

## Prologue

### Voices of the Past

O, There are voices of the past  
Links of a broken chain  
Wings that can bear me back  
To Times  
Which cannot come again  
Yet, God Forbid that I should lose  
The Echoes that remain.                      Unknown.

March 2003

Five years ago, after listening to friends, young and old, as well as journalists, editors and historians requesting War Veterans and Pioneers to write their memoirs I realised that perhaps it was a duty to my descendants that I should do so. Accordingly, I 'bit the bullet' and started a draft of "My Service during WW11 in the Royal Australian Air Force".

It soon became apparent that I should have done so many years ago when the memories were still fresh, although there could be some wisdom in the fact that sometimes the perspective is better if viewed from a distance. Much time has been taken in getting back in contact with old mates and crew members to ensure that what I have written is as historically accurate as possible. I have even had researchers and historians in the UK verify some of the detail, as well as refer to a few publications that have covered the period of my 'Operational Tour' on XV/15 Squadron, RAF Bomber Command. I did

keep a diary for a while, but discontinued same when I started Operational Training in the UK, as diaries were then forbidden. I did have, however, a good diary in the form of letters home and which my Mother kept. Unfortunately these were lost or mislaid before she died in 1979. I do have all my logs and charts as well as photos, other items and notes from mates that have assisted greatly. On a few matters the original draft had to be amended, but after a few years of revision and the acquisition of a computer I was able about six months ago to commence on the final record. There will no doubt be some further amendments and additions as more confirming information comes to hand. I will cover same in a 'summary' at a later stage.

The question will be asked, "Why didn't I write my Service History soon after the war?", and why have so many not put their experiences to paper? Some did, and they are to be congratulated and thanked for their efforts. For many there was the old service adage that it was "Infra Dig to Shoot a Line". I consider it was a common decision of most who returned from active service in any theatre of war to get on with life and leave the war behind.

My father served in WW1 as an 'original' in the 41<sup>st</sup> Btn A.I.F. and went through a number of the great battles in France & Belgium. He was wounded 3 times and gassed. His younger brother was in the 9<sup>th</sup> Btn A.I.F. that landed on Gallipoli on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1915, where he was severely wounded, and later fought in France & Belgium. Their youngest brother, after whom I was named, died on active service in France after being wounded 3 times. As a boy I often wondered why Dad and his brother never talked much about the war except between themselves and other returned soldiers. I now understand. I have now been in the same position. With your mates who survived you can recall facets of your experiences in an

atmosphere of mutual understanding.

War has made me a realist. Indeed there is a season for all things. Yesterday is history and there is nothing you can do to change it, although we do see some historians trying to sanitise the past. It is to-day that is God's Gift in your hands, and Faith that gives you hope for tomorrow.

I hope that what I have written about my service in the Air

Force will be a valuable record for someone in the years ahead.

**R.A.A.F.**

This is to certify that the ~~Officer~~ Airman mentioned below  
~~Airwoman~~  
and whose description is stated hereon is the authorised holder of this identity card.

No. 425992 Rank ACM  
Name and Initials Smith R. W.  
Signature of Issuing Officer McMurray Ho  
Appointment Adjutant No. 2 I.T.S.  
R.A.A.F. Station, BRADFELD PARK, N.S.W.  
Date of Issue 23 DEC 1942

**Renewals and Endorsements:—**

**DESCRIPTION OF HOLDER**

Weight 125 Build Good  
Colour of Eyes BLUE Colour of Hair MED  
Height 67½ Date of Birth 10/1/24  
Blood Group O.4

Signature of Bearer R. W. Smith

**AC-21-Q 10-10-42 425992**

*McMurray Ho*  
*NO. 2 I.T.S.*  
*BRADFELD PARK, N.S.W.*

**ALB-43**

Official Identity Card for the Royal Australian Air Force

Date of Issue 23 December, 1942

THE  
NATIONAL BANK  
OF AUSTRALASIA LIMITED

ALL  
BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS  
TO BE ADDRESSED TO  
"THE MANAGER"  
BRANCH DEPARTMENT

IN WHICH IS MERGED  
THE BANK OF QUEENSLAND LIMITED

PHONE B 2951  
4 LINES  
BOX 1422 T. G. P. O.

MS.

BRANCH DEPARTMENT  
BRISBANE, B3.  
QUEENSLAND

31st January, 1942.

Mr. R.W. Smith,  
The National Bank of Australasia Limited,  
HARRISVILLE.

Dear Sir,

We have pleasure in advising that approval has been given to your application to enlist in the Royal Australian Air Force. As you are a temporary clerk, the question of re-employment at the end of the war is somewhat different from that of permanent officers, and we advise that whilst the Bank will be quite willing to reconsider your position after the war, and whilst you will remain in our records as a temporary clerk on air force duty, your re-admission to the service will naturally have to be a matter for consideration in the light of circumstances which will then exist, and as in the case of other officers, you would need to satisfy the bank as to your physical fitness.

When known, please advise date you expect to be called up.

Kindly acknowledge this letter through your branch manager.

Yours faithfully,

  
Manager.

*Not acknowledged*  
7 FEB 1942  
*AK*

Letter from Employer Giving Approval to Enlist in the Airforce



# Enrolment in the Reserve

RESERVE BADGE No. 3617

**ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE.**

Form P/P. 49.  
(Sept., 1933.)

**ENROLMENT OF PERSON IN THE RESERVE.**

No. R. \_\_\_\_\_ Name SMITH Robert Wylie

Joined at HARRISVILLE

Joined on 26th March, 1942.

**QUESTIONS TO BE PUT BEFORE ENROLMENT.**

What is your Name? Robert Wylie Smith

What is your Age? 18 years 3 months.

What is the date of your Birth? January 10<sup>th</sup> 1924

Are you Married or Single? Single

Are you a British Subject? Yes

Where were you Born? { Town Brisbane  
State Queensland

What is your Religion? Presbyterian

Have you previously served in Australia or elsewhere? If so, state Regiment or Corps, Service, etc. AND PERIOD OF SERVICE Registered as N.S.T. Not sworn.

Do you now belong to any Service, Regiment, or Corps? No Not allotted.

What is your Trade or Profession? Bank clerk

Have you ever been convicted by the Civil Power? Never

Have you ever been dismissed from any part of His Majesty's Service? No

What is your { Place of Residence? "Greenwood" Harrisville  
Business Address? The National Bank of Australasia Ltd Harrisville

I, Robert Wylie Smith declare that the above answers made by me to the above questions are true. R. W. Smith

**MEDICAL CERTIFICATE.**

I HAVE examined the abovenamed, and Certify that he is medically suitable for the Air Force Reserve.

Height 5 ft. 7 1/2 in. Vaccination Marks \_\_\_\_\_

Chest Normal 32" Exp. 35" in. When Vaccinated \_\_\_\_\_

Weight 125 lb. Marks or Scars \_\_\_\_\_

Vision R. Eye 6/6 L. Eye 6/6

Colour Vision \_\_\_\_\_

Hearing R. Ear \_\_\_\_\_ L. Ear \_\_\_\_\_

Medical classification A1B & A3B

~~Physical Description~~

Complexion \_\_\_\_\_

Eyes (colour) \_\_\_\_\_

Hair (colour) \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

(Signature of Examining Medical Officer.)

# OATH OR AFFIRMATION.\*

## OATH.

I, Robert Wylie Smith, swear that I will well and truly serve Our Sovereign Lord the King as a member of the Air Force Reserve of the Commonwealth of Australia, and that I will resist His Majesty's enemies and cause His Majesty's Peace to be kept and maintained, and that I will in all matters appertaining to my service faithfully discharge my duty according to law. So help me God!

## AFFIRMATION.

I, Robert Wylie Smith, solemnly and sincerely affirm and declare that I will well and truly serve Our Sovereign Lord the King as a member of the Air Force Reserve of the Commonwealth of Australia, and that I will resist His Majesty's enemies and cause His Majesty's Peace to be kept and maintained, and that I will in all matters appertaining to my service faithfully discharge my duty according to law.

Sworn

~~Declared~~

before me at

Harrisville

in the State of

Queensland

this

twenty sixth

day of

March

One

thousand nine hundred and

forty-two

Name

J. G. Hare Justice of the Peace.

†(Signature of Officer or Justice of the Peace administering the oath or taking the declaration.)

Address

Harrisville, Q.

Robert Wylie SMITH

has been passed by me this day and

posted to Class

AIR CREW

of the Reserve.

Official Number R.

Date

31st March, 1942.

C. J. Jones  
ENROLMENT OFFICER. \*\*

## RE-ENROLMENT.

I, No. R.

(Rank)

(Name)

at present serving in the Reserve enrolled on (date)

desiring to re-enroll in the Air Force Reserve for a period of four years from

do hereby declare that I agree to re-enroll and to well and truly serve Our Sovereign Lord the King in the Air Force Reserve of the Commonwealth of Australia for the term of four years from (date), or until sooner lawfully discharged, dismissed, or removed; and that I will resist His Majesty's enemies and cause His Majesty's Peace to be kept and maintained; and that I will in all matters appertaining to my service faithfully discharge my duty according to law.

Signature of Reservist

Signed at

in the State of

this

day of

19

before me.

(Signature)

\* A person who objects to taking the oath may make the affirmation. Cross out form not used. All amendments must be initialed by the Officer or J.P. witnessing the affirmation.  
† "Justice of the Peace" means a Stipendiary or Police or Special Magistrate, or some Magistrate of the State who is specially authorized by the Governor-General to administer the oath.  
\*\* Rank and appointment.

Certificate of Enlistment



Form 11.  
(Revised, October, 1939.)

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE  
CITIZEN AIR FORCE

PERMANENT FORCES.

Attestation of No. 425992 Name SMITH Robert Wylie

Joined at No. 3 RECRUITING CENTRE, BRISBANE

on 21 MAY 1942

Questions to be put to the Recruit before Enlistment.

1. What is your name? ... Robert Wylie SMITH
2. In or near what Town were you born? ... Brisbane  
in the State of Queensland
3. Are you a British Subject or a Naturalized British Subject of pure European descent? (N.B.—If the latter, papers to be shown.) ... British subject
4. What is your Age? (You are warned that if you give a false answer to this question you are liable to be severely punished.) ... 18 yrs 4 mths Born 10.1.1924
5. What is your Trade or Calling? ... Bank clerk
6. Are you, or have you been, an Apprentice? If so, where, to whom, and for what period? ... No
7. Are you married? ... No
8. Have you ever been convicted by the Civil Power? ... No
9. Have you ever been discharged from any part of His Majesty's Forces with Ignominy, or for Misconduct, or as Incurable and Worthless, or on account of Conviction of Felony, or of a sentence of Penal Servitude, or have you been Dismissed with Disgrace from any of His Majesty's Naval Forces? (You are warned that you are liable to heavy punishment if you make a false answer to this question.) ... No  
National Trainee Not examined or allotted to unit
10. Do you now belong to any of His Majesty's Naval, Military or Air Forces? ... No
11. Have you ever served in any of His Majesty's Naval, Military or Air Forces? If so, state which, and the cause of your Discharge or Dismissal, or other termination of service. ... No

ATTESTATION.

I do solemnly declare that the above answers made fulfil the engagements made.

Signature of Recruit R. W. Smith

OATH TO BE TAKEN BY RECRUIT ON ATTESTATION.

I swear that I will well and truly serve our Sovereign Lord the King in the Air Force of the Commonwealth of Australia for the term of ~~the duration of the war and twelve months thereafter~~ or until sooner lawfully discharged, dismissed or removed; and that I will resist His Majesty's enemies and cause His Majesty's peace to be kept and maintained; and that I will, in all matters appertaining to my service, faithfully discharge my duty according to law.

So HELP ME, GOD.

(A recruit who objects to take an oath may "affirm." (see Air Force Regulations.)

\*Strike out whichever inapplicable.

CERTIFICATE OF ATTESTING OFFICER.

The recruit abovenamed was cautioned by me that if he made any false answer to any of the above questions he would be liable to be punished as provided in the Air Force Act and Air Force Regulations of the Commonwealth of Australia.

The questions were then read to the recruit in my presence.

I have taken care that he understands each question, and that his answer to each question has been duly entered as replied to by him.

~~It is hereby certified that the above answers are true and correct and that the recruit is a British Subject.~~ (In the case of a British Subject, this is to be struck out.)

The said recruit has made and signed the Declaration and taken the Oath at Brisbane

in the State of Queensland, this Twenty first day of May

19 42, before me.

Signature P. J. J. J.

(A Justice of the Peace or Attesting Officer.)

War Service only.  
When used for  
Attestation  
other than  
duration of  
War, this  
strip  
must be  
cut off.



Description of	SMITH Robert Wylie	on Enlistment
Age	18 years 4 months	WOUNDS, SCARS, OR DISTINCTIVE MARKS.  3/4" circ. scar L. hip.
Height	5 feet 7 1/2 inches	
Weight	125 lb.	
Chest Measurement	32/35 inches	
Complexion	Fair	
Eyes	Blue	
Hair	L. brown	
Religious Denomination	Presbyterian	

### CERTIFICATE OF MEDICAL EXAMINATION.

I HAVE examined the abovenamed recruit, and find that he does not present any of the following conditions, viz. :—

Scrofula ; Phthisis ; syphilis ; impaired constitution ; defective intelligence ; defects of vision, voice, or hearing ; hernia ; haemorrhoids ; varicose veins, beyond a limited extent ; marked varicocele with unusually pendant testicle ; inveterate cutaneous disease ; chronic ulcers ; traces of corporal punishment ; contracted or deformed chest ; abnormal curvature of spine ; or any other disease or physical defect calculated to unfit him for the duties of a soldier.

He can see the required distance with either eye ; his heart and lungs are healthy ; he has the free use of his joints and limbs ; and he declares he is not subject to fits of any description.

I consider him fit for service in the Permanent Air Force of the Commonwealth of Australia.

Date 20 MAY 1942 A, B, A, B,  
 Place No. 3 RECRUITING CENTRE, BRISBANE  
 (Signature of Examining Medical Officer.) [Signature] SQUADRON LEADER

### CERTIFICATE OF APPROVING OFFICER.

I CERTIFY that this Attestation of the abovenamed recruit is correct, and that the required forms appear to have been complied with. I accordingly approve, and appoint him to

B. R.D. MARYBOROUGH.

If enlisted by special authority, number and date to be here quoted

Date 21 MAY 1942  
 Place No. 3 RECRUITING CENTRE, BRISBANE  
 Commanding [Signature] SQUADRON LEADER  
No. 3 RECRUITING CENTRE, BRISBANE

Enlistment in the RAAF

## Rookie-AC2

When war with Germany was declared on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939 I was a student boarder at the Ipswich (Boys) Grammar School in my 'Junior' years of study. I had been enrolled at I.G.S the previous year under a Qld R.S.S.A I.L.A Scholarship that I had won because my father was a returned soldier from WW1 and I had attained a qualifying standard in the 1937 State Scholarship exams. At that early stage, although under the age of 16, I had ambitions of joining the Air Force if the war were to carry on for many years, which it did.

After sitting the "Junior Public Exams" at the end of the 1939 school year, which I passed with above average results (4 A's, 4 B's and 1 C) I was accepted for employment in The National Bank of Australasia Limited at its Harrisville Branch. I took the place of Gordon McDougall who had enlisted in the RAAF. He went on to graduate as a pilot and lost his life in a flying accident in East Lothian, Scotland on Monday 6<sup>th</sup> September 1943.

The war did continue in Europe through 1940, and in early 1941 when I turned 17 years of age I took the opportunity to enrol as a correspondence student with the Air Force Cadets. I received educational material and exercises in Physics and Mechanics, incorporating the theories of flight and navigation etc. Exams were set for each lesson and in my case these were checked and marked by the Headmaster of the Milora State Primary School where I attended and sat the 1937 State Scholarship exam. Early in 1942 on reaching the age of 18 I was given the opportunity to make a formal application to enlist in the RAAF, subject to parents' and employer's consent. I made the application to the Bank and their approval was forthcoming on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1942, subject to a few

qualifications as I was still a temporary clerk on probation which meant that my re-employment after the war would be subject to reassessment at the time. My parents gave their consent on my promise not to start smoking or drinking in the Air Force until I reached age 21. This promise I kept well beyond that time, as I have never been a smoker, and only a moderate drinker since into my 30's. When I returned from active service in 1945 I realised what an enormous stress I had placed on my parents, particularly as my father had seen active service on the battlefields of France & Belgium in WW1 and my mother prayerfully relied on the strength of her Faith. Her prayers were answered.

Armed with the necessary consents I forwarded my application to the RAAF Recruitment Centre in Brisbane and on 13<sup>th</sup> February 1942 had completed the RAAF's Form P/P/39A for Air Crew entry I was now on stand-by as it was policy for actual flying training not to commence until the recruit was of age 19.

In 1942, after the entry of Japan into the war and posing a real threat to Australian territory the government of the day was actively engaged in calling up qualified males into the Militia Forces. Apparently to keep a priority on Air Crew 'hopefuls' the RAAF instituted a call-up of those on 'the reserve' by creating the mustering of Air Crew Guard in Queensland, New South Wales & Victoria. It was under this mustering that I received my call-up to report to No.3 RAAF Recruitment Centre in Eagle Street, Brisbane on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1942. My position at the Bank was taken by John Neville Keys, the son of the then Manager at Boonah Branch, Neville Keys. He went into the next RAAF call-up, was given the number 426112 got his 'wings' as a Bomb Aimer and lost his life with No.466 Squadron Bomber Command on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1944 when shot down by a German night fighter on a raid on the railway installations at Tergnier in the lead up



to the "D" Day invasion of Europe. I reported to No.3 Recruitment Centre along with 191 other recruits who were passed medically fit and duly enlisted, with service Nos from 425819 to 426010 inclusive, and proceeded on posting No.3 Recruit Depot at Maryborough, Qld with the rank of AC2. Authority P.O.R.135/42. I was given the No.425992, placed between No.425991 Bill Washbourne and 425993 Des Webster. Bill came from the Warwick district and Des from the Kilcoy area. This was to avoid surname of Smith under consecutive numbers. The same applied to the Jones & Murphies. The only Smith who remained in strict numerical order was 425891 Robert Angus Martin Smith.

We proceeded by train that evening to Maryborough where we were issued with uniforms, dungarees, boots, toothbrushes, razors etc and settled into barracks with palliasses and introduced to the Air Force life on 6 shillings a day for 7 days a week with free meals, accommodation, medical & dental treatment. In those days the Bank made up the difference in pay, which was not great but amounted to a bit of compulsory saving.

### **I Settle Into Life as a Recruit**

Soon settled into a daily routine of a route march early in the morning while there was frost on the ground before breakfast, drills, lectures and vaccinations. Leave was granted most evenings and over the week-end. It was quite a common practice for the airmen to commandeer a push bike after going to the pictures in town, ride it out to the station gates and leave it there. The recruit depot was situated on the Maryborough aerodrome. Maryborough in those days was a town where everyone rode bikes, and the locals soon got to know where to look for their missing mode of transport. After three weeks intensive initiation into air force life we were passed as suitable

recruits for Air Crew training and were split into several groups and posted to various RAAF stations in Queensland & New South Wales to serve as Guards until posted to an Initial Training School.

