



# A CALL TO ARMS

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WAR SERVICE WITH THE RAAF  
1942-1946

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DIARY NOTES AND MEMOIRS  
OF

ARTHUR GATELY

WINNER OF THE 2002 RAAF HERITAGE AWARD



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**Dedicated  
To the Memory  
of  
Fallen Comrades**

“They gave their lives. For that public gift they received a praise which never ages and a tomb most glorious – not so much the tomb in which they lie, but that in which their fame survives, to be remembered for ever when occasion comes for word or deed ...”

**Lest We Forget**

**Sergeant Pilot Blue Roxburgh  
Flight Lieutenant V. P. Brennan DFC, DFM  
Sergeant Pilot I. H. ‘Kid’ Callister  
Corporal C. J. Stratten  
Flight Lieutenant L. Wettenhall  
Squadron Leader M. S. Bott  
Flying Officer K. H. Slatyer  
Flight Lieutenant R. Darcy  
Flight Lieutenant J. L. Rowe  
Flight Lieutenant B. Newman  
Flight Lieutenant R. Cameron  
Flying Officer R. Day  
Warrant Officer W. C. Leahy**



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abbreviations	viii
<b>THE BEGINNING</b>	1
<b>OFF TO WAR</b>	6
<b>MILNE BAY</b>	9
<b>GOODENOUGH ISLAND</b>	12
<b>KIRIWINA ISLAND</b>	21
<b>FORWARD TO THE ADMIRALTY ISLANDS</b>	47
<b>TOCUMWAL</b>	123
<b>POSTSCRIPT</b>	139
<b>THE AMERICANS</b>	141
<b>THE ROYAL NAVY</b>	144
<b>PER ARDUA AD ASTRA</b>	145

## ABBREVIATIONS

ANGAU	Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit
CO	Commanding Officer
CPO	Chief Petty Officer
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross
DFM	Distinguished Flying Medal
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
HQ	Headquarters
LST	Landing Ship Tank
MP	Military Police
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
OBU	Operational Base Unit
OC	Officer Commanding
OTU	Operational Training Unit
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RNZAF	Royal New Zealand Air Force
RSU	Repair and Salvage Unit
TMO	Transport Movement Office
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
USAAF	United States Army Air Force
USAF	United States Air Force
USN	United States Navy
WOD	Warrant Officer Discipline

## THE BEGINNING

I lodged an application to join the RAAF on 6 September 1942. First hurdle was the medical and educational checks. When these were surmounted, I was advised that I had been accepted into the service subject to release by my employer and the local manpower officer. I had considerable difficulty with my employer, Mr G.E. Stewart, Englishman, master toolmaker and small backyard manufacturing engineer of Villiers Street, Rockdale, who consistently refused to release me from his employ, which also meant that the local Manpower Office would go along with Mr. Stewart's decision. I was determined to keep trying, and quietly worked on an approach of gentle agitation, pestering, and, at times, downright cheek. Eventually I was able to make him see reason that it would be better for his peace of mind if he released me to enlist in the RAAF. And so, quite unexpectedly, one day this came about.

I immediately contacted the RAAF and was able to get on with the process of induction. Initial reception was at the Dalgety building at Woolloomooloo, from here forty or so recruits were taken by bus to the main metropolitan centre at Bradfield Park, near Lindfield. It was Monday 2 November 1942, and I was eighteen years of age.

The RAAF took over the Oceanic and Bayswater hotels at Coogee Beach to house the technical trainees. I was billeted into the Oceanic hotel. In order to travel to the Technical College in Harris Street, Ultimo, in the city, the State Government made special trams available which transported us to and fro on a shift basis six days a week. This was a big operation, the system was well organised.

I commenced a basic fitting course at the college on 9 November 1942 and finished on 1 January 1943, a total of eight weeks. I worked hard on this course and, to my delight, passed. Mr Bannerman was the course instructor. I was posted to the RAAF Armament School at Hamilton, in south western Victoria.

On Saturday 9 January at 7.30pm I left Sydney for Melbourne on a mixed civilian/troop train. Upon reaching Melbourne, I changed to the western line via Ballarat, and arrived at Hamilton in the afternoon of 11 January. As a war-time emergency, the town had practically been taken over by the RAAF. This included the Town Hall, where I had to report, and most district church halls and similar buildings. Along with twenty to twenty-five other men, I was billeted in a resumed cottage just out of town. It was a comfortable old house, and a pleasant walk to the Mess (the Town Hall) and to the class rooms spread around the town. The Armourers' course started on 18 January. The instructors were good and the course interesting. I worked very hard, and came second on the course. I was very pleased with the outcome, and, after great difficulty, I was able to get a trunk line telephone call to my mother and father in Sydney, who were also pleased with the result. The pass also meant that my basic salary would increase from 6/- per day to 10/- per day. As a result of this pay increase I was able to make an allotment of 3/- per day to my mother.

Hamilton was a lovely small country town. It had a very good main street shopping centre, civic buildings, churches etc. and could lay claim to one of the finest mature garden parks I have seen outside a major city.

On Sunday afternoons, I would take my books to the park, find a good shady tree, settle down and get on with some serious study.

I met two men at Hamilton who were attached to the staff of the Armament School, and who I was later to meet in 79 Fighter Squadron; Bluey Leonard (armourer) from Walgett, New South Wales, and Blue Hickey (WOD) from Melbourne. The course finished on 14 February 1943—a truly stimulating month. I was sorry to leave the town.

I was posted to the Fighter OTU training station at Mildura. On 19 February, I travelled by train from Hamilton to Ballarat, where I changed to a crowded civilian/troop train for an overnight run to Mildura. It was a dreadful trip—the train kept stopping and starting, pulling into sidings to let goods trains through—I thought the journey would never end, and arrived at Mildura on Saturday morning in an exhausted state.

From the beginning, I fell in love with Mildura. It was a planned and beautifully laid out city. It had a wealth of shops, high standard of housing, broad avenues, an up to date Workers' Club which was a social centre for the district—a clean open look with a noticeable feeling for trees. The founding and development of this vast irrigation area was largely due to the pioneering work of two irrigation experts, the Chaffey brothers, who were invited to this part of Australia by the Victorian government of the day with the support and assistance of the visionary Victorian Member of Parliament, Alfred Deakin.

The RAAF air station was situated about four miles out of town, and grew out of a small aerodrome that existed before the war. By RAAF standards, it was an impressive station. Maintenance and repair facilities were extensive, barrack accommodation and adjuncts were basic but clean. Amenities for rest and recreation for station personnel were good. Group Captain Peter Jeffries, DFC, a former 3 Squadron desert pilot was the Commanding Officer (CO) and driving force at the time. He, along with a core of other battle tried 3 Squadron pilots, were responsible for seeing that day and night training programs delivered enough fully trained pilots to meet the requirements of a rapidly expanding RAAF. This was my first taste of station life and I enjoyed the experience and activity of it all. During the next three months I worked on Wirraways, Kittyhawks, Boomerangs and a Hurricane fighter, and training planes. Also, during this time, the station dentist saw fit to extract all of my teeth and replace them with dentures, and I had two short home leaves to Sydney while stationed there.

On 25 May 1943, I was posted to 79 Squadron (Spitfires), which was 'forming up' at Woolomanata near Lara in Victoria. This posting entailed a long trip by train from Mildura via Ballarat to Melbourne, change into an electric train to the RAAF base at Laverton, then transport by truck to a sheep property owned by the Fairburn family near Lara. The idea behind using the sheep station property was to allow the formation of an all Australian Spitfire Squadron to be away from prying eyes, at the same time be close and handy to the base facilities at Laverton. About a dozen of us travelled in the back of a truck from Laverton, and, after a bumpy ride reached the Squadron about 7.00pm. It was quite dark, raining lightly, and freezing cold. The Mess was closed and we had to wander among the tents, like stray dogs, hungry, and

looking for a place to bunk down for the night. I inquired at several tents only to be tuned aside by gruff, unfriendly 'sorry, no vacancies, no room'. My spirits were at a low ebb. I felt unwanted and far from home. Eventually, at the end of a row of tents, I was met with a smile and friendly voice which invited me into the tent out of the cold to share a space. So began friendships with some that lasted years into my life.

My good samaritan was a short, thick Scotsman by the name of Scotty Hamilton. He was a Corporal Armourer in the RAAF, but in civilian life a farmer from Border Town in South Australia, married with a young family. Right from the outset, I took a liking to this man. He had a good sense of humour, and always looked on the bright side of life. We became close friends. The other occupants of the tent were Norman Gray, Tom Neill, and Gordon Reeves. Norman Gray was an electrician from Arncliffe in Sydney. He was a friendly chap with a good sense of humour, but when we reached the islands, he moved into another tent. I was sorry to see him go. Tom Neill was an airframe mechanic from Melbourne. Tom and I became close friends. Gordon Reeves was an engine mechanic in the RAAF, a dairy farmer in civilian life, married and from Kyogle in New South Wales. Another occupant of the tent (whose place I took) was another Scotsman, Peter Kerr, from Wellington Point, Queensland. He was also an armourer, and one of the advance party who had been sent on ahead of the Squadron to prepare reception arrangements. All of these men were in their mid-thirties.

After handing in my sealed personal documents and travel orders to the Orderly Room clerk (Ron Nation) the next morning, I reported to Warrant Officer Ralph Chandler, the Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) in charge of all Squadron armourers. He was a calm, experienced, level-headed man, and I got on well with him throughout my tour with the Squadron. I was allocated to an aircraft to work on and became part of the ground crew of Spitfire UP/A in B Flight, piloted by Flying Officer Jim Richards from Newcastle, Harry Chandler the engine mechanic and Tom Neill the airframe mechanic. We became a happy team.

The only way to describe the activities of the Squadron at this stage, would be one of feverish chaos. Spitfires were taking off and landing everywhere, then taking off again, forming themselves into flights, carrying out attack exercises, then landing again and taxiing all over the grass area. On most days, one or two Boomerang fighter planes from the nearby base at Laverton would do low-level 'shoot-ups' in the hope of attracting a hot Spitfire aloft to tangle in some fancy aerobatics. The displays of low-level flying were exciting for us ground staff to watch, but also distracting, and I never saw one of our pilots take the bait. The outcome would have been a foregone conclusion. Fuel tankers, maintenance trucks, personnel on push bikes were racing around all over the place. Vast quantities of stores and equipment were delivered, unpacked, resorted and packed again. Tents were painted with camouflage paint, but, due to the persistent wet weather, they were unable to dry and were stored away in a damp state. When we arrived in the tropics and the tents were unpacked, the canvas of many of the tents was found to be badly affected by mildew, and the tents were useless. Apart from the permanent farm buildings which we were using for administration and messing functions the Squadron was, at this stage, a mobile operation and was to remain so for the long months ahead.

During the early days it was difficult to get to know many people and where they fitted into the structure of the Squadron, but up to the time of leaving Woolomanata, the following is a rough outline of the officers, pilots, NCOs etc.

### **Group 953 - 79 Spitfire Squadron**

Commanding Officer: Squadron Leader Rawlinson. Previously of 3 Squadron.  
Adjutant: Flight Lieutenant Sim Bennett

#### **Flying Personnel**

##### **B Flight**

Flight Commander: Flight Lieutenant Paul Brennan, DFC, DFM (Malta Ace)

Flight Lieutenant Max Bott	Pilot Officer Tasicker
Flying Officer Jim Richards	Sergeant Pilot G. Gilbert
Flying Officer Peter Birch	Sergeant Pilot Clem Smitzer
Flying Officer B. Hollow	Sergeant Pilot Lew Turner
Flying Officer Bill Pickard	Sergeant Pilot L. Gardiner
Pilot Officer Morgan	Sergeant Pilot Callister
Pilot Officer Frank Binning	Sergeant Pilot Roxborough (killed during exercises near Woolomanata)

##### **C Flight**

Flight Commander: Flight Lieutenant Doug Vanderfield, DFC, Singapore Ace

Flying Officer Reg Nathan	Petty Officer George Voges
Flying Officer Paul Sebere	Petty Officer C. McCormick
Flying Officer Warren Napier	Petty Officer Scott
Flying Officer Hopton	Sergeant Pilot Ian McKeller
Sergeant Pilot Wal Howell	Sergeant Pilot Neville Falks
Flying Officer Wal Wilson	

#### **Administration**

Adjutant:	Flight Lieutenant Sim Bennett
Intelligence:	Flying Officer Clarke
Signals:	Flying Officer Cowie
Defence Officer:	Flight Lieutenant Bob Chaffey
Medical Officer:	Flight Lieutenant Atkinson
Equipment:	Flight Lieutenant Ralph Sydenham

## **Flight NCOs**

### **B Flight**

Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley 2A	Corporal Pat Taylor 2A
Flight Sergeant Des O'Brien 2E	Corporal Sid Frood 2A
Corporal Jim Morvell 2E	Flight Sergeant Ace Howell F/A
Corporal Laurie Whittle 2E	Corporal. Bill Oliver F/A
Corporal Wally Block Armourer	

### **C Flight**

Sergeant Les Borgelt Armourer	Sergeant Tom Opie 2A
Corporal D. Hamilton Armourer	Corporal McNamee 2E
Corporal Colin Hamlyn F/A	Corporal Edgar 2E
Flight Sergeant Burgess 2A	Corporal Roy Minner 2A

## **Workshops**

Flight Lieutenant Bob Palmer Engineering Officer  
Corporal Norm Medew F/A

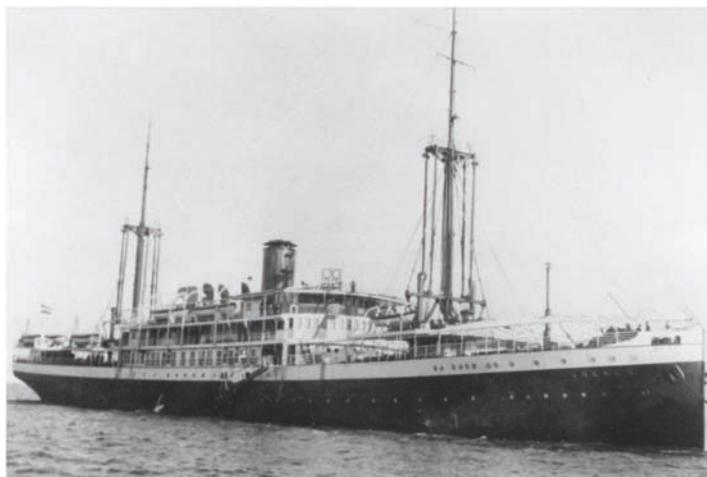
### **1 June 1943**

At last the great day arrived. The Squadron was on the move. The Victorian railways laid on a special train, which picked us up from Lara railway station and took us right into Melbourne. After a long afternoon hanging about on the platform (no one was allowed to leave the station), we boarded a troop train, and in the early evening headed north for Sydney. It was a long boring trip, the only break being the change of gauge and trains at Albury, where we boarded a New South Wales train. Our arrival at Central railway station on the morning of 3 June was routine, but on leaving the platform to assemble in the concourse area, we had to pass through a large crowd of civilians (there was always large numbers of people milling around here waiting to meet friends or family on country trains, or farewelling sons and daughters departing on troop trains). We must have looked an odd collection of servicemen, hardly any of us was wearing a complete uniform, some were wearing slouch hats, others forage caps or no headgear at all. We were unshaven, having been on the move for three days, and most of us were wearing unpolished boots, others in shoes. Without exception, around our midriffs on belts, or pieces of rope or string, water bottles were hanging, bayonets in scabbards or any other item which couldn't be stuffed into a kitbag. We had no shoulder straps for our rifles and carried them. It would be hard to find a group of men less prepared to face an enemy. As we ambled through the gateway into the crowd, a call went up 'The boys are just back from fighting in New Guinea, three cheers for the boys', and so three cheers went up. It was a moving experience, totally undeserved. One of our wits replied, 'Yes mate, and you should have seen the way we left the bloody Japs'.

From Central railway station, we travelled in special buses to the No 2 Embarkation Depot at Bradfield Park. Here the doctors and nurses had a field day, making sure we had a full quota of injections to combat the nasties we were likely to encounter in the tropics. Lined up in queues, the medical team moved quickly, jabbing needles into blokes. Men were fainting and dropping like flies, the place resembled a battlefield. Somehow I didn't pass out, but like so many others was off-colour for a few days. Another feature of our transit visit, was to be fitted out with tropical clothing. This embraced summer underwear, shirts, trousers, socks, gaiters etc. Also at this point, we were promised complete outfits of webbing equipment, eg haversacks, belts, water bottle holders, bayonet holders, rifle straps and bandoliers to hold ammunition. All of this magic equipment was to be supplied to us from RAAF stores at Townsville, and picked up on our way north. Even at this early stage, we had doubts about this promise. At the last general parade, the NCOs handed around six .303 bullets per person, with the strong advice that this ammunition was not to be wasted. What a laugh! The evenings of 3-4 June, we were given leave, which enabled those of us who lived in Sydney the opportunity to slip home and spend a few last precious hours with family and friends. I was always most appreciative of this last minute leave.

### OFF TO WAR

On the evening of 5 June 1943, we were taken to Darling Harbour where we embarked on the *MV Cremer* (4608 tons), a former Dutch island trader. This was an oldish style mixed and passenger ship manned by Dutch officers and Indonesian seamen, which used to trade out of Batavia (now Djakarta) to Singapore, Brunei, Manila and other Asian ports. The ship had been converted to carry troops as well as cargo. The fore holds were used to carry the troops: rough triple bunks fashioned out of timber had been installed on two tween deck levels and the bottom level, which was accessible to the tween decks above and the top deck by wooden staircase steps. If one of the staircases had been dislodged we would have been trapped like rats. At night the ship was closed down, with no one allowed up on the top deck. With so many men jammed together, some were smoking and others were sick, one could cut the air with a knife. It was one hell of a hole.



*MV Cremer*

*This Dutch merchant ship was the cargo/troop ship that in June 1943 conveyed a number of RAAF units (including the ground staff of 79 Squadron), from Sydney to Goodenough Island, via the ports of Townsville and Milne Bay. Manned by Dutch officers and Indonesian seamen, it was one of a number of ships owned and operated by the Netherlands KPM Lines that before World War II traded out of Batavia (now Djakarta), to Asian ports including Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Rangoon, Brunei, Hong Kong, etc.*

*During World War II, when victory-flushed Japanese forces began to over-run the Dutch territory of Sumatra, Java, the ships were ordered to hastily sail for Australia. These merchant ships were readily accepted, and loosely formed into a group known as the 'Lilliput Operation'. They gave invaluable service carrying war material and troops to New Guinea and South-West Pacific Islands. And as a result, while serving with the supply network, suffered losses of men and ships. When the Cremer was returning south in 1943, the ship ran onto some rocks close to St Bees Island, north east of Mackay. The ship sank quickly. Fortunately there was no loss of life.*

*Built in Holland in 1926, the ship's statistics were as follows:*

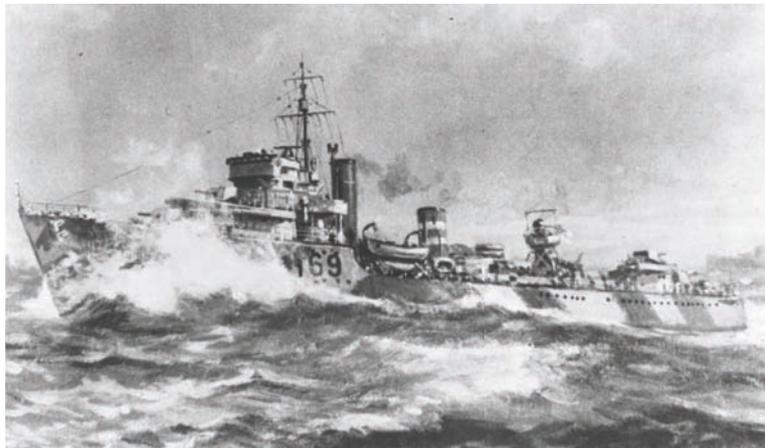
*Tonnage 4608 tons*

*Length 390 feet*

*Beam 52 feet*

*Draught 24 feet*

All blacked out, the ship silently slipped down the harbour and passed through Sydney Heads at 3.00am on 6 June 1943. When daylight broke and we were allowed up on deck, we had a single RAN destroyer, HMAS *Vendetta* steaming off our starboard side, accompanying us as escort.



*HMAS Vendetta*

*The above photo was taken from the original oil painting by the greatly respected Australian marine artist, John Alcott, and shows the destroyer at speed thrashing her way through the sea when she was part of the famous 'Scrap Iron Flotilla' then attached to the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean during World War II.*

*It was this cocky little destroyer escort that in all probability saved us from an attack by a Japanese submarine as the Cremer worked its way north after leaving Sydney Harbour.*

*This photo was generously given to me by Graeme Andrews, author, marine historian and editor of the magazine 'Australian Sea Heritage'.*

What a great experience this was. Headed north within sight of the coast for who knows what adventure. There was a large number of airmen aboard, quite apart from our Squadron, No 79. There were 76 and 77 Fighter Squadrons, 73 Wing

Headquarters, Fighter Control and the RSU group. When all these men were spread around the top deck it was difficult to find a spot to sit down. I was leaning on the port side rail one day, watching the flying skills of some sea birds when a chap moved in alongside me. When I turned to see who it was, to my great surprise and delight, it was a chap by the name of Ron Broome from Arncliffe who had been a fellow member of the Rockdale Boys' Band. Naturally a great old yarn followed. We kept in touch as we moved forward with the war from one island to another.

A mobile cooker was lashed down on the foredeck area of the ship. This handy unit along with its team of busy cooks, seemed to work without a break. It must have been a hot job, particularly so when we moved into the tropics. We were served two meals a day. Breakfast started about 7.30am until around 9.00am and the evening meal from around 4.00pm to 5.30pm. Under the difficult circumstances the meals were good.

Most days after breakfast, we would gather round a fore hatch and listen to short talks given by some of our officers or NCOs about aerodrome defence, health and hygiene in the tropics, lifeboat procedures, etc. The rest of the day we were left to our own devices. At this early stage, one short, puffed-up NCO by the name of 'Ace' Howell raised the heckles of a number of the men. His power-drunk attitude was objectionable to some of the older, more experienced men. Following one or two talks he gave, there was little doubt about the hostility he generated by the comments he received of 'pull your head in', 'do you want to swim home', 'watch your back, Ace'. He mellowed quickly.

One night we had a submarine scare. It frightened the living daylights out of us. The *Cremer* thrashed through the seas, and zigzagged wildly in an attempt to out-distance and out-maneuvre our stalking attacker. If we had stopped one torpedo, I am sure the old rust bucket would have broken up and sunk in a few minutes, and it would have been curtains for all of us. The threat seemed to continue for some time and it was a great relief when the violent movement stopped and with the return of daylight, we were allowed up on deck. It was reassuring to see our cocky little destroyer steaming and plunging ahead on our starboard side.

The weather was perfect, clear skies, warm sunny days, sparkling seas, and, when we entered the Barrier Reef area, sea birds wheeled around the ship and followed us for miles; Squadrons of flying fish would take wing in a desperate attempt to escape from underwater predators. We passed close to a number of small and large islands all covered in trees and low scrub, these gave rise to romantic thoughts of escape to a tropical paradise far removed from the ugliness of war.

On 11 June, five days after leaving Sydney, we arrived off Townsville. This was an open roadstead and our ship anchored among a dozen or so others, all heavy and down to their marks with war material destined for New Guinea. It was hoped that we would be allowed ashore for a few hours, but this was not to be. Instead what business had to be conducted here (which didn't include picking up our much needed webbing) was carried out via launch on a ship to shore basis, and, sometime during the night we weighed anchor and continued our passage north.

## MILNE BAY

Milne Bay at the eastern end of the New Guinea mainland (and the scene last year of heavy fighting between Australian and Japanese soldiers) is two days steaming from Townsville. It was great to be up on deck again as the *Cremer* made its early morning approach through the China Straits to enter the wide mouth of the Bay. Our ship seemed so small and vulnerable. We proceeded slowly and it was close to midday when we reached the end of the Bay. There wasn't a breath of breeze, the place was like a furnace. Almost as soon as the anchor went down, panic stations took over. A siren blasting out from shore warned of an approaching air raid. Japanese bombers from Rabaul had been sighted crossing the north coast of New Guinea and were headed in our direction. The idea now was to get as many men ashore as quickly as possible. Small landing barges were rushed to us and men began to tumble into them. For a short time it was quite farcical on board. One officer was ordering men up from down below to proceed to the barges, while up on deck a harassed NCO was ordering the men to go below because of the air raid threat. Eventually it was sorted out and we all got ashore safely. As it turned out the air raid didn't eventuate.

Close to where we landed was a grim reminder of the war in the shape of the half sunken, half beached British merchant ship *SS Anshun* (3188 tons). It had been shelled while unloading war supplies by a cruiser which was part of a Japanese naval force that had slipped into Milne Bay on the evening of 6 September 1942. The Australian Hospital ship *Manunda* was also in Milne Bay at the time of the attack.



*During the night of 6 September 1942, two Japanese warships slipped into Milne Bay and shelled the SS Anshun as it lay alongside the wharf at Gili Gili, unloading supplies for the army. The ship was badly damaged and later capsized. Lit up like a Christmas tree, the Australian Hospital Ship Manunda was also in the Bay, but the Japanese decided not to move against it.*

*The Anshun was later salvaged, rebuilt, renamed Culcairn and traded on the Australian coast for many years.*

My God it was hot and humid! Perspiration poured out of us, and only a few weeks previously we were freezing to death from the cold at Woolomanata.

I don't think it was the idea of Group or Wing headquarters that we be delayed here, the threat of the air raid had hustled us ashore. Trucks suddenly appeared and we were taken (as guests) to the camp of No 6 Lockheed Hudson Bomber Squadron. With greatly reduced numbers this Squadron was operating from Gurney airstrip as a reconnaissance force, and, according to hearsay, was doing a tremendous job shadowing the movement of Japanese shipping.

After a mud-slushing drive from the waterfront, it was well after midday when we reached 6 Squadron camp. The Mess had been cleared away and the cooks winding down for an afternoon break. Out of the blue, approximately 300 hungry men suddenly appeared. In friendly mood and seemingly in no time at all we were sitting down to a most welcome meal. It so happened that I knew one of the cooks (George Saville) from pre-war days. His father conducted a busy family butchery near the corner of Marrickville and Illawarra Roads, Marrickville. Seymours' great family store was opposite. We were soon into a short, sharp, friendly conversation. He invited me to share his tent during the stopover. All of our men were spread around and accommodated in this manner. I readily accepted his invitation, and, when he was free, we caught up on the past and present gossip and activities. Physically, I saw a great change in George. A short man, he had lost a great deal of weight, had suffered one or two bouts of malaria which had left him drained, weak and out of breath. As a result of taking the anti-malarial tablet Atebrin, his skin was yellow and his eyes popped out like they were held on matchsticks. As we talked, I could see myself and fellow Squadron members looking the same in six to eight months time, tropical skeletons like George going through the motions of living and working.

After dropping my gear in George's tent, I set off with two or three colleagues to have a look at the airstrip.

It so happened that one of the last of the 6 Squadron Lockheed Hudsons remaining operational, returned from a reconnaissance patrol. When it taxied to a stop not far from where we were standing, the aircrew, numbering four or five weary young men, disentangled themselves from the womb of the bomber, jumped up and down a little, stretched their legs and were joyful that another mission was over. They were led by a tall, lanky Squadron Leader. He was dressed in a much washed and faded khaki shirt and short shorts, black leather flying boots, a Smith and Wessen revolver hung loosely from a belt around his waist, a Mae West fronted his chest and a flying helmet sat askew on his head. His crew members were dressed in the same casual manner. I understand his name was Squadron Leader Yelverton. Yelverton was the CO of 6 Squadron. The memory of this aircraft and its crew has remained strong with me down through the years: they were the personification of the probing eyes of our overstretched RAAF reconnaissance aircrews. Within a few minutes, the Squadron Leader and his crew were picked up by a small utility truck and whisked away to their palm grove camp.

Looking at the Hudson Bomber standing there at rest on the edge of the airstrip, I couldn't help but notice the high octane petrol dripping from many of the rivet heads on the underside of the wing surfaces which had been sprung during many take-offs and heavy landings. The aircrew were indeed heroes. We walked to the end of the strip and inspected the cairn which had been erected to mark the furthestmost point where the Japanese forces had been stopped during their attempt to capture Milne

Bay. We didn't realise it at the time, but the Milne Bay victory by Australian soldiers and airmen was a major turning point in forcing Japanese ground troops onto the long, bloody, humiliating road of withdrawal and defeat back to capitulation in Japan.

*This photo shows the original palm tree stump erected at the edge of the Peter Turnbull airstrip at Milne Bay to mark the western-most point of the Japanese advance in their endeavour to capture the bay. Also to serve as a memorial to those Australian officers and men who gave their lives defending the strip. The stump had been replaced by a stone and concrete cairn when I viewed it on 15 June 1943.*

In the evening George and I attended a movie which was shown at the open air camp theatre. This theatre was a primitive but practical affair. It consisted of a large sheet of white canvas for a screen stretched between two coconut palm trees. Logs were strewn about on the ground for seats, a few electric lights were strung between the palm trees, and a single Bell and Howell 16mm projector and a projectionist provided the heart of the matter. A flick of a switch, the lights went out and the show was on the road. When the reel needed changing, on would go the lights and, amid yells, yahoos and laughter, the projectionist would quickly thread the new reel and away we would go again. In the dark, and just prior to a reel change, a chap sat down on the log beside me. When the lights went on, much to my great surprise and delight, was a soldier by the name of George Fetterplace. He was a fellow E Flat bass player from the pre-war days with the Rockdale band. During reel changes we had a great yarn. He was attached to an artillery or anti-aircraft unit and had been stationed here at the Bay for some months.

In the early hours of the morning of 15 June, we had one hell of a storm. The lightning flashes seemed to explode, the thunder shook the ground and the rain came down in buckets. This was an initiation to tropical storms and I wondered how such miserable tents as we were equipped with managed to keep out such rain, but somehow they did.

After breakfast, and when the weather had momentarily lifted, Tom Neill and I hitched a ride to the cemetery where our war dead had been buried. Tom had an Army friend who was buried here and we located the grave. During the search, I was staggered to see the headstone of a young airman who must have enlisted in the RAAF on the same day as I, such a few short months before. His service number was 72115 and mine was 72120: I was saddened by this visit to the war cemetery, and the thought of our precious sons lying eternally in this wet, perpetually damp place filled me with sadness.

And so our two day emergency stopover with 6 Squadron ended. All was hustle and bustle as we went through the motions of moving again. A quick early breakfast, farewell and thanks to George for his friendship and hospitality, a slippery, slithery

ride by truck on the muddy roads to the barges and then a scramble to get back on board *Cremer*. I was appreciative of the experience of this visit, but I wasn't sorry to be leaving the area. The heat and humidity was intense and undermining. There was just so much rain and mud. Mildew attacked everything; clothing, leather, and malaria and other fevers reduced men to chattering skeletons. There was also the sweet, sickly smell of the life, death and decay cycle of the vigorous, encroaching forest, knowing full well that our life and death struggle and imprint here, would be overgrown, and disappear within a short space of time.

The *Cremer* weighed anchor and left the end of the bay around 8.00am and, after passing clear of the mouth of the bay, we headed north and threaded our way past Nuakata Island into Goschen Strait. Yes, it was good to be back on the *Cremer* again, to be up near the forecastle head, leaning over the port handrail with a fresh breeze blowing in one's face, and the strong, steady beat of the ship's engine beneath ones feet. We passed impressive Normanby Island, entered briefly, into Ward Hunt Strait, then into Moresby Strait, which divides Goodenough and Fergusson Islands. The distance run between Milne Bay and Goodenough Islands was approximately one hundred miles, and had taken us six hours. The trip was unforgettable. It was all so natural and primitive, as if we were the first visitors to this part of the world. The trees came right down to the water's edge, and native huts could be seen in small forest clearings near the water. Smoke from cooking fires and inland villages curled lazily above the tree tops and, with the approach of our ship, natives in small wooden dug out canoes put out from the shore as if to greet us. I couldn't escape the feeling that we were intruders. Around 2.00pm we entered a shallow bay which was part of Goodenough Island, and, because of the draught of the ship and lack of shoer facilities, it was necessary for the *Cremer* to stand offshore and drop anchor. It was 15 June 1943, and we had arrived in the heartland of the D'entre Castreaux group of islands.

## GOODENOUGH ISLAND

Goodenough is an impressive island. It is a fairly large irregular shaped piece of land, thick with trees and vegetation, which fill the valleys and hills and climb the sides of an 8350 foot mountain. This mountain dominates the island, and when its head is not lost in the clouds, a thin white whisper of cloud would trail from its top. Across the other side of the Strait was Fergusson Island with its 5615 foot peak.

And so the big task of unloading the ship got under way. Fortunately, at this stage, our Squadron was not greatly involved. The men and cargo alike, had to be transferred to barges and taken ashore. This was a slow process and went on for several days. Trucks were also in short supply, and we had to wait for hours, even into the night before we could get a lift to our camp. We had about a twenty mile drive over boulder strewn roads, across wide flooding creeks, up and down hills, through forest to reach the mountain foothills to get to our camp. It was one hell of a drive, but well worth the effort when we got there. A few weeks prior to our arrival, our advance ground party, who had preceded us to the island, had laid out the camp and erected sufficient numbers of tents ready for occupation by the men. The tents themselves, were a ramshackle, mildewy affair, but because of the showery weather we were experiencing, the act of erection was a Godsend. The tents were spread out fan-like

down the side of the hill with the cookhouses, Messes, orderly room, stores, first aid post, postal etc. forming the point of an apex—these buildings were wooden, prefabricated structures with galvanised iron roofing.

From our hillside camp, we looked down a Kunai grass covered plateau, upon which the engineers had constructed an airstrip. This was a lengthy, wide structure, whose surface was covered with interlocking sheets of heavy gauge perforated, corrugated steel. This was an extremely clever idea, but it had its drawbacks. During tropical downpours this material allowed the water to run right through, thereby enabling the strip to be used during the heaviest rain storms. The principal drawback became apparent following heavy landings, particularly bombers, when some of the sheets would buckle, and had to be quickly replaced.

As soon as it was possible, our aircraft maintenance crews were assembled and taken by open truck to the airstrip, to an area allocated to our Squadron. The trip down the hillside and back each day represented a considerable feat in itself—it was a boulder strewn, pot-holed track and provided the greatest test of survival for both men and vehicles. But we were young, we were at war, and the humour that became part of this mountain exercise conquered all. Thus began a daily ritual, fair-weather or foul, which began well before sunrise and finished long after sunset. We would breakfast at the camp around 4.00am (or it would be taken to the strip) and be at the airstrip around 5.00 to 5.30am. Depending on what late aircraft maintenance had to be finalised at the airstrip, we could be back as late as 9.00pm. These were long, tiring, hot days, which initially continued for seven days a week. The roster was later changed to six days a week, giving each man a day at the camp to take care of personal needs, such as clothes washing, letter writing, rest, etc.

After what seemed a lengthy period, but in actual fact was only a week or two after we had landed on Goodenough Island, our Spitfires arrived. We had become a complete Fighter Squadron again. Because of the limited fuel range of our aircraft, they had to be flown up the east coast of Australia in short stages. I later had the opportunity to talk with Sergeant Laurie (Snowy) Gallaher, who filled me in on the background details of the flight delivery operation.

After taking off from the grassy airfield at Woolomanata in Victoria, the aircraft flew to Bankstown airport outside Sydney, where they refuelled and made ready for the flight to the RAAF airfield at Amberley just outside Ipswich in Queensland. When the Squadron was airborne and north of Sydney, they were joined by a Lockheed Hudson bomber from the RAAF base at Richmond. This aircraft carried a skeleton maintenance crew which was selected from the Squadron to service and check the aircraft throughout this long flight north. The maintenance crew was made up of Sergeant Laurie Gallaher (electrician), Sergeant Jack Smith (wireless), Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley (airframe and engines), and Warrant Officer Ralph Chandler (armourer).

After a trouble-free flight, landing and refuelling at Amberley, the Squadron continued on its way with a long haul to the RAAF airport at Garbutt outside Townsville. It appears, that on this crucial leg of the operation, with fuel running low and daylight fading, the pilots were faced with little choice other than to watch their fuel consumption closely and to get their aircraft down as soon as possible. The tragic

scene that unfolded below was seen by the maintenance crew from the circling Hudson.

The Spitfires were coming in to land, when, suddenly and unaccountably, one of them stopped short, and made to turn off the airstrip. In the process of doing so, this manoeuvre put this pilot and his aircraft into the committed flight path of another Spitfire which unavoidably crashed into and on top of the aircraft beneath and killed the pilot instantly. The young pilot killed was the Flight Commander, Flight Lieutenant Paul Brennan DFC, DFM. This young fighter ace, aged twenty-three, had distinguished himself in the fierce air battles waged over Malta. Miraculously he had survived this life and death struggle over this island bastion, and, along with other fighter pilots, he was brought back to Australia from overseas to help form the core and backbone of newly created fighter Squadrons, of which ours was one. Had Paul survived the war and remained with the RAAF or returned to civilian life, I feel sure he would have carved out a worthwhile career in either area. He was a fighter, he was a young St. George. Paul was buried in the war cemetery at Townsville on 13 June. The other young pilot survived the crash, but was badly shaken—he did not return to flying with the Squadron. The position of Flight Commander B Flight was taken over by another tested pilot, Flight Lieutenant Max Bott.

It was with a great deal of sadness and heavy hearts when the pilots and maintenance crew flew out of Townsville, leaving their dead comrade behind, and headed north towards Cape York.

Flying low and following the coastline, and on a beach not far from Cape York, they sighted the wreck of a Kittyhawk fighter. This aircraft belonged to 75 Squadron, and the story behind the crash reveals that the pilot, Dave Ellerton was flying a replacement Kittyhawk from Townsville to 75 Squadron at Moresby, when he went down to investigate the reported loss of a USAF 39 Bell Aircobra which had run out of fuel, while in the area. Dave Ellerton landed his Kittyhawk on the beach close to the water's edge, his 'plane flipped over, he was unable to release himself from the cockpit, and, when the tide came in, he was drowned. This was another wartime tragedy.

Touchdown point for the Squadron at the end of this leg, was the forward RAAF airstrip base on Horn Island. This island is part of the Thursday Island group, just north of Cape York. As they drew closer to the island, the Squadron was intercepted and surrounded by a swarming squadron of USAF Bell Aircobra fighters. For a few moments a hairy situation existed—that was until a positive identification of the Spitfires as being 'friendly aircraft' was established by the Cobras and our Squadron was able to land. Following refuelling and refreshment, the Squadron continued its flight northward, and, proceeding via Port Moresby and Milne Bay, finally reached Goodenough Island.

Daily life at the airstrip was one of increasing activity. The island seemed to be taking a more positive role in the forward movement of the island stepping stone war against Japan. Many different types of aircraft were coming and going each and every day, transports, bombers etc. The tempo of war from our backyard was stepping up. Our Squadron was on immediate standby; we had a flight of 'Spittys' ready to take to the air at the first warning of approaching enemy aircraft received from fighter control.

We always had a minimum number of aircraft 'off the line' for maintenance, but there were always others in the air or exercising above the island with the CO or the flight commanders. Our primary role was of island defence against attacking enemy aircraft and the Spitfire was a superb weapon to do this job. The other two RAAF Squadrons who formed part of the Wing, and who also shared the airstrip, were 76 and 77 Squadrons. Both of these Squadrons had already proven themselves the previous year in the fierce air battles over Port Moresby, and in close tactical army support operations during the battle of Milne Bay—they enjoyed an enviable reputation. Equipped with American Curtis P40 (Kittyhawk) fighters, their role in the scheme of things had a wider function than ours. Although designed as a fighter (they couldn't hold a candle against the 'Spitty'), when fitted with belly tanks, they had a wide-ranging role across the waters separating our island from nearly Woodlark Island and the northern mainland island of New Britain, which were occupied by the Japanese. Like a scourge from the sky, these Squadrons would suddenly appear and strafe and skip bomb and literally blow the shit out of any target that crawled on the land or moved on the water. They must have been a constant worry to the Japanese.

There was great commotion at the strip one morning when a number of Lockheed Lightning, twin-engined, twin-tailed fighters suddenly appeared out of the blue and proceeded to 'shoot-up' the airstrip. Their shallow dive, low-level speed was quiet and phenomenal and when they zoomed and climbed and rolled off the top, it left one with the feeling that the perfect 'Fighter' had arrived. Their numbers grew into a USAAF Fighter Squadron, and to our great delight, they were allocated an area that was within walking distance from our own.

This was the first real contact with the Americans we had had, and as we got to know them, we appreciated their free and easy style, their friendliness and generosity. A casual inspection one day of the Squadron's ground maintenance and mobile workshop facilities, quickly brought home to us how very well-equipped to do the job they were, and how ill-fitted out we were. Every individual aircraft mechanic had a most expensive kit of chrome vanadium tools in a six tray fold out-fold up chest—the sight of these tools made us green with envy. And it was the theft of such a tool chest by one of our armourers, Mick Moore, which introduced a slightly sour note between us. Soon after the kit went missing, the Americans must have suspected one of our people, as we had been allowed to wander freely through their area. It appears likely that their MPs had permission from our CO or Adjutant to carry out a search of our area and to question us, and, even though an intensive search was carried out, it failed to uncover the kit. Mick Moore must have hidden it well, because, when we later departed the island, he carried it with him, and used it openly throughout his time with the Squadron. This incident left a nasty taste in the mouths of many of us ground crew. It meant that the American serviceman, who lost his kit, would, in all probability, have to pay for the missing kit, and it established Mick as an unscrupulous thief.

It could have been any mid-afternoon on a clear, sunny day. A Lightning P38 fighter took off from the strip and began climbing for air space. When it had reached around ten or fifteen thousand feet of altitude, the pilot began to put the aircraft through a pattern of aerobatic contortions. The pilot knew his business. He threw the plane around the sky in such a manner that highlighted his skill and tested the engineering stress factor of the aircraft to the limit. Now, whether it was by design or accident,

who would know—one of our Spitfires appeared out of the sun and began to roll around the Lightning. The pilot of the Lightning took up the challenge and within seconds a mock air battle between two friendly adversaries took place. They explored and tested every aerobatic rule in the fighting book, and I am sure added a few more rules to the game. In an endeavour to get onto each other's tail, they climbed for heaven at an alarming speed. They rolled off the top into long, deep side slips or tight rolls, they banked steeply, dived and went into spins, then broke away. The sound of their roaring, screaming motors filled the sky, they were masters of their art. These free wheeling 'Knights of the Air' were detached from earth, they fought a life and death royal joust for the hand of the fair Guinivere.

Watching this spectacle from the ground, I would have to say that there were moments when the nippy Spitfire rolled around the Lightning (like a cat plays with a mouse), jumping his tail, and if this contest had been for real, I am afraid the larger, heavier Lightning would have become another statistic. As it began, so this battle ended. With a courtesy dip to each other, they broke away, waggled their wings and returned to us earthlings.

This was the greatest display of aerobatics that I had seen, and, when the C Flight Spitfire, flown by Flying Officer Hopton from South Australia taxied to a halt, he was given a rousing cheer. He was indeed the 'Hotshot' pilot of the Squadron.

A few days later another descent from the heavens occurred when a Spitfire test-flown following maintenance, by Sergeant Pilot Ian McKellar, developed engine failure at the very high altitude of 25,000 feet. Keeping his cool and through skilful flying, he kept the nose of the aircraft high and glided down in a series of descending circles which brought him right over the airstrip. Coming in without power, his landing was a little rough, and at the end, he ran out of airstrip, which resulted in a nose crash. After exhibiting so much skill, this was unfortunate, but, most importantly, Sergeant McKellar was unhurt. The aircraft was a write off.

For a brief period, food and the quality and quantity of it was a much talked about subject; rations were in short supply due to the fact that bulk supplies were brought to the island by ship, of which there was a shortage. Our current diet consisted basically of tinned bully beef, Mick and Vic (meat and vegetables), inedible dog biscuits, washed down by tea or coffee made out of chlorinated water. It was a poisonous brew. I had great difficulty eating the dog biscuits, as only a few short months previously, I had had all my teeth extracted and replaced with dentures—my shrunken, aching gums were like pieces of raw steak. This monotonous diet continued for a few weeks, then was eased by a shipment, of all things, Edgell's long spear asparagus; we seemed to have it for almost every meal, it was growing out of our ears. Due to the reduced scale of our pre-war household economy, I had never been exposed to this vegetable delicacy, and, now in abundance, grew to like it, but there must have been hundreds of men who have never eaten it since.

Around this time, two separate events took place which could have had serious repercussions. In the first instance, I was enjoying the luxury of my first stand-down day from the airstrip duties. My colleagues were at work and I was alone in the tent. I had finished washing my few personal clothes, written a letter home and was relaxing on my rough bush hammock reading a book. A shape appeared at the flap of the tent.

It was the bulk of Leading Aircraftsman Lavertee, one of our camp guards. ‘Who are you?’ he demanded. ‘Gately’, I replied. ‘Well you are to report to the Sergeant in charge of the transport section. He has a job for you.’ I was surprised and a little shaken by this sudden intrusion into my world, but had no alternative but to go along and find out what it was all about. On reporting to the Sergeant (along with other stray dogs rounded up in the camp) he informed us that a ship had arrived and that all RAAF transport on the island was needed to shift the cargo from the beach head to the central RAAF stores depot. I was allocated to ride with Johnny Maxwell as ‘jockey’. Maxwell was a larger than life transport driver, and I had to assist him with whatever was required. This was my first personal contact with Maxwell. In another age he could have been a successful, likeable pirate. He had wit, bravado, bluff, guts and drive, and whenever he was about, it wasn’t long before he was the centre of attention. I warmed to this man. We set off down the mountain track at a furious pace—he was driving an American four-wheel drive, six-wheel truck, and he handled this huge vehicle as if it were a toy. Sitting in the cab with him, roaring and bouncing along, I was hanging on like grim death as we hurtled around the bends, across creeks and deep rutted vehicle tracks. We eventually arrived at the beach head and joined a queue of trucks waiting to be directed by a beach master to a barge as it came ashore from a freighter lying offshore. ‘Sit tight Arthur, I’ll go and check out what’s coming ashore’. With these words, Johnny slipped away and headed for the beach. He returned after awhile, and said ‘there’s a few barges lying offshore waiting to come in, and, if we’re lucky, we could pick up a load that could be beneficial to us’. ‘To us?’ I replied. ‘Yes’, he said ‘if the load is what I think it is, we will take off, bypass the stores depot, and head like buggery for our camp. I want you to get up on top of the load, and, if we pick up a ‘tail’, bang hard on the roof and let me know’. Sure enough, when it was our turn at the head of the queue, we picked up a four ton load of flour in four gallon round sealed tins. It was a beautiful load and filled the truck body to capacity. Johnny’s face was all smiles—I clambered on top, he slipped the truck into gear and away we roared. And what a ride it was! I had nothing to hang onto. I was bounced around on top of the tins, I feared for my life as we retraced our torturous way back to our camp. It was nearly dark when we arrived—within minutes a dozen men appeared out of nowhere and began to feverishly unload the truck—it all disappeared into the bush. If John and I had been picked by the authorities, we could have been in serious trouble. The facts are, that on my day off, I, as an innocent party, was roped into this operation, and, to some extent, felt used.

