd do his best to restore the mess to something resembling a face.

After spraying my wound with sulphanilamide powder, he covered it with a dry dressing, warned me not to touch it, get it wet or scratch it, then told me to come back and see him in three days.

When the dressing was removed by the doctor I was amazed to see the healing powers of the powder he had used.

Not touching the wound, and puffing on more sulphanilamide, he said, "Leave it a couple more days Collins and you should have a new thin skin."

The dance was a great success, and I'm sure no one would have noticed if I had a battered face or not.

One day, while having lunch, one of the bods from the Post Office came into the Sergeants' Mess called out my name and handed me a telegram - a most unusual happening.

Upon opening it, I was stunned to read, "Terribly sorry to let you know Dad died today. Letter following. All my love, Mum."

I was absolutely shattered to receive this news, as I had no idea he had been ill, and he'd looked so well when I'd left home.

I remembered the times we'd spent together; playing golf and tennis, him teaching me to drive the car in the back paddock when I was 12 years of age, accompanying him on the piano (he had a great voice) and, of late, meeting my Air Force mates, having a few beers with us in the Palace Dive, and stuffing Frank Beaumont into the train at Perth railway station.

Author, Mum and Dad at Donnybrook.

The memories came flooding back, and will remain for all time.

I presumed that with Bill a p.o.w. in Germany and our father dead, that my mother was now home on her own, so I applied for transfer back to Australia, where I would be up against the Japanese.

A deputation was sent to interview Mother and I was informed that Trixie, Bill's wife, was living at Donnybrook with Mum. They had purchased the local newsagency and together were running it for Bill.

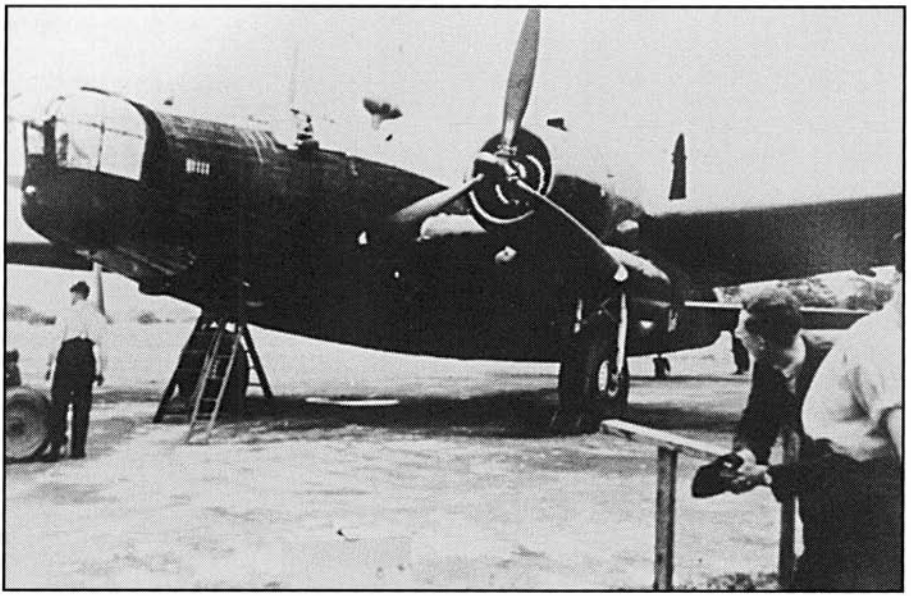
My transfer application was refused, on the grounds that Mum had one of the family living with her.

My time at Kidlington was during the winter; flying time was at an all-time low with lousy weather holding up exercises.

Lectures were ground into us, and I waited impatiently for a posting to a more advanced aircraft.

Eventually the course at AFU Kidlington was completed, and after a few days leave in London and Brighton, I was to report to 14 Operational Training Unit, Market Harborough, to fly Vickers Wellington Bombers.

Chapter 11



Wellington Bomber.
(Photo courtesy RAAFA Museum, Bull Creek).

The Wimpey (named after Wimpey Wellington, Popeye's hamburger munching mate), had twin Hercules motors. The fuselage was built in geodetic construction; that is of a honeycomb configuration, in aluminium, for strength; and if the plane was shot up it could take many holes and still remain in the air.

The inventor of this type of construction was Barnes Wallace, who engineered the skip bombs for the dam raids as seen in the film *The Dambusters*.

Construction of the Wellington commenced in 1936, using Rolls-Royce Goshawk motors.

The Wimpey was now used as a training aircraft for conversion to heavy bombers, prior to moving on to four-engined planes.

Market Harborough was the station where aircrew personnel made their choice to form a crew of six: pilot (skipper), navigator, wireless operator, bomb aimer, rear gunner and mid-upper gunner. An engineer would be allocated when we converted to four-engined aircraft.

The method of selection of the blokes to fly with may have appeared casual to outsiders, but was taken very seriously by those involved.

I could ask personnel if they would like to join the crew, or they could ask me if they could become a member. Each could go to the leader of the particular category involved, check out how that person had performed during training and his overall rating in general.

Just as I had the right to inquire into the performance of each person, they also had the right to check me out with the Chief Flying Instructor if they so desired, to make sure I had some chance of getting them to a target and back in one piece.

By this time I had reached the rank of Flight Sergeant, so most of the 'crewing up' was sorted out in the Sergeants' Mess; usually over a couple of beers.

I walked into the watering hole this evening, and spotted a big Pommy navigator having a pint on his own.

"Mind if I join you mate, my name is Noel Collins," I said, holding out my hand for the friendly shake.

My hand was taken in a vice-like grip, and a deep voice said, "I'm Stan Heaven. Nice to meet you Noel. Let's have another beer."

We both knew the score, that we were summing each other up; it was just a matter of who would ask the question first.

I broke the stalemate. "Stan, I'm looking for a navigator to join me in the crew. You're the first person to be approached, how d'you feel about it?"

"OK by me mate. Glad to be in it," said Stan. "There are four more you have to pick up from here. Let's hope we get a good team."

I spotted an Aussie wireless operator at one of the tables and we headed over to join him.

"I'm Noel Collins and this is Stan Heaven who has just teamed up. I'm looking for a wireless operator. How d'you feel about joining us?"

"Count me in. I didn't think I had any chance of meeting up with anyone from back home. No offence Stan. It's just a nice feeling to fly with someone from your own country, when we're so far away."

We now had three crew members, leaving three more to recruit; two air gunners, and a bomb aimer.

In the Mess the following evening I noticed two young Sergeant Air Gunners laughing and joking at the far end of the bar. Moving closer toward them, I realised I couldn't understand one word they were saying.

I murmured to the bar steward, "What bloody language is that?"

"That, Flight, is the Welsh spiel, and I defy anyone who is not of true Welsh descent to understand one word they are saying. So don't feel you're the odd man out; but they do order their grog in English, just to be sure I understand!"

I wandered over to the two chaps. "Can I buy you two blokes a beer?"

"Indeed you can Flight," was the answer from the smaller of the two Welshmen.

"My name is Doug Everson, and this is 'Scotty' Scott. It's no use giving you his christian name, as you'd never be able to get your tongue around it. I'm usually called Taffy for obvious reasons," he said in the sing-song voice so prevalent in the Welsh language.

"My name's Noel Collins, and I'm looking for two gunners, one for the mid-upper turret, and one for the rear. How do you chaps feel about crewing with me, if you haven't already joined another team?"

"Alright by me Noel," said Scotty. "How about you Taffy?"

"OK by me mate, but I want the rear turret."

"Bloody hell you do Taff. I spoke up first, so I get first choice; the arse end is mine."

"Let's not start off with a brawl," I said. "We'll settle this the old fashioned way, with the toss of a coin. Heads, you get the rear Scotty, tails Taffy, and it's yours."

The rules were laid down. The penny had to fall to the ground, no catching it and turning it over on the wrist, and the toss to be done by someone not interested in the result, not even me.

By this time there were a few onlookers, all amazed that anyone would want the rear turret, the reason being that 'Arse End Charlie' (as the rear gunner was commonly known) was the most dangerous position in the aircraft.

A Warrant Officer offered to toss the coin, and spun it into the air. All heads craned forward as the penny bounced once and finished up showing a head.

"You bloody beauty," yelled Scotty. "Sorry Taffy, but that gives me a better chance of getting a kill than the mid-upper."

I heard a quiet voice behind me say, "You mean you have a better chance of being killed you silly bugger."

I noticed that the speaker was the WO who had tossed the coin for us. He was wearing a well-worn battle dress, with an air gunner's badge on his tunic. He had done two tours of operations in the mid-upper turret, and lost two rear gunners in that time.

There was only a bomb aimer to find to make up the crew, and I hadn't noticed any strays in the Sergeants' Mess.

The five of us new-found mates were walking out of the recreation room the next day when a Flying Officer Bomb Aimer, came towards us. "Excuse me Flight, could I speak to you for a minute?"

"Sure thing; hang around for a minute you four. I won't be long."

"My name is Ted Bloomfield, and you chaps look as if you are crewed-up, but seem to be missing a bomb aimer. Would I be right?"

"You certainly are Ted. I'm Noel Collins, and this motley mob of good blokes are crew members. Have you joined a team yet, or are you looking to make up the quota with us?"

"I'd like to go along with you chaps if that's OK. You seem to be a friendly lot, and I think that's important in a crew."

The other four had been listening in, and quick as a flash, Taffy said with tongue in cheek. "Do you think we should let an officer into

the crew Skipper? If we aren't nice to him he might slam us on a charge."

Ted's reply was equally quick. "I don't charge little Welsh sergeants. I pick them up, spank their bums and tell them to be good boys."

Everyone had a good laugh; shook hands all round, and our crew had been formed; to be welded into what we all decided was the best and friendliest crew in Bomber Command.

The team was now made up as follows:
Flight Sergeant Noel Collins: pilot, Skipper.
Sergeant Dick Pratt: wireless operator.
Sergeant Stan Heaven: navigator.
Flying Officer Ted Bloomfield: bomb aimer.
Sergeant 'Scotty' Scott: rear gunner.
Sergeant Doug Everson: mid-upper gunner.

The Wellington was a comfortable aircraft to fly; a bit heavy on the controls, but without any really bad habits.

The crew from left back row: Tom Lake, Stan Heaven, Doug Everson, Ted Bloomfield, (trainee), Dick Pratt. Front: "Scotty" Scott, author.

We started with a familiarisation flight of just over two hours for the boys to get to know the aircraft, and each other at their respective duties.

Once again circuits and bumps were the order of the day, with the boys having to put up with a rough one now and again; but over all, nothing too bad.

If I did a bumpy landing, I could hear strange mumblings through the intercom, and knew Taffy and Scotty were exchanging a few unkind words about me in their own language, even though I didn't have a bloody clue what they were saying.

Flying training was now getting intense, with camera gun practice, and fighter affiliation, in which a fighter aircraft was sent up to attack us. Our plane had to take evasive action, and the gunners fight off the enemy; usually a Spitfire, or a Hurricane. Camera guns were used and the results carefully assessed at debriefing.

Daytime high-level bombing was also in full swing at the bombing range, using smoke bombs to drop at the target.

Bets were often laid on the results of these exercises, and we managed to win a few pints in the Mess. Ted was right on the ball with his bomb sight.

We had now graduated to night bombing practice. After a few of these had been carried out to the satisfaction of the CO, we were moved to Husbands Bosworth aerodrome to finish our training on Wimpeys.

Attending briefing one evening, a different exercise was laid out for the night bombing.

We were to do three legs of a cross-country, finishing back at the bombing range, drop our load on the target, and return to base. This was to be carried out with strict timing, as would be done in a real bombing raid.

The meteorology boffins had given us clear skies with perhaps eight-tenths cloud cover on the last leg.

We took off and climbed to operating height, and it looked as if the Met men had given us a good forecast for a change. They had a

thankless job, as the weather in this country was about as unpredictable as you could get, with fronts moving in from the sea; mists and fog; and every other bloody intrusion, which made piloting an aircraft as difficult as possible.

I am sure the gods that control the weather say to each other at times, "We'll turn on the real lousy stuff tonight, after giving them a false sense of security early on. You hand out thunder and lightning Thor, and I'll give 'em hell with rain and ice."

We were into the second leg of the mission, when Dick the wireless op said, "There's a hell of a lot of interference on the wireless Skipper. Lousy weather must be around somewhere."

Ted, who was up front at his bombing station, called out, "Dick was right Skip. There's some nasty-looking black cloud rolling in from the west."

"Yes I see it now thanks, and I'm afraid we're heading right into it. Going around it isn't on. I'll have a go at getting up through the mess. Let's hope it's not too high."

From that moment, the aircraft was thrown about like a toy for a few seconds.

The diffused line of light which made up the night horizon had disappeared. Outside was a solid black wall, which completely encased the Wellington in its grip.

I increased the engine revolutions, and trimmed the plane for the climb. Turbulence was now getting hard to control, with the aircraft doing its best to throw itself onto its back.

Suddenly a bolt of lightning ripped across the sky, lighting up the huge mass of surrounding storm clouds, and momentarily blinding me with the flash.

Static electricity transformed the four propellers into fiery balls, known as St Elmo's fire. It also ran up and down the fuselage, making the Wimpey a very eerie sight.

The crew, including me, were not feeling very happy about our situation, and we were hoping the storm would soon pass over.

I now noticed the controls becoming sloppy and the aircraft sluggish. That could only mean one thing: ice.

I pressed the de-icing plunger, and said to the crew, "We have to get down out of this chaps. She's starting to ice up. The rough ride won't be over for a while yet."

The descent was even rougher, causing the gyro compass to tumble, and the magnetic compass to swing all over the place.

I called up the navigator, "Stan, I haven't a clue what our present course is. How's your compass behaving?"

"Useless Skipper. You just concentrate on keeping us in the air; I'll work out where the hell we are when we get out of this filthy weather. It must be like trying to ride a wild horse keeping the old Wimpey under control."

"Skipper to all crew. We're losing the ice. You can probably hear some of it bang against the fuselage as it breaks away from the leading edge of the wings. Something's going our way at last."

We were still in cloud at 2000 feet and getting a fix of our position was out of the question.

"Stan, I've had my gyro locked off for a while. I just turned it back on and it's decided to behave itself, and start working again. I'm going to call up Darkie and get a course back to base."

"Good idea Skip. I'm sure they'll have a busy night tonight."

'Darkie' was the code word for a radio section, whose job it was to listen out on a certain frequency for aircraft in trouble, and direct them to the nearest aerodrome, or give them a course to fly to home base.

Requesting the latter I changed to the frequency and sent out my call.

"Hello Darkie. Hello Darkie. Hello Darkie. This is Hotel Bravo Whisky. Do you receive me? Over."

Back came that comforting reply. "Hotel Bravo Whisky this is Darkie. How can I assist you?"

"Great to hear you Darkie. We're in foul weather. Could you please give me a course and distance to base. Over."

"You boys are sure keeping us busy tonight; it must be nasty up there," came the soothing voice of the duty WRAAF "Please stand by."

After a short time came the welcome call.

"Hotel Bravo Whisky, this is Darkie. Do you receive me? Over."

"Loud and clear Darkie. Please proceed with message."

"Hotel Bravo Whisky, your course to base is 145 degrees magnetic, and a distance of 83 miles. Cloud base at your destination is 900 feet."

"Roger Darkie. Many thanks for your assistance, and a warning for other callers that there's bad icing at 8000 feet. Trying to go up through this filthy weather is not on."

"Thanks for that info Hotel Bravo, have a safe trip home. This is Darkie, going clear of Hotel Bravo Whisky. Out."

"Did you get all that Stan? Have you got a true course for me to set on the gyro compass? I'll be losing height at one hundred feet a minute for the time being."

"Yes Skipper. Fly on 138 degrees. Our ground speed will be pretty slow as we now have a strong headwind."

"Skipper to all the crew: I left the intercom on so you could keep up with what was going on. We should be out of this crap before too long, and pick up the lights of home."

Each aerodrome had a 'pundit', a red light flashing out a letter of the alphabet allotted to it; a welcome sight to homecoming crews.

The good news came from Ted up front, "I can see one or two small breaks in the cloud Skip. What height are we now?"

"1200 feet Ted. The cloud is thinning out. We should be below it in a couple of minutes."

Sure enough, the last remains of the rain-filled black banks of cloud disappeared above the aircraft.

"I've spotted the home pundit Skipper," Taffy the mid-upper gunner called. "Just off to the port side."

"Good stuff Taffy," as I banked around to port, and saw the welcome red light, sending out four red dots, the letter 'H' for Husbands Bosworth.

I called up the control tower, asking for permission to land, and was told to come straight in on runway three when ready, as there

were no other planes on the circuit, but to watch for a crosswind from the port side.

Rounding up on the final approach, I came in through the lead-in funnel, making a fair sort of a landing, and very happy to be safely on the ground once more.

I could tell the crew were also relieved to be down again, because of the constant chatter about the shitty weather - the worst they had ever been in - and Scotty had a sore head, where he'd banged it on the rear turret during our rough ride.

When we arrived at dispersal, the ground crew told me there were still four aircraft to be accounted for from our base, but it was quite possible they had landed away, to get down out of the rough weather.

We had just lit up our smokes when we heard another Wimpey making his approach.

Coming in through the lead-in lights, I could see he was drifting off with the crosswind, and was going to miss the runway unless a correction was done immediately.

"Bloody hell! He's going to prang in the mud on the side of the strip," I yelled.

At the last moment, the pilot banged on full throttle to both motors. Clawing his way back into the air, he managed to stagger around and complete another circuit.

This time he hit the tarmac, and a sigh of relief went up from all of us watching, and I'm sure from all those on board.

The debriefing officer told us that the other three 'kites' (aircraft) had landed safely at other aerodromes.

The crew was being welded into a great team at this stage, with exercises involving all members each flight.

Fighter affiliation was an exciting piece of flying for me and the gunners, but gut-wrenching and annoying for the nav and wireless op.

Usually a Spitfire or a Hurricane was sent up to attack our aircraft, with the gunners using camera guns to show the results of their shooting ability, and the bomb aimer manning the front turret.

My job was to put the plane through a manoeuvre called a 'corkscrew', during which the gunners fired deflection shots at the attacking fighter.

This day we were to battle it out with a Spitfire. Taffy, Scotty and Ted were keen to do well at this shoot-out, and a lot depended on how I flew the aircraft to give them good results.

When we were boarding the 'kite' before take-off, Taffy said, "We're going to get the bastard today aren't we Skip?"

I think in his quiet way he was telling me to have my finger out and to give them good calls during the corkscrews.

We climbed to 5000 feet and levelled off, with everyone scanning the sky, watching for our attacker.

Suddenly Scotty called from the rear turret. "Fighter coming in from the port quarter. Prepare to corkscrew port."

About 15 seconds pause; then, "Corkscrew port. GO."

"Diving port," I called, picking up speed in the dive. "Climbing port. Rolling. Diving starboard. Climbing starboard. Rolling. Diving port." So it would go on until the fighter broke off the engagement.

At the start, and during these manoeuvres, the gunners' accuracy was tested when the cine-gun films were developed, along with my flying ability during the corkscrews.

Fortunately, we had good results from these exercises, which augured well for the real thing.

This further convinced me that we had a first class team coming together. Both Stan, our navigator, and Dick, the wireless op, were doing a great job. Ted had good bombing results, and the boys were happy with the way I was flying the Wimpey.

Night bombing practice and fighter affiliation were now a priority, and our posting to four-engined bombers could not be too far away.

Mock day and night raids on different locations over the UK were also on the agenda; usually of about four or five hours duration, finishing up on a bombing range, for Ted and I to have more accuracy tests at dropping the 'pills'.

We completed our training on Wellingtons at Husbands Bosworth, on 30 May 1944.

Our next move was to Heavy Conversion Unit, at Swinderby, flying four-engined Stirling bombers. They were nicknamed the 'praying mantis' because of their long fuselage and extremely high wheels.

Before going on leave, and on to Swinderby, I had to appear before a board at headquarters, with regard to me becoming a commissioned officer.

Four engined Stirling Bomber.
(Photo courtesy RAAFA Museum, Bull Creek).

I must have said the right things because on 3 June 1944 I attained the rank of Pilot Officer.

The name allotted to this lowest commissioned rank, was 'Sprog' and the crew gave me the usual amount of ribbing when they found out I had become one.

I had ten days leave before having to report to my next station, so I headed for the Strand Palace Hotel in London, which seemed to be the home for many Aussie airmen when on leave.

The staff at the Hotel were always very good to us, slipping in an extra meal if they could. All meals were rationed of course.

The rates we were charged for our stay were much below the usual price. Heads were turned the other way if a young lady accompanied an airman to his room; although some of the hungry staff needed to be slipped a tip to do this. These bods were noted, and blacklisted very smartly.

After a few days in London, I headed off down to Brighton to catch up with the friends I hadn't seen for some time.

Chapter 12

Arriving at Swinderby, on 14 June 1944, I was informed of the bad habits of the big four-engined Stirling.

This aircraft was powered with Hercules engines, which carried a maximum fuel load of 2,254 gallons. It was estimated that 45 gallons were used by each engine to start up, take off, and climb to 3000 feet.

The last member to join the crew was now allotted to us, making up the number to seven.

This was the flight engineer, and his name was Sergeant Tom Lake.

We were very lucky, as he'd been a mechanic at the Morris car factory in Luton and was a full bottle on bomber fuel systems and engine procedures.

A complicated array of switches controlled the fuel flow from the many tanks in the wings, which had to be balanced at all times to keep the aircraft level.

All matters relating to the engines in flight were firstly the responsibility of the engineer, and then me to take any action as deemed necessary.

Tom was nominated grandfather of the crew, as he was 32 years old - the average age of the crew at this stage was just twenty.

My introduction to flying the Stirling was hair-raising.

My instructor was a Flight Sergeant who had completed a tour of operations (30 trips) flying Lancasters and was not at all complimentary about Stirlings.

We all climbed aboard the 'Monster', as he called the plane.

"Well Collins, we will heave this machine into the air, and I will attempt to show you what it can, and can't do."

The first thing as usual, flying a new aircraft, was circuits and bumps; how to get it off the ground and back to earth again without bending it, and keeping your crew in a happy state of mind.

Stirlings had such huge wheels the pilot was 38 feet up in the air while the aircraft was standing on the ground.

"When landing, the plane has to be kept in a tail-down attitude upon touch-down," my instructor said, as we taxied out for take-off, "otherwise, with a nose-down landing, she will leap into the air like a startled fawn, and make contact with the runway about one hundred yards down the track."

We carried out the cockpit drills, now having four of everything in the way of instruments and gauges, for the four motors.

When we were well down the runway, it was the engineer's job to take over the throttles, move them through to the stops, allowing the pilot to concentrate on getting the aircraft off the ground. I carried out this movement, as I was flying second pilot.

The circuit was OK and we were making the final approach when the Flight Sergeant said, "This is where the tricky bit begins. You will notice there's a fair crosswind blowing, just to make things a bit more difficult; but let's take her in."