Bill Washbourne, Des Webster, Col (Snow) Wheatley and myself were posted to No.1 A.O.S at Cootamundra N.S.W. on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1942. Authority No,140/42. We travelled by train from Maryborough and arrived in Sydney only 2 weeks after the Japanese midget submarine attack on that city. We had to change trains in Sydney. At Cootamundra we were joined by Air Crew Guards from other States. Duties at Cootamundra included guarding the Ansons parked on the station aprons overnight, station perimeters, main gate guardhouse and the fuel depot about a mile out of town. Guard duties were usually 4 hours on and 4 hours off. The winter chill was a bit of a shock to the Queenslanders but we were treated generously with the issue of an extra blanket. Ice creams taken on duty at night to help you through your 4 hour shift could be left on a post, or tail of an aircraft and would not melt. If there was a sneaky wind blowing and the opportunity was judged safe we would crawl into one of the aircraft for a bit of a break. It was a fair risk that no one was doing the rounds to check on you.

Duty at the fuel dump was more relaxed. We stayed in a tent, and had trained the possums to eat fruit and chocolates out of our hands until they became a real nuisance. Horse riders, probably going home from the pictures or a dance in Cootamundra and travelling along the road that passed by the dump would be challenged "Who goes there?" Most took it in good humour, but occasionally one would get a bit stroppy but remain cautious in case we decided to fire a shot into the air and scare their horse. To relieve the monotony one night I fired a couple of shots at something flying overhead in the moonlight. Unfortunately these were heard back at

the station and in no time a vehicle with more guards for reinforcement turned up. To the N.C.O who arrived I had to give a quick explanation. Told him I had challenged a person who had come through the fence, and when he didn't stop but went back through the fence I fired a couple of shots after him. A bit of a recco of the area was made but nothing found, so I was instructed to report to the C/O's office the next day. This I did along with others who were on duty at the time. They supported my account of events, but we were ordered to go to the rifle range for target practice and assessment. I was given 5 shots at the 200 yard range and scored 2 bulls and 3 inners, and explained further to the C.O that I would have fired close enough to the intruder to give him a fright. He ordered a close inspection of the site in daylight to see if there was any evidence of clothing caught in the barbed wire fence but nothing was found. I should imagine the C.O's report on the incident would make interesting reading. Bill Washbourne was on guard duty with me at the time and at a reunion of the Air Crew Guards in Brisbane in the 1990's he was surprised when I told him there was no intruder. He confirmed that at the time they all thought I was serious.

My first encounter with an aircraft accident and death was at Cootamundra on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1942. A Beaufighter from No.31 Squadron stationed at Wagga Wagga flew into our circuit and on turning to come in to land stalled and crashed about a mile from the station. The squadron which had been equipped with Beauforts had changed over to the Beaufighter only the month before. It was flown by F/Sgt. John Evan Jenkins (No.407435) and the second crew man, possibly the Observer, was Sgt. Vivian Sutherst (No.35755). Both were killed instantly on impact and are buried in the Cootamundra War Cemetery. I was with a few guards who were sent immediately to the scene of the crash, which we had to keep under guard for a couple of days. It was a sobering experience and I vividly remember



the advice given to us at the scene by a senior sergeant that we were not to dwell on the death of the crew, but put it behind us, do our duty and get on with life. There was nothing we could do to change what had happened. That advice stood me in good stead through the experiences ahead and indeed through my life. It was while on guard duty at the crash site that we had some amusement shooting at rabbits. On one occasion a bullet ricocheted off a rock and as it whined its way across the country side it was amusing to see flocks of sheep scatter in its path.

The Presbyterian Church in Cootamundra had a very active Youth Fellowship Association to which I went with Bill Washbourne and other airmen. We were made most welcome and enjoyed many a happy time

On 16/9/42 we were officially attached to the newly formed No. 73 Reserve Squadron, but our routine on the station did not change.

On 11<sup>th</sup> October Des Webster and I were posted to No. 2 Initial Training School at Bradfield Park (Sydney) as our first step to Air Crew entry. There were also Air Crew Guards from other stations on the same posting, including Keith Mills, Noel Hooper and Eric Sutton who were at Maryborough with me. Since we enlisted our mustering was Aircrew V (Guard), with rank of AC11.

We were part of No. 33 Course at I.T.S. It was an intensive course of lectures on many subjects, but mainly on basic theories of flying, navigation, gunnery and bombing. Physical training played an important part and you were under constant observation for overall assessment as suitable for air crew and put

through various tests to gauge reflexes and co-ordination before being interviewed by a selection panel to be mustered into a particular category.

A wide range of sports was available, including sailing, and evening leave passes were generous. Queenslanders who were issued with the tropical uniform were not allowed to wear it into the city (South of the Harbour Bridge), but that was not strictly policed. We would mostly go to the Anzac Club for a meal and then to a show. Then buy a packet of fruit, say 4 lbs (2 kilos) of Cherries for 2 shillings (20 cents) to eat on the train back to Lindfield and walk to the camp. If you fell asleep on the last train and got carried on to Gordon it was a long walk back to camp- had to hurry to make it by 2359 Hrs. Through the Anzac Club interstate and country servicemen could be introduced to residents in Sydney who were willing to extend home hospitality. I availed of this offer and came to meet Miss MacPherson, a retired Nursing Sister who had a unit on the slopes of the harbour at Neutral Bay. Mac's place became a home away from home for a few young airmen. She was a dear soul and was like a second mother to a few of us. It was a great joy to visit, have a home cooked meal and occasionally sleepover on a Saturday night. She would make up a bed on the lounge and be amazed to find us sleeping on the floor in the morning. I kept up a regular correspondence with her while overseas, as did a few others, and 3 years later made a quick visit on my return in-transit back to Queensland after disembarking in Sydney.

While on the course a few of us including Keith Mills, Eric Sutton, Des Webster, Noel Hooper and myself were detailed to go to the University of N.S.W. where they were doing research into air sickness. We were good guinea pigs, as we were given vouchers for

a meal of roast lamb and baked vegetables before the tests started. The tests involved being strapped into a stretcher and swung from ceiling to ceiling to see how long you lasted. I lost my meal after about 10 minutes as did most. As far as I can remember Noel Hooper was the only one who did not part with his meal.

The course finished on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1943 when we were assigned into various air crew categories for further flying training. The Selection panel tried to get me to accept a pilot's course as my tests confirmed I was well suited to be a pilot. I pressed hard to be given a Navigator category as I was 'interested in mathematics,' and got my wish. Actually the main reason I applied for a 'navigator' was the good gen circulating at the time that those chosen for Navigator and Bomb Aimer courses would be going to Canada for flying training with the plan to go on to the U.K. to fly in Lancasters or Halifaxes. There was a proviso that you had to be 19 years of age by 10<sup>th</sup> January 1943, the date they would have to report back from pre-embarkation leave. (That was my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday and how I became to be the youngest of the draft). This was confirmed when we were given 10 days leave with instructions to report back at Bradfield Park No. 2 Embarkation Depot on 11<sup>th</sup> Jan 1943. As from 2<sup>nd</sup> Jan 1943 my mustering was Air Crew 11 (Navigator) and rank L.A.C. (Leading Aircraftman—not Lance Air Commodore).

It was not hard to take a weeks leave at home. It was a busy week visiting a few relations and then having to say farewells with many a prayer for a safe return from the war. I had made a good friend of the bank manager's daughter, Jean Hall, and I had a feeling that many thought our friendship was more serious. I took Jean to a dance at the Harrisville School of Arts on the Friday night 8<sup>th</sup> Jan, but it was not like the old dances as it was overrun by RAAF and American airmen from Amberley which had now grown into a large



air base servicing the Pacific war zone. Jean promised to write me while I was away and we did keep up a regular correspondence. A neighbour, Mrs Adams, gave me a poem with a sprig of white heather that I kept with me always. She had given the same to my father when he enlisted in WW1. My leave at home finished on my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday anniversary, Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> January 1943 as I left on the morning rail motor from Harrisville on my way back to Sydney, with

a heap of goodies from home including a birthday cake.



At Home on Embarkation Leave with Mum, brother Alex and  
sisters Margaret and Joyce - January 1943.



A Rookie Airman – No. 425992 ACII R.W. Smith  
1942 – In Sydney

## Embarkation Depot Sydney & To Canada

From embarkation leave at home I travelled on the “Kyogle” line, 2<sup>nd</sup> division, from South Brisbane station arriving in Sydney and

No. 2 Embarkation depot at Bradfield Park on Monday 11<sup>th</sup> January 1943. Leave was granted that night, so I went to visit Miss Mac with a piece of my birthday cake. The rest I shared with mates.

Leave arrangements while at Embarkation Depot were very generous. If no drafts for overseas postings had been issued and no particular duties allocated we were stood down after the mandatory morning parade until the next morning, or even over the week-end if it was on Friday morning's parade.

### **The Waiting Period – Stand Downs, Outings and Farewells**

There were a few of us who spent a lot of time together during this waiting period, mainly the youngest on the group to be sent overseas. Besides myself there was Keith Mills who had turned 19 only 8 days before me, Lou Brimblecombe whose 19<sup>th</sup> birthday was about 2 weeks previous to Keith's, Eric Sutton who had his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday the previous August and Des Webster whose 19<sup>th</sup> birthday was in July. We all went on to train as Navigators and Keith, Eric and I became known as the 3 musketeers on the course in Canada. Des went on to train as a Wireless Operator. A few were over 30 years of age and we looked upon them as old fellows. Early in our stay Keith somehow met a girl whose father was a Fijian Envoy Representative in Sydney. Her name was Pat, and on the first Sunday there he asked me to join him and Pat and her friend Merle Green to spend the day at Cronulla and then go to Luna Park at night.

The next few days saw us assigned to some wharf duties at Waterloo and on Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> January we were detailed to the unloading of mustard gas bombs from an American liberty ship at Glebe Island. Keith Mills, Des Webster and I saw no future in this so we went A.W.L. that night and stayed at the Allied Club in town. Stayed in town on Friday and went to the pictures at night with Pat

and Merle. Took Merle home to Punchbowl and her parents insisted I stay the night with them. Went back to camp on Saturday morning to learn that we hadn't been missed. As there was still nothing doing about overseas postings and leave had been granted over the weekend I went back into town, had tea and spent the night at Miss Mac's. Went into town on Sunday morning to meet Keith, and we went with Pat and Merle for a train trip to Lawson in the Blue Mountains.

The next week saw the usual routine of parade, stand-downs, sports etc. On Friday we were placed on a draft with all leave cancelled and no telephone calls allowed. After lunch the unexpected announcement was made that leave was granted and extended to 1300 Hrs on Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> Jan. So I went out to Punchbowl to say my farewell to Merle and her family and thank them for their hospitality, and then on to see Miss Mac and the two girls who boarded with her. They insisted I stay for a home cooked dinner and stay overnight. Slept on the lounge room floor. Got back to camp at midday on Sunday to learn there was no further news on our embarkation and that leave had been extended to 0730 Hrs on Monday. As I had said my 'Good-Byes' I stayed in camp and wrote a few letters.

On Monday morning we were paraded and went on a long route march before breakfast and after lunch at 1300 Hrs given another stand-down. On Tuesday morning it was a swimming parade and early stand-down again. Wednesday morning was another swimming parade, a film on "Next-of Kin" after lunch and then stand-down until the next morning. Keith had got word out to Pat that we were still around, so we arranged to meet Pat and Merle in the evening and take them to the Prince Edward theatre to see "Reap the Wild Wind". On Thursday morning we had another route march, pay parade ("The Eagle sh.. on each 2<sup>nd</sup> Thursday") and stand-down at 1330 Hrs. It was the usual swimming parade on Friday morning, 5<sup>th</sup>



Feb, and another stand-down after the 1330 Hrs parade until Monday morning. By this time we were beginning to wonder if we were ever going to get on board a ship.

With a free week-end ahead I took the opportunity to contact Merle and meet her in town after work and go to the pictures and then see her home to Punchbowl. Again her parents insisted I stay over the week-end. On Saturday morning I went into town to buy a few magazines etc for the trip over to Canada and back to camp to change into tropical uniform of khaki shirt and shorts and back into town to spend the afternoon in the Botanical gardens and go with Merle to the pictures at night to the State Theatre to see "They all kissed the Bride". Slept overnight at the Green's and had a very quiet day on Sunday playing draughts and reading a very funny publication titled "One Big Laugh". On the way back to camp that night the M.P's boarded the train at Wynyard station and anyone wearing tropical uniform had to surrender their leave passes and were ordered to report to the guard house the next morning. Big trouble?? Wearing of shorts in uniform was not allowed south of the Harbour Bridge.

The Wait is Over

**Monday 8<sup>th</sup> Feb 1943** dawned with guards on all gates at No. 2 Embarkation Depot, an early call to parade and orders given for clearances to be completed. All leave passes were cancelled, so no further use for the passes that were taken from us the previous night. **This is it at last.** After attending to clearances we were

instructed to report back on parade with kit bags packed and ready to move on to buses at 1700 Hrs for transport to Woolloomooloo to embark at 1900 Hrs on the troopship "**U.S.S. Hermitage**". It was a ship of 23000 tons which cruised at 18-20 knots. It was formerly the Italian cruise ship "Count Ciano" that travelled around the Mediterranean Sea as a floating casino on pleasure cruises. It had been captured by the American forces and had taken part in the landing of allied troops in North Africa and was on its way back to the west coast of America. We embarked as planned and had a good night's sleep on board.

We were up at 0600 Hrs on Tuesday morning, detailed on to mess duties and instructed in 'Abandon Ship' drills while we lay at anchor in Neutral Bay to take on fuel after taking aboard fresh water, fruit and vegetables and other food supplies at Woolloomooloo. Spent the night at anchor in Neutral Bay and at 0830 Hrs on Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> February it was 'up-anchor' and away, waving to the passengers on the ferries and sighting many hammer head sharks in the harbour. It was not long before we were out through 'The Heads' and setting course Nor-Nor-East into choppy seas with two Dutch Destroyers in escort. I started to feel a bit squeamy? But yes, managed to hold on to my breakfast. We are now under American terms for troops in transit—only two meals a day, but the canteen is open for an hour twice a day. As the Australian landscape slowly dipped from view everyone bravely sheltered their own feelings—generally a mixed feeling of adventure and uncertainty. Everyone realised and acknowledged that as we all went into flying training and operations over enemy territory not all would be returning to see their homeland again.

The destroyer escort left us at 0600 Hrs the next morning and we continued on a zig-zag course through choppy seas in light

rain. I was detailed on to mess duties that afternoon and issued with Aussie Comfort Fund parcels. Soon settled into a routine. Those not on mess duties had to attend lectures-a good bit of armed forces psychology to keep the troops moulded into a unit with a common cause of complaint. A couple of albatrosses followed us for the first few days but they then peeled off formation on us. Sharks and flying fish were sighted and on Saturday a pod of whales was sighted on our port side. On Sunday morning we had church parade at 1000 Hrs and then 'stand down', but I was detailed on guard duties. Certain duties were allotted to the troops in transit such as mess duties/kitchen hand, deck patrol and shifts on the ack-ack gun at the stern. The ship's officers were a bit concerned about the Aussies on the ack-ack gun as they were too keen to shoot at the 'Met' balloons that were released at regular intervals.

**Monday 15<sup>th</sup> February, 1943, a memorable 2 days. We crossed the International Date line.** So, we had Monday twice and the thought of only one day's pay was given much discussion. Sufficient to record here that after our arrival in Canada due submission was made to RAAF Headquarters and suitable adjustment was made in our paybooks. A compensating adjustment was made on our return to Australia in October 1945. One of the Mondays was the end on my guard duty detail and the idea of lectures to fill in the day did not appeal, so I took a stroll around deck without my life jacket and was promptly apprehended and given 3 day's kitchen duties, along with a couple of others who realised the opportunity to avoid lectures and enjoy more than two meals a day as we passed along the corridors with trays of hot food yelling "Hot Stuff" to warn

others to be careful.

### **Pango, Pango**

On Tuesday morning we sighted land ahead. American Samoa. Berthed in Pango Pango harbour in the late morning to take on fuel, fresh water and unload canned food for the American troops based there. Also embarked a contingent of American Marines. Those not on duties were allowed ashore for a couple of hours but had to remain in the vicinity of the wharf. As I was on kitchen duties I had to take on the scene from the deck, watching some of the fellows enticing the native girls in bright floral dresses to climb the coconut trees. Don't think they were interested in the coconuts. Cameras were not allowed, under very strict orders, but some did manage to take a few snaps from the ship. We left Pango Pango at 0820 Hrs next day, Wed 17<sup>th</sup> Feb, and I finished my kitchen duties after midday. Had first good bath and change of clothes for a week, then strolled around the deck again minus life jacket and got another 3 days in the kitchen. Good Show!!

The next morning we sighted a cruiser and a passenger ship heading south-west, the opposite to our north easterly route. There was a rumoured submarine alert that night as the ship's engines were stopped and we drifted for some few hours. Woke early on Friday morning to the sound of the ship's fog-horns but there was nothing in sight. Crossed the equator that day with King Neptune coming aboard to put the rookies through the customary initiation ceremony. We all got a liberal coating of shaving cream. On Saturday morning I finished my kitchen duty 'penalty' and as the news on the bush radio was that we would be calling into Honolulu by Tuesday next, decided to stay away from penalty duties in case shore leave was granted. Lectures had been toned down a bit by now to make the days less

boring. On Sunday, church parade was held at 1000 Hrs and then all were given stand down. So the "Bum Nut" club gathered around Russ Martin's gramophone to hear Glenn Miller playing "In the Mood" for the umpteenth time, along with 'Corn Silk' and other hit tunes of the time. Just can't remember how the group got the name "Bum Nuts". Probably from Gum Nuts sitting on their bums on the deck listening to that one record and almost for sure would have been one of Russ Martin's screwy ideas. Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> Feb saw the celebration of George Washington's birthday with dinner of roast turkey, baked vegetables, salads and ice-cream. A welcome variation from the usual navy beans, saveloys and sauerkraut. A concert was held in the afternoon when we were presented with our 'Crossing the Line' certificates.

## **Honolulu**

Sighted land early on Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> Feb and at 1000 Hrs berthed in Honolulu. Half of the RAAF contingent was granted shore leave that afternoon. I was in the other half who were given 'liberty' from 0830 hrs to 1200 Hrs the next morning.

So we were up early on Wednesday and down the gangplank at 0830 Hrs. I went with Keith Mills, Russ Martin and a few others primarily to buy new gramophone needles. On shore, the first thing we noticed was the number of shop assistants of Japanese descent and the heavily armed guards on all premises with a strong naval and military presence on the streets. We were wearing our tropical uniforms of khaki shirts and shorts and were taken as 'boy scouts' by many Americans, which did not go over too well. It was our first encounter with vehicles driven on the right hand side of the road and the ingrained habit of 'look right' before crossing soon had to be adjusted. I went very close to being hit by an army truck being



driven by an Afro-American. It was a close shave, but fortunately my parents were not to receive that dreaded telegram.

Nowhere could we find gramophone needles-sewing needles, knitting needles. All sorts of needles, but no gramophone needles. Then it dawned on Russ Martin to give a play-acting role of a record spinning around on a turn table. And the shop assistant with a very serious expression said "You mean Phonograph needles". Problem solved and mission completed. So the old record was going to cop a hiding for a few more days. There was other shopping to do, so we split up and went different ways. I stayed with Noel Hooper and we met an American Army Officer who took a real interest in us and invited us to have a look at the Pearl Harbour Naval Base. After going through a few check points, and might I add, given star treatment, we had to explain that we had to be back on board by 1200 Hrs and by then there was not enough time to go any further. We did get a view of the harbour and the devastation that had been caused and he agreed to take us back to the ship.