The flow on from this hijack of the flour, had beneficial results for all the Squadron. For the first time since leaving Australia, and as a break from dog biscuits, we enjoyed the taste of fresh bread; it wasn’t yeast bread in the true sense, it was more like a bush damper, but boy, was it delicious! Jack Bannister, a master bricklayer in civilian life, built an oven, and Ron Perry, a pastry cook and baker put the damper together—how we blessed them. There was another side to this bread story. One evening, our Flight had been involved with last minute maintenance work at the airstrip. This meant a late arrival back at the camp and a late meal. With our ‘dixies’ filled with some nondescript food, we filed past Bluey Fisher, a Mess steward, who handed out one slice of damper to each man from a piled up tray, we then sat down at a table to eat our meal. During the course of the meal, one of the lads felt like another slice of damper (we all did) and with eyes fastened on him, he crept up behind the steward, who was talking to a colleague, and put his hand forward to take another slice. It was almost like a re-enactment of the Oliver Twist story. The steward must

have sighted his hand out of the corner of his eye; he picked up a bread knife and brought it down with such force, that it crashed onto the tray and scattered the remaining damper over the dirt floor. There was an eruption of men, if the knife had connected with the hand of our Oliver Twist, it would have severed from the wrist. Men were all around the steward, shouting, waving and abusing him—it was an ugly scene. Someone sent for the Duty Officer who eventually restored calm. From this day on, a slice of bread has always been most precious to me.

In the early days following our arrival at the camp, there was the absence of one item of equipment which caused much irritation among the men. Although our tents had been erected by the advance party, there were no camp stretchers. This meant, that in this damp, heavy rainfall area, men had to sleep on the ground. Our tent had been pitched on sloping ground, and, despite digging a drainage channel around the perimeter, during heavy rain, the water would overflow the channel and run right through the tent. Clearly something had to be done. With three bushmen in the tent, it wasn't long before we fashioned bush hammocks made out of tree saplings held together by vines. Admittedly the finished product was crude but effective. Another day off from the airstrip duties had come around. I was alone in the tent, I had finished writing a letter home and decided to walk up the hill to the Admin area and pop the letter into the post box. On the way, I passed the open double door of the camp storeroom. Nobody appeared to be on duty, and, to my great surprise, stacked against the wall was a mountain of beautiful, strong, American camp stretchers. I couldn't believe my eyes. To this day, I don't know what came over me. I had a quick look about, still no one around. I nipped into the storeroom, selected four stretchers, and, with two under each arm, quickly made my way back down the hill to our tent.

In record time I demolished our bush hammocks and assembled the four new stretchers. I also had to rig four mosquito nets. On completing this task, I then lay down to think about the great job I had done. This precious time of reflection was short lived. A camp guard appeared at the tent flap. 'Your name?' he asked. 'You were seen leaving the store with the stretchers and have to report immediately to Flying Officer Bob Chaffey—and bring the stretchers with you.'

In an instant my world collapsed. What a hell of a spot I was in. The only comfort my tent colleagues enjoyed at the end of the day lay in ruins at the back of the tent, and I had to face the wrath and judgement of Flying Officer Chaffey. With heavy heart I pulled the beds to pieces and struggled back up the hill. When I entered the store, Chaffey was busy with some task and had his back to me. When he turned around, he found me standing there facing him with the stretchers under my arms. I was utterly miserable and exhausted. 'So who have we here?' he said or rather barked out. 'This is our camp thief. What's your name?', he barked out once again. I never had time to reply. 'Do you know what you have done? Stealing Government property is a serious offence. How long have you been in the Air Force?' And so he continued his devastating tirade against me, during the course of which he mentioned that the stretchers were for the pilots, not the ground staff. Finally he asked me what prompted me to do it. Somehow I managed to emit some sound with the statement that I worked at the airstrip all the week, and, when anything was handed out at the camp, the blokes at the airstrip always seemed to miss out. For a moment he seemed to be stunned and at a loss for words by my simple, straight forward reply. Then he mumbled something about 'we can't have this sort of thing going on'. He drew closer, then looked me

straight in the eye. ‘Now promise me you won’t get up to this sort of caper again’. I promised him. ‘Now get the bloody hell out of here. Take the stretchers with you and don’t come before me again.’ I couldn’t believe my ears. Chaffey had feelings after all. I mumbled some sort of thanks to him and staggered out of the storeroom, back down the hill to collapse within the flimsy walls of my canvas womb. Naturally, when my colleagues arrived home from the airstrip that evening, they were surprised and very pleased with their new beds, and we all slept like logs that night, but I don’t think they really understood the trauma of the day I had survived.

Returning to the camp each day from the airstrip, first call was generally made to see if any mail had arrived from home. On this particular evening, Roy Perkins, our postman, handed me a telegram. The message read, ‘Son born to Mabel and Wal. Mother and baby well. Love Doris’. I could hardly contain my happiness. I knew from home news, that my lovely sister Mabel was expecting a child, and that she had endured a very sick and very dangerous pregnancy (possible kidney failure). It was a tremendous relief for me to know that this long drawn out trial was over for her and that she and the boy were safe and well. He was born on 8 July 1943 and was christened Ian Sylva. Ian was the first grandchild in our family, and I was a proud uncle.

A special occasion of another kind was loudly celebrated one evening when a handful of former members of No 3 Fighter Squadron held a spirited and well fortified reunion in one of our Sergeants’ tents. It so happened at this time that Group Captain Peter Jeffrey DSO, DFC, a former CO of No 3 Squadron and current CO of the Fighter Training OTU at Mildura, flew up from the mainland to have a look at the RAAF fighter Squadrons operating in the area. Along with his official duties, the visit also provided the opportunity to call on some of his former colleagues serving in the area and spend an evening as brothers recalling those desperate days fighting the Italians and Germans in the desert of North Africa. Among those present was our own CO, Squadron Leader Alan Rawlinson DFC and Bar, Squadron Leader (Jock?) Perrin DFC, Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley, Sergeant Jim Morvel and Sergeant Des O’Brien.

Talk around the camp was that a film was to be shown at an American Army Base some miles away. As this was the first entertainment to take place on the island, interest quickly developed and our transport section readily agreed to make two trucks available to transport those interested in attending. In no time at all, the trucks were full to capacity. Johnny Maxwell drove one of the trucks and I was on that one. It was a long bumpy drive through the early evening to reach the camp, and, by the time we arrived, hundreds of trucks had already parked around the perimeter of a large bulldozed clearing, while dozens of others were milling around trying to find a place to settle. It was like attending a huge birthday party—men were shouting, laughing, yahooping and jostling about, trying to find a place to squat. Eventually we found a spot to park and sit down, and soon after it was dark and the show got under way. As it turned out, it was a movie of epic proportion. It was called ‘Yankee Doodle Dandy’, and while embracing a host of Hollywood stars, it featured the show business, dancing and acting magic of James Cagney. He was absolutely marvellous in this film, and while the story was strongly laced with American flag waving, rousing tunes and bullshit, it was, nevertheless, an outstanding production.

At the conclusion of the film, there was a mad scramble to get away. Back on the road and headed for our camp, Maxwell decided to pull out of the line of traffic and pass another truck. From the other direction, another truck was headed our way. It looked as if a head on collision was inevitable, and we could all be killed—somehow he managed to inch his truck just far enough ahead to pull back into the line of traffic as the other truck flashed down our side. It was a narrow escape, and the memory of it still brings me out in a cold sweat.

Shortly after this evening, we attended another movie at a nearby RAAF camp, where they showed ‘Gentleman Jim’, starring the great Errol Flynn and the cool Alexis Smith. It was great entertainment.

While working at the strip on ‘standby aircraft duties’, it was the practice of the ground crew to seek shelter from the intensity of the sun by sitting on their ground sheets on an empty ammunition box, in the shade thrown by the wing of their aircraft. In this way, small groups of crewmen would gather from time to time, and while away the time, discussing all manner of subjects—the war, current Squadron rumours, women, sex, civilian life, politics, and, very rarely, religion. Most times this was taboo. I was christened into the Church of England, and, apart from some early Sunday School instruction, I had not become deeply committed to the faith—this did not mean I was a non-believer. On this particular day, I was mainplane shading with Tom Neill, my tent colleague, fellow crewman and an ardent Roman Catholic, and also Tony Chapman, another ground crewman and ardent Roman Catholic. We had been talking about nothing of any special significance, when, right out of the blue, Tom said to me ‘You know Arthur, you practice a bastard religion, it has no right to exist’. This jolted me out of my daydreaming state. Tom and Tony then proceeded to enlighten me on the wickedness of King Henry VIII, of how he broke from the Catholic Church of Rome, and started his own Church of England. In the space of a short conversation, these two men practically demolished the Church of England. I was badly shaken by this rude and unprovoked intrusion into my world and some months were to pass before the relationship between Tom and myself got back to anyways normal, but even then it was never the same. I was always a little wary.

Our hilly camp enjoyed many advantages, and two in particular stood out. In the first instance, the site was flanked on either side by swift flowing streams—the presence of these streams helped to keep the temperature temperate. During severe drought periods (four days), one stream would cease to flow and become just a series of pools and huge boulders, while the other one, which was fed from the mountain, never ceased to flow. It had a waterfall which dropped into a long broad, shelving basin. It was an ideal spot for swimming and washing one’s clothes, and, during the heat of the day when away from the strip, one could spend hours in and out of the basin with the cool mountain water gushing and gurgling around one’s naked body. The other special attraction was the camp ‘loo’. This was a standard wooden 6-holer, central isolation sited on a small rise which afforded superb views. From here it was possible to sit and crap and look down the hillside to the plateau below, watch aircraft taking off and landing, identify the edge of the island and look across Moresby Strait to Fergusson Island. Out to sea, one could watch rain and storm clouds gather and see them split by great bolts of lightning, and on moonlit nights, the moonbeams would wash the scene below and light up the waters between Goodenough and Fergusson Islands. It was sheer magic. And like most ‘loos’ of this type, this one was also a great

seat of learning. After the opening organ fanfare had finished, and in reflective mood, one could join in a spirited conversation with five other colleagues, and discuss all manner of subjects. This was the only true source of camp gossip and rumour. It all began and ended here, and I know of no piece of real estate which offered such fantastic views and where an unsolicited education and blessed physical relief could be obtained.

Increasing numbers of light medium aircraft, such as Boston, Beaufort and Mitchell bombers, as well as Beaufighters were dropping into the island—the airstrip was becoming overcrowded. Rumours had been circulating that change was on the way. This was confirmed one evening after work when the Adjutant, Flight Lieutenant Sim Bennett called a general Squadron meeting outside the Mess and announced to all and sundry, ‘that the time had come for the Wing to move forward’. That we would pack up and shift to the Trobiands, a small group of islands approximately eighty to one hundred miles north-west of Goodenough Island. Another RAAF Squadron was going to move into our camp, so our old tents etc. were to be left standing. Some of the men were to travel in small barges across the open sea to Kiriwina Island (part of the Trobian group) and the tail-enders would fly. At the conclusion of the meeting, one lark in the crowd called out and asked Sim did he foresee any problems with the move. No problems with the move, said Sim, everything will be the same as usual, all stuffed up. Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley was the driving force behind B Flight activities and along with the C Flight Sergeant, Tom Opie, and men from the Orderly Administration, Messing, medical, stores, and transport, formed an advance party to proceed to Kiriwina Island. There they would establish a camp site and erect tents so that from the moment the aircraft arrived, the Squadron would be operational.

The day of departure from Goodenough Island arrived. A large number of the men were allocated to travel in small open barges, and, while the distance separating the islands wasn't great, this method of transport could have had disastrous results. The men were exposed to the open sea in craft which were entirely unsuitable to handle sudden storms, or rough seas. They had no protection from the sun and the heat, and their inability to defend themselves (apart from a few .303 rifles) invited attack from marauding Japanese bombers and fighters. The backbone of the Squadron could have been wiped out in a few minutes. Thank God they all arrived safely, but if anything had happened, some senior brass would have had a lot to answer for. I was among the tail-enders, and made an early departure from Goodenough, flying across in a Dakota DC3, and arrived at Kiriwina island at approximately 7.00am on the morning of 21 August 1943.

## **KIRIWINA ISLAND**

There was a marked contrast between the formation and topography of Goodenough and Kiriwina Islands. Where Goodenough appeared to have been the result of a gigantic volcanic upheaval that had taken place aeons before and contained an impressive mountain, was hilly on the lower slopes, covered with trees and a vigorous undergrowth, Kiriwina on the other hand, had grown out of the sea. It was a low coral island, barely one hundred feet above sea level at its highest point, was swampy and marshy in parts, and otherwise covered with a thick dense scrub. The annual rainfall was measured in feet, two or three short sharp rain showers a day was not uncommon

with a full scale tropical storm complete with the symphony of high winds, lightning and thunder thrown in day or night at regular intervals. Nature's way of handling this huge volume of water was provided for in a unique way. When the land surface could not handle any more, large surface cracks would suddenly open up (and I mean **large**) and the water would simply run off below the ground. The coral base must have acted like a huge sponge. Despite the climatic conditions encountered, the American Army Engineers built, in a very short time, an all weather road system that linked one end of the island to the other—a distance of approximately six or seven miles. Two very large airstrips which incorporated parallel runways was also built. The airstrips were at opposite ends of the island, and were self contained, with a supporting network of taxiways which ran for miles through the scrub and linked both ends of a strip. Parking areas (bomb safety revetments) were also a part of the design, which overall, could accommodate hundreds of aircraft. The material to carry out this road and airstrip construction was ready at hand. The engineers quarried and crushed the coral and used this material for base and surface construction—when it was rolled and wet, it set like concrete. The whole exercise was an incredible piece of planning and fast construction.

The natives were small of stature, and an attractive medium copper colour with fuzzy hair. The men and boys were naked apart from a small cover over their genitals, the women and girls were bare breasted and wore grass skirts, laying one layer on top of another when a change was thought necessary. The presence of so many troops suddenly thrust into their midst didn't appear to worry them as they moved around the island quite freely and naturally, as if nothing had interfered with their normal way of life. It was always a pleasure to see them walking through the scrub, the men would lead, the women folk chattering and following behind with arched backs carrying large baskets of bananas, paw paws or Taro root on their heads. When engaged in bartering or trying for conversation, they seemed to be gentle people. The practice of chewing beetle nut was widespread among them—a blood red mouth and gums would open to you when trying to make social contact—this wasn't one of their most attractive features. The presence and work of the church was quite noticeable among them, and ANGAU, under Captain Whitehouse, had been in Administrative control of the island for some time.

Our camp was located just off the island's main road, approximately halfway between the two airstrips. 76 Fighter Squadron was our next door neighbour with 77 Squadron located a little further away, also close to the main road. The entrance to our camp was via a driveway into the scrub which led to a large prefabricated, fly-screened, timber and gal-roofed building which embraced the Sergeants' and Airmen's Mess. They were joined by a cookhouse—a good working arrangement. The Admin area (Orderly Room), stores, medical, postal occupied separate facilities, but were grouped reasonably close together. Branching off from either side of this main spinal driveway, tracks had been cut into the scrub with small clearings to accommodate individual tents. The overall plan allocated areas for the disposition of the Squadron. The B and C Flight maintenance crews, admin, stores, medical, officer and aircrews were all grouped where they could readily be located. It was basically a good layout.



*Pilots of 79 Fighter Squadron, Kiriwina Island.*

*Back Row (L-R): Flying Officer Bill Pickard (NSW), Pilot Officer Reg Nathan (NSW), Sergeant Doug Grinlington (VIC), Flight Lieutenant Max Bott (NSW), Flying Officer Paul Sebire, Sergeant Phil Turner (NSW), Flying Officer Bill Wright (NSW), Flying Officer Jim Barrie (VIC), Pilot Officer Owen Morgan, Flying Officer Warren Napier (NSW), Pilot Officer Frank Binnings.*

*Front Row (L-R): Flying Officer Peter Birch (NSW), Flying Officer Ken Slayter (WA), Flight Sergeant Bob Rice (SA), Warrant Officer Ian McKellar, Sergeant Andy Byrne (NSW).*

One of the biggest problems at the camp, was coming to terms with the stifling heat, particularly when in one's tent. This was largely due to the density of the scrub, which allowed very little movement of air. Another unsettling experience could take place when returning from the Mess at night. It was not uncommon, when finding one's way in the dark along the track, to run smack dab into a spider's web, constructed like a fish net which had been thrown across the track by a giant sized Tarantula spider. The horror and shock of being snared in one of these webs and clawing off the spider lives with me yet. On reaching one's tent and lighting a lamp (later we enjoyed a small electric light) before retiring at night, one had to closely examine the camp stretcher to make sure there were no Millipedes (like a centipede, but black and shiny with a million legs) that would crawl into the bedding and join a spider or two. Mosquito nets were a must at night. They were claustrophobic things, but without them, rest was impossible and the parasites would suck us dry. Having established the setting, it is appropriate to continue the story. The ground was wet from recent rain when we alighted from the Dakota on the morning of 21 August 1943. A truck was sent to pick us up from the airstrip, and in no time, we were quickly transferred to the camp and directed to the location of our tents.

The Squadron was back in operation almost from the time the first maintenance crews and pilots with their aircraft arrived on the island. Maintenance and flying routines, thrashed out on Goodenough Island, ran like a well-oiled machine. From before sunrise till long after sunset, the crews and pilots were at the airstrip. Your aircraft was either 'on the line' ready for an immediate 'scramble' should bandits suddenly appear, or in a reserve position where you could be called upon if a larger threat developed, or in the workshops area in the very capable hands of the Engineering

Officer, Flight Lieutenant Bob Palmer and his clever crew undergoing a major overhaul or repair. Both pilots and crew took great pride in their individual aircraft, cleaning and polishing became a team effort which cemented relationships between the aircrew and ground staff, and had a lot to do with morale. A gleaming Spitfire (even in wartime camouflage paint), standing in readiness, could be viewed as an outstanding piece of aeronautical engineering, a flying machine of pure design and performance that transcended the fact that it was primarily just another weapon of war. Neither groups liked to be transferred (even temporarily) to another aircraft.

Practice ‘scrambles’ were a daily feature. This kept the pilots and crews on their toes, and it was a happy Flight Commander who could get his boys airborne in record time.

It so happened that on the day of our arrival at Kiriwina, a Federal Election was to be held. After we had been shown the location of our tents, and had dropped our personal gear, we were returned to the airstrip to resume duty with our Flight. With regard to the election, the Labor Government in Canberra made it clear that every endeavour would be made by the Electoral Commission to record the vote of every serviceman and woman wherever they were serving. Furthermore, all service personnel serving overseas, and under the age of 21 years, would be eligible to vote. This amendment to the law made it possible, for the first time, for many young men to give some indication, through the ballot box, how they felt the government was running the war and the country. Throughout the weeks leading up to the election (on Goodenough Island) interest quickly developed. Wherever small groups of men could gather—either squatting on the ground under the wings of their aircraft, in the Mess, in the back of trucks, at the shower block, sitting on a six holer, or within their tents—there was only one major topic, ‘Who was going to win the election?’ And so the great debate continued, right up to election day, which was Saturday 21 August 1943. A tent was set up in the camp, which was staffed by an officer, NCO and clerk, who handed out the voting papers, and ensured the correct running of the booth. The tent flaps were thrown open for business from 8.00am to 8.00pm. Voting was not compulsory.

It was dark and raining when Tom and I and about twenty other lads arrived back at the camp from the airstrip. We went straight to the Mess for our evening meal, after which we made our way quickly to the booth. It was close to closing time when we arrived and a full scale rain storm had blown in. The tent was shaking and flapping like a thing possessed, the staff were doing their best to hold on to papers and boxes. It was a night I would not forget. Here I was at the age of nineteen, on a little known island north of New Guinea, in a wartime situation where I had just recorded my first vote. In all truth it was for John Curtin, our great wartime Prime Minister, who led the country and the Australian Labor Party at this time. Some weeks later, when the final count was known, the sweeping victory won by the Labor Party was due, in great measure to the very strong vote polled by servicemen. This endorsement of support was a personal victory for John Curtin.

On 30 August, American ground support units began moving into a camp situated deep in the scrub opposite our own. This operation took place quickly and quietly. The only visible evidence of their existence was a modest sign standing near the edge of the main road, displaying the groups unit number. The airstrips, dispersal area and

roads were built and maintained by the US Army 46<sup>th</sup> Engineers, and what a splendid job they did. Most of the trucks were driven by Negroes.

We received our first USA comforts issue on 1 September. The issue consisted of three cartons of cigarettes, two ounces of tobacco (Bull Durham), cigarette papers, eight packets of candy (fruit drops), one dozen packets of matches, three razor blades, a tube of shaving cream, three tubes of toothpaste, and one tablet of soap. This issue was repeated on 1 October.

The strength of the RAAF on the island appeared to be growing.

At this point of time, the following units could be identified:

- No 41 OBU (Operational Base Unit, concerned with transit movement operations)
  - No 4 and 6 MBW Units (Construction duties)
  - 76 Kittyhawk Squadron
  - 77 Kittyhawk Squadron
  - 79 Spitfire Squadron
  - 14 Fighter Sector (Aircraft control, ground-to-air communication group)
  - 26 RSU (Repair and Salvage Unit)
- } Under control of 73 Wing



*Kiriwina Island 1943  
Tom Neill sitting on the mainplane, and myself in foreground of our Spitfire UP/A*

At approximately 7.00pm on 5 October 1943, we experienced our first bombing raid. It was more a nuisance probe. Approaching from the south-east point of the island, the Japanese made two runs. A number of bombs were dropped, which, so it was reported, resulted in three casualties and twenty-five wounded. Searchlight and anti-aircraft gun response seemed to be weak. On 6 October at 8.00pm, we had our second bombing raid. Approximately eight bombs were dropped in the vicinity of the northern airstrip, no casualties were reported.



*Spitfire UP/L (Sergeant Pilot Lew Turner) being guided along the taxiway on Kiriwina Island by two of his crewmen. Jim Williamson (Mech) starboard wing and Doug Knight (Armourer) port wing.*

This day, 13 October, literally started with a bang. The Squadron was organised for an early breakfast, the Mess buildings were lit up like Christmas trees. At approximately 4.30am the Japs pulled a surprise with a pre-dawn nuisance raid. When the nearby anti-aircraft guns started popping and the lights in the Mess went out, it seemed as if the enemy was right over our heads, and that we were the principal target. Men were crashing and scrambling to get under tables, jamming doorways to get out, rushing into the scrub and jumping into nearby slit trenches which were half full of water, with scraps from the Mess floating on top. As it turned out, the air raid was of short duration, no damage or casualties were reported. Panic and self-preservation walked hand in hand during those early hours. As the day unfolded, so began a two-day operation, which, I am sure, had a shattering affect on the Japanese occupying their main South West Pacific base at Rabaul on the north east end of the island of New Britain. The RAAF had been asked to cooperate with the USAF by making some of its ground staff and facilities on the island available to support a two-day air offensive against Rabaul. In the case of our own Squadron, it required us to transfer our aircraft and men to the opposite ends of the airstrips, with a large percentage of our maintenance crews being distributed throughout the revetment parking bays to assist American ground crews in whatever way we could. The overall control of this large operation was handled by the 13<sup>th</sup> USAAF headquarters staff at Port Moresby. A large number of Liberator and Mitchell bombers based at Port Moresby, and protected by a swarm of Lightning and other fighter squadrons operating from Moresby, and airstrips on the north coast of New Guinea, would join forces and proceed to their target. Because the bombers had a far greater range than the fighters, the idea was for the fighters to fly ahead as far as Kiriwina Island, which is half way to Rabaul, to land at Kiriwina, top up their fuel tanks, oxygen etc, take-off again and be aloft in a rendezvous position to meet the bombers when they appeared over head. Jointly they would then press on to the target.

Kiriwina Island also provided a safety net for damaged aircraft, or aircraft running low on fuel when returning from the raid.

In the half light of dawn, and while sitting by the roadside with colleagues waiting for a lift to the airstrip, two or three Jeeps drove out from the US Army Camp opposite our own (the 69<sup>th</sup> Service Squadron). In no time this innocent trickle of vanguard vehicles became a flood. The noise of motors, gears being changed and yahooping was deafening. Hundreds of vehicles of all descriptions passed before us. A large number of petrol tankers, mobile cookers, workshop and repair rigs, ambulances, oxygen unis loaded with cylinders, innumerable Jeeps, mobile cranes, specialised vehicles we had never seen before. All of this servicing equipment had been assembled in the scrub, quietly, without fuss or bother, and no one on our side of the road had any idea what function this army unit performed. This vast convoy proceeded to the airstrip and took designated positions. Eventually we were picked up and distributed among these Americans. From out of nowhere they arrived. Large numbers of Lightning fighters in parallel groups zoomed in low over the airstrips—climbing, they broke away to the left and right to line themselves up, one behind the other, to approach the airstrip for a landing.

Touching down at over 100 miles per hour the lead aircraft raced to the end of the runways, where they were met by Jeeps carrying large signs which read 'follow me'. As the lead aircraft were led away, the fifth Lightning had touched down at the end of the strip, which meant that, with two airstrips operating, within minutes, ten aircraft were down, with others lining up behind. And so in this fast and most exciting way the fighters were grounded and arced away to their respective fuelling revetment bays.

Viewing this operation from the sidelines, and with my heart pounding, my greatest fear was that, should an aircraft blow a tyre from a heavy landing, or suffer a structural breakage, and, with three or four aircraft racing up behind, it could be the cause of one disastrous pile up crash. As it turned out, there were no accidents and the plan unfolded without a hitch. Ground control and servicing were first class. The first aircraft to arrive had been directed to a fast taxi run via the lengthy connecting road network to the opposite end of both airstrips, so that, when the green light order from the control tower was given to 'take-off', they would be the first to become airborne. From the moment the propellers stopped turning, roving petrol tankers were quickly on the scene, topping up fuel tanks, and oxygen trailers followed suit. Fresh faced young pilots disentangled themselves from their cockpits to stretch their limbs and relieve themselves in the scrub. In no time, jeeps arrived carrying urns of hot coffee and doughnuts to refresh the aircrews. Crew chiefs heading teams of assistants carried out quick inspections of tyres and wheels—nothing was left to chance.

By 8.30am this large force of fighters had been received, and by 9.45am, the aircraft had been serviced and were ready to take their place with the main stream force. By 10.00am the first flights had taken off and reached their protective altitude (20,000 plus feet), and were ready to receive the bombers on their way from Port Moresby. Hardly seeming to move, the bombers came into view, the fighters took up position and the whole group moved slowly out of our vision on their way to blast the daylight out of the Japanese at Rabaul.

In the space of a few hours, I had been witness to, and part of (though infinitesimally small) a large-scale operation. This was my introduction to the American way of doing things on a large-scale. I was greatly impressed.

This operation shattered many ill-formed thoughts I had grown up with regarding Americans, among them being, that 'they were loud mouths, show-offs, and full of bullshit'. Most Australians like myself involved with this strike, learned life time lessons to the contrary.

The level of aircraft activity remained high throughout the day. Healthy numbers of Lightning fighters and 825 Mitchell bombers returning from the raid over Rabaul, were dropping in for fuel to see them on their way back to bases in New Guinea. A damaged Liberator blew a tyre on landing and crashed. Fortunately the crew jumped clear and were okay. To keep the strip clear, the bomber was quickly bulldozed out of the way and was a write off. A wide variety of aircraft were in and out. P47 Thunderbolts, Kittyhawks, Spitfires, Beaufort bombers, Beaufighters, DC3 Dakota transports and amphibious Catalina flying boats, even a new Australian Boomerang fighter. It was a never ending change.

The second raid on Rabaul was mounted today 13 October which was a carbon copy of what happened yesterday. The same major aircraft commitment, the same ground servicing involvement carried us through. The Japanese must have wondered when this offensive was going to stop. The largest air transport, a Douglas DC4 arrived around 9.30am on 14 October. It is a four-engined machine with a tricycle under carriage. It was a thing of beauty, and I am sure will set a pattern for commercial acceptance after the war. A B17 bomber and a Catalina PBV also paid a visit.

### **26 October**

Another early dawn attack by Japanese aircraft. Complete surprise. Considerable number of bombs dropped. This was the worst raid up to date. One person was reported killed, sixteen injured, radio station hit. Very little flak or searchlight activity.

### **31 October**

This was a day of days. Squadron claims first official 'kill'. Credit passing to Sergeant Pilot 'Kid' Callister, flying C Flight Spitfire P. He was flying at 15,000 feet on patrol over the northern airstrip with Sergeant Pilot 'Junior' Falks, when a Japanese Tony aircraft was sighted. They pursued the Tony who dived the aircraft to 800 feet over the sea, when the 'Kid' shot it down. There was a celebration in the aircrew Mess that evening.

### **5 November**

This was a very sad day for the Squadron. Only a few days before, 'Kid' Callister had been celebrating with his colleagues, the shooting down of a Japanese Tony aircraft. On this day, as a result of a tragic accident, the 'Kid' himself was killed. My understanding of the chain of events is as follows:

The 'Kid' had been invited by Squadron Leader Max Bott to lead a group of four Spitfires in a dawn patrol over the island. Our Squadron, as well as 76 Squadron, was operating from the opposite end of the airstrip to which we normally used. This change of operational direction was requested by the Americans while the Rabaul

raids were in progress. This reorientation, change of base, area and topography could also have contributed to what unfolded.

Programmed for early this day was a bombing raid on Gasmata to be carried out by Kittyhawks from 76 Squadron. Spearheading the attack, an early daylight probe by Wing Commander 'Woof' Arthur and his No 2 was planned to check if the weather over the target was okay for the Kittyhawks to strafe and drop their bombload. The stage was set for disaster. The 'Kid' and his fellow pilots were unaware of 'Woof' Arthur's proposed early take-off. In the half light of the very early morning, the 'Kid' led out onto the airstrip from a side taxiway—further back 'Woof' was already on the strip. Unaware of each other's presence, they both saw the green light from the Duty Pilot's tower, and began their take-off run to become airborne. 'Woof' ran up the back of the Spitfire, and the 'Kid' was killed instantly. The Kittyhawk careered on for a short distance, crashed, then burst into flames. 'Woof' was pulled clear, but suffered severe burns and shock. He was flown out to hospital, possibly to Port Moresby, and the 'Kid' was buried under our own Blue Peter flag on the island that day. We walked hand in hand with a great sadness for many days.

### **13 November**

RAAF strength on island increasing. No 78 Squadron equipped with Curtis P40s (Kittyhawks) arrived, also the following Beaufort Bomber Squadrons began operating: No 6 (re-equipped since our early Milne Bay visit), No 8, No 100, all doing a great job. A couple of interesting 'hot' Mitchell bombers also began flying in and out from the island. As well as carrying bombs, they were fitted with .50 heavy calibre machine guns and a single, hand loaded 75mm cannon, firing through the nose position of the aircraft. The understanding was that these Mitchells were used with great effect against the small Japanese supply ships and barges servicing enemy posts around the coasts of New Britain, North New Guinea and adjacent islands. A belt from a .75mm shell could have a devastating result. No mail from home for close on three weeks.

### **24 November**

8 Flight, to which Tom Neill and I belonged, was on the pre-dawn shift which meant that our flight was in a state of standby readiness should an early morning 'bandit' warning or 'scramble' call go out. We had carried out our preflight aircraft checks, the motor had been run, and we settled down under the port mainplane to catch a short snooze and to await developments of the day.

A shower of rain blew in. This increased in intensity, so we rescued a couple of empty ammunition boxes from the back of the revetment to sit on and pulled our ground sheets closer about us. The rain, now with wind, further increased. We had a full-scale tropical storm on our hands. Our aircraft rocked above us, we were concerned that it could be blown over. The air was full of flying debris from the scrub, and the surface of our revetment was covered in water and resembled a disturbed lake. The thunder followed by the lightning, frightened the bloody life out of us. This was the worst tropical storm we had experienced. There was one hell of a clap of thunder, followed by a crack and blinding flash of lightning, which lit up our revetment like the brightest day—we thought we had been struck. A few minutes later, amidst all this fury, one of

the lads from a nearby revetment, came running to us, yelling out that Johnny Stratton had been struck by lightning and was dead. This shook us up. I stood by our aircraft and Tom ran back in the pouring rain to the revetment with the bloke. By the time he arrived, others had gathered and soon after the doctor was on the scene and confirmed what we already knew. It appears that, as the storm developed, Johnny and his offsider, took shelter in a small storage shed at the back of the revetment. Johnny threw his ground sheet down on the ground and lay down. It was the last bolt of lightning which frightened the shit out of Tom and me, that had struck him. His offsider, sitting on an ammunition box alongside him, escaped with just a severe shaking.

Corporal Johnny Stratton from Newcastle was the most popular man in the Squadron. He was everyone's friend. He had a permanent smile on his face and a storehouse of humorous stories which knew no end. At any time, upon request or without, he could break into song, and, before long, everyone in his company was singing along. He had the sort of character which is extremely rare in this life, and a personality which one just could not forget. In the afternoon, under our Squadron flag, he was buried in the USAAF cemetery on the island—a moving funeral. The service was conducted by the Reverend Gordon Powell.

RAAF strength on the island was further increased today with the arrival of No 22 Boston Bomber Squadron, No 24 Vultee Vengeance Bomber Squadron, and No 30 Beaufighter Squadron.

### **25 November**

At a nearby US Army camp, the men built themselves an open air theatre. It was complete with screen, stage, lighting and a crude, but effective sound system. Seating was made from palm logs. It was here they watched movies and put on their own live shows. This small complex, carved out of the scrub, was appropriately named 'Coconut Grove'. A special attraction this evening was a live show presented by the US Services Entertainment Unit, which starred the actor Gary Cooper and Phyllis Brooks. It was a great night's entertainment, with standing room only. Una Merkel was also one of the entertainers.

### **28 November**

Squadron claims second 'kill', credit going to Flying Officer 'Archie' Moore, flying a B Flight Spitfire UP/E. It so happened that Flying Officer Moore had taken his aircraft up for an acceptance flight following a 120-hour maintenance check. While putting his machine through the 'hoops', he received a radio message from ground control, advising him that a bandit reconnaissance plane was over the island. He proceeded to intercept, and shot down a Japanese Dinah. There was a celebration in the Officers' Mess that evening.

### **14 December**

There was a light bombing raid during the early hours of this morning. Several Jap aircraft were over the island—two bombs were dropped at the north end: no casualties or damage reported.

## **20 December**

Heaviest air raid experienced up to time of writing, approximately twenty Jap aircraft involved. Started about 3.40am and finished about 6.00am. A large number of bombs were dropped, mainly at the northern end. No casualties or damage reported.

## **21 December**

An interesting day. Our own pilot, Flying Officer Jim Richards in Spitfire UP/A, flying in formation with Flying Officer Barrie, both scored hits this morning on a Japanese Tony. It started burning, but being short of fuel, our pilots lost sight of it. It is claimed as a probable. The action took place over the sea about 150 miles from the island. During the attack, one of the 20mm cannons on UP/A jammed. This caused the aircraft to slew and made it difficult for any accurate firing. Upon his return, (and rightly so) Jim Richards voiced his strong disapproval and disappointment about the malfunction of the cannon. As the aircraft armourer, naturally, this disturbed me, but as the jamming problem was due to a faulty booster mechanism design, I just had to take the criticism on the chin. The booster mechanism carried out three functions of dragging the shells out of the ammunition bins, stripping the belt links from the 20mm shells, then feeding the shells into the cannon, with the three of these functions, all taking place at very high speed. To the best of my knowledge this jamming problem was never really overcome.

Squadron Leader Max Bott is now the CO of the Squadron, effective from 5 November 1943. Flying Officer Jim Richards is the acting Flight Commander of B Flight.

And so, without fanfare or trumpet, the first CO of 79 Fighter Squadron, Squadron Leader Alan Rawlinson DFC and BAR, slipped away. I cannot recall one occasion when he addressed the Squadron as a whole, or one particular incident to remember him by. He seemed to be aircrew orientated, and I don't think the ground staff figured very high in his Command picture, possibly only if aircraft serviceability wasn't as high as he would have wished. This was his style. I never felt it represented leadership. As with Squadron Leader Rawlinson, Max Bott was greatly respected as a pilot, having flown Kittyhawks with 76 Squadron and survived, during those critical days of life and death, at Milne Bay and Port Moresby. From the moment he actually took over as CO, he was seen to be the CO. He moved among the men. He knew many by their first names. This did not mean he was everybody's buddy, as, when the occasion arose, he could voice his displeasure with the best, and applied discipline as firmly as the offence demanded. He identified with the Squadron, everybody knew him, he was our CO.



*Maintenance overhaul on UP/A, Kiriwina Island 1943.*

*Working on aircraft engine (L-R): Bob McIntyre, Harry Chandler*

*Gathered around gun (L-R): Lew Kakoschke, Arthur Gately, Keith Swift, Ned Kelly, Tony Chapman.*

## **22 December**

My twentieth birthday. Received telegrams and cards from all at home. My thoughts are with loved ones today.

## **25 December**

Christmas Day. Our cooks excelled themselves. They prepared a very tasty Christmas dinner. Menu consisted of turkey, vegetables, plum pudding, sweets, dried fruits, bread and coffee. There were two sittings, and the meal was enjoyed by all. In the evening a fellow armourer and friend, Doug Knight, and I visited another US Army open air theatre, called the 'Huba Huba', and listened to the 158<sup>th</sup> Military Band playing a selection of some great music. This was followed by the British film, 'In Which We Serve', which had been written, directed and acted in, by the creative Noel Coward. It was an impressive production. It was a most enjoyable evening.

## **31 December**

The last day of the year. This day saw the beginning of a series of operations carried out by the RAAF over the enemy held island of New Britain. The attacks embraced hit and run, bombing and strafing raids on Gasmata, and escort support when Spitfire and Kittyhawks covered flights of Beaufort bombers, which were able to drop heavier concentrated loads of bombs on selected targets.

Only a day or two before this offensive began, a replacement pilot, Flight Lieutenant L. Wettenhall joined the Squadron. He hardly had time to meet the CO and unpack his kit, before he was allocated to Spitfire UP/O, and took off on the first strafe operation by our Squadron. I met this man at the airstrip, and clearly remember him with his Mae West gear about him, making his way toward his aircraft. Somewhere over the sea or land of New Britain, he fell out of flight formation. As soon as his disappearance was noticed and reported to the Flight Leader, a Spitfire was detailed to investigate. This quick aerial search proved fruitless. A more detailed search over the land and sea was carried out over the next day or two, but nothing was found. He was posted as missing. The loss of Flight Lieutenant Wettenhall, this new member of the Squadron, a man we hardly had time to get to know, was keenly felt, and left us with a sad and heavy feeling.

### **8 January**

Operations for the year got under way. Squadron participated in another Gasmata patrol, all aircraft returned safely. UP/A was flown by Jim Richards, who has been promoted to Flight Lieutenant and takes over as B Flight Leader from Flying Officer Peter Birch.

### **18 January**

Another New Britain patrol. Eight Spitfires involved, four from each flight, providing top cover for thirty-two Beaufort bombers, which passed the base at approximately 12.44pm. UP/A flown by Jim Richards developed engine trouble, and UP/F radio trouble—both returned to base. All other aircraft returned safely.

### **19 January**

The Squadron seems to be caught up in a cycle of unfortunate events. We have just learned that Flight Lieutenant Rowe, while ferrying a replacement Spitfire from Horn Island in the Thursday Island/Torres Strait area to Port Moresby, came down in the sea. A search of the area was made, but nothing sighted, and he was posted as missing. He was very popular with his fellow pilots.

### **21 January**

New Britain patrols continued. Spitfires, representing both B and C Flights, participated. UP/A was flown by Flying Officer Frank Binning. The Spitfires provided top cover for thirty-one Beaufort bombers, while sixteen Kittyhawk fighters also provided lateral support for the bombers. It was an impressive sight. All aircraft returned safely.

### **22 January**

New Britain patrol. Twelve Spitfires participated. UP/A flown by Jim Richards. Top cover for twenty-three Beaufort bombers. All aircraft returned safely.

## 24 January

New Britain patrol. Twelve Spitfires participated, top cover for twenty-one Beaufort bombers. UP/A was unserviceable, preliminary work was started on an engine exchange.

The days were very hot and very long. The maintenance program was heavy. The constant heat, both day and night, the glare from the coral, humidity and rain, drained the best of us. In order to provide cover for the Beauforts, the Spitfires had to be fitted with belly tanks to increase their operational range. The normal tank fitted to the aircraft only had a fuel capacity of eighty-five gallons. With belly tanks fitted the range was better than doubled. There had been trouble with the belly tanks. First consignment flown up urgently, from the mainland, were made of plywood. They were beautifully designed and constructed, and fitted snugly under the belly of the aircraft. Trouble began when it was found, that, after the tank had been emptied, or if it had to be jettisoned in flight for emergency reasons, the tank was so light, it couldn't be shaken clear of the slipstream. This represented a danger to the pilot, and possible damage to the aircraft, particularly on landing, when the tank might bounce clear of its fasteners. Quite clearly, some engineer or design team on the mainland had not done their homework. They had not tested or foreseen that such a hang up could happen. The plywood tanks, numbering hundreds, were, to the best of my knowledge, abandoned where they were stacked. This must have been a costly exercise. New, slightly larger and heavier tanks made from duralium, were fabricated and rushed to the Squadron.

It was concerning an aircraft to which one of these new tanks had been fitted, that an accident occurred which could have had tragic results. It was the practice that all of our aircraft which were to participate in a New Britain patrol (in this case a sweep over Rabaul) were to be made ready late the previous afternoon. On the final runup of UP/O (pilot Flying Officer Warren Napier) it was found that the oil seal on the airscrew had ruptured, and had to be replaced. As the NCO in charge of the Flight, Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley, with Corporal Claude Edgar, decided to return to the strip after the evening meal, and replace the ruptured seal. They returned to the strip, and, using the headlights of a jeep, they worked swiftly and carried out the work on the aircraft. The details of the following events which took place, were related to me. At about 11.00pm after washing the surplus oil from the cowlings and the aircraft with petrol, Corporal Edgar climbed into the cockpit to run up the engine, while Jim Jelley engaged the external batteries into the external plug. Unfortunately, the master switch on the battery cart, which was designed to be in the 'OFF' position at all times, had been tampered with, and was constantly in the 'ON' position. Whilst fitting the plug into the socket, the plug pins contacted the metal skin of the aircraft. This caused a flash which ignited the petrol vapour and petrol that was about the aircraft. There was one hell of a 'Whoomph' and the whole lot burst into flames.

Fortunately Jim and Claude were able to jump clear, flames and smoke filled the revetment, and one whole Spitfire, including a new belly tank, was reduced, in a few minutes, to a black burnt out skeleton and ash. This was a close shave, but thank goodness, Jim and Claude escaped with their lives. An inquiry was held, and both men were cleared of any negligence.

I have always considered myself fortunate, that, while serving on Kiriwina Island I had the good luck to meet the Presbyterian Padre, Reverend Gordon Powell MA. He was attached to the Wing as one of the Protestant Padres.

My first introduction to the man was per medium of a sign erected alongside the main road past our camp. In bold lettering the sign announced, 'DON'T FEEL DOWN IN THE DUMPS, CALL IN AND SEE THE OLD SINBUSTER'. The sign was complete with an arrow pointing the way. This approach to his ministry was typical of the fresh, down to earth way he drew men about him to listen to the spoken word of the scriptures. He set up shop between 79 and 76 Squadrons. With the help of some willing workers, he had the scrub cleared from a respectable area, laid some palm logs on the ground for seating, and had a complete pulpit and communion table made from coral. He referred to this open air house of God as his coral cathedral. Leadership came naturally to this man. In no time at all, he gathered around himself a band of workers, followers and believers, who were devoted to him.

Within a short time, he was attracting increasing numbers of men to his Sunday services. The evening service, in particular, had a large following. You could always rely on hearing a good sermon, not the fire and brimstone type, but more in accepting the challenge that present living presented, using the example and strength shown by Jesus Christ. Hymns would be sung, supported by a choir he had assembled, a lesson would be read by one of the men. More often than not, this service would be conducted neath a canopy of stars and with a minium of ground illumination. The deep shadows of the surrounding forest and scrub enveloped the worshippers as if they were still in a womb. Unforgettable.

Appreciative of the need for men thrown together during the war to escape from the reality of the present, he initiated a series of talks held in the Airmen's Mess following the evening meal. The talks supported by simple slide equipment were spread over several weeks, and dealt with such subjects as a 'Pre-War Journey Down the Volga River', and 'You, Married Life and Sex'. Introducing the talks, the Reverend mentioned of winning a scholarship while a student at his training college in Melbourne. This enabled him to get to England. Once there, it was just a stepping stone across central Europe to reach the USSR. As a foreigner, the fact that he was able to get into Russia during such sensitive international times, was a rarity in itself. The talks got off to a good start. It was a fascinating journey through the heart of this country of mystery. The men absorbed it like a sponge, and the Mess was packed. At the conclusion the meeting was thrown open to discussions. The evening finished with a cup of coffee and a biscuit. This was the pattern.

The idea behind the second series of talks, 'You, Marriage and Sex', which was given by Padre Correll, was to try and capture the attention of the young men in his audience, who, in all probability, would be entering the marriage stakes at the end of the war. He handled such a personal, delicate subject with balance, good taste and common sense. The talks were laced with humour and moments of seriousness. Question time was uproarious, and unbelievable. I am sure he got his message across.

Whenever a protestant death occurred in one of the Squadrons, or units embraced by the Wing, Padre Powell or Padre Correll would conduct the funeral service. As a man of the cloth, I had not previously encountered the like of Gordon Powell before.

An incident took place at the airstrip one day, which was one of a number of irritations which added to a general feeling of disquiet among the men. It was the practice of the camp cooks/messing people to send our midday meal down to the strip in the back of a utility truck. This small truck was used around the camp for general duties, eg. for carting rubbish to a tip, picking up stores, getting rid of cookhouse garbage, and conveying food containers to the men working at the airstrip. On this particular day, when the truck arrived, it was found that the containers were sitting in a sea of mud. Apparently the camp people hadn't given any thought to washing out the back of the vehicle. What with the heat, the flies and the first sight of this delivery, it was only seconds before an explosion took place between the men waiting ready with their dixies and the unfortunate messman. Quite often this midday meal tasted no better than slop, and now, here we were being treated no better than pigs. An officer was called from the nearby pilots' standby hut, who agreed with the men's reaction. He got in touch with the camp and called for the immediate presence of the catering Sergeant at the strip. The sergeant arrived pronto. He blew the shit out of the messman, and ordered the truck and food back to the camp, and arranged for a quick replacement with a fresh lot of food delivered under more hygienic conditions. We had no further trouble in this area.