I think he must have been watching the crosswind, and didn't notice that we were going to touch down slightly tail-up.

The big wheels touched the runway, and she leapt into the air like a bounding kangaroo.

The instructor called out, "You bloody bitch! Keep your bloody feet on the ground!"

Then another smaller bump as he cut the throttles and pulled back on the stick, settling her down on the ground.

The only problem was that by this time, we had drifted off the tarmac, and were trundling across the grass; we finished up on the perimeter track, two hundred yards around from the end of the runway.

"That Collins, is not the way to land a Stirling, but as I said, these aircraft and I have never been the best of friends. Take her back to the take-off point, and see how you manage a circuit; I'm sure it will be better than that one."

I was still a bit shaken after the last effort and hadn't heard a word

from the rest of the crew, except the rear gunner. I'm sure I heard Scotty grunt out the words, "Holy shit," as we did the big bounce down the runway.

He would have felt the worst of it, hanging out the back of the fuselage in his turret.

The control tower called up as I was taxiing back to have my first try at a circuit, to tell me the runway had been changed. The new one was more into wind, which would improve my chances of a softer landing.

I did my pre-take-off cockpit drill (Mary's anatomy still being used as a reminder) and turned into wind, to fly a four-engined bomber for the first time.

The Stirling rolled down the runway gradually picking up speed until the tail lifted. The instructor took the throttles through the gate, and I concentrated on getting the aircraft off the ground.

She was heavier on the controls than anything I had flown before, making my climbing turns slower than expected.

Turning into wind for my final approach, I said to the Flight Sergeant in the right-hand seat, "Well here goes Flight. I hope I can get us all down in one piece."

"You bloody well better. Even I managed to do that, with a little help from up above."

I noticed he had his eyes turned to the heavens above, as if asking for divine assistance. I hoped his message was received loud and clear.

The drift was very slight, which gave me time to get the tail-down attitude for touch-down.

Pulling the throttles right off, the earth came up to meet those huge wheels. The old darling gave one small leap forward, then settled snugly on the runway; staying there until I braked, and turned off the strip at the taxi point.

"It's a miracle, a bloody miracle. You only had one little bounce, and stayed on the runway! How the hell did you do that?"

"It must have been divine intervention Flight. I saw you saying a silent prayer. I think He must have heard you."

My instructor couldn't see the river of perspiration running down my back, and under my flying helmet, but I now felt confident I could handle the machine OK.

That would have been the best landing I ever accomplished on Stirlings, and I must say they kept you busy every time you flew them: concentration on landing was a must.

We were doing well, getting through our list of eighteen exercises, consisting of day and night bombing, and mock raids, when we struck a snag on number thirteen.

I was doing my pre-take-off check list, when the starboard outer motor began to backfire and pour out smoke.

Tom, the engineer said, "Close that one down Skipper. We won't be going anywhere in this kite tonight; sounds like she's done a piston."

I taxied back to dispersal, shut the aircraft down and left it to the ground staff to worry about.

The crew, me included, were totally 'pissed off' with this engine failure, as we'd have to attempt the exercise again, and we didn't want to get behind the other crews.

Two nights later we were to tackle No 13 again in a different aircraft; an overnight cross-country trip.

Turning onto the runway to take off, there was a yell from Scotty in the rear turret.

"Bloody hell Skip. I can't touch the bloody guns. The shitty things are electrified. I'm getting a shock if I touch them."

"Come out of the turret Scotty. I'll call up control and ask what they want us to do."

We were the only crew flying at the time, so an electrical bod was sent out to have a look at the problem while we were still on the runway.

The news I did *not* want to hear came from the rear gunner's intercom.

"Sorry Skipper. I'll have to ground this aircraft," said the electrical fitter. "There's a bad short, which will have to be located and fixed. Please take her back to dispersal."

Moans, cries of derision and an unhealthy flow of foul language came from members of the crew; my own thoughts going along with theirs entirely.

The next attempt at this exercise (number 13) was equally frustrating.

After starting up, Tom called out, "One of the generators isn't working Skipper, and we're not permitted to take off with only one producing power. Take the bloody thing back. We've had it again."

Cursing all the gremlins that were haunting No 13 exercise, I taxied back, with the crew mouthing unprintable language about Stirling aircraft, and the bogey of the number thirteen.

The CO called for me the following morning, and said, "Collins, with all this trouble you're having, I was going to change the exercise number to 12A. Something told me not to do this, so I've scrubbed it altogether. Your crew have done very well so far, so I'm advancing you to exercise No 15, to catch up with the rest of the course."

Calling the crew together, I gave them the good news. I could see the relief on their faces, as we were all getting superstitious about that number thirteen.

That night Ted and I were invited to Sergeants' Mess by the rest of the boys; many beers were consumed and a good time had by all.

We finished flying at Swinderby, on 13 August 1944, saying goodbye to Stirling aircraft with no feeling of regret.

Ten days leave was granted, before our next posting. This was to be Lancaster Conversion Unit at Syerston.

I went down to Brighton for the break; meeting up with Norma, doing a round of the dances and shows.

Catching up with new arrivals from Aussie was great; we could find out what was going on in the war against Japan, as news on that front was very scarce in England.

I had purchased a two-stroke motor bike at this stage, and after

picking it up at Swinderby, set sail for Syerston, having cadged petrol from a friendly 'Erk' (groundstaff mechanic).

About half way there, I realised my fuel was not going to make the distance. At the next village was a small garage, where I pulled in and did my best to talk the owner into selling me a gallon of two-stroke petrol.

"Have you got a petrol coupon?" he asked.

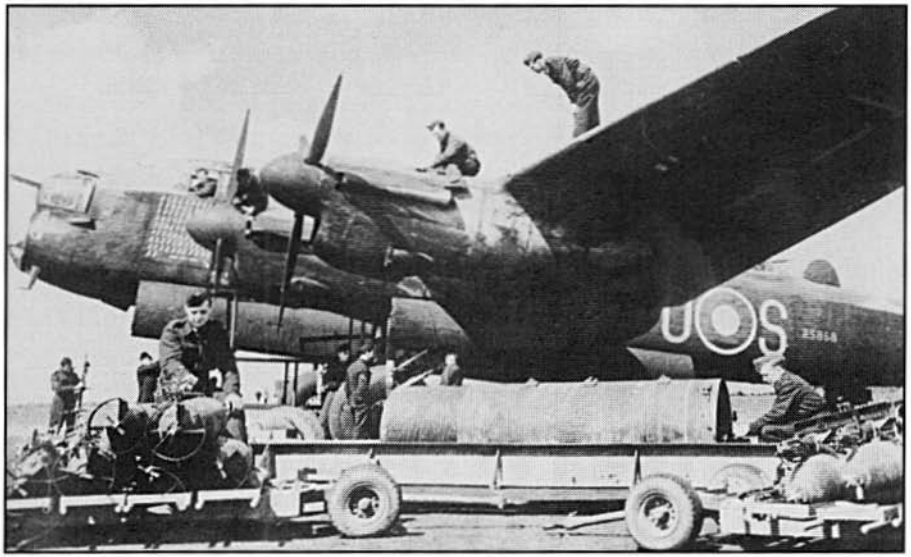
"Sorry mate. I thought I'd have enough to get me there, but the bike is using much more than I gambled on."

"I can't give you any without a coupon. I can only buy fuel for the amount of tickets I have."

A man, obviously a farmer, said to the proprietor, "Give the lad what he wants Clem, don't be so bloody miserable. Look at the risks he's taking. Take one yourself for a change; if not, use my coupons."

I gave my heartfelt thanks to the farmer, filled my tank, and rode on to Syerston.

Arriving at the aerodrome, and having my first good look at the Lancaster; I had a strange feeling about it: an urgent desire to fly the aircraft.



Lancaster bomber loading up.
(Photo courtesy RAAFA Museum, Bull Creek).

My first flight in a Lanc was unforgettable. It handled like a dream.

The trim could be set and it practically flew itself; and the use of George (automatic pilot) was the best I had used. It actually flew the aircraft without too much correcting.

Landing was a joy, putting her down on three points was a breeze after the troubles I had landing the Stirling.

If such a thing could happen, I suppose I had fallen in love with the Lancaster.

The crew were also very impressed with the layout of their equipment in the aircraft.

We did four days of intensive flying, day and night, before being posted to number 61 Squadron, Skellingthorpe, just outside Lincoln.

61 Squadron was a member of 5 Group, which was commanded by Group Captain Cochran.

Members of this group were known as Cochran's Crazy Kids gaining this reputation from the difficult and specialised targets, such as railway junctions, oil refineries, armament factories, Crupps works in the Ruhr Valley, etc, which were all heavily defended by flak and fighters.

I mounted my trusty little motor bike, and set off for Skellingthorpe, arriving there without incident, and no fuel problems this time.

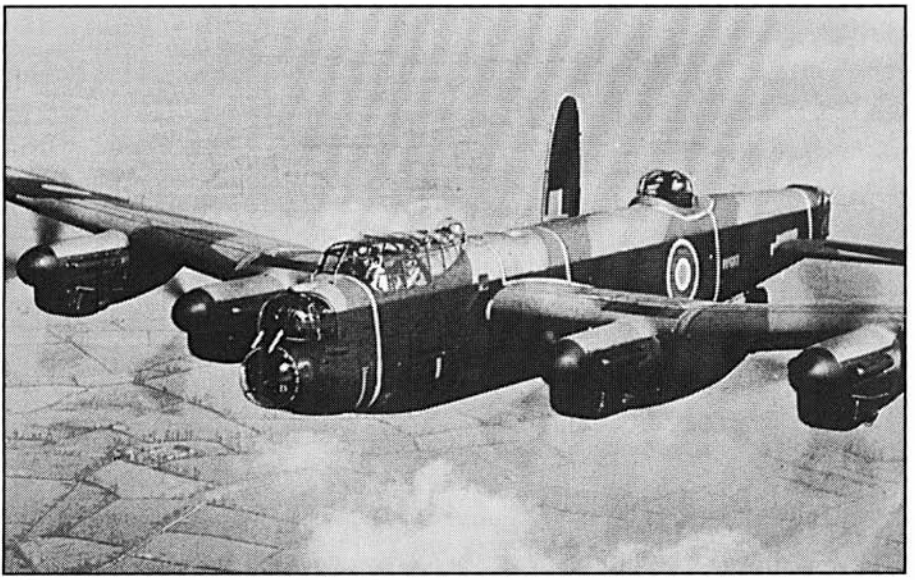
It was the first week of September, 1944.

61 Squadron was made up of A and B flights, our crew becoming members of the latter.

This aerodrome was hastily built on farm land at the beginning of the war. The buildings, Nissen huts, were made of curved corrugated iron, and would freeze the balls off a brass monkey in the cold weather.

The only heating in this miserable accommodation was a pot-bellied stove which burned coal (when there was any).

The next day I was told to report to RAF Wing Commander Pexton, the CO of 61 Squadron.



Lancaster in flight.

"Pilot Officer Collins reporting for duty Sir," I said, throwing one of the best salutes I could muster.

"Right Collins, you are now a Flying Officer, take off the narrow rank rings, and put up broad ones. All captains of bomber aircraft must be FOs or higher. We do not stand on ceremony on this operational squadron. Saluting is kept to a minimum; Squadron Leader and above only. We're here to do a job of bombing enemy targets, not bullshitting around pulling rank. Take a couple of days for you and your crew to settle in, then come and see me again, and I'll arrange for you to fly second dickie (pilot) with me on an operation."

"Thank you Sir," chucking another salute.

"OK Colly, see you in the Officers' Mess later on."

The nickname from Pexton was to stick with me all the time I was on the squadron.

The remainder of the crew met with their respective section leaders and were all satisfied with their lot.

One of our first jobs was to visit the parachute section, to have our 'chutes fitted personally, as they remained our own property.

They were a seat type, which hung off your bum when walking, and fitted into a bucket seat in the cockpit, making quite a comfortable cushion.

One strap came over each shoulder, and another two through the crutch, snapping into a metal quick-release box on the stomach.

Two good looking young WRAAF girls had the job of fitting the 'chutes, and I suspect were put there to boost morale.

They certainly did that, and it was not the only thing that was boosted!

"Look Jean," said one, "we've got an Aussie coming up next. Better let the crutch straps out a bit more, don't you think?"

"Yes Kay, I'm told they take up a bit more room than normal so I'll do just that. Would you mind standing Sir, while I adjust your shoulder straps. That's right. Now I'll just bring the bottom straps through your crutch; like that, and I'll get you to sit in the bucket seat as you would in the aircraft."

What with the fumbling, and a craftily executed little tickle, I was starting to rise to the occasion; and so was the red in my face.

I saw the cheeky grins on the girls' faces, and knew they were having me on, so I said to them, "You may have started something you can't finish. It appears things are getting out of hand. What are you going to do about it?"

"You make the appointment," said Jean, "and one of us will relieve the pressure with the greatest of pleasure."

"I might just do that," I said. "Be prepared ladies!"

With the two-way banter over I swung my parachute over my shoulder and made my way from the room amid much laughter. I headed to the crew room, where I stored my 'chute in my newly acquired locker.

On 5 September I was called to Wing Commander Pexton's office, and told I was to fly with him on ops that day, and to attend briefing with him when the time was announced.

The past CO of the squadron was Wing Commander Doubleday, an Australian pilot, who had married an English girl. She had presented him with twins a short time before he was due to finish his tour of ops.

The Winco gave us our target for the trip, which was Brest, on the coast of France; we were to bomb gun positions that had been bypassed when the ground troops had landed on D-Day.

This was to be a daylight raid, and was expected to take about five hours. A small number of aircraft were sent on this mission - about sixty all told.

Wing Commander Pexton taxied out and was first to take off. He climbed to 2000 feet, then handed the controls over to me in the left-hand seat, saying, "You've got her now Colly. Keep her on this course unless the nav gives you any change, and at the same rate of climb until we reach our given height."

"Yes Sir," I replied, a little sweaty in the palms, as I concentrated like hell to fly a true course and rate of climb. I levelled off when we reached our designated height of 10,000 feet.

The first words I heard from the crew were from the navigator giving me a slight alteration of course. I wasn't sure they were very happy about a new boy on the job, flying their aircraft. I think I would've felt the same in their position.

Suddenly up ahead black puffs of smoke appeared in the sky, and Pexton said, "There's your first look at flak. It looks harmless enough from here, but each of those puff balls carries a lethal dose of shrapnel, and we do our best to avoid the worst concentrations, by going around them if possible. I'll take over now and take us through the bombing run. The target indicators, placed by the Mosquitoes of Pathfinder Force, should be going down shortly."

Sure enough, a minute or so later, a green cascade of flares was dropped by the low flying Pathfinder 'Mozzie'.

We went through the bombing run without any serious problems; a bit of flak came close a couple of times, but not near enough to cause a worry.

The bomb aimer called "bombs away," and the skipper put the aircraft into a dive to clear the target area, and on course for home.

"Righto Colly, take over. I don't expect any enemy fighter activity, but you'd better do some weaving just to clear vision for the gunners."

'Weaving' was carried out by keeping the aircraft horizontally steady, while lying the plane on one side, and then the other, allowing the gunners to have a clear view on each side below the aeroplane, clearing any blind spots.

The remainder of the trip home was uneventful. Pexton took over as we entered the circuit; put her down smoothly, taxied into dispersal and shut down.

"Well from here on Colly, you and your crew are on your own. All the very best for a safe and successful tour, I'll speak to you all before you go on your first raid."

"Many thanks to you Sir, and your crew, for the trip today. It's given me some clues what to expect on daylight raids."

So ended my first operational 'sortie' on 61 Squadron, flying Lancasters; even though it was as second dickie.

We quickly settled into the routine of the station, which was very much down to business, without being very strict with rules and regulations.

Each member of the crew had his job to do, and if it wasn't carried out efficiently, he was letting down the rest of the team, possibly causing disaster to all concerned.

The call sign for the squadron was very appropriate for me being a West Aussie. It was Black Swan, and the pub in the village of Skellingthorpe carried the same name.

I was at all times reminded of WA and home.

Chapter 13

Our first operation was on 10 Sept 1944. The target: German gun positions, ammunition dumps and troop concentrations in and around Le Havre on the French coast.

We took off at 1510 hours, circling to gain height, then set course across the English Channel for the target.

Breaking through light cloud, one of the most incredible sights was all around us.

Hundreds of bomber aircraft, from all directions in the UK were visible as far as the eye could see, converging into one huge stream, flying in a gaggle formation.

The word 'gaggle' was taken from the name given to a flock of geese flying in formation: stacked below and behind each other.

The exclamations coming from Taffy and Scotty, the two Welsh gunners, were impossible to understand; but from the intonation in their voices, they were absolutely awestruck with the full vision they had from their turrets.

Taffy came up with the best description he could think of.

"Skipper it's like a huge swarm of bees spread over the sky, all heading for the queen. I'm sure this will never be seen again in our lifetime."

Accurate flying was essential, as there were aircraft just above and ahead, also below and behind. Height and airspeed had to be spot on.

Approaching the target, the flak began to burst around us, but not close enough to cause us any problems at this stage.

Up ahead I saw the target indicators go down, and at the same time Stan called, "Turn to 200 degrees Skipper, to bring us onto our bombing run."

"OK. Are you ready to take over for the bombing run Ted? There's been no cancellation of the TIs, so all's clear to go ahead and drop our load."

"Hold her steady on the present course Skip. Bomb bays open."

Taffy from the mid-upper turret suddenly called out, "Shit Skip, take off some speed, I'm looking straight up into the open bomb bays of the kite above us."

I glanced up, and sure enough it was not a pretty sight to see. Racks of bombs hanging just above us.

I eased back on all four throttles, and agonisingly slowly watched the Lancaster pull slowly ahead, its deadly load moving out of danger to our aircraft.

"Good work Taffy. If you hadn't spotted that kite, he could've dropped the lot on us in another couple of minutes."

"D'you mind if I get on with the job of dropping these bloody bombs on the target?" asked Ted.

"Sorry, but we would've taken the load down with us, if that bod had dropped his pills on top of us."

"Take her left a bit Skipper. Left. Le-e-eft. Steady. Steady. Hold it. Hold it. Bombs gone!"

I felt the aircraft lift as the load dropped away, and held her steady for the camera to take a photo of the result of our effort.

Stan gave me the course to fly for the return trip, and as we were to lose height to get out of the target area quickly, I put the nose down, and got the hell out of there.

Reaching our designated height, I levelled out and headed for home and an after-ops meal of bacon and eggs, followed by a few beers in the Mess.

I landed at base, and said to the crew as we taxied into dispersal, "Well fellas, that's Number 1 done, we only have 29 more to do for our first tour; let's hope they're all as easy as that one."

We had been in the air four hours and ten minutes, and were glad to climb out of the plane, have a nervous pee and a smoke. Everyone was talking about the close call we'd had.

At debriefing we were told that 992 aircraft had been on the raid. No wonder it became a bit crowded up there.

The following day we were again sent to German positions around

Le Havre. This was a smaller group, with an early briefing and breakfast.

Take-off was at 4.45 am on a cold September day; we were glad to get into the plane, start up the motors and get some heat through the aircraft.

This raid was uneventful, except for the usual anti-aircraft fire thrown up at us, but once again we came through unscathed.

That was two days in a row we had been on ops; both daylights, and I was watching the next day for the battle order to be posted, to see if we would cop three in a row.

Sure enough, we were on the list to fly again.

The ops meal and briefing were later in the afternoon, so Ted and I had lunch in the Officers' Mess, with everyone playing the usual guessing game as to what the target would be for tonight.

There was the tale put about that the target for the night would be chosen in this manner.

Air Commodore Sir Arthur 'Butch' Harris had a big map of Europe on the wall of his office, covering all potential targets for Bomber Command.

He would then call in his little daughter, hand her a golden dart, and say, "Throw the dart at the map darling, and we will see where to send the boys tonight."

Comments were made when a particularly dangerous target was selected. "She threw a lousy bloody dart tonight," or "I wish Butch would face her in a decent direction for a change," and, "that dart is made of bloody lead, not gold. The bastard of a thing keeps landing on heavily defended targets. It's time he bought her a new one."

When the cover was lifted off the route map at our briefing, the target was seen as Stuttgart, a city deep into south east Germany. Quite a test for our first night raid.

We took off at 1855 hours (6.55 pm) did a short climbing triangular course to gain height, after which Stan gave me the first compass setting for the trip.

When we had crossed into enemy territory, Taffy in the mid-upper

called me up saying, "There's heavy flak coming up a fair way ahead Skipper. Have you seen it yet?"

"I have now thanks Taffy. Stan, I'm going to alter course to port to get around this crap. It looks pretty clear over in that direction."

"OK Skipper. Let me know when you want to get back on to our correct course, and I'll give it to you."

We edged around the flak concentration, and moved towards the target area without much further interference from the ground.

It was getting close to our ETA (estimated time of arrival) at the target, and I said to the nav, "I can't see a bloody thing going on below Stan, I hope we didn't stuff up with that course alteration around the flak!"

I had no sooner spoken when all hell broke loose straight ahead.

Clusters of green target indicators were dropped by Pathfinder Force; anti-aircraft fire streamed towards the leading formation of bombers, and radar-controlled blue leader searchlights began probing the sky for victims.

These searchlights would fix onto an aircraft with a powerful blue-white light, and immediately others would lock onto the leader, and the bomber would be coned in light.

The anti-aircraft gunners would then fire up the beams of the searchlights, and if the plane couldn't escape the lights by evasive action, its chances of survival were practically nil.

It remained like a silver moth, pinned to a black background.

"You're bang on target Stan. What a bloody show it is from up front here. Come out of your cubbyhole and have a look. You too Dick, if you can leave the wireless for a minute."

Being our first night operation, we were awestruck with the intensity of the activity going on above, below and all around us.

Stan and Dick came up front for a quick scan around then scuttled back to their places.

Dick said, "Thanks for the invitation Skipper, but in future I think I'd be better off not seeing what is going out there; it all looks pretty dicey to me."

Stan called up Ted in the bombing hatch, and said, "This course is also the run-in Ted, so call the skipper when you're ready to take over. Did you get that Skipper?"

"Roger Stan. Give me the call when you're ready Ted. Bomb doors open."

"OK. Here we go. Right. Right. Steady. Steady. A bit far Skip. Left. Hold it. Hold it. S t e a d y. Bombs gone!"

We were carrying a 4000 lb bomb (*cookie*) and cans of incendiary stick bombs, to stir up the fires that were already raging down below.

Suddenly Ted called up on the intercom, "Skipper! The bloody cookie hasn't gone. It's hung up in the bomb bay. I'm positive I selected it."

"Right Ted. I'm going to run through again. I can see the other aircraft fairly well in this light. It should be OK."

Ted didn't waste any time calling me through the run again, but said, "No go Skipper. The shit of a thing is still there."

"Hang on Ted."

"Dick do you know how to handle the manual release of the cookie?"

"Yes Skip."

"Take the panel off, and let me know when you're ready to release the bastard."