While we were ashore many seriously wounded and shell-shocked G.I's from the Pacific Island battle zones were embarked for repatriation to their homeland. Many required full time medical attendants to apply necessary therapy to teach them to walk again and regain normal physical co-ordination. The ship was now crowded for the rest of the trip.

A band played on the wharf during the afternoon, and then it was 'Aloha' as we sailed away to strike rough seas and cold weather all Thursday and Friday, which kept us in our bunks and under blankets for most of the time. We were issued with sheep skin vests from the Australian Comforts Fund which were well received. The seas calmed down a bit by Saturday morning so I was able to enjoy

breakfast of beans and an apple. Got some entertainment in the afternoon with the ack-ack guns firing at flak bursts. The Aussies also got some entertainment hearing the G.I's calling their mates 'cobras' after hearing us call ours 'cobbers'.

On Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> February, four days out of Honolulu, complaints were lodged about the breakfast because it was not hot. The weather was still cold and rainy. Church parade was held at 1000 Hrs. At 0100 Hrs we had advanced clocks by 30 minutes. In the afternoon I sewed some badges on Ben Smith's overcoat and was rewarded with a sandwich-can only guess that he got it from the canteen. Clocks were advanced by 30 minutes at 0100 Hrs on Monday morning. We again woke to cold and cloudy weather but the sun managed to break through late in the morning. To keep us on our toes we were put through 'Abandon Ship' drill which didn't go over too well with the American troops who embarked at Honolulu.

Up on deck after breakfast on Tuesday morning 2<sup>nd</sup> March to see a convoy ahead and a welcome to the sea gulls that had started to circle the ship as we moved towards land. Soon as it was a very spectacular view as we passed under the Golden Gate Bridge to enter San Francisco harbour and berth on the southern side opposite the famous Alcatraz prison island at 1600 Hrs when the tide was favourable. We were promptly disembarked, assembled on the wharf and marched to a ferry terminal to board the ferry across the harbour to Oakland where we were entrained and departed at 2000 Hrs for Vancouver.

### **We enjoy Our Trip to Vancouver Through to Edmonton**

After a bit more than 3 weeks on the ship, it was luxury

accommodation and service on the train, and I really enjoyed a good night's sleep. It was breakfast in style on Wednesday morning as we sped through the foothills of the Cascade mountains, and we enjoyed the view of snow capped hills and frozen lakes for the first time. We descended on to the plains and farming communities of Oregon, fruit, chocolates, ice-cream papers and magazines (you name it) all available from the waiters on the train. We went through Roseburg, and on to Eugene, Albany, Salem (the Capital) and arrived in Portland just on dusk, with the snow capped Mt. Hood on the eastern horizon. The things we noted most during the day were the absence of fences between houses in the towns and cities, and the lack of paint on nearly all the wooden houses. Of course the Queenslanders could not help but notice the luxury of the train travel at speeds and stability that were unknown on the Queensland railways at that time. After such a full day of interest it was no trouble to settle back into the bunk for a good sleep as we travelled on overnight to Seattle and on to Vancouver.

Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> March was another memorable day. Woke at 0700 Hrs in Vancouver, had breakfast at the station then a pay parade to be issued with Canadian Dollars. Leave was granted from 1130 hrs until 1800 Hrs when we had to be back at the station. The Canadian hospitality came to the fore as we were approached by a Mr Keeler who introduced himself as a Rotarian (my first contact with Rotary) and offered a lift for a few of us into town to the tourist bureau and the YMCA where we enjoyed a meal for 5 cents. He arranged with us to call back at 1400 Hrs to pick us up and drive us around the sights of Vancouver and back to the station by 1800Hrs. There were three of us and as far as I can remember, although I am not sure, the other two may have been Ben Smith and Russ Martin. We were taken over the Lions Gate Bridge, through Stanley Park with its Indian Totem Poles and views of the snow capped Lions Head

mountains as well as past the Houses of Parliament and through a few suburbs to be back at the station on time. After tea (what the Canadians called the evening meal) at the station we left by train at 2100 Hrs via the Canadian National Railways route through the Rockies to Edmonton.

We woke the next morning to be greeted by the most spectacular scenery as the long train snaked its way alongside frozen rivers and lakes and snow laden conifer tress in the foot hills, climbing all the time. All around were the majestic Rockies with not a tree on them but capped in snow. It was cold outside but we were in heated carriages with the same service that we enjoyed on the train from Oakland to Vancouver, but the waiters were Canadians. When we did stop at a station for the engine to take on water we could not resist the temptation to jump out and romp in the snow. Most were wearing their dungarees over the singlet and underpants, so it didn't take long before the freezing temperatures scuttled them back to the warmth of the carriage. At our stop at Avola for 20 minutes it did not take long for a snow fight to develop and by some fluke or by accident a hard packed snowball hit the window of a carriage and broke it. (Jim Bateman it was). Anyway it made that carriage too cold for comfort so the occupants herded into adjoining carriages when we got under way again. Then we saw a bit of organization that you would not see on the Queensland Railways. As we pulled into Jasper the train stopped with the broken window right beside a ladder and a couple of tradesmen with the necessary tools and materials to repair the damage. In less than 20 minutes the new window was installed. We had now climbed to a good height and at Jasper there was a lot of sheet ice on the ground which caused us a few problems to stay on our feet. Three young boys gave us a bit of amusement as we threw our spare Aussie halfpennies along the ice and into snow drifts. After Jasper we crossed the Athabasca River

and the highest point on the trip. From there it was downhill on to the prairies of Alberta. We had to stop for some unknown reason near Edson, before going on to Edmonton where we arrived early in the



morning of Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> March 1943.



Avola - Where a carriage window was broken



Jasper - Where the window was fixed

### During our 20 minute stop

We stayed on the train until 0600 Hrs and the arrival of a few canvas topped 3 ton trucks on to which we were loaded. The temperature was Minus 23. Fahrenheit and I soon realised that the best option was to be among the first to throw your kitbag in and jump in after it with others piling in after you to keep the cold at bay. We were taken immediately to No.3 Manning Depot (as the RCAF called it), given breakfast and allotted to barracks. We then had to assemble in the 'Arena' for a lecture on what to expect in our future movements and to remind us that in the RCAF the flag in front of HQ had to be saluted. This did not impress the Aussies. After that we were given leave until Monday morning. As a general rule most of the trainees under the Empire Training Scheme in Canada were given leave over the week-end. After a shave and a shower I teamed with an Ian Scott (RCAF) and went into town to the pictures and then to a dance at the Memorial Hall. It was very cold coming back to camp on the tram.

On Sunday morning we slept in until 1100 Hrs, then shaved, showered and had dinner before a few of us went into town to the YMCA which was well equipped with a ten-pin bowling alley, heated swimming pool, gymnasium, dance floor and dry canteen. Came back to camp reasonably early with Ben Smith and John Honeyman.

It was down to business on Monday morning as we were issued with flying suits and other gear needed. Photographs were taken for Identity Cards, Dental & Medical checks after dinner and then back into town with Bub Sargeant for a while before coming back to camp to write a few letters to home. On Tuesday morning we were

paraded at 0900 Hrs and those mustered for training as Navigators were transported to Edmonton Airport where No.2 Air Observer School was situated, to be signed in, allotted to barracks and issued with text books and settled in after a quick trip into town to buy a few necessities. Three Australians-Jim Bateman, Bill Bowden and Geoff Cohen were assigned to Course No.71N1 along with a number of New Zealanders and Canadians. The remainder of the Australians, including myself, were assigned to Course No.71N2.

## Navigators Course No. 71N2

No. 2 Air Observers School - EDMONTON, Alberta, CANADA

**On Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> March 1943**, one month after embarking in Sydney, we started on the above course for training as Air Navigators. It was a rather quiet day, with the issue of text books and some navigation instruments. Even had time to write my first long letter home.

The following day however saw the start of what was to become a regular routine of breakfast, parade, lectures, dinner (at midday), more lectures, tea (evening) and study at night, interrupted

on occasions with sport's afternoons and later on with daylight and night flying. All interspersed with visits to the canteen where we soon learned to enjoy waffles with maple syrup, coke and ice-cream. On Friday at the end of the first week we experienced a very heavy snowfall, got issued with our navigation watches and had our first 'Dry Swim' as navigation exercises in the classroom are called. Leave was granted over most week-ends.

On Saturday morning we had another 'dry swim' to prepare us for our first flight and then it was stand-down until Monday morning. Church parades were always held on Sunday mornings. Went shopping on Saturday afternoon with Bub Sargent and to a show "Journey for Margaret". Had a sleep-in on Sunday morning to 1100 Hrs, then shaved and showered and had a big dinner before settling down to write a few letters. Bub Sargent was doing the same and Keith Mills came by to try to get us to go out for tea.

On Monday 15<sup>th</sup> March we had the usual lecture periods, a pay parade at which the Red Cross managed to get a donation of \$5- from us; study at night to keep up with the course. Between lectures the next day we were paraded for issue of battle dress, during which there was more snow fighting. For some reason Bub Sargent and I missed out on the issue that morning-they had probably run out of RAAF-Blue battle dresses in our size. Went to the pictures that night to see "In Which We Serve". Bruce McGiffin came over from the Manning Depot while we were at lectures on Wednesday just to see how we were going. He was still awaiting a posting on to flying training. He was one of the "Bum Nut Club" on the troopship coming over. Got a letter from cousin Danny, in the Army in New Guinea, and answered it that day as well as writing home again. Lectures on Thursday included one on the camera which was very good. Made a visit to the barber before tea. On Friday we had more 'dry swim'

exercises and at 1500 Hrs had a Wing's parade for passing-out of earlier courses of Navigators and Bomb Aimers. Bub and I were issued with our battle dress, had a 'signals' lecture and I was put on my first duty on "Watch parade". Cannot remember for sure now, just what that involved, but I think it meant you were not granted leave over the week-end. Had our usual lectures on Saturday morning, during which there was some excitement when a Boston crashed on the 'drome. There was a false fire alarm in the barracks that night, probably something to do with Ben Smith smoking in bed. Was not feeling 100% and could feel the flu coming on. Still not feeling well of Sunday, just mooched around and went to bed early.

### **I Have a Spell in Hospital**

On Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> March I was quite sick and stayed in bed, and was admitted to the Station Hospital with a severe attack of 'flu. Bub Sargent and Ben Smith visited me after tea. The next day in hospital gave me something to write home about, particularly to Jean Hall who was a nurse in the Ipswich General Hospital. A nurse came and stripped me to the waist to wash me down, as she said, as far as possible. Then does likewise from the other end to wash me up as far as possible. Finally says "I now have to wash possible". Slept most of Wednesday. Keith Mills and Ron Etherton dropped in with some mail that had arrived and on Thursday. Scotty Gall dropped in with some writing gear so that I could write a letter or two. Got discharged on Friday morning-missed the C.O's parade. A couple of lectures in the afternoon and early to bed. Recuperated a bit on Saturday morning by sleeping in (no lectures) and then went into town after dinner with Bub Sargent. Met Ben Smith at the YMCA and went to a show at night. On Sunday morning did some study to catch up and after dinner went for a walk with Keith Mills and Ron Etherton, playing with some kids ice-skating in the frozen over gutters on the

way.

Woke on Monday 29<sup>th</sup> March, (sister Margaret's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday) to a great blanket of snow. 9 inches had fallen overnight, so the snow fights were alive again. This was when we experimented and discovered that an orange left on top of the ground froze solid in a very short time, but if buried in the snow took a long time to freeze. We were due to have our 'orientation' flight the next day after muster and pay parade. The weather was dirty however, and this was scrubbed. Instead, we were given lectures on the layout of the Avro Anson, (the "Aggie"), and the 2<sup>nd</sup> navigator's job of winding up the undercarriage after take-off, some 130 odd turns of the handle. For our training flights we were paired, the 1<sup>st</sup> Navigator did the log and plot charts and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Nav practiced map reading. I was paired with Scotty Gall, aged 30. After tea Keith Mills, Ron Etherton and I went to see "Random Harvest".

### **Airborne at Last**

**Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> March 1943** Whooppee!!! Airborne, Took off at 0907 Hrs in 'Aggie' No.6074 with bush pilot Mr Anderson on a flight plan: XD (Edmonton)-Wetaskiwin-Camrose-XD. Landed 1034 Hrs. What a familiarisation flight!! Got a bit airsick and no wonder. The pilot thought the 'Aggie' was a fighter plane and shot up the school house at Looma where his girl friend was a teacher. Circled it a few times and could see through the windows as we flashed by.

Next day was April Fools Day but avoided being caught out as we had a packed day of more lectures. Then on Friday we had a



few lectures and reported to the Records Office to have our fingerprints taken. Then in the afternoon we had our first photo flight taking hand held obliques. We were given a number of landmarks to photo and the pilot just went from one target to the next which was always in view because of the good visibility and the pilots local knowledge. No directions from the navigator were needed. In spite of the many banks & turns involved I did not get airsick, but others did suffer effects.

It was back in the air again on Saturday morning for another photo flight. This time it was taking vertical cross-country line overlaps from the school house at Namao to a bridge 2 miles S-W of there. Good fun-watch the drift. On these flights the duties of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> navigator were shared. Under strict instructions of course, not to let go of the camera when taking obliques out of the rear window. In the afternoon we relaxed—Ron Etherton, Keith Mills, Russ Martin, Lou Brimblecombe and I went into town, had two games of ten-pin bowling at the YMCA (Won the 2<sup>nd</sup> game), had tea at “Tony’s” and went to the pictures to see “One of Our Aircraft is Missing”. Back to barracks on the 2140 Hrs bus. As the weather conditions earlier in the week had set back the flying programme, some time was made up on Sunday. Church parade was held in the morning, and after dinner we were briefed for our first navigation exercise which was a flight of about 3 hours with 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Nav duties shared. Route was: XD–Fort Saskatchewan–Camrose–Lougheed–Mannville–Lake Yekau–XD. Took off at 1400 Hrs with Mr Ireland as pilot.

### **Training Continues**

Included in lectures on Monday 5<sup>th</sup> April was a special talk from a Squadron Leader on the conditions prevailing in Britain. A signals lecture was held after tea, but I did not attend. On Tuesday

morning, more lectures {classes on various subjects}, and after dinner we were transferred from "D" Barracks to a new barracks building across the road. Real '5 star' accommodation, with central heating and bathroom/toilet facilities incorporated as well as the sleeping quarters. We still preferred to have some windows open and a bit of fresh air coming in, and Ben Smith still smoked in bed. It was quite a change, as before we had to run from the bath/toilet block back to your hut in temperatures that were unfit for brass monkeys. It was supposed to be a sports afternoon, but that had to be scrubbed.

On Wednesday morning we had another photo flight, this time with a female passenger, probably a friend of the pilot, Mr Lawrie. Then on Thursday we had a review and discussions on our first photo flight, as all the films had been developed and printed. This was followed by practice on the drift recorder. Leave was granted after dinner, from 1400 Hrs, but most of the class stayed in camp to catch up on studies and letter writing. After lectures etc on Friday I was rostered on Duty Watch parade, strolling around that night in rain & mud. More lectures on Saturday morning and more studies in the afternoon as we prepared for "Maps and Charts" exam. Duty Watch Parade before tea. Sunday was still wet and miserable and we studied most of the day, with Duty Watch Parades at 1000 Hrs and 1800 Hrs. A football appeared from somewhere, so a few fellows managed a game in the mud.

Got mail from home on Monday 12<sup>th</sup> April, with the photos that were taken when I was home on pre-embarkation leave. As the weather was still unsuitable for flying on Tuesday and Wednesday we were occupied with more studies and lectures as well as a game or two of football in the mud. I had to go over to the Manning Depot to have a photo taken and more fingerprinting. Got back in the air on Thursday for a photo exercise with the Ft. Saskatchewan bridge as

our target. It was a very bumpy flight. On Friday it was back in the air again on Nav. Exercise No.2: XD- Bremner-Willow Creek-Beynon-Millet-Yekau Lake-XD. A very good trip. Got a telegram from home, and as it was the end of Duty Watch was granted 48 Hrs leave.

So on Saturday morning it was into town to do a bit of shopping, and while browsing through the book department of the Hudson Bay Company store I met a Mrs Gillespie who had some association with Australia, and she invited me out to tea that night, which I gratefully accepted. Went back to camp for dinner, and catch up on a bit of washing etc. Then went to Mrs Gillespie's place, met her daughter Marsh who showed me over the nearby University after tea. Walked back to camp-about 6 miles. Caught up with studies on Sunday morning, and after dinner a few of us went on a long walk out past the riding ranch. It was about this time that John Stopp was posted from the course to another A.O.S. to complete his nav. course. (He went on to No.166 Squadron, and was shot down and killed on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1944 on a raid on Gelsenkirchen-would have been very early in his tour)

On Monday 19<sup>th</sup> April we had our first exam in the morning on "Maps & Charts". Got some mail, including Don Grant's circular to the Bank staff in the services. Lectures that night on the stars-introduction to astro-navigation. More lectures on Tuesday morning and study in the afternoon to make up for the Easter Friday holiday at the end of the week. Collected my RCAF ID Card. Into the air again on Wednesday on Air Exercise No. 3 Took off at 0830 Hrs on route: XD-Bremner-Lloydminster-Marwayne-Bremner-XD. Almost went without my parachute harness, but it was a good trip. Went with Keith Mills to the pictures at night to see "Reunion in France". Lectures all day on Thursday, and preparation for Air Exercise No. 4 which we were to fly next Sunday (Anzac Day). Stand-down on Good

Friday so went out to tea with Mrs Gillespie & Marsh and met Lin Gilmore, a friend of Marsh's and a brother of a Mrs Cairns who lived in Ipswich. Lectures again on Saturday morning and went into town shopping in the afternoon, met Lin and Marsh. Had tea with them and came back to camp to study. On Sunday (Anzac Day) we flew Exercise No.4 which was the first time we did an air-plot-previous flights were mainly map-reading. Route was: XD-Ft.Saskatchewan-Hughenden-Czar(Recce)-Wainwright-Ellerslie-XD. In the afternoon the Australians and New Zealanders held a remembrance service at the Cenotaph.

On Easter Monday, 26<sup>th</sup> April we had lectures in the morning and a photo flight in the afternoon. Then on Tuesday we had lectures all day. In the mail I got a letter from Don Grant with news about the bank employees who were in the services. On Wednesday we had an exam on "Magnets & Compasses" and flew Air Exercise No.5 in the afternoon. To Trochu & Torrington with a 'recce' of Three Hills. A very rough flight and most of us got air-sick. On Thursday we started studies on Astro Navigation and had a good lecture on Radio D/F Navigation which was very interesting. On Friday morning we had an exam on "Meteorology", pay parade and an informative talk on the war in the Middle East. Late in the afternoon we took part in a Victory Loan parade through the streets of Edmonton with a pipe band leading the parade, and all the services involved.

Then on Saturday morning we flew Air Exercise No. 6 which was quite an experience. Mr Lightheart was the pilot and the route was: XD-Bremner-Scapa-Coronation-Bremner-XD. We climbed on track through cloud and heavy rain. Good experience in D.R.Navigation and instrument flying for the pilot. Most of the aircraft turned back but we soldiered on. At E.T.A Coronation came down

through broken cloud and there under us was a small town and railway station that the pilot thought was Coronation, but he wanted to make sure and made a low level run past the station to see if we could read the station name. Too close the first time, so around again and stood off a bit further, when we were able to confirm that it was Coronation. So back into the cloud and D.R. Navigation back to Bremner and Base. I think at the end he may have homed in on a radio beam, but anyway I was pleased with the navigation exercise, and earned some brownie points for it.