Following the departure of our original Adjutant, Flight Lieutenant Sim Bennett, his place was filled by Flying Officer Thomas. In all fairness to this man, coming direct to us from the mainland, he must have been shocked by the appearance of the Squadron in the matters of dress, the casual approach to discipline and general smartness. For instance, our tropical clothing was threadbare. Shirts, trousers, shorts were washed out, boots suffered badly from being continually damp, and the abrasive effects of the coral. Our fur felt hats had been pushed into a thousand shapes, some showed evidence of where washers had been cut from them to supply an immediate maintenance need. An odd beard showed up on some of the faces of the old hands. On the other side of the coin, it was difficult to replace worn out clothing, footwear etc as most times the Squadron store was out of stock. Sometimes this shortage could last for months, and when items did become available, it was difficult to get away from your work, as your first responsibility was to attend to your aircraft and pilot at the airstrip, or if you did get away, the store did not always have your size. Replacement clothing, footwear, etc was an ongoing problem, over which the men had no control.

Within a short space of time, the new Adjutant made his displeasure with the current state of affairs known. Orders were issued that the men were to be clean shaven, long sleeved shirts, trousers complete with gaiters, respectable hats and boots were to be worn, and, when moving out of the camp, gas masks were to be carried at all times. Tent and kit inspections were to be carried out. This attitude and general sharpening up around the camp was understandable, but it made life difficult for the men at the airstrip. Work on the aircraft was very hot. A short sleeve shirt, shorts and boots were about as much as the men could stand. Quite often it was just a long pair of trousers and boots with no shirt but a handkerchief tied around the neck to wipe away the perspiration from one's face and eyes, and a battered, faithful hat. Keeping the aircraft flying or in a state of readiness was the sole purpose of our being there, and without any camp bullshit, we had been doing this successfully for some months now.

Matters finally came to a head when, one evening following the meal, a meeting was held in the Airmen's Mess. A capacity crowd attended, including the Adjutant, accompanied by an NCO from the Orderly Room. After the Adjutant had outlined the new regulations, the meeting was thrown open for comment from the men. Almost at once, everyone had a grievance or a point of view to express, voices were raised, the gathering became noisy and agitated, nothing was being achieved. Eventually a shaky level of calm returned. One speaker was being listened to, his comments made sense and seemed to get to the kernel of the men's problems. He was Frank Cooney, an armourer's assistant: in civilian life he was a printer, who could express himself clearly and with vigour. While Frank was on his feet speaking, the CO, Max Bott, walked into the Mess. The gathering was called to attention and the CO was given the floor. Almost in tears, he appeared to be in a state of shock. I felt sorry for him. He said he was surprised and deeply sorry that this state of affairs among his men had come about. With a waver in his voice, he assured the men he would do his level best (without the bullshit) to restore the spirit of cooperation that previously existed in the Squadron. That was the end of it. The meeting broke up. From this point in time, petty irritations ceased and the men got back to doing the job they did best. I never thought I would witness such a gathering as this, and certainly not in a frontline Squadron. On the mainland such a protest would have been considered mutinous and dealt with accordingly.

### **27 January**

As from this date our pilot Flight Lieutenant Jim Richards took over temporary command of 79 Squadron. The CO Squadron Leader Max Bott returned south to the mainland, for well earned leave and, rumour has it, to be married.

### **29 January**

As from this date and after returning to the Squadron following a short leave, Flight Lieutenant Doug Vanderfield took over temporary command of 79 Squadron from Flight Lieutenant Jim Richards.

### **3 February**

New Britain patrol. Eighteen Spitfires participated, largest escort to date. UP/A flown by Jim Richards, who led the formation. UP/H flown by Flying Officer Tassicker developed engine trouble and the Spitfire had to be abandoned. Flying Officer Tassicker parachuted to safety and landed in the sea. He was supported by his Mae West dinghy, and, after half an hour in the water, was picked up by a Catalina flying boat and returned to the Squadron. Following completion of the patrol, all other aircraft returned safely. Our aircraft UP/A had been aloft for an engine check and gun test, daylight was fading when it returned. Tom quickly proceeded to have the aircraft refuelled, check tyres etc. while I refilled ammunition boxes, oiled and pulled guns through so that all would be ready for the next day's operations. Access to the guns was gained by removing fasten down lids on top of the wings, and while clearing the port wing outer .303 machine gun, in the bad light, I failed to note a bullet still held up in the breach of the gun. I released the breach to squirt some oil into the mechanism, and within a split second, the gun fired, almost blasting my left foot, which was hanging over the leading edge of the wing close to the gun port. Another inch or two,

and I would have had a shattered foot. I was still shaking when Tom dropped what he was doing and raced to see if I was all right. Together we examined the cause both fully aware of the bullet I had failed to see.

### **8 February**

New Britain patrol. Sixteen Spitfires participated. UP/A was flown by Sergeant Pilot Lew Turner. Shortly after beginning of operation, Lew returned to base as engine on UP/A began giving trouble. All other aircraft returned safely.

### **10 February**

New Britain patrol. Twelve squadrons participated. UP/A flown by Jim Richards returned to base soon after beginning patrol, engine began playing up again. UP/A flown by Sergeant Pilot Nevil Faulkes, developed engine trouble, and made a crash landing at northern end of southern strip. Fortunately pilot Faulkes escaped unhurt. All other aircraft returned safely.

### **11 February**

New Britain patrol. Twelve Spitfires participated. UP/A still unserviceable. Flying Officer Ken Slatyer led B Flight, and Flight Lieutenant Doug Vanderfield led Squadron. All aircraft returned safely.

### **12, 13, 14, 15 and 16 February**

New Britain patrols continued. Twelve Spitfires participated through these days as escort for Beaufort bombers. UP/A flown by Jim Richards on 16 February returned to base with engine trouble. Jim along with the other pilots, were frustrated and angry about continuing trouble with engines. All aircraft returned safely.

### **19 February**

Another tragic loss to the Squadron. Flying Officer Ken Slatyer, test flying UP/E following an engine change, developed engine trouble over the island. He endeavoured to glide the aircraft down and make an emergency landing at the south strip. Unfortunately a glycol leak had developed (engine cooling system) which gave off deadly fumes. The aircraft lost aerodynamic ability, fell out of control, and he crashed to his death in the marshes not far from the strip. Understanding was, he was in constant radio contact with the base throughout the descent which heightened the tragedy. He joined the Squadron last October, and was one of a number of young pilots who had served with the RAF, and survived the air battles over England and Europe, and had been rushed back to Australia to fly in the defence of our own country. He came from Western Australia, was fairheaded, open faced, with almost a perpetual smile. He had a most engaging personality and was very well-liked by his fellow flying colleagues, as well as by the ground crew who had contact with him. A funeral service conducted by the Reverend Gordon Powell was held at the island cemetery that afternoon. All who could attend were there. It was a very sad occasion.

With so many New Britain patrols taking place, the maintenance work and long hours spent at the airstrip, was very demanding. I always felt that our Flight was extremely fortunate, and very well served by a small core of NCOs who were thoroughly experienced and who knew how to generate team spirit. Three of them were battle tested veterans who had survived the Middle East desert campaigns with No 3 Squadron, and three others who served with various RAAF squadrons. In the first category, I refer to Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley, a short dynamo of a man who was out and about everywhere. There was very little that escaped his attention and few problems he couldn't put right. He took an interest in everybody in the flight, and addressed all by their first name. He was a natural leader and the driving force behind the flight. Corporal Jim Morvel was built in a different mould. A thick set man of average height, with a quiet, thinking solid demeanour like a farmer. He didn't waste words, was a brick of a man, and always ready to lend a hand and pass on his knowledge and experience. Sergeant Des O'Brien was an engine fitter. Better than average height, a mop of thick dark hair and good looking. Fiery tempered, always tackled a job head on, and at one hundred miles an hour. More of a loner than his two colleagues, energy to burn and was innovative. In order that our aircraft inspection and maintenance program could go ahead without interruption by the weather, he built a hangar by erecting a series of palm logs and roofing the area with heavy canvas. It was a great success. Des was an individualist, and his own man. The three other NCOs were Corporal Laurie Whittle, an engine fitter from South Australia, and Corporals Pat (Squizzy) Taylor and Syd (Slutskin) Froom, both air frame fitters from Sydney. Laurie was a tall, spare, bookish man, who at times seemed to be wrapped up in a world of his own. He was a superb engineer, and Jim Jelley treasured him in the flight. When it was possible to break through his reserve, he had a very dry sense of humour, and was a lovely bloke to know. Pat Taylor and Syd Froom were inseparable as work mates. They both had an off beat sense of humour, were practical jokers, got their work done and rarely took life seriously. The foregoing is a brief description of the NCOs, who alternately took responsibility for keeping the flight in the air.

## **20 February**

Replacement, rebuilt engines from Laverton suspect and considered unsafe. Pilots unsure of personal safety and engine performance. Only three B Flight Spitfires operational today. Remaining nine grounded. This was an all-time maintenance low. Rumours of a move in the wind.

## **22 February**

New Britain patrol. Only six Spitfires serviceable to escort 27 Beaufort Bombers, Kittyhawks from No. 76 Squadron participated. All aircraft returned safely.

## **24 February**

First batch of original pilots, Flying Officer Peter Birth, Pilot Officer H. McCormack, and Flight Sergeant Dud Gridlington, returned south today after completing an approximate nine month tour of duty. This tour was relieved halfway through with a fortnight's home leave—not so lucky the ground staff. Replacement aircrew arriving, no names as yet. UP/A still unserviceable, engine banks being replaced.

## 27 February

The CO, Squadron Leader Max Bott announced movement of Squadron. No indication as to next area of operation. Preparations for transit soon got under way. Jim Richards and Flying Officer 'Tassie' Tassicker posted home. Jim said farewell to Tom and myself—we will miss him. Advance party of Squadron moved out of camp to nearby No 46 OBU (Operational Base Unit) to await transit—facilities quite good. Also on transit was a small group of our own ground staff, who had applied, and been selected, to undertake Air Training Crew—they were waiting for a lift back to the mainland by aircraft. Among this group was Bill Thorpe, known to everyone as 'Fog'. Tall and lean, with a big droopy moustache, he was a larger than life character—quite untameable. Everyone knew him, and he called everyone 'Sport'. He had a very dry sense of humour, and was a lovely bloke.

## 3 March

While at the OBU, a number of men had been allocated to demolish the old camp. At the same time, work parties had been formed and shifts allocated to load a transport ship, which had been sent to lift the 'Wing' off the island. To my great surprise, when we arrived at the eastern pier (there was no harbour at Kiriwina Island, and this well constructed wharf structure had been built out into the sea off the edge of the island) to begin loading, our transport was a Liberty ship. I first noticed these amazing ships lying to their anchors in the open roadstead outside Townsville, when we were making our way north. I was greatly interested in these US 'Kaiser' built, prefabricated, mass produced, all welded wonders of the marine transport world, and now, I had the opportunity for a close inspection of one. Our ship was the *Marcus Daly*, just one of hundreds of such ships plying the oceans of the world and delivering men and materials to waterfronts around the world, wherever the war was being fought. We began unloading straightaway. As the trucks arrived, all the bits and pieces, vehicles, mobile cookers, tents, ammunition etc was transferred to large rope nets or cable slings, and quickly hoisted on board. With four holds working day and night, it didn't take long to shift a lot of cargo. The work was hot and strenuous.



*The SS Marcus Daly*

*This was the Liberty ship that transported a number of RAAF units (including 79 Spitfire Fighter Squadron) from Kiriwina Island to Manus Island, via Milne Bay, Finschhafen, in March 1944. They were truly an amazing functional marine transport development. Mass produced and launched out of shipyards on the east and west coast of the US. Over 2500 ships were built.*

*It so happened that the war history of the Marcus Daly was quite unique among Liberty ships. After departing Manus Island, the ship became part of the great supply armada that supported the invasion and recapture of the Philippine Islands. The following extract is from a book written by JG Bunker with the title 'Liberty Ships, the Ugly Ducklings of World War II':*

*The Marcus Daly was another fighting freighter, honoured as a 'Gallant Ship' for her role in the invasion of Leyte. Two of her crew killed trying to save wounded shipmates were posthumously awarded the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal. 'This ship', said the WSA, 'was under constant air attacks for several days and nights and was credited with shooting down several planes'. Merchant seamen assisted in manning the guns. General MacArthur commended the Marcus Daly for saving the dock area from serious damage or destruction.*

*For six days and nights, her guns, manned by a skilful and courageous crew, defeated vigorous attacks by enemy planes in a series of heroic actions. In December 1944 she again emerged victorious, after engaging enemy bombers and suicide planes. The stark courage of her gallant crew, against great odds, caused her name to be perpetuated as a Gallant Ship.*

*On her second voyage to the Philippines, with 1100 troops on board, the Marcus Daly was again attacked by the Japanese planes. Able Seaman Alvin R. Crawford was killed instantly. Able Seaman Richard G Mathiesen was severely wounded, but managed to drag two men clear of a fire. He died soon after.*

*The vital statistics of a standard Liberty ship was as follows:*

*Off all welded steel construction*

*Hull length 441 feet 6 inches*

*Beam 56 feet 10 inches*

*Draft loaded 27 feet 9 inches*

*Deadweight tonnage 10,920 tons*

*Gross tonnage 7500 tons*

*Speed 11 knots*

*Propulsion, a single 2000 HP triple expansion steam engine*

*Construction Number of Marcus Daly was Number 1697.*

*After World War II, and along with hundreds of other Liberties, the Marcus Daly was eventually sold for its scrap steel value, and fell to the searing edge of a blow torch and then a furnace.*

*In retrospect it was a great privilege to have sailed on her.*

#### **4 March**

Still loading transport.

#### **5 March**

Loading continued throughout the day and finished about 7.30pm. We had departed the OBU earlier and gathered to embark. A strong wind, and consequent swell started to work the ship in and out against the wharf, which meant, that if severe enough, the structure suffered the possibility of demolition, also that it was completely unsafe to use the ship's gangway. The ship was on a lee shore, and had to be held a short distance off by its anchors. A large rope boarding net was rigged over the port side toward the bow, and fastened to the wharf. The men had to scramble up this net (carrying all their gear) to get onto the ship. To an untrained person, the prospect of

boarding a ship in this fashion, appeared daunting and scary, at the same time, the exercise was hilarious, particularly when on the wharf viewing the acrobatics of your colleagues trying desperately to secure a footing on the insecure net. When it came my turn to climb the net, the ship had worked away from the wharf, and the net was angled out over the water. I was convinced that I was going to end up in the water. It was an experience I will never forget. Time and time again one leg or the other fell through a hole in the net. This required a supreme effort to get both legs climbing again. The ship's bulwark seemed ever so high and far away, but, eventually with great effort, I got close enough to reach hands that hauled me, and all my gear, the same with my colleagues, clear over the top. My God, what an experience!

Around 1.00 or 2.00am, the lines were cast off, and we sailed away from Kiriwina Island. I had been on the island for six months, or to be exact, 168 days. This had been a time of highs, lows, friendships formed, great activity, intense experiences lived, and, in particular, moving emotions when I thought of the wonderful young men we had left behind, buried on the island.

All was confusion on board the ship that first night. We were allocated to No 1 hold, where we were able to bunk down. People were milling about all night, it was impossible to rest. Once again, access and egress to the hold was via a series of wooden staircases which linked tween decks, and in the event of having to abandon ship, one would have to be very lucky to make an escape. The ship was closed up at night. This was necessary as a safety measure, to ensure that no glow from cigarettes or flaring matches pierced the darkness and invited attention from a probing submarine. I had made up my mind, that, where possible throughout the day, I would try and spend as much time as I could on deck, that is, subject to how much sunlight and heat I could stand. While negative thoughts were passing through my mind, it was reassuring to feel the powerful thrusting beat of the *Marcus Daly* engine. We were at sea again and on the move again. What lay ahead?

## **6 March**

A fine clear sunny morning greeted us. How wonderful it was to be up on deck, and fill your lungs full of fresh sea air. Without any naval escort, and steaming alone, our ship hurried south. We sighted the mountain top of Ferguson and lofty Goodenough Island, with its telltale whisper of white cloud feathered out from its mountain top. As we closed the northern coast line of New Guinea, we passed a number of seemingly uninhabited beautiful islets. We entered the northern channel into Milne Bay, and once again it was as if we were the first to view the natural untouched beauty of this area. Proceeding slowly up the bay, we dropped anchor at about 7.30pm. There were a considerable number of ships in the bay, and in the fading light I counted fifty. That evening a concert was held on the forecastle deck, using No 1 hatch as a stage. It was organised by a chap called 'Squash' Lemon, and supported by local talent. They put on a most enjoyable show. 'Squash' Lemon was a remarkable fellow, he was Mr Entertainment, and, with the help of a number of supporters, he put on a number of live shows for the men at Kiriwina Island.

## 7 March

The furnace-like heat of the Bay built up early. We swung to our anchor. On deck we were spread about, sweating and chasing whatever shade we could find. Rumour has it that we could be under way at any time. In order to cope with the toilet problems of such a large number of men, approximately 800, two substantial structures were built, and suspended out over the sides of the ship (port and starboard). These crude but effective canvas covered shelters embraced a large eight-hole WC box. There was no room for modesty here, and as the sea breezes whistled around your derriere, you could enjoy a chat with your neighbour, as your past spread over the water below you like berley for fish. A couple of times a day, a crew member would hose down the sides of the ship. The old routine of two meals a day fell into place. The meal consisted of a diluted soup, disguised bully beef and dog biscuits, washed down by coffee made from chlorinated water, ugh. Sometime during the afternoon, we were handed a cardboard carton containing emergency rations, this was a US package which was cleverly designed and prepared. My understanding is that four RAAF units are being transported on this ship, these being 79 Fighter Squadron, 114 Fighter Sector, 14 WT and 26 RSU.

## 8 March

Still at anchor in the Bay. This morning I had the opportunity to visit the engine room and galley of the *Marcus Daly*. I have always been interested in steam power and marine engines (a legacy from my father who built working models of this machinery) and I found the inspection most enlightening. Descending deep into the bowels of the ship via a long steel ladder, I entered the hot world of the marine engineer. Although the ship was at rest, here, in this room, the sound effects of power surrounded me; there was the high pitched hum of a steam driven generator, which created electricity, the noise of ventilation fans forcing hot air out and steadily and greedily, sucking fresh air in; there was the steady pulsating rhythm of pumps, possibly providing pressure for the plumbing system and bilge pumps. This sound emanating from the auxiliary equipment, was the perfect background to view the main engine. This giant source of power, a triple expansion engine stood there, spotlessly clean, just waiting for its life force force of steam to stir its innards into action. My seaman/guide explained to me, that, fully loaded to the Plimsoll line, this engine could push the ship of 7200 tons through the seas at speeds of between 10 to 15 knots, simply amazing. After a quick look at the compact boiler room, I was taken back topsides, to the galley, where I enjoyed a quick cup of hot, sweet, black coffee. The galley, like the engine room was spotlessly clean; stainless steel bench tops, cupboards and cooking equipment shone like a mirror, and two Negro cooks in white trousers, sweat shirt and cap, worked quietly at their chores. I thanked my guide for his friendliness, and rejoined my colleagues.

A hospital ship arrived, which we were unable to identify. Our ship weighed anchor, proceeded through a boom, and lay alongside a jetty. All units disembarked, an outbreak of dysentery was given as the reason. The units were distributed among a number of shore establishments—79 Squadron was hosted by 43 OBU. Since we were here last, I noticed a great deal of improvements to road works. Undergrowth had been cleared and held back, anti-malaria army squads were moving around, spraying drains, pools and low lying catchment areas, a substantial number of prefabricated

buildings had been erected and there appeared to be a plan behind the general layout of the place. Being among the late arrivals at the OBU, there was insufficient shelter for a number of us, so the Commandant of an adjoining US Army hospital opened a ward, which provided beds for us.

This was a kind gesture and very much appreciated. It was the first time I had slept in a bed between clean white sheets, since leaving home. Beneath each pillow, six packets of candy had been placed, this action was typical of American friendliness and generosity. In the evening, I attended an ACF Cinema unit, which showed a film starring Bing Crosby in 'Sing You Sinners', plus Otto Kruger in 'Scandal Sheet'. Enjoyed both movies.

## **9 March**

Still guests at the hospital/OBU unit. Around 10.00am Blue Hickey, the WOD, held a parade and called for volunteers to work in a nearby store. This request fell on deaf ears—no one stepped forward. Calling on his extensive command of colourful language, he expressed his displeasure at our lack of Service spirit, and straightaway counted off eleven heads (mine included), and ordered us to march to the store and work there until no longer required. With a corporal in charge of us, we moved off, groaning and grumbling about being caught for this job. A sergeant met us at the entrance to the store. 'Righto you lot', he said, 'you'll be unpacking boxes and stacking the contents, and the sooner you finish, the sooner you can bugger off. When you see what is in this building, you'll blow a gasket. Now get this straight, I don't mind how much you eat inside, but don't bloody well let me catch you taking anything out. There's a corporal inside, he will show you what's to be done'.

And what a surprise it was! The building was chock a block full of those extras which we could have bought and would have appreciated when we were at Goodenough and Kiriwina Islands. In great quantity, here were tubes of toothpaste, razor blades, tinned fruit, condensed and reduced milk, tea and coffee, tinned meat, biscuits, writing paper and envelopes, pens and ink. Small's club chocolate, sweets etc. All the stock sitting there waiting for distribution to forward RAAF units. It made me angry to think of the lack of awareness and energy required to bring these small comforts to the men. In no time we were breaking open boxes and stacking the contents. Now and then there would be an interruption to this activity while we consumed the contents of a tin of peaches, stuffed ourselves with Arnott's biscuits, munched a Club chocolate etc. As we moved around the store, we popped an odd small item or two into our pockets which would not attract too much attention when we departed. Around 11.30, the task was completed. The sergeant thanked us for our labour, and, without passing too critical an eye over us, we marched out through the entrance and back to the OBU. The old saying goes, 'never volunteer, never explain', which we didn't, we were conscripted and virtually given a pass key to a treasure house. We returned with a smile on our face.

In the afternoon, I took advantage of some free time, and hitched my way by truck to the RAAF small boat section which was situated on the foreshore of the bay. My reason for the visit, was to catch up with Ron Broom (a pre-war friend). Fortunately Ron was at the base, and we were able to spend a little time together, catching up with movements, news and gossip.

## 10 March

An early start to the day. Breakfast was at 6.45am followed by a general parade, at which we were advised that we could be on the move again today. Time was our own after the parade. Tom and I paid another visit to the cemetery, after which we had a quick look at No 9 Operational Group HQ. Here we met up with Corporal Jim Morvel, Jack Fisher, Lyn Brown and several others. Jim had heard about a large US Army vehicle assembly plant that had been erected at Homa, which was situated about 15 miles along the north-eastern shoreline of the Bay. So, as a group, we decided to have a look at this operation. We had no difficulty hitching a ride on a truck, and within a short time reached Homa.

The first thing we noticed was a substantial finger wharf that had been built out into the Bay. A couple of Liberty ships lay alongside the wharf and were busily unloading crates onto a steadily moving line of trucks. The whole area was a hive of activity.

Following the route taken by the trucks, we arrived at a very large cleared area, that had been carved out of the jungle by the bulldozers. Here an amazing sight met our eyes. A huge shed, and I mean **huge**, had been erected, and beneath this all weather canopy, running from one end right through to the other, two parallel conveyor lines had been built, upon which the basic chassis of vehicles were being moved steadily forward. With each move, bits and pieces were added by gangs of army mechanics, so, that, by the time a chassis reached the end of the line, it was a complete vehicle. The unit was tested, given a final inspection, filled with petrol, then driven off to join a large pool of vehicles waiting to be shipped out to forward elements of the US Army or Air Force serving in New Guinea or island outposts. A friendly US soldier guided us through this complex, and explained some interesting stages of the assembly procedure. To say that we were impressed would very much be an understatement.

The advantages of a front line assembly unit such as this was obvious;

- (a) The component parts of a variety of army vehicles were manufactured in the US, crated, then shipped direct to the point of assembly as close as safely possible to a war zone, thereafter the lines of distribution were shorter and immediate.
- (b) By using army personnel, local territorial labour laws, union, strikes, etc were eliminated. If necessary, production was possible 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

At the conclusion of the inspection, we thanked our soldier guide, hitched a ride back to the OBU, where we arrived just in time for lunch. After lunch we proceeded to pack. A special thanks went to our hospital host for making accommodation available to a small number of us. Around 2.00pm. we climbed back onto the trucks, and were taken to the wharf where we re-embarked onto the *Marcus Daly*. When loading was complete the ship moved away from the wharf, and came to anchor again in the Bay.

## 11 March

Beautiful morning. Milne Bay with its background of blue mountains and coconut fringed shoreline, was a sight to behold. As usual we can expect a hot, glaring steamy

day to develop. A naval force arrived, led by HMAS *Shropshire* and supported by two USN light cruisers and four destroyers—it was a reassuring sight. After the ships had come to anchor, a scout seaplane from one of the USN cruisers took to the air. A rough count disclosed somewhere in the vicinity of one hundred ships of all types gathered in the Bay. We settled down again to two meals a day.

### **12 March**

Beautiful morning. At 9.00am, the *Marcus Daly* weighed anchor, and, around midday, passed out through the entrance of the Bay. Our ship formed part of a small convoy, which was escorted by a small number of light naval craft. Passing through Goschen Strait, and staying close to the north New Guinea coastline, we proceeded in a north-westerly direction. Destination unknown.

### **13 March**

Still underway and proceeding slowly—passed through Ward Hunt Strait, hugging north New Guinea coastline and headed in north-westerly direction. Spent most of the day on deck, leaning over the port hand rail, watching the untouched, rugged beauty of the coastline slip away and getting some relief from the sea breeze generated by the ship's movement. Destination rumoured to be Finschhafen.

### **14 March**

Beautiful morning. Around 6.00am, we arrived off Finschhafen. Barely maintaining steerage way, the *Marcus Daly* moved slowly around offshore in a circle all day. From the ship we could observe considerable air activity taking place at and above the airstrip—the air traffic seemed unceasing. A number of dysentery cases have been reported—food not the best, water could also be suspect. Around 7.00pm, the *Marcus Daly* got properly under way, formed part of a convoy consisting of seven LST Barges, six destroyers, and one RAAF crash boat, which made a valiant attempt, in choppy seas, to keep up with the larger ships. Seen against the light of the setting sun, the convoy made an impressive sight as we headed north. Destination uncertain.

### **15 March**

Convoy still headed north. Another very hot sunny day. Men lay, sat or propped themselves everywhere about the deck, doing their best to cope with the heat. A large supply of tinned food had been stacked on top of No 1 hatch, and covered with tarpaulins—understanding is, that there could be a food shortage for several days after we land. Strongest warning was issued that we were not to interfere with this supply. It didn't take a great deal of imagination to realise that the heat generated beneath the tarpaulins would 'blow' most of the cans, and render the food useless. With this possibility in mind, Jack Fisher, Tom Neill, Bluey Leonard and I carried out an exploratory trip below decks and uncovered another cache. We decided to help ourselves to a few tins of food to see us through an emergency. This small reserve we discreetly planted in our kit bags.

As a token defence against air attacks, several Bren guns had been mounted around the ship. I manned a Bren gun for seven hours. Talk has it that Flight Lieutenant Doug Vanderfield and Flying Officer Reg Nathan have been posted home. Admiralty Islands is hot favourite for our landing.

## FORWARD TO THE ADMIRALTY ISLANDS

### 16 March

Early start to the day. Passed several islands on route. Weather beautiful. Around 6.00am we approached the Admiralty Island group. It had been a long, interesting haul from Kiriwina Island, and now we are on the threshold of a new chapter in this war time experience.

Proceeding at 'slow ahead' the *Marcus Daly*, with the rest of the convoy, passed through an outer reef of Manus Island (largest island in the group) and entered a very fine harbour, which we have been given to understand, is known as Seeadler. As the harbour opened up, the view from the ship on the port side showed coconut plantations growing almost to the water's edge and continuing for some distance along the foreshore, while ahead, and to starboard, higher, hilly, tree covered ground came into view. Fighting between American and Japanese ground forces was still taking place. Heavy explosions could be heard, and shells from shore-based artillery pieces whistled overhead. Considerable air-to-ground activity was taking place, and it was great to see 76 and 77 Squadron Kittyhawks bombing and strafing the blazes out of the Japanese. Both of these Squadrons had preceded us to the Admiralties. The advance party of 77 Squadron arrived on 6 March, and a flight of their Kittyhawks (twelve aircraft) arrived on 9 March, and flew straight into operations. 76 Squadron arrived a few days later.

Around midday, we came to anchor. The tarpaulins were removed from the food stacked on No 1 hatch, and we were told we could help ourselves to this supply. As we suspected, most of the loose tins and cases were 'blown'. This was a dreadful waste—if only this mountain of food had been distributed among the men earlier, most of it would have been saved. As it turned out, most of it was dumped.

We were transferred to an LST (landing ship tank) around 1.00pm, and taken back out through the harbour entrance and reef, to a point offshore where we turned and followed the coast line around to a small lagoon-like harbour situated on the south-eastern side of the Los Negros Island. This short sea voyage introduced us to another amazing US weapon of war. The LST was specially designed for transporting and landing large numbers of men, heavy equipment, vehicles, tanks etc right on the beach. This function it carried out superbly. One could not describe such a ship as having attractive sea-going lines as it resembled a large, long, floating tank with a sharp bow. Topside it had space on its flat deck for a limited number of light vehicles, and mounted machine guns for protection against an air attack, while inside its huge cavern like interior, it could absorb huge amounts of equipment. Fitted with powerful diesel engines, it could manoeuvre and move at a respectable rate of knots; its semi-flat bottom enabled it to run right up onto the beach, and, when its huge bow opened and split into two large doors, evacuation of its cargo could be speedy. And so it was,

when around 4.00pm through the open doors of our LST we were disgorged onto the island of Los Negros.

Once ashore, we came face to face with the northern end of the then short airstrip known as Momote, from which we were to operate. Sporadic fighting was still taking place, perimeter troops had not entirely secured the area, small arms fire could be heard, and artillery was still banging away. Bulldozer operators, who were working around the clock to lengthen and broaden the airstrip, had .50 calibre machine guns mounted on their big 'Cats', as well as very powerful headlamps so that they could work and fight throughout the night. Talking to an American soldier who was watching our landing, he said that a number of bulldozer operators had been killed by the Japanese snipers.

When all of our Squadron members were ashore, we assembled in a loose fashion, and were told that we had been allocated a small camp area about two and a half miles away, located between where the extended airstrip would pass and the coastline of the island. As no trucks were available to take us or our gear to the camp site, we were pointed in the general direction and headed out. What a rag tail collection of people we appeared to be. Dressed in an odd assortment of clothing, loaded down with gear and wandering along in dribs and drabs. By the time we had reached the half way mark, I was wrung out. Tom and I rested for fifteen minutes or so, then we pressed on. He relieved me of a pack. It would be true to say that most of us were unfit. The tropical heat and the bad diet had a wearing effect, and by the time we reached the allocated area, I was exhausted. I am sure, that only for Tom's assistance along the way, I would have collapsed.

No organised food arrangements existed. This is when our emergency food supply came in handy. Tom Neill, Jack Fisher, Bluey Leonard and I shared our bully beef and dog biscuits, and were thankful. We slept on the ground that night. Sometime during these early hours, we had an air raid alert, and in the early hours of the morning a light shower of rain blew in from the sea. This is when our ground sheet capes were a blessing.



*Hot tinned meal of meat and vegetables (Mic and Vic), taken alongside plantation track by ground crew members of 79 Squadron soon after landing on Los Negros Island, 16 March 1944.*

## 17 March

Early start to the day. Weather fine. Our camp was a bloody shambles. Apart from an odd sheet of canvas seen here and there, no tents had come ashore from the ship. All that could be seen standing among the shot blasted palm trees, were sticks supporting personal ground sheets or mosquito nets, or bed positions burrowed into the sand. I wonder how long these conditions will last. Contact had been made with a neighbouring US Navy 'Sea Bee' unit (Constructional Battalion) who readily agreed to let us join their food queue. A hot meal served under civilised conditions was much appreciated, plus numerous cups of good coffee. We felt like very poor relations. With time on our hands, Tom, Jack Fisher and I inspected several nearby Japanese defence positions that had been put out of action by US Naval gun fire; coastal guns, searchlight batteries, nests of foxholes, and a cook house which stank to high heaven. Fighting was still taking place—small arms, guns and explosions from artillery shells can still be heard. Somehow, back in our camp area, I procured an American camp stretcher—which I will guard with my life. Understandably, living so close to the sea, the humidity at our beach camp is no where near as high as Kiriwina.



*Pilots of 79 Fighter Squadron, Los Negros Island*

*Back Row (L-R): Flying Officer Joe Marshall (standing), Flight Lieutenant Max Brindsley (standing), Flight Lieutenant Bill Wright (seated), Pilot Officer George Voges (seated), Flying Officer Frank Binnings (standing), unknown (seated), Sergeant Clem Schmitzer (seated), Flying Officer Allan Yates (seated), Sergeant Allen Byrne (standing).*

*Front Row (L-R): Squadron Leader Pilchard, Flying Officer Curly Clayton, Warrant Officer Ian McKellar, Squadron Leader Max Bott, Flying Officer Dickie Long.*

## 18 March

Weather fine. A parade was held in the morning, and along with others, I was detailed to help dispose of (bury) a large dump of Japanese small arms ammunition. Also inspected another Japanese camp. Another parade was held after a scratch lunch, and, with thirty others, I was part of a workforce party to return to the *Marcus Daly* and help unload the ship.

The return involved a 20-25 mile journey by truck via a jungle road from Momote airstrip to Red Beach on Manus Island, (an initial US Army landing site), on the foreshore of Seeadler Harbour. It was still early days since the invasion and all Japanese resistance had not been crushed. As we motored through this heavily timbered area, any moment I expected a burst of machine-gun fire or a grenade attack from an isolated enemy pocket. From what I could observe, the road we were travelling along had been a narrow Japanese vehicle track, linking the two areas. Since the invasion, the American army engineers had rapidly started to upgrade the route—large bulldozers, graders and sheep foot rollers were working around the clock to make an all water main road. There was a great sigh of relief when we reached Red Beach. The debris of an amphibious landing was still scattered about. A simple jetty had been built out from the shore, and, a Sergeant Ferry Master was controlling barge traffic. A small barge was made available to transport our group back to the ship and in no time at all, we were back on the deck of the *Marcus Daly* ready to begin the night shift.

### **19, 20, 21, 22 and 23 March**

Work of unloading continued day and night throughout the above dates. Shifts were organised on a six hour on, six hour off basis. The work of loading and unloading nets and slings was consistent and very hot, particularly during the day when working down below in the hold or alongside a barge. Meal arrangements hardly existed. We grabbed what we could when we could, and it was difficult to get any rest during off-duty hours. Flying Officer Bill Coffey was in charge of the work detail, ably assisted by Corporal Norm Madew.

Fighting between American and Japanese ground forces still taking place. Japanese positions being heavily shelled by American shore batteries. A number of US Navy patrol boats were seen moving around the harbour. They made a great sight. No doubt they belong to advance squadrons.

When sufficient cargo had been removed from the *Marcus Daly*, to reduce its draft, the ship was taken back outside Seeadler Harbour around the coast to the small lagoon-like harbour, which I now understand is known as Hyane. While this sea voyage was of short duration, it was, nevertheless, most enjoyable. I was on deck throughout, and admired the skill of the navigator and Captain in piloting this large ship through a narrow pass in the reef into the pocket sized harbour of Hyane. Soon after the anchor went down, a relief unloading crew from the Squadron came aboard, and a very tired crew were taken back to the camp. This still appeared to be in much the same state of confusion as when we left. One or two American bell tents had been erected and our mobile cooker was back in business. Looking forward to a washing day.

### **24 March**

Camp still disorganised. Tom working on *Marcus Daly*. Poor old Bob Chaffey was trying hard to get camp organised. US Navy 'Sea Bees' doing a splendid job extending the airstrip and building taxi roads and parking areas. Heard the sound of an approaching Kittyhawk, and, through the coconut palm trees, saw a 77 Squadron Kittyhawk making a landing approach. He appeared to be coming in too high for the

short airstrip: there was a sickening crash, and the aircraft burst into flames. The pilot was dragged clear but, as I understand, died later. These aircraft accidents always filled me with sadness. A small number of new American bell type tents had been erected within the camp area and allocated. We were fortunate to be among the early lottery winners. Our tent crew then consisted of Tom Neill, Jack Fisher, Bluey Leonard and myself. Tom and Bluey were away on the *Marcus Daly*, so Jack and I gathered all of our gear together, and moved into the tent. At this time Jack was becoming increasingly unwell. He was running a temperature, and looked like death warmed up. I got him to lie down on my camp stretcher. He was complaining of being cold and was shaking like a leaf. I covered him with our blankets, and, as soon as I could leave him, I reported his condition to our medical section. This active little group was hardly operating, only having just received and erected a tent, but said they would call on him as soon as possible. I thought Jack might be down with malaria, but, when the medical orderly called to have a look at him, he felt he had a bad attack of Dengue fever, and that he should be kept in bed.

Over the next few days his condition seemed to deteriorate. He said he was aching all over, was sweating profusely and seemed a little delirious. To add pain to injury, he developed dysentery, and we were running back and forth to the six hole toilet box situated a little distance away in the scrub. Each visit we were challenged by our nervous guards, who yelled out 'halt, who goes there', and Jack and I responded with growing impatience, 'it's Jack Fisher, and I am going for a bloody shit, so bugger off'. He was like a wrung out towel, and all he wanted to do was die. I was very worried about him. Following one run to the toilet, I just got him back to the tent before a shower of rain hit us. Being a new tent, the water began dripping through the canvas like a dripping tap. This necessitated moving him around to dodge the drips. I removed the blankets and covered him with our ground sheets. The final crunch came when the wind and rain, coming in from the sea, increased in intensity and blew the tent down on top of us. What more could happen? I crawled out from beneath the canvas and immediately enlisted the help of our tent neighbours, who helped me re-erect the tent and make it more secure. Over the next few days, the medical section called and kept an eye on him. He gradually responded but it took some months before he got back into shape.

### **25 March**

Returned to *Marcus Daly*. Started shift at 6.00pm and finished at 11.59pm, worked steadily throughout. Ship just about empty.

### **26 March**

Rested all morning. Proceeded to airstrip in the afternoon and helped to erect flight and workshop tents for aircraft maintenance, and for belting ammunition. Fighting between Americans and Japanese can still be heard. Because extended airstrip will pass too close to our camp and the 'Sea Bees' require our site, the Americans have asked us to move—this request comes after a number of our tents have been erected.

### **27 March**

Worked all day at the airstrip, belting ammunition.

## **28 March**

Proceeded to the airstrip and continued to belt ammunition. Our Spitfires flying in from Kiriwina Island arrived at approximately 11.00am and made a great sight as they made their approach to the airstrip and landed. Thank God there were no prangs. When UP/A rolled to a stop, Tom and I met our new pilot, Flying Officer Joe Marshall. He was a shortish, thickset chap, aged about 26, with a broad open smile, and a handshake like a vice. His family background was dairy farming at Hayfield in Victoria, and he recently returned from Britain, where he had been flying with the RAF in Spitfires. Seems a friendly enough chap and I think we will get on well. In the afternoon, the Squadron carried out its first strafing attack in the area. At the present time, we have three Squadron Leaders on strength.

## **29 March**

Moved to our new camp site which is located in a coconut plantation just over a mile from the airstrip, and not far from the sea. A much better position. Once again the camp plan grouped most related areas together—Messing, stores, admin, medical, guards, aircrew, and B and C maintenance flights and workshop personnel. Biggest percentage of the tents, which were larger and, with a few adjustments carried out, were airy and spacious. Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley did a great job organising loads of clean white sand to be brought into the B Flight area which was spread over the floors of the tents. This made life a little more liveable. Extension work on airstrip proceeding well. US Navy ‘Sea Bees’ were working around the clock. Squadron rear party arrived. UP/A out on strafing run, guns fired well. Work load consistent, one month without a rest or washing day.

## **30 March**

Rained all night, spirits a little damp in morning. Squadron on early morning standby. UP/A, with five B Flight and six C Flight aircraft patrolled, and then strafed a small offshore island still occupied by the Japanese. Fighting still in progress on Manus Island. Had a close look at several wrecked Japanese aircraft, workmanship seems to be of very high standard. Also inspected some nearby machine gun and pill box emplacements, which included a cleverly concealed network of fox holes. This part of Los Negros, where our camp and also 76 and 77 Squadrons have settled, was a huge coconut plantation—rows and rows of palms wonderfully laid out. Living environment here far better than on Kiriwina Island—not so steamy, ground cover not so stunted. Complete absence of native life, not even a village in the vicinity.

## **31 March**

Continued to belt ammunition, repetition a little humdrum. UP/A flown by Joe Marshall in formation with UP/G flown by George Gilbert on convoy patrol, operation lasted three and a half hours.

## **1 April**

Squadron still strafing. UP/A on standby all day.

## **2 April**

Early morning standby. Camp area slowly becoming organised. UP/A flown by Joe Marshall on two strafing flights. Considering lodging an application for aircrew training.

## **3 April**

Not feeling so good. UP/A on reco standby, otherwise a quiet day. In the evening Jack Fisher and I visited the 44<sup>th</sup> Navy 'Sea Bee' camp and saw the film 'The Life Story of Irene and Vernon Castle', starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Superb entertainment and production.

## **4 April**

Rained rather heavily. Difficult to move around the camp. Great news is that hostilities between American and Japanese forces on Manus Island has ceased. Work still progressing on airstrip. Received a letter from cousin Ron Small. He has been transferred up north again.

## **5 April**

Squadron on early standby. UP/A on readiness, worked on A's guns all morning, very hot work. Feeling squeamish in the afternoon. Mail arrived in the evening. Sick during the night. Quite a few of the boys are off-colour.

## **6 April**

Still feeling squeamish. Rested on bed until able to report to sick quarters. Given some pills and stood down for the rest of the day. Just lay about.

## **7 April**

Easter Good Friday. Feeling a little better. Returned to airstrip and carried out a gun inspection on UP/J. UP/A on readiness. Considerable aircraft activity at and above the airstrip. Hot shot pilot Flight Lieutenant Hopton, also Andy Christie and Peter Kerr posted home.

## **8 April**

Easter Saturday. Squadron on early standby. Rain started early morning and continued heavy throughout day. UP/A on readiness. Tom and I spent most of the time sitting on ammunition boxes under A's mainplane. Rumours about moving again starting to circulate.

### **9 April**

Easter Sunday. UP/A off the line and on standby. I was detailed to unload an incoming Flight of DC3s arriving at Momote airstrip. Approximately fifty landed and were unloaded throughout the day.

### **10 April**

Easter Monday. Heavy air activity at the airstrip. Douglas DC3s arriving in flights of tens continued throughout the day. I am sure we couldn't be winning the war without the assistance of these marvellous freight planes and their aircrews. Large numbers of Liberator and Mitchell bombers also arrived. It amazes me where they are parking all these aircraft. Seems possible that a build up for a great forward offensive is taking place. Camp starting to look like a proper camp.

### **11 April**

Tuesday. Surprising it has not rained for two days, feels like a drought has set in. Mail position not so good. Squadron carried out formation flying exercises. UP/A flown by Joe. In the evening played cards (500) with Kakoschke and Pat Donoghue.

### **12 April**

Wednesday. Detailed to work in camp area all morning. UP/A on standby. No flying. Great numbers of Liberator bombers occupied all available space. Sure is a great sight.

### **13 April**

Thursday. Work around camp continued. Stand built for a pressure tank erected, constructed out of palm logs. UP/A on standby. Easy afternoon.

### **14 April**

Friday. Squadron on early standby. Several more of our original pilots posted home. Flying Officer Frank Binnings, Flying Officer B. Morgan, Flight Sergeant George Gilbert, Flight Sergeant Neville Faulks, Flight Sergeant Wal Howard, and Flight Sergeant Clem Schmitzer. The latter group were often referred to as the 'Tiny Town Mob', as they were all a little on the short side. They were a great bunch of young, keen pilots. Some new aircrew replacements arrived—no names at present. Flight Lieutenant Max Brinsley still acting CO and flying UP/C. UP/A unserviceable, engine and guns requiring attention.

### **15 April**

Saturday. Liberator bombers now operating in strength from the island. It was a great sight to see these squadrons forming up and moving off together. UP/A serviceable again. As time permitted, we began to make improvements to the lay out of our tent. We raised the centre pole to stand on top of an empty 44 gallon drum, which enabled us to lift and peg out the side flaps of the tent thereby allowing us to place our camp stretchers, (complete with mosquito net frame) under the flaps. This idea permitted a

greater flow of air through the tent and increased the useable floor area. When the above was carried out, we then built a wooden table right around the 44 gallon drum. The design of the table incorporated a built in seat which gave us all space for writing, reading and playing cards. At a later stage, the camp electrician connected all tents to an electric light system. This one single globe made a tremendous difference to how we spent the long night hours. At the back of the tent, and at a respectable distance, we built a small fireplace which incorporated a burner, similar in principal to a primus burner which was fed from an elevated four gallon drum containing 100 per cent aviation petrol. At all times regardless of the weather, this 'choofer', as we called it, allowed us to boil the billy or boil our washing as need be. Without a doubt, the fit of our tent was one of the best in the camp.

## 16 April

Sunday. Severe blow to the Squadron. Just before day break, the CO Squadron Leader Max Bott and Squadron Leader Pilchard collided on the airstrip near the southern taxi point. It appears, while waiting for the flash of the green light from the control tower, Max Bott's engine began to overheat, so he began to taxi along the strip to break off at the next turnoff. Pilchard was unaware of Max's intention and began to make up the back of Max's aircraft, and decapitated him. Pilchard was thrown clear about 100 feet and was badly injured. Max's aircraft was UP/M and Pilchard's UP/J. Both aircraft were write-offs. Understanding was that Max was about to take Pilchard aloft for a familiarisation flight over the island. Squadron Leader Pilchard was to become our new CO when Max Bott returned to the mainland. To heighten the tragedy, during his recent leave, Max was married. He was buried that afternoon, beneath our Blue Peter, in the American War Cemetery at the northern end of Momote airstrip. The whole Squadron attended the funeral. It was a most moving service. To add to the depression and sadness of the occasion, it rained throughout the day. A memorial service was also held in the Airmen's Mess that evening. He was a fine officer and a damned good CO.