"Roger."

"Right Ted. We do it once more. I know we're jiving with Jesus a bit, but we'll be OK."

"Let's go Skip. I'm ready," said Dick.

"Make it a quick one Ted. Don't worry about the aiming point too much. There's plenty to have a go at down there."

"Bomb aimer to wireless op. When I say go, release the catch. Skip hold the same course."

"GO!"

I felt the plane lift and knew the offending bomb had at last left the aircraft.

Closing the bomb doors, I put the nose down, turning onto the course for home and increasing speed so we wouldn't become a rear straggler; easy meat for a night fighter, or searchlight.

I asked Tom, the engineer, if he would pass me my piss tin from the back of my seat, as I was busting for a leak.

It was only then that I realised I was a lather of sweat, as my inner flying suit felt quite damp as I fished for my John Thomas through the four layers of clothing.

This needed quite an effort as you can imagine!

The fires from this attack were huge, lighting up the sky for miles around. Thank the Lord there weren't any night fighters about at this time, as all the bombers must have been visible.

We pressed on for home, dodging around another couple of flak concentrations, until the welcome sight of the English Channel came into view.

All crews had been warned to keep a sharp lookout for enemy fighters infiltrating into the circuit area.

They would then pick out a bomber coming in to land, dive down and shoot up the aircraft on the runway and scream away into the night sky, before anyone had time to do a thing about it.

I was doing plenty of weaving as we came closer to Skellingthorpe, and the crew didn't need any second warning as I lost height, preparatory to joining the circuit area. All eyes were straining to catch sight of any unusual aircraft.

"Navigator, Skipper. We should be about 15 minutes from base. You should see our pundit coming up any minute."

Ted called up from his front hatch, "There's our lovely red letter S (dot-dot-dot) showing up a few degrees to port Skipper."

"I see it thanks Ted. Bloody good show Stan, your navigation was spot on all night."

The squadron aircraft call sign was QR, marked on each plane.

I called up base, "Hello Blackswan. Hello Blackswan, this is QR-W whisky, QR-W whisky. What are my landing instructions?"

"W whisky this is Blackswan. Join the circuit at 1000 feet, on the upwind leg. The runway is clear, you can come straight in."

"Roger, Blackswan. Many thanks."

I turned into wind for my final approach, and put her down well up the runway, so I wouldn't have to taxi too far back to our dispersal point.

"Good job all round fellas. A bit dicey with the cookie, and going through the target three times was probably asking for trouble. That's behind us now, and our first night attack is over. Let's hope the others to follow aren't quite so eventful."

I went to the pilots' debriefing room, where the air was full of smoke, with bods having nervous drags on fags. When I was telling the intelligence officer about the hang-up with the 4000 lb blockbuster, and the three attempts to drop it, he said, "I don't know whether to say 'bloody good show', or 'you must have rocks in your head'. That was a hot target."

"I still haven't made up my own mind," I said, "but I'm inclined to agree with your last version, about the rocks."

We had a five day break until our next op, on 17 October.

This was a daylight raid on Boulogne, to attack German positions, and gun emplacements around the city. The German garrison surrendered soon after this raid. Over 700 aircraft took part in the attack.

The following night the golden dart landed on Bremerhaven. Take-off was to be 1815 hours, on a cold and blustery night.

With all checks completed, and the motors running sweetly, I taxied in line to the runway, calling up each crew member, making sure all was well with them.

Turning onto the take-off path, I said to them, "OK chaps, I've got the green light. Prepare for take-off."

We trundled down the runway gaining take-off speed.

"Take over the throttles Tom. We've got a bloody load on tonight; plus there's a rotten crosswind, and I'll need both hands on the wheel."

Climbing away, I had just retracted the undercarriage when the starboard wing started to drop, and the aircraft to slide in that direction.

I could see Tom watching me like a hawk, as I battled to get that wing up. Utter silence from the rest of the crew, who must have known that something was wrong, noting the angle of the aircraft.The wheel was as far to the left as it would go. The slide had stopped, but the wing was not lifting to right the plane.

All motors were set at climbing revs, so I pushed the starboard outer throttle to its limit and at the same time I applied gentle but firm port rudder.

My heartbeat started to return to normal as I saw the wing slowly begin to rise and the aircraft regained its normal flying attitude with no further problems.

"What the bloody hell caused that?" asked Tom. "I thought we were going to 'buy it' for sure."

"The only thing I can think of is: we must have copped a hell of a blast of wind that kept blowing for some time, and prevented the aeroplane fom recovering."

I had checked my trim tabs, and all settings were as they should be, so the episode was to remain a mystery.

There was some nervous chatter from the rest of the crew, so I called them up and said, "The drama's over chaps. The aircraft is behaving normally, so we're carrying on as usual. Any of you feeling shit scared during that little lot? Don't feel lonely. Anyone who says he wasn't, is a bloody liar."

We carried on and bombed Bremerhaven, without any serious problems; the usual flak and searchlights to worry about, but night fighters were practically non-existent, which was a great relief, as they had been pretty active when other targets had been attacked by different groups.

I heard at debriefing that other skippers had problems during take off, and the Met boffin had put it down to unusual prolonged gusty crosswind conditions.

We had now done two long night cross-country exercises, and five operations in twelve days; plus I had done the extra second pilot trip with Wing Commander Pexton.

A welcome leave break was now on the agenda, and the crew were going their separate ways. The Poms headed for home; Dick was going to London and I headed for Brighton, and then back to London for a few days.

I met up with Norma and Jackie again. Jackie had had a letter from Jack, but he'd been posted to Lossiemouth in the North of Scotland, and hadn't been able to get down to Brighton.

Norma and I did the rounds of the dances, and met up with our mates at the White Lion pub (plus a few others) and generally had a great time.

I left to spend a few days in London, going first to Australia House to see if I could catch up with anyone I knew.

The Agent General at the time was Mr Troy, and he and his wife were wonderful to all the Australian servicemen. They would arrange for blokes to go to parties, tours and to people's homes for a meal.

We would take tinned food if we could scrounge some from anyone at Aussie House, as the Poms were on very tight rations.

One afternoon I met up with another Aussie pilot named Jock Atkinson, and Mrs Troy said she was looking for two Australian airmen to make up numbers for a girl who was having her twenty-first birthday party. Would Jock and I like to go?

Having nothing better on the books, we said we would love to, and were given the address in a rather posh suburb in London.

We were met at the door by the mother and father of the young lady, and introduced to their daughter; a lovely looking red-headed girl, with a curvaceous figure to match the good looks.

There would have been only about ten couples at the party; and I'm sure none of the men had ever met any of the women before.

The parents were on duty as fire wardens, on the roof of the block of flats where they lived. Leaving us to our own devices, they said they would call down later and see how we were making out.

We moved the goldfish out of their small aquarium into a couple of big saucepans, cleaned it out, and proceeded to make up a 'punch'.

Heaven knows what finished up going into the 'witches' brew'; the last thing I saw was a bottle of gin. I thought it better not to watch the rest of the procedure, and decided to be careful when partaking of the potion.

The carpet was rolled back, the gramophone cranked up, and with Glenn Miller belting out the music, the dancing started. The jitterbug being all the rage at the time, the girls were swung over shoulders, between legs; skirts were flying high, and the flash of multi-coloured scanties could be seen by all those pretending not to look. A truly beautiful sight!

The effect of the 'punch' was becoming evident in quite a few cases. A couple of Yanks and their partners were sleeping peacefully on the floor and in the lounge chairs; and I must say I was feeling a little worse for wear myself.

Lillian, the birthday girl, and I had paired off and I was determined to stay on my feet for the rest of the evening.

Mother came down from the rooftop, appeared satisfied that all was in order, and returned to her duties up above.

Lillian said, "Come with me," and we slipped upstairs to the bedroom.

"Blast, there's someone in there. We'll check the second one."

This bedroom was also occupied, but it had two beds, so we dived in and grabbed the mattress and bedclothes, then Lillian led the way to the bathroom, and we dumped them into the large bath.

Locking the door, we returned downstairs to rejoin the party.

Things must have proceeded at a pretty hectic pace, as I vaguely remember escorting Lillian to our aquatic bedroom, and after that, nothing.

Waking about 8 am, and finding the hostess in bed (bath) with me, gave me quite a shock, as I am sure it did to her.

Both still being in full marching order, I assumed nothing untoward had taken place.

We had a good laugh at ourselves, and used the bath for its rightful purpose, together, a little later.

I met Jock back at Australia House for lunch, and we spent a quiet afternoon at the pictures, slowly recovering from our night out and the contents of the goldfish aquarium.

Leave came to an end all too soon, and I returned to the squadron for a rest, as most of us did after leave.

All the crew returned on time, and we were immediately given flying exercises in fighter affiliation: trying to stop a Spitfire shooting us down with a camera gun, and our gunners replying with same, while I put the aircraft through the corkscrew evasive action.

High level bombing practice was also on the agenda, as was air to sea firing with live ammunition for the gunners and the bomb aimer Ted, who was in the front turret.

This gunnery exercise was carried out at low level over the ocean which caused quite a thrill, but I had to be careful as the judgement of height over water is very tricky.

The groundstaff crew were not very happy finding salt from the spray underneath their aircraft, and not backward in letting one know, regardless of rank.

On 5 October, we were on the 'battle order', and when the cover was removed from the map at briefing we saw the trip was to Wilhelmshaven.

We took off, climbed to bombing height through cloud, and arrived at the target area, with ten-tenths cloud covering the whole scene.

Pathfinder Force had to mark the target on H2s (radar) and bombing was carried out by the same method.

We were to learn later that the bombing was not very accurate and not considered a good attack.

The only good thing about it was that it was another mission completed, and we were still in one piece.

It was at this time we were allocated our own aircraft, QR-X, and were to fly it exclusively, except when she was taken off ops for regular inspections and overhauls.

Where possible these were done when we were on operational rest leave.

The skipper who'd just completed his tour (30 raids) took me out to the aircraft and we checked the Lancaster right through.

"Look after the old girl, Noel. She has no bad habits, and hasn't let me down, even though she's been on the receiving end of a few hits, and attacks by fighters. By the time you finish your tour, this aircraft will have 100 operations against her name. Good luck to you and your crew, and QR-X x-ray."

Getting our own Lancaster, from a flying point of view, was great for me and for the rest of the crew. Each member had their own equipment, which they kept in first class order; a great help to the ground staff.

On 6 October we were briefed for a mission to Bremen.

An important industrial target, it harboured the Weser shipyard, Focke-Wulfe aircraft factories, the Siemens electrical works, and other armament factories essential to the German war effort.

We took off at 17.55 hours. The Met bod had promised fine weather for the entire journey, with moonlight over the target area.

This was good news for the bomb aimers, but also good news for the German night fighter pilots, as our aircraft would again stand out like a 'country dunny'.

"Enemy coast coming up Nav," called Ted from his bombing position up front. "I'll be able to give you a fix in a couple of minutes. It's like bloody daylight. We must be sticking out like dogs' balls to those ack-ack gunners down there."

"Skipper here. Keep a sharp lookout for fighters everyone. I'll be weaving continuously, Ted and gunners, and will let you know when I'm going to take a break."

"Take a look at that bloody flak mon," said Taffy from his mid-upper turret. "It's pouring up away to the port side. There must be some poor bastard off-course over there, and they're giving him everything they've got."

"I'd say he's wandered too close to Groningen, quite a large built-up area and known to be heavily defended," said Stan.

"I don't think I will take a look thanks Taffy. I'm quite happy here in my little cubbyhouse, oblivious to the turmoil going on out there. I became inquisitive on our first night raid over Stuttgart, and I'm not over keen to see all that shit being hurled up at us in future."

We turned on to the bombing run, and the 'flaming onions' were coming up in a never ending stream. Thank God, for the moment, we appeared to be living a charmed life, with shells exploding just far enough away not to cause much damage.

" Keep her steady Skip. We're bang on target," said Ted.

"Bombs gone. Bloody good show, I reckon we had a near perfect run-in and drop that time."

I had to hold the aircraft steady for the next thirty seconds, so that the camera could take the photo of our bombs on the target. This was always the longest 30 seconds of the trip, as it was a great temptation to turn onto the next course, get the hell out of the danger area, and head for home.

Some chaps had fallen for this urge, and had been 'balled out' when their photo showed a fine shot of the night sky but no evidence that they had actually been to the target area and dropped any bombs.

Stan had just called to me to alter course, and I was in the middle of a fairly steep turn, when a burst of flak exploded very close to us, but apparently doing no serious damage.

"Shit, that was bloody close Skipper," said Tom the engineer standing next to me. "I can smell the stuff."

"As long as we can't feel it we're doing pretty well Tom! Rear gunner, are you OK?"

"Yes Skipper."

"Mid-upper?"

"OK. Skip."

"Navigator OK Skipper."

"Wireless op. OK."

Ted gave me a thumbs-up from down in the bombing hatch, so luckily no one had copped any shrapnel, as there must have been a shower of it around outside.

We had been on our new heading for a few minutes when I noticed a few sparks flying out behind the starboard inner engine. I took another look a few seconds later, and the few had become a stream.

I called up Tom who was working on his fuel panel, and said, "I think we have a big problem with that engine mate. I'm going to shut it down."

"You do that bloody fast Skipper, or it'll burst into flames in no time. We must've copped some shrapnel in the cooling system, and lost all the coolant."

I flicked off the switches to the damaged motor; at the same time 'feathering' the propeller (turning the leading edge of the blades into the oncoming air flow).

This prevents 'windmilling', which happens when the propeller continues to rotate after the engine has stopped, causing drag, slowing the aircraft and increasing fuel consumption. At the same time I pressed another switch which activated a fire extinguisher built into the engine.

I called the wireless op.

"You'd better contact base Dick, and let them know we've lost a motor, making us late home."

"OK Skip, I'll let you know when I've got the message through."

"Hello Nav. Skipper here. I'm going to use a slightly nose-down attitude to increase speed a bit, to make up for the drag of the dead engine I don't want to flog the starboard outer motor."

"OK Skip. Let me know every 500 feet you lose so I can keep a check on my chart."

"Roger Stan."

"Wireless op, Skip. Your message is through to base. They've acknowledged, and wished us the best for the trip home."

"Thanks Dick. Let's hope all goes well from here on."

The weather remained clear and we were lucky not to encounter any enemy fighters. Flak was thick in a few patches, but we were able to avoid most of the heavy concentrations.

Eventually the English coast could be seen, by the line of broken cloud covering it. This was a comforting sight after our close shave with the flak barrage.

I called up base, "Hello Blackswan, hello Blackswan, this is QR-X x-ray. Could I have landing instructions please?"

Just as I spoke, the outer lighting system and the runway lights were switched on; I wondered if they'd been turned off because of any enemy intruders hanging around.

"QR-X x-ray, this is Blackswan. We received your message you'd be late home, having had a motor knocked out. Well I have news for you: QR-X is the first aircraft home. Three engines must be enough for you! Come straight in; you're cleared to land."

I completed the circuit and had no problems putting the old girl back on the ground.

Having turned off the runway, I shut down the port inner engine, and taxied back to dispersal, using the two outers.

We all climbed out of the aircraft, everyone chattering about our close call, with that excited grin of relief on the face and the churning guts slowly settling down.

With both feet safely on the ground, and the 'drag of a fag' laying a smoke screen in the truck taking us back to debriefing, I said, "That's lucky No 7 over, we'll be right now."

Life at the squadron soon takes on the facade of normality after an op which, in my humble opinion, is about as far from normal as one can get.

Training never stops. Bombing practice, baling out training from the hull of a Lancaster in a hangar, ditching in the sea, fire drills, all

necessary to practise in case we have to escape from a crippled aircraft.

These drills were all taken very seriously, as we may need to use them on our next trip.

The strange thing was, that once aboard the aircraft, it was never us that was going to cop it, always the other bloke.

I would never feel comfortable flying with a person who said he wasn't scared on operations. I would class him as a liar or as one who was foolhardy enough to take unnecessary risks.

The morning after getting home from Bremen, while still brushing the sleep out of my eyes, I heard the Tannoy system announce, "There is a battle order up on the board for 61 Squadron. All crews check immediately. I repeat..."

Ted and I went to the Mess notice board to check on the battle order, and sure enough our crew was on the list.

Briefing was only an hour away, so I assumed this raid had been put on in a short space of time.

When the cover was removed from the route map, I was surprised to see this was to be a short trip to the island of Walcheren, just off the coast of Holland.

My curiosity as to the target was put to rest in a few minutes when the unusual plan was revealed.

A huge dyke surrounded the island, keeping out the invading ocean and making the land viable for farming.

After D-Day our invading armies bypassed Walcheren Island, leaving the garrison of German troops and artillery still remaining there, to be dealt with by the RAF at a later date.

This time had now arrived. The tides on the coast of Holland were at their highest for some time to come, ideal for the task at hand.

We were to bomb the dykes near the town of Flushing, allowing the sea to pour in and cover the land, and with it the German garrison.

The island of Walcheren was, hopefully, about to be sunk.

We took off at 12.15 pm together with 120 other Lancasters of 5 Group, and headed for our target.

Light flak was coming up from the island, and no enemy fighters were sighted during the raid.

Being a daylight operation, I could see the first wave of aircraft going through the target area, but no results of the attack could be seen as yet.

We were about half way home, when Taffy called out to me, "Skipper, there's a Mosquito coming up alongside real close. He's off our port wing now and the navigator is making signs."

"Thanks Taffy. He is close. I can just about see the whites of his bloody eyes. I can make out his sign language now. He's pointing down, and then sticking both thumbs in the air, I think he means the dykes have been breached. Let's hope so."

The Intelligence bods had not received any confirmed reports of the damage to the dykes when we arrived back, but a reconnaissance aircraft was being dispatched in a couple of hours time, to photograph the area.

Some of the bombs were delayed-action and armour piercing, and had to be given time to do their work before the results could be assessed.

I went with the rest of the crew for our bacon and egg after-ops meal; then Ted and I went to the Officers' Mess to have a couple of pints, while waiting for the results to be announced.

The photographic Mosquito was back in quick time (the trip had only taken us three hours); our own photos had shown a good result, so we kept our fingers crossed.

A bit later we went down to the Intelligence section, and were greeted by smiles all round.

"Bloody great show," said the senior Intelligence officer. "The breach has been confirmed and the sea is pouring in over the island."

I rustled up the rest of the crew from the Sergeants' Mess, and we all went off to the local pub to celebrate, together with some of the other crews.

About a week later we did another trip to Flushing, but the raid was not a success, owing to low cloud and filthy weather.

About this time I bought a small car from the Squadron graveyard. When blokes had been shot down, and the next of kin didn't want the vehicles, they were sold to the highest bidder.

Naturally, the bids were never high, and my offer of 10 pounds, for a 1934 Morris Minor was accepted.

Fitting the seven of us into this small vehicle at first appeared to be an impossible task but, through trial and error, a system was worked out.

The two front bucket seats tipped forward to allow passengers onto the small bench seat in the back.

Stan, the navigator, was a very big man, so he sat in the front seat. Taffy, the mid-upper gunner, the smallest in the crew, somehow sat on Stan's knee. How the other four fitted into the back seat, I'm sure I don't know; but they did.

I looked at the springs before I hopped into the driver's seat, and vowed never to do it again, as the sight was rather disturbing.

I had a very small petrol ration, and with a bit of bulldust, could pick up an extra gallon or two here and there. Scrounging was the name of the game if you owned a car, and our crew became very proficient in this profession.

Tom, the engineer, who used to work at the Morris factory at Luton, became a doubly important member of the crew keeping 'Monty the Morris' on the road.

He became good mates with a garage owner in Lincoln, and managed to scrounge spare parts at the right price. Tom would do the repairs, and was exempt from putting in for fuel and parts.

The main worry was burnt-out valves, caused from now and then using fuel which had a higher octane rating than recommended for the Morris!

One night, the seven of us were bowling along on our way to a country pub on the road to Waddington, when a loud rattle developed in the engine.

"Bloody hell Skipper. Slow down. You've done a big end bearing."

"Can we keep going Tom? We're past the point of no return, and we're all dying for a pint."

"Take her real slowly Colly, and we should make it, but I can't promise anything."

We made it to the pub, but Tom was worried about the trip back to Skelly, with the big end trying to hammer the connecting rod to bits.

I saw him having a few words with the publican before they both disappeared out the back door.

Tom was away about twenty minutes, but came back with a grin on his face saying, "I managed to scrounge some heavy gear oil from the pub garage, drained half the oil from Monty, and bunged in the black goo. With a bit of luck that should get us home OK."

"Bloody good show mate. You're on free grog for the rest of the night."

He drank the best brandy in the house; Tom loved his drop of good brandy.

We made it back to Skellingthorpe at a gentle pace, and repairs were carried out once more by the man who was a first class engineer on Lancasters, and equally as good on Morris cars.

'Monty' gave good service to me and the crew, with many hair-raising, and hilarious experiences over our time at 61 Squadron.

Chapter 14

On 14 October, we were on the battle order for a night mission, with briefing at 2130 hours, where we discovered our target was to be the marshalling yards and warehouses in the town of Brunswick.

The ground crew had QR-X in top order, and with the crew all settled into their positions, I fired up the ever reliable Rolls-Royce motors. We left the runway beneath us at 2250 hours.

The CO had informed us that 230 aircraft of 5 Group, and 7 Mosquitoes of Pathfinder Force, would be taking part in the operation.

The brilliantly lit target indicators were marked on the ground in such a way that they themselves were not the actual bombing point.

The leader of the PFF group would call up the main bombing force, to give the number of seconds delay after the bomb aimer's bomb sight passed over the target indicators.

In this way the target indicators were not destroyed by the main force.

A wrong positioning of the TIs was cancelled by dropping yellow flares and a different colour was dropped to mark the new position.

I noticed the flak becoming heavier and searchlight activity intensifying as we moved closer to the target area.

Excitedly Taffy called out from the mid upper turret, "Skipper there's a 'Blue Leader' searchlight just come up ahead on the port side. Have you spotted it yet?"

"Got it now thanks Taff. Keep an eye on it for me. Can you see it from down there Ted?"

"Yes Skipper. I'm watching it. Shit, it's swinging straight towards us!"

The aircraft was suddenly engulfed in glaring white light, which would destroy our night vision in seconds: QR-X would be captured in the brilliance.

"Shield your eyes, and hang on. I'm going to dive straight down the beam and see if I can break out of the light."

I slapped my seat height adjustment down to the floor to get my eyes below the level of the intense light.

Concentrating on the instrument panel, I put the aircraft into a steep dive, straight down the beam of the searchlight, remembering that I was still carrying a full bomb load.

The flak was starting to give us full attention with the lights on us, and I prayed the sudden dive would put the ack-ack gunners off-target.

"Our speed's getting pretty high Skipper. Don't forget the bomb load!" Tom warned me.

I suddenly called, "Hang on, I'm climbing, and making a steep turn to port. Keep your eyes out for other aircraft. There's another two hundred-odd around somewhere."