The rain kept up in the afternoon so I went into town with Noel Hooper where we met Russ Martin and Bub Sargeant, and went to a dance with 'Ivy' and a few of her friends that Russ and Bub had chatted up. On Sunday morning wrote letters home before dinner and in the afternoon went with Scotty Gall and Alex Taylor on a hike with the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Club. Here we met Alice Grosco, Mary, Isobel, Helen, Joe and a few others. Had a great time making a fire to toast marshmallows, and spin a few yarns about the 'hoop 'snakes, and 'wampoo' pigeons in Australia. Alice became quite a good friend and kept up correspondence with me until I returned to Australia. On later hikes with Aussies on later courses she met Jim Cossart, who was on a Bomb Aimers Course, and was a friend of mine at Ipswich Grammar School in 1938-39. Jim lost his life on 14<sup>th</sup> March 1945 flying with 106 Sqdn on a raid to the oil plant at Luitzkendorf.

On Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> May it was lectures as usual and a crack at a D.R. Test in preparation for a mid-term exam on Friday. More lectures on Tuesday morning and two sports periods in the afternoon, when I would go out to the university track for athletics with a Canadian middle-distance runner, who was a good coach and gave me some good advice on the tactics of 440 and 880 Yard running. Brought my times in the 440 down to about 51 secs and the 880 to

just on 2 mins. Called into town on the way back to camp and did some shopping. After tea did study on subject of 'Photography'. Had our photography exam the next morning, it was an easy paper. In the afternoon we did another D.R. Test - 'dry-swim' for a bombing raid on Duisberg. Little did I realise then that I would bomb this target twice in one day seventeen months later. After that, prepared for a flight scheduled for the next morning. But the weather conditions worsened on Thursday and flying was scrubbed for the day.

In terms of arrangements made with Alice last week-end I phoned her (No.83882) to make a date for Saturday night. On Friday morning we had a C/O's parade and our mid-term D.R. exam. Weather remained bad and flight scheduled for that night was scrubbed. Saturday morning was filled with lectures and after dinner it was flying again on Air Exercise No.6 that so many did not complete on the first attempt (to Scapa & Coronation). I had the job of 1<sup>st</sup> Nav. again, leaving Scotty to wind up the undercarriage and get a bit of map reading practice this time. It was a rough trip. Then, as arranged, I took Alice to a dance at the YMCA that night. Walked home in the rain.

A 'phone call diversion during the week. Early in the week during a lecture the 'phone rang and it turned out to be a girl wanting to speak Eric Sutton, or one of his pals. Somehow, I got the job, probably because I was nearest the phone and Eric saying that she would be referring to either Bob Smith or Keith Mills as he had mentioned those names to her when he met her last week-end. Three of us were regarded as the 3 musketeers, Keith & I were the two youngest on the course, and Eric was only a few months older. We had all enlisted on the same day as Aircrew Guards, been on separate postings for a few months, and then re-united at No. 2 Initial Training School at Bradfield Park to commence training as



aircrew and mustered together to train as Navigators. To come on this course we were required to be age 19 by 10<sup>th</sup> January 1943, which was my nineteenth birthday, so I just made it as the baby of the course.

So to the phone I go - "All for one and one for all". She explained that she had two very good friends and wanted to know if Eric and his two mates would like to join them one evening and go 'shagging'. With a bit of quick thinking and with survival uppermost in mind I asked her to hang for a moment while I checked. It called for some reference to our Canadian Instructor which caused a bit of hilarity among the class and a few remarks about how you can be so lucky etc until he explained that in Canada the term meant 'dancing'. With that bit of clarification and referral to Eric & Keith, I told her that we would be happy to meet them on Sunday afternoon. Had the usual church parade on Sunday morning and after dinner set off with Keith and Eric as leader to meet Mildred, Charlotte and Maureen. Spent some time with them at the YMCA and came back to camp in time for our first night flying exercise. It turned out the three girls became very good friends, I partnered Maureen O'Connor who was a primary school teacher. Took off at almost midnight on what was called exercise No. 21 for a 2 Hrs 45 mins flight, sharing 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Nav duties with Scotty Gall.

Monday 10<sup>th</sup> May saw us sleeping in until dinner time as we didn't land from our night exercise the night before until after 0300 Hrs. Had lectures after dinner. Did very well with mail from home over the next two days. On Tuesday morning we flew exercise No.7, as 2<sup>nd</sup> Nav this time, and in the afternoon got the results of our mid-term D.R. exam. I got a mark of 87%, with which I was pleased. Had lectures all day Wednesday and a late night studying. On Thursday morning flew Exercise No. 8 "navigation by track error", as

1<sup>st</sup> Nav. After dinner we were given leave. Went out with Maureen to the Capitol cinema and walked home with Keith who had taken Charlotte out, after we had seen the girls home. Made it a late night as it was an hour walk back to camp. Got more mail from home on Friday morning and had lectures all day. Detailed on Duty Watch Parade that night. Spent Saturday (15 May) in camp as I was on Duty Watch Parade, studied in the afternoon and prepared for night flying Exercise No.22. Took-off at 2305 Hrs, but had to return to Base with trouble in the starboard engine. Changed over to a 'photo' plane and took off again at 0045 Hrs (Sunday) for a 3 hours solo night flight. Didn't get to bed until 0500 Hrs, but up again at 1030 Hrs to prepare for Air Exercise No.9, as 2<sup>nd</sup> Nav, that afternoon. Took off at 1335 Hrs, with Mr Barnard as pilot for a fight of 2 hrs 55 mins.

Had lectures all day on Monday 17<sup>th</sup> May and wrote 7 letters to friends at home to catch up on some of my mail. Also had to prepare for Air Exercise No.10 scheduled for the next day. It was lectures in the morning on Tuesday, and Air Exercise No.10 in the afternoon. Took off at 1355 Hrs with Mr Luyckfassel as pilot for a flight of 3hrs 15 mins as 1<sup>st</sup> Nav. It was a bumpy trip but a good navigation exercise as the pilot flew the courses given and didn't tend to track crawl.

Wrote more letters and cards that night. Had lectures all day on Wednesday, and after tea prepared for Night Flying Exercise No.23. Took off at 2300 Hrs with Mr Rathbone as pilot on a trip that took 3Hrs 15 mins down to Little Fish Lake. It was time off in the morning so we slept in. Had 2 lectures after dinner and went swimming at West End before tea. It was then more evening lectures and preparation for Air Exercise No. 11 the next morning. This consisted mainly of preliminary work on the flight plan. On Friday morning took off at 0855 Hrs for a 3 Hrs trip as 2<sup>nd</sup> Nav, enjoying the

scenery and pretending to be map reading with the pilot Mr Neale keeping an eye on your performance, as the pilots had to file a report after each flight. Had two lectures after dinner, and as it was the end of my stint on 'Duty Watch' I went out with Maureen to the Capitol cinema and saw "Hitler's Children".

On Saturday and Sunday had 48 Hrs leave pass after duty watch. Went into town and banked \$40 in to an account I had established with the Royal Bank, to bring my balance up to \$80-. It was Red Cross day in town so I bought a fountain pen, then called on Maureen to say I could not go out with her that night as I had accepted an invitation out to tea with Mrs Gillespie. After tea went for a walk with Marsh while Mrs Gillespie went to the pictures with a friend. Slept in as usual on Sunday morning and did some preparatory flight plan work for a flight scheduled the next day. In the afternoon went hiking with the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Club and we were joined by several Aussie Sergeants from RAAF No.30 course who had their wings and were in transit through Edmonton.

On Monday morning 24<sup>th</sup> May 1943 we took off at 0830 Hrs On Air Exercise No.12 with Mr O'Hanlon as pilot. I was 1<sup>st</sup> Nav and was satisfied with good results. It was a 4 hour flight and we had to plot a square search and leading line search patterns. Study after dinner, and then after tea I did my laundry that had been soaking for a few days and wrote a few letters home. Lectures on Tuesday morning and sports in the afternoon when we played softball and got beaten by one run. After tea we were up till late doing Aircraft Recognition. Had lectures all day Wednesday and prepared for flight that night. Took off at 2355 Hrs with Mr Craig as pilot on a 3 Hr 15 min flight navigating by D/F. Not a very satisfactory result as the pilot was obviously track crawling. After the night flight slept in until dinner time and then had a couple of lectures in the afternoon.

Before tea went round to the University for athletics training (running & high jump). Got a telegram from home and at night it was practice with the sextant shooting a few stars. Called on to C/O's parade on Friday morning and a passing out parade for Bomb Aimers. Sent a telegram home in the afternoon and as I was feeling a few sore muscles after yesterday's athletic training I had a rub down and went to bed early. Had lectures on Saturday morning and moved to new classroom in new G.I.S. Buildings. Attended a Highlands Games in the afternoon where I represented the station in both High and Long Jumping. With not much success, but our team managed to come second overall. Met Marsh Gillespie at the games, who was there with two friends Pat and Betty. Flying was scheduled for that night, but had to be scrubbed owing to bad weather. Usual sleep-in on Sunday morning, and after dinner Keith Mills & I went out to Maureen's home. Walked home in the rain.

On Monday 31<sup>st</sup> May it rained all day, but did not interfere with a full programme of lectures, but did cause night flying to be scrubbed again. Wrote home, and at night went out with Keith and Charlotte; Maureen was unable to come. The girls were going to Vancouver the next day. Bad weather continued all day Tuesday, so it was lectures all day and study at night. Got a card from Maureen on Wednesday to say the girls had arrived in Vancouver, and also got a letter from my old boss, Mr Lindsay Hall. We were supposed to have an Army Co-op exercise but that was washed out. Aldis Lamp tests in the afternoon and study at night. Put my forage cap in for dry cleaning. On Thursday (3<sup>rd</sup> June) had P.T. first thing in the morning and the "Synthetics on Astrograph". Cannot remember what that entailed, probably an astro navigation dry swim. A morse test in the afternoon and two letters from home, one from Jean Hall and the Bank's 'Nautilus' magazine. Answered Jean's letter and also wrote one to Merle Green. It was usual C/O's parade on Friday

morning and our 13<sup>th</sup> week Navigation Test in the afternoon. Got a letter from Maureen, and after tea went in to town, went to a show, came back to camp and wrote a few letters. On Saturday morning we had more lectures, and after dinner wrote a couple of letters and did my washing. Went out to tea at Mrs Gillespie and went in to town with Marsh, bought progress numbers of Journal and Bulletin to send home. Usual sleep-in on Sunday and wrote more letters in the afternoon. Study after tea and preparation for a flight schedule for tommorrow.

On Monday 7<sup>th</sup> June we had lectures in the morning and flew Exercise No. 13 in the afternoon, as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Nav. Took off at 1425 Hrs and were airborne for 3Hrs 15 mins. More study after tea. Lectures most of the day on Tuesday with sports in the latter half of the afternoon. After tea went for athletics training at the university and came back to camp to prepare for tomorrow's scheduled flight. Took off at 0855 Hrs on Wednesday on Air Exercise No.19 with Mr Williams as pilot on a low flying exercise of 3 Hrs 20 mins. It was great-best trip yet. After dinner got a letter from Maureen which I answered and also wrote some letters home. Had lectures all day Thursday as it rained all day. More running around in the mud, and athletics training at the university was cancelled. Friday saw lectures again all day, and start of another duty watch which I hoped would be my last time. The weather cleared up in the late afternoon and we were able to fly night exercise that night. Took off at 25 mins after midnight (Sat morn) with Mr Real as pilot. Usual 3 Hr trip as 1<sup>st</sup> Nav, being a night exercise. It was an interesting one on which a few got lost. Didn't get into bed until 0430 Hrs so slept in until dinner time. Studied all afternoon as the study load was getting heavier, and it was early to bed as we had a flight scheduled for Sunday morning. Took off at 0855 Hrs with Mr Real as pilot, as 1<sup>st</sup> Nav on a flight of 2 Hrs 50 mins. Had dinner when we landed and

slept all afternoon. Wrote a long letter home after tea.

For the week starting Monday 14<sup>th</sup> June we had a heavy programme of lectures and study as the weather continued to be poor, scrubbing all flying. I was on Duty Watch until Friday. It was still drizzling rain at the end of the week and on Saturday morning we had more lectures. After dinner Keith Mills and I went to a show, and then after tea we went to another show with Charlotte and Maureen, who were now back from Vancouver. Walked home from Charlotte's home through large pools of water and mud. Was able to tell Maureen that I had received her card that morning that she had posted the day before in Calgary on the way home. Usual sleep-in on Sunday morning and study in the afternoon. Went to tea at Mrs Gillespie's with Ian Pender and Don Plumb. Ian was on another course, and I cannot remember how Don came to be invited. A night flying exercise was scheduled, but had to be scrubbed.

On Monday 21<sup>st</sup> June it was still raining, so we had another full day of lectures and study. Got 2 letters from home. After tea managed to go to the university track for athletics training as the weather cleared during the afternoon. This enabled us to get airborne on Tuesday morning on Air Exercise No.15. Took off at 0855 Hrs, as 2<sup>nd</sup> Nav, with Mr Stewart as pilot on a flight of 3 Hrs 05 mins and managed to get some practice with the bubble sextant by taking a few shots on the sun. Rain came on again in the afternoon, so went to a film on the station "Road to Tokio". It was still raining lightly on Wednesday, so it was lectures and study during the day, and after tea met Maureen in town and went to see "China". Lectures all day on Thursday and training at the university track after tea. Saw Maureen and Charlotte on the way home. Weather cleared on Friday and was good enough to fly, so at 1435 Hrs took off with Mr Rungel

as pilot on Air Exercise No.16 which was for only 2 hours.

On Saturday we got called for 2 lectures in the afternoon. Got letters from both of my sisters. Just after tea Maureen and Charlotte came riding bikes past the barracks so we had a bit of a yarn with them, but could not go out with them that evening as we had a flight scheduled for early the next morning. Immediately after breakfast on Sunday morning took off at 0910 Hrs with Mr Tibbets as pilot on Air Exercise No.17 as 1<sup>st</sup> Nav on a trip of 3 Hrs 25 mins to Cremona and a look at the Rockies. A very good flight. More athletics training at the university in the afternoon and then over to a sports ground where Keith Mills and Eric Sutton were playing cricket. Maureen, Charlotte and Mildred were there watching them. Took photos.

On Monday morning 28<sup>th</sup> June, we had 'magnetism & compass' exam and after dinner two periods of instruction/educational films. Two letters from Aussie in the mail. More training at the university after tea. On Tuesday morning another exam on Instruments and D/F. Went to the pictures after tea with Maureen, Keith and Charlotte to see "Happy go Lucky". Was supposed to do Aircraft Recognition that night but missed it. Lectures all day on Wednesday and at 2355 Hrs took off on Air Exercise No.26. This exercise had been scrubbed about 6 times owing to bad weather. It was a 3 hour flight, which meant we didn't get to bed until about 0400 Hrs on Thursday morning. So it was a sleep-in until 1045 Hrs.

Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> July was "Dominion Day" After dinner went to a sports meeting conducted by the Southside Business Ass'n, at the Southside Sports grounds which had a straight 220 yard track and a lap of about 880 yards. Ran in the 440 yards race and won it, for which I received the grand sum of \$80-00. Soon after competed in



the high jump, but could only manage 4<sup>th</sup>, which paid nothing. This was my first experience of a professional sports meeting that also included cycling. Athletes were not permitted to wear 'spikes'. The dirty tricks played by the cyclists in team events really opened my eyes. Maureen and Keith and Charlotte came to the event and we celebrated afterwards by going out to tea at the Royal George on my winnings. At the meet 3 parachute jumpers put on a very interesting display.

Friday saw us with lectures all day and flying Air Exercise No.27 at night. Took off at 2355 Hrs with Mr Lannon as pilot on a good flight of 3 Hrs 20 mins. At this time of the year in Edmonton it is nearly midnight before it gets dark, so night flying is fairly restricted. Usual sleep-in on Saturday morning after night flying. Saturday afternoon and Sunday saw the usual week-end chores, study and letter writing.

Monday 5<sup>th</sup> July saw the start of 2 weeks of intensive lectures, study, flying and exams to complete our course on time. In peace time the course would take over 12 months but in the urgency of the war situation had to be concentrated and focus on the essentials. Flew Air Exercise No.18 that morning. Took off at 0900 Hrs with Mr Real as pilot on a trip of 3 hours. Then on Tuesday afternoon we flew Air Exercise No.20. This was blindfold exercise that took us all over the map for almost 3 ½ hours. We took off at 0900 Hrs with Mr Filby as pilot. Air Exercise designated No.19 must have been cancelled. Bad weather prevented any flying from Wednesday to Friday. Got a long letter from my brother Alex on Wednesday and then one from Miss McPherson in Sydney on Saturday. Lectures all day on Saturday and study at night before flying Air Exercise No.28 which was a night navigation on the same

course of daylight exercise No.10. Took off at 2300 Hrs with Mr Barnard as pilot. Flew through storms and cloud out to Frog Lake. Slept in on Sunday morning-you were excused from Church Parade if you were flying the night before. After dinner studied meteorology for an hour or so and then went to watch Keith and Eric playing cricket and then we all met Maureen, Charlotte and Mildred at the corner of 109<sup>th</sup> and Jasper later in the afternoon.

On Monday 12<sup>th</sup> July we had our final D.R. (Navigation) test. Wrote home and did preparation for more flying tomorrow. A large bag of mail from Australia came in but I did not score a thing. Maureen phoned just after tea. On Tuesday(13<sup>th</sup> July) took off at 0835 Hrs with Mr Luyckfassel as pilot on Air Exercise No.21, which was a special, incorporating evasive action, designed to prepare us for active service conditions. More lectures in the afternoon and studied meteorology at night. Supposed to fly on Wednesday morning, but this was scrubbed-raining again. So we had our final meteorology exam. The rain kept up through Thursday and Friday so time was passed with sessions of lectures and study more lectures on Saturday morning, usual laundry chores and letter writing after dinner and as the weather had cleared prepared for flying that night after tea. This was night flight over the route of Exercise No.9 that we had flown in daylight two months ago. Took off at 2355 Hrs with Mr Kellough as pilot and as 2<sup>nd</sup> Nav. I had to practice astro shots with the bubble sextant. That meant a sleep-in on Sunday morning and as we had some catch-up to do in order to finish the course on time another night flight was scheduled that evening. Took off at 2325 Hrs with Mr McCall as pilot on the route of Exercise No.11 that had previously been flown in daytime.

It was the usual sleep-in after night flying on Monday morning 19<sup>th</sup> July. In the afternoon and on Tuesday & Wednesday

we had a few final written tests. On Wednesday night our final night flying test was scheduled. Took off at 2300 Hrs with Mr Cusater as pilot on the route of Exercise No.12 flown in daytime. This flight of 3 Hrs 05 mins was the final air exercise on which we were assessed. On Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> July after dinner we were advised that all had passed the course, and got instructions to attend to clearances for medical and dental and to hand in any equipment that had been issued to us. **'Wings' passing out parade would be held on Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1943.**

On Thursday night Keith, Eric and I took the girls out to The Barn and then went walked them home. We invited them to the 'Wings' parade, but they could not attend. Friday was a big day with the presentation of our 'wings' and the sewing of Sergeant's stripes on our sleeves. At the pay parade after 'wings' presentation I was given a slip of paper with the instructions "Here is your Commission, it is now up to you to arrange for the issue of Officer's Uniforms etc". Also commissioned off course were Ivan Biddle and "Inky' Keena who were posted to other Air Observer Schools as instructors, Ken Todd, Ted Hall, John Honeyman, Noel Hooper and Les Sabine. Ben Smith was on line-ball about passing and had to go to a review committee as at this stage he had admitted he had put his age back to enlist, and he was in fact aged 35 Yrs-not 30 years according to the records. Ben did eventually go on the fly in Bomber Command and lost his life on night of 24/25 Dec. 1944 on a raid on Cologne with 166 Squadron.