*Squadron leader Max Bott, CO of 79 Squadron.*

*During the fierce air battles over Port Moresby, and the heroic land and air struggles to defeat the Japanese at Milne Bay, he flew Kittyhawks with 76 Squadron.*

### **17 April**

Monday. The sadness of the previous day was still with me—but life goes on. Flight Lieutenant Max Brinsley DFC, was appointed acting CO. He was a tall man with a free-flowing mop of dark wavy hair, which he used to pull straight back—this was complete with an impressive aircrew moustache. He had an engaging smile and personality, and always gave me the impression of being perfectly cast in the role of an Errol Flynn type of Captain Blood, Buccaneer—if complete with a sword, he would have rescued any damsel—he cut a dashing figure. Squadron on standby at southern end of strip.

### **18 April**

Tuesday. Squadron on early standby. Around day break, a Squadron of Liberator bombers began taking off for a bombing mission. Fifteen had become airborne and were beginning to form up; the sixteenth came roaring down the strip, when it appeared that the undercarriage began to fold up before the aircraft was properly airborne. This premature action resulted in a rather nasty crash which came to a grinding halt about 200 yards from where we were standing by our own Spitfires. The aircrew came tumbling out at break neck speed. All were safe with the exception of the rear gunner who broke a limb, and had to be assisted by two of his colleagues. In no time a bulldozer appeared and pushed the Liberator out of the way. Take-off operations continued with another eleven Liberators joining their young colleagues aloft. All told twenty-six Liberators participated in this bombing mission. Returning from the mission, one of the Liberators blew a tyre on landing, which resulted in another crash, all the crew escaped safely. Here again, a bulldozer suddenly appeared and pushed the wreckage out of the way. Both aircraft were complete write-offs.

### **19 April**

Wednesday. Squadron on early standby. Liberator bombers continued their pre-dawn take-offs and forming up exercises prior to departing on their daily bombing mission. When the morning was sufficiently advanced and our own aircraft pre-flight checks were complete, Tom and I, separately, inspected the Liberator wrecks from the previous day. Any thought of repairing these damaged aircraft was completely out of the question after viewing the mess caused by the bulldozer when pushing aside to clear the airstrip. Equipment meant nothing to the Americans. The attitude was, if it is broken, let us get another new one. With the RAAF, we would patch, repair and stitch (costing thousands) and hope for the best. Clambering over one of the wrecks, I was able to pick up a piece of Perspex from one of the shattered windows. Throughout the day there was considerable activity at the airstrip. The US Navy had a service facility at the northern end of the strip, and carrier-based Grumman Wildcats, Hellcats, Avengers and Corsaires were up and down all day. Flights of DC 3s loaded with cargo and men were in and out. Liberators returning from bombing missions, Kittyhawks from 76 and 77 Squadrons added to the flow. All this traffic, including our own, must have added great pressure and responsibility on the control tower people. UP/A flew on convoy patrol twice in the morning and once in the afternoon.

Two prangs occurred during the day. UP/H flown by acting CO Flight Lieutenant Brinsley, blew a tyre and was written off, and UP/T flown by Flying Officer Warren Napier, also blew a tyre but the aircraft was repairable. Both pilots were shaken, but otherwise okay.

## 20 April

Thursday. The day began like so many others. Our flight was on early standby at the airstrip. This meant an early rise in the dark, a quick cup of coffee (ugh), something hot out of a tin in the Mess, then a scramble onto the back of a truck and a fast run down to our aircraft parked near our workshop area, not far from the airstrip. Our pilots would have gone through a similar early morning camp routine, following which, they would have quickly joined their ground crew waiting with the aircraft. There was the roar of motors starting up, and with a man sitting out on each wing tip, the pilot was guided by hand signals from his crew, and taxied the aircraft to our standby position at the southern end of the strip. Most times this latter activity would take place in the half light preceding daylight. Usual practice called for six Spitfires (half a flight) to be on duty, and parked one along side the other with their nose facing the airstrip for an immediate take-off. At the first sound of the scramble alarm, the pilots pulling on gear, would race from their nearby standby hut, jump into the cockpit, start up their Spitfire and literally become airborne within a few minutes—this was a well rehearsed procedure.

On this particular morning, with our aircraft in position, we were involved with the routine practice of ‘running up’ the motors to make sure they reached the required number of revs. While this pre-flight check was taking place, the early morning departure of Liberator bombers was going on—already four or five had thundered past and were gaining altitude to assemble overhead. Our aircraft UP/A was standing at the end of the line, our mechanic Blue Findlay was sitting in the cockpit ready to start the motor. Another Liberator came thundering along the airstrip—using hand signals, Bluey indicated to Tom and me that he would wait until the bomber had passed before starting to run the motor. Tom and I were watching the Liberator closely, it became airborne, its motors were roaring—this is the most critical stage of flight—everything is stretched and straining, particularly the motors, to break the bonds of gravity holding the aircraft back. It had climbed to about 200 feet above the ground, was fast approaching to be above and abreast of us, when, to our horror and shock, we noticed that the port outer motor had stopped. The propeller was feather turning very slowly—the port wing began to drop rapidly until the plane got out of control and nose dived right into the ‘Sea Bees’ camp, the camp that was originally ours.

This terrible accident took only seconds to happen, and it happened right before our eyes. The explosion, air wave and bang, felt as if our ear drums would burst. Three thousand gallons of high octane aviation fuel, a load of bombs and ammunition, and most tragic of all, nine American aircrew (one airgunner was thrown clear) all disappeared in one unholy, blasting flash. In the camp itself, 40 hard working ‘Sea Bee’ sailors were killed and many others injured. The blast blew all of us ground crew to the ground. One of our colleagues, Bruce Popel from Western Australia was hit by a piece of metal, which punctured his lung and he was raced to hospital as soon as an

ambulance became available. All of our aircraft were showered with pieces of hot metal. Fires had broken out in the camp, ammunition was popping off and the airstrip near us was covered with pieces of red hot metal and smouldering cloth covering parts of bodies. It was the most heartrending, gruesome sight I had seen. All of us were in a state of shock. The fact that we had escaped this holocaust, hadn't properly dawned on us. In no time ambulances were on the scene at the camp, removing the dead and dying and attending to the wounded, while fire trucks started to put out the fires. Bulldozers suddenly appeared and began quickly clearing the airstrip. Steps were taken to replace our aircraft. Before we actually completed our withdrawal, the airstrip was sufficiently clear and another Liberator bomber lumbered and thundered past us to join his waiting colleagues circling high overhead. And so the war went on.

## **21 April**

Friday. After a nightmare night of indelible thoughts, mind pictures, flash visions of so much death, Tom and I dragged ourselves into this day. We were at the airstrip early (Joe was one of the pilots on standby duty yesterday, and had also witnessed the catastrophic disaster), and we were there to send him off on another convoy patrol. UP/A is nearing its logged 200 hourly inspection. This is a major overhaul on the maintenance schedule.

## **22 April**

Saturday. Squadron on early standby. Our flight was not involved with this duty. Convoy patrols were still in place, and UP/A flown by Joe was still involved. There was heavy, continuous air activity at the strip throughout the day. Flight Lieutenant Max Brinsley still acting CO and Flying Officer Yates was OC of Flight B. UP/L nearing 240 hourly inspection, and at the end of the day, UP/A was withdrawn to begin its 200 hourly maintenance check. Camp and facilities now in good shape.

During this last couple of weeks, a US Navy Liberator bomber has been taking off most afternoons around 3.30 to 4.00pm—sometimes a little later than this. We understand the idea is to stooge around the Japanese base at Truk Island, drop a few bombs and keep the bastards awake and guessing. The bomber would then arrive back at Manus Island after a five to six hour round flight, anytime between 9.00pm to 10.30pm. Around the expected time of arrival, a searchlight beam from both ends of the airstrip would pierce the darkness and act as a beacon to assist the navigator to guide the returning bomber back to base. Having located the base, the bomber would generally make a low pass over the island, and then make a long, low approach from out at sea to make a landing. Invariably, the navigation lights on the aircraft, would be turned on, also the flare path on the strip. This particular evening, Jack and I decided to take in a film being shown at a US Navy camp near the northern end of the airstrip. Complete with our ground sheet, ammunition box for a seat, we climbed onto the back of one of our trucks and set off for the camp. Our transport section generally made a vehicle available at night to take the men to a nearby film or other entertainment. When we reached the airstrip the driver backed the truck into a parking position just off a perimeter road which ran close, and parallel, to the strip, and close to the 'Sea Bee' camp which had suffered so disastrously two days before. In no time, dozens of trucks had arrived—there was a very large crowd, all headed for the open air theatre. We soon found a suitable spot to squat, and settled down to watch the

movie. The film being shown was 'Finger at the Window', starring Lew Ayers and Lorraine Day. It started to rain very heavily. We pulled our ground sheets closer round our shoulders, and peered at the film through the rain drops dripping from the verandah like roof of our wide brimmed hats. Around 9.30pm, the searchlights were turned on, and shortly after we heard the Liberator pass over our heads through the gloom. It was a good film, we could see how it was going to end, so we decided to leave a little early, make our way back to the truck, and get a seat before the exodus began to take place. We found the truck. The rain had stopped, we climbed aboard and sat down, looking down the airstrip and out to sea.

While yarning and chatting away, we saw the green and red navigation lights of the Liberator go on—the flare path was already alight and soon after the searchlight beams were doused so as not to blind the pilots. The Liberator was low down, almost on top of the sea. It kept boring in, coming in at an angle and not in line with the strip. We both voiced the same thought, that, if he didn't straighten up soon, it would be too late to correct—he kept boring in. We were alarmed and stood up in the back of the truck yelling out 'for Christ's sake straighten up, what's wrong with you?', with his wheels down the Liberator kept boring in, and, of course the tragic inevitability of it all, happened. He crashed at ground level into a stand of palm trees bordering the 'Sea Bee' camp. All of this took place within 250 feet of where we were standing, for a brief horrible moment it looked as if the crash would take place right on top of us. It was a frightening, sickening sight. The Liberator began to nose over, for a split second we could see the pilots trying to get out, they did not have a chance in hell, the Liberator burst into flames. We counted five aircrew who managed to jump clear from the rear of the aircraft. It crashed onto its back and the other five airmen were burned to death. There was no knowing what deaths or injuries had occurred (if any) in the camp. Fire trucks and ambulances were soon on the scene, and, out of the confusion of milling and departing trucks, jeeps and blitz wagons, we gradually made our way back to camp. It was a sombre, sad ride. Nobody had anything to say, everyone was wrapped up in their own thoughts. The big questions that remained with me and Jack was, 'what went wrong in the cockpit of that Liberator? Why didn't one of those pilots see that they were committed to the wrong course, that they were way out of line with the flare path?'

### **23 April**

Sunday. No notes recorded. I was still in a state of shock.

### **24 April**

Monday. Maintenance inspection on UP/A proceeding, guns finished, airframe and engine well on the way. While working on our aircraft, we were surprised and delighted to see a small group of Australian Navy boys approaching our maintenance area. This was the first occasion since we had been away, that anyone from our own services had made contact with us. There were six of them from the frigate HMAS *Gascoine*. Their ship was anchored in Seeadler Harbour. They were on a brief shore leave, had heard that a number of RAAF squadrons were operating from Momote airstrip, so decided to hitch a ride from the harbour and investigate the truth of this. I feel sure they were as pleased to see us fellow Aussies, as we were to see them. We invited them to share a meagre lunch with us at the airstrip, which they gratefully

accepted. There seemed to be an immediate rapport between us—conversation flowed freely and was wide and far ranging. Before they departed, we were invited to join with them at their ship that evening. On return to our camp later that afternoon, our transport section agreed to make a truck available to take fifteen of us on the long run to the harbour. So, after our evening meal, we set off, and arrived at the Red Beach Quay at Seeadler Harbour about 7.00pm. A ship's boat from the *Gascoine* was waiting for us, including one of the lads we had met earlier in the day. This was a new experience. In the fast disappearing evening light, our boat weaved its way between the ghost-like shapes of many naval ships and freighters lying to their anchors. On coming alongside our own host ship, the erst of our sailor friends were leaning over the handrail, and, with beaming smiles and handshakes, received us warmly on board as we stepped from the gangway.

This was the beginning of a very pleasant evening. We were quickly taken below to their Mess area in the focsle—here we were introduced to the rest of the off-duty crew and made feel quite at home. They soon opened their beer ration, and shared it liberally among us—fresh bread sandwiches appeared and coffee was available to those who wanted it. The stories came thick and fast, laughter filled the Mess, we were relaxed with our own kind of people, and we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. We learned that their ship was comparatively new, having been commissioned in 1943, and that the ship's Captain was Lieutenant Commander J. Donovan. After a limited tour of their ship, we returned to the Mess where a small canteen was opened and we were able to buy some razor blades, toothpaste, writing paper, etc. and similar small items. The evening flew by. In no time it was time to go. We said our farewells at the gangway, and, just as we were leaving, they gave us a sack of potatoes and some fresh fruit. What an occasion it was. What a great bunch of blokes they were.

## **25 April**

Tuesday. Anzac Day. This was just another day here, but we realised that, back on the mainland, memorial services would be taking place right across the country. Inspection work continued on UP/A. The spinner cap and tail section was repainted, and the aircraft was looking good. Harry Chandler, mechanic (one of nature's gentlemen) and Tom worked well together. Both men were sons of farmers, and had a quiet, sensible approach to life. The port engine of a Liberator cut out over our section, fortunately the aircraft landed safely.

## **26 April**

Wednesday. This was the anniversary day of the Squadron. First year of operations completed since forming at Woolamanata. Proceeded to the airstrip, inspection work on UP/A finished, and, after lunch, the aircraft was test-flown by Joe, who was pleased with the performance. Guns were not fired. UP/G, which was flown by Flight Sergeant Bob Rice, test-fired his guns. I assisted with clean up. The Squadron was partially stood down a little earlier this afternoon. In the evening, a celebration was held in the Airmen's Mess to mark the formation of the Squadron. The CO, Flight Lieutenant Max Brinsley, and WOD Blue Hickey opened proceedings with short speeches. Later in the evening, a supper was served, which included slices of fresh bread, real butter, onions, cheese, sausages and beetroot, complete with grapefruit

juice and gin. Several toasts were made, and Andy Anderson replied on behalf of the airmen. All those present seemed to enjoy the evening.

### **27 April**

Thursday. Major inspection started on UP/L. This Spitfire was the first in the Squadron to have clocked up 240 hrs of flying. The aircraft was generally flown by Flight Sergeant Lew Turner. UP/A flying on convoy patrols throughout the day.



*Flight Sergeant Phil (Louie) Turner. Original pilot of UP/A.*

### **28 April**

Friday. A small group of us were reinvited back to spend the evening on board the HMAS *Gascoine*. Harry Chandler and I thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. It would be impossible to count the number of merchant ships, loaded down with cargo, and naval ships swinging at anchor in Seeadler Harbour. I am sure all of this war material and naval power is the prelude to a big push further north.

### **29 April**

Saturday. UP/A on convoy patrol. In the evening I completed an application to do an advanced Fitter Armourer's Course. The second airstrip, called Mockerang is at last in operation on Los Negros Island. It is situated on the long peninsular which forms part of the entrance to Seeadler Harbour. Like Momote airstrip, Mockerang was built quickly by American engineers, and is a great credit to their drive and management. Harry Thomas, a leading stoker on the *Gascoine* visited us at the airstrip.

### **30 April**

Sunday. Last day of the month. Rumours persistent about reform of the Squadron. Flight Lieutenant Brinsley still acting CO, and Flying Officer Allan Yates acting CO

of B Flight. Both men seem to be harmonising well. Scrub typhus, dengue fever and malaria said to be raging on the island, considerable number of cases reported. Doug Parnell and a mate from the *Gascoine* visited camp in the afternoon. Harry Thomas reported to be posted back south. Two food parcels arrived from home.

### **1 May**

Monday. Time slipping by, entering into second year of operations. UP/A on convoy patrol. Talk of fitting tropical cowls back on aircraft—hope not. This cowl robbed the Spitfire of its true, clean ‘fighter’ appearance.

### **2 May**

Tuesday. Flight on early morning standby, worked on guns in morning. UP/A washed and waxed, looked great. Des O’Brien, Laurie Whittle, Pat Donoghue, Jim Williamson and Ron Preston have been transferred to workshops.

### **3 May**

Wednesday. This was a rostered day off from duty. I did some washing and letter writing. A relaxing day.

### **4 May**

Thursday. Liberator bombers operating in full strength from both airstrips. In the morning, Joe flew UP/A, tyre change required, otherwise everything satisfactory.

### **5 May**

Friday. Squadron on early standby at airstrip. Tom and I worked hard all morning on UP/A. In the afternoon UP/A was flown by Sergeant Pilot Cameron on convoy patrol, during the take-off a tyre blew. Sergeant Pilot Cameron completed the patrol and crash-landed the aircraft on Mockerang airstrip. Extensive damage was done to the starboard mainplane, radiator, oil cooler, propeller and air intake. A new tyre was fitted and the aircraft was towed off the strip to a nearby dispersal bay. Fortunately, apart from a shaking, Sergeant Pilot Cameron came out okay. After all the work Tom and I, and others, had recently put into the major inspection, the crash made all our endeavours seem wasted. Nevertheless, we were heartened by a close inspection carried out by Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley and some workshop boys who felt the aircraft was repairable and should fly again. When moving UP/A to the dispersal bay we were nearly clocked by a P40 landing with a dead motor. All in all, one could say that it was an eventful day. Rumours still persisted about home leave.

### **6 May**

Saturday. UP/A dismantled and brought around to our workshop area from Mockerang. Inspection started on UP/G, 120 hourly. Tom received a copy of the Melbourne *Sun*, dated Thursday 22 March 1944, which showed an excellent photo of Los Negros Island.

## 7 May

Sunday. Understanding is that 12 RSU is to put UP/A back together again. Tom, Harry Chandler and I have been transferred as ground crew to UP/L. The pilot Flight Sergeant Lew Turner has been grounded with malaria. Worked on UP/G. Seems to have been an improvement with the catering. These last few days our meals have been extra good. In the evening I played cards with Clyde Woodbridge and Max Stewart.



*Second crew of UP/L (L-R): Arthur Gately, Tom Neill, Harry Chandler.*

## 8 May

Monday. Finished armament inspection on UP/G. UP/L participated in convoy patrol. Liberator bombers keeping up pressure on Japanese held island bases. UP/V developed engine trouble, Flight Sergeant Chumley bailed out over the water, picked up by rescue service.

## 9 May

Tuesday. Squadron stand-down. Spent morning washing, reading and writing. In the afternoon, Jack and Bob Blackwood caught some fish. In the evening, Jack and I visited the 44<sup>th</sup> 'Sea Bee' camp and saw the movie 'Reunion in France', starring Joan Crawford. Invited Flying Officer Joe Marshall to supper. Tom cooked the fish with some chipped potatoes we had scrounged from the Mess. It was a first class meal and enjoyed by all.

## 10 May

Wednesday. Quiet morning spent in camp. Washed a few clothes and had a cup of tea with Bluey Leonard. UP/L on standby.

## 11–26 May

No notes recorded during this period.

## **27 May**

Saturday. In the early hours of the morning, about 2.00am, a flight of Liberator bombers were taking-off from the southern end of Momote airstrip. Six had become airborne and, during take-off, the seventh had damaged the left hand end of the flare path, putting the lights out of action. Unaware of the damage to the flare path, when the eighth bomber became airborne, he banked too early and collided with a stand of palm trees near the end and edge of the airstrip. There was a terrific explosion followed by a fire. All the aircrew were killed. The explosion woke everyone in the camp. In our own tent, instant reaction found us all out of our stretchers, standing in a state of shock, wondering what the bloody hell had happened. We were living on our nerves these days, not knowing what was going to happen next. There was little sleep left during the rest of the night. At the northern strip, Mockerang, one Liberator blew to pieces in the air, and another crashed into the sea. The Americans are paying a very high price with the loss of so many precious sons.

Flight Lieutenant Brinsley is still acting CO of the Squadron. Flight Sergeant Lew Turner, Flight Sergeant Chumley, also Flight Sergeant Andy Burns posted south. Original pilots nearly finished. New batch of aircrew arrived today. Steady progress is being made with repairs to UP/A, which is sitting on jacks with one mainplane repaired. UP/L still going strong.

## **28 May**

Sunday. Twelve months tropical service nearly completed. Dengue and malaria fever playing havoc with the lads. Airstrip and road work around the island in great shape—American naval construction battalions have done a great job. All Spitfires are nearing their 200 or 240 hourly inspections. UP/L with approximately 255 flying hours. Liberator bomber flights from both airstrips still operating at maximum effort. Group Captain Gordon Steege still keeping an eye on the operations of 73 Wing, comprising 76 Squadron, 79 Squadron, and other supplementary RAAF units.

## **29 May**

Monday. Squadron on early morning standby at airstrip. Very little flying took place. Easy day.

## **30 May**

Tuesday. Squadron stand-down. Did some washing in the morning and posted a parcel home. Work on UP/A progressing, should not be long before she is back on-line again. An American naval Liberator bomber blew a tyre on take-off, all aircrew safe. Looks as if the aircraft is repairable. In the evening Jack and I visited the 104<sup>th</sup> 'Sea Bee' camp and saw a film, 'The Song of Bernadette', starring Jennifer Jones. Truly a wonderful show. Our tent mate, Merv Jones, has been granted compassionate leave. We gave him a tent farewell supper. He leaves in the morning.

### 31 May

Wednesday. All in the tent were awake early. Merv said his farewells and left for the airstrip, where he boarded a US Dakota DC3, which was due to leave (take-off) between 5.30 and 6.00am. Down at the strip, Tom, Harry and I pushed on with our respective jobs on UP/A. I fitted the four Browning machine guns back into their wing positions. It was hot, steady work. At the end of the day, when we returned to the camp, imagine our surprise to find Merv back in the tent. As Merv related the story, the aircraft took off about 6.00am. It was fully loaded with fuel, plus twenty-two passengers, complete with their personal baggage, two pilots and a crew man, twenty-five all told. When the Dakota was about thirty miles out from Manus Island, one of the motors cut out. The plane started to lose height rapidly, and, when they were down to about 500 feet above sea level, the chief pilot ordered the abandonment of all personal luggage. This desperate move brought about a great reduction in weight, which kept the aircraft flying, and the plane struggled back to land at Momote airstrip. This was a close shave. All Merv possessed was the clothes he stood up in.

### 1 June

Thursday. This morning I installed the two 20mm Hispano cannons back into UP/A. This was a big job, and I had to call on the assistance of another armourer. Jack was very sick with another bout of Dengue Fever, and had to be admitted to our small camp hospital. Merv still with us.

### 2 June

Friday. Merv left this morning on another Dakota DC3. Work continued on UP/A. In the afternoon, I visited Jack in hospital. He was still quite sick. In the evening, I visited 73 Wing theatre and saw the movie 'Between us Girls', starring Kay Francis and Dianne Barrymore. This was a lively film.

### 3 June

Saturday. This was a Squadron stand-down day, but both flights of 79 Squadron participated in a Wing exercise, led by Group Captain Steege. The air manoeuvring of the three squadrons was impressive. At the conclusion of the exercise, Group Captain Steege was the first to land. As soon as his Kittyhawk had rolled to a stop, he was out of the cockpit, and, with pad and pencil in hand, he was alongside the airstrip, and noted those aircrafts (pilots) who made bad or rough landings. I am sure some of the pilots would get a dressing down before the day was out. UP/L flown by Warrant Officer 'Jock' Haines had to detach himself from the group, because his undercarriage was not fully retracting and the engine was giving trouble. The aircraft was handed over to our workshop boys to investigate and make good. This morning I armed up UP/A in readiness for an armament test-firing. In all probability this could take place tomorrow. Not feeling well—think I am coming down with Dengue. Visited the pay clerk and withdrew £4.

#### **4 June**

Sunday. Sick throughout the night. Was admitted to our hospital with severe attack of Dengue fever.

#### **5–10 June**

Still in hospital throughout the above mentioned period.

#### **11 June**

Sunday. Discharged from hospital back to tent. Stood-down from duties until I recovered. Tom went down with Dengue and was very sick. He was admitted to MCS (Medical Clearing Station). Surprise of surprises, Squadron took delivery of a Wirraway training plane.

#### **12 June**

Monday. Still a little groggy on my feet. Taking things easy.

#### **13 June**

Tuesday. Continued to take things easy. Did a little washing in the morning.

#### **14 June**

Wednesday. Returned to work, or, rather, put in an appearance at our maintenance area. The Wirraway has been up and down all day. Serviceable aircraft in B Flight are UP/O, UP/M, and UP/? UP/L in workshops undergoing an engine change. Flight Lieutenant Max Brinsley still acting CO, with Flying Officer Dicky Long as OC of B Flight.

#### **15 June**

Thursday. Very little Squadron activity, routine becoming monotonous. Liberator bombers still operating in strength and around the clock. When we arrived at our maintenance area in the morning, a USAAF maintenance group had moved in over night and set up operations practically alongside us. This was a sight to behold. The basic equipment consisted of several medium-sized marquee tents, with a core grouping of six to eight large aluminium caravans. Each caravan was fitted out with the best equipment available to take care of the major trade specialisations; eg. electricians shop, instrument repair section, sheet metal design shop, fabric repairs, chief engineer's office etc. In the marquees there was a well-equipped sheet metal fabrication area, engine area, tyre replacement, carpenter's shop, armoury etc. A number of towing tugs were noticeable, along with mobile cranes and scaffolding for working on engines. At the first opportunity, Harry and I spoke with a number of Americans, who were only too eager and friendly, to give us details about their unit. One thing we learnt was, that as quickly as they arrived, they could pack and be gone overnight. This was the efficient way the Yanks worked. Mail position not too good, none for close on a fortnight.

### **16 June**

Friday. Squadron on early standby. Worked in the morning. Tom discharged from MCS. He looked washed out and weak. Flying Officer McKeller posted home, also Corporal Clyde Woodbridge left for home on compassionate leave. Visited 'Sea Bee' cinema seeing the film 'Gambling on the High Seas', with Wayne Morris. After the show, Joe Marshall and Hugh Kennare popped in for a cup of tea—an enjoyable evening was had by all.

### **17 June**

Saturday. Squadron stand-down. All personnel gathered at airstrip to have section photos taken by Robinson, Official Photographer. Otherwise an easy day.

### **18 June**

Sunday. Worked at maintenance area in the morning. Inspection started on the Wirraway. Flying Officer Frank Binning revisited Squadron. He delivered a replacement Spitfire from the mainland. Liberator bombers operating in great numbers. The Japs must be having the shit blown out of them. I understand that the 9<sup>th</sup> USAAF engineering service group operating alongside us, carries out the maintenance work for four Liberator squadrons. US Skymaster (DC-4) transport aircraft now operating regular flights to and from the island. Mail position not too good.

### **19 June**

Monday. Change of shift, now working afternoons, quiet morning in tent. Caught up with some correspondence. Blue Leonard working on a new burner for our petrol stove burner.

### **20 June**

Tuesday. Squadron stand-down. Helped Bluey to install a new burner, and we rebuilt fireplace—works very well, like a primus.

### **21 June**

Wednesday. An easy morning, little washing and writing. Flight Lieutenant Jim Richards visited Squadron. He ferried a Spitfire from Port Moresby. Aircraft was operationally unserviceable to fly further. He hitch-hiked a flight to Manus—he did not bother to get in touch with Tom or myself. Waiting on call for aircrew aptitude test.

### **22 June**

Thursday. Rained heavily in morning. Squadron on standby. Caught up with a little correspondence. Aircrew aptitude test with Jack Fisher and Bob Blackwood, which wasn't easy. Heavy rainstorm, Squadron stood down. Photographs of Squadron printed. I ordered a set. In the evening, Jack and I visited the Wing theatre and saw the

film 'Ten Gentlemen from West Point', starring George Montgomery and Maureen O'Hara. Good entertainment.

## 24 June

Saturday. Quiet morning spent in tent. Finished reading a most interesting American historical novel, 'Rabble in Arms', written by Kenneth Roberts, based on the early days of the American War of Independence. Proceeded to strip in the afternoon. A few days previously, Joe said he would book the Wirraway for today, and, if either Tom or I would like to have a short flight over the island, he would only be too happy to take us up. Because it was getting close for us to be posted home, Tom declined the offer, but I accepted. Joe said 'grab yourself a parachute, Arthur, and we'll get cracking, and, when we get aloft, I will shake my head from side to side (the intercom was broken down), and you can take hold of the joy stick and have a little fly'. Joe also said that, because of the tremendous concentration of shipping in Seeadler Harbour, no aircraft, would be allowed to fly over the harbour (they would be shot down), so we would have to restrict our flying to around the edge of the island. I lost no time in getting a parachute (the harness of which did not fit) and climbed into the rear cockpit of the Wirraway. Joe soon had the motor started, and we taxied around from our maintenance area to the airstrip. It was only a short time before we had the green clearance for a take-off from the control tower, and the next thing I knew, we were racing down the airstrip, became airborne, and were climbing out over the sea. I could hardly suppress my excitement. I had flown before, but never in an open aircraft—this was a new experience. We continued to climb until we reached about 1500 or 2000 feet, then levelled off, banked to the left and approached Manus Island. The view was breathtaking. As we drew closer to the edge of the Island, it was possible to see the passage through the outer reef (a Liberty ship was entering at the time) which we had passed through the day we arrived at the Admiralties on the *Marcus Daly*. Within minutes, we were almost over the harbour, but, following instructions, there was a change in direction, to continue the course around the coastline. Looking at the harbour, I could hardly believe my eyes. By any stretch of the imagination, Seeadler Harbour is a large body of water, there are certain parts of it which disappear out of vision. Within this reef, fringed, natural, well protected area was gathered the greatest collection of ships that it would be possible to imagine. As far as I could see, ships were tucked away into every nook and cranny, while in the main body of the harbour, the 'heavies' were riding to their anchors. There were US Navy battleships, cruisers, destroyers, aircraft carriers, submarines, LSTs, motor torpedo boats, tugs, and, mixed up in this, were uncountable numbers of Liberty ships, loaded down to their marks. This great Armada formed a large part of the fleet that was being assembled to invade the Philippine Islands. It was easy to understand the 'trigger happy' nervousness of the Americans about any aircraft straying into their powder keg, and, if the Japanese had mounted a determined Kamikaze attack against this lot, well, the outcome is too horrible to contemplate. An overall view of such a large gathering of ships, at such an historic time comes to so few, and I consider myself fortunate that, along with Joe, we saw the cutting edge of one of the broadswords that helped to carve the way back to the heart of Japan.

It was about this point of our flight, that I felt Joe had shaken his head which was the signal for me to take hold of the joy stick, and get the feel of flight, which I did. I only held it for a few seconds, when Joe half turned around in his cockpit, and shook his

head strongly, indicating to me to leave the stick alone, which I promptly did. We banked to the left and followed the southern coastline on our way towards Momote airstrip. Headed in this direction, I caught a glimpse of the channel that separates Los Negros and Manus Islands, also our camp and maintenance areas. We started to lose height, and were getting lined up with the airstrip, when, all of a sudden there was one hell of a racket from an alarm Klaxon informing us that the wheels were down and locked into position—it frightened the bloody daylight out of me. Everything was now set for a landing—Joe had eased back on the throttle and we were making a good approach. Next thing we saw was two red flares fired from the control tower warning us not to land, but to bugger off and fly around again. Joe immediately gave the motor the gun, and began climbing away from the airstrip. Well, we went round again and without any untoward incidents, made another approach, got the green okay from the control tower, and made a good landing. It was not until we had taxied our way back from the airstrip to our maintenance area and climbed out of the Wirraway with Joe did I learn of the danger we had been in. It transpired, during the flight, that the radial engine could have ‘seized up’, that we could have dropped like a stone, and in all probability, both been killed. From the nose to the tail of the aircraft, including the windscreen, the fuselage was covered in oil. Joe had been flying blind, and how he managed a second flight around the circuit, I will never know. He apologised for the short duration of the flight, and the flying lesson, which I readily understood. I thanked him for getting us round safely, and back onto the ground. This was a close call.

### **25 June**

Sunday. Quiet morning in camp, worked at airstrip in the afternoon. Report of new CO arriving.

### **26 June**

Monday. Squadron on stand-down. Bob Blackwood, six others and myself were detailed to tidy up area around Officers’ Mess. Pilot Officer Hugh Kennare and Bob Dinsdale admitted to camp hospital with Dengue fever. Both very sick boys.

### **27 June**

Tuesday. Worked at airstrip in morning. Refitted armament to UP/L, guns have yet to be harmonised. Squadron Leader S.W. Galton (who apparently arrived yesterday) and previously of 85 Squadron, officially took over as CO of 79 Squadron. Early in the evening, a meeting was held in the Airmen’s Mess, where the adjutant introduced the new CO, after which the CO gave a pep talk. First impressions were good, but only his actions and time will support this. Liberator bombers continue to operate around the clock. A large number of dispersal bays, scrub clearings and even alongside minor roads and tracks are chock a block full of aviation spirit in 44 gallon drums, and stacks of bombs. It is a wonder the island doesn’t sink because of all this weight. Flight Lieutenant Max Brinsley is now OC of B Flight, and Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley is still doing a good job running the maintenance of B Flight. With the mail today I received my fourth comforts parcel from the Rockdale Council. These parcels are much appreciated and are organised and packed by a small group of local women who have sons, husbands and daughters serving with the armed forces. A party was organised in the Officers’ Mess this evening, which included the presence of seven

American nurses. Apparently spirits were running high and one of our officers, no doubt trying to big note himself, gave one of the nurses the Squadron Blue Peter flag. This flag which flew every day, was hoisted in the morning on a pole near the Orderly Room, where everybody could see it and was aware of it. Admittedly, it was a bit frayed around the edges, and had lost a little colour, but this wind worn piece of rag had draped the coffins of our departed boys, and no one had the right to give it away.

## **28 June**

Wednesday. On the way to the Mess this morning, I noticed a new flag flying. Inwardly I was seething. The flag incident resulting from the high spirited behaviour of one or two in the Officers' Mess the previous evening spread like wildfire and the men were angry. I proceeded to the airstrip and started to harmonise the guns on UP/L. This work was cancelled and I started an armament inspection on UP/O. B Flight strength at present time stood at five serviceable Spitfires—UP/C was with workshops undergoing engine change. The Wirraway was on B Flight maintenance strength. Afternoon off. It rained heavily. Did a little washing.

## **29 June**

Thursday. Squadron stand-down. I continued work on UP/L, but heavy rain interrupted harmonisation arrangements. I had heard about an aircraft assembly plant which the Americans had put together, not far from our maintenance area. In view of the close down due to the weather, a small group of us were given permission to take a Blitz waggon and go and have a look at this operation. To our amazement, the Americans had erected a very large portable hanger; the framework of which was built out of tubular steel interlocking scaffolding sections which bolted together. The whole area was then covered with large sheets of heavy duty waterproof canvas. This roof provided a spacious all weather working area, where, at one end, men were unpacking large wooden crates (shipped out direct from the USA) which contained aircraft components in an unassembled state. In a production line manner, teams of specialist mechanics were bolting together fighter aircraft. We had seen a similar plant at Milne Bay where trucks, Jeeps, Blitz waggons, etc were assembled, but to see such a highly sophisticated piece of equipment as a fighter aircraft put together in an assembly line fashion (in this war zone), had to be seen to be believed. Talking to a Master Sergeant, we were given to understand that a number of other aircraft were programmed for assembly here, eg. Kittyhawks, Thunderbolts, Lightnings, and that the current aircraft being worked on was a P61, a nightfighter known as the 'Black Widow'. In some respects it was similar to the P38 Lightning fighter, having twin motors, twin tail booms and a tricycle undercarriage. Here the similarity ended. The Black Widow was a much larger machine, somewhere between a fighter and medium bomber. It was powered by two twin row Pratt and Whitney radial engines, developing a total of 2000hp. It carried a crew of three with a power operated gun turret. Armament consisted of four 20mm cannons, four .50 calibre machine guns and it could be fitted with rockets. Wing spread was approximately 55 feet with a fuselage of 40 feet. When the assembled aircraft had reached the end of the line, it underwent a large number of testing checks, and when satisfactorily completing this examination, it was pushed out onto the tarmac area, filled with petrol, and run through a series of ground taxiing trials. On completion of these a test pilot took over and put the aircraft through an exhaustive combat style flying check. When all the bugs were finally

worked out and passed operationally sound, the aircraft took its place in a large parking lot to await despatch to an active area USAAF Squadron. The Black Widow is a most impressive looking aircraft.

This overall assembly operation was a further example of the high level of supply and production management carried out by the Americans. Mass production was an art form practiced by them and this is what will eventually submerge the Japanese.

The rain continued throughout the day, but stopped by late afternoon. In the evening Jack and I visited the 12<sup>th</sup> US Cavalry station where five boxing bouts took place. Our Johnny Maxwell participated in one of the bouts and won his heat. The boxing bouts were followed by an Abbott and Costello film, 'Who Done It?' All in all this was a most satisfactory day.

### **30 June**

Friday. Last day of the month. Proceeded to the airstrip and worked on UP/L all morning, completed harmonisation. In the afternoon, I popped across the road to 77 Squadron and called on a colleague, Max Johnson. Weather very humid. No mail. In the evening, a meeting was held in the Airmen's Mess where a number of men (including myself) gathered to protest about the gift giving of our original flag to an American nurse. Feelings ran high about this incident, several of the men expressed themselves quite clearly and strongly about their disgust at the Officer's behaviour. The Adjutant and the CO were present. The CO was surprised at the extent of the men's feelings. He apologised on behalf of the Officers' Mess and promised to have the flag returned. The men were satisfied and the meeting broke up.

### **1 July**

Saturday. Surprise! Surprise! The old flag was back on the flag pole. The CO must have approached the nurse, explained the position, and retaken possession last night. Squadron on early standby. Worked at airstrip in morning. Liberator bombers still operating at strength. No mail.

### **2 July**

Sunday. Squadron stand-down. Rained in morning, heat oppressive toward midday. Joe Marshall with several other aircrew proceeded on home leave. In the evening I attended a lecture given by our Intelligence Officer about the progress of the war. This brought us up to date, and was most interesting.

### **3 July**

Monday. Morning off. Worked at strip in afternoon. UP/P pranged at northern end of airstrip, blew a tyre on landing, damage slight, aircraft repairable. A P-61 Black Widow put on an aerobatic display over airstrip, most impressive. In the evening, Jack and I visited the US Acorn theatre and saw the film 'Watch on the Rhine' starring Paul Lucas and Bette Davis. This was a first class show. When we returned to our tent, we made a cup of tea, and, while we were enjoying this, an American soldier walked into the tent. He said he was selling watches, and promptly pulled up his shirt

sleeves to reveal both forearms covered with wrist watches. They appeared to be of high quality. The soldier went on to talk about the price, and also about a whole range of other merchandise he could procure. He spoke, without stopping, for about fifteen minutes. He had the greatest line of bullshit I have ever heard. Nobody made a purchase. I think we all had the feeling that his goods were stolen from the US PX stores.

#### **4 July**

Tuesday. American Independence Day. Morning off. Worked at airstrip in the afternoon. Spent the evening at home in the tent.

#### **5 July**

Wednesday. Squadron stand-down. Jack Fisher, Bluey Leonard, Bob Willot and I decided on a trip to Manus Island. We left our camp about 8.45am, got a lift down to near the airstrip, and hitch-hiked a ride on a truck around Momote, which dropped us about 9.30am at the Dragoon Pier on the foreshore of Seeadler Harbour. From here we boarded a launch/ferry service which took us across the harbour. During the course of the passage, we threaded our way past a flying boat base under construction. A great number of merchant ships swinging to their anchors and cut in close to three Liberty ships, the *Edwin Booth*, *Walter Colton*, the *Westward Ho*. We arrived at a busy small boat quay on Manus Island at about 11.00am.

We were overwhelmed by the scene that confronted us. The planning, development and construction that had taken place here within such a short time after the invasion was unbelievable. A deep-water pier had been built out into the harbour. This enabled cargo ships such as the Liberty to unload quickly on both sides of the pier. Along with enlisted longshoremen, the pier was well equipped with cranes, fork lift trucks etc, which ensured the fast removal of cargo. Hundreds of large Quonsett/Nissen huts had been erected. These were all numbered and laid out in street fashion. These in turn were connected to an all weather road system, which fanned out from the pier. These Quonsett/Nissen huts housed the substantial tonnage of war material that was being shipped out from the US. In every sense of the word, Manus Island was an arsenal.

Speaking with a US Navy Chief Petty Officer (CPO), he said that from these stores, they could completely revictual a naval ship from a needle and thread, a Gob's hat (sailor's cap), a tin of pork and beans, anchors and chains, and, if need be, a new set of engines for a destroyer. But, then again, having seen the big way the Americans operate, I should not have had any doubts about the new set of engines. I was also given to understand that a well-equipped shore-based engineering workshop had been built, and, from where we were standing, the CPO pointed out a floating dock that had been towed out from the west coast of the US across the Pacific Ocean. This important facility was to be used for the docking and repair of ships of up to about 8000 tons. The living quarters built for the officers and men were well designed and laid out, and, wherever possible, small and colourful tropical gardens had been established. I have the feeling that the Americans intend to stay.

In the meantime, midday had crept up on us, and it was time to find somewhere for lunch. This problem was soon solved when we approached the camp of the 44<sup>th</sup> 'Sea Bees'. Yes, they were only too happy to have us 'Aussies' join them for lunch. These naval construction boys worked 24-hours around the clock. They worked hard and were responsible for the tremendous amount of construction we had seen all about us. As such, they required the best food and catering facilities that could be provided. They built themselves a huge open sided, airy, fly wire covered building, complete with an air trap to keep out insects. The concrete floor was covered with large, freshly painted tables and seating forms. On each table in use, white jugs of fruit juice were placed, and messmen moved about the hall wiping down the tables and sweeping the floor. The stainless galley, fitted out with electric ovens, refrigerators etc would have done any first class hotel proud. The meal queue hadn't started to move when we arrived, and, just before starting, we saw a CPO closely inspecting and turning over the hands of the cooks, and checking out the cleanliness of all the white gear they were wearing.

This hygienic approach to Mess management was far removed from the slap dash treatment practised by our cooks. Quite often, because of the heat, they would only be wearing a pair of shorts, covered by a dubiously white apron, boots, no shirt or headgear, and, with perspiration running down their hairy chests (or otherwise). They would plop the food into your dixie, as if they were doing you a favour.

When the queue started to move, we passed through the air lock into the main hall where we picked up an aluminium tray and cutlery. The tray was pressed into shape containing four or five bowls, and, as we moved past the cooks, the main meal and a sweet were deposited in the bowls. The queue moved quickly, all was clean and hygienic and the meal was tasty and satisfying. On our way out of the hall, we thanked the CPO for having us to lunch, pushed our trays through a small bench high door, where they were quickly whisked away to a washing up area. Around 3.00pm we left the island, returning via the same route as we had arrived and reached our camp around 5.00pm. The visit to Manus was an experience I am sure we will long remember. Spent evening quietly at home.

### **6 July**

Thursday. Morning off. Worked in the afternoon. Inspection on UP/? due any time. Pay day. Rained heavily in the morning, spent night at home in tent.

### **7 July**

Friday. Morning off. Worked at airstrip in the afternoon. Started armament inspection on UP/?. Worked steadily throughout afternoon and finished late, but enjoyed the job. Bob Blackwood still in hospital with Dengue fever. Visited Wing theatre in the evening, seeing the film 'Footlight Serenade', starring Betty Grable and John Payne. Just average.

### **8 July**

Saturday. Squadron stand-down, easy morning. In the afternoon, Tom, Jack, Bluey and I visited a nearby ocean lagoon to look for some cats eyes, a type of attractive

small sea shell, suitable for making hand made jewellery, and to have a swim. Didn't find too many worthwhile cat's eyes, but we did enjoy the swim. Squadron Leader Galton still the CO, with Flying Officer Scott as OC of C Flight, and Flight Lieutenant Warren Napier acting OC of B Flight. On the maintenance side, Squadron seems to be functioning quite well. Flight Lieutenant Bob Palmer, who runs the Workshop area is doing a good job, and Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley, Flight Sergeant Des O'Brien and Sergeant Jim Morvel, are worthy of special mention. What a team of NCOs they are. We have now entered our fourteenth month of overseas service. No mail.

### **9 July**

Sunday. Morning off, caught up with some writing. Bluey just walked into the tent with a carton of beer he bought on the black market. He was pleased as punch. Worked at the strip in the afternoon. Considerable air activity over strip. Several flights of DC3s arrived. Pilot Flight Sergeant Bob Rice arrived back from home leave. Flying Officer Doug Scott proceeded on leave. In the evening we attended another lecture given in our Mess by the Intelligence Officer on the progress of the war, most interesting. After the lecture, when we had returned to our tent, Bluey generously opened his carton of beer and shared it with us. A good evening and thick heads were had by all. No mail.

### **10 July**

Monday. Change of shift, worked at airstrip in the morning. Started 280 hourly armament inspection on UP/L, the veteran Spitty is still going strong. Bluey and Bob Willot won a ballot draw for a trip on the destroyer HMAS *Arunta*. Much to our sorrow, four great blokes have been posted out of the Squadron to No 10 Repair and Salvage Unit; Bluey Finlay (mechanic), Harry Chandler (our own mechanic), Morgan and Shearing, both mechanics. Tom and I will particularly miss Harry. He was a lovely quiet fellow, off the land, and possessed a dry sense of humour.

### **11 July**

Tuesday. Squadron on stand-down. Rained heavily throughout the night and continued well into the morning. In the evening, we all visited the Wing theatre, seeing (for the second time) the film 'Gentleman Jim' starring Errol Flynn, Alexis Smith and Alan Hale. Great entertainment. No mail.

### **12 July**

Wednesday. Worked at the strip in the morning, afternoon off. Caught up with some washing. For some time I had been thinking about doing a correspondence course. General education attracted my interest, particularly the course outlined by the British Institute of Technology. I obtained the necessary literature from the institute, and submitted an enrolment form. Tom went guarantor on the course. A little mail arrived.

### **13 July**

Thursday. Early morning standby. Worked at strip in the morning. Apart from routine duties, nothing out of the ordinary happened. No mail.

### **14 July**

Friday. Rained heavily throughout the morning. Squadron stood down. Bluey and I cleaned, and retopped the floor of the tent. Our habitat looks a little more respectable now. Strong rumours circulating that 76, 77 Squadrons, MCS, 4RC, 49 OBU and 7 TMO will be moving out. Aircrew from a visiting RAAF amphibious Catalina flying boat staying with the Squadron. Flying Officer Gillie Wright and Flight Lieutenant Warren Napier arrived back from leave. In the evening, Jack and I visited the Wing theatre, seeing the film 'Laugh your Blues Away', starring Jinx Falkenburg. She is one hell of a good looker, but the movie was just average entertainment.