We shot out of the cone of searchlights into blessed darkness, with the lights searching the night sky, trying to pick us up again.

Stan called me up on the intercom, "You were a bit bloody rough pulling out of that dive Skipper. I don't know what the g-force would've been, but it broke two of my new pencils when I was trying to work out a new course, and nearly blacked me out as well."

"Never mind Stan, I'll sharpen them for you when we get home," came the cheeky reply from Taffy.

"OK. Cut out the chatter back there. We're not out of the shit yet; we still have a bombing run to do; and get home!"

"Ted here Skipper. The blue leader searchlight has just gone out so we shouldn't have any more trouble from that bastard, at least for the time being."

Stan gave me the new course for the run into the target. The flak was very heavy at this stage, although we didn't appear to have sustained any damage.

"There go the red target indicators," said Ted. "Five degrees starboard Skipper. We're bang on course. Great work Stan. Hold her there Skip. A touch to port. Steady. Steady. Hold it. Hold it. Bombs

gone! Let's get to hell out of here Skipper. The flak is getting heavier, and I've just seen another blue searchlight looking for a victim."

"I see it all Ted, and am not at all impressed. What's the new course for home Stan? It's time to get out of this crap."

I put the aircraft into a dive to our new height and course, heading out of the target area like a cut cat, with those beautiful motors not missing a beat: all gauges were showing normal.

Tom tapped me on the shoulder, pointed to the fuel indicators and gave me the thumbs-up; everything was going well in that department.

We were well on the way home, when Tom called me up. "I thought everything was going too smoothly Skipper. We have lost all pressure in the brake system. There'll be no brakes when we touch down. I'm afraid there's nothing can be done about it up here. The old girl must have collected a piece of shrapnel in the works during that last lot of flak."

"OK Tom. Stan, work out a course for the emergency runway at Woodbridge. I'll have to put down on the long runway, not having any skids."

"Right Skip, give me a couple of minutes and I'll have it for you."

"Wireless op, can you hear me Dick?"

"Go ahead Skip."

"Call up base and tell them we've altered course for Woodbridge, and the reason for doing so. Stan'll give you a new ETA shortly."

The runway we were heading for was specially built for aircraft which had been badly shot-up and were unable to land on their normal airfield without the possibility of crash landing, belly landing or loss of engines.

The first section of this mile-long strip was normal bitumen, while the last half was grassed, for belly landings, and for aircraft likely to lose control after touching down.

I called up Woodbridge when we were in range of the circuit area, and was told to orbit at 2500 feet, as there were other aircraft in the stack who had much greater problems than our own.

My trouble was going to be keeping the plane straight on the strip when it began to lose speed. I could manage to control direction with the outer engines and rudder until that point, but when the motors were cut back, it was in the lap of the gods.

We came down to circuit landing height eventually, and were given permission to 'come on in'.

"Skipper to all crew. I want you to go to your crash positions now. This is just a precaution in case I have to drop her on her belly, or do a ground loop if we are heading for something nasty, like a fuel tanker or another aircraft on the ground."

We came in on the final approach, careful of the crosswind I had been told about by the Control Tower.

Touchdown was OK, fairly well down the strip, so there would be plenty of grass to use if we struck any trouble. The crosswind wasn't causing too much drift, and the plane was slowing quite rapidly as I cut back the motors.

"Tom," I called, "cut the two inboard engines. I'm going to be a bit busy."

They both stopped. As from force of habit, I applied brakes to stop a swing to port. Realising in an instant there would be no response, I gunned the port motor a little for correction, and we remained just on the runway.

The grass was coming up now and, cutting the remaining two engines, dear old QR-X trundled to a stop, doing a slow turn to port, as if taking a bow.

Within 60 seconds of coming to a halt, a tractor was hooked on and the aircraft was towed away to a dispersal point, where we all piled out, dragging our smokes out of our pockets, and moving a safe distance away to light up.

A small truck arrived to pick us up, and take us to a central debriefing station, where each member of the crew was questioned as usual.

While waiting my turn I talked to the pilot of a Halifax that had been badly shot up on the same target.

"How did you come out of it mate?"

"Three of my crew killed: navigator, rear and mid-upper gunners. I had to belly-land her, and after the rest of us had scrambled out, they bulldozed the plane off the runway."

Here was me thinking I'd had a problem, with only a brake failure to worry about.

I went into the interview room thanking God for small mercies.

Ted and I went to the Officers' Mess to get a meal, before turning in for a bit of shut-eye, as it was now about 7 o'clock in the morning.

When I went down to the hangars to see how repairs were going to the aircraft, the sight that greeted my eyes was amazing.

Several crashed aircraft had been pushed well away from the runway, and were in the process of being lifted by cranes onto big trucks to be taken away: I presume to make room for more 'prangs'.

Our aircraft had been repaired by 1500 hours, and we were able to take off at 1645 hours, arriving back at Skellingthorpe 45 minutes later.

We were greeted like long lost children by our groundcrew. They went over QR-X with a fine tooth comb, not happy until they'd inspected someone else's repair work and given it the all-clear.

The groundcrews were a wonderful breed of men: they were tireless in their efforts to keep the 'kites' flying.

I've seen them working up on the motors, out in the freezing weather until the spanners fall out of their hands, which can no longer feel anything. The cuts and grazes don't bleed until the hands begin to thaw. And then the pain sets in.

This usually happens when changing the flame arresters on the exhausts, which hide the blue flames from enemy fighters.

The work doesn't stop for a second, as another mechanic is waiting to take over from the bloke now sitting in the crew hut, next to a pot belly stove, grimacing with pain as the circulation slowly returns to his blue hands.

We had three days without any operations, and made the best of a

couple of good nights out with the crew in Lincoln, meeting with some new members of the opposite sex at a couple of dances.

On 19 October we were sent on a night raid to the city of Nuremburg, which was a pretty hot target, but we managed to get through without any damage to the aircraft or injury to the crew.

Chapter 15

On the twenty-fifth of the same month, a low level cross-country exercise was listed, with take-off time of 1430 hours.

I'd been looking forward to this flight for some time, as those who'd been on this trip previously told of thrills they had experienced flying at a low altitude.

The minimum height we were supposed to fly at was 300 feet, but this instruction was rarely adhered to. Pilots, out for some extra excitement, would go as low as possible.

I'm sure the Flight Commanders knew this was going on, but turned a blind eye; after all, they'd been there themselves, hadn't they?

The low-level course was triangular; the two turning points were villages, easily visible by the church spires at each one. The exercise would take about an hour to complete.

We took off, doing a steep climbing turn to 350 feet, to show anyone watching on the ground that I was playing by the rules as we headed away from the base.

"Ted would you mind getting belly-down in the bombing hatch, keeping a good lookout in front for any nasties, like high tension power lines or any other obstructions that could get in the way. Taffy in the mid-upper, would you do likewise. Scotty in the rear turret, facing backwards, keep an eye out for any planes taking an interest in what we're up to. OK fellas, let's get down and do some real low flying."

Tom was in the cockpit with me, and I told Stan and Dick to come up front and have a look if they wanted to, as there was no navigation or wireless contact to worry about.

The slightly undulating countryside was ideal for low flying, with only man-made obstructions to be wary of, and these were plainly visible.

I took the Lancaster down as close to the deck as possible; following the curves of the small rolling hills.

"Skipper. Ted here. There's a railway line coming up, with a loco pulling a line of empty trucks and he's belting along the track. How about giving it a beat up?"

"Right Ted. I'll come up from behind him, on the starboard side. It's really flat here, and we shouldn't be too high above the cab when we pass him."

I took her down lower, and flew up the length of the train, with Dick and Stan standing behind me to get a look.

The engine driver and the fireman spotted us just before we came level with the cab.

The surprised look on their faces gave way to broad grins as they waved madly with rags.

All the crew were waving back, and Scotty, in the rear end, said he had his guns pointing to the sky, and was swinging his turret from side to side.

I did one more pass along the train, and with a final wave, we were on our way, opening up the throttles to gain a bit of lost time.

Flying at this height was totally exhilarating; and seemed much faster over the ground. The higher one flew, the more the speed in relation to the ground diminished.

We flew on to our first turning point, doing a 'split arsed' steep turn above the church spire, and headed off on the second leg.

One thing I drew the line at was flying low over sheep or cattle, causing them to race around in confusion. I would climb, or go around the paddock to avoid them.

Half way along the second leg, I called up Ted.

"Do you see what I see coming up ahead mate? It looks like some Land Army girls on top of that small haystack, fixing a cover or something."

"Yes it is Skip. Let's give them a gentle 'shoot up' for a close look at a Lancaster."

At the mention of the word 'girls', Stan and Dick appeared as if by

magic out of their cubbyholes again, to get another look at the goings-on down below.

One of the girls spotted the aircraft coming towards them, and must have shouted to the other two, as all three slid down off the stack as we roared over the top.

I pulled back gently on the stick as we went over, and the slipstream blew the cover off the top, together with a bit of hay.

By the time I'd turned, and was doing a tight circuit around the field, the girls were jumping up and down, laughing like mad, and waving anything they could grab hold of.

We were also enjoying the fun so I made one final low pass before getting back on course, and continuing the exercise.

As we came closer to Skellingthorpe, I climbed to the legal height of 300 feet, and then to 1000 feet to enter the circuit area.

I was given the OK to land and shutting down at the dispersal point, noticed that the truck to take us back to the crew room, was already waiting. Most unusual.

The driver told me that I was to report to the Flight Commander's office after putting my flying gear away.

This didn't sound like good news to me, after the antics we'd been up to, and I'd hazard a guess that some lousy bastard had dobbed me in for extra-low flying.

This happened every now and again, and didn't go down at all well with the crews who were letting off a bit of steam between operations.

I presented myself before the Squadron Leader, and sure enough, I was in the hot seat.

"Collins," he said, "it's been reported to me that an aircraft with our Squadron markings, QR, has been flying at an extremely low altitude, in the vicinity of the designated 300 feet level course. Unfortunately, or fortunately, as the case may be, this farmer did not get the aircraft letter, so we aren't able to identify positively who was the culprit. Evidently this pilot was flying low enough to blow the cover off a haystack some Land Army girls had just put on. Do you know anything about this?"

"A person would have to be bloody crazy to get down that low, don't you think so Sir? One would have to be nearly on the deck; that's too risky."

I hadn't replied in the affirmative, or the negative, and the Flight Commander knew damn well that I had done it, but didn't press the point any further.

It was common knowledge that higher ranking officers had a bash on the low level course every now and again, and not sticking strictly to the rules!

Maybe that was why I saw a slow grin spreading over his face, as I was dismissed.

On 28 October we were sent with other 5 Group aircraft to bomb the submarine pens at Bergen.

This turned out to be an unsuccessful operation, as cloud cover was over the target area, and only a few planes were able to drop their bombs from beneath the cloud.

We were well on the way home from this raid, when Dick called up.

"Skipper, we've been diverted to the Fido strip. There's ten tenths low cloud at base, and many other stations are fogged out all over the Midlands."

"Thanks Dick. Stan, will you give me a new course to fly and time to reach this runway?"

Fido was the code name for the Fog Dispersal Unit, and from reports I had heard from skippers who had used it, landing on it was a hazardous experience.

The landing area had pipes running along each side of the strip. These were filled with petrol, and jets were lit at intervals along the length. The heat generated caused the fog to lift, giving enough visibility for an aircraft to land.

When first constructed, the pipes were also laid across the ends of the runway but these were soon found to be a death trap.

An aircraft returning from a raid had fuel leaking from a ruptured fuel tank and burst into flames after passing over the flaming pipe at

the end of the strip. These were removed immediately after this shocking accident.

I could see the glare from the area coming up from quite a distance away; a weird sight through the surrounding fog.

Calling up the control tower, I was told to join the circuit at 3000 feet and listen out for further instructions.

I told the crew, "Keep a sharp lookout for intruders. Night fighters could see this bloody outfit from Berlin."

From this height, we could see the hole in the fog that the heat was creating. The lift in the atmosphere was going to make landing a very interesting piece of flying!

I'd been listening to other planes being called down to lower altitudes and now it was our turn.

"Fido control to QR-X. Reduce height to 2000 feet. Do one circuit and join upwind leg at 1000 feet."

"Roger control. Wilco."

On the final beam approach, we suddenly burst into the glare of the heated area, with the runway straight ahead, and the aircraft bouncing about like a toy balloon.

I knew I had to put her down at the first attempt; there was no going around again and having another shot here.

Coming in low over the lead-in lights, with plenty of power on, I cautiously felt for the runway, half blinded by the brightness.

Suddenly the wheels touched the strip, with the aircraft in a slightly nose-down attitude. She leapt into the air with a hell of a bounce, and I rammed on power again to try and land her correctly at the second touchdown.

We bounced again, but not as badly, and when we touched the earth the next time, I was able to cut the throttles and keep her on the ground, and on the runway.

"What a bastard of a place to try and land an aircraft! Are all you blokes OK? That was a hamfisted attempt on my part," I said. "We're bloody lucky to be in one piece."

"You can say that again," said Scotty from the rear turret. "My balls are down near my boots, and my gut is where they should be. I'm very happy to feel the rear wheel rumbling along underneath me, I can tell you."

A vehicle with a 'follow me' sign at the back was at the end of the strip. Soon we were at the dispersal point, and thankful to shut down the engines.

The Sergeant in charge of the groundcrew came over and I said to him, "You'd better check the undercarriage pretty well Sarge. That was a bloody heavy landing but I think everything inside is still holding together."

"Don't you worry about that Skipper," he said. "That was one of the best landings to come in tonight. We have a couple damaged kites down at the end of the runway, one is a write-off, but thankfully no one was hurt."

We all went off to debriefing, and I was dying to get out of my flying gear, as perspiration had been flowing freely during that encounter with the fog dispersal unit.

The weather and fog had cleared in the morning, so we took off for Skelly, arriving back at base about thirty minutes later.

I said to the crew, "I know I cursed the place, but when you think of it, where the bloody hell would we have landed without it?"

There was no answer to that question.

Chapter 16

Leave, beautiful leave: I was off to London to meet Norma, staying at the Strand Palace for a couple of days. We saw some good shows, and generally enjoyed ourselves.

Walking back to The Strand one evening we heard the sound of a flying bomb coming towards us.

These are rocket-propelled and, when they run out of fuel, the gyro stops and the bomb comes straight down.

I was watching the flight of the thing, coming up Fleet Street, when the fiery tail went out, and the noise stopped. It was on its way down!

I noticed a steel laundry van parked just in front of us, so I grabbed Norma and, heaving her up into the van among the bags of linen, wasted no time getting in there myself.

Suddenly there was a hell of a bang and a roar.

Glass and bricks rained down on top of our temporary bomb shelter, frightening the bloody life out of us.

When the dust had settled, and we decided we were none the worse for wear, I lifted the little lady out of the van, as a London bobby appeared out of the murk.

"'Ullo, 'ullo, 'ullo," he says, "been havin' a little bit of how's yer father in the comfort of the laundry van 'ave yer?"

I was so bloody wild, I had to take a couple of deep breaths before answering.

"Constable," I said, "if you think it's possible to have sex in there, with the bomb going off, and all this crap landing on the van, you must have rocks in your head, or the powers of concentration beyond belief."

By this time Norma was laughing her head off; it was too much for the bobby and me, and we also cracked up.

"Only jokin' Sir, only jokin'," he said, as he walked on his way, and we moved off full of humour, after nearly being killed by a buzz bomb!

When a few of us decided to have a 'boozy' day out in London, we would start the day at Codger's Pub at 11 am, until it closed at 2 pm. Then across the road to Greasy Joe's, for a horse steak with an egg (both highly illegal) and chips to prepare the inner man for the ordeal ahead.

Then it was off to Tooly's Golf school, where for two shillings and sixpence, you could become a member and, if you wished, could belt a golf ball at the nets. The main attraction was a very well-equipped bar, where members could legally have a drink, when the pubs were closed. From Tooly's, it was back to the pub until it closed at 10 pm.

This was the time the Chamois Club opened until 2 am, and when this closed, the All Night Club opened until 6 am.

It was a very long crawl, but as none of us drank spirits, and at most places the Pommy beer was so bloody awful we managed to get through the session fairly well.

I didn't take Norma on these days out, saying they were too strenuous for a young lady!

Some of the clubs had hostesses and I'd been there a few times before!

Frank was flying Hawker Henleys in Wales, towing airborne targets for trainee fighter pilots to fire at. He had some hair-raisng stories to tell.

He said he would fly to Skellingthorpe and take me back to Wales for a break next time I had leave.

The weather in November was terrible and, after getting back from leave, we didn't fly on operations until the twenty-first of the month.

When the cover was taken off the map at briefing, the CO said, "Well chaps, it's the 'milk run' again," (meaning the Dortmund-Ems Canal; we had been there many times).

"A photographic Mosquito found the aquaduct at Ladbergan has just been repaired after the last raid, which drained it dry. Let's go over and knock it out again. We don't want those German engineers to run out of work, or the canal to hold water, as it carries supplies for the German forces."

We took off at 1735 hours with a three-hour flight to get to the target.

Two hours into the trip, I said to Stan, "It looks like some pretty heavy cloud up ahead. I hope we don't have to bomb through it, as we have to be very accurate with this lot."

By the time we arrived in the target area, some of the attacking force had been through the bombing run. It was then that our bombing leader from Pathfinder Force came up on the wireless.

"Main force, this is your bombing leader speaking. Those of you that have not dropped your load, I want you to hold your attack and orbit to port losing height to just under 4000 feet. I've been down in my Mosquito to have a look. You'll be below cloud at this height and visibility is great. Come in on your same bombing run. New red target indicators have been dropped for you, and are spot on. Good luck. Out."

This wasn't going to be funny. Coming down under 4000 feet over Ladbergan the bloody light anti-aircraft fire would be like a shower of hailstones coming to greet us.

We broke cloud, and I hadn't been wrong about the flak; it was thick.

"Take over Ted," I said, and I heard him mumble, "Holy bloody shit, we'll never get through all this crap in one piece."

The gods must have been smiling down upon us that night as we came through the bombing run without a scratch.

Stan gave me the course to fly for the first leg of the trip home and, except for some areas of flak which we skirted around, we arrived back at base without further incident.

We were told next morning that the raid had been a great success; the aquaduct had been breached, and the canal had once again been drained of water.

Despite all the problems involved in this operation, no aircraft were lost.

The following day the loudspeakers put out a call that a battle order had been posted on the board with a list of crews to go on operations that night.

I thought we may miss out, having been on ops the night before; no such luck, we were one of the crews to fly.

The pre-flying meal was at 1400 hours and for the trip they gave us a package of sandwiches and Thermos flasks of coffee. These were larger than usual, making me suspicious.

At briefing a little later I saw we were carrying the maximum fuel load for a Lancaster. The attack was to be on the German submarine pens at Trondheim, in a fiord on the northwest coast of Norway; a hell of a long trip as we were to find out.

The meteorological officer told us the weather report was not good to begin with, but would improve as we went further out over the North Sea.

Getting into our flying gear, and picking up our parachutes, we were taken out to our aircraft dispersal point, having the last 'drag of a fag' until we got back.

In the truck feeble jokes were shared, even though the faces couldn't be seen through the haze of cigarette smoke.

The Sergeant in charge of maintenance for the aircraft, gave me the pre-flight chart to examine, telling me all was in order for flying.

When we were all on board the nerves disappeared as the job on hand took over.

The groundcrew were ready to start the mighty Rolls-Royce engines, plugging in to the battery bank trolley to turn the motors over for starting, to save the charge in the batteries on the aircraft.

I gave the thumbs-up sign that I was about to turn over the port inner engine which revolved slowly picking up speed. With a couple of pumps on the throttle it roared into life with a belch of smoke and flame.

Now that the four motors were running sweetly, and all cockpit checks were completed (Mary's pretty fanny was still useful!) I called up the crew, to make sure all was well with them, and their various pieces of equipment.

When each crew member had confirmed through the intercom system that he was ready, I began to taxi out for our turn to take off.

Having done the last cockpit check before turning on to the runway, I lined up with the other aircraft and waited for the green light to give me the 'all clear' to move.

This came and I pushed the four throttles steadily forward, until we were moving along well. Tom took them over for the remainder of the take-off while I concentrated on getting off the ground, carrying a full fuel load and a belly full of armour-piercing, delayed-action bombs.

We slowly climbed away and immediately set course, as we wouldn't have enough fuel for circling and gaining height as usual.

Heading out over the North Sea, we continued to climb up through the dark clouds and rain, with the aircraft being thrown around as the storm worsened. Dick Pratt, the wireless op, called me up and said, "Skipper, base has just contacted me, and said the meteorological bods have got it wrong. We're to get below the cloud until we're closer to the coast of Norway. The clear weather is too high for us."

"Good old bloody met men. Another balls-up. Maybe one day they'll get it right. Thanks Dick."

"Closer to the coast of Norway," I thought to myself. That was still hours away, and I hoped this shit didn't keep hanging around that long.

I put the nose down, throttled back and started back down through the stinking weather, hoping all the time to break the cloud cover and get some clear air.

With the altimeter showing 1000 feet I was becoming anxious as we were still in cloud; but outside, the light appeared to be increasing.

I was about to level out and stay at 750 feet, when the bomb aimer said from his front hatch, "I can see the ocean, Skipper, and we're not too bloody far above it."

Still flying through patchy cloud, I came down to 600 feet, above a very angry looking North Sea, with still a long way to go to get to our target.

Handling the plane in these conditions was a constant job of manual flying, as the automatic pilot couldn't be engaged, and the Lancaster doesn't have a second pilot. I looked like being very busy for the next few hours.

We'd been told to expect the round trip to take about 11 hours!

When we eventually came closer to the coast, I put the aircraft into a climb, gradually leaving the foul weather behind us, and cleared the coast at bombing height in beautiful moonlight.

This made it great for flying, but also make us stick out like dogs' balls for enemy fighters, and the anti-aircraft gunners.

The crafty Germans had laid a beautiful white smoke screen over the snow-covered target area, and Pathfinder Force were having trouble laying the indicators for us to bomb on. These had to be accurate, so that there was no chance of hitting the town and killing Norwegian civilians.

"Wireless op here Skip," said Dick. "I've just heard from base. We're to orbit the target area and await further instructions."

"OK Dick," I said, and continued to go around; always a dicey thing to do.

After a couple of circuits, I said to the crew, "All the searchlights and ack-ack gunners seem to be concentrating on us. What the bloody hell is going on?"

Dick came on the intercom again, "Hell I'm sorry Skipper. I gave you the wrong instructions. I read the code number incorrectly. It should have been: Abandon mission. Drop bombs North Sea."

We were the only stupid bastards left over the target area. No wonder they were throwing everything at us, and the searchlights were getting too close for comfort.

I put the plane into a steep dive, at the same time giving Dick a healthy blast of Aussie outback swearing. We were very lucky to get away with this balls-up; but we had, and it was no good carrying on about it. We'd all made mistakes, and still had the big job in front of us: to get home.