With kit bags packed and left at 'despatch' as instructed, I went to Maureen's for tea. Her father drove me to the station where we left Edmonton by Canadian National Railway at 2130 Hrs for

Toronto.

### **Reflections on leaving Edmonton**

Thoughts that would be shared by all now on their way to the European Theatre of WW11.

All shared a sense of satisfaction and relief that we had earned our 'wings' as Air Navigators after a very intensive course of 4 ½ months that involved a total of 75 Hrs 55 mins of daylight flying and 34 Hrs 45 mins of night flying for the average member, and instruction and exams in 12 subjects such as Navigation, Maps & Charts, Magnetism & Compasses, Instruments, D.F/Wireless Telegraphy, Meteorology, Aerial Photography, Signals, Reconnaissance, Armament and Aircraft Recognition. In all I managed an overall pass of 82.4%. A few found the going hard towards the end of the course, as it was not easy and acknowledged the support, encouragement and assistance given by the chief instructor F/O. Brown (RCAF). He did encourage a few to hang in and was rewarded with their dedication and success. All realised though that there was still a long way to go with further training after our arrival in the UK before we were fully trained to assume the roll of a navigator in a crew on Bomber Command.

The main memories most of shared:-

- The extreme cold and snow covered prairies when we first started flying, which made it difficult to judge height from the air.
- The mud and slush when the snow did melt, and the river thawed, and the great swarms of mosquitoes-large scotch greys.
- The fields turning to green when wheat was planted and

to

yellow as the dandelions came into bloom.

- The brown bears coming in close to town in search of food

in

the late winter and playing with their cubs who often got a disciplinary clout.

- Gophers popping in and out of their holes in the field

beside

our barracks.

- Young children ice skating on the frozen gutters in the streets'

- Our own first try at ice skating on a frozen flooded tennis court and being conned into playing ice hockey, which was good because it gave you a hockey stick for support.

- The pain that a few suffered from frost bitten ears- in spite

of

warnings.

- The Indian quarters that we passed through when walking

to

town.

- The hospitality of the people.
- On a few reported occasions being mistaken for "Austrians'.
- The beauty of snow laden trees early in the morning.
- For Queenslanders—the 4 distinct seasons.
- Saluting the flag in front of HQ. The furore caused when

an

item of female underwear was hoisted thereon one night

and

the Aussies had no objection to saluting that particular standard.

- The skill of the 'Bush Pilots' They were all civilians who had good permanent work because of the Empire Training Scheme, but they were very competent at their job. True Canadian Geese-born to flying.
- Waffles and Maple Syrup and Coke and Ice Cream in the Station canteen.
- Strictly taboo. But some made it\*\* Flying under the high level bridge.
- The sports facilities at the YMCA.
- Ben Smith's accidents from smoking in bed.

Personally, there was the joy of wonderful friends made. The gang of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Club and at the YMCA where I met Alice Grosco who kept up correspondence with me for two years after the war, until I told her I was going back to Scotland to marry Alma. Alice did have a special reason to keep in touch, as from a later Bomb Aimer course she met Jimmy Cossart on one of the Club's regular hikes. He came from Boonah and was a boarder with me at Ipswich Grammar School 1938-39 and she was quite surprised when Jim told her he knew me. Later I was to meet Jim at the Boomerang Club in London on a few occasions until in the last months of the war he lost his life in a raid over Germany.

Perhaps the most cherished memory was the wonderful friendship that Keith and Eric and I enjoyed with Charlotte, Mildred and Maureen. They really treated us more like brothers and I would say did not put any pressure on us for a lasting relationship. We were welcomed into their homes. They truly were three girls who enjoyed

the simple pleasures, and were good companions to each other. What you saw was what they were.

As we left Edmonton we were all aware that we were now on the way to the big adventure with its inevitable risks. Also we would soon be split up to go various ways. In fact when we got to Embarkation Depot at Halifax, after leave, a few of us would move into the Officers Mess, whilst the rest would be in the Sergeant's Mess. But for the period of leave, and until we got to Halifax, those who were commissioned would continue with Sergeant's stripes on our uniforms and stay as a group. Most important in our minds was to enjoy leave as we journeyed to Halifax across Canada with a break to visit New York. We had completed a course of flying training, all with over a 100Hrs up, and without an accident and with no loss of life.

### **These Were Fellow Course Participants**

Following is a summary of the participants on the course and a brief detail of the operational experience of most, with pertinent information on those who lost their lives in training and on operations over Europe as well as those who were shot down and were taken Prisoner of War, or, in one case evaded capture.

After the war I kept in regular touch with **Keith Mills**, and since the late 1980's with **Lou Brimblecombe**. We were the three youngest on the course. **Eric Sutton** did his tour with 622 Sqdn which was also based at Mildenhall where I served in XV/15 Squadron. And I did not get in contact with him again until December 2002, when he was traced living in Victoria. **Roy Olsen** moved to Tasmania after he retired as a school teacher and we had contact each Christmas. **Noel Hooper**, who came from the Nambour district died



a few years after the war. **Scotty Gall** returned to work with the Bank of NSW and on retirement moved to Cooroy in Queensland, where I resumed contact in the early 1990's. After his wife died he sold his property and moved to a retirement village in Brisbane, where he also died in 1999/2000. In one of those co-incidences in life, Scotty (or Vernon as he was known to his family) turned out to be a brother of a friend we have known in the church at Alexandra Headland for many years.

It is interesting to note the service history of the '**Todd' Brothers, Ernie and Ken**. They were both schoolteachers from the Newcastle area (both born in Canada). They enlisted together and went through initial training and operational training together and served on the same squadron flying in Wellingtons out of Foggia in Italy. They returned to their pre-service vocation. Ken, who was shot down and taken POW, died in 1986 at the age of 71 and Ernie died in 2002 at the age of 89.

**Don Plumb "Bluey"** did a tour in Halifaxes and died of acute leukaemia about 1987.

**Course No.71N2-EATS-at No2. A.O.S EDMONTON, Canada. All members of RAAF**

**Duration 10/3/1943 to 23/7/1943,**

**Instructors:- F/O.W.H.Brown & P/O. Pogue ??? (both R.C.A.F)**

<b><u>NAME</u></b>	<b><u>Number</u></b>	<b><u>Birth</u></b>	<b><u>Enlisted</u></b>	<b><u>Discharged</u></b>	<b><u>D.O.Death</u></b>	<b><u>Posting on</u></b>	<b><u>Rank</u></b>	<b><u>Awards SeeNotes</u></b>
						<b><u>Discharge</u></b>		<b>***</b>
<b>BIDDLE</b> Ivan R.	424905	13/10/1913 Goulburn	09/10/1942 Sydney	09/10/1945		8 O.T.U	F/Lt	Instructor in Canada
<b>BRIMBLECOMBE</b> C.L. (Louis)	425592	23/12/1923 Brisbane	25/04/1942 Brisbane	07/12/1945		9 A.H.U	F/O	(218/514 Sqdn)
<b>ETHERTON</b> Ronald H.	423088	02/11/1921 Sydney	20/06/1942 Sydney		13/08/1944	76 Sqdn	F/Sgt	***No.1
<b>GALL</b> V. Scott	424915	08/08/1912 Mosman NSW	09/10/1942 Sydney	16/04/1946		1315 Flight	F/O	(467Sqdn)
<b>HALL</b> Ernest T	406976	17/02/1914 Perth	26/05/1941 Perth	25/02/1946		9 A.H.U	F/Lt	Instructor in Canada
<b>HONEYMAN</b> John	429498	23/05/1923 Deepwater	08/10/1942 Brisbane	15/02/1946		1656 C.U	F/Lt	D.F.C.
<b>HOOPER</b> R. Noel	425851	16/12/1923 Nambour	21/05/1942 Brisbane	21/08/1945		1 P.H.U	F/Lt	*** No.2
<b>KEENA</b> Ilford N.	424870	12/10/1912 Ballengarra	09/08/1942 Sydney	22/06/1945		9 A.O.S	F/O	Instructor in Canada
<b>LEWIS</b> John H.	423142	27/01/1923 Broken Hill	20/06/1942 Sydney		08/11/1943	3 A.F.U.	Sgt.	***No.3
<b>MARTIN</b> H. Russell	418289	28/12/1922 Melbourne	15/05/1942 Melbourne	13/12/1945		21 O.T.U	F/O	D.F.C
<b>MILLS</b> Keith C.	425954	02/01/1924 Mackay	21/05/1942 Brisbane	27/10/1945		78 Sqdn P.O.W	W/O	***No.4
<b>MURTHA</b> Harold H.	429473	30/05/1922 Brisbane	08/10/1942 Brisbane	05/09/1945		12 O.T.U	F/O	(463 Sqdn)
<b>OLSEN</b> Roy P.	429479	10/07/1920 Bundaberg	08/10/1942 Brisbane	15/11/1945		640 Sqdn	W/O	***No.5
<b>PALFERY</b> Noel J.	424920	16/05/1914 Brisbane	09/10/1942 Sydney	18/07/1945		467 Sqdn	F/O	(467 Sqdn)
<b>PLUM</b> Donald A.	424934	17/12/1919 Inverell	09/10/1942 Sydney	17/12/1945		96 Sqdn	F/O	(466/462 Sqdns)

<u>NAME</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Birth</u>	<u>Enlisted</u>	<u>Discharged</u>	<u>D.O.Death</u>	<u>Posting on</u> <u>Discharge</u>	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Awards SeeNotes</u> ***
<b>SABINE</b> C.W. Leslie	426165	08/12/1917 Brisbane	23/05/1942 Brisbane	01/07/1946		466 Sqdn	F/Lt.	D.F.C.
<b>SARGENT</b> Allan J. (Bulb)	410098	19/10/1918 Williamstown	08/11/1941 Melbourne	22/01/1946		1 M.R.U 44 Sqdn-P.O.W.	W/O	***No.6
<b>SMITH</b> Benjamin H.	424891	24/03/1914 Merriwether	09/10/1942 Sydney		24/12/1944	166 Sqdn	F/Sgt	***No.7
<b>SMITH</b> Ian H.	423913	20/10/1922 Katoomba	18/07/1942 Sydney		18/06/1944	115 Sqdn	F/Sgt	***No.8
<b>SMITH</b> Robert W.	425992	10/01/1924 Brisbane	21/05/1942 Brisbane	12/12/1945		32 Base No.3 Group RAF Bomber Command	F/Lt	(XV/15 Sqdn)
<b>SUTTON</b> Eric C.	425910	04/08/1923 Gympie	21/05/1942 Brisbane	17/09/1945		84 O.T.U	F/O	(622 Sqdn)
<b>TAYLOR</b> Alexander	424804	04/08/1920 Arncliffe	09/10/1942 Sydney	02/01/9/1946	R.A.F.	F/O Dumbeswell		
<b>TODD</b> Ernest	424942	30/12/1913 Canada	09/10/1942 Sydney	10/08/1945		3 A.O.S	F/O	(142 Sqdn) Italy
<b>TODD</b> W. Kenneth	424878	16/07/1915 Canada	09/10/1942 Sydney	06/12/1945		142 Sqdn	F/Lt	***No.9

### General Comments

All participants in the above course were members of the RAAF, and many were recruited under the “Air Crew Guard” category in May 1942. They left Australia (Sydney) on the USS “Hermitage”, departing on Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> February 1943, arriving via Pago Pago and Honolulu at San Francisco on Tuesday 2nd March 1943, where they disembarked and then entrained at Oakland to go by rail, via Vancouver, to Edmonton in Canada where they disembarked on Saturday morning 6<sup>th</sup> March 1943 when the temperature was reading –23 (Fahrenheit).

Course No.71N2 started on 10<sup>th</sup> March at No.2 A.O.S at the Edmonton airfield with Avro Anson aircraft flown by civilian “Bush” Pilots. Passing out parade and presentation of wings with promotion to Sergeant was held on Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> July. Eight members were commissioned off course to rank of Pilot Officer. No casualties were recorded on training.

All but 3 were posted to “Y” (Embarkation) Depot in Halifax Nova Scotia (spending some time on leave in Montreal & New York on the way) where they embarked on the R.M.S “Queen Mary” on Friday 28<sup>th</sup> August 1943 and sailed to the Clyde in Scotland where they disembarked at Gourock on Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> August 1943 and entrained for overnight travel to the RAAF’s No.11 Personnel Despatch and Reception Depot at Brighton. From here most were posted to various advanced training units to be incorporated into a crew and fly in Lancasters & Halifaxes of Bomber Command.

Postings as listed in the above schedule are the postings as recorded at the time the airman was recalled to No.11 P.D.R.C at Brighton for repatriation to Australia, or upon date of death, or at time of loss on operation and taken POW. Sqdn reference under notes is one they did tour with (where known).

## Course 71N2- Details of Casualties, either loss of life or shot down and taken P.O.W, or Evaded Capture

- No.1.** Ronald Henry ETHERTON No.76 Squadron. In Halifax 111 LL578 MP-H Bar on night of 12/13 August 1944 took off from Holme-on-Spalding At 2129 Hrs to bomb the Opel Motor factory at Russelsheim. Crashed 2Km N.E. of Hamm (Germany) and all crew were killed. They rest in France in the Choley War Cemetery, which suggests their graves were investigated by an American Unit. Of the 297 aircraft (191 Lancasters, 96 Halifaxes 7 10 Mosquitoes) that took part in the raid 7 Halifax & 13 Lancasters were lost. 6.7% of the force. Local reports stated the factory was only slightly damaged.
- No.2.** Rupert Noel HOOPER No.463 Squadron. In Lancaster 111 LM597 JO-W on night of 24/25 June 1944 took off from Waddington at 2229 Hrs on their first 'op' to bomb flying bomb base at Prouville. Crew, with exception of the F/Eng, were all RAAF; believed shot down by night fighter. B/A, W/O/P and both gunners were captured and taken POW Pilot, F/Eng & Nav (Noel) evaded capture Pilot W/Cdr D.R.Donaldson RAAF was among the most senior officers to evade capture in 1944.
- No.3** John Hedgley LEWIS The Course's first casualty, in training, on 8<sup>th</sup> November 1943 at No.3 Advanced Flying Unit, Halfpenny Green. Buried in Chester (Blacon) Cemetery, Cheshire, England. Section A Grave No154
- No.4** Keith Cyril MILLS POW. No.78 Squadron. In Halifax 111 MZ692 EY-P on night of 22/23 June 1944 took off from Brighton at 2230 Hrs to bomb railway yards at Laon. First operation for most of the crew. Shot down by enemy fire and baled out. 5 were taken POW and 2 evaded capture. All the crew, with exception of the F/Eng, were RAAF. Keith was arrested in France and taken into custody by the Gestapo, being held with other members of his crew for about 3 months in Buchenwald Concentration Camp until 'rescued' by the Luftwaffe and transferred to Stalag Luft L3 Sagan and Balaria. POW No.8018. 4 Halifaxes were lost on this Laon raid.
- No.5** Roy Peter OLSEN POW. No.640 Sqdn. In Halifax 111 LK865 C8-Q on night of 27/28<sup>th</sup> May 1944 took off from Leconfield at 2356 Hrs to bomb Military Camp at Bourg-Leopold. Shot down by night fighter and crashed 0228 hrs near Antwerp. Pilot, F/Eng & M/U/G were killed. Roy was taken POW and held in L7 Stalag Luft, Bankau-Krueberg. POW No.95.
- No.6** Allan Joseph SARGENT POW. No.44 Sqdn. In Lancaster 1 LL938 KM-S on night of 21/22<sup>nd</sup> June 1944 took off from Dunholme Lodge at 2325 Hrs to bomb synthetis oil plant at Wesseling. Shot down by night fighter Pilot, B/A, W/O/P and R/G were killed and are buried in Nederweert War Cemetery. Bub was taken POW and held in L7 Stalag Luft, Bankau-Kreulberg. POW No.236. Of the 133 Lancasters & 6 Mosquitoes that took part on this raid, 37 Lancasters were lost—27.8% of the force. 10/10 cloud was encountered and planned 5 Group's Low-Level marking of the target was not possible so H2S was used with only moderate success. 44, 49 & 619 Sqns lost 6 aircraft each. This was the last occasion on which Bomber Command would suffer such a severe loss in operations to the Ruhr.

It is believed that above crew was the only Bomber Command crew lost in the war that comprised airmen from the 3 Commonwealth & Dominion air forces, plus a USAAF representative.

**No.7**    Benjamin Hartley SMITH

No.166 Sqdn. In Lancaster 1 NG297 AS-K2 on night of 24/25 December 1944 (Christmas Eve) took off from Kirmington at 1515 Hrs to bomb railway communications at KOLN-Nippes (COLOGNE). Crashed in the target area. All the crew were killed and buried locally, since when their bodies have been interred in the Rheinsberg War Cemetery.

97 Lancaster & 5 Mosquitoes took part—5 Lancasters were lost over the target area and 2 more on return to England owing to bad weather. Oboe marking was used with very accurate results. Local reports showed that railway tracks were severely damaged & an ammunition train blew up. Nearby airfield,(Butzweilerhof) also damaged.

**No.8**    Ian Harrison SMITH

No.115 Sqdn. In Lancaster 1 HK559 A4-H on night of 17/18<sup>th</sup> June 1944 took off from Witchford at 0102 Hrs to bomb oil installations at Montdidier. Dived into the ground and exploded with great force at Gannes (Oise), 5 Km N of St-Just-en-Chausse. All lie buried in the Gannes Communal Cemetery.

317 aircraft (196 Lancasters, 90 Halifaxes, 19 Mosquitoes & 12 Stirlings) took part in this and a similar targets at Aubnoye and St Martin-l'Hortier. Targets were covered by cloud. Master bomber called off raid at Montdidier after Only a few aircraft had bombed. Above was only aircraft lost on this operation.

**No.9**    William Kenneth TODD    POW

No.142 Sqdn. In Wellington Bomber took off from Foggia in Italy to bomb airfield on outskirts of Vienna. On 10<sup>th</sup> May1944. It was crews 10<sup>th</sup> "Op". Shot down by fighter in target area. In hospital in Vienna for short period before going to Frankfurt for interrogation and to Stalagluft 3 at Sagan. And later to Luckenwald from where they were repatriated to England..

**NOTE**

About 4/5 weeks after the course started John Henry STOPP, No.419738, born 3/7/1915 in Cairns Qld, Enlisted 10/10/1942 in Sydney was posted to another A.O.S to complete a Nav Course from which he was commissioned off course. On the night of 12/13 June 1944, flying with 166 Squadron on a raid on GELSENKIRKEN their Lancaster crashed in Holland and all on board were killed They were buried on 16<sup>th</sup> June 1944 in the ZELHEM General Cemetery It would appear that would have been very early in their tour of operations. John Stopp was transferred when his flying Training-partner was hospitalised. I think it was Doug Rogers No.424609 who was commissioned off a later course and served in No4 Group RAF Bomber Command in Yorkshire - he was attached to 41 Base before returning to Australia.