### **15 July**

Saturday. Rained heavily throughout the morning, work at airstrip held up. Finished inspection on UP/L aircraft flown by Warrant Officer 'Jock' Haines. Everything proved satisfactory. An American Douglas DC-4 arrived, most impressive aircraft. Afternoon off. No mail. In the evening our three old 3 Squadron veterans, Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley, Sergeant Jim Morvel and Sergeant Des O'Brien attended a reunion at Wing, hosted by Group Captain Gordon Steege and attended by a sprinkling of other 3 Squadron officers and men. I understand a good evening was had by all.

### **16 July**

Sunday. C Flight on early morning standby. Worked at airstrip in morning. UP/G and UP/O had to be rearmed, guns on UP/G fired very well, one cannon stopped on UP/O. Booster/link stripper trouble. In company with Jack Shields and Bob Willot, we visited the nearby American maintenance workshop. While here, we spoke with several USAAF aircrew. They were most interesting chaps, one of them mentioned, that on 14 July, three Liberator bombers, flying in tight formation, collided in mid-air, all the crews were killed. Another amphibious RAAF Catalina flying boat was parked in our maintenance area. This provided an excellent opportunity to have a close look at these most versatile aircraft. I would have given anything to have been a member of its crew. Afternoon off. No mail. In the evening I attended a lecture given by our Security Officer, Flying Officer Smale. Most interesting.

### **17 July**

Monday. Rained heavily throughout morning. Squadron stood down. A Liberator bomber blew a tyre on landing, aircraft was a complete write-off. Thank heavens all the aircrew escaped uninjured. A new craze seems to have swept through the Squadron—volleyball is in full swing. A court has been built near the Administration building, and, from early sun up until sunset, seven days a week, you would see 'off-duty' personnel thrashing out a game to loud accompaniment of cheers and boos, which could be heard throughout the camp. Along with the game, new aircrew and

ground staff seem to be arriving. It's not like the early days when everyone knew everyone. Spent the evening in the tent. No mail.

### **18 July**

Tuesday. We are certainly getting our share of rain; the heavens seem to open up and drench us at the most unexpected times. Moving about, one always needs to take a ground sheet along to provide some protection from the weather. This morning, Ian McLean and I visited a nearby US Army camp, where we were able to buy some clothes. Their shirts, trousers etc were made of first class material. Worked at the airstrip in the afternoon. UP/M had a test firing, armament worked very well, cleared the machine guns and cannons, and rearmed the aircraft. Enjoyed the job. Quite a few of the lads are suffering from severe dermatitis and infected ears. Scotty Ralston was one such case. He was so bad with dermatitis and ear problems he had to be sent south for intensive hospital treatment. So far, I have escaped this problem. No mail. Still raining.

### **19 July**

Wednesday. Rained heavily throughout the night and well into the morning. Our hep-cat DJ has just played a jive record over the camp loud speaker system—this should get every foot-tapping airman on the move. Was able to buy a few photos from the Squadron photographer, Robinson. It was like getting blood out of a stone. UP/G was slightly damaged at the maintenance area when an American truck backed into it during the early hours of this morning. Worked at airstrip in the afternoon. UP/? had a short flight and an armament test-firing was spasmodic, one or two gun stoppages, problem identified on landing and soon rectified. Squadron on late airstrip standby. The CO, Squadron Leader Galton called a maintenance meeting to discuss servicing problems. He raised some good points and came over well. This evening we received our first beer ration, this consisted of three small bottles of American Regal Pale. It was enjoyable, but tasted more like lolly water than our own strong beer. Heavy rain clouds building up. We could be in for one hell of a downpour.

### **20 July**

Thursday. Squadron stand-down. Rain didn't eventuate. We started out with a beautiful day. This was the signal for us to hop in and do our washing—the primus burner worked overtime. Later in the morning, I was detailed, with working party, to assist with the erection of a four pole marquee for our stores officer, Flight Lieutenant Bob Palmer. This was a rather large marquee, which required a great deal of physical effort. Eventually we had it standing. It was very hot work, so I took off my shirt, and put it down nearby. Sure enough some thieving bastard stole it. I reported the loss to the stores officer, and had it replaced. In the evening a further beer ration and a bottle of Coca-Cola. Some mail from home arrived which made life a little more bearable. Jack played two-up this evening and lost £35, while Bluey, who also played the game, won £65. A special action war film was run in the Airmen's Mess. It showed bombing and fighter aircraft techniques used by the USAAF (possibly from the 5<sup>th</sup> or 307<sup>th</sup> bomber groups), and was loaned to the RAAF by the USAAF. The action photography was fantastic. The evening closed with a feature film 'Tortilla Flat',

starring Spencer Tracy, John Garfield, Hedy Lamarr and Allen Jenkins, and that character actor Akim Tamiroff. It was a great evening's entertainment.

### **21 July**

Friday. Light rain in the morning. Pottered about in the tent. Worked at airstrip in the afternoon, and carried out some gun maintenance on UP/M.

### **22 July**

Saturday. Fine sunny day, temperature very high. Jack and Bluey are making some very nice brooches which they hope to sell to the Americans. Worked at the airstrip in the afternoon. Recent inactivity becoming tiresome. Enjoyed a chat with Flight Lieutenant Warren Napier. He is quite a decent chap. He served with an RAF Fighter Squadron in England, and related some of his experiences. A good looking man of average height, he was always well turned out. He had a shock of sandy coloured hair, a respectable RAF handle bar moustache, and, most times, wore a white or coloured cravat, as many RAF types were wont to do. His constant companion was a pipe, which he appeared to enjoy. Following my talk with Warren, I paid a short visit to the Liberator workshops which operated close to our own maintenance area. I had struck up a friendship with two USAAF mechanics, and it was always a pleasure to chew the fat with them. No mail this evening.

### **23 July**

Sunday. Squadron stood down. Very warm and humid in the morning. Played cards (500) with Jack, Tom and Bluey—this was always great fun, lots of shouting and laughter. After lunch, we had a very heavy downpour of rain, but it eased off and we were able to boil the copper and do some washing. Lately, I seem to have developed a terrible fear of aircraft—the slightest bump, crash or loud noise makes me nervous. As I write these notes, the daily force of Liberator bombers is returning to base. They make a great sight, but the noise level is high. At long last, I now have a complete set of Squadron photos. Robby, the photographer, must have made a packet of money out of this operation. News on the grapevine reports that Flight Lieutenant Jim Richards is a test and ferry pilot at Laverton RAAF Base in Victoria, and, that his mate, Flight Lieutenant Peter Birch is stationed at my former base of Mildura.

Another tragic aircraft accident took place early this evening. A Liberator bomber returning to base after fighting its way back from raiding the Japanese base at Yap, collided with an ambulance at the end of the airstrip. The ambulance was waiting to rush the critically injured bomb aimer from the bomber to hospital. The hydraulic system on the bomber had been severely damaged, which, among other functions rendered its braking system quite useless. The bomber collided with the ambulance, killing a flight surgeon, the ambulance driver, and I understand, the bombardier died later. This happened about 4.30pm.

### **25 July**

Tuesday. Worked at the airstrip in the morning. Another fine aerobatic display between a Spitfire and Grumman Hellcats. Rumours have it that advance parties of 76

and 77 Squadrons will move out within the next two days. There was a meeting today of all our section leaders. Something will break soon. Received some mail.

## 26 July

Wednesday. As from today, 79 Squadron takes over complete fighter control of the island. Started work at 5.30am this morning. B Flight on standby at airstrip. In the half-light of dawn, and standing with 'Boong' Willingham, Jack and Bluey, we watched 24 Liberator bombers take to the air on another bombing mission. Thank goodness there were no accidents. A number of Douglas DC3s were parked near the TMO area. This tends to support the view that 76 and 77 Squadrons will soon be on the move. Afternoon off. This afternoon, Flying Officer Darcie (Tasmanian) flying UP/C did a very low shoot-up flight over one of our perimeter taxiways and cut a number of telephone cables crossing the taxiway. Fortunately, Darcie landed safely, but considerable damage was done to the underside of the aircraft. This sort of flying was dangerous and against the rules. In all probability he was reprimanded by the CO. In the evening Jack and I popped over to the Wing and saw the film 'The Flying Tigers', starring John Wayne. Good entertainment. No mail.



*A gathering of B Flight maintenance men in front of Spitfire UP/A on Los Negros Island (Momote Airstrip 1944)*

*(L-R): Harry Chandler, Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley, Blue Findlay  
Kneeling: 'Boong' Willingham*

## 27 July

Thursday. As a result of the heavy air traffic operating from Momote airstrip, urgent repairs had to be carried out. The Squadron was on early standby, and B Flight was temporarily transferred to operate from Mockerang airstrip. The construction of

Mockerang was a fantastic piece of aerodrome engineering. Complete with supporting taxiways, the design embraced a very long, very wide, crushed coral, all weather airstrip. The width of the strip allowed two Liberator bombers to take-off abreast. This was quite remarkable, and while we were parked there, we saw such a take-off and landing take place. There was also a smaller emergency strip. Where construction was concerned, there were no half measures by the Yanks.

As a result of Flying Officer Darcie's low flying antics yesterday, a new port mainplane has to be fitted to UP/C, the guns were removed this morning. The command structure of the Squadron was reannounced this evening. Squadron Leader Galton is still the CO. Flight Lieutenant Ron Susans is the OC of B Flight, with Flight Lieutenant Galway as the deputy OC. Flight Lieutenant 'Gillie' Wright is the OC of C Flight, with Flight Lieutenant Warren Napier as the deputy OC. At the present time, there is a degree of unrest among the men. The feeling is, that after three major island moves, twelve months working in these tropical conditions is quite long enough for any man. What with the indifferent rations, Dengue and Malaria fevers, the constant heat and rain, we are nearly worn out and down to skin and bone. The rumours of moving again also tend to add an element of discontent. Perhaps we will hear what is going to take place soon. Received some mail from home this evening. My sister, Doris, mentioned that my brother-in-law, Ed Bosley, Sergeant in the 7<sup>th</sup> Division artillery, had passed the OTC at Woodville in South Australia, and on the 20<sup>th</sup> of this month had been posted to Darwin as a Lieutenant attached to the artillery.

## **28 July**

Friday. Early morning standby. During the forenoon our aircraft were ferried back to Momote airstrip. Since joining the Squadron at Woolomanata in Victoria, I have been impressed by the leadership and skill of a number of the men working around me. Working under adverse conditions with a shortage of tools and equipment, they have kept the aircraft flying. I feel the following men deserve special mention: Flight Lieutenant Bob Palmer, engineering officer Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley, Flight Sergeant Des O'Brien, Sergeant Jim Morvel, Corporal Pat Taylor, Corporal Rus Schroeter, Corporal Laurie Whittle, Sergeant Les Borgelt, Corporal Clyde Woodbridge, Leading Aircraftsman Andy Anderson, Leading Aircraftsman McDonald, Leading Aircraftsman Chappel. There was a further issue of American 'lolly water' beer, fifteen bottles for 8/3d. No mail.

## **29 July**

Saturday. Truly a beautiful morning. Squadron on early standby. UP/G finished 160 hourly inspection, was test flown, everything satisfactory. Afternoon off, finished a spot of washing, then tidied up tent. Picked up beer ration from store, this was doled out at three bottles per issue. Intermittent heavy rain fell early in the evening, so we decided to play cards. Rain finally set in and continued heavy throughout the night.

## **30 July**

Sunday. The catering/messing section was short of staff, so a roster was drawn up calling for assistance from the other sections of the Squadron. Along with Merv Haswell and Bob Blackwood, I worked in the kitchen throughout the morning. Our

duties were mainly cleaning and, in a minor way, helping to prepare food arrangements for the next meal. Down at the airstrip this morning, one of our Spitfires UP/? piloted by Flight Lieutenant Galway, collided with a Liberator bomber while taxiing past the USAAF 9<sup>th</sup> Service Workshop area. No one was injured, a wing tip on the bomber and propeller on the Spitfire were damaged, both can be repaired. In the evening I attended a talk in the Airmen's Mess given by our Intelligence Officer about the forthcoming Federal Referendum. The idea behind the talk was to present the 'Yes' and 'No' points of view about the Referendum. At the conclusion of the talk, the meeting was thrown open for discussion—this was a stimulating exercise and capped off an enjoyable evening. A little mail arrived.

### **31 July**

Monday. Change of shift, worked at airstrip in the afternoon. Heavy rain, looks like continuing. At approximately 11.30am the crew of the Catalina flying boat were called to attention. Two of our Spitfires UP/V and UP/Z, flown by their respective pilots, Flight Lieutenant 'Gillie' Wright and Flying Officer Jim Barrie were carrying out practice attacks against a flight of Liberator bombers. On completion of the exercise, and in the process of returning to base, the aircraft encountered heavy weather over the island. In an endeavour to find their way down through the muck, both aircraft ran short of fuel and the pilots had to bail out over the water. They landed safely and later were picked up by the Catalina. The Spitfires were received into the all embracing arms of King Neptune. A little mail arrived. Spent the evening in the tent.

### **1 August**

Tuesday. First day of the month. This was a stand-down day for Ian McLean, Clancy and myself, so we decided to make an early start and visit Manus Island. Proceeding via the usual method of hitching a ride by truck to Seeadler Harbour, then by ferry, we arrived at Manus Island around 10.00am. We visited a US Navy store and bought a few items of clothing. Following this, we called into the 35<sup>th</sup> 'Sea Bee' Mess where we enjoyed a meal. We were made most welcome by Chief Petty Officer 'Chuck' Moran, who hailed from Portales in New Mexico. After the meal, and when he had finished his shift, he invited us back to his quarters, where we enjoyed a cup of coffee and a most enlightening talk about the US. We arrived back at our camp at 4.00pm. A good day was had by all. In the evening, we visited the Wing theatre and saw the film 'Young Tom Edison', which starred Mickey Rooney (as young Tom) and Fay Bainter as his mother. This was an outstanding biographical film, one of the best we have seen. No mail.

### **2 August**

Wednesday. Very warm in the morning. Did some washing and reading. Worked at strip in the afternoon. Another DC4 arrived. No mail.

### **3 August**

Thursday. Very warm in the morning. Jack and Bluey went for a swim in a nearby ocean lagoon. I worked at the airstrip in the afternoon. A friend of Jack's and a fellow

Gippslander, Bob Dinsdale, had been posted back to the mainland, so we decided to bust into our beer ration and give him a send off. It was a great evening. Those present were Jack Fisher, Bruce Leonard, Bob Willot, Bob Blackwood, Tom Neill, yours truly, and, of course, the guest of honour, Bob Dinsdale. The exhausted combatants retired from the field of battle about 2.30am. Poor old Bob was due for an early departure about 5.30am.

#### **4 August**

Friday. A very warm morning. Lingered a little longer in the cot following the heady activities of the previous evening. Loading operations started on a Liberty ship in Seeadler Harbour to move 76 and 77 Squadrons, also other support units. We were also advised to return our webbing, gas masks and rifles to our store. It will be a relief to unburden ourselves of this baggage. Looks as if this could be an indication of our own move. Rumours flying thick and fast. Worked at airstrip in the afternoon. Received course guarantee back from British Institute.

#### **5 August**

Saturday. In the morning, Ian McLean, Bluey and I were recruited to work in the equipment store, checking and packing gas masks. The time passed quickly enough. In the afternoon I worked at the airstrip until 4.00pm. A number of men from 77 Squadron have been billeted with our Squadron. In the evening along with Reg Willingham, Col Davidson and Max Cordell, we were recruited for night work to assist with the loading arrangements of a Liberty ship in Seeadler Harbour. This ship had been booked to move 76 and 77 Squadrons. Our particular duties involved loading the trucks at the air stores park, and riding jockey on the trucks to the harbour. We started work at 5.00pm and worked steadily throughout the night and finished at 4.00am the next morning. Pilot Officer Hugh Kennare was the duty officer at the wharf. On finishing, Reg and I enjoyed a light snack in our kitchen back at the camp, and then climbed wearily into bed.

#### **6 August**

Sunday. Very tired, very tired. Stayed in the cot until 11.00am, then freshened myself with an invigorating shower. Had lunch, then did a spot of washing. An accident occurred in the camp this afternoon, which could have had tragic results. One of our men Bill Tester, was syphoning some aviation spirit from a 44 gallon drum for use with his petrol 'choofer', when the fumes from the petrol vapour were ignited by a nearby fire. There was an immediate explosion—Bill's tent and nearby Reg Britton's tent were burned to the ground. All this happened within minutes. Bill managed to save most of his personal gear, but in the process he was badly burned about the arms. In the evening, Jack, Tom and I popped over to the Wing theatre, and saw the film 'Slightly Dangerous', starring the lovely Lana Turner and Robert Young. Good light entertainment. No mail.

#### **7 August**

Monday. Rained heavily throughout the night and continued on and off all day. Change of shift—early morning standby at airstrip. Squadron on thirty minutes notice.

Two replacement Spitfires arrived from Port Moresby late yesterday afternoon, and were now undergoing acceptance checks. Afternoon off. Much too wet for any outside activity, so I spent the time writing and reading. A little mail arrived which brightened our spirits. Loading operations at Seeadler Harbour still continuing and both 76 and 77 Squadrons almost ready to move. Men from 77 Squadron still eating in our Mess. Our tent members are still the same, Tom Neill, Jack Fisher, Bluey Leonard, Bob Blackwood and yours truly. Merve James is still on leave.

### **8 August**

Tuesday. Weather continues rainy and squally, nevertheless, appreciably cooler. The 80 hourly inspection was started this morning on UP/M. This Spitfire is now the responsibility of Tom and me. We hopped in and finished the job early. I am eagerly awaiting my first lesson from the correspondence school—much time is wasted. When I complete this course, I will feel that I have achieved something worthwhile. We are now entering our fifteenth month of overseas tropical service. The continuous heat and rain is wearing us down. It will be great to get back home again. In the evening we enjoyed a cup of tea and a chat around the table.

### **9 August**

Wednesday. Finished a few last minute jobs on UP/M, and then signed her armament check as OK. About 10.00am this morning, three US Navy Grumman Wildcats exercised over the airstrip with two of our Spitfires. Once again, it was a wonderful aerobatic display, but the Wildcats were outclassed from the beginning. Another replacement Spitfire flew in from Port Moresby. The steady arrival of the aircraft seems to scotch rumours about our Squadron's imminent departure from the Admiralty Islands. Afternoon off. Did a spot of washing. Some mail from home arrived. News from sister Doris that our cousin Ron Small had returned south after spending four months in New Guinea. Ron was an Infanteer with the 2/4<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

### **10 August**

Thursday. Early morning standby at airstrip. Attended to UP/G, which in company with UP/? and flown by their respective pilots, Flight Lieutenant Yates and Sergeant Pollard were sent out to look for the aircrew of a missing Liberator bomber. Both aircraft returned safely, but the pilots failed to sight any trace of the aircrew. Engine inspection still proceeding on UP/M. Around 10.30am this morning, a Liberator bomber, when roaring along the airstrip, just prior to becoming airborne, met with a nasty accident. Its two starboard motors cut out, the aircraft crashed into a bank and within seconds, became a total wreck. Miraculously the plane didn't catch fire, and there was no explosion. Apart from a very severe shake up, thank God, all the crew escaped unhurt. If this engine failure had occurred a few minutes later when the aircraft became airborne, this would have been a totally different story. For the record, the bomber had completed 62 raids over Japanese held bases, and the air gunners had claimed four enemy aircraft to their credit. Quite a performance. Corporal 'Woody' Woodbridge, who had been granted a short leave on compassionate family grounds, arrived back at the Squadron today. He was a fitter-armourer by mustering, a quiet, decent, no nonsense bloke with a good, dry sense of humour. It was good to see him back again. A little mail arrived, and in return, I posted the second payment of 30/- to

the British Institute of Engineering Technology off my correspondence course. In the evening, Jack and I hitched a ride to the USAAF 307<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group theatre and saw the film, 'Old Acquaintance', starring Bette Davis. Good entertainment.

### **11 August**

Friday. Early morning standby at the airstrip. As daylight began to creep in, it developed into a beautiful clear morning. Two replacement Spitfires have completed their acceptance checks and have been given their Squadron identification numerals. We now have another UP/V, and, bless my soul, another UP/A. For nostalgic reasons, Tom and I would have liked to have been transferred as maintenance crew to UP/A, but it was not to be. Furthermore, we would have had to transfer to C Flight, and we were happy working for Jim Jelley in B Flight. Inspection on UP/M proceeding, seems as if it will never end. In the forenoon, a Liberator bomber, on landing, either made a heavy landing, and blew a nose wheel, or the aircraft got out of control. It finished up on the bank, and was a complete write-off. Fortunately, all the aircrew escaped uninjured. The bomber had participated in a large number of missions against the Japanese, and its gunners claimed three enemy aircraft. Afternoon off, a little tired and weary, so caught up with some spine bashing. In the evening, a special meeting was held in the Airmen's Mess. Letters of commendation were handed to several members of our Fire Tender crew, who were on duty the night the Liberator bomber crashed at the end of Momote airstrip on the night of 27 May 1944. Apparently on this tragic night, our boys did a very good job, and the higher command of 13<sup>th</sup> USSAF Group, felt it fit and proper that the names of our boys should go forward for this unit Commendation. Coming from our Allies, this was a unique tribute. It was a heart-warming evening.

### **12 August**

Saturday. Early morning standby at the airstrip. Following the early morning 'run up' of the engine, and aircraft readiness check, the ground crews were want to gather at times and enjoy a brief chin wag. This morning, Ian McLean (or old 'Mac' as we used to call him) and Bill Fuller, got our heads together to chew the fat. Invariably, conversation ranged over current rumours, squadron gossip, the latest joke or politics. This morning, we dealt briefly with politics and the forthcoming referendum. Before enlisting, Ian was teaching at a one teacher school at Mount Buffalo in Victoria. From what I gathered, he loved the children, and got on well with most of the parents and people in the small town. He had the most engaging big smile, with a personality to match. Always loved a joke, had a fund of stories to relate, and always gave me the feeling that he never took life too seriously. Any time spent with Ian McLean was definitely to your advantage. At long last the inspection of UP/M was completed. The aircraft was flown by Sergeant Pollard, who gave it the okay. In the afternoon Blue was rostered to work at the Mess, and Jack and I gave our petrol 'choofer' burner a quick overhaul. A little mail arrived. All is well at home.

### **13 August**

Sunday. Weather fine at the moment, but, looking at the scattered cloud cover moving about, it could build into a storm. The new, or reconditioned Spitfire UP/A was test flown by the CO Squadron Leader Galton—everything proved satisfactory. The maintenance is to be carried out by C Flight. At this point in time, there appears to be

a degree of unrest among the men. This could be attributed to a number of reasons, among those being the reduced flying activity and involvement in operation, and the monotony of the food. After all, there is a limit to the number of ways the cooks can disguise tinned bully beef. There was also the incident of Flight Lieutenant Ron Susans' and Flight Lieutenant 'Gillie' Wright's breaking into the food store. In all probability, it must have been done for a lark, because the aircrew were basically eating much the same food as the ground staff. Nevertheless, it doesn't go down too well with the troops when Commissioned Officers get up to these antics. Mail arrived. In the evening we all spent time around the big central table writing letters home. I voted 'yes' in the referendum. The reason being that, after a week or two of discussion among the boys, and listening to arguments for and against the Referendum outside the tent, I arrived at a 'yes' decision because I felt the Federal Government (either Labor or Liberal) needed the inclusion of the extra powers, numbering 14, to the Federal Constitution to help the Federal and State Governments to be better placed toward working for a full employment society throughout Australia in the post war reconstruction years.

#### **14 August**

Monday. During the early hours of the morning, it started to rain and built up in intensity right up to lunchtime, when it eased off and finally stopped. Because of the rain, the Squadron was on a readiness standby position, our flight was on thirty minutes notice. A number of men from 77 Squadron are still sharing our Mess. Something seems to be lacking with the movement control of 77 Squadron. Talking with one of the men, he informed me that the ship was finally loaded, and that right at the last moment, just before the ship shoved off, twelve men were hurriedly placed on board, and all most of them possessed was what they stood up in. Goodness only knows what happened to their personal gear. In the evening, a meeting was held in the Airmen's Mess to discuss our food position. The meeting was presided over by Warrant Officer Haines, (aircrew). Ian McLean represented B Flight. All the other sections had a representative.

#### **15 August**

Tuesday. The weather was lovely this morning. I was able to get some washing done. Although we wear rags, they still have to be clean. The clothing position is getting grim. A few weeks ago, a list was called for from those men who required replacement clothing. Well, it was the same old story, by the time airstrip personnel could get to the store most of the clothing had been given out. Three days ago, Sergeant Jim Morvell and Flight Sergeant Tom Opie flew to Port Moresby to check on two Spitfires waiting delivery to the Squadron. Several of the lads procured a damaged workboat, which they repaired and fitted out with a motor that had been part of a 'Light Generation Plant'. The boat floated and the engine worked, so the boys were able to putter about a nearby lagoon and make their way, via a connecting creek, into Seeadler Harbour. They carried out a first class job. The airstrip control tower was rebuilt and made much higher—this should be a great help to the pilots. A further 'food' meeting was held this evening in the Airmen's Mess, some good may come out of this meeting.

**16 August**

Wednesday. Rained heavily throughout the night, and continued well into the day. Both flights on notice. Reported to airstrip about 10.00am. Current rumour suggests that the 13<sup>th</sup> USAAF Bomber Command, based on the island, will shortly be moving out. Yesterday, several flights of Lockheed Lightning fighters made a spectacular arrival at our airstrip. Looking back over the months since our landing, one can't help but be impressed by the way the Americans get things done. I am pleased that we are working with them, side by side, and not fighting against them. Toward late afternoon, the daily flight of Liberator bombers returned—the heavy rain caused considerable confusion over the airstrip. One bomber landed safely with a dead motor. Upon returning to camp, we received a further beer and cigarette ration, consisting of six tins of American beer, six packets of cigarettes and two cigars—for which we paid. I kept the beer and gave the cigarettes and cigars to Jack and Tom. A general parade embracing the men of 77 Squadron was held. In the evening, Jack, Tom and I popped over to the Wing theatre and saw several first class action films, which had been loaned to our Wing entertainment section, carried out by USAAF Squadrons operating from England, showing the bombing, strafing and fighting action over Europe. The results were devastating. There was also an excellent film coverage of the Pacific Theatre and this was followed by a first class documentary highlighting the drama associated with the construction of an oil pipeline from Texas to New Jersey on the Atlantic seaboard. This evening was a feast of film viewing.

**17 August**

Thursday. Rained heavily throughout the morning, eased off toward lunchtime. The following aircrew on leave: Pilot Officer Hugh Kennare, Pilot Officer George Vader, Pilot Officer Smith, with Joe Marshall and Flying Officer Dickie Long a little overdue from leave. Considerable air activity over airstrip. Grumman Hellcats turning on a good display. In the afternoon, two more reconditioned Spitfires arrived from Port Moresby, this brings the Squadron near up to strength again. No mail.

**18 August**

Friday. Fine morning. After breakfast, I finished some washing and wrote some letters, Jack started hand work on a tortoise shell watchband, should be a nice job when finished. I bought a sheath knife from a hustling Yank working through the camp for 30/-, which will be ideal for a fishing kit. Worked at the airstrip in the afternoon. At long last, our hole in the wall canteen managed to secure some goods for sale that the men had need of, eg. toothpaste and brushes, soap, writing materials, a little tinned fruit. Flying Officers Dickie Long and Joe Marshall returned from leave, and Flight Sergeant Tom Opie and Sergeant Jim Morvel returned from Port Moresby. There is a hot story doing the rounds of the camp at the moment about a disturbance in the Officers' Mess. Apparently, Warrant Officer Haines and Flight Sergeant Pollard were involved in an argument with the CO and they told him where to get off and walked out. Both men are now eating in the ground staff Sergeants' Mess. A little mail arrived. Feelings about 'Black Prince' or the CO not riding too high.

## **19 August**

Saturday. Fine clear day. After breakfast, I was included in a working party to clean up camp area. Liberator bomber squadrons still operating in strength and Lightning fighter squadrons exercising around the island. The war news seems to have taken a turn for the better. We seem to be winning on all fronts—the show could be over by this time next year. No further news about my correspondence course. Worked at strip in the afternoon, routine duties. Joe visited airstrip and called around to our workshop area to see Tom and me. We had a good chat with him. He brought us up to date with what was happening back at home and spoke about his leave. He is certainly a nice chap. A little mail arrived, and my sister Doris mentioned that she had seen cousin Ron, who is recovering from his tropical service and enjoying his leave.

## **20 August**

Sunday. Fine weather still holding. Warrant Officer Haines and Flight Sergeant Pollard are proceeding on leave. One of them lives in Western Australia, so will have a lot of travelling to do. Looks as if the CO wants both men out of the way following the confrontation in the Officers' Mess. First ground staff home posting was announced. 'Snowy' Anderson (airframe fitter), should be leaving within the next day or two—this boosts morale. Group Captain Steege is still the big chief with Squadron Leader Davidson in charge of Wing. Squadron Leader Bowers the CO of 76 Squadron. The replacement Spitfires have been given their respective numerals UP/D, UP/V and UP/Y. One of the aircraft is operationally grounded. Sergeant 'Lew' Turner's veteran Spitfire UP/L is still going strong, having clocked up nearly 300 flying hours. In the evening, Jack and I visited the 40<sup>th</sup> 'Sea Bees' theatre and saw the film 'Jane Eyre' starring Orson Welles and Joan Fontaine—superb entertainment.

## **21 August**

Monday. Fine weather still holding. Change of shift. Early morning standby at airstrip. Tom and I crewed UP/G and rode the wing tip jockey when Joe Marshall taxied the aircraft around to the scramble area. Back at camp, volleyball fever has really taken hold, another court being made. As a result of a fall while playing camp football, Jack has a nasty bruise around his left knee cap. In the afternoon, a further list of home postings were announced over the PA system, the names of sixteen guards were read out—things are looking up. No mail.

## **22 August**

Tuesday. It rained lightly throughout the morning. Routine duties at airstrip. Several flights of Lightning fighters did a shoot-up of the airstrip. Our small camp canteen is obtaining supplies from American PX sources, there is an improvement in what the men can buy. In the evening a general parade was held in the Airmen's Mess. The CO wanted to find out what was causing the unrest among the men. There was a frank expression of reasons from the floor, which the CO and Adjutant did their best to answer. The meeting finally broke up with the CO saying he would do his best to bring about an improvement in food, conditions and relations. The meeting should go a long way toward clearing the air. Actions speak louder than words. Oh, for a return to Max Bott. Four new inward postings arrived. No names as yet.

### **23 August**

Wednesday. Weather holding fair, not quite so humid. Along with Tony Chapman and Ron Hardie, I was rostered for Mess duties. This time it was the Officers' small Mess at the airstrip. Joe Marshall was on scramble standby, so this gave us an opportunity for a brief chat. With the departure of 76 and 77 Squadrons, Wing Headquarters has been wound down and Group Captain Gordon Steege and Squadron Leader Davidson are eating at our Officers' Mess. I am sure there has been a slight improvement with our tucker. There was a further beer issue, comprising six small bottles for 4/-. Due to the decrease in Squadron activity, several of the lads have been busy at the strip workshop area, building small boats, and doing a good job.

### **24 August**

Thursday. Slight drizzle of rain in the morning but it didn't develop. Four of the lads, Andy Anderson, Bruce McDonald, 'Butch' Cotton and Flight Sergeant Des O'Brien happened across a wrecked Japanese truck. They rescued the six cylinder engine, and, after considerable, tender and loving care, they kick started it back to life. It was a commendable resurrection, and all they have to do now, is to find a boat hull to accommodate the engine.

The following is a list of some of the aircrew who have joined the Squadron since moving from Kiriwina Island:

Flight Lieutenant Ron Susans  
Flight Lieutenant Reed  
Flight Lieutenant Newman  
Flight Lieutenant Galway  
Flight Lieutenant Williams  
Pilot Officer Day  
Flying Officer Davidson  
Pilot Officer Vader  
Pilot Officer Hugh Kennare  
Flying Officer Dickie Long  
Flying Officer Joe Marshall

There are others but I do not have their names. One of the replacement Spitfires, UP/D carries the name 'Lady and Sir Henry Pakes', painted on its sides, which promotes the idea that this aircraft could have been a personal gift to the RAF from this noble couple. The aircraft was previously flown by Flight Lieutenant Adrian Goldsmith in the Darwin area, and also carries two stars painted on its side, indicating confirmed Japanese 'kills'. It rained heavily in the evening, so we all spent the night around the table playing cards.

### **25 August**

Friday. Early morning standby. Arrived at our workshop area around 5.30am, uncovered UP/L and, with our mechanic oversighting procedures, I climbed into the cockpit, settled down, and then started the motor. The twelve cylinder Rolls Royce

miracle roared into life, and, during the next five to ten minutes, I gradually eased the motor up to its maximum revolutions. This was a thrilling moment for me—having started many of these motors from a separate mobile battery cart, here I was with my hand on the throttle with enough power to fly. The thought raced through my mind, all this Penguin now has to do is suddenly grow wings and take to the air. I came back to reality, cut the switches and climbed out of the cockpit back to the ground. I was still a Penguin.

Following this stimulating exercise, I wandered over to the Flight Control Tent, and while reflecting on my moment of power, enjoyed a lovely cup of cocoa. Later in the morning, we proceeded to breakfast, and, for the first time in many, many months, real fresh eggs were on the menu. I ate a whole four of them, the reason being that there was a surplus of eggs and we would not know when we would see them again. Jack rode the wing on UP/M and guided Joe around to the alert scramble area, and Tom did likewise on UP/G and brought Flight Lieutenant Alan Yates to the scramble area. I finished the morning shift with a routine check on UP/L. In the afternoon, and back at camp, I did some washing (soap is in short supply) and then carried out a maintenance check of our modified 'choofer' burner, which is working well.

## **26 August**

Saturday. Weather fine and clear, the beginning of a nice day. In the morning, Flight Lieutenant Williams flew UP/L for about an hour. He also tested the four Browning machine guns which fired satisfactorily. And, with Flying Officer Dickie Long flying UP/Q, Flight Lieutenant Galway in UP/O and Flying Officer Davison in UP/G, these pilots in their Spitfires turned on an interesting aerobatic display against an equal number of Grumman Hellcats. Clyde Woodbridge and Max Stewart are making good progress with their boat, they should have the motor running soon. This afternoon, on one of our courts, a championship game of volleyball was played against a visiting USAAF team. I didn't witness the game, but, judging by the sound of shouting and yahoing coming from this direction, the game must have reached fever pitch. Our team won.

## **27 August**

Sunday. Arrived at workshop area around 5.30am. Uncovered and ran up UP/G, really enjoyed the experience again. Shortly after UP/G and UP/D were taxied around to the alert scramble area. Liberator bombers' activity seems to have decreased, understanding is that several groups are now operating from Wakde Island, which is closer to the action, thereby increasing the range of bombers. Units of P61s (Black Widows) have also moved out, destination unknown. Flight Lieutenant Ron Susans arrived back from leave. Our volleyball team, which was successful yesterday against a crack visiting American team, was beaten today by another visiting American team, and so the game goes on. Jack's knee cap still looking sore and red. The great news over our PA system this evening is that Paris has fallen to the Allies and is quickly being occupied by our forces. After all these years, what feelings of joy and relief there must be among all Frenchmen, that the yoke of occupation by the detestable Germans has, at long last, been thrown off.

## 28 August

Monday. It rained heavily throughout the early hours of the morning, then eased off as the day progressed. Change of shift, back to afternoon. There was a spectacular aerobatic display over the airstrip this morning. Squadron Leader Starke, CO of 77 Squadron, flying a stripped P40N and Flight Lieutenant Newman of our Squadron flying a Spitfire, waged a realistic battle royal in the skies above us. Both pilots were masters of their art, and, if the dogfight had been for real, I am sure they would have destroyed each other.

A special event took place this afternoon. The island was paid a visit by an American entertainment team, headed by the film star Bob Hope and supported by the singer Frances Langford, the comedian Jerry Collona and others. The possibility of such a visit had been made known to us two or three days before over our PA system. Arrangements were made to leave a skeleton crew with the aircraft, so that the majority of the afternoon shift could see the show. A large wooden stage had been erected at the northern end of Momote airstrip near the 7 TMO building. Along with a very large number of USN sailors, airmen and ground crew, our small Squadron group, including Jack, Tom, Bluey and me, took up a position within this crowd about 1.30pm. I understand it was a band from the 13<sup>th</sup> USAAF Group which kept the crowd in a happy frame of mind—they certainly played some terrific music. A small number, in a group, of American nurses (heavily escorted by officers), joined the group. They were given a rousing reception, and, if they got up to move about, a great roar went up—the men were starved of the sight and presence of women. We stood about in the boiling sun till about 3.30pm. A Dakota DC3 made a low pass over the airstrip, landed, then taxied as close as possible to the stage. The door of the Dakota (named the *Golden Arrow*) opened and out stepped Bob Hope. I have never seen such a mass demonstration of acceptance. The crowd went mad. You couldn't hear yourself. Under close personal guard, he and his troupe made their way on stage. The show started immediately, and over the next hour and a half, we were treated to an explosion of laughter, song and music, fun and banter. Bob Hope played the crowd like the maestro of mirth that he is. Golden thrush, Frances Langford sang all the right tunes, and Jerry Colonna was at his craziest best. For a short time, the horrors of war were the least thing on anyone's mind.

All too soon, at 4.45 or 5.00pm, the show ended. It had been a great morale booster, and I am sure it left everyone with some indelible memories. The entertainment group were quickly whisked away in cars, and I understand, performed another show for the troops that evening at Mockerang airstrip. In the evening, Jack, Tom, Bluey and I visited the Wing theatre and saw the film, 'Uncertain Glory', starring Paul Lukas and Errol Flynn, which was very good, also three American newsreels: the first newsreel showed the construction of the Ledo Road in Burma and the transportation of war supplies to China by the USAAF transport command over the Himalayan mountains, and the great work done by the pilots flying the small Piper Club aircraft, all of which was great stuff.

## 29 August

Tuesday. The CO, Squadron Leader Galton is proceeding on leave, and from today, Flight Lieutenant Susans takes over temporary command of the Squadron. Completed

some washing, then caught up with some letter writing. At this very moment, over our PA system, Mike Connors, the ABC radio announcer, is broadcasting his hospital session. It is a bright programme with plenty of variety, subtle wit and cheer up messages. In the afternoon, and down at the strip Flight Lieutenant Newman, in a stripped down UP/G turned in an interesting aerobatic display against a Grumman Hellcat. There was also a ground accident involving the old Liberator transporter, *The Battler*. As a result of a heavy landing, its port oleo leg collapsed, which caused the aircraft to slew and crash to the ground. Fortunately none of the aircrew were injured. The aircraft was towed away, and taken over by the 9<sup>th</sup> USAAF Service Group. In the evening, Bluey and I popped over to the Wing theatre, and saw the movie, 'Phantom of the Opera' starring Nelson Eddy, Susan Foster and Claude Rains. Quite a good show.

### **30 August**

Wednesday. Rained heavily throughout the night. A pay parade was held in the morning. The Skymaster DC-4 still flies in at regular intervals. Woody's boat nearing completion. In the afternoon, and down at the airstrip, Flight Lieutenant Keith Gorange of Fighter Sector stopped by and passed the time of day. I had met him previously at Mildura. He is a very nice chap. While working about our aircraft, Tom and I also enjoyed a brief chat with Flight Lieutenant Alan Yates and Flying Officer 'Curly' Clayton. They spoke briefly about their overseas experiences, also mentioning Warrant Officer May's parachute drop and rescue from his damaged aircraft, and his amazing escape through occupied France, Spain and into Portugal, and then back to England. The stuff from which heroes are made. No mail.

### **31 August**

Thursday. Rained heavily throughout the night, and continued well into the morning. A number of men from 76 and 77 Squadrons still remain on the island, some are still messing with us. This move would be the greatest balls-up I have seen. Pleasant surprise when I ran into Joe Bekerath. He is an armourer's assistant and I first met him when we served together at Mildura. Heavy rain continued into the afternoon, no work at the airstrip. Further home postings announced over the PA system, the latest being Don Campbell, Charlie Chambers, Foster Ward (helpful Admin Clerk), and our popular WOD Blue Hickey. The acting CO, Ron Susans seems to be handling the job with confidence, having distinguished himself in the Middle East serving with No 3 Squadron. He has certainly been tempered by fire. Flight Lieutenant Warren Napier and Flying Officer Tony Chapman (who came away as a Sergeant Pilot) are the only two remaining of our original aircrew. Rumours of moving still persistent. We received another beer issue today, twelve small bottles or cans for the price of 5/6, six cans were issued at different times. In the evening, the rain held off sufficiently for all those in the tent to visit Wing theatre, and see the film 'The Road to Morocco' starring Bob Hope, Dorothy Lamour and Bing Crosby. A jolly good laugh.

### **1 September**

Friday. The first day of the month. Weather trying very hard to clear. Further home postings announced, the latest being Roly Bullivant (our flight tanker driver), Tex Ormisher, 'Snowy' Lungren, Ken Matthews (carpenter's mate). Four replacement

general hands have been posted into Squadron over the last few days. Decision has been made by the Adjutant and camp Administration to erect a recreation hut, which at this late stage, seems bloody ridiculous to me. For the time being, Ian McLean and Bluey have been attached to help out at the food store, their places at the strip have been taken by Curly Webber and Clancy. There was a spectacular display of flying this morning by a flight of USAAF P38s. One of them doubled back and shot up the airstrip before he began an accelerated climb which was completed when he rolled off the top into a long shallow dive. Our aircrew have shown considerable interest in the P38s and likewise the American fighter pilots are interested in the Spitfire. This common interest has led to a loose arrangement being arrived at whereby both groups of pilots gave each other sufficient ground instruction that could lead to flight. Our acting CO, Ron Susans, grasped the nettle and flew a couple of circuits in a P38—he seemed to handle the aircraft very well. Likewise, an American pilot flew UP/C, and upon landing, passed that it was the most beautiful aircraft he had ever flown. After a long maintenance inspection, UP/? was test-flown, everything was satisfactory. At long last the first lesson of my correspondence course arrived. I can now make a start. Also included in the mail was a 10/- canteen money order sent to me by an old family friend, Mrs. Ollie White of Banksia. Our workshop area neighbours the USAAF 9<sup>th</sup> Service Engineering Group, attached to the 321<sup>st</sup> Service Squadron, are starting to pack up, no doubt they will be moving closer to the action. We had fresh meat for our evening meal which was very tasty. Our small canteen has received additional odds and ends for sale, and, before he leaves the Squadron, Foster Ward is doing a roaring trade. Flight Lieutenant Darcy arrived back at Squadron on Thursday 31 August after a short home leave.

## **2 September**

Saturday. Rained heavily throughout the night and continued all day easing up around tea time. In the morning we visited the equipment store and handed in our old camp stretchers and received a new one. They are American stretchers, and the first decent bed we have had since being in the tropics. Flying Officer Len Reed arrived back from leave on 31 August. Jack worked in Officers' Mess today. The main strength of the 13<sup>th</sup> USAAF have moved off the island, mostly fighter aircraft like Lightning P38s and Navy Hellcats are all that remain. In the afternoon a few of the B Flight maintenance crews, including myself, popped down to our workshop standby area to sign up and cover our aircraft. Flight Lieutenant Darcy had just landed after flying a P38, he was impressed by the fighter's performance. Rain still hanging about. Spent a quiet evening in the tent—there was a little matter about the drainage from our tent affecting our next door neighbours' tent housing Lyn Brown, Frank Cooney, Wal Cowie and Herb Waterman. Apparently Herb Waterman had been copping our overflow.

## **3 September**

Sunday. This is the beginning of the fifth year since Australia declared war in World War II, the date being 3 September 1939. The weather began to clear. Pilot Officer Cameron arrived back from leave yesterday. After finishing one and a half hours of study, Jack and I refreshed ourselves with a swim in the salt water lagoon—the water is always the right temperature, and one could stay in for hours. There was considerable air activity over the airstrip this morning. Along with all the aircraft

flying in and out, Joe flew a P38 and put on quite a good show, and Flight Lieutenant Darcy exercised a P47 Thunderbolt—there can't be many types of aircraft which Darcy hasn't flown, particularly fighter aircraft. Flight Lieutenant Galway also flew a P38. Later in the morning, Joe flew UP/M and Flight Lieutenant Ron Susans flew UP/G and together they carried out a little formation flying with two American pilots in UP/L and UP/? respectively. In the afternoon Flying Officer Davison flew the Wirraway for about thirty minutes, and took Ron Duneford as his passenger. After he landed, he flew UP/Y on a test flip. Flight Lieutenant Warren Napier had an exciting few minutes when he landed UP/P. One of his tyres blew out when he touched down, but he was able to hold the aircraft on an even keel and made a safe landing. This is the second time this has happened to him. He is an exceptionally good pilot and a good bloke to boot. Sergeant McNamee, Corporal Claude Edgar and Corporal Hale flew to Port Moresby today to inspect replacement Spitfire aircraft. No mail.

#### **4 September**

Monday. A fine clear morning. Change of shift. Arrived at airstrip around 7.30am, spent a little time in armourers' flight tent, then proceeded with maintenance check on our aircraft. Flying Officer Davis arrived early at the strip. He warmed up the Wirraway and his first passenger for the day was my old tent mate, Jack Fisher. They were aloft about an hour and Jack loved every moment of the flight. Next passenger was Bill Sydenham, followed by 'Snowy' Thomas, a transport driver. Flight Lieutenant Galway flew a P38 in company with an American pilot who flew UP/D. In the afternoon, Flying Officer Turnbull flew the Wirraway and took Bob Blackwood for a flight. Upon the return of the Wirraway, Flight Lieutenant Alan Yates and his passenger, Flight Lieutenant Thomas (the Adjutant) flew to the nearby small island American naval base of Pitalu, where they spent the night. Back at the camp, a number of tidying up, minor alterations were taking place around our Mess building. This work was being carried out by local native workers under supervision. Late in the afternoon, Jack, Bluey Down and I popped down to the lagoon for a swim. After a very hot day this sea water bath was most refreshing. A little mail arrived.