The crew settled down again and, as we were over the sea, I said to the bomb aimer, "Ted, we'll drop the load as soon as you're ready. I want to get rid of the weight as quickly as possible. It's a long way home."

"Just hold her steady on that course Skipper and I'll let them go."

"OK Ted. Bomb doors open."

"Bombs gone Skip."

I felt the aircraft lift as they fell away, and I called up Tom, the engineer, and asked how the fuel situation was.

"Not too bad Colly. We should have a couple of buckets left when we land, if we don't strike too much of a headwind on the way back."

I had to go down through the rotten weather again, but the cloud base was much higher than on the outward bound leg. This was a help to our fuel consumption but the flying conditions were still very rough.

Eventually the welcome sight of the coastline of England came into view, and never have I been happier to see it.

I had been at the controls for the full eleven hours and was just about stuffed.

Thirty minutes later Stan called out, "Skipper and Ted, you should be able to pick up the flashing red pundit light at Skellingthorpe any minute."

"I have it Stan, coming up ahead, ten degrees to port. That's the best navigation possible under those conditions. Bloody good job. How's the fuel supply going Tom? We should be on the ground in about 15 minutes, if we aren't stacked up waiting for our turn to land."

"We're not going to have any to spare Skipper, but if we don't have to hang around too long we should be alright."

There were only 171 Five Group bombers on this raid all up, so I didn't expect any hold-up gaining permission to land at base.

This was the case, and when I called up to get my turn to join the circuit, a happy voice called from the control tower. "Come straight on in QR-X. You're the first one home Colly. I'll bet you could do with a pint."

It was the voice of our Squadron CO, Wing Commander Pexton, up in the control tower, waiting for his chicks to come home to roost after such a bloody awful trip.

I was never so pleased to get out of the seat, and the aeroplane, as I was after this abortive effort, and all the crew felt the same way.

I was told in the Mess that aircraft, very low on fuel, were landing as far north as Scotland, and down the east coast.

I thanked my lucky stars for such a good crew, especially on this occasion, the navigator and the engineer: Stan for finding our way through the weather, with height, course and wind changes, and Tom for balancing out the fuel load in the many tanks, and stretching the load to the limit.

The next morning I learned that one crew had ditched in the North Sea, out of fuel, and were lost.

We didn't fly on ops again until December: bombing practice and fighter affiliation taking up much of the time.

Our next op was on the fourth; the target was to be the town of Heilbronn; the railway junction being the object of the attack.

We took off on time at 1645 hours, into the murk the Met man had promised us at briefing; visibility was down to about 75 yards.

The usual crowd of groundstaff and aircrew not flying were at the runway to wish us good luck.

After stooging around to gain height, we climbed on course to cross the English Channel and, at 5000 feet, broke through cloud to clear skies. We had now crossed the enemy coast, still climbing, and could see other bombers all around us.

Anti-aircraft fire began to stream up like coloured flaming onions towards the leading aircraft, and I knew we'd soon be on the receiving end of a hot reception.

We were now at our bombing height of 15000 feet and Stan, the navigator, said, "You should see the target indicators go down in 5 minutes Skipper."

"Thanks Stan. I'll wait for your call to turn onto the bombing run."

"Rear gunner here Skipper. Some poor bugger behind us has just copped it. He's going down, and well alight."

"Mid-upper Skip; I've got a flamer, a Lanc or a Halifax, out on the port side."

"OK both of you, keep an eye out. See if you can spot any parachutes opening, and keep count for intelligence when we get back. Also keep an extra sharp lookout for night fighters, they must be causing the havoc."

"Nav here Skip. Turn 30 degrees to port. This will bring us onto the run-in to drop the load."

"Right Stan. Did you get that bomb aimer?"

"Sure did Skip," said Ted from right up in his perspex bubble.

"I'm already down on my guts, the bombsight is all fired up, and working OK."

Suddenly down went a cascade of green target indicators, to mark the countdown position from which our bombs were to be released.

"Take over bomb aimer. Give me the run-in now."

"OK Skipper. Left a bit. Left. Left. Steady. Hold it there. Right. Steady. Hold it. Hold it. Bombs gone. Let's get the hell out of here Skipper. This flak is bloody close. I can just about touch it."

I felt the aircraft give the usual lift as the bombs were released, and increased speed to get out of the target area, turning on to the due west course Stan had given me to head for home.

I could see fires and huge explosions on the ground; ammunition must have been stored there, or a train load had been in the marshalling yards.

Bombers could be seen around us, altering course as we were, to get away from the glowing background that made us so vulnerable to night fighters.

We were flying along without any problems, when Scotty the rear gunner called out, "Skipper I just caught sight of a fighter, ME110, well out on the port quarter. I don't think he's spotted us yet. He's just gone into some cloud."

"Keep an eye out for him Scotty, there's a big bank of cloud ahead and below us. I'm going to fly into it."

Diving into the cloud was a comforting feeling, but I knew that the fighter may have been vectored onto us by radar, and still be shadowing our flight path.

I decided to break cloud very gently, and asked Taffy in the mid-upper turret to keep a sharp lookout for the Messerschmitt.

Creeping slowly upwards, Taffy's gun turret broke the cloud, and he yelled, "Shit Skipper. Get down! The bloody kite is just above us."

I shot back into the cloud, stayed there for a few minutes, then slowly came up again, warning the gunners to watch out.

As we broke cloud, I could see the enemy plane turning away to port, showing his underbelly.

At that moment the rattle of the gunners' machine guns could be heard, and I saw flashes of strikes pour into the fuselage of the ME110.

"We hit the bastard Skipper," yelled Scotty from the rear turret. "Did you see the hits?"

Taffy also claimed hits, and I told them I'd seen it all. The aircraft going down through the cloud and disappearing from sight was witnessed by the three of us.

We made it back to base without further incident, and at debriefing, the gunners claimed a 'possible', for the shooting down of an enemy aircraft.

The whole crew were pleased that mission was over; especially me, as it was the fourth of December; my twenty-first birthday.

Ted and I were having a beer in the Officers' Mess a little later, when the CO came in.

"What the hell d'you think you are doing going on operations on your 21st birthday Collins? That's against the rules; how yours was missed I don't know. Well it's over now, luckily, so let's get stuck into a few pints for the happy return and many more of them."

The following morning we were told that 12 Lancasters had been lost the previous night, so the night fighters must have been out in force, as we thought.

On 6 December we were sent on a raid to Geisson, which happily went off without any unusual drama.

The ninth was just the opposite. We left at 0435 hours, to do yet another trip to Dortmund-Ems Canal.

Just over an hour out, Dick called me up. "Skipper, I've just had a message from base. The operation has been cancelled, due to bad weather over the target. We're to return, and take our bomb load back."

"You're sure about that bit of taking our bombs home are you Dick?"

"Yes Skip. I checked the code twice. I couldn't believe it myself, but it's right. Stan, I've been given a triangular course for you to lay off, to reduce our fuel load before landing."

I know what my feelings were about landing with a full bomb load, in lousy light, on a Pommy winter's early morning. Not bloody good, and I could feel the old gut do a bit of a slow roll at the thought.

Control called me into the circuit on the upwind leg, and I could just make out the plane in front of me; his navigation lights were on and he was doing the crosswind leg.

Going downwind, he went on and on, and I had to keep behind him in my turn. The circuit was turning into a bloody cross-country exercise, as he slowly turned towards the runway, and used a long, low approach before touching down.

I said to the crew, "There's some silly prick ahead of us doing a cross-country circuit, and I have to follow him, if you're wondering what the hell I'm doing dragging us around the sky."

The leading aircraft clawed its way onto the runway, appearing to land fairly heavily. It carried on well down the strip, coming to a halt and not attempting to turn off to dispersal.

By this time I was over the lead-in lights and ready to touch down.

"Get clear you stupid bastard," I yelled to no-one in particular, thinking of the belly full of bombs just below my bum.

I had split seconds to make up my mind, and called to Tom, the engineer. "I have to go around again, before we lose any more speed,"

at the same time pushing all four throttles steadily forward. "Take these over Tom, right up to the top," I said as I quickly moved the undercarriage lever to the 'up' position.

The flaps were fully down in the landing position; dangerous in this situation, as the plane wanted to climb sharply when the throttles were opened up.

Holding the stick forward against this pressure, I eased the flaps up a little at a time, until only one-third remained down: bring them up too fast and the aircraft would 'mush' and most likely smash into the ground.

With the four motors howling we somehow clawed our way back into the air.

I brought the remaining flap to the 'up' position, the throttles to the normal climb setting, and climbed to 1000 feet to rejoin the circuit for another landing.

There wasn't a sound from any of the crew. I think they were numb with shock, as I would've been had I not had to work so hard to keep us from falling out of the sky.

It was a sweat soaked body, and a shaky voice that called up control, "Hello Blackswan, this is QR-X, permission to land. May I come straight in?"

"QR-X from control. You are cleared to land. The obstruction has been moved from the runway."

I came in on a normal approach, except for using extra power to cope with the bombs we were carrying.

Thankfully I managed a good landing, and taxied into dispersal with our lethal cargo, thinking how close we had come to disaster.

The groundstaff Sergeant was waiting when I stepped out of the aircraft, and said, "I don't know how that plane managed to keep flying. It looked as if it was going to fall out of the sky when you gave her the gun to go around again."

"We have you blokes to thank for many of our narrow escapes Sarge. When I called on those engines for everything they had, the

response was immediate, and maximum power was there. Had there been anything but that, we would've had it."

Going around again with a bomb load on board, was the talk in the Mess for a couple of days, but the crew and I were quite happy to forget the incident as soon as possible.

On 27 December, the target was Rheydt, site of an important railway junction and marshalling yards.

The result of this raid was very good, putting the area out of action for some time. Our only problem was being diverted because of bad weather at Skelly, and making it home the following morning.

Aircrew do not like being diverted to strange aerodromes, but realise this has to be done, especially when flying in the atrocious weather conditions handed out by the English winter.

New Year's eve came around, and a big 'do' was on in both the Sergeants', and the Officers' Mess. We'd been told there were no operations laid on for the following day, so the game was on for young and old.

We welcomed 1945 in with great gusto, and many half pints of bitter. I think the 'singing' could be heard in Lincoln, as it mainly consisted of raucous bawling, and sounded like a herd of wounded bulls.

The party was in full swing when, at about 3 am, some bod came in telling everyone to shut up, and that there was a battle order on the board for ops in the early morning.

"Bullshit! Bullshit! Get lost! You're a bloody liar," and various other non-complimentary verbal expressions were hurled at the intruder.

Moments later the CO came in calling for order, and said, "I'm afraid Group has done the dirty on us chaps. That notice for the show in the morning is for real. I don't know if going to bed would be a good thing, as you'd only get a couple of hours, and probably feel worse when you wake up. I leave it to your own discretion, and of course, cut out the alcoholic drinks."

There was a rush to see who'd been posted for the operation; second from the top, there we were: 'F/O Collins & crew'. We'd drawn a short straw again.

I went over to the Sergeants' Mess to see how the crew members were making out. They were all still on their feet, and not too much the worse for wear.

We had a couple of soda waters, and I said, "I'm going for a short walk. Anyone coming?"

Trooping out into the freezing weather, flapping our arms around, it was a pretty short walk, I can assure you, but did wonders for clearing the head.

When the cover was removed from the route map at early morning briefing, I couldn't believe my eyes: the Milk Run, the bloody Dortmund-Ems Canal in daylight. What a wonderful New Year's Day present to welcome 1945.

Our groundcrew knew what had taken place the night before, and were waiting for us with a portable oxygen bottle, to give us all a good sniff before we boarded the aircraft; it's known to be good for hangovers, and as a sobering-up remedy.

I started up the motors, and taxied out for take-off in a happy frame of mind, brought on I'm sure, by the leftovers in the system, from the events of the previous evening.

During take-off, I had Tom take over the throttles a little earlier, just in case I needed extra concentration to get us into the air.

When we had settled on course, I said to the crew, "Each of you give me a call, starting with you at the rear Scotty, just to let me know you are all awake. It was a pretty heavy night, and I don't want anyone dozing off. I'll do a check about every half hour."

Everything was going along well, when I heard a gentle snoring coming through the intercom.

"Who the bloody hell is asleep and snoring?" I yelled into my microphone. "Get your eyes open and keep a sharp lookout whoever you are!"

"It's me Skipper," said Taffy. "I thought I'd have a little practice at

snoring to let you know what it sounded like. I wasn't asleep, just helping keep the boys awake."

"OK Taffy."

I didn't mind the joke under the circumstances. Anything to make sure everyone was doing their job.

What caused the hurry to mount the raid was the result of a Mosquito photographic aircraft returning with a clear picture of the canal repairs having been completed, and barges with their cargoes of armaments and vehicles about to be moved.

This was a great opportunity to not only breach the canal, but also to catch the fully laden barges, destroying them and their contents in one strike.

Pathfinder Force dropped the target indicators spot on which led to the attack being particularly successful.

During the bombing run the flak became bloody hot, and the other bombers could be seen getting their noses down, and heading hell bent for home, having dropped their load.

This was a six-hour trip all up, and the flight home, in gaggle formation, was uneventful except for the usual pockets of anti-aircraft fire, which we evaded in most cases.

All aircraft from 50 and 61 Squadrons returned from the mission, with only two being slightly damaged.

The message was bandied about that we should take off half pissed every time we went on a raid, and maybe no aircraft would ever be lost.

This tongue-in-cheek suggestion was not received with a great deal of humour when it reached the ears of the Flight Commander: he was still in a lousy mood with Group having put the trip on, after saying that New Year's Day was free from operations.

Chapter 17

The next ten days were very busy: on 4 January Royan (a 6 hour 20 minute trip); sixth, Houffalize (5 hours) and a 9 hour 30 minute raid on Munich on the eighth. This was a particularly hot target, which was heavily defended by flak batteries, and we were very happy to get home in one piece from that one.

On 13 January, we were on the 'battle order' once again, with briefing at 1500 hours.

When the cover was removed, showing the route in and out of the target, a groan went up from all the skippers in the room.

The target was a synthetic oil refinery at Politz, situated near Stettin, on the Baltic Sea, very close to the Polish border and the river Oder.

This was estimated to be a 10 hour 30 minute trip across the North Sea, up the Baltic Sea past Sweden on our port side, and on to Politz after crossing the coast.

We were warned that this target would be heavily defended, as the oil refineries were vital to Germany's war effort, and very few were left in operating condition after attention from Bomber Command.

We left the ground at 1645 hours, and set course for the long haul.

Sweden being a neutral country, no aircraft of either side were permitted to fly over its territory.

I said to the crew, "Keep a good look out for any concentration of flak from here on. Stan tells me we're getting close to passing the island of Heligoland; it is one huge anti-aircraft battery, and I want to give it a wide berth."

Searchlights and flak streamed up from the island; some poor devil must have strayed off course, and was copping the lot. I didn't like their chances of surviving that barrage.

Flying over the sea up to this time the trip had been smooth going, but from here to the target opposition from ground forces and possible fighters was expected to be to be heavy.

We were carrying a 4000 lb bomb (cookie) plus canisters of incendiaries, to stir up the fires already started, and to create new areas of devastation at the refinery.

There were just over 200 Lancasters of 5 Group, plus Mosquitoes of Pathfinder Force on this attack.

As we approached the target area, fires and explosions could be seen on the ground, indicating that the first wave of bombers to go through had been very accurate dropping their loads.

"Navigator here, Skip. Here's your course to run into the target indicators."

"OK Stan. Bomb aimer, she's all yours Ted. Call me through the run and let's get out of here. This bloody ack-ack is too close for comfort, and there's too much of it."

The course set down for the return trip was most unusual, as it was exactly the same as the track we had flown along to get to the target.

At briefing we'd been told this would be totally unexpected by the Germans. The night fighters would be busy elsewhere waiting on other routes for the bomber force to return.

As we flew with Sweden on our starboard side, red anti-aircraft shells began shooting straight up in the air. They were in the shape of big V-for-victory signs, which left us in no doubt which side this neutral country was barracking for.

This gave me a good gut feeling for the long trip home. I called Stan and Dick out of their cubbyholes to take a look at this strange but very welcome sight.

The remainder of the trip home was uneventful, but I was very happy to climb out of the aircraft after such a long spell at the controls.

The gamble in flying the same route in and out of the target must have paid off, as we learnt next morning that only two Lancasters were missing.

The following night we had another 9 hour 45 minute operation to targets at Merseburg, from which we thankfully returned unscathed.

Our next mission on 7 February, was the 'milk run' once again, the Dortmund-Ems Canal was to be breached near the town of Ladbergen.

This was another successful attack; carried out at night, the canal was drained, and barge traffic halted.

The following day, the loudspeakers blared out that a battle order had been posted on the board, and all crews should check immediately.

Ted and I went over to take a look, and sure enough we were on the list to take part again.

"I don't know about you Ted, but I could do with a nice quick trip tonight, somewhere in the range of three to four hours would be great."

"I agree with you Skip, but I am afraid that's pretty much wishful thinking, with most targets these days being deeper into enemy territory."

The pilots' briefing room was, as usual, thick with smoke and loud conversation: the crews were waiting for the map to be unveiled, showing the route and target for the night's raid.

It was 8 February 1945.

"Right chaps, let's have some quiet please," said the ops officer. "Some of you went to this target about three weeks ago and did a good job. However, photographs show repairs to get the refinery partially back into production again, are nearing completion, and we've been asked to see that this doesn't happen."

With that, he took the cover from the big map, and there it was: Politz.

A loud buzz went around the room, as many of us realised the track into, and out of the refinery, was exactly the same as we had flown three weeks previously.

One skipper called out, "That's a bit bloody risky isn't it Sir, using the same courses that we flew last time?"

"The powers-that-be say that the Germans would never expect us to do it again."

I said to the bloke sitting next to me, "I hope the Luftwaffe don't get shitty shrewd, and guess we might be doing the same trip again; and be waiting for us when we cross the coast from the Baltic Sea."

I don't think anyone in the room was very happy about the route, and I wondered what Stan and the other crew members were thinking at their separate briefing sessions.

I didn't have long to wait to find out, and the words they used to vent their feelings on the matter, were not very complimentary to the masters of strategy.

Chapter 18

I lined up on the runway at 1635 hours, getting an immediate green light to take off, which went without incident.

The weather was clear, and we had a good run with no problems, crossed the coast from the Baltic Sea and proceeded inland towards Politz.

I could see a diversionary raid in progress to the south which took pressure off our attack.

Stan called up, "Turn 20 degrees to port Skipper. This will bring us on course for the run in to the target indicators."

"OK Stan, turning port."

Suddenly all hell broke loose.

There was a banging, and a clatter, as something smacked into the armour plating at the back of my seat, and richocheted out through the side of the aircraft.

I realised in a flash that we had been hit by a night fighter, and were in big trouble.

The starboard outer engine was burning fiercely. I turned off the fuel. I pressed the built-in fire extinguisher control. The fire dulled for a short time then burst out again worse than before.

"Is anyone wounded?" I called on the intercom. "Call in, starting from the rear turret. Scotty? Scotty give me an answer. Can you hear me Scotty."

No reply.

"Mid-upper," said Taffy, "I have a piece of shrapnel in my head, but I seem to be functioning OK. It's not bleeding much."

"Navigator OK."

"Wireless Op OK, but there's a bloody hole near my foot, where a shell has come through the floor and gone out through the top of the fuselage."

"Engineer OK," said Tom, standing beside me, giving a shrug, indicating nothing more could be done by him.

"Bomb aimer here Skipper. I've been hit in the back, but am able to move OK. I'm not bleeding that much."

I couldn't stop the engine with the 'feathering' button. The situation was hopeless. The fire was spreading along the wing.

"Put on parachutes! Put on parachutes! Taffy, take a look in the rear turret. See what's happened to Scotty."

The reply came back shortly.

"Scotty is dead Skipper. He must've had a direct hit. The turret is a shambles."

We'd been losing height steadily, and controlling the aircraft was difficult; especially the ailerons, which were damaged in the attack, making it practically impossible to keep lateral stability.

Hydraulic lines beside my seat had been cut, and I was being sprayed with the fluid, making me sick. I felt like passing out.

"I'm afraid we've had it chaps. Best of luck to all of you. Jump-jump! Jump-jump!"

Ted was having trouble getting the front escape open in the bottom of his bombing compartment, where some of us were to bale out.

"Jump on the middle of the hatch Ted, then give it a bloody great heave, and see if you can move it, or you'll have to go to the rear door to get out."

Thankfully the hatch came away after a couple of attempts.

"Bomb aimer gone," said Ted as he left the aircraft.

"Good luck Colly," said Tom, giving me a slap on the shoulder, as he scrambled down and out of the hatch.

Each of the remaining crew called me as they baled out, which took some time. Taffy by now was having some trouble seeing properly, as his wound had started to bleed, the blood getting in his eyes. Stan and Dick got him out OK.

I must have been half stupid with fumes from the hydraulic fluid, as I then did the craziest thing possible in this situation.

The four straps holding the parachute snap into a quick release box

situated over the stomach. When getting out of an aircraft after flying, the pilot has to press down on the release catch so that the straps can fall away, leaving the 'chute free in the seat, and allowing the pilot to step out from behind the controls.

Having followed this procedure many times, it was second nature to me to carry it out as usual.

This I did, and was standing at the top of the escape hatch, ready to jump.

I happened to look back at the seat, saw my parachute lying there, liberally sprayed with oil, and then I realised what I had done.

Glancing at the altimeter, I reckoned it was reading about 1500 feet. Thinking I had no chance of getting out in time, I grabbed a portable fire extinguisher, and was about to hit myself over the head, to get it over with quickly.

"Have a go you bloody idiot," flashed through my mind, and I tossed the extinguisher out of the hatch, and made a grab for my 'chute.

I threw it over my shoulder, and attached the two top straps into the release box, but only had time to get one bottom strap in place. I took a last look at my height, which was just over 1000 feet, and stepped down to the escape hatch.

Chapter 19

That's the last thing I remember about leaving the aircraft.

I couldn't have been fully conscious at this stage, as I don't remember baling-out, or pulling the ripcord to open the parachute.

On the ground I slowly gathered my wits and thought, "How the hell did I get here?"

My finger tips and nails were throbbing painfully, as I had evidently been trying to dig a hole to bury my parachute, as per escape procedure; not realising the ground was frozen, and all I was doing was tearing the skin from my finger tips.

My 'chute was a great white heap, still attached to my body.

Except for a sprained knee, and twisted back, I didn't appear to be in bad shape, having been lucky enough to come down on a piece of land with no trees, only some light scrub.

Managing to hide as much as possible of my 'chute in the bush, I sat down to try and work out my best option.

Above me, I could hear the sound of the bomber force returning home, and ack-ack fire still being pumped up from positions not far away.

I thought my best move was to get away from the point of landing, and the tell-tale parachute lying in the bushes.

Still wearing my life jacket, I staggered out of the bushes, onto a main autobahn. This turned out to be the road into Stettin.

Suddenly, a rather high-pitched voice screamed out, "HALT. HALT."