Three other trainee navigators who sailed to Canada in the same draft were assigned to Course No.71N1. They were Jim Bateman No.423042 (149 Sqdn- awarded D.F.C), Bill Bowden No.424728 (261 Sqdn) and Geoff Cohen No.424725 who was commissioned off course and remained in Canada as an instructor at No.3 A.O.S.

Course 71N2 - Empire Training Scheme  
No. 2 A.D.S. Edmonton - Alberta - Canada  
10 March 1943 to 23 July 1943



Back Row: Keith Mills, Bob Sargent, Lou Brimblecombe, Noel Hooper, Eric Sutton, Alex Taylor  
Middle Row: Ken Todd, Ernie Todd, Don Plumb, Noel Palfrey, Ron Etherton, Roy Olsen, Les Sabine,  
Bob Smith, John Honeyman, Harold (Roy) Murtha  
Front Row: Russ Martin, Ted Hall, Scotty Gall, Ian Biddle, W.H. Brown, ? , Ben Smith,  
John Lewis, I.N. Keena, Ian Smith

We've Got Our Wings - Rookie Sergeants



The "Three Musketeers"  
Eric Sutton, Bob Smith, Keith Mills  
23<sup>rd</sup>. July 1943





As an L.A.C. in Edmonton  
In Front of Wilsons Stationery Shop in Jasper Avenue  
24 April 1943



Air Photography Exercises "Spring"  
Bridge Over North Saskatchewan River about 1 ½ miles S.W. of Fort Saskatchewan  
Looking S.W. in Direction of Edmonton Which is Visible in Distant Background

Notification of Selection for Appointment to Commissioned Rank

Effective 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 1943

NO. 2 AIR OBSERVER SCHOOL, R.C.A.F.,  
EDMONTON, ALBERTA.

23 JUL/43

Date.

AUS425992 SGT SMITH, R.W.

Notification has been received at this school, Chief of the Air Staff  
advice P5508 d/ 23 JUL/43, that the marginally noted airman,  
a graduate of Course No. 71 N, No. 2 Air Observer School, Edmonton, Alta.,  
has been selected for appointment to commissioned rank, effective 23 JUL/43.

*R. M. Grant*  
Chief Supervisory Officer,  
No. 2 A.O.S., Edmonton, Alta.





1<sup>st</sup> July 1943  
Dominion Day Sports - Winning the 440 yds



Eric Sutton, Keith Mills, Bob Smith  
- at University Sports Ground



Keith said the Wrong Thing!

## Have Wings \*\*\* Will Travel

From Edmonton, Canada to Brighton, England

We left Edmonton, with "N" Navigator wings and Sergeant's stripes sewn on to our tunics, by train, at 2130 Hrs on Friday 23 July 1943. After the busy day of Wings Passing-out Parade and getting clearances we soon settled down to a good night's sleep. Woke up in the early hours of Saturday at Saskatoon and travelled all day across the prairies through what seemed like endless fields of wheat and grazing country. It was almost express through Watrous, Rivers, Portage, La Prairie and arrived at Winnipeg at 1845 Hrs. Had a stop-over there and left again at 2000 Hrs. Into the bunk at 2230 Hrs for another good sleep. The scenery was different on Sunday as we moved into Ontario with mostly coniferous trees and a few Indian settlements. Arrived in Toronto at 0830 Hrs on Monday morning where those of us going to New York detrained and wandered around to have a look through a few shops before catching a train leaving at 1330 Hrs for Niagara. Had a few hours there to look over the Niagara Falls and then catch a train that left an hour late at 2230 Hrs down the Lee-High valley for New York. This was another train trip in the U.S. that went too fast to even count the telephone poles as they flashed by, and with the best of service from the Afro-American waiters on board.

### **New York and Sightseeing**

Arrived in New York at 0900 Hrs on Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> July and most of us including Keith Mills, Noel Hooper, Roy Olsen, Lou Brimblecombe, Russ Martin, Ian Smith, and Eric Sutton and myself made our way to the Anzac Club (somebody had the directions) where accommodation was arranged at the Wentworth Hotel-on the ground floor. Settled in to our rooms and had something to eat somewhere

before we went to Madison Square Gardens where a circus was performing. After that we went to the Stage Door Canteen for tea, where we received a hospitable welcome and were given complimentary tickets for a few tours and shows the next day. Met the actress Connie Hayes there. On Wednesday morning we went on a sight-seeing tour during which we called into a few shops and I purchased a 2 ¼ X 2 ¼ Voigtlander camera which gave me good service for many years. After that we went to the Empire State Building and rode the elevator to the top. What a ride that was and what a view from the observation deck at the top. Keith, Roy, Lou, Noel, Russ and I then went for a stroll around Central Park where I took the first photos with the Voigtlander and on to the Stage Door Canteen for tea and more free tickets. The show that evening featured Xavier Cougat and his orchestra, the Andrew Sisters and other acts. We then went to a broadcast at the CBS studios before going back to the hotel.

Stayed in the hotel until midday on Thursday and then went to the Rialto on free tickets and on to the Rockefeller Centre to view an exhibition. Had tea and came back to the hotel to write a few letters. We were on the ground floor and it was hard to get a good sleep, the street outside was as busy at 0300 Hrs as it was at 1500 Hrs.

### **We Return to Canada**

Noel Hooper and I decided that we had better do something about our Officers gear in Montreal and to leave New York a couple of days before the others. So on Friday morning we went to the station to enquire about trains. Met two girls going to the Statue of Liberty so went along for the ferry ride, back to the Anzac Club and a show at the Roxy. Caught a train by the skin of our teeth at 1850 Hrs. Had to

change trains at Depew at 0500 Hrs on Saturday morning to go on to Toronto where we arrived at 0915 Hrs and left 30 minutes later for Montreal where we arrived at 1910 Hrs, running about 30 mins late as the train had hit a woman walking on the track about an hour out of the city. When we arrived we went to the YMCA where they arranged accommodation for us at 1491 Bishop Street.

On Sunday morning, 1<sup>st</sup> August, we went for a circular tour of the city by tram, jumping off at places of interest. Noel was bit non-plussed by the priests stopping on each step of a long climb up the hill to a large cathedral at the top. They appeared to pause briefly on each step in prayer. So, he taps one on the shoulder and recommended they install an escalator-a suggestion that was ignored. Asking directions on the tram was almost useless as the conductors gave the impression that they only conversed in French. We had tea at the YMCA and then went for a walk through the heart of the town. We must have given the impression of two lost souls as two girls approached us and started a conversation. Their names were Dorothy and Kay. They were students at the McGill University in Montreal and invited us to meet them the next afternoon and they would take us up Mont Royal to view the town by night.

We did our shopping on Monday morning where RAAF uniforms etc were available. Got issued with P/O's braid, badges and cap, but decided to leave issue of quality uniforms and overcoat until we arrived in England. Met Dorothy and Kay as arranged in the afternoon and went up the mountain. As we had to meet up with the rest of our course on a train leaving Montreal at 1930 Hrs the next day the girls agreed to have dinner with us and then meet us again the next day at 1730 Hrs to show us over the University where they resided in one of the colleges on the campus. This we did on Tuesday after more sight seeing around the town and checking out of our accommodation. After our visit to the University it was a quick trip to the station with the

girls to see us off and to catch up with the rest and board the train departing at 1930 Hrs. On the way to No.3 'Y' Depot at Halifax. That was the Canadian designation for an embarkation depot.

Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> August saw us travelling all day along the St.Lawrence River with its lumber mills, log jams and fishing villages and arrive in Halifax close to midnight raining cats and dogs. We were settled into barracks. Those who were commissioned off course were directed to the Officers Mess and Quarters and all others to the Sergeants Mess.

## **Halifax**

Our late arrival did not prevent us being paraded at 0830 Hrs on Thursday and then attend to usual clearances etc. It seemed that there were still clearances whether you were arriving or departing. After dinner we were put through decompression chamber tests to assess our reactions to lack of oxygen. It was quite an experience as the chamber was decompressed to a height equivalent of about 18,000 feet. We were equipped with oxygen masks. At this height we were instructed to take off our oxygen masks under the supervision of trained personnel and to see how many times we could write the alphabet on the paper that had been issued. Supervisors kept an eye on each individual. I can remember being very pleased with myself as I visualised the alphabet written about six times on my piece of paper before I was told to put my oxygen mask back on again. Then I couldn't believe my eyes-there was the alphabet written once and then down to about 'm' or 'n' before the pencil trailed away into a real scribble. Your mind had been telling you that all was well, so the danger of losing oxygen at heights over 10,000 feet was impressed on us. Most of us were non-smokers and had very similar results, but the

smokers capacity to cope was really restricted and a couple had to be put back on oxygen very quickly.

On Friday we had a C.O.'s parade at 0800 Hrs and then it was back into the decompression chamber again for 2 hours, with oxygen masks kept on and listen to the supervisor giving more information on what we could expect flying for more than two hours at heights of over 20,000 feet. During this exercise the chamber was decompressed to a height equivalent of over 25,000 feet. After dinner it was P.T. exercise and games. Wrote a letter home and attended to a pile of washing that had accumulated.

Games of tennis and softball filled in most of Saturday morning. After dinner went into town with Ken and Ernie Todd (Ken had been commissioned off course but his brother Ernie was not) to the Anzac Club to give it the once over, and see what services and freebies were available there. Back to camp for a wash and change into clean clothes and after tea went back to a dance at the Anzac Club for a couple of hours. Slept in late on Sunday and spent all afternoon writing letters.

On Monday, 9<sup>th</sup> August, we were called on parade at 0800 Hrs for P.T. exercises and games. After dinner we underwent night vision tests, which I had trouble in passing and then back to more letter writing to catch up with my correspondence. Got a letter in the mail that day from Maureen. What seemed to be the established routine of parade, P.T. and games was the dose on Tuesday morning. For games, a rugby league match was organised for the Aussies and Kiwis between the Officers and the N.C.O.'s. It was a match that Keith Mills has not forgotten. I was playing on the wing for the Officers and going flat out for a certain try. I heard Keith behind me call out, "here Bob" when he had no chance of catching me. Not thinking I passed the ball back to Keith, who promptly propped, turned and set off back

in the other direction. Unfortunately for him however, I was being supported by Kiwi P/O. Simon Snowden, of Maori descent and well built, and who was in the right position to effect a heavy tackle. Simon and I became good friends after that. Keith, I am sure learnt a lesson and did not appreciate the obstacle course we were put through after dinner.

On Wednesday morning, to keep us fit, we were employed on trench digging, and after dinner some of us were put through another night vision test. With a bit of assistance from a mate I did better than the test on Monday. Night vision was for gunners and not for navigators. Did my ironing after tea as we did not have the luxury of a batman yet.

Did well with mail on Thursday - 6 letters from home. After dinner went on a harbour cruise. I was on duty as Reception Officer that night and didn't get to bed until 0430 Hrs on Friday. Received a telegram from home on Friday morning and another letter from Maureen. We had pay parade after which I went into town to buy a suit case, and did some ironing at night. On Saturday morning we had a lecture on 'Rehabilitation' and I spent the afternoon writing letters to reply to those I had received during the week. Sunday was a very quiet day and a few of us went to a concert in the evening at the Anzac Club.

Monday 16<sup>th</sup> August was another good day for mail with 7 letters in the morning and 1 in the afternoon. So my correspondence was not up-to-date for too long. Pictures in the Officers Mess at night, "Desert Victory" and "The More the Merrier". Usual parade and P.T. on Tuesday morning and into town after dinner for shopping and on to the Anzac Club for tea and a dance at night. More P.T. on Wednesday morning as we were waiting for a draft to embark. Went to see "Stage Door Canteen" at night with Simon Snowden. Since our football match we

had spent a few times together looking around the sights of Halifax. Although he was of Maori blood, because of his surname he had become known as "Snowy". Thursday afternoon was set aside for more sports and in the late afternoon we marched through town with a brass band at the head of the procession. It was into town again on Friday to buy a dressing gown and then to pictures at night to see "Jungle Book" Football practice occupied some time on Saturday morning. The bush telegraph was passing on a rumour that the "Queen Mary" was on the way from New York and would be calling within a few days, so I packed one of my kit bags in the afternoon. Slept in late on Sunday morning and after dinner went for a walk with Les Sabine around Mt Pleasant Park, and to the pictures in the Officers Mess after tea.

After mandatory parade at 0800 Hrs on Monday 23rd August we had lectures and a test on Aircraft Recognition. Managed to pass the test, but only just. After dinner went into town with 'Snow', met one of his mates and went to the Anzac Club for tea and a show afterwards. It was P.T. on Tuesday morning and we were given notice to be on parade again after dinner. That was a fair indication that a draft had been issued for embarkation. The draft was read out and as far as I can remember all the navigators from Course 72N2, except for a couple who did not come on to Halifax, were on it. We would be embarking within 48 hours. Broke off parade to have medical examinations, and then it was into town with 'Snow' again, who was also on the draft, for tea and the pictures to see "Song of the Islands". On Wednesday morning we had to take our 'Not wanted on Voyage' baggage on parade and complete clearances. A few of us went to the Anzac Club that evening just to say good-bye to the place.

**On Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> August 1943,** we had pay parade in the morning, dinner and then our final parade with our 'Wanted on Voyage'



baggage. We were then transported to the harbour and **embarked on the "Queen Mary"**. I was billeted in Cabin A24 with 14 others.

### **We Sail to the UK**

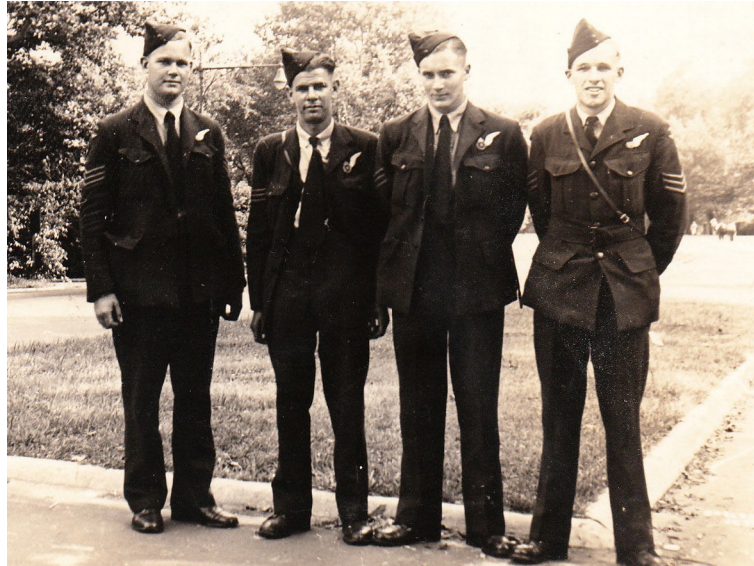
Sailed early on Friday morning into good seas. It was back to two meals again while 'in transit'. The ship had taken on a large contingent of American Servicemen in New York and it was very crowded. With such a large number on board, all were assigned to particular areas with coloured lines to follow to different venues to which they were allowed, such as sleeping quarters, bathroom facilities and Recreation and Entertainment areas. We had a limited deck space allotted to us and yellow lines to follow to the dining room and other colours to the toilets etc. On the lower decks the 'other ranks', mainly American troops, were assigned to sleeping areas on a shift basis.

The "Queen Mary" proceeded at full speed of over 30 knots on a zig-zag course and was unescorted. If you were walking down a passage-way when 'she' changed course by about 30 degrees you were pinned against the wall until 'she' got on a steady course again for another 15/20 minutes or thereabouts. You certainly had the feeling that a submarine would have very little chance of a torpedo attack. Time was passed playing cards, listening to music, reading the daily newspaper that was printed on board, writing letters and attending entertainment provided on board, which mainly favoured Officers. The seas stayed good all day on Saturday and at night most of us in Cabin A24 followed the relative coloured line to the large theatre on board to see a movie. Church Parade was held on Sunday, and another show in the theatre at night.

We continued to zig-zag through good seas at full speed all day Monday and enjoyed a concert in the lounge at night. On Tuesday we came around the north of Ireland and were greeted by friendly aircraft overhead and land in sight by mid-morning. This first sight of 'the Old Country' will remain in the memories of most on board for the rest of their life. There was a band of The Royal Marines on board and as we sailed up the Clyde past Arran with the Scottish coast of Ayrshire on our starboard the band played "Land of Hope and Glory". As indeed it was at that time in history. There were not too many dry eyes on the decks, even among the American troops. We weighed anchor off Greenock and at 1900 Hrs were disembarked onto barges to be entrained at Greenock to travel to Brighton by rail.

### **Brighton, England**

Travelled overnight and got our first encounter with a country at war with the blackout. Early in the morning the train steamed into the large railway yards at Crewe, then on to Rugby and the outskirts of London where we witnessed bomb damage for the first time. Arrived in Brighton at midday and were transported to No. 11 Personnel Despatch & Receipt Centre. Have never been able to work out how the despatch came before the receipt. We were assigned to billets. The N.C.O.'s to either the 'Metropole' or 'Grande' on the esplanade near the famous West Pavilion and the Officers to the Lions Head a bit further along to the east. Those establishments had been commandeered by the War Department and allotted to the RAAF's No. 11 P.D.R.C, which had been transferred to Brighton from Bournemouth. So, on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 1943 we were officially disembarked in the United Kingdom. We spent the next two days attending to the requirements of reception, records, leave passes etc, and writing letters home as we awaited delivery of our 'Not wanted on Voyage' baggage.



In Central Park, New York  
Roy Olsen, Keith Mills, Lou Brimblecombe, Bob Smith



Along the St Lawrence River - Part of the Aussie Contingent  
Ross Martin and Ian Smith at the 'Door' in Tropical Uniform



In the Gardens - Halifax

P/O Bob Smith

## Advanced Training-United Kingdom

### Brighton, Sidmouth (*Devon*), West Freugh (*Scotland*)

Settling into No. 11 P.D.R.C. at Brighton, by midday on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> September 1943 I had completed most of the requirements for reception and after lunch (now back to the system of calling the midday meal lunch and the evening meal dinner) I was rostered on my first duty as O.I.C. of one of the light ack-ack batteries on the esplanade, from 1400 Hrs to 1800 Hrs. Almost got court-marshalled when I gave permission to the two N.C.O.'s on the guns to fire a couple of rounds to test them. An English Army Major was soon on the scene to check on 'the emergency'. After a bit of discussion he accepted my explanation and didn't take the matter any further. After dinner I met 'Snow' who had also come over with the R.N.Z.A.F. contingent on the Queen Mary and who were also billeted with us in Brighton. We went to a dance at 'The Palais' that night. Had a very interesting conversation with a girl aged in her early twenties who came from Israel and was working her way through to a degree at an English University, as well as a couple of other girls who were more interested in 'Snow'. They seemed to think he was a real heart throb. He was a good looking and good natured bloke.

This duty on the gun positions got me out of an awkward position on Sunday. We had Church Parade in the morning, usual roll-up, with quite a few Roman Catholics joining the Presbyterians. After lunch, by chance or design, Snow had met one of the girls we were talking to at the dance on Saturday night, and she suggested that he bring his friend along (that was me) as she had a friend to come with her and we could go to the pictures at night. Being a good friend I went along with him to the cinema on this blind date. Her friend turned out to be about 40 and did not appeal. There was no way I was going

to be involved so I called Snow aside and explained the position. He saw my point of view and then backed me up with the explanation that I could not stay as I was rostered to go on Gun Duty in less than two hours. So I made a diplomatic departure and beat it post haste, feeling rather satisfied. Saw Snow the next morning and he told me I had made a wise decision.