#### **5 September**

Tuesday. Early morning standby at airstrip. Arrived about 4.30am, prepared flight aircraft for an immediate take-off. Yesterday and today at this early hour of the day, there has been a steady, cool breeze blowing, which has made life a little more bearable. A Kittyhawk P40 developed trouble with its undercarriage and had to make a forced landing. The aircraft was knocked about, but fortunately the pilot was unhurt. A meeting of all armourers was called by Warrant Officer Ralph Chandler and held in the flight tent at the strip—several of the men have been detailed to camp duties for the time being. I will remain with the aircraft. When I arrived back at the camp in the afternoon, a food parcel from home was waiting for me. I was surprised to learn that the parcel had been on the way to me since 25 March 1944, a time delay of approximately five and a half months. Fortunately the contents were in good condition, so we all enjoyed a tasty supper (one of Mum's special fruit cakes, a tin of fruit etc.) in the tent that night. Earlier in the evening, Jack, Tom and I visited the 17<sup>th</sup> Naval Construction Battalion and saw the musical film 'Follow the Boys', starring George Raft, Dinah Shore, the Andrews sisters and Sophie Tucker. This was first class entertainment.

## **6 September**

Wednesday. Today I started full time work at the airstrip. One pleasing feature about this business, was that my time was fully engaged throughout the day. Our workshop neighbour, the USAAF 9<sup>th</sup> Service Mobile Engineering Group, has, for all intent and purposes, moved out. As swiftly as they had arrived, so they have departed. All that remains is for some minor work to be carried out on a few Liberator bombers by a small rear party of mechanics. We are sorry to see them go, they were a great bunch of chaps. Rained heavily throughout late afternoon, cancelling all work at the strip. Spent the evening in the tent. Some mail arrived.

## **7 September**

Thursday. Further home postings were announce today, those being George Harris, R. Butcher and K. Wignell, all will leave at the same time. After a short spell in the camp hospital, Corporal Clyde Woodbridge returned to work. He had been suffering from a nervous rash. Pilot Officer Hugh Kennare arrived back after a three week home leave. Carried out routine maintenance checks on aircraft throughout the day.

## **8 September**

Friday. Taking advantage of a short break in our morning aircraft checks, Tony Chapman, Bill Sydenham and I had a quick look at a Curtis Commando transport. This was a new aircraft which had a greater load carrying capacity than the great old warhorse, the Dakota DC3. It could also fly further and faster. First awareness of this machine was from viewing American Signal Corps films, covering transport command operations from India into China and the Italian theatre. This was the first visit to the island of this aircraft, and its appearance created a great deal of interest. On the way back to our maintenance area, we also paid a short visit to the USAAF 2<sup>nd</sup> aircraft assembly unit where they were currently putting together Lightning P38 and Kittyhawk P40 fighters. As mentioned previously, the Yanks are doing a fantastic job here and their hangar assembly workshops are a great credit to them. In the afternoon, Pilot Officer Hugh Kennare flew in UP/M and Flight Lieutenant Darcy flew UP/D. After he had finished flying, I had an interesting chat with Hugh. We all spent the night in the tent around our great table, and finished our day with a barbecue. We all chipped in and bought some fresh meat on the black market from an American source.

## **9 September**

Saturday. This last few days the weather has been holding fine. Another replacement Spitfire arrived. A routine day at the airstrip. Jack's knee cap seems to be improving. A little mail arrived and I finished the second lesson of my correspondence course. We spent an enjoyable evening at home in the tent with Ian McLean, Bert Spence, Bluey, Tom, Jack and Bob Wilmot.

### **10–13 September**

Apart from routine aircraft maintenance checks at the airstrip very little activity has been taking place throughout above dates. Airframe fitter, Corporal Sid Frood was posted home. We received another American beer issue. Aircrew belonging to visiting amphibious Catalina flying boat arrived back from a brief leave. Two US Navy Corsair fleet fighters visited the island on 12 September. Most impressive design with large protruding nose supporting a compact powerful radial engine, also has a cranked wing to assist flight performance and fold up storage capacity on an aircraft carrier. Since the departure of Doug Vanderfield Flight Lieutenant Darcy seems to fly the greatest number of hours per month. Flight Lieutenant Warren Napier and Flying Officer McKellar (original pilots) still with us. Chanced to see a US Navy aircraft carrier pass close to the island—in all probability home base for the two Corsair fighters. Good progress being made with camp improvements. Officers' Mess and airmen's recreation hut almost finished. Pat Donoghue, a flight rigger, and a Commonwealth Public Servant in civilian life, has been given the option of discharge or continuation of service. Sighted a copy of a *Pix* magazine, dated 12 August 1944, showing an excellent drawing of Goodenough Island. I must try and obtain a copy. Aircrew belonging to the 'Old Duck' air sea rescue plane are still living with our Squadron.

### **14 September**

Thursday. Rained heavily throughout the morning, eased off towards lunchtime. Inspection started today (280 hourly) on Catalina flying boat. The new Squadron DWO arrived, Brown by name. He will have to be good to replace Blue Hickey. Woody has finished his boat. A little mail arrived.

### **15 September**

Friday. Weather holding fair. Inspection completed on Catalina flying boat. This afternoon UP/Y flown by Flying Officer Len Reed, crashed on take-off. Just as the aircraft became airborne, the motor cut out. The pilot was uninjured, and assessment was that the machine is repairable. Flight Lieutenant Newman flew UP/O to mainland and the replacement Spitfire which arrived on 9 September will be attached to B Flight. Catalina taken up for test flight. Bob Blackwood and several other lads included in flight. New Officers' Mess completed, and by all accounts a very nice job. Flight Lieutenant Ron Susans still acting CO. In the evening, Jack, Bluey and I visited the Acom theatre and saw the film 'Starmaker' starring Bing Crosby and juvenile cast. Joe Marshall gave us a lift back to camp in the officers' truck, and on the way had an enjoyable chat with the CO, Curly Clayton. No mail.

### **16 September**

Saturday. A clear sunny morning. Being at the right place at the right time often provides opportunities that might, otherwise, not occur. It so happened that the Catalina required another test-flight, so Sergeant Jim Morvel, Tony Chapman, Don McIntyre, the photographer Robby Robinson and I were lucky enough to be invited along for the test. I have always had a great interest in the design of the Cat. The clean uncluttered line of the boat shape, the high upswept tail, the huge monoplane wing

which also was the base for the unobstructed engine pods, the way the wing top floats dropped down from the wing, and when retracted in flight, became an extension of the wing. And when the designers added a retractable undercarriage and made the aircraft amphibious, I thought this was the ultimate in flying boat design. Furthermore, the huge wing provided space for a fuel capacity that gave the aircraft a tremendous range. It was a superb long range reconnaissance vehicle. Digressing further, in June 1939, only two months before the outbreak of World War II, an early version of this 'consolidated' flying boat, was named 'Guba' and owned by an American millionaire, Mr Richard Archbold. He had the plane flown across the Pacific Ocean by a professional crew and it landed at the Rose Bay flying boat base in Sydney Harbour. The main purpose of this visit was to carry out geological oil search surveys in remote parts of Papua New Guinea, and Dutch New Guinea accessible by water. A secondary arrangement for the flight (but no less important) was to assist the Australian Commonwealth Government to carry out a flight path survey across the Indian Ocean should it become necessary to open an emergency Empire air mail route to England should the Asian leg be closed. The outstanding aviator, Captain P.G. Taylor was in charge of this Indian Ocean exploratory flight survey on behalf of the Commonwealth Government. As I recall, the Indian Ocean flight was a success with the flying boat, after leaving Rose Bay, touching down at Port Hedland, Batavia, Cocos Island and the islands of Diego Garcia and the Seychelles and finally completing the survey at Mombassa on the east coast of Africa. An alternative flying route to England had been proven.

Following the outbreak of World War II, the US Defense establishment, particularly the US Navy, found a place for this consolidated flying boat which was classified by the navy as a PBY, but referred to as a Catalina, and it became the far seeing eyes of their fleet. Indeed, the majority of the maritime powers of the western world found a place for this most versatile aircraft, including our own RAAF.

After boarding the flying boat we were instructed to bunch up behind the aircrew so that the pilot could trim the aircraft when in flight. We taxied slowly to the airstrip and, getting the all clear from the duty pilots tower, the 'Cat' started to move, eventually gathering enough speed to imperceptibly give us a lift-off. The great wing was vibrating, and looking out towards the port wingtip, the wing seemed to be gently flapping like a great pelican. In no time the wheels were retracted, and we were given the picture of a clean hull. I was fortunate in having a splendid view of what was happening out of the navigator's window. We climbed steadily out over the ocean, gradually turning to port to follow the coastline of Manus Island. After a short time, the pilot announced that we could spread ourselves about the aircraft. I quickly moved aft, and had an excellent view out of the port side gun blister. In the meantime, the aircrew proceeded to carry out instrument and flight manoeuvring checks to ensure that all was put well on landing. Suddenly, and literally, out of the blue, one of our Spitfires appeared. The pilot was in a playful mood. He threw the fighter around the Catalina, executing some fancy rolls, dives, feint side and frontal attacks. Our photographer nearly did himself a damage trying to get the best angle for a photograph. Then, to our further surprise, our cheeky fighter pilot nestled his Spitfire just in and below the umbrella of the port mainplane of the 'Cat', where he proceeded to make faces and rude hand gestures at us through his Perspex canopy before wagging his wings and breaking off to return to base. This was exciting stuff, and I loved it. In the meantime, our lovely 'Cat' just plodded on and the crew got on with

their checks. We flew right around the edge of Manus Island and, as on the previous occasion when Joe took me up for a flight, the harbour was chock a block full of shipping. We crossed the channel to Los Negros Island, passed over our camp and Momote airstrip twice, then headed to a point offshore from the entrance to Seadler Harbour, where the pilot brought our great bird down until it almost touched the water. We were racing along, almost kissing the waves, then he lifted us up and headed back home to Momote. The testing and our flight were over. What a tremendous experience this has been. Up to this point of time I had made a number of flights, but none compared to this and I can't imagine there ever being a repeat of this day.

Further home postings were announced this afternoon. Among the lucky ones was my close friend Ian McLean, Sergeant 'Lucky' Lawrence and Les Moore, both cooks, Blue Fisher, messman, Norman Harris, Wally Vine, Jim Landerman. In the evening Bert Spencer and Ian McLean joined us in the tent for a cup of tea and a yarn. No mail.

### **17 September**

Sunday. Hot work at the airstrip in the morning. Fitted the armament back into UP/G. In the evening, Jack and I visited the Wing theatre and saw the film 'Gas Light', starring Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer. This was a superb film. No mail.

### **18 September**

Monday. Throughout the night a number of flights of Dakota DC3 and DC4 transports have been practicing night landings and take-offs from Momote airstrip. The constant drone of engines and the whine of propellers changing pitch leaves little room for rest. Understanding is these transports are being fine-tuned to land big loads (day or night) just as soon as an airstrip has been secured after a landing has been made in the Philippines. Felt like a wrung out rag this morning. It was also hot and humid and as much as I could do to straighten up the tent. At long last Jack's knee has healed up. 'Smoky' Dawson and Barney Lyons, both cooks, have been posted home. Further batch of replacements arrived, mostly guards. A little mail arrived. Closed the evening with a nice cup of tea.

### **19 September**

Tuesday. A most oppressive morning. Woke up like yesterday, tired and worn out. Ian McLean still on Squadron. Down at the workshop area, Sergeant Des O'Brien launched his boat into a nearby lagoon and when it touched the water, a great cheer went up from the boys. Out of the debris scattered around our foreshores, he received a wrecked Japanese hull, and, in his spare time, restored it to a floating state. Like the hull, he salvaged a six cylinder motor from a wrecked vehicle and breathed life into it. Fitted with a gearbox, an instrument board and bits and pieces that would do a Liberator bomber proud, and a propeller that would make a marine engineer give the game away. He buzzed around the lagoon with a smile on his face that would have done Joe E. Brown proud. Whatever Des tackled, he tackled with skill and enthusiasm and the outcome was always a first class job, and this launch was no exception.

In the afternoon a welcome break from the oppressive heat took place. An ongoing rain storm blew in, this immediately started to cool our world, and it also persisted long enough to cancel work at the airstrip. Throughout all this, further Squadron replacements arrived. When back at camp, I took advantage of release from duty to complete lesson number three of my correspondence course. Just after we finished our evening meal, the rain stopped, and an announcement was made over the PA system that a truck would be going to the Acorn 24 theatre. Jack, Bluey and I wasted no time in scrambling on board to see the film 'They Got Me Covered', starring Bob Hope and Dorothy Lamour. Just average entertainment. On the way to the theatre, I chanced to see a small Grumman twin-engine amphibious monoplane flying boat parked near the TMO office. I had previously only seen a photo of this rare beauty, which, I believe, is used as an inter fleet VIP personnel carrier by the US navy. I was impressed. In some respects it was similar in design and size to a small passenger land plane built and flown in Australia before the war and known as a Gannet.

### **20 September**

Wednesday. Another warm day, but not starting off as humid as yesterday. My old friend, Ian McLean, flew out early this morning on a Liberator transport and headed straight through to Brisbane. I am going to miss his cheery smile and his great sense of humour. Further Squadron replacements arrived. There are so many new faces appearing it makes one feel a little out of place. Taking advantage of a break with maintenance duties, I once again visited the USAAF 2<sup>nd</sup> Aircraft Assembly Unit, who are still busy turning out an interesting number and variety of American fighter aircraft. Bert Spence, Ian McLean's old tent mate, moved into our tent this afternoon. He is a very nice bloke and we all made him welcome. This evening our new canteen was opened in the camp. Since Foster Ward's departure, Ray Harris has been managing and doing a good job. A little mail arrived.

### **21 September**

Thursday. Nothing out of the ordinary took place this morning. But, this afternoon, when Flight Lieutenant 'Gilly' Wright was carrying out high altitude flying in UP/P at 32,000 ft, the motor of his Spitfire packed up. Keeping his cool and control, he was able to glide down over Momote airstrip. He made a spectacular approach and a perfect landing. This was a fine piece of flying.

### **22 September**

Friday. Warm sunny start to the day, but weather became unstable toward lunchtime. Close inspection of UP/P revealed that the engine was losing compression and had also developed a glycol (cooling fluid) leak. This was a deadly combination, and 'Gilly' Wright was an extremely lucky man to get his feet back onto terra firma. Further replacements arrived. Des O'Brien having trouble with his boat. Apparently the stern propeller shaft bearing is overheating. A little mail arrived. We finished the evening around the table playing cards and having a nice cup of tea. Identified by the sound of its motors, a DC4 transport has just taken off. The time is now 9.20pm.

### **23 September**

Saturday. This morning the ADC arrived at Los Negros. He inspected our camp, workshop and strip areas. Following this visit, rumours of all kinds spread like wild fire. There was also a report that 'Jinker' Jelley had double banked in a Lightning P38 and had been taken for a short flight. It rained heavily in the afternoon, so all work and operations at the strip were cancelled. Back at camp and in the tent, Bluey suffered a little setback. He returned from having a shower and came prancing into the tent like a frisky young gazelle. Jack, Tom and I were sitting on our hammocks enjoying a cup of tea and a yarn. Bluey pranced over close to me, whipped the towel from around his waist, flourished his considerable penis close in front of my face, and said, 'Arthur, cop this'. As an immediate reflex action, I said 'Yes Blue, and you cop this', and threw the cup of hot tea over his genitals. He let out a terrific yell and backed off. For the next few minutes, the air was thick with oaths and considerable doubt was placed on my parentage. The incident certainly caused a stir. Jack and Tom were soon on their feet, expressing disapproval at what I had done. I was sorry for my action, and apologised to Blue. There was no ill-feeling between us, and I am happy to say there was no repeat performance of this type of behaviour. We all spent a quiet evening in the tent. There was no mail.

### **24 September**

Sunday. The day started with heavy rain. This continued and at about 11.00am airstrip operations were cancelled. Two home postings were announced with George Stevens (aircraft hand) and Mick Beguli (driver) getting their marching orders. Made and installed a new blind, for keeping out the rain, alongside my camp stretcher.

### **25 September**

Monday. This was a rest day. Washed some clothes (rags) and did a little stitching and darning. Bert Spence and Blue were also on stand-down and they prepared an enjoyable (black market) lunch. Promotions were announced. Corporal Rus Schroeter (in charge of maintenance records) was promoted to Sergeant, and Roy Dudley (clerk) and Sid Harbour (carpenter) both promoted to Corporal. Rained throughout evening. We all spent the night in the tent. The lads played cards and I wrote a letter to Ed Bosley, my brother-in-law, and made up this diary.

### **26 September**

Tuesday. Rain continued throughout the morning, halting operations at the airstrip. It eased off in the afternoon, so Tony Chapman and I popped down to the northern end of Momote airstrip where the US Navy assembly and repair unit were putting together Grumman, Wildcat, Hellcat, Avengers, Helldivers, Corsairs and goose amphibious flying boats. Only one word could describe this operation. Impressive.

### **27 September**

Wednesday. Dad's birthday. Sent a telegram yesterday. Hope it reaches him in time. Early this morning there was a collision between a Liberty ship and a tanker, both made it back to Seadler Harbour. Flying Officer Cameron, flying UP/A ran into a

flock of birds which badly buckled various parts of the aircraft. Started work on UP/L, but heavy rain cancelled operations for the afternoon. No mail.

## **28 September**

Thursday. In the morning I finished installing the guns back into UP/L, very hot work. Warrant Officer Jock Haines and Sergeant Pilot Vin Pollard arrived back from leave, both looked fit. Flight Lieutenant Ron Susans, flying UP/G made a very low approach over south end of Momote taxiway, and cut several telephone lines. Susans landed safely and the aircraft was undamaged. Bad weather blew in from the south and cancelled operations for the day.

## **29 September**

Friday. Heavy rain continued throughout night and well into the day. Operations cancelled at airstrip. A few leaks have shown up in the tent, which we still have to repair. At long last we have had a clothes issue, this is long overdue. The knees and backsides are out of my trousers, and the backs out of my shirts. This shabby state of affairs applies to the clothing of most of the men. Jimmy Lane was kept busy in the store. Flight Lieutenant Bob Palmer (engineering officer) is acting Equipment and Stores Officer. The camp notice board always carried a copy of the 'Daily Routine Orders'. It is by this means that the Adjutant is able to communicate with all personnel and make known the current rules and regulations of Squadron administration to be carried out. Attention was drawn to the need to improve name boards attached to the outside of tents, so that, day or night, all personnel could be located with less trouble. Right from the early days spent on Goodenough Island our tents carried name boards, but of late, I would have to admit, the standard had slipped, and some tents had no name boards at all. We decided to make a special effort and create something worthwhile. Bob Blackwood, nicknamed Crobotzal (the German Bastard) was given the job of designing and building the board, painted the surface with a good background colour and with stylish, standard lettering, headed the board as follows:

'The Reichstag'  
(members)  
Herr Von: GATELY  
Fritz: NEILL  
Fraulien: FISHER  
Herman: SPENCER  
Count: LEONARD  
Baron: CROBOTZAL BLACKWOOD

On completion the board was fastened to a six foot post and placed in a prominent position outside the front of our tent. A hearty laugh was enjoyed by us all, and it created a little interest around the camp. Later in the afternoon, we erected a canvas awning which stood out from the back of the tent, this has extended our dry area and reduced the amount of mud being carried inside. It was hot work. Further home postings were announced. Alf Burrell and Patrick Doody, both wireless assistants, and Barry Lyons (cook). Incidentally, we are back on shift work again.

### **30 September**

Saturday. Last day of the month. And surprise, surprise, it is not raining. In the morning, I worked hard on UP/L, had a few problems refitting armament. The old flying Duck or Walrus air sea rescue flying boat, skippered by Pilot Officer Watson, left us to return to its base at Goodenough Island. Another batch of replacements arrived. The fine weather didn't last long, in the afternoon heavy rain set in cancelling operations at the airstrip. Camp improvements looking good, our new recreation hut and showers well worth waiting for, and require special mention. Further home postings announced; Jack Rogan (Armourers assistant), Bill Day (cook), Graham Hayes (aircraft hand). During the course of my armourer's duties, I worked closely with Jack Rogan. He was a damned good bloke and will be missed. Quite a good delivery of mail arrived, all in tent received two or more letters. Bert Spence received word that old Mac had arrived home safely. Finished the evening with a little letter writing and a cup of tea.

### **1 October**

Sunday. The day broke fine and clear. This morning I was rostered to work in the kitchen. I don't mind this occasional change of duty, it is good for one. The work continued until lunchtime. When the meal was finished. After lunch I did some washing and picked up another beer issue. Our new sign at the front of the tent looks good and continues to attract interest. Meanwhile at the back of the tent, we are still carrying out improvements. We spent a quiet evening in the tent. Jack and Blue got stuck into a few grogs. The CO Squadron Leader Galton (the Black Prince) arrived back from leave.

### **2 October**

Monday. The fine weather continued. About 10.00am Flying Officer Cameron, flying UP/G encountered problems with the engine of his aircraft. Apparently, while in a dive, the engine over revved. The unholy scream could be heard all over the island. One of the main bearings packed it in, also a big end broke, which punched a hole in the sump. This completely wrecked the engine. Cameron skilfully guided the aircraft back to the strip and landed on a dead stick. This afternoon, I started an armament inspection on UP/?. Further home postings were announced Sergeant Trevor Treadmill, and Ron Coverdale (both instrument repairers), Roy Parkins (our popular postal officer), also his mate, Syd Harbour (carpenter). A little mail arrived. Spent a quiet evening in the tent.

### **3 October**

Tuesday. Fine weather continued. Rostered day off. This morning, I parcelled up and posted a shirt and pair of trousers, which I had recently purchased from a US clothing store. The quality of the American clothing issue was vastly superior to ours. It is hardly worth mentioning, but as announced in our DROs, Squadron Leader Galton has taken over control of the Squadron again. Lately I have been bothered by a nasty skin rash which has shown up on my right shoulder, also I have been getting sharp shooting pains through my left hip. I suspect the latter has resulted from the day I was thrown off the port wing of UP/A when taxiing from the airstrip back to our workshop

area. I reported these problems to our medical section. While attending the medical section, I noticed old Peter Scott (flight mechanic from Western Australia) pillowed up on a camp stretcher with a very bad tropical ulcer on one of his legs. While in the area, I enjoyed a brief chat with Ron Nation (clerk), a very nice chap. A DC-4 transport is still operating from the island. Started work constructing a wooden cabinet to stand at the foot of my camp stretcher, it should be handy to store odds and ends. Ran into Joe Marshall when checking to see if there was any mail, enjoyed a brief yarn. I understand Sergeant Jim Morvel ran up and ground tested the engine of UP/? this afternoon. In the evening we enjoyed a good natter around the table.

#### **4 October**

Wednesday. Very warm morning. Finished constructing the wooden cabinet, it looks good. This morning we had another prang at the airstrip. UP/A flown by Flying Officer Len Reed blew a tyre on take-off, the aircraft partially ground looped, then dropped back on its tail wheel, rippling and breaking the aircraft's back. It is now a write off. Fortunately, apart from a severe shake-up, Len Reed escaped uninjured. It is worth mentioning at this stage, that Squadron serviceability consisted of the following aircraft:

B Flight: UP/?, UP/D, UP/L, UP/M, UP/B.

C Flight: UP/T, UP/V, UP/X.

This afternoon, a working bee was organised by Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley to carry out some improvements to our Flight tent at the airstrip—it was very hot work. In the evening, Jack, Blue and I popped over to the Wing theatre and saw the film, 'This is the Army', starring George Murphy, Ronald Reagan, and Joan Leslie. This was a lavish production. Not bad entertainment, but liberally laced with American propaganda.

#### **5 October**

Thursday. A warm sticky morning, more than likely work up to a change. Keith Swift popped around this morning. We enjoyed a good chat over a cup of tea. He is an enginefitter attached to B Flight. He comes from South Australia, and before enlistment was a cipher clerk with the Department of External Affairs in Canberra. Jack attended sick parade this morning. He has a small growth affecting his right eye, and the Doc told him he will have to have it treated back on the mainland. Of late there has been a considerable number of thefts reported taking place in the camp, this is disturbing. Further home postings announced. Ron Down (instrument repairer), our recent tent mate Bert Spencer, Sergeant Tom Mudge (equipment assistant) and Ike Alderson (Mess staff). A large number of replacements arrived.

#### **6 October**

Friday. Still warm and sticky, no change as yet. Spent a quiet morning in the tent, writing, reading, and washing. The USAAF 2<sup>nd</sup> Aircraft Assembly Squadron is still assembling healthy numbers of aircraft, while at the same time, some army units are moving off the island—the 168<sup>th</sup> AA unit left yesterday. It hardly seems possible, but the present concentration of shipping in Seadler Harbour seems larger than ever—surely the invasion of the Philippines will take place soon.

A most unfortunate, tragic accident took place this afternoon. Flight Lieutenant Darcy was flying a P38 Fighter borrowed from the USAAF. According to reports, he flew over Momote airstrip at about 1000 feet. With only one motor functioning, he endeavoured to start the other motor as it coughed and spluttered and the propeller was turning slowly. He appeared to be losing height, then the second motor stopped. About a mile from our camp, and over the sea, our Padre saw the fighter spear into the sea and disappear. A rescue mission wasn't mounted as Darcy would have died within a few minutes. Flight Lieutenant Darcy was an exceptionally good pilot and well liked by his colleagues. I wonder how the CO will explain to RAAF Group Headquarters how and why we lost a pilot, and how the Yanks explained the loss of an expensive aircraft. Further home postings were announced. Athol Carter, Vic West (RT Operator), Maurie Marshall (wireless assistant). No mail.

### **7 October**

Saturday. No change in the weather. A group of our men were invited on board HMAS *Arunta* to participate in an offshore exercise. I understand several other naval craft were involved, including HMAS *Shropshire*. The lucky men were as follows: Flight Lieutenant Williams, Flying Officer Davis, Flight Lieutenant MacDonald, Warrant Officer Haines, Flight Sergeant Pollard, Flight Sergeant Tom Opie, Sergeant Hunt, Sergeant Les Borgelt, Corporal Reg Johnson, Leading Aircraftsman Bill Tester, Leading Aircraftsman Tom Neill, Leading Aircraftsman Wal Cowie, Leading Aircraftsman Col McKeown. They left the camp about 4.30am and returned well after tea. According to Tom, they had a terrific day and were well treated. In the afternoon, the old 'flying duck' or Walrus flying boat returned to the island after completing its inspection at Goodenough Island, the same maintenance crew also returned. Flying Officer Hugh Kennare test flew, and approved, the new replacement UP/B. He really put the aircraft through its paces. A little mail arrived from home. Mum, Dad, sister Doris, particularly Doris, doing a good job keeping me posted. I do love them all. In the evening, we all popped over to the Wing theatre and saw the film 'The Sullivans', starring that fine character actor Thomas Mitchell, Ann Baxter, Trudy Marshall and several other stars. This film biography is based on the story of the five Sullivan boys who lost their lives on the USS *Juneau* when this ship was sunk by enemy action. It was a moving story.

### **8 October**

Sunday. A hot sultry morning. A memorial church service and general parade was held this morning to mark the passing of the late Flight Lieutenant Darcy. The new Wing Padre is a fine, clear speaker and his comments were thoughtful and moving. Officers attending were CO, Flight Lieutenant Williams, Flying Officer Clayton, Flight Lieutenant Long, Flying Officer Mott, Flight Lieutenant Thomas, and a sprinkling of others whose names I can't remember. During the service, there was considerable air activity overhead, and the thought entered my mind that fellow departed spirits were paying Darcy their respects and calling him home. Following the service, I returned to our tent and invited Bill Tester to share a cup of tea and a yarn. Flight Lieutenant Galway has just returned from leave and looked fit. Work at the strip this afternoon was hot and sweaty and routine. I had some maintenance checks to carry out and a few small jobs in the flight armament tent. Our engineering officer,

Flight Lieutenant Bob Palmer has been posted home and his replacement is Flying Officer Mott. I never worked in Bob Palmer's work shop area, so I can't really say what he was like to work for—but from what I could see, he worked hard at his job, was well respected and outwardly seemed a good type of officer. Our tent mate, Bert Spencer left for home this morning and would have been airborne during the church service. We will miss him. No mail.

### **9 October**

Monday. Weather still hot and sultry. Most of the original Squadron ground staff members have now had sixteen months continuous tropical service. This in itself may not appear as anything out of the ordinary, but, after three major island moves, which included the forward stress that these involved, plus dysentery, dengue fever, malaria, dermatitis, war accidents and strain, indifferent food, constant rain and heat, all the lads with the deep yellow dye of the Atebrin tablets, were not only feeling, but looking, the worse for wear. On average, this period of tropical service amounted to an entitlement of thirty days on their leave cards. Now the CO, Squadron Leader Galton, has put forward the idea of letting some of the lads proceed home on a maximum of fourteen days leave, plus travelling time. His basic idea is, that, if the Squadron has to move at short notice, he doesn't want to be left with all new hands. From his point of view, this plan would result in a short interrupted leave which wouldn't give time to make a reasonable recovery after such an exhaustive period of tropical service. From what I understand, some of the men are interested in the idea. This afternoon Flying Officer Hugh Kennare had a taxiing accident in UP/D. He ran into a pothole, which tipped the nose of the aircraft over resulting in a bent propeller. Hugh was disturbed about the prang, but later in the afternoon, the propeller was changed and Joe Marshall took the aircraft for a test flight, where everything worked out all right. Spent a quiet evening in the tent writing and reading. Prepared a draft telegram to send Mum tomorrow for her birthday on 15 October. A little mail arrived.

### **10 October**

Tuesday. No change in weather. Controversy developing over leave proposal, no decision arrived at. In view of possible movement or leave, Sergeant Des O'Brien and Corporal Clyde Woodbridge have sold their boats to the Americans, for what I understand, was a fair price. And on the camp front and in their own time, Blue and Bill Tester have joined forces to manufacture some foreign orders, or, for want of another description, 'War Souvenirs', which they are flogging through an expert salesman, Gilbert Grout, to the Americans. Carpet baggers are everywhere. Incidentally, Sergeant Russ Shroeter is to proceed on leave, and Peter Scott has been discharged from hospital and joined forces with Francis Cooney in the war souvenir business. This afternoon I was able to obtain a few precious photos from Herb Waterman. My meagre collection is growing. As I scribble these notes in the tent, the mosquitos are really getting at me. It will be great to be able to move, or sit about, and particularly, to sleep at night without the bother of these pests and the suffocation of nets. Yahoo.

## 11 October

Wednesday. Weather conditions hot and sultry. Back on early shift again with Flight allocated airstrip duties. The new WOD, Brown by name, seems a decent chap. And since he took over, has bucked in with the camp lads and cleaned and tidied up the camp area. Also worth mentioning, that, when the nearby American 168<sup>th</sup> AA group moved out, our guards moved into their Mess hall and converted the building into a barracks, which made it easier for their call and shift arrangements. Lately, I have been devoting as much of my free time as possible to my correspondence course. This afternoon, a Beaufort bomber flew in. No mail. In the evening, Jack and I visited the Wing theatre and saw the all Negro film, 'Cabin in the Sky'. The show starred Rochester, Ethel Waters, Lena Horne and Duke Ellington and his band. It was beautifully acted, with music and storyline by George Gershwin.

## 12 October

Thursday. No change in weather, this would be the longest dry spell we have had for some time. The 320 hourly inspection was started early this morning on UP/L. I finished my part of the job right on lunchtime. Of late, there has been a great variety of aircraft flying in our airspace. The following list will give some idea of this. Transports such as Douglas DC3s, DC4s, Curtis Commandoes, converted Liberator bombers, Lockheed Lodestars, Venturas, Beechcraft and Fairchilds, bombers such as B25 Mitchells, A20 Bostons, flying boats such as Catalinas, Grumman Goose, Voight Kingfishers and fighter planes such as P38s, P40s, P47s, Grumman Wildcats, Hellcats, Helldivers and Corsairs. I hope to see a B29 (Super Fortress) before I leave the island. This afternoon I hitched a ride down to 7 Transport Movement Office, situated alongside the airstrip, and, while looking around this area, I was reminded of a RAAF Officer who I felt played a most significant part in the establishment and successful running of this important unit. His name is Squadron Leader Carlisle, and he first came to my attention when we came ashore from the *Cremer* at Goodenough Island. His was the guiding, controlling hand of all shore operations from the moment the barges or boats touched shore. There was no denying his authority. He was the 'beachmaster', and cargo unloading and direction proceeded rapidly following his shouted orders. The same procedure followed at Kiriwina Island, and although I flew from Goodenough to Kiriwina Island, sure enough his controlling hand was observable. On the occasion when a small group of us were sent by truck from the newly captured Momote airstrip on Manus Island to begin unloading operations on the *Marcus Daly* in Seadler Harbour, sure enough the man on the spot directing RAAF shore operations was Squadron Leader Carlisle. In my book, he did a splendid job and sure earned a mention or decoration for his outstanding effort and leadership. Thinking further about Squadron Leader Carlisle, also took me back to that day (18 March) when about thirty of us were rushed by truck over the battle scarred road from Momote to Seadler Harbour. This road (now an all weather highway) was pushed through tall timber in record time by US Army engineers and US Navy 'Sea Bees' to link important areas. These road engineers, with machine guns attached to their bulldozers, worked day and night to build this road, and although I have since passed this way many times, I never cease to recall that first day and their accomplishment. Returning to camp, I finished the afternoon with some washing, writing and reading. No mail.

**13 October**

Friday. Weather still hot and humid, and, due to lack of rain, surprisingly dusty. Carried out early morning armament maintenance check on UP/L, then settled down beneath the mainplane while other lads continued with their inspection duties. With so many new arrivals appearing at strip, it is difficult to keep up with names and faces. Jack Shields (armourer) has been relieved of his temporary duties in the Officers' Mess and was replaced by Mick Moore. Just prior to the lunch truck arriving, two American Red Cross girls drove up in a jeep and inquired where they could locate one of our lads who was making a few trinkets for them. Clyde Woodbridge and I were soon able to head them in the right direction. This was the closest I have been to a woman for just on seventeen months. They were both good lookers and their voices sounded smooth as silk. It will be good to get back to civilisation again. Quiet afternoon back at camp. Did some writing and reading. In the evening Jack and I popped over to the Wing theatre, and saw the film 'Immortal Sergeant' starring Thomas Mitchell, Henry Fonda, Maureen O'Hara and Reginald Gardiner—a good show. Further correspondence lesson arrived.

**14 October**

Saturday. Hot, dry weather continues—our tent fresh water is exhausted. Inspection work on UP/L proceeding. The electricians are having some trouble. In the meantime, I have been assisting with the armament work on UP/B. The Liberator bomber which was left behind with a skeleton maintenance crew when the main body of the USAAF 9<sup>th</sup> Service Group moved out, has finally been repaired. The four engines were run up this morning, taxiing and braking checks were carried out and the old battler waddled away from us. Considerable truck activity taking place on the road system, large bomb dumps and ammunition concentrations are being reduced, no doubt being transferred to bases closer to the action. This afternoon, an American Beechcraft transport pranged on the airstrip. I understand it is almost a write-off. Bob Blackwood is working in camp. He is doing some painting jobs around the place and I believe he is doing a good job. Flight Lieutenant Warren Napier and Flying Officer McKeller are still with us. It is Caulfield Cup day and Peter Scott and Francis Cooney are trying to earn themselves a few extra bob acting as bookies. No mail.

**15 October**

Sunday. Today is Mum's birthday, and I would have given anything to have been at home, enjoying the day with her. The love, sincerity and ongoing warmth of one's parents, sisters or brothers, as the case may be, is something to be very happy about. Even at this young age, I can look back on a life of love, guidance and support. My sisters can say the same, and all of this has been made possible through the efforts of Mum and Dad.

There was a light shower during the night, but the rain had cleared away by early morning. Before daybreak, we were down at the airstrip attending to our aircraft duties. An early cup of tea was put together in the Flight tent (by me) and Roy Menner made some toast. This early morning snack kept us going until the breakfast truck arrived from the camp. Later in the morning, Flying Officer McKeller appeared in the Jeep and drove several of us to the northern end of the strip to inspect a visiting

RNZAF Venture bomber. We chatted briefly with two of the aircrew, who told us they had flown in a Wing Commander from one of their advanced bases to inspect the position at Momote with the strong likelihood that some of their Squadrons, with support groups, could be moving here shortly.

Two of our NCO armourers, Flight Sergeant Charlie Grant and Sergeant Les Borgelt have been busy constructing a 20mm cannon stand—if everything works out alright, this will be a big help to the Squadron armourers. Quiet afternoon back at the camp. Did some washing, writing and sleeping. No show at Wing, so spent a quiet evening in the tent with Tom. Other lads were out visiting in other tents. No mail. Deliveries seem to have been a little irregular of late.

### **16 October**

Monday. Sometime during the night in the early hours of the morning it started to rain and continued right up to lunchtime. Change of shift, back to afternoon. When our shift truck arrived at the strip, we were surprised to see several of our flight maintenance tents had been blown down. Apparently a heavy rain squall had hit the maintenance area and flattened our badly supported tents. A working bee was soon organised and the tents re-erected, only this time the job was properly carried out. Back at the camp a public address speaker had been fastened to a palm tree close to our tent, the speaker was removed and reattached to a palm tree in the maintenance area at the strip. The speaker fulfilled a more useful purpose in its new location. Apart from routine aircraft checks, the rest of the afternoon was quiet. There was nothing worthwhile showing at the Wing theatre, so we all spent a quiet time in the tent doing our own thing. I caught up with some reading and brought these notes up to date. No mail.

### **17 October**

Tuesday. Intermittent light showers throughout the morning, which, when added to the heat, resulted in a hot, humid, sticky brew. Caught up with some washing, followed this with a quick swim in the lagoon, then back to the tent for a refreshing cup of tea and a yarn with Englishman, Bill Tester, who I had previously invited to share a brew. Bill was a storeman in the Squadron, and was one of the most interesting men that I had met at this stage of my life. I suppose you could refer to him as a rolling stone. He had travelled widely and was able to describe some of the places and people he had met in a remarkable story telling way. His tales stirred an adventurous chord within me, and, when this war is over, I hope I can visit some of the countries he spoke about. In the afternoon, one of our RAAF Catalina flying boats visited the island and delivered back from leave, Flight Lieutenant Newman, Flying Officer Vader and newly commissioned officer Pilot Officer May, plus several replacements for the Fighter Sector control unit. UP/L was test flown by Warrant Officer Jock Haines and everything checked out okay. I helped load three U/S Spitfire engines onto a trailer for shipment back to Australia. As previously mentioned in my notes, a man who deserves great praise for his work on Spitfire Rolls Royce engines, is Corporal Laurie Whittle. He could really fine tune these motors and quickly detect what might cause future problems. In the evening, Jack and I visited the theatre at No 1 ARU, and saw the movie 'Princess O'Rourke', starring Olivia de Havilland, Robert Cummings, Jack Carson and Jane Wyman. Good light entertainment.

**18 October**

Wednesday. Weather following usual pattern. Hot, showery and sticky. About 8.00am 'Bonny' Les Bridges and Herb Waterman were given a noisy send off as they left camp in a Blitz waggon for the airstrip to proceed home on leave. Both were original B Flight mechanics and were popular among the flight. Herb was a Flight Rigger (airframes) and 'Bonny' Les was a Flight Mechanic (engines). It is understood they will be flying part way on the Catalina that flew in yesterday. Scuttlebutt has it that Warrant Officer Brown, our new WOD has ideas of building barracks to house the men. What a crazy idea this is, with talk of a major Squadron move taking place any day, this would be an unnecessary expense, furthermore, most of the men now share a tent with others with whom they wish to camp. I hope Brown's idea doesn't get off the ground. Cutting across Brown's pie in the sky, already three enterprising G Flight men, Max Stewart, Corporal Clyde Woodbridge and Jack Shields, have embarked on a building scheme to replace their tent with an off ground structure. It is being built out of scrap material, square in shape, about eighteen inches off the ground, boasting a wooden floor, fly wire sides and a high, well drained roof of canvas. Admittedly it will be like living in a bird cage, but most suitable for the climate. I feel sure it will be a success. In the evening Bruce Day and I hitched a ride to No 1 ARU and saw the film 'An American Dream', starring our own Shirley Ann Richards and Brian Donlevy. It was an excellent film in Technicolour and pursued the great self-made American dream and theme of small beginnings, eventually culminating in a huge, vital industry that helped the USA win the war. Great enterprise stuff, great American propaganda. No mail.

**19 October**

Thursday. Grape vine news circulating camp to the effect that Japanese news sources have stated that American forces have landed in the Philippines. Our own news bulletins haven't confirmed this, but in view of the build up on this island of men, material, aircraft and ships spread over these past few months, I am sure that a major thrust by the Americans must take place soon. Although we have had heavy rain on and off throughout the day, it has little cooling effect. We are still sweating like pigs. An inspection was started on UP/D this morning, the armament side of the operation was soon completed. This item is a little late mentioning, but two days ago, we received our first issue of Australian beer. The ration is to be one bottle of beer about every two days at 1/6 per bottle. While not ungrateful for the American beer we have been receiving, the change to real beer is appreciated, and will be a welcome break from the American lolly water. Tom has had bad trouble with his hands and arms. The surface of the skin has been breaking and pussing like a tropical ulcer, so much so that the doctor has relieved him from his duty. This morning Reg Willingham, Max Cordell and I were given the job of erecting a shed over the refrigeration plant attached to the Officers' Mess. While working in the area, we couldn't help but notice the untidy state of some of the Officers' tents that were erected close to their Mess: some of them lived like pigs, and if airmen had ideas of living like this, they would soon be on the mat. Our tents were regularly inspected by the WOD, sometimes accompanied by the Adjutant, and occasionally the Commanding Officer.

## **20 October**

Friday. A light shower in the morning. Further postings were announced over the PA system. The backbone of our old transport section will soon be headed home. These include Sergeant Young, Johnny Maxwell (my old flour lifting comrade), Eric Bloomfield, 'Snowy' Britton, Les Wright, Wally Banks, and Norm, the fitter. And later in the day another batch of replacements arrived. In the afternoon, while working on my aircraft, Joe Marshall popped around to our maintenance area to see how things were going. We enjoyed a chat and, later when I had some time to spare I slipped around to the Ops hut and had a cup of tea. A big batch of mail arrived.

## **21 October**

Saturday. Weather warm but looks like being a good day. Surprise, Surprise, Surprise. After a considerable absence from the Squadron, who should walk into the tent just before lunchtime, was Merv James. He had been given home leave for compassionate reasons. His young wife was having a difficult time having their first baby. Fortunately everything worked out okay. He is a very nice chap, and it was good to see him back again. When passing through Port Moresby, he mentioned that he had met Arnold Giles, with whom I had enlisted. Over the years we had been keeping in touch by letter, and now Arnold was due to arrive here any day. Further home postings were announced, these included our own tent mate Bluey Leonard, Wal Cowie, Gordon Lalshear, 'Boots' Smith and Len Shaw. News also to the effect that Sergeant Des O'Brien, Corporal Kevin Hanslow, Les Bridges and Herb Waterman had already been posted to main land air stations. Pat Donahue's posting was also announced. Very little flight activity at the airstrip in the afternoon.

## **22 October**

Sunday. Weather very muggy. Bob Blackwood is working around the camp area doing odd jobs. Tom's hands are still breaking out in sores. With the home posting of our tent neighbour, Wal Cowie, his tent mate Francis Cooney is expecting a call any day now, and has started to pack up. Our news bulletins state that American operations in the Philippines against the Japanese appear to be progressing favourably. The American landings were confirmed the day after the Japanese broadcast them, so we are now aware of MacArthur's latest thrust. In the evening Jack, Merv and I popped over to Wing and saw the film, 'The Butler's Sister', starring Deanna Durban, Franchot Tone, Akim Tamiroff and Pat O'Brien. A good show.

## **23 October**

Monday. The hot weather is unrelenting. Change of shift, back on to morning operations. Stewart and Woody's fly wire shack looking good, they are making a first-class job of it. There was a little tension in the tent this evening. We all had a few words to say and let off steam, which is only natural when five or six blokes are cooped up together in this heat for months on end.

## 24 October

Tuesday. A 22 Squadron Boston Bomber flew in from Noomfor Island this morning. The reason for the visit was to pick up some canteen supplies for the Squadron. It so happened that I knew the Flight Mechanic who accompanied the flight. His name is George Faraday from Newcastle, and we were both on the same basic fitting course at Ultimo Technical College—sure is a small world. In the morning Joe Marshall flew UP/P and test-fired the guns. Everything worked OK. The aircraft was quickly checked and refuelled after landing, and the guns cleared and reloaded. In the afternoon, Merv and I popped down to the lagoon for a quick swim, then visited the hospital to see Roy Menner, who was admitted with Dengue fever. He did look crook. Tom's hands are beginning to heal. No mail.

## 25 October

Wednesday. Severe lightning and thunder storm throughout early hours of the morning, this was followed by heavy rain and wind. The wind blew down a palm tree beside Ray Harris' and Tony Chapman's tent which completely wrecked the tent and severely injured Ray. The trunk of the tree hit Ray a glancing blow on the forehead and gave him a compound fracture of the skull. He was rushed to a nearby American hospital unit where he was given immediate attention. By every good grace he survived. Bill Tester has taken over Ray's job and will run the canteen. Because of the violent weather, operations at the strip have been cancelled. Today I posted home £20. A little mail arrived.

## 26 October

Thursday. Bad weather seems to have eased, but in its place we have dreadful high humidity. Roy Menner out of hospital but still looks crook and weak. The powers that be have decided to erect a hangar type workshop at the strip. At this late stage of operations, it seems a ridiculous decision. George Faraday gave the twin motors on the Boston bomber a good test runup this morning—he seems to know what he is about. Just prior to lunch a rain storm blew in which looked like continuing, so maintenance operations at the strip were cancelled for the rest of the day. News over the PA system to the effect that, during the Philippine invasion operations last Friday, our HMAS *Australia* was hit by a bomb which killed the Captain and several of the crew. This was a tragedy. Fitzgerald the guard has been rostered home. A little mail arrived.

## 27 October

Friday. Rain. Rain. Rain. Operations at the strip cancelled. During this thoroughly saturated morning, Arnold Giles arrived. He has been attached to 15 AR Depot at Port Moresby where he had been working as an aircraft electrician. I was able to get him bunked down into a tent close to ours. It is close on two years since I last saw him. I am a little late reporting this, but Bill Fuller, Bill Hale, Johnny Sturm and most of the other chaps who had taken early leave, have been officially posted from the Squadron. In the evening, Merv, Arnold and I popped over to the Wing and saw the film 'Lifeboat' which, among other first rate people, starred Talulah Bankhead and John Hodiak. It was an excellent film.

## **28 October**

Saturday. Still raining. The Boston bomber from 22 Squadron (whose crew have been staying with our Squadron) departed this morning about 8.00am. Down at the strip, and at a convenient moment, I was able to walk Arnold Giles around and show him some of the workshop and aircraft assembly facilities that the Americans had erected not far from us. He appeared to be impressed. The latest A20 or Boston bomber that had been assembled by the No 2 ARU was wheeled out of the hangar and test flown this morning. Four flights of US Navy Corsair fighters landed at the airstrip this morning. They made a fine sight. Well, our old tent mate Bluey Leonard is all packed up and ready to go. We will miss him. I still have a pain from my left hip shooting down my leg. It is not enough to hold me up with my duties, but I will have to have it looked at when I get back to the mainland.