I did just that; very fast, and shot my arms into the air in the universal sign of surrender. It was just as well I did.

In the half light, I turned around to find out who was my captor, and was astonished to see a young Hitler Youth brownshirt, about 14 years of age, pointing a Luger hand pistol at me from about four paces.

To say I was scared would be the understatement of the year: but what was more frightening was the look of terror on the face of the young German, and the fairly steady hand that held the pistol.

I fully expected the trigger to be pulled at any moment, and my

miracle bale-out and survival to be a wasted effort on the part of the gods looking after me.

It must have dawned on him that he was in the box seat, and that I was no threat to him, as his manner changed in an instant.

He became an arrogant little bastard; pushing me in the back, waving the Luger about, and shouting out in German, which was a total waste of time, as I couldn't understand a bloody word that he was saying.

I was taken into four different houses to be searched, so I could be shown off to the occupants.

"I haben ze Americana. I haben ze Americana."

I have an American. The little bugger thought he had caught a Yank!

We were walking further down the road, about a yard apart, when suddenly a piece of shrapnel smacked into the road between us, screaming off into the night.

This was most likely a spent piece of anti-aircraft shell returning to earth.

This scared the hell out of me, and I'll bet the young German was shaking in his shoes. I hoped he had taken his finger off the trigger of the Luger he was still clutching in his hand.

This was the second time tonight I had escaped death by a small margin, which was good news, as it evidently meant my number was not going into the frame just yet.

The young brownshirt took me to a caravan where some German army SS troops were stationed. There he gave the greatest performance of the night.

Giving a rigid Nazi salute, and yelling, "HEIL HITLER, I haben ze Americana," the young soldier stood stiffly to attention, waiting I am sure, to have praise heaped upon him for catching an enemy aviator.

The troops threw a sloppy salute in return, more a wave of the hand, and one of them jammed his cap onto my head, saying, "Nicht Americana. Luftwaffe, Luftwaffe."

The three of them laughed their silly bloody heads off, as they pointed at the dishevelled and dirty apparition confronting them.

There was a telephone connected to the caravan, and one of the SS

used it to notify a superior of my capture; I was escorted to an airfield outside Stettin.

They took me to the control tower, where one of two German pilots could speak quite good English. He started to quiz me about Australia, after noting the shoulder flashes on my battle dress.

I gave my name, number, and rank, as per the Geneva Convention, and then kept my mouth shut.

He asked me to turn out my pockets, and when I pulled out a full packet of Senior Service cigarettes, all three made a grab for them.

The interrogator won the fags and, after taking one, handed them around. When I put my hand out for their return he slapped my arm and gave me just two smokes.

He kept the packet!

"You are a prisoner-of-war now. We take what we want from you."

At that moment three ME109 fighter planes took off from below us, and the interrogator said, "They're going to shoot down American Flying Fortress bombers. We will soon win this war!"

I could have argued but thought it wiser to remain silent.

As I was taken away by a guard, I got the shock of my life. Walking along the road towards me were Ted, Taffy, Tom and Dick.

We did the required thing, and did not recognise each other, hoping that the Germans would believe we weren't from the same crew. I personally don't think this worked, as each prisoner was from a different position in the aircraft, making up part of a crew.

The guard locked me in a room with bars on the one window, and left me wondering what the hell was going to happen next.

They brought me some very suspicious looking sausage to eat, along with a piece of black bread and a tin mug of some liquid of unknown origin.

I tasted all three and nearly gagged at the flavour of each. Watching me closely, the guard saw my reaction and pointed to the food, then to himself as he beamed a big smile my way. Eating a small portion of the bread and taking a few sips of the horrible brew, I gestured to him to help himself.

The German wolfed the food and drink down, and I think it was then I realised that food must be a very scarce commodity in this country, and maybe giving the meal away was my first big mistake. When would I get another?

The other four members of the crew were shoved into the room, and we all shook hands as soon as the guard had left.

"I don't think this room would be bugged," I said, "as it's the normal station guard room, and they wouldn't be expecting visitors like us to drop in on them."

I asked Taffy how his head wound was, and he said a doctor had removed the piece of shrapnel, and bound it up for him. It was bleeding a bit, but should be OK.

The piece of metal in Ted's back was a different story: the doctor wouldn't touch it because it appeared to be close to the spine. An x-ray was required, and not possible to have.

The next morning we were taken to Stettin railway station, where a train was at the platform, and a mob of civilians were swarming about trying to get into the carriages.

When they saw us being escorted onto the platform, a nasty murmur went up from some of them and one man, stepping quickly past the guards, smacked Taffy across the bloodstained bandage on his head, causing the wound to begin bleeding again.

We were then taken below the station to a storeroom to keep us out of the way of the civilians who, given half a chance, would have done as much damage as possible to us.

To them we were the Terror Fliege, the 'Terror Flyers' who did nothing but bomb their cities to kill innocent people.

I learned from one of the English-speaking guards that they were told nothing of the Luftwaffe bombing of London, Coventry and other targets.

When I asked him about these inhuman attacks, and the indiscriminant V1 and V2 rockets on London, he would not believe it.

We were eventually brought up from below and quickly herded into a small compartment, with the doors and windows locked for our protection.

The locomotive that had backed up to pull the train had many patches welded on the boiler; the result of low level attacks by allied fighters shooting them up.

At last we pulled out of the station, glad to leave the angry crowd on the platform, out of sight and out of reach.

When I asked the soldier if he knew where we were being taken, he said, "I am not supposed to tell you, but it will not make any difference, the war is lost for Germany anyway. You are going to the Luftwaffe interrogation centre at Frankfurt."

"How long will that take?" I asked.

"God knows. I just hope we all get there in one piece."

He had his girlfriend with him on the train so his mind was not totally centred on us. In fact he treated us well.

When stopping at a station where we were allowed to go for a short walk, extra guards would come with us; not to stop us trying to make a run for it, but to protect us from attack by the public.

At one such stop, the guard with the lady friend sneaked us into a cafe at a station, where we had sausage and black bread and, as there were no German military personnel in sight, he gave us each a glass of beer. He went up 100% in our estimation.

We were savouring every drop of this windfall, when our benefactor called out quietly, "Hide your beer. There is an officer coming through the door."

I decided the best way to hide it was to drink it; so did the other blokes, hiding the pots under the table.

The officer stared hard at us for a short time, spoke to a couple of guards who had just come in, then took no further notice of us.

We were taken back onto the train, eventually finishing up in Berlin.

The destruction of this once proud city was a shock even to us who knew the pounding it had taken from Bomber Command.

My expression when I saw the awesome damage, was, "You could stand on an armchair and see most of Berlin."

Thank God we didn't hang around amongst this devastation, as we would have been on the receiving end of our own bombs, had an attack been launched on the city that night.

Chapter 20

Arriving at Frankfurt, the five us were taken to the interrogation centre; our first taste of a prisoner-of-war camp.

Before being lined up on the parade ground with other aircrew bods from different countries, I was taken away to be searched.

This is when I realised I had made two bad mistakes.

Firstly, the chain on my identity disc, worn at all times around my neck, had broken and I had put it on my bed locker to fix.

It was still there.

This meant I had no official identification, which gave the German interrogators scope to give me a bad time.

To make matters worse, as we were flying not far from the Russian front (just over the frozen river Oder) we had each been given a card, written in Russian, saying, "I am an Englishman. Take me to the British Ambassador in Moscow."

This was to be used if we made it to the Russian front, and at the same time we were to yell, "YA ANGLICHANAN! YA ANGLICHANAN!" (I am an Englishman) if approached by the Russians. We had been told by our intelligence officers to keep our hands bloody high, as they were all trigger happy.

I was still carrying this damn card in the pocket of my battle dress and it was found during the search. Nothing was said at the time, but I was sure it would be brought up at a later date.

The parade was taken over by a German officer who spoke fluent English.

Still trying to convince him we were not from the same aircraft, my crew had spread themselves among the other blokes in the line-up.

"Will the crew of the Lancaster shot down on the bombing of Politz, please step forward!"

No one moved.

"Come now. Don't be stupid and don't waste my time. We know who you are. Step foward now."

Again no one moved.

"Very well, if you want be stubborn about this, we will see what a spell in solitary confinement will do to bring you to your senses. Flying Officer Collins, the Australian pilot, come forward. Guard, take this uncooperative officer away to solitary. Given time alone for a spell, he may change his attitude toward his captors!"

I was taken away, and pushed into a cell, with an iron bed against the wall, a filthy straw mattress, one equally filthy blanket, and a smelly piss bucket.

There was a row of about ten of these cells, separated only by a wall made of a compressed wood material.

Inside the door, a handle raised and lowered a wooden flag outside the cell to call the guard - one was on duty at all times.

I noticed a large radiator set in one corner of the room, and wondered if it worked, as it was freezing cold in the cell.

I pushed the flag down for the guard, and after a long wait he opened the door, and asked in broken English what I wanted. Pointing to the radiator, I gave a good imitation of a man shivering to death, "Can you give heat?"

He nodded his head and disappeared.

The big radiator came on, and the warmth was wonderful to feel, heating the whole cell quickly.

Soon I began to sweat, and flagged the guard again to turn the heat down.

No one came, so I banged on the door, and eventually the door opened, and the bastard stood there with a big grin on his face, saying just two words, "Too hot?"

"Yes, turn it down please."

Away he went, and I watched the heater to see if the glow would reduce.

Nothing happened for quite a while, then it began to fade, and then the bloody thing went completely out.

It didn't take long for the temperature to drop to damn cold again, so once more I pushed the flag down.

The tormentor opened the door, and this time was laughing his silly looking face off.

"Too cold again? You do not know what you want."

I learned that this was a form of harassment handed out to newcomers, to try and get us into a state of mind to make it easier for the interrogator to get information from us.

The following morning, a German officer came to my cell; a thin faced officious looking bastard, who proceeded to give me a good gruelling.

"Where are your identity discs Collins? You are not wearing them?"

"The chain snapped when I baled out, and I lost them."

"That is a lie. You never had any. You are a spy aren't you?"

"My number is 415858, Flying Officer Collins, NT."

"What is this card you were carrying? It says to take you to the British Ambassador in Moscow. Why did you want to go to Russia to meet the British Ambassador? What information was so important you were sent to meet with him?"

"My number is 415858, Flying Officer Collins, NT."

"I know your supposed name and rank. What I want to know is the business you had to discuss in Moscow," he yelled.

I repeated my name, number and rank.

Turning red in the face, he screamed at me, "You will be shot! Shot as a spy! You have no identity, and the card written in Russian is evidence of your mission! You will be shot!"

With that tirade over, he stormed out of the cell leaving half of me believing him, and the other half applauding him for being a very good actor.

I was sure the latter assumption was correct, as I was certain they knew I was the pilot of the Lancaster, and the make-up of the rest of the crew was pretty obvious; but they would never hear that from me.

I was left to my own devices for a couple of days, and given a bit more of the hot and cold treatment.

For food, there was a piece of black bread that looked and tasted as if it had a good amount of sawdust in the mixture, and a mug of ersatz tea that tasted like nothing on earth, but was warm and wet.

I was sitting on my bed pondering my situation, when suddenly a small round piece of the dividing wall popped out and landed at the head of the bed.

"Whisper through here," said a voice from the next cell. "If a guard comes, push it back quickly. I will have my hand against the wall to stop it coming through this side."

"Who are you, and what are you?" I asked. "How do I know you aren't a German planted in there to get information from me?"

"I am a British Lancaster pilot. I've been here for two weeks, but I think they've given up on me and I'll be out of here shortly."

"Tell me the last pre-take-off cockpit drill for the Lancaster, and I'll know if you are genuine."

He rattled off the drill, and a couple of other features about the cockpit, which assured me he was on the level.

We had many conversations through the hole, until he was taken from the cell a few days later.

The day eventually came when I was escorted to interrogation. I received a few shocks during the interview.

The man asking the questions was in naval uniform and spoke perfect English with an upper class accent.

We had been told by our Intelligence Officers that their German counterparts tried to get information about the longest serving members of a squadron, in the hopes they would capture one.

We came into this category, as our crew had twenty-nine operations on the board, and was one of the most experienced crews at 61 Squadron.

Upon entering the room, I was faced with the photo of a Lancaster, with our squadron markings on it, hanging behind the interrogator.

"Well Flying Officer Collins, you recognise that Lancaster do you? Tell me, how is Wing Commander Pexton these days? He gets on well with his men I believe? You and your crew are unlucky, being shot down so near the end of your tour of operations."

The surprise must have shown on my face, but my only reply was my name, number and rank.

After making these statements, I presumed the insinuations that I was a spy had been discarded.

I was wrong.

The 'Naval Officer' went on, "I could have you shot. You have not admitted being the pilot of the Lancaster. You have no identification. And you wanted to be taken to the British Ambassador in Moscow. You are still in trouble. Look Collins, I am a Naval man, I am not really interested in the Air Force, or interrogating prisoners-of-war. All I want to do is to get back to sea. Answer these few simple questions and let's get this silly business over."

He then proceeded to ask me questions about radar and equipment in the aircraft that I couldn't have answered if I'd wanted to, as they were to do with new navigation and wireless installations.

He also asked questions about the raid on Politz: the number of aircraft, bombs carried, bombing height, how we were shot down, crew lost or injured, course in and out, and so on.

For answers he was told my name, number and rank.

I decided he was about as much a Naval Officer as I was a spy. His knowledge of the Air Force, aircraft equipment and procedures was extensive.

By this time his voice was rising, "I am disappointed in you Collins. I thought you would have more sense being in the position you find yourself. You are in a very dangerous situation." And, to the guard standing at the door, "Take him back to solitary to think over his stupidity."

These interrogations were held every two or three days, to what

end I could not imagine. Perhaps they provided an opportunity for him to practise his verbal bullying.

"Flying Officer Collins, we have caught another person who has been found to be spying for the Russians. He is about to be shot in the courtyard at the back of this building.This could be your fate if you do not co-operate with me at this interview. You must answer these questions."

"My name is Collins NT 415858 Flying Officer."

Suddenly there was a rattle of machine gunfire that frightened the living bloody daylights out of me and brought a broad grin to the face of the German.

"That looks like being how you will end up Collins," he said. "Take him away."

I suspected that this was a pantomime put on for my benefit, as we had been told of this manoeuvre by our Intelligence Officers on the squadron.

This must have been the last ditch effort to gain any information from me, as I was not interviewed again.

One morning about thirty of us were called on parade and I noticed that the rest of my crew were in the line-up.

All seemed to be doing alright, but we still kept up the pretence of not knowing each other, although I knew very well that the Germans had put us together since the beginning of our capture.

We were marched to the railway station at Frankfurt and put on a train for God-knows-where. We only knew that we were heading south.

Chapter 21

Some of the bigger towns and cities we passed through showed signs of having been bombed, especially around the railway yards.

Food was pretty scarce, but drinking water was our main worry with most of the supplies out of action at stations we stopped at.

Coming to a halt at Leipzig station, I noticed a couple of taps on the platform and asked an English-speaking guard if Dick and I could get off and get some water.

The buildings and marshalling yards had been badly damaged by bombing and civilians were milling around trying to get transport out of the city.

The guard said he would come with us for protection from the German people, as they were an angry looking crowd.

Dick tried the first tap. "No good Skipper. No water."

"Same with this one Dick," I said, turning the tap with no result.

At that moment, two little blonde-headed girls, about six years of age, walked out from the crowd and held up the water bottles they were carrying, for Dick and I to have a drink.

They didn't say a word, but the beautiful smiles on their faces said it all.

I took a small drink, and handed the bottle back saying, "Thank you," not caring if anyone saw me wipe away a couple of tears. I noticed Dick was also touched by the gesture.

Getting back on to the train, I said to Dick, "It makes you wonder what this bloody war is all about when something like that happens. I just hope they don't get into trouble."

We had now found out that we were headed for Nuremberg, where there was a big prisoner-of-war camp where we were to be held.

The friendly guard told us that we were being taken far south, as Field Marshall Montgomery and his troops were advancing in that direction and we were to be kept ahead of them so that we could not be released and be sent back to England to carry on fighting.

We were in the front coach, with a big 'p.o.w.' sign painted on the roof. Behind us was a line of fuel tankers, and a flat top carriage carrying anti-aircraft guns at the ready.

The train came to a halt near a forest, about a mile outside a town, and we were told it would be some time before we got going again, as the railway yards had been bombed, and some new track was being laid to get us through.

The guards handed out a few Red Cross parcels, from which I managed to win a tin of sardines.

I was standing by the window trying to open my tin of fish, when I glanced out, and to my horror, saw an American Thunderbolt aircraft, flying very low and heading straight for the engine of our train.

"Get down! Get down!" I yelled. "Air attack! Down, down!"

I hit the floor with bodies landing on top of me, as everyone tried to make themselves as small and flat as possible.

There was the sound of gunfire as the aircraft roared across overhead; then a big bang, and whoosh, as the boiler was hit, and a shell tore into the top left-hand corner of the carriage, ripping it away.

I imagined what would happen if the Thunderbolt returned to follow up the attack by shooting up the length of the train, with the fuel tankers making a tempting target.

I roared at a guard, "Let us out. Let us out into the forest."

"Promise not to escape," he said.

"We won't escape," we all yelled as we dived for the doors, but the Germans beat us out to it being just as scared as we were.

I was hoping like hell the pilot had seen the 'p.o.w.' sign on the roof above us, or was low on fuel, or out of ammunition; anything to stop him coming back.

Once more the gods were looking after me, as we didn't see the aircraft again.

After some time another locomotive arrived and towed the damaged one away; returning later and connecting up to our carriage once more.

I never did find my precious tin of sardines.

Eventually the train moved off, but this time a lookout was posted on each side window, to keep a watch for 'friendly' hostile aircraft.

Luckily we weren't attacked again and arrived at our destination, totally worn out from travelling day and night, and constantly facing the possibility of attack from our own aircraft and harsh treatment from the young guards.

We were lined up outside the Nuremberg station, waiting to be taken to the prison camp, when a bloke sidled up beside me and whispered, "I am English. Come with me. I will pretend to arrest you and get you through to Switzerland with the underground people."

"Piss off," I said in no uncertain manner. "You are about as English as I am German," and turned my back on him.

After a couple of minutes, I took a look and he had gone.

British Intelligence had warned us of this ruse to get us away from the other prisoners and hand us over to people who had no interest in keeping us alive.

Chapter 22

The camp at Nuremberg was very big. I couldn't guess at the number of prisoners being held here; it would run into thousands.

The camp Commandant had us lined up before him, then proceeded to tell us the rules for the Stalag (prison camp).

Roll call was taken, and this was the first time I had heard my RAAF number 415858, called out aloud in German. This caused me and a few of the blokes around me to crack up. It came out something like this: "Feer ine foomft arkt foomft arkt." One chap said it was like someone clearing a frog from his throat.

The officer taking the parade roared, "You think this is a joke? You will find it is no joke being a prisoner-of-war in Germany. Be quiet!"

This stopped our frivolity very smartly.

I was allocated to a hut which was to be my living quarters for my time at this camp.

Each of the huts had a prisoner officer, who was to be in charge; settling any arguments between the blokes and managing the general daily routine of the camp.

My hut had a Flying Officer carrying out this role, and he was one of the most overbearing bastards I'd ever had the misfortune to meet.

Upon meeting me, he said, "Collins, I am in charge here and what I say goes. You will obey the rules I make or you will answer to me. Understood?"

"No I don't understand," I said. "We are of equal rank and you have spoken to me as a lowly underling, and if I don't like your bloody rules I'll bloody well tell you so."

I don't think he'd ever been spoken to like this by any of my fellow prisoners and by the look on his face it came as a hell of a shock to him, as he didn't know what to say.

I turned my back on him and walked in to find my bunk and meet the other chaps I was to live with.

There were about ten three-tiered wooden bunks with wooden slats and straw mattresses; a couple of grubby-looking blankets were brought in by a German guard.

In the middle of the room was a pot-bellied stove with a very empty coke or coal bin beside it.

Only body heat was giving any warmth to the building, and at this time of the year the temperature was freezing.

There was a number of different countries represented in our hut: Canada, America, Holland, France, Britain and New Zealand.

All were aircrew and eager to find out the latest news of the war.

I told them my news was not very current, as I'd been travelling for quite a while, covering about 800 kilometres from Stettin on the Baltic Sea.

"The news at the time I was shot down," I told them, "was that the war wouldn't last more than a few months, so we shouldn't be in the bag for too much longer."

We made ourselves up into groups of five, and on rare occasions when a Red Cross parcel arrived, we would divide each item into five equal portions and cut cards for any bits left over.

These parcels were supposed to be one per person per week, but this was now a thing of the past and we were lucky to get any at all.

They were brought by big white Red Cross trucks from Switzerland and when seen heading for the camp, the cry would go up, "The White Angels are coming," and we would hope for a parcel within the next few days.

The Germans had a nasty habit of puncturing any tins of food, such as meat, fish and tinned butter, so they couldn't be kept for escape rations. These had to be divided into five and eaten immediately if they hadn't already gone bad.

We had a very clever bloke with a soldering iron, who would solder up the hole in a tin of rancid Canadian butter, then we would trade it to the guards for a pocket knife, cigarettes, or anything else we needed. When he found the butter was bad, he couldn't do anything about it, as he would be caught trading with the prisoners and be in big trouble.

The shortages we felt the most were food and tobacco. At this stage of the war the German forces themselves didn't have much food to eat; rail transport had virtually come to a halt as any time a train moved it would be shot up by allied aircraft.

Tampering with the tea was another rmethod of getting a bit back on the 'Goons' (German guards).

The food parcels sometimes contained a packet of tea, which was carefully extracted through a small hole in one corner; this was done in such a manner that the hole could easily be repaired.

Each time the tea was brewed, the leaves were kept, thoroughly dried out, and returned to the packet through a small paper funnel; the hole carefully sealed to look like new.

This was then traded to the guards for whatever was needed by the group. They must have thought some countries made very weak tea, until they found out about our handiwork.

One night, just after lights out, I heard a familiar sound in the night sky: the increasing throb of Lancaster engines, and they appeared to be coming straight for Nuremberg.

(When on ops we were briefed about the proximity of p.o.w. camps, if they happened to be close to the target area, and every precaution was taken to avoid any bombs landing near them.)

The aircraft noise was getting very loud now, and suddenly a heap of green target indicators landed not a great distance outside the barbed wire.

Some of the chaps, who didn't know bombing procedure, yelled, "Shit, they're going to bomb the bloody camp!"

I called for them to shut up, "That's the safest place for the TIs to be placed. The bomb aimer will have a delay from them before pressing the tit, and the bombs will land well away from us."

We weren't allowed outside during an air raid, so crowded around the windows and doorway for a better look.

The sky over Nuremberg was lit up by searchlights, and anti-aircraft guns blazed away, with streams of coloured lethal shells headed for the destruction of the bombers. These could be seen like silver moths when caught by the searching lights.