On Monday morning I had more matters to attend to at reception. Mostly this was to deal with the issue of Officers uniforms etc. Got measured for my great-coat which was to be made by a tailor on Saville Row and issued with headgear-Officers for the use of.

Up to this point I had kept a small pocket diary since leaving Australia but discontinued the practice forthwith when it was brought to our attention in lectures and sessions held in connection with our reception at Brighton that diaries were not to be kept. This would be particularly enforced once we got on to operational squadrons. As a result from hereon I have to rely on memory and reflections with mates as we recalled our experiences in later years. For the next few weeks it was a daily routine of morning parade to hear who had been drafted to advanced flying schools etc, rostered on to duties such as the gun positions, or orders to attend lectures on the Brighton Pavilion. The beaches were heavily mined and this kept us on our guard when we were on gun duties, particularly when a stray dog wandered on to the beach. The Pavilion was also booby-trapped and was accessible only by walking a plank from the Esplanade.

When not on duties and on stand down we made regular trips to London on the train to get acquainted with the Boomerang Club in Australia House, and enjoy some food that was not available elsewhere. It also gave us an opportunity to explore that area of central London that was within walking distance and included many of

the well known and historic buildings and landmarks. Here also, I was introduced to the Overseas Club whose members hosted Commonwealth servicemen on leave. I also had to go to London to be fitted and issued with my Officers Uniforms and Greatcoat. We were also introduced to sirens signalling an air-raid alert and 'all-clear', and the lives of Londoners who slept in the underground stations platforms. At Brighton the only enemy action I saw was one day when a German twin-engined bomber came in low over the channel, climbed to about 1000 feet over the town and as it circled around the outskirts dropped a stick of bombs and headed out to sea again. It was all over in less than two minutes and the gun batteries on the esplanade did not get a chance to fire at it.

### **I Go to Scotland On Leave**

On 11<sup>th</sup> September 1943 I was given 7 days leave (authority POR 174/43) and headed off to Aberdeen to stay with Jim and Nan Joss to whom I had been referred by the Overseas League at the Boomerang Club. I wished to go to Aberdeen to have the chance to visit Kintore where my father and uncles spent leave during WW1. It was a wonderful introduction to Scotland, and the fore-runner of a few more happy times there when on leave which eventually led to meeting a lass who stole my heart, but more about that later. That's in the future still. Got back from leave to learn that some of the course had been posted to Advanced Flying Units. Keith Mills and Eric Sutton and a few others had been posted to No. 4 Observer A.F.U. West Freugh, Scotland and John Lewis and Lou Brimblecombe had been posted to No. 3 A.F.U. at Halfpenny Green. A few weeks later John was to be our first loss of life when he was killed in an accident flying over Wales on a training exercise. A few days after I got back Noel Hooper, John Honeyman and myself were instructed to attend Course No.14 Aircrew Officers Training School at Sidmouth in Devon.



With necessary travel warrants and instructions we arrived in Sidmouth on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> September. The three of us were impressed with the beauty of the English country side as we travelled through Hampshire and Dorset to Devon. It was hard to realise that the country was at war, until you passed an airfield or a large military establishment. We were met at the station and transported to the Training School that was situated in a stately mansion that was probably an up-market holiday resort in peace time.

### **More Training in Devon**

The course was an intense period of lectures on Air Force Rules and Regulations, Physical Exercises, Field exercises with live ammunition, escape procedures and parade ground drills under an iron-fisted disciplinarian R.S.M. from one of the Guards Regiments, whom we referred to as the 'screaming skull', but not to his face. None of us was that brave. We were put over an obstacle course on the second day there and only a few of us managed to complete it in the approved time. I was still reasonably fit from athletics training and managed to go over all the obstacles except one, but within the time allowed. After 23 days we were put over the same course again and everyone passed, all the fittest they had ever been.

Field exercises included live ammunition with shots fired at medium range, hand grenades, firework crackers etc and it was our observation to identify the type and direction from which the detonation was heard and make quick decisions on evasion tactics. We were also given exercises in techniques of camouflage and the use of the terrain to move and avoid detection. In the event of being shot down over enemy territory it was your first duty to avoid capture. Parades and Parade-ground drills were real masterpieces with the



R.S.M. in charge. The short straw must have had my name on it when it came to parade-ground drills. When we were given duties for colour parades and reviews. I landed the duties of S/M of Parade, Adjutant of Parade, C/O of Parade and Reviewing Officer of Parade. It is a mystery how I was not promoted immediately to rank of Air Commodore or above. Noel and John felt sorry for me-like b.hell they did!

On our first day we were fitted out and issued with khaki battle dress, army boots etc, and this was our standard dress for the course, except for evening meals when the traditions of dining in the Officers Mess were observed. A few got postings from the course either to A.F.U. or back to their unit. I remember one Aussie pilot who was sent to the course as a disciplinary measure after he pranged a 'Wimpy' on take-off at an O.T.U, apparently without injury to any of the crew. After about ten days he was posted back to his unit to take up further training with the crew. Nine Aussies started the course but there were only five of us there at the end. Leave was granted most nights and at week-ends, so we were able to spend some time in town and go to the pictures or a dance. Met a girl, Irene Collins, at a dance one night who asked me to escort her home-what a walk; I think it must have been to the next village. She worked in a shoe shop in town, and I did see her a couple of times after that when I went down town.

Most vivid memories of the course relate to small arms firing practice, throwing live hand grenades, and the cross country exercises when we somehow managed to make tracks through an apple orchard, stuff a few into our jackets and get back to discover that we had a sort of crab apple used for making cider. Also tried our hand at toasting chestnuts, but not much satisfaction there either. Drilling the squad when under the instruction of the 'screaming skull' provided a bit of entertainment, particularly when he decided to take over and show us how to do it. He would give the order 'Quick March' at the top of his

voice and let the squad get down the road about 70/100 yards before giving the order 'About Turn'. By the 50/60 yard mark the squad had agreed that from a certain person forward they would disregard the order, the ones at the crucial point would hesitate, and behind them they would do the about turn. That really curled the 'mo' and sent a string of invective over the countryside, when the ones in front said they did not hear him. He didn't fall for it-had been through that mill many times before. We got the feeling that he would liked to blame the Aussies and give them a bit of extra drill, but as they were of higher rank he had to play it cool.

At week-ends we were given leave, although the whole course was de-facto stand-in for the local Home Guard Unit, we were given details of the mined areas on the beaches, most of which were at the base of high cliffs and difficult to reach. Generally it was the area immediately below these cliffs that were not mined. On our first Sunday Noel and John and I headed off west close to the coastline along the tops of the cliffs, almost to Exmouth from where we could see Torquay in the distance. As we had been walking for a bit over 2 hours, we decided to veer north to a village that had golf links nearby where we found a café and had lunch. We crossed a railway line, into a village called Otterton and followed country roads and lanes back to Sidmouth. The next Sunday we headed north towards Honinton and got as far as Aflington. On this walk, following roads and lanes off the main road we stopped to talk to some villagers to enquire if a village about 2 miles further north had a café that was opened on Sundays. They did not know, had lived there all their lives and had never been to that other village.

We would have walked about 20 miles on each of those Sunday hikes, and that kept us in good physical condition. Knowledge gained on the Sunday hikes proved very valuable later on and was put

to good use. On the Tuesday of the last week we had our final test on the obstacle course. No problems for any of us, even up and over the poles that were fixed horizontally at varying heights between the trunks of two pine trees to a height of about 30 feet, the only obstacle that stumped me on our run over the course on our first day. I did not go over the top then, but under it. The next day we were given our final test of escape techniques. We were despatched at 0830 Hrs to go to a spot near the village of Axmouth which lay just south of the road to Lyme Regis and north of the seaside town of Seaton. It was up to us whether we went singly, or in small groups like a crew from an aircraft that had been shot down. But we had to get to the destination without being observed by the instructors who would be in positions at a couple of points along the way. The sergeant in charge of the exercise, when informed that Noel and John and I would stick together and go as a team for the exercise said that was a good idea and even recommended to the others to learn from these Aussies who often did well in this exercise. We did well, but it involved a bit of cunning.

Our plan was to let the field get away and ahead of us while we went to a café for morning tea to formulate our tactics. We had to be at the 'target' by 1600 Hrs. That gave us a bit over 7 hours to do about 9 or 10 miles measured in a straight line. We had prepared a bit beforehand, and by fair means or foul John had obtained a woman's hat and shawl. After morning tea we set off walking to the village of Sidford less than 2 miles north of Sidmouth where we knew we could get a taxi and were sure that no scouts would be stationed along that route. I have a suspicion that John had had a discussion with a taxi driver in this village on one of our Sunday walks because we found him very co-operative and willing to help, although he was going to use up a bit of his petrol ration. Sometimes crosses my mind if he got a voucher from John to say his taxi had been commandeered for defence purposes. For him it was going to be a round trip of about 20

miles. I cannot remember what the fare was, but probably in the 5/10 Pounds range, and that was probably the best fare he had made on a Wednesday in war time. In the taxi we set off on the main road towards Lyme Regis and after about 5 miles turned right along a road that went past a quarry and then north-east to Colyford our destination for the taxi. On this last stretch we had a fair idea that scouts would be stationed, so John donned the hat with the shawl over his shoulders and sat up and surveyed the scene while Noel and I crouched down so as we could not be observed. With a bit of luck John spotted our friendly Sergeant sitting under a tree about 15 yards inside a field with a ditch between him and the road. No other scouts were seen. We left the taxi at Colyfield and walked the last mile or so to Axmouth and the designated meeting place. No one was expecting escapees to come in from a northerly direction so we arrived without being spotted to the amazement of the team that had congregated there. We timed things so that we did not arrive until just after 1530 Hrs. A few had already arrived carrying flags to indicate they had been spotted by one or more look-out scouts. Not long before 1600 Hrs the Sergeant, and other spotters arrived and were about to announce that no one had spotted the 3 Aussies, when he looked around to spot us and cried "How the hell did you three get here??" We told him we did not spot any other look-outs, but we did see him under a tree and where he was.

We had our story ready that we were coming up a ditch beside the road when we spotted him and realised we could not pass along that ditch without him seeing us, so we back-pedalled a bit using trees along the road as cover, and then crossed the road and away a bit to the north, which brought us in from that direction. We told him we were within the length of 2 cricket pitches from him, and that really had him flabbergasted. Somehow or another he got the correct information by Friday morning, and told us he was not very impressed,

but couldn't decide whether to admonish us for not entering into the true spirit of the exercise or just acknowledge that we had exercised initiative that we had so often been instructed to do.

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> October saw the completion of our Air Crew Officers Training School, and on Monday morning we set off by train back to Brighton. We went via Salisbury where we had a stop over to have a look around the town and visit the famous cathedral. During WW1 my father had been billeted on Salisbury Plains with 41<sup>st</sup> Battalion A.I.F. and used to talk about the Cathedral and his visits around the area. I did not know it then, not even until the 1980's, that my paternal great grandparents had come from East Hagbourne in Berkshire about 20 miles from Reading in the area that we were to-day travelling through.

Back at Brighton on Tuesday it was a return to the usual routine of morning parade, lectures and stand-downs as we waited for a posting to an Advanced Flying Unit. During this time we were attending a lecture in the old ball room on the Pavilion when the whole pier was rocked by an enormous blast. Someone had detonated one of the booby-trap mines on the end of the pier and really started some activity. We were evacuated very quickly. Never heard any more reports and whether there were any casualties apart from a few sea gulls. At Brighton a new contingent of EAT's N.C.O.'s and Officers had arrived and the duties on the ack-ack guns had been assigned to them which gave us more time to take visits up to London.

### **My Posting Comes Through - Scotland**

On Parade about 6<sup>th</sup> November my posting came through to No. 4 (Observers) Advanced Flying Unit at West Freugh, near Stranraer in Scotland. There were other navigators on the same posting that

were on a course after No. 71 and arrived in Brighton about a month or so after I did. These included Keith Nunn, Hector Craig and Soapy Campbell. Noel Hooper and John Honeyman were posted to an A.F.U. affiliated with No 5 Group Bomber Command. I seemed assured to going into No. 3 Group which operated in East Anglia.

Those going to West Freugh left Brighton by train on Monday 8<sup>th</sup> November, travelled overnight, changing trains probably at Carlisle, and arrived in Stranraer and on to West Freugh by RAF transport on Tuesday to attend to the usual requirements of reception for a course that was due to start the next day. Keith, Hector, Soapy and I were all billeted in the same Nissen hut in the Officers quarters.

We certainly got our introduction to the Scottish weather coming into their winter. The famous Scotch Mist just hung on and on, in fact for the first six weeks we were there we never saw the sun from the ground, but at 2,500 feet you were above cloud and in clear sky. For the first few days we were kept in the lecture rooms for revision in most of the subjects we had studied at Edmonton and talks on what to expect as we moved on to become acquainted with new navigation aids etc that were coming into use in Bomber Command. Our air exercises at West Freugh over the 8 weeks we were there comprised 30 Hrs 35 mins of daylight flying and 18 Hrs of night flying at SS heights between 1500 feet and 5000 feet. The air exercises over routes as detailed in my log book were mostly over the Irish Sea area to landmarks in Northern Ireland, Wales and the Carlisle area to the East. In most cases the exercise started from Ailsa Craig, a landmark island in the Clyde Estuary. You had to be wary of your height and track to ensure you did not come to grief on the Isle of Man.

A great advantage of flying with RAF Staff Pilots was they flew the course given to them. They couldn't see the ground anyway

most of the time. This gave good experience in D.R. navigation and was a great help in charting an air plot. They were mostly very experienced pilots who had served with the RAF in India as well as on operations at home and were very experienced in flying Ansons and Oxfords.

### **Some Flying "Incidents"**

The starting point of Ailsa Craig nearly caused an accident on one of our exercises. We had climbed through cloud and on course etc, when I said to the pilot we would proceed on our first course of the exercise from E.T.A. Ailsa Craig, which would have been not far out because of the short distance we had flown. He insisted on going below the cloud to get an accurate fix from which to start our exercise. Our course was nearly too accurate, as when we broke cloud at about 800 feet Ailsa Craig was almost dead ahead, and the faithful "Old Aggie" as we called the Anson flew past the cliff face too close for comfort. The pilot circled the island, flew a bit north of it and then came back on the course we were to fly on the first leg and climbed back into the cloud over the island with a satisfied look on his face.

On another exercise the first course was eastwards to Wigtown, and then on to Silloth, past a mountain that was about 1500 feet high near Gatehouse-on Fleet I think it was called 'Crefell' and it had claimed a few aircraft crashing into it, so we had to make sure we were at least at 2000 feet. For the exercise we had been given 'met' winds of 30/49 Knots from the west. By the time we got near Gatehouse-on Fleet it was obvious that the true wind was over 70 knots and in response to radio message we were recalled.

A flight of less than 30 minutes out took over 2 hours on the return with the Aggie at maximum air speed. Coming over the top of

one of those high mountains you had the feeling you could just have jumped off like from a moving tram. A night exercise was scheduled to fly to Newcastle to give us navigation experience and the air defences there some dry-swim practice. Before we got as far as Silloth we were recalled as Newcastle was in fact being raided by the Luftwaffe. Sometimes I have wondered about the co-incidence. It was on one of those exercises that I had a bout of air sickness and on landing the pilot put it in his report. The O.C. Training ordered me to report to the M.O. for an assessment. I cannot remember what his examination involved but I was not scrubbed from flying.

On 30<sup>th</sup> December we were detailed on navigation exercises flying at 5000 ft. Two navigators were assigned to an exercise flying over the Irish Sea due south to Holyhead in Wales and then north west to Ballyquinton Point in Northern Island. This had the Isle of Man along this path. The two navigators on this route were Keith Nunn and Harold 'Hal' Peters, both graduates of No. 74N course. Most of the route was covered in cloud with base at about 1000 feet. It turned out to be a tragic day. The aircraft in which Hal Peters was flying must have descended through the cloud too soon and crashed into a mountain on the island. Hal was 33 years of age and came from Bentleigh in Victoria. He was buried in Andreas (St Andrew) Churchyard on the Isle of Man. My last navigation exercise at West Freugh, a week later, was over this same route.

Another flying incident at West Freugh that remains in my memory concerns the crash of a Hampden twin-engined bomber. A few of the RAF pilots were discussing the flying capabilities of this aircraft, a few of which were stationed at West Freugh for coastal surveillance work. A F/Sgt. pilot was arguing that the aircraft would not pull out of a spin. One of the ex-India RAF Officer pilots disagreed and said when the weather was clear enough he would take one up to



about 5,000 feet, put it into a spin and pull out. He did this a few days later in sight of a few onlookers - but unfortunately the aircraft did not pull out of the spin and went down to crash into the sea. One of the ex-India pilots was heard to remark "That is only four of us left now".

### **Leave in Oldhall - I meet Alma**

As I had advised Jim and Nan Joss in Aberdeen that I had been posted to West Freugh, Nan wrote back to say that she had been in touch with a Friend/Cousin in Paisley and she and her husband would be happy to host me if I went to Glasgow. We were given 48 leave pass one week-end so I took the opportunity to go by bus, getting off at Oldhall between Paisley and Glasgow to visit Ronnie and Molly Whyte and their daughter Alma who lived at 39 Tylney Rd, Oldhall. This led to many enjoyable leaves in Aberdeen and Paisley when I came to be accepted freely by both families over the times ahead and which was eventually to see Alma and I marry. I think that we would both agree however that it was not love at first sight.

Hector Craig, who had some relatives in Glasgow came with me on the bus on our two week-end leaves. We were not happy with the smoke filled busses filled with farm workers in heavy sweaty smelling clothes, and not a window opened. It was winter, damp and cold, but some fresh air was desirable, so we would open the window a bit near our seat to get a look that only a Ranger's fan would give a Celtic fan. Ronnie Whyte was a staunch Ranger's follower and I was soon to learn of the rivalry between those two sides. The passion for football, what we called soccer, was new to us.

Our course at West Freugh was completed on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1944. Our posting came through the next day and we were given a

few days to complete clearances-the usual medical, dental etc and pack our Officer issue steel trunk for despatch to our new station. Keith Nunn and Hector Craig and I were posted to No. 84 Operational Training Unit at Desborough in Northamptonshire. We realised then that we were destined for No. 3 group Bomber Command that was equipped with Lancasters. We were given 7days leave and travelling time and had to report to Desborough by 24<sup>th</sup> January (Auth POR 2/44). Travelling warrants were issued at the Adjutant's office on 11<sup>th</sup> January, a day after my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday anniversary, and I went on leave to Aberdeen for a week and then to London for a few days to catch up with mates at the Boomerang Club.

Now it was on to joining a crew, further training as a crew with more advanced aircraft and at heights above 10,000 feet. As it turned out it was to bigger and better things and experiences that made men of us. ....