## **29 October**

Sunday. Doris' birthday. I do wish I was home for this occasion. She has been so good looking after Mum and Dad and keeping up correspondence to me and Ed. It looks like being a nice day here. I hope it is the same at 20A French Street, Kogarah. It was a stand-down day here for part of B Flight, so Merv James, Keith Swift, Arnold Giles, Jack and I, decided to hitch rides and visit another part of Los Negros Island. This exploration meant changing from one truck to another as we made our way deep into unknown territory. We were amazed at the extent of the network of roads, camps, and facilities that the Americans had constructed. When it got close to lunchtime, we stopped at a large American camp and were generously provided with lunch. Back on the road again. It was a special treat to catch a glimpse of the shoer base built for the Martin mariner flying boats breasting Seeadler Harbour. As we moved around throughout the day, we encountered a fair amount of rain, but it eased off as we made our way back to camp.

## **30 October**

Monday. The day broke fine and clear, yes, it was hot, but should develop into a beautiful day. Change of shift, back to afternoons. Did a spot of washing in the morning and sent a further payment of £3 to British Institute of Technology for correspondence course, also a postal note to Kodak in Sydney to pay for processing of a film. Routine maintenance work at the airstrip in the afternoon. Both B and C Flights have erected substantial maintenance huts from timber and iron roofing salvaged from 76 Squadron Mess buildings. Picked up a pair of trousers that Jack Stewart, the fabric worker had repaired for me—he did a very good job. The CO, Squadron Leader Galton has just received notification of his promotion to Wing Commander. He didn't waste any time getting his braid up. Over the past few days there has been several RAN chaps going home on draft. They have been accommodated by the Squadron while waiting for air transport. Spent a quiet evening in the tent reading and writing.

## **31 October**

Tuesday. Another beautiful morning. Started the day with some study and followed this with a quick swim. Merv also joined me. Tom visited the American hospital to see Ray Harris and Wal Ramsay, the medical orderly, both patients were making good progress. The DWO Brown and Flight Sergeant Langley carried out an inspection of the tents this morning. Ours passed the scrutiny, but they caused a stir when they poked their nose into the transport section. At the airstrip a start has been made to construct a new armament hut—most of the material has been salvaged from ex-76 Squadron facilities. With all the building that is going on, it gives one the impression that our Squadron is to stay on the island. Late in the afternoon heavy clouds moved in, accompanied by plenty of thunder and lightning. We could be in for another rainy period. For supper Blue put together a meal that would melt in your mouth. No mail.

### **1 November**

Wednesday. Beginning of a new month. The weather this morning was hot and sticky, we also had a couple of heavy showers mid-morning. Corporal Clyde (Woody) Woodbridge was admitted to hospital with a poisoned leg and today Sergeant Les Borgelt was back in hospital with a bad bout of malaria. He has been having a rough time of it lately. For the first time since the inauguration of the Squadron, a general and CO's parade was held. This involved getting dressed in full tropical kit, belts, buckles etc. including slouch hats. It took place on the nearby USA playing field. In the future there is to be a parade every morning with a CO's parade every Tuesday. Seems like a lot of bullshit, but, then again, a little parade ground discipline will smarten the Squadron up and pull a lot of the chaps into line. Sure wish old Maxie Bott was here to take the CO's salute. In the evening, Jack, Merv, Tom and I popped over to the Wing and saw the movie 'The White Cliffs of Dover', starring Irene Dunn, Sir C. Aubrey Smith, Van Johnson, Alan Marshall, Frank Morgan, Dame May Whitty and Roddy McDowell. This was a first class production, beautifully acted by first class leads and a treasure house full of character actors, beautifully filmed (photographed), plenty of emotion, with a strong Anglo/American story line. This film must have worked wonders for the British/American relationship.

### **2 November**

Thursday. Hot sticky morning with a grey overcast sky. First of the parades held. Started the day with some study, then wrote a couple of letters. Blue invited Lance Wood and another (both RAN boys) to share a cup of morning tea with us. Both men were posted home on draft after serving on the HMAS *Australia* for five years. Lance mentioned that a Stanley Cairncross (a neighbour from my childhood days) was also serving on the ship. He also confirmed that a Japanese VAL bomber crashed onto the ship, badly wounding Commodore J.A. Collins, killing Captain. Dechaineux, Commander Rayment, several other officers and a number of ratings. Apparently most of the damage occurred in the vicinity of the bridge. They both were nice chaps and glad to be on their way home. Throughout the afternoon there was a steady drizzle of rain which eventually intensified, so operations were cancelled at the strip. No mail.

### **3 November**

Friday. Early this morning, Ray Menner, Roy Dudley, Pat Donohue and all the navy personnel flew out for the mainland. Parade held, then back to the tent for a spot of washing. Merv and I salvaged a few odds and ends from nearby empty tents. Arnold Giles informed me he wasn't too happy at being with the Squadron. I had the feeling that he wasn't settling in too well. During the night, 'Shorty' Richards, a transport driver, caused a stir. Primed up with grog, he took a truck, some beer, and disappeared into the scrub. He has boxed himself into a tight spot. Routine maintenance operations at the airstrip in the afternoon.

### **4 November**

Saturday. Hot sticky morning. We could get rain before the day is over. Parade held. Did a spot of washing, then made a cup of tea and enjoyed a yarn with Merv and Blue. This morning Flying Officer Cameron flying UP/T pranged the aircraft when landing. From what I was given to understand, it looks like pilot error. The aircraft is repairable. With a further rise in rank to Air Commodore, Gordon Steege arrived this morning with three other pilots flying P40s from 76 and 77 Squadrons. With the arrival of Gordon Steege, it is quite likely that there could be a change in current operations. Incidentally, I heard a rumour that I had been posted south—only time will tell. 'Shorty' Richards, the transport driver, was sentenced by the CO to 27 days hard labour for his reckless behaviour. Early this morning, Blue, Bill Tester and a small party proceeded to Manus Island seeking supplies for the canteen. In the evening, we all popped over to the Wing and saw the film 'A Wing and a Prayer', starring Charles Bickford, Don Ameche and Dana Andrews. It was good entertainment. The story-line was about the USN Fleet Air Arm. On arrival back at the tent, Tom and Jack had a few heated words. Both men had a short fuse, but we were able to cool the friction down. A little mail arrived. Closed down for the evening.

### **5 November**

Sunday. Beautiful morning but it was wild and windy throughout the night. For some unknown reason, the parade this morning was cancelled. Called into the medical section this morning. I have developed an irritable rash under my left arm pit. Bill Tester and his friend popped into the tent this morning. We all enjoyed a cup of tea and a good yarn. Toward lunchtime the bad weather closed in, operations at the airstrip were placed on hold, and eventually cancelled, so the afternoon was spent in the tent. Early evening a Beaufort bomber from 8 Squadron arrived. No mail, but a few parcels arrived.

### **6 November**

Monday. Beautiful morning, warm without being excessively hot, clear blue sky. The rash under my arm is not quite so irritating. The lotion that Ossie Adair from the medical section provided seems to be drying up the problem. There still appears to be a considerable number of Dengue fever cases in the hospital. Change of shift, back to mornings. Routine maintenance work at the airstrip. A daily inspection was carried out on the Beaufort bomber whose number was A-9-611 with 45 bombing raids to its

credit. Also, for the first time since we arrived on Los Negros Island, a RAAF DC3 transport flew in. Progress on new flight workshops going well. Flight Sergeant Jinker Jelley organising the operation. Last night Johnny Maxwell and Les Burrell flew out on a home posting, and about 10.00am, further replacements arrived. Also Flight Lieutenant Susans arrived back from home leave, and made good use of the Jeep. About 3.30pm, a meeting of all section Commanders was held in the Officers' Mess. Something is bound to come out of this. No mail.

### **7 November**

Tuesday. The parade this morning was taken by Flight Lieutenant Susans. As rumoured, the general shake up and change was outlined in an announcement by Flight Lieutenant Susans. The only originals left in B Flight were Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley, Tony Chapman (flight rigger) and Bob McIntyre (flight mechanic). The rest of the Flight maintenance strength was made up of replacements. The remainder of the Flight originals was formed into a separate group, more or less awaiting home posting. This included me. About 3.00am this morning, Blue flew out on a DC3 bound for Brisbane and home leave. I am sure going to miss the old bastard. Last night Bob Blackwood was rostered for ground duty at DID. A few parcels and packages arrived from home. The visiting Beaufort bomber flew out this morning. In the afternoon, Merv, Arnold Giles and I walked down to the water's edge to take a few sunset photographs. The sooner a lot of us originals are posted home the better this will be. There is too much back biting going on between a few agitators and the discontented. Quiet evening in the tent.

### **8 November**

Wednesday. The weather this morning was windy with considerable cloud cover. Attended parade which was taken by Flight Lieutenant Galway, then went to sick quarters where I had some more lotion applied to my sweat rash. About 10.00am, further home postings were announced over the PA system. Among those being Flight Sergeant Tom Opie, Sergeant McNamee, Harry Chappel, Ron Harding, Frank Carrol, Clem Macauley, Gilbert Grout, George Washington, 'Springtime' Murphy, and Merv Haswell. Did a spot of washing and followed this with some study. Arnold Giles seems a little more settled. No mail.

### **9 November**

Thursday. Weather hot and sultry, at times it is an effort to move about. Morning parade, then attended medical section for further treatment to my sweat rash. Now that the maintenance section has been formed into one group, more or less under the control of Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley, and the remainder of the original members formed into a pool, and having nothing to do with the activities at the airstrip, life around the camp this past few days seems a little aimless and too easy. Further home postings announced, the lucky chaps being Laurie Whittle, Norman Gray, 'Ned' Kelly, Claude Bird, Andy Anderson, McDonald and Corporal Claude Edgar. I feel that another week could find the biggest majority of we original members posted. This afternoon there was some excitement down at the airstrip. At approximately 2.15pm a surprise attack was made by three Japanese aircraft on Momote airstrip. It was a hit and run affair, which caught the island defence organisation completely by

surprise. This should not have happened, and there could have been serious consequences. At the time Merv and I were sitting in the tent talking. The first we heard was the sound of rapid gun fire, several explosions intermixed with the scream of over revving aircraft engines, this was the Japanese planes making a hasty retreat. The anti-aircraft guns opened up, but, by the time they swung into action, the Japs would have been well away. According to reports, the enemy strafed and dropped a few bombs in the vicinity of the Transport Movement Office. No damage or casualties resulted. A little mail arrived in the morning. In the evening, Arnold and I visited the Wing and saw the biographical film 'Dr. Wassell', starring Gary Cooper and Lorraine Day. The film was an all technicolour production and was good entertainment.

### **10 November**

Friday. It rained heavily during the early hours of the morning, but cleared up before daybreak, then we experienced hot and sultry conditions. This morning's parade was taken by my friend, Flying Officer Joe Marshall. Following the parade, I reported to the medical section for further treatment to my rash. Incidentally, Warrant Officer Jack Smith arrived back from leave. About 10.00am there was an earth shattering explosion in the direction of Mockerang airstrip. We should hear through the day what caused the explosion. Right at this moment, 11.20am over the PA system, the operator is presenting a program called 'G I Jive', hosted by Jill the 'Jive Girl' and is relayed from the USA via our local radio station WVTD, The Voice of the Admiralties. The swinging jive band hitting the air waves at the moment is Bob Crosby and his Bob Cats, and they are really going to town.

With regard to the explosion mentioned earlier, story has it that it was an ammunition ship that exploded in Seadler Harbour. A large number of deaths and damage was reported. This type of accident is always on the cards where there are large concentrations of fuel and explosives. Received a little mail, including a letter from Ed, who is serving somewhere in New Guinea. Nothing worth viewing at Wing so we all spent a quiet evening in the tent.

### **11 November**

Saturday. Armistice Day. It is 36 years since the end of the first Great War in Europe. I wonder when ours will end. The parade this morning was taken by Flying Officer Ross Day. Visited medical section for rash treatment, then called on Clyde Woodbridge and Max Stewart and enjoyed a cup of tea and a yarn. Merv sprained his ankle this morning, jumping off a truck and was admitted to hospital. Even though it is Melbourne Cup Day, the atmosphere in the camp is much the same as usual, with very little race ballywho taking place. The only bloke I have seen or heard of running a 'book' was Flight Sergeant Langley. About twenty-one replacements arrived this morning. This is the largest single batch so far. One of the new chaps moved into our tent, Bob Burns by name. Ray Harris returned to the Squadron today. He still looks rather groggy, and his forehead is badly depressed. I gave Bill Tester a hand to reconstruct his tent which was badly damaged by fire.

## **12 November**

Sunday. The weather this morning was so hot and close, one could almost touch it. No parade. Popped into medical section where I was attended to smartly, then called on Merv, whose sprained ankle has eased considerably. Mac, from Arnold's tent, called in and had a yarn and a cup of tea with Tom and me. Incidentally, Syracuse won the Melbourne Cup, putting in a very fine run. In the afternoon, 'Butch' Colton called in and, along with five other chaps, we proceeded to the airstrip and started work building a new Operations Room. While we were on the job, a transport Liberator or C86, made a perfect landing with the port outer motor out of action, the pilot handled the aircraft beautifully. No mail. Finished the evening with a little study, then off to bed.

## **13 November**

Monday. It rained a little throughout the early hours of the morning, becoming very sticky as the day developed. Attended parade, then popped into the medical section for treatment to my rash. Further home postings announced, some of the lucky ones being, Bill Duncan, Ron Preston, Lou Kakoschke, Doug Mansfield, Bob Taylor, and my old mate, Tom Neill. Once again I was disappointed that my own name was not on the list. The armament section now mainly consists of new people. The Warrant Officer in charge is a chap by the name of Eggleston, he is supported by Flight Sergeant Charlie Grant, Sergeant Davidson, a sergeant armourer, plus two corporal armourers and several armourers. There was a stir in the camp today, when Arnold was called up before the CO. Apparently he had seriously breached the censorship rules, and was reprimanded and warned against a repeat performance, didn't appear to be unduly concerned. Ray Harris is going to be transferred to a convalescent camp at Segai, somewhere in New Guinea. Further replacements covering all musterings arrived. In the evening I popped over to the Wing and saw a news film covering the championship fight between the heavy weight boxers Joe Louis and Jim Bradfield. A little mail arrived.

## **14 November**

Tuesday. It rained throughout the early hours of the morning and eased off at daybreak. The CO's parade this morning was actually taken by Wing Commander Galton. Although daily parades in this area seem a little unnecessary, a CO's parade such as we have had this morning, does seem to smarten everyone and make them realise they still belong to the service. After the parade I was invited by Joe to his tent for a chat, a cup of tea and a smoke. Joe told me he had received advice from the Air Force Board that his release from the Service had come through, and that he was able to return to working on the land. He was delighted and I was very happy for him. After our yarn, I reported to the DWO and was allotted to a work detail cleaning up around the camp and unloading stores for the catering sergeant, Johnny Ash. As I write these notes, the last golden rays of the setting sun splash across the paper. I have seen some magnificent sunsets since being in the islands. Old Tom has completed his packing and is fully prepared for the long trip home. In the evening, Joe called in to thank Tom for his friendship and faithful work on the aircraft, and to wish him bon voyage. Tom was clearly moved by Joe's expression of goodwill. The evening finished on a good note, with Tom shaking hands with Jack Fisher.

### **15 November**

Wednesday. Throughout the early hours of the morning, we experienced a rather heavy electrical storm. These always frighten me, particularly so after Johnny Stratton was struck by lightning last year. My old mate, Tom, said his farewells and stepped quietly out of the tent. He was on his way. His C86 Liberator transport left the island for Brisbane about 5.00am and, with this electric storm raging around, I was greatly concerned for his safety. I returned to my bed for a short time and immediately dropped off to sleep. Upon awakening, and looking about, the old tent looked deserted, particularly so with the absence of Tom. The parade this morning was taken by Flying Officer Smale. Following the parade, I was detailed, with Corporal Jack White, to shift a few odds and ends and generally clean up the new Operations Room at the airstrip. While down at the airstrip, I chanced, once again, to run into Flight Lieutenant Keith Gorange from Fighter Sector Control. We enjoyed a brief yarn. Jack and I finished the clean up job around midday and by the time we wandered back to the camp, it was lunchtime. No further duties were detailed, so I returned Tom's and my own blankets to the store, then assisted Jack White to move into our tent. No mail, but I received my second Christmas parcel from Rockdale Council Patriotic Fund, making a total of five parcels received from the Fund since joining the Air Force in 1942. The civilian women and menfolk behind these funds do a tremendous job for the men and women in the services.

### **16 November**

Thursday. After the parade, I was detailed by Flight Sergeant Langley to duties around the camp. What a way to finish eighteen months front line service with a Fighter Squadron! Our tent now consists of Jack Fisher, Merv James, Bob Blackwood, Bob Burns, Jack White and myself. I am the last of the originals. The new chaps seem decent types of blokes. No mail.

### **17 November**

Friday. Hot beginning to the day, with indications that a storm could develop later. Attended parade, and, at the conclusion of which, I was detailed with Jack White to proceed to the airstrip and help complete the covering of an equipment store being erected at the maintenance area. On completion of this, a group of us, including Jack Lang returned to the camp across the lake in a large used emergency aircraft dinghy. A good laugh was had by all.

### **18 November**

Saturday. Weather continues very hot, anticipated change didn't develop. About 9.30am a spectacular display was put on by ten of our pilots. We had seen nothing like this since we left Kiriwina Island. Taken as a salute to the Squadron, they roared low over our camp in two flights of five in very tight formation. They then proceeded to climb at a rapid rate, and, upon reaching an agreed height, to break off at tangents and do their own thing. Throwing themselves all over the sky, the aerobatics were a marvel to watch and I am sure the pilots were enjoying the sheer joy and freedom of being able to display their individual skills. At the conclusion of the display, they

made a routine line ahead descent and landing. Some of the talented pilots were Flight Lieutenant Ron Susans, Flight Lieutenant Galway, Flying Officer Hugh Kennare and Flight Sergeant Pollard. This morning I missed the parade, and was later called up by the acting DWO, Flight Sergeant Langley to explain the reason why. He was not satisfied with my explanation and reprimanded me. At the conclusion of our confrontation, I was ordered to join a work detail erecting tents around the camp. The party included Bob Malcolm, Con Newman, 'Juke Box' Dickinson and Jim Draper. Near to lunchtime an announcement was made over the PA system that daily parade will cease, and that only the CO's parade will continue to be held on Tuesdays. Cheers and laughter could be heard throughout the camp. So much for Flight Sergeant Langley's brief exercise of power.

About 2.00pm an announcement was made that with a Squadron move pending, all surplus personal gear of a higher priority can be transported. Naturally this item of news raised spirits and a fresh flood of rumours. Merv is still handicapped with his ankle and is only able to move about with the help of crutches. As the day lengthened into shadows, I popped down to the lagoon for a quick swim and was greatly refreshed. In the evening I visited the Wing theatre and saw the technicolour film 'Frenchman's Creek', starring Joan Fontaine, Arturo de Cordova and Cecil Kellaway. The film was adapted from a book written by Daphne du Maurier, about a French privateer who raided the Cornish coast and fell in love with a lady of the court. Very romantic stuff. It was beautifully produced and photographed, and, while I thought Fontaine and Kellaway were good, Cordova was a bit on the weak side. No mail. I retired early.

### **19 November**

Sunday. Warm start to the day. After breakfast I washed a few clothes and aired some others. According to the Adjutant, the last of us originals should be cleared and away from the Squadron by next Friday. The thought of home leave pleased me tremendously, but I won't believe it until I am actually on the way. There was nothing worth while viewing at the Wing theatre, so I spent a quiet evening in the tent reading and studying.

### **20 November**

Monday. It rained during the early hours of the morning but had eased by daybreak. After breakfast I was told to report to the Orderly Room, where the Adjutant informed a group of us that he would be handing out leave notices today to a small number of men, and that tomorrow the rest of us would receive official advice regarding our leave. The lucky chaps today were, 'Big Jim' Williamson, Bob Malcolm, Con Newman, Jim Draper and George Washington. During lunch, tension flared between Jack and Arnold—rather silly really, caused by friction related to duties at the airstrip. I have noticed lately, that both men seem to irritate each other. In the evening, I slipped quietly out of the tent on my own and popped over to the Wing and saw the film 'Cover Girl', starring Rita Hayworth and Gene Kelly. It was a glamorous production but lacked substance.

## **21 November**

Tuesday. The CO's parade this morning was taken by Flying Officer Smale, apparently the CO was on the sick list. Following the parade, I was instructed to call at the Orderly Room. When I arrived, there were already a number of lads there. The Adjutant read out a list of names whose postings had come through, some of those being Corporal Clyde Woodbridge, Max Stewart, Tony Chapman, Bob McIntyre, Dick Hudson, Harry Chappel, Bob Malcolm, Col McKeown, Keith Swift and a few others. My own posting hadn't officially come through, but, along with several others, we were to be sent home on leave pending posting. We were to be advised by the Squadron when to report to the RAAF movement centre (in my case Bradfield Park, Sydney), to be told the extent of our tropical leave, and be issued with civilian food, petrol, ration cards, etc. Without wasting time, all the men proceeded to do the rounds of the various sections of the Squadron and have their clearances signed. On the completion of this task, I called on Joe Marshall and told him about my posting. I was also delighted to hear that his posting was now official, and that he would be leaving on the same flight. On returning to the tent, I soon had my kit bags packed, and was, literally, ready to go. In the afternoon, when Jack returned from the airstrip, he brought with him the good news that a group of men would be leaving the Squadron shortly for Oakie in Queensland, to prepare some new Spitfires ready for acceptance as part of the plan to refit and reform the Squadron. This news was the first that we, as ground staff, had received that the Squadron would shortly be on the move. It so happened that Jack White, Bob Burns and Jack, himself, had been included in this small group of maintenance men chosen for this advance party task. Received some mail, including a lovely letter from Mum and an old family friend, Miss Winnie Clark. In the evening I slipped out quietly and popped over to the Wing and saw the movie, 'Music in Manhattan'. It was a good show, but I didn't know the actors. After the show, and on returning to the tent, we had a gathering to wish me farewell. This was helped along with three bottles of beer. During a break in the carry on, I popped over to our transport section, and using their internal camp phone, I got in touch with Joe Marshall and invited him over to our tent. He readily accepted, and within a few minutes joined our small gathering. Many toasts were made and jokes told. It was a memorable, happy, yet, momentarily, a sad occasion. Some of the men I knew I would never see again, and my connection with 79 Fighter Squadron was almost at an end. These matters weighed heavily on my mind and heart, and close to midnight, I retired to my bed and in no time, was asleep.

## **22 November**

Wednesday. It seemed as if I had hardly closed my eyes, when, at approx. 2.15am 'Happy' the guard, doing his rounds, woke me so that I would be ready in time for my departure. To my great surprise, the lads were also up and moving about. I was soon dressed, we all sat around our big central table and enjoyed a last cup of tea, a biscuit and a chat.

I slipped into the tent next door and said farewell to Arnold Giles, returned, shook hands firmly with the boys. It was time to go. One last look around, a farewell wave, an outside look back at our 'Reichstag' tent, then on to our transport section. The departure party numbered eight. Flight Lieutenant Dickie Long, Flight Lieutenant Allan Yates, Flying Officer Joe Marshall, Warrant Officer Jack Smith, Keith Swift,

Dick Hudson, 'Dicko' and myself. We loaded our gear and ourselves onto the back of a truck, and with the rest of the Squadron deep in slumber, drove out at 3.05am. On arrival at the airstrip, we checked into the US Navy Transport unit. They soon had us and our gear sorted out, and, when the formalities were completed, we enjoyed a lovely hot cup of coffee prepared by a cheerful American Red Cross girl. We boarded a US Navy Douglas DC3. This Trojan transport aircraft hardly seemed large enough to carry twenty-five people (which included the aircrew) and our gear. Facing each other, we were seated 11 each side on hard pressed metal seats, with our gear piled up in the middle between us. The inside of the fuselage was unlined, so I knew that the noise from the engines would make conversation difficult. As the first light of day began breaking into the eastern sky, we taxied onto Momote airstrip, the pilot warmed his motors, and, at about 4.05am became airborne and headed south. In the weak morning light, and through a small window in the aircraft, I caught a brief glimpse of the islands below. What a turnabout from the way we had arrived at the Admiralties so many months ago. My thoughts touched on many things. Dominant among those being about this huge arsenal and forward base that the Americans had created and carved out of what must have been a sleepy, sea washed tropical paradise before this. From here, death and destruction radiated day and night across great ocean distances in bombers, to bring retribution to the Japanese holding onto island positions to the north, east and west of Manus Island. There was a great loss of life originally securing this base, and continuing losses in helping maintain and operate this dynamic, driving war machine. Hundreds of loved sons, as well as our own loved ones, were buried here. I, myself, on a number of occasions, escaped death by the merest whisper. My spirit resides with them during their eternal sleep. I feel guilty about leaving.

It was a short flight to Finschhafen, which we reached at approximately 6.10am. Our stay here was of short duration. Somehow space was found to take on an AIF Captain and his gear, then we continued on our way. The flight path followed the northern coastline of New Guinea in a south easterly direction until we reached a point at the south easterly end of the Owen Stanley Range, which the DC3 was able to surmount allowing us to drop down into the Milne Bay area and land at Turnbull airstrip. I would never have thought that I would visit the Bay on three occasions. Fuel was topped up here, and this break allowed us to get out of the aircraft and stretch our legs. An announcement was made by the transit authorities that two ordinary servicemen would have to give up their seats on the flight, to make room for a US Naval Officer and USAAF Captain. I was very angry by this move. Our return home was just as important to us, as to be concerned about the transit of any officer. For a moment I thought, 'Well Art, here goes your seat'. At this point Joe Marshall came across to me and said, 'Arthur don't move. I will say a few words if they attempt to take you off'. I did appreciate this action. As it turned out, 'Dicko' stepped forward and said he would wait for another flight, and another serviceman said he would also. At 9.30am we took off from Turnbull airstrip.

This was a long, uninteresting leg of the flight, and we reached Townsville at 1.30pm. Once again it was good to get off the aircraft and stretch our legs, furthermore we were hungry. But by God, it was hot. It was a different sort of heat to the islands—this heat was much drier, and felt like the hot breath of a furnace. I was burning up. We found shelter from this extreme, and sustenance, in a near by American Red Cross hut, and, what I most appreciated as part of a light snack, was an ice cold glass of milk, fresh milk. It was delicious. Our aircraft had been refuelled and was ready to go.

Venturing out into the heat again and looking around, I had never seen such a great variety of aircraft sitting on a tarmac or flying in and out. This would have to be one of the busiest airports in the country. We reboarded the DC3 and took off from Townsville for Brisbane at 2.20pm. Our flight path south closely followed the Queensland coast, and now and then I would look out of the window, but wasn't greatly impressed by the brown, dry looking country I could see below. The shadows lengthened into early evening, and very soon, darkness was upon us as we steadily drew nearer to our destination. The lights of towns, streets and houses appeared and cars could be seen crawling along the roads. It won't be long now. Suddenly, without any warning, the floor beneath us fell away, we and the gear were thrown all over the place. The aircraft had dropped into an air pocket and was falling like a stone. The thought flashed into my mind—what a way to go. After surviving the islands and getting so close to home, to end up burning and spread all over the ground. As quickly as it happened, so it ended. The aircraft shuddered violently as the engines and wings grabbed real air and the aircrew desperately worked at the controls to regain altitude. Whew! What a close call. This incident frightened the shit out of me and the others, and all we wanted was to get back on Terra Firma as quickly as possible. This wasn't long in coming—the chief pilot made a beautiful three point landing at Eagle Farm airport, Brisbane, at 7.45pm, a flight of four hours and twenty-five minutes. I felt like kissing the ground. We loaded our gear and ourselves into a truck and we were driven right into the heart of the city. Here there was a parting of ways. The officers were going to try and book into a city hotel and next day return to Eagle Farm airport and hitch a ride on a flight going through to Sydney and Melbourne. I shook hands firmly with Joe and the other officers. I had the feeling I would meet up with Joe sometime in the future. Our problem now was to try and get digs anywhere. Brisbane, at this time, was a frontline troop town, and accommodation was at a premium. Also next day, we had to report to the Railway Transport office, located on the interstate platform of the Queensland railway system. Here we had to get our names on a list for a place on a troop train headed south. Right out of the blue, in this central Brisbane street who should appear but Con Newman and Jim Draper, both of the lads arrived here from Manus Island yesterday. They said there were some vacancies in their billet at Selwyn House, a short distance out of the city. They gave us directions, and, without wasting any time, we soon found the place, were accommodated and bedded down for the night. It had been a long, tiring day.

### **23–25 November**

I reported daily to the Railway Transport Office and finally secured a bunk on a troop train heading south and leaving Brisbane on Sunday 26 November. In the meantime I took advantage of the few days delay, and had a good look at this lovely city and some of the outer suburbs. What I enjoyed most was the big country town feeling that it seems to impart. There were very few tall buildings, most of the streets were wide and clean, there were some beautiful, colonial style, sandstone government and commercial buildings, and the city boasted a magnificent City Hall. Within easy reach, was a most restful botanical garden, which breasted the Brisbane River. The tempo of life seemed to be much slower. There was also an excellent modern tram system, which enjoyed a vast network of operation. My pattern for these few days was to rise and breakfast early, walk into the city and catch a tram to one of the outlying suburbs. This was an adventure in observation, as I would travel miles through a number of suburbs before reaching the terminus, whereupon I would turn around and

travel back to the city. Most of the houses were raised off the ground on stilts, which in this hot sticky summer climate, was an excellent idea as it allowed a flow of air to pass beneath the floor and introduce a cooling effect. Furthermore, there was a marked absence of depressing slum suburbs, which partly ring the cities of Sydney and Melbourne. Although troops were everywhere, hopefully, this will not be a permanent arrangement, and, when peace returns, Brisbane would be a lovely place to live.

## **26 November**

Sunday. It was a full mixed civilian/troop train which, late in the afternoon, pulled out from South Brisbane Railway Station. Every bunk in my carriage was occupied, mainly with soldiers, but there was a scattering of navy and air force men. There were eight carriages. It was a slow monotonous journey. We reached Casino in the early hours of the evening, where we were able to stretch our legs and get something to eat. While stopped here, I found a station porter and asked him if he would send a telegram for me to my home address, giving the folks early advice of my home coming and approximate time of arrival at Central Railway Station, Sydney. I gave him a £5 note. Next stop was South Grafton where there was a train crew change. From here we travelled through what seemed a never ending night, with numerous hold ups in railway sidings to allow troop and freight trains to thunder past, heading north.

## **27 November**

Monday. A breakfast stop was made at Gosford, and, around about 10.00 or 10.30am our train crawled into Central Railway Station. Journey's end. I had to pinch myself to make sure I had made it back. As was expected these days, the station was crowded with people—Mums and Dads, big and little brothers, sisters, girlfriends, wives with a child hanging onto them, all reaching out to grab their loved soldier—it was an emotional scene. I had a hasty look about to see if anyone was there to meet me, hoping that my telegram had been received, but this was not the case. I shook hands and said farewell to Con Newman and Jim Draper (both men were travelling home to Victoria) fully aware that I might never see them again.

With a kitbag on each shoulder, I eased my way through the crowd, and struggled around to platform No 23, suburban electric trains, and caught a train to Rockdale. It felt good to be viewing familiar sights again as they passed by.

My dear father had a small hairdressing shop near the railway station on the Bexley side of the line, at No 8 Walz Street. I could imagine his surprise when I suddenly appeared. It was around midday when I reached his shop. I could hear the scissors clicking away and some small talk going on. I stood in the door way. He was cutting a man's hair, and I was blocking the light, he turned to see the cause of it, took off his glasses, excused himself from his customer, walked towards me and he helped me down with a kit bag, and, in a moment, we were hugging each other. There was a lump in my throat, I was close to tears and so was Dad. 'Welcome home, son, welcome home. When did you arrive?'

In between customers, we enjoyed a sandwich lunch and a catch up with family news. He mentioned that these past few months Mum hadn't been well in health, and that I should expect to see a change in her. We spent about an hour together, then I caught a Walter's taxi from the nearby station cab rank to our neat semi-detached home at 20A French Street, Kogarah. Dad was right. When Mum opened the door, I couldn't believe just how much weight she had lost. She was still in her dressing gown. Her poor thin face and dark ringed eyes looked out and could not believe it was me standing there. I took her in my arms, kissed her and held her close. She began to cry, softly. 'Yes, Mum, it's me. I'm really back. Don't cry.' We moved inside and I shut the door. In the evening, Dad and Doris arrived home from work, and so we quietly continued the reunion. For the time being, our small family was complete.

The weeks of my leave were very busy, and at times worrying. Soon after I settled in at home, Mum's health deteriorated. Medical tests and x-rays disclosed she was suffering from a mastoid affecting her left ear. This required an emergency operation, which was carried out at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Missenden Road, Camperdown. Apparently this was a difficult and delicate operation, and for a few days it was touch and go. Her head was swathed in bandages as drainage of the wound continued to take place for several days. After about a fortnight, she started to improve, and, during the third week, an old friend of the family, Arthur White, drove her home from the hospital, where she continued with her convalescence. To me it seemed that I was meant to be home on leave at this time, to share the worry and load with Dad and Doris. Either one, or the three of us, were with her during visiting hours.

Before leaving the Squadron, it was made clear to me by a clerk in our admin section, that my official posting had not come through. I was to be sent home on leave, pending posting, and, that in the meantime, it was my duty to keep in touch with Bradfield Park leave and posting section in Sydney. They would advise me as to the extent of my remaining leave, and to where and when, my next posting would be. Following my first week of leave, I phoned Bradfield Park twice a week, first thing on Monday morning and last thing on Friday afternoon. Invariably, the answer would be, 'no documentary advice received from the Squadron as yet, or RAAF posting section. Stay on leave but keep in touch'. And so, on this basis, I continued with my leave. Mum grew stronger each day, and this gave us all a great boost.

When it was possible, I visited the shopping centre at Rockdale, loved to walk along the main street and peep into shops I knew so well, call and see Dad, and enjoy a cup of tea and yarn with him in between customers. Doris and I took complete enjoyment by seeing a couple of movies, and, twice after she had finished work, (typist/clerk with the ABC), we enjoyed a meal and glass of wine in the dining room at the Carlton Hotel in the city.

One weekend, I caught a sooty old steam train from Hurstville down the south coast to Wollongong. Here I changed into a bus, which carried me a considerable number of miles to the growing suburb of Windang, situated on the southern side of Lake Illawarra. My eldest married sister, Mabel lived here in a tidy little fibro cottage, with her steelworker husband, Walter Sylva, and my new little nephew, Ian. Ian was born in 1943, when I was serving on Goodenough Island. I spent a few delightful days with Mabel, Wal and young Ian. This was our first get together since before I enlisted, and that was now over two years ago. We had so much to talk about; there was Mum's

health, family goings on, friends, politics, the progress of the war. It just went on and on. This visit also gave me my first insight into how hard Wal worked at the BHP Steelworks at Port Kembla, and the bastard of a job he had. He was employed in the coke division, which produced huge quantities of coke that fired the giant blast furnaces for the production of iron ingots. The coke was produced by the method of burning coal in large parallel ovens. During the course of the burning process, the progress of the burning coal and ovens had to be inspected by lifting lids on top of the ovens. Wal was one of a number of operators who had this most unenviable job of working on top of the ovens. The men were fitted with special clothing and extra thick soled boots, but, even then, the special boots didn't stop the soles of their feet from burning and severe blistering. I understand the job wasn't so bad in the winter time, but one can imagine what a Dante's inferno it must have been in the summertime. He worked a continuous roster of rotating shifts. If ever there was a hell on earth, I feel sure that working on the coke oven batteries would be very close to it. At the end of the shift, he would arrive home exhausted and wrung out.

It was with a heavy heart that I said farewell to Mabel and Wal, with a parting hug for young Ian. I am uncertain how soon it will be before I see them again.

Much to our great joy, Mum's health continued to improve. The days became weeks and, before I knew where I was, 22 December had come around and my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Doris arranged a simple, but much appreciated evening at home for me with a few friends, which included Ollie and Arthur White of Banksia. A happy Christmas Day soon followed. On the first working day of the New year, 1945, I contacted No 2PD RAAF at Bradfield Park, Lindfield, and was told to report and pick up my personal papers, rail movement order etc. I had been posted to No 7AD (Aircraft Depot) at Tocumwal in NSW, effective from 24 January 1945. My leave was to continue up until the evening of 23 January.

## TOCUMWAL

Tocumwal is a small, sleepy, rural town situated in the Riverina on the banks of the Murray River, about 450 miles south-west of Sydney. In the scheme of things, its geographical position is significant. It is a secondary rail gauge change station (companion to Albury), between Victoria and New South Wales. Considerable tonnages of freight (rail) eg. primary produce, sheep, cattle etc pass through here via the direct connecting rail links between Sydney and Melbourne. If there is a redeeming feature about this area, it is the Murray River that passes nearby.

At a time when it looked as if the Japanese forces would launch a serious attack on our country, the Federal Government decided to build a large bomber base at Tocumwal NSW to be protected by a fighter station at nearby Corowa or Benalla in Victoria. Thousands of acres of grazing land at Tocumwal were resumed, and, at a feverish pace, the CCC (Civil Construction Corps) constructed two large parallel airstrips, complete with connecting taxiways, roads, hangars, workshops etc. Some distance away, a complete self contained village, to house the RAAF personnel, was built. From the air the village looks like a small country town, but having little connection with the airbase. The concept, design and emergency building of this defence facility was, I consider, a tremendous achievement. But events soon overtook

this great construction. The war in the north was turning strongly in our favour. On the sea and land, the Japanese were being defeated and pushed back. Along with a number of other defence establishments throughout the country, the original requirement of Tocumwal had been by-passed. The RAAF was now receiving increasing numbers of Liberator bombers from the USA, so an Operational Training Unit (No 7OTU) was set up at Tocumwal to train bomber flight crews for the Liberator Squadrons. Also, an Aircraft Depot (No 7AD) as a store and workshop to overhaul equipment and spares for use on its aircraft.

Whichever way you approached Tocumwal, it was an awkward place to get to. From the Sydney end, a mixed civilian/troop train departed Central railway station at 10.05pm on Sunday nights. Very old, uncomfortable carriages called 'dog boxes' were pressed into service by the railways. They had no central corridor, but single compartments that were built across the carriage with an access door on either side. Two long seats, facing each other, were built across the width of the carriage, and a small toilet was fitted into a corner, which meant that, whoever occupied that particular seat in front of the toilet, was disturbed each time another person needed to use the toilet. Luggage racks across the compartment were erected overhead.

Eight to ten airmen or WAAFs, plus their gear, would be crammed into these cells. Right on time, the steam train would struggle out of Sydney, and, soon after it had passed through Strathfield railway station, preparations would be made to settle down for the night. Some of the men would be happy enough to sit up, others wanted to stretch out on the seats, some slept head to foot, on the floor between the seats, and others stretched out, head to foot, on the overhead luggage racks. Many a night I have slept in this elevated position. When all had been sorted out, and by common consent, the lights would be turned out, and, so throughout a long uncomfortable night, one might try and get some rest or relive the memory, joys or otherwise, of the leave just left behind.

Numerous stops at sidings would be made to let freight trains pass. At some ungodly hour during the night, a stop would be made at Cootamundra, which, according to the season, would be freezing cold or suffocatingly hot, and, early in the morning, a breakfast stop would be made at the railway junction town of Junee. A mad rush would be made here to get into the Railway Refreshment room as soon as possible, so as to be among the first to be served and able to find a table to sit at. Invariably, the menu consisted of porridge, sausages and mashed potatoes, a slice of bread, or lamb's fry and bacon, washed down with lukewarm tea. The butcher in this town, who held the contract to supply meat to the railways, must have made a fortune. Following breakfast, everyone would scramble back to the train, which was switched from the main southern line across a maze of tracks to the Hay-Griffith line heading west. This line terminates at Hay. Halfway along its length, is the junction town of Narrandera. Here the train is diverted onto another branch heading in a south westerly direction, pass-through the towns of Morundah, Jerilderie, Berrigan, Finley, and arriving and terminating at Tocumwal around 2.30 or 3.00pm in the afternoon. This was the end of a long, tiring journey. The RAAF generally provided transport to take personnel to the camp.

On arrival at the camp, first call was made to the 7AD Orderly Room to hand in personal documents, and to be directed to the location of one's billet. As described

previously, the whole area was laid out like a western country town, and it was only a matter of finding one's street and numbered house, and there you were. Internally the unlined, iron roofed cottage was divided by a central wall into two large dormitories, which all up contained about 40 beds. It was simply a matter of finding an empty bed, plonking down your kit bag, visiting the store, filling a palliasse, signing for a couple of blankets, and this was home.

First duty was to report to the Warrant Officer in charge of the armament section. In order to do this, I had to catch a bus that served on a route system, all the technical sections which were part of the aircraft depot complex. These sections were spread out over a wide area as part of the base decentralisation design. The armament building (standard plan) was a large 40 foot galvanised iron structure, painted in brown earthy camouflage colours, so as to blend in with the terrain. These buildings attracted, and generated heat like a furnace. After meeting the Warrant Officer, who seemed a decent enough chap, I was introduced to a sergeant who introduced me around to all the other armourers, about thirty, busily working away on guns at their benches. I was shown to a bench and instructed by a corporal as to what my duties would be. Essentially, it was an armament checking station where rifles, flare guns, revolvers, machine guns etc. were cleaned, regreased, made ready for immediate use and storage. The work was organised on a docket system, this way your daily output could be checked. Your hours were spent inside a building, starting, and finishing, by the clock. It was more like working in a factory.

Apart from the early months of initial training, my service in the RAAF, so far, had been closely associated with work on aircraft. First of these was the Wirraway trainer, followed by Kittyhawk Fighters, the Boomerang fighter, which was just coming on line, and the Spitfire. There was the urgency and intensity of armament duties connected with the day and night training programs of pilots at the Fighter Operational Unit (2OTU) at Mildura. And to cap this off, the unforgettable experience of months spent on front line tropical operations with a fighter Squadron. It was this close association with the real thing that I was missing most: your Squadron, your flight, the comradery of your mates, a sense of belonging, the freedom of movement, set backs, small victories, working with the pilots.

In quiet moments of reflection I realised that someone had to do this routine depot work, but, personally, I found it soul destroying, particularly in such an outlandish place like Tocumwal.

On the other hand, life in the billet was interesting and lively. There was a steady turnover of men. New arrivals in and others being posted out. Most of the men had served on training stations or with active Squadrons. All states were represented and this, at times, led to a great deal of good natured (if at times heated) banter. On the left of my bed were two Victorians, Eric Strauss and Billy McConnel (who were always arguing about Australian Rules football). On my right was a quiet Queenslander, Walton Robinson, with whom I got on well, and on his right a cocky little bloke from Sydney, Douglas Tweedie, opposite were two Victorians, Andy Ringing from Gippsland, and Fred Adams from Melbourne. Both men had terrific personalities, were the most popular in the billet, and they were inseparable pals.

Saturday was generally a station stand-down day. This enabled all concerned to spend the rest day however they wished. Some would be content to stay in the camp, others would walk into town, visit the general stores, the chemist, the news agency for papers, books or magazines (it was here I bought a copy of *The Federal Story* written by Alfred Deakin). Or try to get a meal at one of the overcrowded cafes or a beer (rationed) at one of the three hopelessly jammed hotels. Some of the men owned cars and would escape from Tocumwal to the nearby towns of Finley, Jerilderie, Cobram or Shepparton. In these places, away from the crowd, they could shop in comfort, enjoy a few quiet beers and dine at the local hotels.

One very hot Saturday afternoon station stand-down, I along with a few other lads out of our billet, visited a popular sandy beach on the banks of the Murray River. Several adventurous or more foolish among us (including me), decided to swim across the river to the other side. As a result of a severe drought, which affected the whole of the Riverina area, the river was very low and hardly seemed to be flowing. Crossing it looked a breeze. But what a shock we were in for.

We plunged in, and before we knew where we were, we were carried out into the centre of the river and down stream. I considered myself a strong swimmer, but was powerless against the flow. I couldn't turn back, but had to go with it. I gradually edged my way to the opposite side near a bend in the river and was able to get into an eddy that swirled toward the bank. Here I was able to scramble ashore and find a place among the shore line debris, where I could lie down and recover. I was exhausted. After I recovered, I realised, that in order to swim back, I would have to repeat and reverse the process, and get myself into a position much further upstream, so, that when I took to the water again, the river would carry me downstream to where I could gradually edge myself close to the bank, and gradually scramble ashore. This I was able to do. In retrospect, I could say, yes, I had swum the mighty Murray River, but, in doing so, I came close to drowning.

And so the months at Tocumwal slipped by. During this time, on three or four separate occasions, the area was blanketed by severe dust storms. For days at a time, the sky was blood red. It was impossible to see the sun, and, throughout the day, the lights everywhere had to be turned on. The fine talc dust penetrated everything. It could be seen filtering down through the roof of whatever building one entered, and, upon waking in the morning, one's top blanket, pillow case, face and hair would be coated by a fine layer of dust. It was heartbreaking to witness what was happening to the precious topsoil of our land being blown away across such vast distances—at times even clouding the skies over New Zealand.

My involvement with the Rockdale boys' brass band had been interrupted by the war. Much to my delight, I discovered that a small voluntary band had been formed at the base. I found no difficulty in joining this group of enthusiasts, and thereby was able to revive my interest in band membership and love of music. My instrument was the E Flat Bass. The band would play at the weekly bull ring parade, and generally, was held on a Sunday morning, at dining in nights held in the Officers' Mess, and other occasions on the base when it was felt that a little light music would provide atmosphere and colour.

It was during this period that I first began to experience stomach pains, severe most of the time. These could strike me at any time, day or night, and most likely, just before meal time. Food would give me temporary relief, and then after awhile, the trouble would start all over again. At the first sign of this discomfort, I approached the medical section to find out the cause and get some treatment. After questioning by an overworked doctor, he arrived at the opinion that my trouble was nervous dyspepsia, which was brought about by my change of environment and diet, which could be corrected by taking an alkaline powder, three times a day. I started this treatment at once, which gave me some temporary relief, but didn't get to the root of the trouble.