Suddenly the ground trembled, the hut was shaken, and everything in it rattled, as the bombs came raining down. We could clearly hear the sound of them exploding.

Two aircraft were seen to be on fire, and I just hoped the crews were able to get out in time, as both blew up a short time later.

Food was always on our minds and any animal was considered fair game if it came anywhere near a hungry p.o.w.

In our hut we had a New Zealand fighter pilot who was having a battle of his own to obtain a good meal from a mobile food source.

There was one German officer who, every few days, took the early morning roll call while his little fat German 'sausage' dog straggled after him sniffing around some distance behind.

The big fiery red-bearded New Zealander, could be heard calling in a husky whisper, "Here puppy. Here pup. Pup pup pup. Good doggie. Come here you walking meal."

The daschund stuck its nose in the air and strutted back to its owner.

I am sure the red hair and beard would have been enough to frighten any animal from getting close to him.

He never did catch the dog.

To relieve the boredom in the camp, we would walk around the compound with heads down looking for cigarette butts. We never found many as most smokers kept their own unless they were flush with tobacco, which wasn't often.

The compound next to ours held Russian prisoners, who were treated very harshly by the German guards, most of whom were young troops wounded on the Eastern Front. They hated their former foe.

When any of the Russian prisoners died, their heavy greatcoats were removed and traded over the wire for food or cigarettes.

I traded two of my precious smokes for one of these coats. It was a bit on the nose but kept out the bitter cold.

One morning on parade the German officer in charge of our

compound said, "Very soon now you will leave this camp and go to another one, so get yourselves ready to go at short notice."

Not having seen any transport around for some time, one of the chaps called out, "How the hell do we get there?"

"You will march. It is not very far."

That had to be a bloody lie, as it wouldn't be worthwhile moving such a large number of prisoners just a short distance.

Word soon came through, that General (Blood and Guts) Patton and his troops were advancing towards Nuremberg, and we were to be kept ahead of them so we could not be released.

On parade one afternoon, we were told that we would be marched out the following day.

Chapter 23

The following is taken from the diary of a doctor p.o.w., from Compound One, who completed the full distance with us:

April 4th Wednesday.

Left Nurnberg on march 1430 hrs. 12 kms. 1545 hrs dive bombers attacked rail bridge. Killed three of our men.

Three injured men left in nearby town Feutch.

Dick Pratt, my wireless operator, wrote this note:

"Having proceeded about 200 yards over the bridge, I saw the approaching planes were US Thunderbolts. They circled, then one plane dived.

I saw a bomb leave the plane and an explosion followed.

The second aircraft started to dive but the pilot, probably realising that the men below were p.o.w.s, suddenly pulled out of the bombing run.

Both planes then circled once or twice, then flew off."

Bivouacked in woods near Pfifferhutte at 1900 hrs. No German rations issued today. Men ate from Red Cross parcels. Some P.O.Ws lit fires for warmth, but the guards ordered that the fires be put out.

April 5th Thursday

Left woods near Pfifferhutte at 0800 hrs. German count; 16 men missing (2099).

Long halt round noon - ringside seat of terrific bombing of Nurnberg. Whole column confused. 1300 hrs. The beginning of a long wait. (Neumarket), North of the town of Polling for a German ration of about 16 oz of soup, and one ninth of a loaf of bread.

Sat and waited round in the mud and rain, and marched on at 0200.

April 6th Friday.

(20 kms) Marched all night in a very uncomfortable rainstorm.

Hauptman Falk, German block commander, wanted to march after

0600 hrs, but Col. Goode refused to march further in the rain, so we bivouacked in the woods, miserably wet, tired and cold.

1030 hrs, on the march again - passed through the village of Mulhauser and Polletin. Arrived at the outskirts and waited for a couple of hours for a ration of one Red Cross parcel per two men, and one ninth of a loaf of black bread.

We were billetted in churches, schools and barns in this town, Birching.

April 7th. Saturday

Started march at 0800 hrs; passed the village of Antmandorf, (or Autmandorf), original destination 24 kms south. Marched on a further 6 kms in order to get billetted in town of Landosdorf.

Very difficult march for the men today, and the column quite confused.

German allotment of accommodation fell several times short of the number of men.

German issue of food today.

April 8th Sunday.

Spent the whole day in the monastery grounds. No German issue of food today. Men would starve only for Red Cross parcels. Saw several Allied aircraft. Signalled to them with large P.O.W. sign made of toilet paper and empty Red Cross tins.

Artillery fire heard distinctly all day. Potatoes, 125 lb for 1800.

April 9th. Monday.

0900 hrs marched South towards Neustadt (on Danube). 1200 hrs, 2 P51 (Mustangs) flew low over column. 1230 hrs, chow halt.

1700 hrs - 382 loaves of bread - 12l lbs margarine - 2lb salt - 2 quarters of horsemeat - German issue. Individual issue of 1/3 loaf each.

Many of the Aussie prisoners made small forges from empty tins, using a fan which forced air through a tube to a small tin, in which was placed the fuel to be burnt: paper to start and shavings from a dry stick.

The fan handle was turned and a roaring little fire was the result, on which a 'brew' could be made very quickly at rest stops. Dry timber was 'acquired' from barns we were housed in overnight.

Towards evening after we had received a Red Cross parcel, a German guard, with a woman walking beside him, came up to me and said quietly, "You give me bar of chocolate, I give you woman for 'jig a jig'."

"No thanks mate," I said. "This is one time that eating is more important than sex, and God only knows what she's carrying about."

He went on up the column peddling his scruffy blonde, but I didn't see him get any takers.

April 10th Tuesday.

0800 hrs, marching South towards Pfoffarhausen. 1200 hrs column (blocks 1 &2) divided at Obernelsdorf.

All men billetted in barns at these two villages by 1600 hrs. No German food issued today.

April 11th Wednesday.

Remained in these villages. 1200 hrs, aircraft passing over dropped cluster of incendiary bombs, fell just short of Unterumelodorf. B17 fortress, Group 2. Accidental.

April 12th Thursday.

Remained in villages all day. Roll call. Count today 1794.

German issue of 200 loaves at 1030 hrs.

April 13th Friday.

4 kms 0900 hrs. Marching south towards Puffenhausen again.

1100 hrs arrived Margarent. Overnight billets in barns.

1200 hrs news of President Roosevelt's death due to a heart attack last night.

Guards becoming very trigger happy. One man shot in the hip. Bread 1/9 loaf per man.

April 14th Saturday.

Remained in village till Monday. German issue of 1/9th loaf of bread. Running short of Red Cross food a worry. 2 1/2 lb potatoes.

April 15th Sunday.

Stayed all day and rested.

While we were lying around in the barn, a pet white rabbit came hopping through. One of the Aussie blokes could see a good meal running around and began stalking the bunny.

It went behind a spoked wheel, and the captor was just about to pick up his meal, with his arm between the spokes, when he noticed a pair of jack boots had appeared on the scene.

Quick as a flash he began stroking the rabbit. "Nice little bunny. Who's a good bunny then?" and all the time he was keeping one eye on the German officer's boots.

Knowing the game was up, he put the rabbit into the German's extended hand and the vision of stewed bunny disappeared, as he walked out the barn door with the meal.

I wondered if the German officers had rabbit stew that night!

The next morning, a couple of Americans chatting up a Polish milk maid and an Italian woman seemed to be making some progress, when two German guards came storming in.

Drawing their pistols and pointing them at the Yanks, they yelled their heads off and pushed them away from the women.

The Yanks took off out of the barn and were not seen again until much later in the day, very subdued.

April 16th Monday.

Left 1000 hrs for Holzhausen 11 kms. One American Red Cross parcel, and one French parcel between four men. 2lb potatoes and 1/9 loaf of bread. Stayed barn.

April 17th Tuesday.

(8 kms) Left 1000 hrs, marched for Obermunchen. Very beautiful country, but hilly. Stayed in barn. No bread.

April 18th Wednesday.

(8 kms) Stayed all day. Left 5 pm for Reichendorf. Arrived 2000 hrs, stayed in barn. Good spot. British Red Cross parcel for four.

April 19th Thursday.

Stayed all day. Three days bread issue of 1/9 loaf.

April 20th Friday.

(7 kms) Left for Moosburg. Arrived 10 am. Had bath, and given billets.

Chapter 24

The p.o.w. camp at Moosburg was home to thousands of prisoners of all denominations; many, like ourselves, marched ahead of oncoming allied forces to keep them from being set free.

Food supplies from the Germans were getting smaller and the quality, if there ever was any, was miserable.

The soup at the evening meal often had some strange offerings in it.

Meat was very rarely seen in the soup, which was usually watery with a bit of red cabbage, turnip and potato floating around in it.

This evening, one of our group of five was dealt out his soup which contained meat!

It was a piece of cow's udder with the teat still attached.

In our hut we had a Canadian air gunner, who had a badly wounded leg which was soon to be amputated. We tried to keep him cheered up as much as possible with jokes and stories.

I said to the bloke with the cow's teat, "Can you lend me your cow's teat for a few minutes? I want to play a joke on Kevin."

"You can have a loan of it for two smokes," he said. "You get them back when I get the meat back."

The deal was done.

I slipped the piece of udder into the fly in my pants, leaving the teat hanging out. I walked up to the table near Kevin's bunk, saying, "This bloody thing's no good to me in this place. I'm going to cut it off," and pulled a knife out of my pocket.

"Don't do it Col! Don't do it! We'll soon be out of here, and you'll want it then you silly bugger. Put that knife away and put your dick back in your pants."

"It's no good," I said, lying the teat on the table and cutting it in half. "That's the bloody end of it."

When no blood appeared Kevin woke up to the trick, and called me

all the nasty names he could think of, all the while laughing his head off with the other bods.

The chap I had borrowed the teat from said, "Give me my bits of udder back, or it will cost you your two fags, it's still meat."

There was one thing the Germans did have and that was plenty of pink toilet paper.

A bloke from another group in our hut had his heating forge going flat out and a large pot of water on with a roll of pink toilet paper bubbling away in the container.

"What the hell are you doing there?" I asked.

"I'm bloody hungry mate, so I'm going to boil this dunny paper to get all the colour out, add a few raisins I kept from a Red Cross parcel, and eat it like oatmeal porridge."

This I had to see, and a few other chaps gathered around to witness the results of this culinary art form.

The pink dye was eventually boiled out, the cardboard centre removed and the soft tissue pulled apart then covered with clean water. In went the raisins, a bit of powdered milk and the whole mess was brought to the boil once more.

The time came for testing and many pairs of eyes were glued on the face of the cook to note his reaction to the recipe.

He just kept nodding his head and eating, until finished, so the concoction must have tasted like plum pudding to him!

"That was very tasty, and I don't feel hungry any more," he said patting his stomach contentedly. I wondered how his insides were going to react to the arrival of the strange mixture.

Speaking to the "chef" a couple of days later, I asked him how he was going.

"Alright," he said, "but I haven't been able to go to the toilet since I had my feed, and I feel a bit bloated."

Immediately bets were laid as to how many days it would be before he became unblocked.

Five days passed and he said he felt stirrings in his belly. As he

headed for the row of open toilet seats some hangers-on followed to see the job was done.

Evidently there was a great blast of wind, followed by the evacuation of the dunny paper, and a satisfied smile on the face of the perpetrator, who said, "It was all worth it."

The German personnel in the camp appeared more agitated every day and even the older friendlier guards were acting in a strange manner.

During the still of the night a few days later, we could hear quite clearly the sound of gunfire, and see flashes of light on the horizon.

We knew that the American General Patton and his army were heading in our direction, and now understood why the Germans were so touchy; some even trying to become quite friendly, hoping we would give a good report of them to the Yanks when they arrived.

When I awoke early one morning I found the compound strangely quiet. No guards had been into the hut to get us out for early morning roll call, and the loud speaker system was silent.

Some of us rushed outside and were astonished to see there was not a German in sight.

The guards and the dogs had gone, and the guard towers were empty.

We ran back into the hut yelling, "The 'Goons' have gone! The bastards have gone! We'll soon be out of here."

Suddenly the loud speaker system boomed out; the voice distinctly English.

"Attention. Attention everyone. All German personnel have left the camp. We now have control. Please remain in your compound. Upon the sound of small arms fire, or the sighting of tanks to the north, get quickly into your slit trenches, and stay there until things settle down, and the shooting stops. Good luck to you all."

There was an increasing rumble of sound coming from over a rise in the ground to the north east of the camp.

American tanks came bursting over the hill heading straight for the camp; the only resistance coming from a small tract of woodland

where a few German fanatical troops with only machine guns and rifles were matched against the tanks.

The Americans, with their guns pointing to the sky, called many times to the Germans to surrender.

When they did not cease firing, the Yanks lowered their guns and blasted the woods until all resistance ceased.

When the tanks again turned towards the camp, I made a run for the trenches and dived into the mud at the bottom, not giving a damn about the wet slush, as a few shells went well over the top of us.

It was all over in a matter of minutes; the tanks drove straight through the gates and knocked down barbed wire between compounds, while we all cheered and yelled as we were set free.

With his two pearl-handled pistols thonged to his thighs, the General came through the compound saying how pleased he was to be able to release us and that we would be on our way home before long.

About an hour later a mobile bakery arrived and within a short time I had half a loaf of beautiful white bread all to myself; I don't think I ever tasted anything quite so wonderful.

We were all given American packs of food rations and the days of being hungry were behind us.

The officer in charge of our compound told us we were allowed to go into Moosburg for a look around but looting would be punished severely, and we were not to interfere in any way with the civilian population.

The American armed forces had now moved on and all remaining German troops had been taken prisoner, relieved that their war was over.

I went into Moosburg with a couple of other blokes, and as we were poking around in a small church, I noticed a trapdoor in a room at the rear.

One of the chaps gave me hand to lift the door and we went down into a cellar where through the dim light we could see a tin trunk in the corner of the room. "Let's get this open," I said. "You never know what we might find."

Breaking the flimsy lock only took a few minutes and when we saw what was inside, we were astonished.

"Holy bloody hell!" I said. "This must run into millions of pounds. I wonder if it's the genuine stuff, or forged."

The trunk was packed with English bank notes of high denomination, and looked like the real thing to us.

We didn't get a chance to find out because at that moment two American Military Police came down the steps, and when the corporal saw what we were looking at, he said, "What the hell have you guys got there? Leave that stuff right where it is, and piss off out of here."

I found out later that the Germans had invasion money planted in many different places, ready for when they invaded England.

Did we have our hands on a fortune? We will never know.

One day one of the chaps from our hut came riding back to camp on an auto-cycle (a push bike with a little engine attached to the wheel) and wearing, of all things, a beautiful fur coat.

When asked where he had got it, he said, "I bought it for a pack of twenty cigarettes. You can get binoculars and cameras for the same amount of smokes."

He didn't smoke and had kept his fags to trade for anything he wanted.

How I wished I didn't smoke, but I was well and truly hooked, and the opportunity passed me by.

A few of the boys decided to try out some of the local wines, and came back to camp with a nice old skin full; singing their heads off, arms around each other, having a great time.

About two hours later you wouldn't have recognised the same bods; they were violently ill and remained in a sad and sorry condition for a couple of days.

I wandered into a compound for a look around, and in one of the huts, who should be sitting there, but Fred Roberts from Bunbury.

Fred had been 'in the bag' for some years, having been taken prisoner on Crete.

We talked about families, as the Roberts, Johnston, and Collins clans knew each other very well.

Fred didn't smoke, and when he knew that I did, he said, "This is for you Noel. You can make some use of it. I've been keeping this tin, hoping I would meet some mate who would enjoy it."

With that he handed me a tin of Havelock pipe tobacco, a pipe and a packet of cigarette papers.

I couldn't thank him enough as smokes were the one item that were still in short supply.

I hadn't seen any of my other crew members since the Nuremberg camp, and was resigned to the fact that I would not see them again until we were back in England; if then.

We were told that we would be taken to an airfield within the next few days to begin our repatriation back to the UK.

Then came the great news that the world had been waiting for:

"The war against Germany is over."

Chapter 25

While waiting at the airfield for transport to fly us out, two German fighter aircraft, with white streamers jammed in their wing flaps to show they had surrendered, began to circle the field wishing to land.

A green flare was sent up and Military Police vehicles went out to the runway to escort the planes in to the hangars.

Before long, the wonderful sight of a number of DC3 Douglas Dakota transport planes flew into the circuit area, and we knew we would soon be on our way out of Germany.

The pilot of our aircraft said we were to be flown to Le Havre in France, where a big repatriation camp had been set up.

We took off on the first leg of our long trip home, and I felt quite strange as a passenger in the aircraft, not having had that experience before. I was itching to get my hands on the controls again.

The camp at Le Havre was run by the Red Cross, and every possible comfort was given to us. Hot showers, plenty of good food and attention from the ladies of the British, American and French Red Cross.

I was given the option of spending a few days in France, or going on the short list for returning to England; I chose the latter and was back across the Channel in a couple of days.

At a staging camp I was deloused for the third time since being released and then sent on to the old stamping ground at the Brighton Hotel on the south coast.

Coming down the stairs the following morning, I heard a quiet voice behind me, "Hello Aussie, great to have you back."

I turned around, and was surprised to see Norma standing there.

Giving her a big hug, I asked, "How the hell did you know I was coming back, or was still alive?"

"My brother was posted to 50 squadron at Skellingthorpe," she said, "and he let me know when you went missing. I've been keeping in touch with Australia House and eventually found out you were a

p.o.w. When I heard prisoners were being repatriated, I guessed you Aussie aircrew would be sent here, so I've called every day to see if I could find you and today is the lucky day."

I'd just been given leave and was going up to London to see if I could find any news of brother Bill, as he would have been back before me, released by General Montgomery earlier than us down south. Norma came with me for a couple of days.

I was told the good news that Bill was back in England and was on leave at the moment. He could have been anywhere so, after Norma and I had seen a couple of shows in London, I decided to go back to Brighton. Bill would have to report back there at the end of his leave.

I was sitting at the bar in the Officers' Mess a few days later and the bloke with his back to me kept bumping me, so I turned around and said, "For Christ's sake watch what you're doing mate! You're spilling my beer."

He turned towards me, "You're bloody dead you young bastard," and passed out cold.

I had found my brother!

Bill came back to earth quickly and I bought him a shot of brandy to settle his nerves.

Then began a reunion party that carried on for days with some of Bill's p.o.w. mates to help keep the fires burning.

One of these blokes had an MG sports car and when we were at a pub one morning he loaned it to me to go and pick up Norma from her place off Elm Grove, about three miles away.

The car had plenty of pick-up and was a joy to drive. Soon we were heading back to the pub with not a care in the world.

I took a right hand turn into the hotel a bit fast, causing the tyres to squeal, before changing down a gear and pulling up at the door.

Watching this, from a distance of about six feet, was one of the local constabulary who, judging from the look on his face, was not too happy with my driving ability.

Wandering over to the driver's side door, he said, "Well, well, well, what have we here? An Australian pilot trying to fly a British sports

car over the streets of an English city, and I'll bet a pound to a pinch of you-know-what, that he doesn't have a drivers licence. Am I right?"

"Yes you are officer." (I was prepared to crawl to get out of this one.) "But there are unusual circumstances."

"Do tell me," he said, "and it had better be good."

Just as I started my story, Bill and two of the other chaps came out and leaned against the wall to see what was going on.

"All of us are ex-prisoners-of-war," I said, "and all my gear from the squadron would have been sent home by now, including my drivers licence. I was with 61 Squadron stationed at Skellingthorpe, and shot down on 8 February this year."

The young policeman appeared suitably impressed with this and the crestfallen expressions so well displayed by the onlookers were a sight to melt the hardest heart.

"Righto lad," said the bobby. "That sounds a good enough reason to me, but remember that car doesn't have wings, so don't make any further attempts to make it fly. Have a safe journey home to Australia."

We all thanked the officer for his good wishes and returned into the pub, to continue the interrupted celebrations of our survival and anticipated trip back home.

Bill, having been back in the UK for some time, had already been allocated a sailing date for a ship home. So we decided to front the Transport Officer, to see if I could scrounge my way home on the same ship.

When I had explained the unusual circumstances which brought us together, and the fact that our mother had virtually lost her whole family, since our father died in 1943, and both sons were p.o.w.s, I kept my fingers crossed for his answer.

"This is a situation that's never come up before, and I find it a very deserving case. I don't think one more body on the ship will cause any problems, so I can see no reason for not allowing you to travel home together."

This called for further celebrations, which continued until the great day came, when we were told to be ready at a day's notice to move out and board a ship for our journey home.

I said goodbye to friends I had made in Brighton, and to mates I was leaving behind, and who would follow us at a later date.

My crew were now scattered all over the UK, and the only postal address I had was that of Ted Bloomfield, my bomb aimer. I didn't meet up with any of them before leaving; getting home was all I could think of at this time.

Bill and I were seen off at the Brighton station with much hilarity, a few farewell beers, and calls such as, "Say hello to Aussie for us you lucky bastards. Have a safe trip."

"Your turn will soon come," I yelled back. "See you back home."

The train pulled out, and we were on our way to Australia.

Chapter 26

No time was wasted getting us down to the docks where our ship for the journey, the *Arundel Castle*, was waiting to take on her passengers, all ex-prisoners-of-war.

There were 'diggers' on board who had been 'in the bag' for over four years after being taken prisoner in Greece or Crete; I don't think I ever saw any of the old timers without a grin on their faces; they couldn't believe that it was all over.

Before we reached the open sea the loud speakers blared out, "Attention all personnel, we have been advised that even though the war with Germany is over, there are some German submarines that may not have received this information, and one or two who do not wish to adhere to the call for cessation of hostilities. Therefore full blackout conditions will be in force for the entire trip home. No smoking on deck after dark and do not throw any rubbish over the side of the ship that can be spotted by a surfacing U-boat. As we get closer to home, the Japanese submarines will be watching out for shipping in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, so extreme care must be taken by all on board this ship."

The officer in charge of this movement of ex-p.o.w.s was a Lieutenant Colonel; a small man, pompous, with a very red face and a la-di-da manner of speech.

He was immediately nicknamed 'Pinky' and I never heard him referred to by any other name during the duration of the journey home.

Gambling places run by enterprising blokes soon sprang up at various locations throughout the ship. They had plenty of practice in the prison camps, where IOUs were legal tender to be claimed after the war, when deferred pays were collected.

Bill and I were watching a game of two-up on one of the hatch covers, when two army privates came over to us saying. "You're the two brothers going home together aren't you?"

"That's right," said Bill. "Who are you blokes?"

"My name's 'Whopper Cock' and this bloke's 'Tadpole'."

"Your names are what?" I asked, not believing my ears.

"Whopper Cock and Tadpole," he repeated with a wide grin on his face, "and we are well-named believe me," breaking into a good belly laugh. "We were taken prisoners in Greece, so were in the bag for a good long stretch."

We became good mates with these two characters, and one day they put an interesting, yet suspicious, proposition to us.

Bill and I were to give them a pound each (about a week's pay for me) and they would gamble with it, guaranteeing to return at least our stake money the next day.