West Freugh - Laundry Hung Out to Dry In Our "Heated" Quarters

At Aircrew Officers Training School  
Sidmouth, Devon



Noel Hooper, Bob Smith



Bob Smith, John Honeyman

## Training as a Crew

Crew Formation at No. 84 O.T.U. (Operational Training Unit)

## Desborough, Northamptonshire

For operational training I was posted to No. 84 O.T.U at Desborough in Northamptonshire, an Operational Training Unit under the control of No.3 Group, (RAF Bomber Command) as from **25<sup>th</sup> January 1944.** This Unit was flying ex-operational Vickers Wellington X's, with unit identification "IF". This was our introduction to flying above 10,000 feet in aircraft equipped with oxygen. Radio I/D was "Foodramp".

Along with Keith Nunn and Hector Craig I was accommodated in the Officer's Quarters and went through the usual reception procedure. A programme of lectures and 'dry-swim' exercises started immediately and went on for two weeks. Flying exercises started on 15<sup>th</sup> Feb, crewed with a staff pilot and flying as a 2<sup>nd</sup> navigator under supervision, to gain experience on new special navigation equipment and flying at heights of 10,000 to 15,000 feet, wearing oxygen masks. Instructors, mostly with operational experience, assessed our work and passed us as satisfactory to proceed further into the formation of a crew and on to further training towards posting to an operational squadron. Over that first month lectures and tests occupied a lot of time, and were most interesting as we were instructed in new equipment coming into use, some of it still on the secret list. During that second fortnight we flew 2 daylight flying exercises and 1 night exercise of between 4 and 5 hours each. On 28<sup>th</sup> February after flying a special daylight exercise of 4 ½ hours at 15,000 feet all the aircrew under operational training were assembled at 1700 Hrs and told to sort themselves into crews by the next afternoon.

**On 1<sup>st</sup> March 1944 our crew was formed.** In the morning pilot F/Sgt. Ron Hastings approached me to see if I had been claimed yet and when he said he had obtained another Aussie as a Bomb Aimer and two RAF fellows who had come through a gunners course together and wanted to be together in a crew, I agreed to join them. Soon afterwards we approached a Wireless Operator who had many flying hours to his credit and had come from a unit where he was an instructor. So, for the time being we had a crew, with a Flight Engineer to be added when we went on to conversion to four engined bombers:-

#### The Crew:

Pilot F/Sgt Ronald William Hastings	RAAF No.423112 Born 11 Nov 1922
Nav. F/O Robert Wylie Smith	RAAF No.425992 Born 10 Jan 1924
B/A F/Sgt Harold Edward Burns	RAAF No.422144 Born 5 Nov 1915
W/Op.F/Sgt Victor Frederick Pearce	RAF No.1196145 Born 17 Jul 1920
M/U/G Sgt George Henry James Malyon	RAF No.1432616 Born 7 Jan 1923
R/G SgtDonald George McFadden	RAF No.1387716 Born 26 Feb 1923

All aircrew were volunteers, so the RAF fellows were in the RAF Volunteer Reserve. Between ourselves we were called respectively, Ron, Smithy, Bobby, Vic, Mike and Mac.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> March most of the newly formed crews, including us, were sent to the satellite 'drome at Harrington, about 4/5 miles away, to fly a high level bombing exercise in daylight and then about 6 hours on circuits and bumps (which gave the navigator nothing to do) over 2 consecutive nights, and on the next night 2 ½ hours on high level bombing. Having completed these exercises it was back to the main 'drome on 8<sup>th</sup> March to start a very intense month of flying training in daylight and at night. These exercises were always over approved set routes, sometimes with an experienced pilot as we went on long night flights, fighter affiliation exercises and high level bombing. Lectures still

continued at times during the day and there were breaks for sports and evening/week-end leave.

### **Dealing With an Emergency**

On 13<sup>th</sup> March, flying in an older Wellington 111 No. X3995 and letter coded "U" for Uncle we had an emergency forced upon us on take-off after lunch. Just as the aircraft started to lift off the runway the flap over the port wing fuel tank inlet sprung open, causing that wing to stall. As that wing started to drop it was only the quick corrective action by Ron that saved us from disaster. It took the combined effort of him and the Bomb Aimer who was standing beside him to hold the joy-stick hard over to starboard to keep the plane on level flight. The control tower had noticed our wild take-off, and before we could gather our wits they contacted us with a call "Foodramp Uncle-are you in trouble". Ron replied with a brief description of the problem and immediately got a message back to circle if possible and come into land immediately as they would have emergency vehicles standing by. An experienced pilot was put in direct contact from the control tower to assist Ron. Although we did not know it at the time, sirens were sounded on the 'drome and a fire tender, ambulance and crash wagon were rushed on to the tarmac. Ron instructed me to keep the runway on our starboard wing in sight and guide him around to the downwind end. Then, as he lined the aircraft up on the runway and started a landing approach he ordered all except "Bobby" Burns, the B/A, to take up crash positions, leaving the intercom to all positions open. With the two gunners I took up the crash position. Vic, the wireless operator, was tuned into a BBC radio broadcast and was not aware of the emergency, although he admitted later he thought the flying was a bit rough. I learned a lesson from this as I should have tapped Vic on the shoulder as I went past him to the crash position and beckoned him to join me.



Ron and Bobby managed to control the aircraft sufficiently to make a reasonable landing although it gave a severe lurch to port as we touched down, causing Mac, who was next to me in the crash position and had started to get to his feet as soon as the wheels touched the ground, to fall against me and force my head on to the side of the fuselage resulting in a bit of a lump on my right temple. Mac thought for a minute that he had severely hurt me as we both ended up lying on the floor. This lurch caused Vic to look around and see Mike, Mac and myself in the crash position and to wonder what was going on. So we had a bit of explaining to do. We were all O.K, and saw a certain humour in what happened next. As soon as we came to rest Ron contacted the control tower with their sign and the message "Foodramp Uncle here—we have pancaked", only to get the immediate response "Foodramp Uncle, if you have pancaked you have not pancaked here". A quick look around and we recognised the surroundings—we had landed at Harrington, the satellite strip. As they say, all is well that ends well, (in spite of Murphy's Law). Transport was immediately sent out to the aircraft to take us back to the base 'drome for a quick medical assessment, but we said we were O.K. The M.O told me I would probably get a black eye if any bruising came out and that my flying helmet had probably saved me from more serious injury. In reflection, it is possible that if Ron had attempted a full 360 degree turn back to the runway we had just taken off from, the outcome could have been much worse.

The M.O did not say anything about not flying for a day or two. The experience certainly strengthened our confidence in and respect for Ron, and taught us valuable lessons. We did not hear what happened to the ground crew responsible for fuelling the aircraft and ensuring that the wing flaps were properly secured. Probably went on a charge and received some form of punishment. The aircraft was given a thorough inspection, before it was moved and flown back to the base 'drome. The undercarriage must have experienced some stress when we touched



down. We flew again in the same aircraft four days later on a high level bombing exercise and had no problems.

By 8<sup>th</sup> April we had completed all the requirements of the course at O.T.U and were passed as fit material to proceed to conversion to four engine aircraft. We were given about 11 days leave (Auth POR 15/44) and instructed to report to No. 1653 H.C.U (Heavy Conversion Unit) at Chedburgh in Suffolk on 21<sup>st</sup> April. A signal had come through that a crew was required for an Australian Squadron in No.5 Group with a condition that it must comprise at least 4 Aussies in the crew. The only one to qualify on our course was P/O. George Edwards (Pilot) who had crewed with Keith Nunn as his navigator. Both had known Ron Hastings prior to this time. Keith had known Ron and his father before the war. Both Ron's father and Keith were employed in the then Union Bank of Aust- later to become the ANZ Bank. Ron & George had trained together as pilots. That crew eventually went on to No.467 (RAAF) Squadron at Waddington in Lincoln and were shot down on their second 'Op' on 29<sup>th</sup> June 1944, bombing the flying bomb base at Beauvoir in France. George was killed and Keith was captured and taken POW. After the war Keith resumed his career with the Union Bank. I have no recollection of where Hector Craig and crew were posted to.

### **Previous Service history of our Crew members**

#### **Pilot "Ron"**

When he was born in 1922 his family surname was 'Heuzenroeder'. His father was employed in the Union Bank and in the mid-1930's with the world scene focussing on the Nazi regime in Germany, and the bank considering his transfer to Manager of a country town, they requested him to change his surname. Ron was in secondary schooling at the time and chose the name 'Hastings'.

Ron enlisted in Sydney on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1942 and was posted to No.2 I.T.S. at Bradfield Park. On 15<sup>th</sup> Oct 1942 he went to No.5 E.F.T.S at Narramine in N.S.W and on 17 Jan 1943 to No.8 S.F.T.S at Bundaberg in Queensland. On 7<sup>th</sup> May 1943 he graduated with his pilot's wings and posted to No.2 Embarkation Depot with rank of Sergeant. Embarked in Sydney on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1943, travelling via the USA and arrived in the U.K. on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1943 at No.11 P.D.R.C at Brighton. On 7<sup>th</sup> Sep 1943 posted to No.15 (Pilot) A.F.U at Andover before posting to 84 O.T.U at Desborough on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1944.

### **Nav. "Smithy"**

Enlisted 21<sup>st</sup> May 1942 at No.3 Recruit Centre, Eagle St, Brisbane in an intake of 'Aircrew Guards' and posted same day to No.3 Recruit Depot Maryborough Qld. On 13<sup>th</sup> June 1942 posted as 'Air Crew Guard' to No.1 A.O.S. Cootamundra N.S.W. where on 16<sup>th</sup> Sep 1942 was posted into No.73 Reserve Squadron. On 11<sup>th</sup> Oct 1942 posted to No.2 I.T.S. Bradfield Park, Sydney and on 2<sup>nd</sup> Jan 1943 to No.2 Embarkation Depot, Bradfield Park. Embarked Sydney on 8<sup>th</sup> Feb 1943 on troopship "U.S.S. Hermitage" to San Francisco and then by train to Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. On 7<sup>th</sup> March 1943 posted to No.2 Air Observers School at Edmonton. Graduated with wings as a Navigator and granted a commission on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1943. On 4<sup>th</sup> Aug 1943 posted to No. 1 "Y" (Embarkation) Depot at Halifax, Nova Scotia. On 26 Aug 1943 embarked on the "Queen Mary" to the UK. Disembarked on 1<sup>st</sup> Sep 1943 at Gourock, Scotland, and then by train to Brighton, England and posted to No.11 P.D.R.C. on 2<sup>nd</sup> Sep 1943. On 27<sup>th</sup> Sep 1943 attended Air Crew Officers Training School at Sidmouth, Devon, for a 4 week course. Posted On 9<sup>th</sup> Nov 1943 to No.4 (Observers) A.F.U at West Freugh, Scotland and on 25 Jan 1944 posted to No.84 O.T.U, Desborough,England.

### **B/Aimer 'Bobbie' or 'Rabbie'**

Enlisted on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1942 at No 2 Recruit Centre in Sydney and on same day posted to No.2 I.T.S at Bradfield Park. On 15 Aug 1942

posted to No.2 Embarkation Depot at Bradfield Park. And on 21<sup>st</sup> Aug 1942 posted to No.1 E.D. at Ascot Vale, Victoria. Embarked in Melbourne on 7<sup>th</sup> Sep 1942 and 'disembarked' No.3 Manning Depot, Edmonton Canada on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1942. On 11<sup>th</sup> Oct 1942 posted to No.5 A.O.S at Winnipeg and on 29<sup>th</sup> Dec 1942 posted to RCAF station at Trenton, then on 21<sup>st</sup> Feb 1943 posted to No.4 Bombing & Gunnery School at Fingal and on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1943 to No.4 A.O.S at London Ontario. On 13<sup>th</sup> Oct 1943 posted to No.1 'Y' Depot at Halifax, Nova Scotia. Embarked at Halifax on 22<sup>nd</sup> Oct 1943 and 'disembarked' 31<sup>st</sup> Oct 1943 at No.11 P.D.R.C. Brighton, England. Posted to No.4 A.F.U. West Freugh, Scotland on 23<sup>rd</sup> Nov 1943 and on 25 Jan 1944 to No.84 O.T.U. at Desborough, England.

#### **W/Op. Vic.**

Enlisted in the RAF 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec 1941. Commenced flying training in August 1942 after transfer to the RAF V.R. After completion of Wireless Operator's course was posted to Bobbington as an instructor prior to posting to No.84 O.T.U. Desborough on 25<sup>th</sup> Jan 1944

#### **M/U/G. 'Mike'**

Enlisted in the RAF on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1941, in the RAF Regiment. Initial Training at Cardington, and on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1941 posted to White Waltham and Cranwell for a ground observers course before posting to the Outer Hebrides and Orkney Islands. In June 1943 volunteered for flying duty (R.A.F.V.R) I.T.W Bridlington ,Yorkshire and Air Gunnery Schools in Shropshire and Bishops court, Northern Ireland. Graduated with wings in Dec 1943 and posted to No.84 O.T.U, Desborough on 25<sup>th</sup> Jan 1944.

#### **R/G. 'Mac'.**

Enlisted in the RAF on 5<sup>th</sup> Feb 1942 and served in the RAF Regiment until June 1943. when he volunteered for flying duties and had the same postings in flying training as 'Mike', which is why both wanted to stay together in the same crew. Both came from London.

**The Crew in front of a 'Wellington X'**



**Ground Staff**

Mac, Vic, Mike, Bobbie, Ron Smithy

Hours flown at No.84 O.T.U.

Daylight - 34 Hrs 30 mins    Night - 30 Hrs 30 mins

**No. 1653 H.C.U. (Heavy Conversion Unit)**

**Chedburgh, Suffolk**

This unit was equipped with ex-operational Stirlings 1 & 111. Unit I/D. **H4.**

On 21<sup>st</sup> April we were posted to No. 31 Base (No.3 Group R.A.F.Bomber Command), Stradishall, Suffolk, under whose administration were No.1653 H.C.U. and No.3 L.F.S. Feltwell for training in 4 engined heavy bombers. A Flight Engineer, straight from training at a Rolls Royce training school, was appointed to the crew. As a general rule this was a Flight Engineer's introduction to flying. Sgt. Ron Partridge was added to the crew, and immediately earned the nick-name 'Pheasant' by Ron. His training in the Merlin engine at the Rolls Royce establishment was not put to use while we were flying Stirlings with radial engines, but was going to be valuable when we graduated on to the Lancaster Bomber. Ron was destined to stay with our crew only for our first 6 operational sorties.

After 3 weeks of extensive lectures, introductions to and instructions on the special equipment that we would be using on a squadron, most of it specialist to a particular crew member, and general information that applied to all given by experienced personnel on what to expect on operations over Europe as well as survival and escape techniques it was back to practical flying exercises. At first these were with an experienced pilot for dual familiarisation flights of circuits and bumps and then on to a high level navigation and bombing exercise before Ron was allowed to go solo with his crew.

We did not escape the now accepted 'emergency' that can crop up on training flights. On our last 'dual' flight on the morning of 18<sup>th</sup> May we had a F/O. Gill as Captain. On take-off he cut one engine to give Ron the necessary experience in that situation. It almost backfired as the aircraft we were in, R9287 H4-Y (Yoke) was rather sick on 3 engines and refused to climb while the under carriage

was still down. Fortunately Chedburgh was on a plateau and the ground fell away from us. The under carriage was retracted and we did manage to gather a bit of speed to give us a safety margin above stalling. The 'killed' engine refused to re-start, so Ron also had experience with landing on 3 engines. An eventful 25 minutes. After lunch we were transferred to another aircraft and Ron was allowed to go solo with the crew for 2 hours of circuits and bumps.

### **Involved in a Diversionary Flight at Time of Normandy Landing**

Over the next 18 days and nights we did a number of special cross country navigation and bombing exercises and then flew what was an 'Op', but it was not credited as such. It was on the night of 5/6<sup>th</sup> June 1944, the eve of "D.Day". We took off at 2310 Hrs on a special exercise flying at 12000 feet which took us out over the North Sea, approaching the Belgian coast near Ostend and at about 20 miles from the coast altered course to roughly Nor-East for 15 mins, before turning to port and then heading back to base crossing the English Coast near Orfordness. We had been on a diversion raid to draw attention away from the landings on the Normanby Coast of France. When we got back over Suffolk we were given a triangular course to fly, still at 12,000 feet, until it was all clear for us to descend and land. Below was an extensive procession of aircraft heading towards France, so we soon realised that the invasion of German occupied Europe was under way. We landed about 0130 Hrs on 6<sup>th</sup> June, "D.Day", and were informed that General Dwight Eisenhower would be broadcasting a special announcement later in the morning.

A day or two later we were paraded and given the duty of scouting through a near-by 'wood', as there had been a report that a parachutist had been seen to jump out of a German aircraft that had flown over. About 30 to 40 airmen hiked through that wood and

surrounding fields, but found nothing. Later in the afternoon two farmers walked up to the guards at the station's main gate with a suspect in tow. One was carrying a hay fork in a menacing manner. They found him on the edge of the wood, probably waiting for night to fall before moving on. Never did hear what the sequel to that was.

On 12<sup>th</sup> June, in the afternoon, we were detailed to take an aircraft on a flight test. On arrival at the aircraft we were met by a senior officer who informed us that an important passenger was on board who we had to deliver to Tempsford, the base of No.161 Special Duty squadron, and to fly below 500 feet all the way there and back. So I had to prepare a quick flight plan to Tempsford. When we got on board we discovered that our passenger was a very attractive young French lady, probably in her early 20's, who was to be parachuted out over France that night on a special mission. What a girl?

No. 1653 Chedburgh - Suffolk

F/E Sgt Ron Partridge Added to The Crew That Went to "Ops"

Smithy, Bobbie, Ron, Pheasant?,  
Mac, Mike, Vic

Two days later we completed out training at Chedburgh with a high level bombing and fighter affiliation exercise which involved corkscrews for which the Stirling was not particularly suited, and neither was my stomach. I have to admit that I did suffer some air-sickness on such occasions. On 14<sup>th</sup> June we were advised of our positing to No. 3 Lancaster Finishing School at Feltwell in Norfolk and to attend to our clearances from Chedburgh.

Hours flown at No.1653 H.C.U.

- Daylight 27 Hrs 25 mins, Night 20 Hrs 25 mins

No. 3 L.F.S. (Lancaster Finishing School)

Feltwell, Norfolk



Still under our posting to No.31 Base, Stradishall we were attached to No.3 L.F.S from 18<sup>th</sup> June 1944 for a concentrated 10 day course of lectures and instructions and our introduction to the "Lancaster 1". The squadrons of 3 Group were equipped with the Lancaster 1 and Lancaster 111. The course was mainly for the pilot. Instructors were pilots who had completed tours on the 'Lanc'.

P.O. Treasure was assigned to our crew for 3 hours of dual and solo circuits and bumps in daylight on 23<sup>rd</sup> June and for the same at night the following day. The next day we were on our own for a test flying a triangle over Norfolk for over an hour and 2 days later flew a cross country navigation test of over 3 hours.

It was a great thrill to eventually get on to Lancasters. A vast improvement on the Wellington and Stirling and truly the most successful heavy bomber of WW11. It was a 'plane that gave the crews a feeling of confidence. Its power and manoeuvrability and load carrying capacity exceeded all others at that time. As far as I was concerned I had reached my goal. After some operational experience, you were convinced that every one who operated in the light and medium bombers in the early years of the war deserved a 'gong'.

On 27<sup>th</sup> June 1944 we were advised that we were posted to No.XV/15 Squadron at Mildenhall, Suffolk, a permanent RAF Base and one of the jewels of Bomber Command.

Hours flown at No. 3 L.F.S.

- Daylight 4 Hrs 20 mins, Night 6 Hrs 20 mins