At the end of April, the Prime Minister, John Curtin, was admitted to hospital in Canberra, suffering from severe congestion of the lungs. His condition was serious and the nation was alerted and kept informed of his state through regular newspaper and radio bulleting. This man struck a common chord, he reached down to everyone and was the leader that wound up the huge effort that enabled Australia to make such a great global contribution toward winning the war. He and his cabinet literally lifted the country up by its bootstraps. The war ended in Europe on 9 May and on 5 July, almost two months short of the end of the war against Japan, our great Prime Minister died. It was as if a dark cloud had descended over our country. To have carried the people and the country through so many testing years of war and to die just when victory was in sight, was indeed tragic. He was truly a battle casualty. His flag-draped coffin lay in state in the King's Hall, Federal Parliament House, Canberra, between the House and Senate Chambers. A RAAF plane carried it across the continent for burial in his home electorate of Fremantle.

During the concerned period of John Curtin's final illness, May-June 1945, the Governor General, Lord Gowrie, acting on the recommendation of John Curtin, invited the Federal Treasurer and Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, Ben Chifley to lead the Government during the temporary absence of the Deputy Prime Minister, Frank Forde.

The continuing and firm leadership question of the party and the government of Australia, could not be left unanswered for too long. A week after the death of John Curtin, an ALP Federal Caucus ballot was held on 12 July, and Ben Chifley received an overwhelming vote of confidence, and was confirmed in the position of Prime Minister. It was generally felt that a strong, steady hand was at the helm.

It started out like any other working day. I was stripping down a machine gun on my bench when, above the noise and chatter within the building, I heard the ring of a telephone. Shortly after the sergeant called out 'Gately, will you report to the Warrant Officer'. Wondering what this was all about, I stopped what I was doing, quickly wiped my hands and proceeded to the Warrant Officer's tiny cubbyhole of an office. 'Well, Gately', he said, 'you can finish the gun you're working on, and hand in your tools. You've been posted to Brisbane. You'll catch the first bus back to camp, and report to the Orderly Room. They'll give you more details there, but start getting your clearances today. You have to be off camp and on the afternoon train and headed north tomorrow.' I could hardly believe my ears. I thought I was going to be stuck in Tocumwal forever. As directed, I quickly finished the gun I had been working on, handed in my tools, said my farewells (with many a reply and question of 'lucky

bastard, how did you do it?') I was soon out in the fresh air, waiting for a bus, and felt like jumping over the moon.

Back at the camp an Orderly Room clerk soon put me in the picture regarding my posting. It so happened that a small force of RAAF ground staff technicians were being assembled in Brisbane, to be attached to the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm, which had established a shore base at Rockleigh, known as HMS *Nabsford*, with repair facilities for its aircraft at nearby Archerfield aerodrome. And, as I was later to learn, this repair and salvage base was a small part of a much larger operation associated with the movement of a British Fleet of aircraft carriers and support ships which had been withdrawn from northern hemisphere operations and urgently dispatched by the British government to the South-West Pacific area to assist the American Government fleet and ground operations to deliver the coup de grace in the war against the Japanese. Prior to our arrival in Brisbane the fleet had been involved in some heavy fighting against the Japanese, which had incurred many casualties and damaged aircraft.

Several other men from 7AD were included in this northern posting, including Doug Tweedie, a barrack colleague. We made the rounds obtaining our clearance and when it came to saying our farewells, Walton Robinson suggested to us, after we got settled down in Brisbane, to look up his father, mother and sisters, who resided in Banyo, a northern suburb, only a short distance by train out of the city. In the meantime, he said he would write and let them know we were coming.

And so, on the afternoon of 16 July 1945, our train pulled out of Tocumwal and after an uneventful overnight trip, we arrived in Sydney during the afternoon of the next day. We agreed to meet the following morning at the RTO at Central Railway Station and get bunks booked on a troop train. Neither of our families were aware of our arrival in Sydney, so our overnight stay was a surprise. We met the next morning and were advised by the RTO that our places were booked on a troop train leaving Sydney the evening of 19 July and due to arrive in Brisbane during the forenoon of the next day. This arrangement suited us fine, as it gave us a couple of unexpected days with our families in Sydney, at the same time landed us in Brisbane on the due date to report.

Leaving the cold weather of Sydney behind, it was near midday when our 'trooper' struggled into the station at South Brisbane. It was a lovely, warm, sunny day, and I felt this would be the first of many to follow. With familiar sights about me, the city just across the river, it was good to be back. I don't think Doug had quite the same feeling. In no time we were headed south on a tram out through the suburbs of Woolloongabba, Dutton Park, Annerly, Mooraka, finally terminating at Salisbury. It was a short walk from the tram terminus to the nearby suburb of Rockleigh. From what I could observe, this part of Rockleigh embraced a number of large heavy industrial organisations and from what I later learnt, these groups contributed a great deal toward Queensland's splendid war effort. These industries specialised in heavy, large steel prefabrication, marine and electrical engineering, large 'one off' engineered components. In the early days of the war, and operating on an around the clock basis, accommodation and a large cafeteria had been built nearby to cater for the needs of shift workers. With the progress of the war and a slackening in demand for this type of production, the Royal Navy was able to negotiate the takeover of the barracks building and cafeteria, and, so securely anchor the HMS *Nabsford*.

From the moment we were checked in through the entrance gates by Navy guards, we were part of the Navy, and subject to its discipline, rules and regulations. We were soon processed through the office and taken to a barracks building, where we were shown to a small cabin which contained four bunks, a coat cupboard etc. which we shared with two English sailors. There was hardly enough room to swing a cat. The next day, we were taken in a small navy bus to Archerfield aerodrome. Here we were introduced to our fellow Australians and supervising Chief Petty Officers, who allocated we Australians to work parties involved with overhaul of machine guns, cannons etc on a variety of Fleet Air Arm aircraft, or the removal of armament, bomb racks etc. from badly damaged, write-off aircraft. The aircraft include Sea Furies, Corsairs, Grumman, Avengers. The pattern of our days was set. It was good to be working on aircraft again and out in the open.

Living at close hand, working and socialising with the English sailors was a refreshing experience. They brought with them strong verbal pictures of their world, expressed in a dozen different dialects. Pictures of their cities, towns, suburbs or villages painted in so many different counties, north, south, east or west of England, Scotland or Wales. To just sit back and listen to them or join in conversation was a feast. Their opinions were as varied as they were colourful. They found difficulty in understanding the structure of our political system—there were too many states, too many governments. We needed one government like the UK. In many of them, their brief experience of life here convinced them that we had it too good, there was too much food, too much sun, too much freedom, and where was the restrictions of a class barrier? While a small number of them looked upon us as ex-convicts, Colonials, to be used by the British government as, and when it saw fit. When this point of view surfaced in our company, the temperature rose sharply and the opinion was quickly and expressively challenged. And then there were others, who for the life of me, couldn't understand why the Australian government called the Yanks to come to our aid during those early desperate days of fighting against the Japanese. Why didn't we wait until the Brits got here?

Fortunately, Doug and I found the two sailors with whom we shared the cabin, to be most agreeable and whenever we ventured into the city, they invariably accompanied us. Paul Fricker was an aero mechanic who hailed from the town of Blandford in the County of Dorset, while Jim Walton, a sheet metal worker, was from Coventry in the Shakespeare county of Warwickshire. Jim had lost his parents as a result of the severe German air raids carried out against this city, and an older brother, who was a Major in the Tank Corps, was killed in France soon after the D-Day landings. His remaining brother, I learned later, who was an Air Raid Warden, was also killed in one of the air raids. Of slim build, medium height, strong features, capped with a fine head of hair, brown in colour. Jim had a soft, quiet gentle nature, was often reflective in conversation, and at times, seemed almost like a poet—with poetry a medium he often loved to quote.

In quiet moments we talked about many things—our families, our respective countries, pre war days, history, politics. This subject led to a reminder of the fact, that at the end of May, the wartime coalition government of Great Britain under Mr Churchill, was carrying on until the result of a general election was known. Polling day was fixed for 5 July (before our arrival at HMS *Nabsford*) but in order to allow

time for the votes of the armed forces serving abroad to be brought home and counted, the final result of counting was not to take place until 26 July. When news of the election result was first broadcast over ABC radio on the morning of 27 July, a great shout rose up from the camp, it carried on in isolated bursts for a few minutes. This was an undoubted expression of joy felt by a large number of sailors who had voted, or felt that a change of government was necessary. The vote said that the British Labor Party, under the leadership of Clement Attlee, won a decisive victory at the polls, and had driven the Conservative Party, under the leadership of Winston Churchill, from the government benches. I was shocked by the result. I just could not believe it. I found it very difficult to understand why the British people (the voters) would cast aside such an outstanding war-time leader, a leader who had inspired, and pulled the country from the edge of an abyss along a path to a crushing victory against the forces of evil. It wasn't until after I had had many discussions with Jim and Phil, and a number of other sailors, that I began to see a larger picture. The feeling was, that the vote wasn't so much against Churchill, as it was against the Conservative party, who, for years before the war, when the Conservatives were running the government, did nothing to lift the country out of the bog of depression, did nothing to relieve the blight of unemployment and its dead hand across the country, did nothing to try and stimulate trade, to improve health care, education, social services, including care of the aged, did nothing to put the armed forces, Navy, Army and Air Force in a state of readiness to protect the country from the foreseeable threat of conflict with Adolf Hitler and his gang of Nazi thugs. Some of the lads spoke quite strongly about the wasted years of Stanley Baldwin and the appeasement behaviour of Neville Chamberlain. Within the space of so many short weeks among these British sailors, I felt I had graduated from the University of Life.

During the week, and sometimes on weekends, Doug and I, occasionally accompanied by Jim and Phil, would catch a tram into the city and spend the evening at Air Force House. This well-positioned centre was most efficiently run by volunteer women (invariably mothers, wives, girl friends of airmen) who staffed a haven where servicemen could meet and get a cup of tea and a biscuit, read the newspapers in the comfort of a lounge, write a letter, play cards or a game of billiards, and, in the evening, enjoy a main meal. I don't suppose these women fully realised the great service they were providing. In our case, this social centre was a welcome break from barrack life.

Depending what movie was showing, we would visit the cinema at Woolloongabba. On one such occasion, and during the interval, I popped into the milk bar next door to buy an ice cream. There were a large number of customers struggling to get to the counter, so I stood back to wait for the crowd to thin. Looking around the shop, I noticed a display stand holding books and magazines. I proceeded to inspect the stock, and to my surprise, there was a slim paperback war book with the title of *Spitfires Over Malta*, jointly written by Pilot Officer Paul Brennan, DFC, DFM, RAAF, Ray Hesselyn DFM and Bar, RNZAF, and Harry Bateson. I could hardly believe my eyes—here was a book, partly written by one of our Squadron Flight Commanders, Paul Brennan, who was killed on Barbutt Airport at Townsville, such a short time before. It seemed that my visit to this cinema on this particular night was meant to be. By the time I reached the counter, paid for the ice cream and book, the intermission conclusion bell was ringing. I felt a treasure had fallen into my hands.

Keeping Walton Robinson's suggestion in mind about calling on his family, one fine Sunday afternoon, Doug and I caught a steam train from Central Station in the city out to the northern suburb of Banyo, a distance of about six miles. Our visit was a complete surprise to the family, as Walton hadn't written to his parents alerting them to the possibility of a visit from two of his RAAF colleagues. Not that it made any difference, because, from the moment Edwin Robinson opened the front door of his lovely home at 175 Tufnell Rd, Banyo, we were warmly received, as if we had been sons of the family. In no time we were introduced to his very friendly wife, Alice, (who insisted we call her Mum) and their two lovely daughters, Marie and Jean. The kettle was soon on the boil, the table set and a real country home style afternoon tea was spread before us. There was much laughter and happiness around the table that afternoon. As Doug and I were later to learn, Edwin (Dad) Robinson, was a returned soldier from World War I, who campaigned with the Light Horse against the Turks in the Middle East during that war. On return to civilian life, he pursued the career of a primary school teacher, which he had started before enlisting in the AIF in 1916. We thoroughly enjoyed meeting the Robinson family, and were warmed by the hospitality they showered upon us. While this was the first of a number of such visits, I had an inner feeling that it was also the beginning of a lifetime friendship, and joint association.

On 6 August 1945, the first atomic bomb was dropped on the city of Hiroshima (Japan) from the belly of a B29 Super fortress of the USAAF. The explosion of super fireball proportion wiped out the city and caused enormous loss of life. Following this raid rumours began circulating, via radio newscasts and press reports, that the Japanese war-time government had been seeking ways through foreign diplomatic channels, of ending the war without loss of face. On 9 August, a second atomic bomb was dropped on Japan. This time the large city of Nagasaki was the target, and, here again, there was a huge loss of life, and the destruction of the city. Following the dropping of the second bomb, there was an air of expectancy that the Japanese government would finally be forced to the negotiating table and sign an 'unconditional surrender'. This was anticipated any hour, any day.

During the evening of 14 August, Doug and I were relaxing in a small lounge/sitting area within the barracks complex, enjoying a cup of tea, some light conversation, with half an ear open to take in the evening news on the radio. A late news statement mentioned that, tomorrow, it was expected the Prime Minister would make an announcement about the progress of the war against the Japanese.

The morrow dawned bright and clear. It was 15 August 1945. There seemed to be more activity within the camp than usual—rumours were running wild; 'The Japanese refused to surrender, another atomic bomb had been dropped, the Americans had landed on the Japanese mainland', and so they went on. With breakfast out of the way, and another work day ahead, there was no official announcement in the morning. When we returned to the camp in the afternoon, and were relaxing with a cup of tea, we heard on the radio, the gravelly voice of the Prime Minister, Ben Chifley, announce that the war was over. The Japanese had agreed to an unconditional surrender. For a few minutes the Prime Minister continued his speech, but I am sure no one heard what he had to say. A shout of joy went up from all present—the British sailors were shaking hands with all we Aussie airmen, and likewise we with them. There was a feeling of unbounded relief, a feeling of almost unbelief. Can this be

true? After all those years of fighting, struggle, pain, heartbreak, young and old lives sacrificed, the ties of parental, family and romantic love shattered forever. All to feed the insatiable territorial appetites and lust for power by Dictators, governments and politicians. When we wake in the morning, will the war actually be over?

We weren't wanting to sleep the night away to find out. A sudden decision was made—Jim, Phil, Doug and I had a quick shower, a change of clothing, and headed by tram into the city. When we reached Woolloongabba, people were singing and dancing in the streets and, the closer we got to the city, so the crowds increased. After we crossed the Victoria Street bridge, the trams were forced almost to a halt. We alighted here and made our way, with great difficulty to Air Force House. The place was packed with happy, shouting, singing servicemen and women. Considering ourselves regular clients, we made our way through to the kitchen, where we were able to chat, enjoy a quick snack, sing and laugh with many of the ladies we had come to know during our frequent comings and goings to the house.

Joining the crowds once again, Anzac Square with its eternal flame was to be the centre of our homage, joy and participation in the night's revelries. We eventually made the area, but there were too many happy people for us to penetrate to reach the Square, so we gradually made our way to the City Hall with its large open plaza, where an even larger crowd was gathered. Judging by the numbers, it seemed as if the whole civilian population of Queensland had decided to visit Brisbane, and join the thousands of milling sailors, soldiers, airmen and servicewomen, arm in arm, embracing, kissing, singing, shouting, all bent on celebrating the end of the war. The noise was deafening. I am sure the same scene is being repeated in all the capital cities and large towns throughout the country. What I was witnessing, and what I was part off, was an uninhibited explosion of the human spirit—a form of release, relief and thanksgiving that the terrible years of sacrifice were over.

When dawn broke over the city, we withdrew from the still celebrating crowds, and caught an early morning tram back to Salisbury. We were desperately tired, and there was hardly a decent whisper left between us. Fortunately, this first post-war day was announced as a stand-down day, so we were able to rest up and recharge our batteries.

With the cessation of hostilities, the reason for us being attached to the RN here in Brisbane was removed. It was now a case of going through the daily motions of work at Archerfield aerodrome until such time that an RAAF/RN decision was made as to what to do with us. When the decision was finally arrived at, our small group of RAAF people were gathered together, and we were told we would be posted back to the same air station from which we had been drawn. To Doug and me, this announcement was almost like a sentence of exile. We were hoping for a change to the RAAF base at Richmond or Parkes. Now we would have to mark time at Tocumwal until we were discharged, and when would that be?

The weather at this time of year was all that one could wish for, there were warm sunny days, blue filled skies and light breezes, with free weekends to get out and about. On one such lovely Sunday, I caught a steam train from South Brisbane railway station, and travelled on a south eastern line through the districts of Wynnum, Manly, Thornside, and alighted at Wellington Point. The purpose of my visit here, was to call on a former member of 79 Squadron, Peter Kerr, who, in 1944, was

returned to the mainland from Manus Island, suffering from severe tropical dermatitis. Peter's skin was in a dreadful state, and for many months he must have suffered considerable pain and discomfort; after extensive treatment, he was eventually discharged from the RAAF, and with his young family, settled at the Point, within sight of the sea.

It was a long walk from the railway station to the Point but the road passed through a lovely area of small pineapple farms, tall trees and water views, so the exercise was most enjoyable. After making inquiries at one or two houses, I eventually found Peter's house. My visit was a surprise which made our reunion all the more enjoyable. Over a tasty lunch, we reminisced about our days in the Squadron, about the people we had met, the places and experiences we had shared. His dear wife suffered the conversation in smiling, nodding silence. He had made a wonderful recovery, and it was good to see him again. I departed about 3.30pm, walked back to the station and caught a train back to Brisbane. I felt very happy about the visit, in so many way, it had been a most rewarding day.

While waiting to be notified by the RAAF of the date of our official posting, work (of a fashion) continued at Archerfield aerodrome. Armament was still being removed from damaged aircraft, cleaned, boxed and stored and replaced on overhauled aircraft. It was a case of trying to keep busy, of going through the motions.

In the meantime, I made good use of the unknown weekends I had left in Brisbane, by seeing as much of the surrounding area that I could reach by train and tram, and by visiting the Robinson family as often as possible, without wearing out my welcome. I made them aware that my last farewell could be my last for sometime, as I might have to suddenly depart. This also applied to our two English sailor friends, Jim Walton and Phil Fricker.

Finally, Doug and I received our movement orders. We were to depart HMS *Nabsford* on 1 November, and to report to 7OTU Tocumwal on 7 November. This travelling time took into account the difficulty we might encounter securing a bunk on a troop train travelling south to Sydney. As it turned out, we had no trouble in this regard, and left Brisbane on the afternoon of 4 November, and, travelling overnight, arrived in Sydney during the forenoon of 5 November. Brief as our changeover was, it enabled us to spend a little time with our families. The return arrangements by train to Tocumwal were the same as previously described, only, instead of returning to the store/factory duties at 7AD, we had been posted to the Liberator bombing training group, 7OTU— and we arrived on time, 7 November.

Owing to the change of units, we were unable to return to the previous billet and our colleagues, but found alternate accommodation in a small, masonite prefabricated hut that had apparently been standing empty. In no time it was scrubbed out, bed frames, palliasses, blankets etc were drawn from the store, and we had ourselves a cosy, private cabin. It was occupied by four armourers: Lindsay Stone, Doug Tweedie, Ken Stowe and myself, all from Sydney. Seemed as if the wheel had almost turned full circle. Ken Stowe and I first met on the same basic fitting course at Ultimo, Sydney, and passed the Armourers' course at Hamilton, Victoria in 1943, and now here we were to meet again in 1945.

I found work on the Liberators quite a challenge—wherever we looked, heavy .50 calibre machine guns seemed to be poking out of the fuselage. There was a twin mounted set in a sophisticated nose turret, a similar arrangement in a lonely tail turret, a mid-upper and an amazing piece of engineering in a ball turret which dropped down through the floor (this turret required a very small gunner), as well as beam mounted sets poking out of large open hatchways on either side (near the tail) of the aircraft. In addition to all this defensive armament, was an extensive arrangement of bomb racks built into a large cave like area in the middle of the aircraft, which, when fully loaded, displayed their deadly intent when the bomb bay doors in the stomach of the plane were rolled open to disgorge below, this confetti of death and destruction. These large four engined birds of war were a world apart from the simplicity and sting of a Spitfire.

The weeks leading into Christmas were close upon us. The railways, who had made a tremendous contribution keeping trains and people, and war materials moving throughout the war years, were threatening a National rail strike if certain industrial ills weren't attended to. There was every likelihood that the strike could start just before and extend over the holiday period. In response to this possibility, a senior officer at 7OTU let it be known that if the railway strike went ahead, rather than see Liberator bombers sitting on their wheels at Tocumwal and station personnel wanting to get home to their families on this post war Christmas, the aircraft would be used to fly a limited number of flights to the capital city of each state, thus enabling personnel wanting to get home for the Festive Season. This sounded like a great and logical idea, but it was too good to be true. I understand the proposal was knocked on the head by some public servant or officer at the Air Board in Melbourne, who, no doubt would be safely at home during this rail confrontation, with his wife and family, Christmas cake and pudding.

Final talks between the governments and unions broke down, the strike went ahead. All major rail traffic between the states came to a halt with the exception of a limited number of freight trains committed to the transport of perishable produce between the capital cities, and an odd passenger service to maintain a link between the states.

The day for proceeding on leave arrived. In the midst of this departure gloom, a word on the grapevine said, a freight train would depart Tocumwal station about 11.30pm tonight, and if we palmed the guard a couple of quid, he might let us ride in the guard's van as far as Junee on the main North/South line. On receipt of this news, our spirits were buoyed considerably—if this plan unfolded, there was every chance we might get home on leave.

Around 4.30pm, Doug, Ken, Lindsay and I, complete with a small kitbag, walked from the camp into Tocumwal. We enjoyed a couple of beers at the first open pub, then proceeded to a Greek café, where we put away an oversize mixed grill. It might have to do us for awhile. It was nearly dark by the time we finished our meal, so we wandered leisurely down to the railway station. Sure enough, a string of loaded freight trucks and a van were standing at the station, and about a hundred airmen were spread about waiting for the guard to appear. So much so for keeping this travel rumour to ourselves.

During the early and middle hours of the evening, airmen kept arriving in dribs and drabs. The head count now totalled about one hundred and thirty. The night wore on, the men were getting restless and walking about; there was a feeling of doubt about the real departure of the train. Unanswered, and out of the darkness of the night, a steam engine, emitting clouds of steam, pumping grunts and indigestion noises, backed into the station, also our long awaited mysterious guard arrived. Our faith in some rumours was restored. The train crew lost no time in coupling the engine and tender up to the goods trucks, also an extra van, and the guard quickly collected two pounds from each airman, (which I understand he would share with the other crew members). Crowded in like cattle, we spread ourselves between the two vans, it was 11.30pm and here we were 'jumping the rattler', hopefully on our way to Sydney.

What a night and what a ride it turned out to be. Whenever the train stopped at an intermediary station to hook on another truck, there would be a resounding crashing sound at each coupling, finally ending with a whiplash crack and shake at the guard's vans. It was hard on one's nervous system, and rest was impossible.

Around 6.30am, the train struggled into Narrandera station. We were told to vacate the vans, as there was uncertainty as to how far the train would proceed, and, if so, when. Like most country towns which grow alongside a railway line, there is usually a Railway Hotel, and Narrandera was no exception—it boasted a fairly large one.

Having been denied the promise, at this point, of a forward journey, the next important matter to be attended to, was the question of food. Unkempt, dishevelled, and far from home, one hundred and thirty hungry men straggled across the road from the station and gathered outside the guest door entrance of the hotel. Several strong knocks were applied to the door—this was repeated a couple of times. Eventually the door was unlocked and eased open a couple of inches, and the concerned face of the publican inquired 'What the hell do you want, what's the bloody racket all about?' Our chief door knocker said, 'We want some breakfast and we want it now'. The publican said, 'It's too early yet. I'm not open for business'. Our door knocker said 'You'd better think again'. And with that, he quickly pushed the door open, far enough for the publican to see all those hungry faces, and the pounds, shillings and pence looking at him, so, in no time flat, he opened the door and directed us into the dining room. With the help of his wife, a couple of sleepy housemaids and a handy man, a breakfast of toast, tea, a sausage and an egg, was soon on the table and everyone was satisfied.

The engine still had steam up and was panting quietly at the station. Word was quickly passed around that, in about an hour's time, the train would be leaving for Junee. Taking no chance of missing this lift, we quickly refilled the vans, and pulled out of Narrandera about 9.30am.

The day quickly developed into a brassy, hot, sunny day. My God it was hot. At a set speed, the engine puffed and snorted its way across the plain. On two occasions it stopped at small stations, where the crew left the train and refreshed themselves at trackside pubs. We all joined them at the second pub, and slaked our thirsts and replaced gallons of perspiration.

The line wound its way through the outer areas of this large town, and, around midday, the train came to a halt in the large railway freight assembly area at Junee. This was the end of the first stage of our homeward journey. We quickly abandoned the guard's vans, and struggled our way across a maze of railway tracks to reach Junee railway station. This brought us to the main north south line. When we had nearly all gathered on the station, we approached a tall, well built, uniformed station assistant who seemed to be moving about with an air of authority. We asked him if he knew any trains would be coming through and headed for Sydney that we might get a lift on. In a brusque manner he said, 'Yes, there is a limited express expected from Albury about midnight tonight, but none of you bloody mob will be getting on it, it's fully booked out'. For a few seconds following this provocative reply, the atmosphere was a little tense, but quickly evaporated. Admittedly, during the war, many servicemen moving about the country gave railway staff a very hard time of it. At the same time, many railway people were downright rude and antagonistic toward servicemen, such as we had just encountered. When servicemen were on the move, they were either on their way to war, coming home from war, posted to another unit or going on leave. Until they arrived at their destination, they never knew, with any certainty, when they would next put their head down or get their next meal. On the other hand, the big advantage civilian railway staff enjoyed, was, that at the end of every shift (day or night), they would return home to a comfortable bed, a decent meal, and with luck, a little tender care.

In view of the negative response to our onward travel hopes, there was no point in hanging around the railway station for the rest of the day, so, in small groups, we made our way into the town. Lunch was the first matter to be attended to, and while in the café, we got into conversation with a fellow diner, who suggested we should approach the Council and see if they would open the town baths for us. As soon as we finished lunch, we followed through with this idea. The Town Clerk's Office sent an attendant along who opened the baths and hired costumes out to us. This was a most agreeable act, and, for the better part of three hours, we got rid of the dust and grime of our travels.

Although this stopover in Junee wasn't contemplated when we set out, we took advantage of the delay, and had a good wander through the town and a look at the shops. I had a browse through the main newsagency-bookshop and bought a copy of Dr. A.J. Cronin's latest novel, *The Green Years*. I look forward to making a start into the book. We finished the day over a couple of beers in a comfortable old pub. I liked what I saw of the town.

Our plan was to return to the railway station and, casually, separately move to a dimly lit section of the platform, somewhere near where the second or third last carriage would stop, if and when it arrived. And when the train began to move to slip quietly out of the darkness and gain entry to a carriage through a rear or forward door. This is exactly what unfolded. About 12.15am the express roared into the station, most of the carriages were in darkness, and at the first sign of movement, about fifteen of us quickly boarded the train. As far as I could see we were the only ones who made the break. Goodness knows how the rest of the lads travelled on. The train quickly gathered speed. We settled down with our kitbags in the narrow side corridor of the carriage. No sooner had we adjusted to this arrangement, than the train conductor appeared. He gave us a withering look and said, 'saw you smart buggers jump on at

June—this is a fully booked express and I can't stop it now, but you can rest assured, I will put you off when we make our first stop early in the morning at Goulburn. In the meantime you can't stop here. Pick up your kitbags and follow me back to the luggage van'. So, as best we could, we fitted ourselves in among suitcases, parcels, bags etc in the van, and click clattered our way through a long night. True to his word, and almost as soon as the train came to a halt at Goulburn station, the conductor appeared and personally made sure that we were all off the train. At least we were now that much closer to Sydney and home. Is it any wonder there was so little goodwill between servicemen and railway staff. My God it was cold—it was 6.30am.

We spruced ourselves up with a wash and a shave in the toilet area and then made a discreet inquiry from a junior porter if any trains for Sydney were expected. He mentioned the likelihood of a motor train coming about 9.30am from Canberra. This was just the news we wanted to hear.

Right on time, and almost without a sound, the motor train from Canberra eased itself into the station. A number of passengers alighted, so, taking advantage of the crowd movement, we quickly worked our way around the end of the last carriage, down across the railway tracks, and gained entry to a carriage from the off side—no one seemed to have noticed us. A number of empty seats were available, so we spread ourselves through the carriage. After a short delay, the train proceeded on its way to Sydney. We weren't bothered by a conductor throughout this leg of the trip, and reached Central Railway Station around midday. While our journey home on leave had been an interesting and unusual exercise in jumping trains, the distance that we had travelled had taken us almost two and a half days. This could have been flown in two or three hours on any one of a number of Liberator bombers still sitting on their tyres at Tocumwal. As a post-war gesture, a modest airlift operation would have shifted hundreds of stranded RAAF personnel from the semi-isolated air station to the capital cities throughout the Commonwealth.

How wonderful it was to be back home again, particularly over the festive season. And, while it was well enough to know, and feel, that you were one of the lucky ones to have survived the war, feelings of doubt, and, almost of guilt, would, at times, creep in and say, 'Yes, you survived, but why you, why you?' It was a time of reflection, with thoughts crowding in about so many fathers, sons and daughters, who were struck down in their prime, and who wouldn't be home for this, or any other Christmas.

Ours was a quiet lunch with Mum, Dad, Doris and myself seated around the festive table. Mum, although in indifferent health, prepared a very tasty Christmas dinner, complete with plum pudding. Dad secured a bottle of wine from somewhere, and we gave each other a small gift. Ed was still away, serving with the Army in the Solomon Islands, and wasn't expected home until February or March next year.

I took the opportunity while home for these few days to slip down by train and bus to Lake Illawarra, and spend a couple of days with Mabel, Wal and my bright little nephew, Ian who was now two years of age. We all enjoyed a lovely time together.

On returning home, I called on our old family friends Arthur and Ollie White of Monahan Avenue, Banksia. And while in the area, I had a sentimental look at my old

school on the hill at Rockdale. Looking through the main gate into the playground area, I could see the old school bell atop its post and the nearby class room that had been converted into a library, and furnished by a generous and hard working parent, Mrs. Ossie Bates. I quietly asked myself, because of the war, what had become of so many boys with whom I used to run, shout and play ball with in this asphalt covered yard. Some of their names and faces filled my mind—Morton Plumb, Eric Anderson, Harry Walstrom, Les Mulveny, the Spilsbury brothers, David Spriggins, Neville Little, the Beattie triplets, Charlie Smith, Lindsay Burns, Keith Gooch, Douglas Cartwright, Keith McLachlan, Ted Hoare, Max Oldfield, Ken Smith, Bert and Harry Cairncross, Ray Goode, Keith Bamford.

The rail strike ended before my leave finished, so I was able to return to Tocumwal by train. Scheduled maintenance work on the Liberators proceeds and OTU flying programs already under way, continued through to completion.

The Demobilisation Plan which began operating from 1 October last year was gathering momentum. Every other day, work colleagues and friends would disappear from around you. They would have received their marching orders from the Orderly Room to get their station clearances, and on a systematic basis, to proceed to the Demob centre established in the capital city of the state in which they originally enlisted. This arrangement was flexible, in as much as servicemen and women could request, beforehand, to be discharged in another state of their choice. In essence, the overall scheme was simple, well conceived and executed. It was based on a point system. So many points were given for your age at the date of enlistment, so many for each month of service, additional points if you had one or more dependants. Members with the highest score of points were progressively discharged first.

During February of the New Year, I enjoyed another short home leave from Tocumwal. On Wednesday 27 March 1946, I was instructed to report to the Orderly Room to being pre-discharge formalities from my unit 7OTU. I was well aware that my points score was creeping up, but, when I actually got the call, I found it hard to believe. First visit was to the medical and dental officers for a quick examination, then I began the round of getting station clearances, picked up my movement order, rail warrant and personal documents from the Orderly Room. This activity was spread over a couple of days. I said my farewells to Lindsay Stone, Ken Stowe and a few other colleagues. My friend Doug Tweedie departed in February—then I was on my way to Sydney. I had no regrets about shaking off the dust of Tocumwal.

I reported to No 2 Personnel Depot at Bradfield Park, Sydney, on 1 April and was processed through the Reception and Disposal Squadron, where I handed in my personal documents, returned unwanted gear (clothing etc), visited the accounts section, was issued with ration cards covering food and clothing, and a voucher for a suit and hat. Incredible. I was then instructed to return home and wait for a communication from the discharge Squadron part of the Combined Services Disposal Centre which was set up within the complex of the Sydney Showground, at Moore Park, where final discharge arrangements would take place. Within a matter of days, I received a note making a date for me to report to the centre.

After checking in at the reception area, I was handed the inevitable clearance form, which required from me, step by step signatures that services had been given and

understood. Without going into the finer details of the form, it embraced another visit to a medical officer, advice given on civilian re-establishment matters, procedure required for a medical pension, rehabilitation and vocational guidance plans, calculation of leave entitlement, visit to the paymaster to collect last pay and allowances due, collection of my will, and, finally, to pick up an Interim Certificate of Discharge, and a Returned from Active Service Badge.

To all intents and purposes, I was free from service life. Just before leaving the building, I passed two tables, one was manned by an official from the Returned Soldiers League, and the other from the Air Force Association. Both were inviting immediate enrolment into their ex-service organisations. This was good salesmanship. I joined them both. So, around midday on Tuesday 9 April, 1946, I walked out of the eastern doorway of the Hall of Manufacturers building at the showground and returned to society as a brand new, free civilian.

### **POSTSCRIPT**

Looking back over the years of my war service, I can say, without doubt, that my life was changed completely when I joined the RAAF. It would have been the same if I had served in the Navy or Army.

Before enlistment, as my notes reveal, I was engaged in an essential, protected, manufacturing industry and there is every likelihood I could have remained there throughout the war.

As the threat to our country drew closer, I became increasingly concerned. On 7 December 1941, the US Pacific Fleet was almost destroyed by aircraft of the Japanese fleet while at anchor in Pearl Harbor, Honolulu, Hawaii. Singapore fell to the strategy, boldness and combined strength of the Japanese forces on 15 February 1942. This catastrophic event embraced the enslavement and incarceration of a large civilian population, also British and Indian troops, and our own precious 8<sup>th</sup> Division. With the bulk and cream of our army, the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions struggling to get back home for the defence of our own country from the Middle East, and the 9<sup>th</sup> Division still committed to the British 8<sup>th</sup> Desert Army under General Bernard Montgomery, the victory flushed Japanese forces, soon after the fall of Singapore, began a southerly sweep, and quickly over ran the Dutch possessions of Sumatra, Java, Borneo. Then began a series of death and damage inflicting air raids on our northerly mainland town of Darwin, and a serious northerly attack on New Guinea, which almost reached Port Moresby on the southern coast.

The battle of the Coral Sea, which took place between the coast of Queensland and the Solomon islands, brought the war closer to our front door, and was just decided in our favour (combined US and Australian naval forces) against the Japanese Navy in May 1942.

Instead of fashioning the nuts and bolts of war, I felt a very strong desire and pull, to volunteer and become part of our armed forces, and, in my own way, small though it might be, to make a contribution to the defence of our country. I was eighteen years of age. My first choice was the Navy, but, because of my slight build, and being

underweight, I didn't measure up to their special requirements. At the time I was greatly disappointed by the turn down, but some months later, I made an application to join the RAAF. After passing their medical and education checks, I was accepted as a technical trainee. I grabbed this training opportunity with both hands.

From day one, the horizon and experiences of my life began to widen. I was rubbing shoulders and sharing backgrounds, opinions, with young men of my own age, men from all walks of life, men from the city, like me, and others from distant towns and country places throughout the state.

With the basic fitting and armourers course behind me, within months, five to be exact, I was working alongside desert veterans from No 3 Squadron on Kittyhawks, and our new Australian-built Boomerang fighters, Wirraway trainers and an occasional Hawker Hurricane fighter at the Fighter Training OTU at Mildura, Victoria. I met and worked with some fine men here, I fell in love with the district and city of Mildura, and enjoyed every day of this posting.

Arriving back at camp after a short leave at home, I was informed, to my great surprise, that I had been posted to a Squadron. Little was known by the Orderly Room staff about the complexion or purpose of the Squadron, other than it had something to do with fighters, and that I was to get cleared straight away as soon as possible, and report to the airbase at Laverton in Victoria.

So began my connection as an original foundation member of No 79 Spitfire Squadron. With increasing numbers of men joining the RAAF, one could consider oneself very fortunate to be posted to a Squadron. Regardless of the type of the Squadron, this was where movement and action generally started, this meant getting close to the cutting edge.

Looking back to my pre-enlistment days, I found it hard to believe that, within a matter of months, I would be working on Spitfires, and moving forward from one tropical island to another, and getting so close to the front as Group planning felt at the time, but this was how our Wing should be.

The ability to get along with a wide range of people and work with them, was a situation that I had not previously come face to face with, but this rapidly changed once I joined the Squadron.

Operating on a level of its own was the quality of leadership or lack of it that we were exposed to. Where leadership exists, and is responded to by the men, it can lead to team spirit, and, when this comes into play, nothing seems impossible.

During my tour of duty with the Squadron, I always felt that our best CO was Squadron Leader Max Bott, and that Flight Lieutenant Doug Vanderfield would have made a good replacement. Both men were battle tested and proven fighter pilots, and while they spent most of the time with their heads in the clouds, they also had their feet on the ground, and moved freely and comfortably among the men. They got out and around. They conveyed a feeling of belonging, of strength, saying we are all up here in this hot house to finish the job. Let us do the best job we can together. Unfortunately, just as Max Bott was getting into his stride, he was killed and Doug Vanderfield had completed his second tour of duty. It was time for him to go home.

We had a good balance of Spitfire pilots. Most of them were experienced Squadron veterans brought back from England, and the Middle East, who were supported and yeasted with, keen graduates from the Fighter OTU in Mildura. Most of them appeared to have a good, friendly working relationship with their maintenance crew. In our case, we enjoyed two good pilots back from England, starting with Flying Officer Jim Richards from Newcastle, and finishing with Flying Officer Joe Marshall from Hayfield/Drouin, Victoria. Both were good blokes.

The closest and best exponent possessing these magic qualities, I felt, was right here in our overall B Flight maintenance chief, Flight Sergeant Jim Jelley. He was a youngish, short, thoroughly tested veteran. Having survived the battlefire of the Middle East with No 3 Desert Squadron, he was brought back to Australia with many of his colleagues to help form the backbone of newly formed squadrons and training establishments. He had an appreciation and knowledge of most of the technical problems associated with fighter aircraft. In this area, he also received great assistance from two other 3 Squadron NCOs, Des O'Brien and Jim Morvell. He had the ability to draw men together (regardless of technical mustering), to assist one another to operate as a team—he generated team spirit. He was on a first name basis with everyone in the Flight. At all times he was approachable, never tried to talk or play one down, but could sure give a blast if you did something wrong or stupid.

Essentially, he was a grass roots man. But rank never worried him. He worked just as well with, and, where it was required, was just as tough on officers/NCO aircrew, as he was with men in the Flight. And he was respected for this.

At all times he was seen—he was down at the airstrip, he was out and about—he knew what was going on. He was the driving force behind the Flight. After I left the Squadron, I never again saw the dedication or the likes of his leadership in the RAAF or when I returned to civilian life.

Equally important, but working in a different way, was the spirit of mateship. This was the cement, that, once having been found, held you and your comrades together through the good and difficult times. It is a mysterious mental and physical bond that I feel will be part of my heart and soul to the end of my days.

## **THE AMERICANS**

I have devoted this concluding section of my notes to our comrades in arms, as I feel it would have been entirely remiss of me not to have highlighted the great force they represented on the human side and, in a material sense, in uniting with us in the drive to defeat a common enemy.

It was a rare experience to have been in a position over a reasonable period of time on various island locations during the war, to see how the American forces were put together and operated.

To begin with, their servicemen were well fitted out. Dress and field clothing, underclothing and footwear was of the best design, quality and manufacture. They

seemed to be well fed—their tinned food and emergency packs, which no doubt, became monotonous like our own, showed variety, and when it became possible to obtain fresh supplies of food, eg. meat, fruit and vegetables, they did their level best to obtain it. While working at the strip on Kiriwina Island I saw, and on a regular basis, considerable quantities of fresh fruit and meat, being flown in on DC3s, direct from the Australian mainland. And I have no reason to believe it didn't happen elsewhere.

Jungle uniforms, small arms and personal body equipment was well proven. Their .30 carbine was a light weight, semi-automatic rifle which must have been ideal in close jungle fighting. They carried a compact water bottle, dixie, and the helmet was close fitting and could be used for a variety of purposes.

Field equipment was of the best quality. Tall standing, centre pole Bell tents allowed a reasonable circulation of air and in most instances, kept you dry during heavy rain periods. Their camp stretchers were strong and didn't collapse beneath you like the Australian rubbish, and their jungle hammocks were a work of art. Mobile equipment such as complete workshops, cookers, power generation sets, first aid and tent hospital equipment appeared to be well thought out, and no apparent shortage of what went with it, ambulances etc.

They had access to nearly every type of transport imaginable. Jeeps by the thousands, Blitz waggons, personnel carriers, light weight, medium and heavy duty trucks.

When it came to the bulk movement of war supplies across the oceans, the steel, all welded, prefabricated Liberty steamships, built in the US by the Henry Kaiser and other large ship-building organisations, carried what was needed to all war fronts of the world. I can't imagine how the global conflict could have been won without them. This applied equally to the great use they made of the Douglas Dakota DC3 air transport. These functional, simple trucks of the air filled the skies, and it is hard to think of an air carrying role in which they weren't involved. The steady, reliable and familiar beat of their twin engines invariably drew eyes aloft to seek them out.

Where military aircraft were concerned, in our theatre of the war, where long distances had to be flown over great stretches of water to reach enemy targets, the US Kittyhawk fighter was a Jack of all trades. It could fly at a reasonable altitude, speed, and, fitted with a belly tank, its range was greatly increased. It had a deadly fire power, which was effectively used for strafing, and the aircraft could also be fitted with racks to carry bombs.

A companion fighter, which was also used with great success, was the more sophisticated, twin-boom, twin-tail, twin-engined tricycle undercarriaged, Lightning fighter. This aircraft could fly at a great altitude and speed, could be fitted with tanks which also greatly increased its range, also had devastating fire power. It was often used at Squadron strength to give high altitude fighter cover protection to Liberator bombers carrying out heavy, long-distance bombing raids.

Another interesting, versatile aircraft was the Mitchell B25 medium bomber. This was a fast, high and low flying, twin engined, twin tailed, tricycle undercarriage machine. Heavy calibre .50 machine guns poked out of the turrets—it could be fitted with a variety of weaponry, including, at times, a .75 forward firing cannon, which played

havoc against small Japanese ships and barges supplying coastal defence posts. It was an interesting sight to watch these aircraft taxiing slowly along the taxiways or waiting to take-off. The motors appeared to be too big and powerful, and, running at low revs, sounded as if they were out of synchronisation. The whole air frame would shake (including the pilots looking out of the windows), and I would not have been surprised to see the whole lot collapse in a heap in front of me. However, once they were airborne, with the engines operating at full revs, everything settled down. They were a hot machine, and I think they were flown by hot pilots. Lieutenant-Colonel James Doolittle of the USAAF used Mitchells in his Squadron to be the first to bomb the cities of Tokyo, Nagoya and Kobe in Japan. This most daring raid was launched from the deck of the US navy fleet aircraft carrier Hornet on 13 April, 1942.

The great awakening came when we landed on Manus Island soon after the main force of Americans had established themselves and were still clearing out serious pockets of Japanese resistance.

Once the miniscule airstrip of Momote on adjoining Los Negros Island was secured, the US Navy 'Sea Bees' started working day and night with great bulldozers, tractors, earthmoving equipment and built a tremendous, all weather airstrip, which ran from one edge of the island to the other. A great network of taxiways and connecting road links was built around the airstrip. A cluster of pre-fab Quonset buildings, catering for airport control, admin and overlooking a salt water lagoon, a cemetery, complete with a small, well designed chapel was established, where many American servicemen, who were killed wresting this place from the Japanese, were interred. Our own Squadron Leader Max Bott was buried here.

An all weather road connecting the airstrip and Seeadler Harbour, was also pushed through the jungle in record time. And when this was finished, another large airstrip, close to the harbour, and on a peninsular, called Mockerang, was built—this was mainly used by the bombers.

Around the foreshores, and further inland, the Sea Bees pressed on with a great construction program. A vast network of roads, Quonset prefabricated storerooms, workshops, semi permanent camps and docking facilities were built.

US Navy warships, and a small number of Australian naval ships were in and out of the harbour. And, before I departed, I saw the harbour full of an armada of US warships and cargo transports, all ready to move forward to the Philippines. It was an unbelievable sight.

On a personal, face to face basis, I always found the Americans approachable, friendly and willing to assist whenever possible. They were most generous with whatever they could give. On a number of occasions, during our settling in days on Los Negros Island, before our supply network had been properly established, they helped our Squadron, and no doubt, our other Squadrons, with food from their own hard pressed resources. Only but for this, we would have known many lean and hungry days.

I shared many lengthy conversations with them, and I liked them for what they were—open, eager to communicate, lack of pretence, inquiring. I feel we owe them a

debt we can never repay. For the loss of their precious sons in coming to our aid when we needed it most at a time when no one else was rushing to our side.

I admired the drive and ability to size up a situation, to work out a plan, and, having done so, to boldly get on and get the job done as quickly as possible. I admired their inventiveness, the tremendous manufacturing energy of their country, and management skills.

All of my previous, ill formed thoughts about Americans, had vanished by the time I returned to Australia.

### **THE ROYAL NAVY**

Although the time I spent seconded to the Royal Navy shore establishment, HMS *Nabsford*, in Brisbane was of short duration, (a brief six months), it was a continuous day to day, live in basis, and it was indeed a rich experience.

I met, and worked with some fine men—Englishmen, Scotsmen and Welshmen. Some I would consider to be the salt of the earth. Many had survived years at sea, operations in the Atlantic, the North Sea and the Mediterranean, and the tragic loss of family on the home front. It was a privilege to have rubbed shoulders, shared a yarn and a beer with them.

From the beginning of my short association with the men of the *Nabsford*, was the awareness, at the back of my mind, that, two layers beneath my own skin was an English grandfather and grandmother.

So this postscript, embracing additional thoughts, to the record of my war service, is complete and at an end.

## **Per Ardua Ad Astra**

They were born to fly –  
Fly upwards to the stars;  
To loop and turn and dive and climb  
Around the throne of Mars.

This was their heritage –  
These young Australian men –  
To hold within their valiant hearts  
a splendid cause: and then

To work, and fight, and die,  
if this the cause must ask.  
And we who hold their cause as dear,  
We also have our task:

The desk, the store, the bench, the aircraft,  
the gun, the hospital – Far from the throne  
of mars – Yet these we know, because  
with them – We struggle to the stars.

The above descriptive poem is from the pen of Section Officer DM Blakers.