I looked at Bill and we both nodded, handed over a pound each and hoped for the best.

The next day, Tadpole handed each of us two pounds; a very satisfactory result as far as we were concerned and probably a better one for them, although we never asked any questions.

This rewarding arrangement went on for a considerable time, Bill and I making quite a bit of money, with no effort. Whopper Cock and Tadpole must have made a nice little pile for themselves.

Pinky spoke to us all over the loudspeakers one morning, "It has been brought to my attention that there is a great amount of gambling going on throughout the ship. This has got to stop. As of today, all gambling will cease."

There were howls of protest from all over the ship, as this pastime was the favourite of a big number of the blokes on board.

The ship's officers ran a sweep on the number of nautical miles the ship would travel in twenty-four hours, nearest to that number took the lot.

Some enterprising bods fronted Pinky, said this was a form of gambling, and if officers could set up a game like that, we could do likewise and keep our games of chance going.

Pinky saw the light and withdrew the order but warned, "All games will be closely watched over by officers in charge."

This was a load of bulldust, as most of the officers were the biggest gamblers on board.

Being a Pommy troop ship, there was no alcohol to be obtained on board; or so those in charge thought!

The Merchant Navy crew members were given a rum ration, the same as the Royal Navy. This they would save up, bottle and flog off at a highly inflated price.

Bill and I were approached by a crew member and asked if we wanted to enter into an arrangement to purchase a bottle each time one became available.

We said we'd be in it, and went off to contact WC & T, who we were sure would make up a foursome to buy the grog.

I wasn't very keen on dark rum, but mixed with Coca Cola, or any other soft drink it went down OK.

This mixture had a kick like a mule, so had to be taken in small doses, or you would probably find yourself wandering off the ship into the ocean.

Bill had two mates going home with us, Harry Marks and Billy Quirk, both RAAF types, who were in the same prison camp with him. They also joined the 'Rum Club' and we had many a merry night during the journey, plus many a nasty hangover the following day.

We learned through the grapevine that we were going through the Panama Canal and were looking forward to this experience.

Early one morning, I felt the ship come to a stop and heard the anchor chain rattle down. I went out on deck and asked one of the crew members, "Why the hell are we stopping? Where are we?"

"We're in the fresh water lakes at the entrance to the Panama Canal. We'll have to wait here until a couple of ships move through, from the other way."

By this time all the blokes were up and about to see what was going on and where we were.

I heard one chap say to his mate, "I'm going over the side with a cake of soap. I'm bloody sick of these salt water showers. We're in fresh water. It's too good to miss."

About twenty blokes soon got the idea and, throwing in some life belts, jumped in after them; some from the higher decks.

The loud speaker system immediately came on, and Pinky's snooty voice came over, "There will be no swimming from this ship. I repeat, no further troops are to jump into the water. It is too dangerous."

With that, a couple of life rafts were cut free, dropped into the water, and about a hundred-plus bodies hurled themselves over the side, yelling very explicit instructions, such as "Get stuffed Pinky!" "Up yours Pinky!" "Take a bath Pinky!"

A net was lowered over the side, and all the wayward troops climbed back on board. Nothing was ever heard of the incident again; I think Pinky had given up any hope of taming this mob of hard doers.

The next day we docked at Colon, at the entrance to the Panama Canal.

Pinky came over the wire with some good news for a change, "All personnel will be allowed shore leave for the day, and I trust that you will be on your best behaviour, blah, blah, blah," as a roar of approval went up all over the ship.

This was the one and only time I heard a cheer for Pinky.

We were all pleased to get a break from the ship as it had been a pretty rough crossing of the Atlantic, and to get the feel of Mother Earth under one's feet again would be great.

Bill, Harry (Pee Wee) Marks, Billy Quirk and I set off to find out what pleasures and sights Colon had to offer.

The first thing to try of course was the Panamanian beer, but it would have to be pretty bad to put us off as our taste buds were going to be very receptive to a cool beer, after the constant rum and whatever mixed with it.

We were told of a big hotel about two miles away and to get there a horse and carriage ran a service.

The four of us tracked down the carriage and driver and sat back like royalty while we were driven in style to this magnificent hotel, set amongst palm trees near the ocean.

"I wonder what they charge for a beer in this joint," said Billy Quirk. "I bet it's pretty pricey!"

We were pleasantly surprised by the price and settled in for a few cool ales.

The time came for us to return to Colon so Billy bought a couple of bottles of beer to have in the carriage on the return journey.

He was leading the way out when suddenly there was one hell of a loud crash.

Billy, merrily swinging a bottle of beer in each hand, had walked straight into a large plate glass full length window, completely shattering it.

"Let's move out a bit faster," I said, as Billy backed off.

Once outside we made a dash for a normal taxi which luckily happened to be outside, and made a quick trip back into Colon.

No more was heard of the incident and fortunately Billy had only a few small cuts, which were soon patched up by a caring barmaid.

The four of us were happily having a drink in a bar, and talking to some Spanish girls seated on our knees, when three Yankee Military Police came striding in and headed straight for our table.

"OK you guys. Out into the paddy wagon quick smart! Let's go. Let's go!"

"Get stuffed," was the reply from a couple of us. "You have no control over us and we aren't due back for hours yet," I said.

"Take a look outside buddy and I think you'll change your mind," said the Corporal in charge.

Bill and I went out to study the situation then hurried back inside to get the other two.

"There's a bloody riot going on out there!" I yelled. "Let's go with these blokes in their wagon. For once we're on their side."

I grabbed the bottle of 'Old Henry Rye' I had bought to take back to the ship and we moved out very smartly. There was one hell of a brawl going on, as far as we could see down the street.

The trouble started when the blokes woke up to the fact that they were being short-changed by the barkeepers when exchanging their English currency for Panamanian dollars.

One of the offenders suffered a broken nose for being caught in the act.

Word of the cheating soon spread around and all hell broke loose; fights starting up all over town.

We were driven down to the docks by the Yanks where we thanked them for getting us out of a nasty situation.

At the gates into the wharf I noticed there were a couple of large drums for any grog found on returning revellers.

Asking around for a pocket knife, I was handed one, slit the lining of my cap, slipped in my flask of Old Henry rye whisky and made it through without the searchers finding my booty.

We went up on deck and could see the rest of the blokes being rounded up and herded back to the ship, in any type of transport that was available.

Meanwhile we were passing around the flask of fire water, which the whisky turned out to be. After a couple of swigs I was violently ill, as were a couple of the others.

How I wished that I'd never bought the gut rot, or that the guards had found it at the gate.

Chapter 27

The next morning we were surprised to see a warship glide into the harbour. It was the HMAS *Australia* on her way to England on a goodwill mission.

I was watching her as she dropped anchor when a signalling lamp began sending a message to our ship, which I automatically began to read.

Imagine my surprise when I read, "Is Fred Roberts on board? This is his brother Newton."

I raced up to the bridge and explained the situation to the officer, who handed me an Aldis signalling lamp saying, "Help yourself, it's great to see the *Australia* here."

I sent back the message, "Newtie. Noel Collins here. Fred still in England. Is very well. Met him in prison camp. Message ends."

"Thanks Noel. Peter Barrett also on board. Have safe journey home."

I couldn't get over the coincidence of meeting Fred Roberts in the Moosberg prison camp and then his brother under these circumstances at the Panama Canal.

The *Arundel Castle* moved away from the docks and dropped anchor a little way out. Some of the stragglers, most in very poor condition, were being returned to the ship with the native fruit vendors in canoes.

One person had been knifed, and was in poor shape, but I never heard if he survived.

The next day it was our turn to proceed through the canal.

Stopping at the locks, while the water level between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans was altered, was an experience none of us had been through; we found it fascinating.

At last we were in the Pacific Ocean and through the never ending grapevine, were informed that we were heading south to New Zealand to drop off some Kiwis we had on board.

The warning was put out again about blackouts and garbage, as we were reminded that Japanese submarines were still operating in the area and the danger was very real.

Seeing the Southern Cross in the night sky was a great thrill for us all and a sign that it wouldn't be too long before we were home in Aussie at last.

Eventually, our ship arrived in Wellington, New Zealand, where we were given shore leave for the day.

It was a wonderful sight to see the reunions taking place on the docks: wives, Mums and Dads, girl friends, all greeting loved ones who were lucky to be home after living through harrowing and dangerous experiences.

Tears of joy and relief coursed unashamedly down many a still smiling face.

The New Zealand people were great: they took many of us into their homes for a meal and when we went into a pub we didn't have to pay for our drinks.

I said goodbye to a couple of Kiwi Air Force bods I had met on the ship and we swapped addresses to keep in contact.

We left Wellington very quietly before dawn the following day, as this last leg of our cruise home to Sydney was possibly the most dangerous: enemy submarines were evidently known to be monitoring this part of the coast.

I asked Bill, "How do you feel at this stage? I have a knot in my guts that won't go away."

"Join the clan. I'll bet there aren't many on board who don't feel the same way. Have you noticed how quiet everyone has gone? Like us, their minds are already on the wharf at Sydney."

We were told we would see land the following day, and would be docking in Sydney Harbour soon after.

A few of us had bets as to who would be the first one to see land; winner take all.

All of the gamblers were up at dawn, with eyes streaming in the cold wind, trying to bring into focus the first sighting of the Australian coast.

"There it is! There it is," yelled Billy Quirk.

"Bullshit," I said. "That's cloud."

"Under the cloud, under the cloud!" he called.

"Bloody hell you're right Billy," as a thin black line strengthened under the cloud base.

We were looking at the coastline of Australia.

Chapter 28

We were welcomed home by the sound of two tugs hooting as the Arundel Castle was escorted through Sydney Heads by two tugs. Their crews greeted us with waves and cheers while we stood on the deck and yelled excitedly.

But we were soon brought back down to earth when we were told that our ship couldn't dock as there wasn't a spare berth at the wharf for us. We'd have to be taken ashore by tugs and small boats after the Arundel Castle had anchored in the harbour.

There was a chorus of booing, catcalls, and yells of, "What a bloody homecoming; can't dock on our own shores!" "What bastard arranged this balls up?"

We said goodbye to Whopper Cock and Tadpole, who came from Queensland and would be going no further with us.

Bill and I eventually went ashore, where a reporter from a Sydney newspaper wanted to interview the two brothers who were both in the RAAF, had been p.o.w.s in Germany and arrived home together on the same ship.

How the blazes he'd found out about us I do not know, but was possibly told by one of the bods coming ashore before us.

The Transport Officer sorted us out and Billy Quirk, Bill and I were to go by train to Melbourne, where Billy's parents owned the Terminus Hotel. Bill and I were to face the rotten trip across to the West by train.

Upon arrival in Melbourne, we hotfooted it to the Transport Office, and pouring out our tale of woe; one that no human with a heart could resist. We were given permission to see if we could get a seat on a plane and fly home at our own expense.

Off we went to the airline booking office, where a lovely young lass was subjected to the most heart-rending story she'd ever heard.

"Tomorrow's flight is fully booked," she said, "but let me see what I can work out for you. Ah yes, I have two politicians booked for tomorrow's flight to Perth, but their conference doesn't start for three days, so I'll tell them there's been a double booking and they will have to go on the next day's flight. It happens quite often that changes

to bookings are made during the war," she added with a cheeky grin on her face, handing Bill the two precious tickets and wishing us a great trip home.

We immediately sent urgent telegrams home to Mum,Trix and Ginge, letting them know of our lucky quick trip West.

Billy Quirk insisted that we go home with him, stay the night at his parents' hotel and he would get us out to the airport in the morning.

We tried to talk him out of this arrangement saying that his parents wouldn't want two strangers hanging about when he first arrived home.

Billy took no notice of this argument, so off we went to the Terminus Hotel.

Bill and I needn't have worried about being in the way: while the reunion took place, we made ourselves scarce for a few minutes, but Mr and Mrs Quirk would have none of this and treated us as if we were part of the family.

There was a great party at the pub that night, with family and friends calling in for a drink and a great deal of ale consumed well into the night.

We were a bit the worse for wear as we thanked the Quirk family early next morning and the taxi arrived to take us to the airport.

Both of us were feeling decidedly unwell as we boarded the aircraft so didn't want to drink during the flight. I think the hostess was shocked that two ex-p.o.w. airmen said "No thanks" to her offer of beer.

Taxiing out for take-off, I noticed Bill's hands were gripping the arms of the seat pretty tightly and he didn't look too good.

It was then I realised he hadn't flown since he'd had to bale out.

After we'd been in the air for a while, he relaxed and I must admit that I began to feel more comfortable myself, even though I still didn't like anyone else flying the aeroplane!

We landed at Adelaide, where we went for a walk in the fresh air, still not feeling too good, then back on board for the next leg of our flight to Kalgoorlie.

At this stop, we were feeling much better and after taking off again, I asked the new hostess if we could have a beer.

"I'm sorry," she said. "The previous hosty said you weren't

drinking beer and as nobody else was I didn't get any on board at Kalgoorlie. I have Scotch and soda if you would like one."

Bill and I glanced at each other, nodded, and said that would be fine.

I noticed that the hostess' surname was Mofflin, an unusual name, and as I had been in Mofflin House at Wesley College (plus a Bill Mofflin had been in my class) I asked her if she was related to him. They looked pretty much alike, both having red hair.

"Bill was my brother. He was killed last year unfortunately. This war has taken quite a number of old Wesley boys."

I said how sorry I was to hear of Bill's death, and it was the luck of the draw how some survive and others pay the ultimate price.

Nearing Perth airport, I had feelings of excitement, unrealism, as if this was not happening. Bill said he felt the same way and his heartbeat had just about doubled.

Our plane flew over the city where few lights could be seen; blackout restrictions were still in place as the conflict with Japan was still going on.

On the ground, the flares had been laid out ready for our landing.

I noticed at Kalgoorlie that an RAAF pilot had come on board, gone straight up into the cockpit and I hadn't seen him since.

When the hostess came along to ask us to fasten our seat belts I asked her about him, and she informed me that he was doing a conversion course onto this type of aircraft and would be doing the landing at Perth under the Captain's instructions.

We came in to land and I glued my eyes to the runway lights. We touched down with a hell of a bump, did a couple of kangaroo hops, running over a couple of lights on the way, and finally came to a shuddering halt back on the runway.

"That would have to be the worst bloody landing I've ever been in," said Bill and I heartily agreed with him. He was a dirty off-white colour and I must have looked the same, as he said I didn't look too good.

After taxiing in to the terminal, the motors were cut bringing a welcome silence after the long trip.

Chapter 29

We were home. We had made it against the odds: and boy, what a feeling that was!

Bill and I walked down the steps of the aircraft, and into the airport building, and there they were: Mum, Trixie and my lovely Ginge.

There were hugs, kisses and tears all round, with hardly a word spoken in those wonderful first minutes of being with each other once again.

My mother had lost my father, her two sons had been in serious circumstances in prison camps so for us to come home together was a great moment for her.

An old mate of mine, Warwick Walters, from Donnybrook, also came out to say a quick 'welcome home', then left us to the family reunion.

Mum had booked us all in at the 'Adelphi', Perth's leading hotel on St George's Terrace, and we made our way there directly from the airport.

Being hungry was one thing I had vowed never to put up with after my p.o.w. days, so after we'd had a shower and cleaned up, I said to the other three, "What about going down to Bernie's hamburger joint for a feed? I'm bloody hungry and it's just down around the corner in Mounts Bay Road."

They all agreed and we went off while Mum had a rest after the excitement.

After downing a hamburger with an egg and double onions, we arrived back at the hotel to be told that Mother had arranged a special meal for us, after the dining room had closed, with champagne and all the trimmings.

How the hell we were going to get through the meal we did not know, but it had to be done as we couldn't let Mum down after going to so much trouble and expense.

We couldn't eat it all, but put it down to the excitement of getting home; no mention was made of Bernie's burgers.

We returned to Bunbury and Donnybrook the following day and I said a temporary goodbye to Ginge, as I was going to have a couple of days at home before coming into Bunbury to stay at the Johnstons.

Home again with Ginge.

The people of Donnybrook and the local RSL hosted a 'welcome home' night when there were enough returning servicemen to warrant it.

With local Army and Navy returned personnel we had a great night in the Memorial Hall followed by a few beers upstairs in the RSL rooms.

Ginge managed to have a few days off work and stayed with us at Donnybrook. Dancing with her again....

One day Mrs Johnston said to Ginge and I, "Have you two decided on a wedding date yet?"

We said we hadn't, but after some dicussion, chose the twenty-fifth of August.

We were given a round of parties at which some strange presents were given.

Ginge received a nightie with barbed wire around the neck and a draw wire around the bottom held together with a padlock. The key was in an envelope with the words; 'Ginge - to give to Noel at the appropriate time.'

A chemist friend gave me a suspicious looking small flat parcel which I was hesitant to open.

"Open it, open it," yelled the crowd, which I did, and out popped two babies' dummies with the bulbs tied down.

The attached note read, "Come in sucker."

Another present was a potty chair with the words printed across the back, 'Baby Dumpling's Atomic Splitter'.

We were married in the Church of England pro-Cathedral in Bunbury on 25 August 1945, as arranged.

Ginge had as her bridesmaids: Ella Hope (Hopie), and her cousin, Marie Arthur. Brother Bill was my best man and Terry McDaniel groomsman.

St. Pauls pro-Cathedral, Bunbury.

The reception was held at the RSL Hall, where over 200 guests were present; the biggest proportion of whom were Johnstons and Piesses.

My family was represented by my mother, brother and one second cousin.

My future mother-in-law said to me, "One of the best things about you Noel, is your lack of relations."

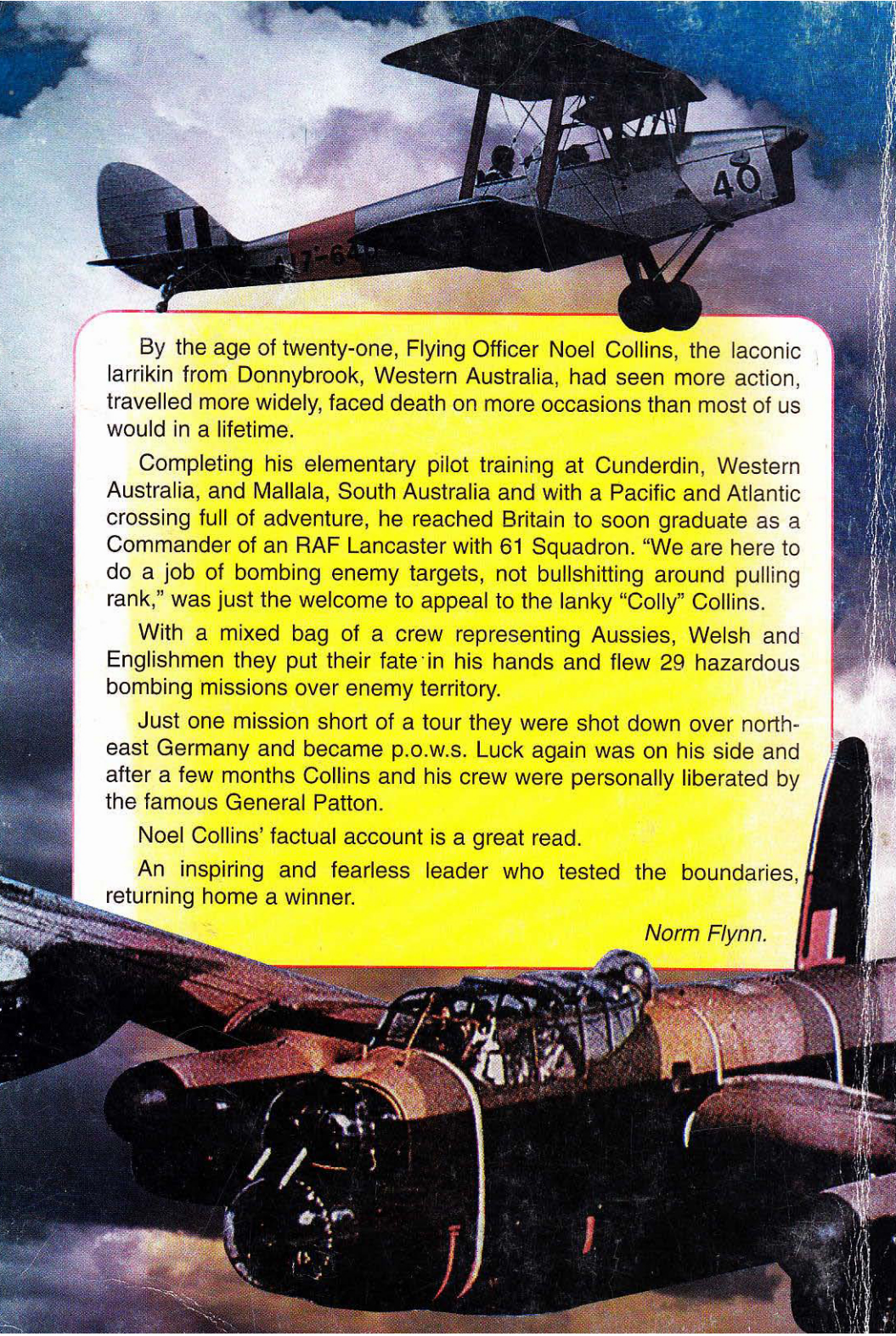
I didn't quite know how to accept that remark, but took it to be a backhanded compliment for keeping numbers down at the reception.

When the telegrams were being read, Bill and I were in for a big surprise. One of them said, "All the best to Noel and Ginge. Stop. WC and T." We were the only two to know those initials, Whopper Cock and Tadpole; how they knew about the wedding we will never know.

We were going to Caves House at Yallingup, with Bill and Trix coming down the second week for the honeymoon they never had.

Ginge went to get changed into her going away outfit and returned looking lovely as we prepared to get away in my mother's car which she had loaned us for the two weeks.

With 'goodbyes', and 'good luck' ringing in our ears, and the rattle of tin cans dragging behind us, we set off not knowing what the future held for us; nor at this stage of our lives did we even care.



By the age of twenty-one, Flying Officer Noel Collins, the laconic larrikin from Donnybrook, Western Australia, had seen more action, travelled more widely, faced death on more occasions than most of us would in a lifetime.

Completing his elementary pilot training at Cunderdin, Western Australia, and Mallala, South Australia and with a Pacific and Atlantic crossing full of adventure, he reached Britain to soon graduate as a Commander of an RAF Lancaster with 61 Squadron. "We are here to do a job of bombing enemy targets, not bullshitting around pulling rank," was just the welcome to appeal to the lanky "Colly" Collins.

With a mixed bag of a crew representing Aussies, Welsh and Englishmen they put their fate in his hands and flew 29 hazardous bombing missions over enemy territory.

Just one mission short of a tour they were shot down over north-east Germany and became p.o.w.s. Luck again was on his side and after a few months Collins and his crew were personally liberated by the famous General Patton.

Noel Collins' factual account is a great read.

An inspiring and fearless leader who tested the boundaries, returning home a winner.

Norm Flynn.