



AS IT HAPPENED

BY

JEFF WILKINSON

AN INTRODUCTION

The scene needs to be set for the main part of this story which will follow the 'how, who, why, where and when'.

After gaining my wings in Canada I was posted to the UK for my operational training which took place in Hawarden, Cheshire before being posted to the newly formed No. 457 (RAAF) Squadron on the first of July 1941 to fly Spitfires. The squadron was initially based at Baginton, near Coventry, before moving to Jurby on the Isle of Man. On the twentysixth of September 1941 I was posted to No. 452 (RAAF) Squadron at Kenley and Red Hill, Surrey, again flying Spitfires and completing 25 operational sorties. Some senior pilots were sent home to Australia, among them the Commanding Officer 'Blue' Truscott, Bardie Warne, Raife Cowan, Jack Elphick, Pat Tainton, Frank Coker and Dick Holt all of whom were graduates of Nos. 1 and 2 Aircrew Training Courses under the World War II Empire Air Training Scheme.

The newly appointed Commanding Officer of No. 452 Squadron, Ray Thorald-Smith, called me to his office to inform me that I had been recommended for a commission and that I was being posted back to Australia.

Next day I flew over to Squires Gate, near Blackpool for my interview with the Officer in Charge (OIC), an Australian Air Vice Marshal Toohey. When he heard that I had been posted back to Australia, he said he would hurry up the approval of his recommendation so that I could get an Officer's uniform in London.

On reporting to RAAF Headquarters, I was told that my appointment would have to await confirmation from Australia and that I could take a week's leave. However, when I reported back a week later, the confirmation still had not come through, so I would have to travel back to Australia as a Sergeant Pilot. That also meant that I would not receive the twenty pounds cash grant for a Saville Row tailor-made uniform.

THIRD CLASS PASSENGERS

Glasgow was to be the departure point of our transport which was the old passenger ship 'Letitia' of about 10 000 tons. Our party, consisting of myself, Pat Campbell, Roy Riddel, Frank Shelley, Keith Gamble, Ian Louden and Jack Morrison went aboard, followed by

Officer Pilots Dick Holt, Bruce Brown, Mark Sheldon and Raife Cowan plus a contingent of Canadian Army Warrant Officers.

Then to our surprise, a large group of German Navy Prisoners of War came up the gangway escorted by armed guards. They were led off to cabin accommodation, as were the Canadian Warrant Officers and our Officer Pilots.

Being joined by some 'Boston' Sergeant Pilots including two chaps named Vial and Hughes, it was then our turn to be allocated our berths.

"Down the hold" came the order of the Transport Officer. "You men take your kitbags down there and rig the hammocks that you will be sleeping in".

We reluctantly went down the ladder to our sleeping quarters for the voyage across the Atlantic to Halifax, Nova Scotia. The hold was dark and damp and there were no ablutions. We had to clamber up the ladder to the deck above to use those amenities. During the rough passage, sea water came into the hold, so we had to stow our gear in our hammocks to prevent it getting soaked until the crew pumped the hold dry.

Having but one escort vessel, a Corvette, we assumed that the Germans had notified their U-boat commanders to leave the vessel alone as it carried German POWs.

For relaxation, we were allowed to share the Second Class Saloon with the Canadians. For security reasons, at nightfall all entrances and portholes were slammed shut and blacked out so the saloon was soon filled with smoke from 'Cape to Cairo' cigarettes, the only brand we could purchase aboard. They were South African cigarettes which some wit dubbed 'the scrapings of the desert from the Cape to Cairo' - with good reason I might add. Beer was available in the saloon but the food was terrible.

When we arrived at Halifax, we thought that things would have to get better. Everyone disembarked and the party of Australians was taken to the railway station to board a train for Montreal. Here, the officers were shown to a sleeping carriage by the Transport Officer and we were shown to the last carriage which boasted a third class rating, having hard wooden seats and being filled with a tribe of Red Indians, men women and children in full indigenous regalia.

Leaving the carriage to complain to the Transport Officer that we expected something better for the six hundred mile trip, we were reprimanded and threatened with a charge if we did not return to our carriage. Luckily for us, one of our officers, Dick Holt, arrived on the scene. Being the great negotiator that he was (post-war President of the Airline Pilots' Association), he arranged for a new carriage to be hooked onto the train. It was fitted with comfortable seats that could be folded down for sleeping, enabling us to enjoy a pleasant trip to Montreal. Victory!

On arrival, the officers were put up in an hotel and we were shuttled off to cold huts and crook food in the Dorval ferry pool. After a couple of days, it was decided that something had to be done, so Pat Campbell and Jack Morrison went into the city to see if better accommodation could be had. They came back with the good news that the Mount Royal Hotel would put us up in the commercial travellers' room which had enough beds for us all.

Settling in nicely for three weeks, we were drawing pay each week for food and a social life. Some of our group even went to New York for a look around before resuming our much improved journey home under the care and responsibility of Uncle Sam. Officers and Senior N.C.O.s were all in together in the sleeping and dining cars to San Francisco, then billeted in a good hotel prior to boarding the 'Westpoint', a converted passenger liner,

for the final leg home. We Sergeants were treated the same as RAAF and US officers, with cabin accommodation taking the place of the ship's hold accommodation that our former hosts had delivered to us. Wellington (N.Z.) was a port of call before we caught our first glimpse of Australia.

With the puzzling absence of tugs, the ship edged into a Port Melbourne wharf and the US sailors had to descend ladders to secure the mooring ropes while our 'wharfies' sat on their bums looking on.

"What's wrong with you So-and-Sos" we began yelling. "Give the Yanks a hand you lazy b.....s" we cried.

"We are on strike" came their 'welcome home' greeting.

Our embarrassment was high as we wondered how the Americans would feel about this introduction to wartime Australia.

On reporting to RAAF Headquarters, I was told that my commission had been granted two months ago and that I had better hotfoot it out to Ascot Vale Clothing Store for my Pilot Officer's off-the-hook uniform.

The final ignominy in my commissioning saga came three years later when I was being demobbed in Brisbane. I was informed that my deferred pay would be reduced by the difference between the RCAF and RAAF rates of pay which I drew during the three weeks that I spent in transit in Montreal!

FOOTNOTE

The three years following this episode were spent in Australasia as shown in my Profile of Service. To briefly personalize that period, following my conversion to Kittyhawks I experienced operational service in the South-West Pacific Theatre of War with No. 75 (Kittyhawk) Squadron, firstly at Milne Bay during a hot period against the Japanese, before the squadron moved to Horn Island during the latter part of 1942.

In October 1942 I was invalided out of Horn with malaria and hospitalized at Greenslopes (Brisbane). On recovery, I was posted to 'Fighter Flight' at RAAF Williamtown New South Wales for refresher flying on Spitfires prior to a posting to the newly formed No. 79 (Spitfire) Squadron which was operationally based at Goodenough Island and Trobriand Island, New Britain area until November 1943.

In the first half of 1944, I spent an instructing stint at Central Flying School (CFS) Parkes, New South Wales and at Air Gunnery School (AGS) West Sale, Victoria.

In the second half of that year, it was back to No. 75 Squadron flying Kittyhawks out of the island of Noemfoor off what was then Dutch New Guinea. At Noemfoor, the Australian Air Contribution to the American Air Offensive was directed by Air Commodore Fred Scherger from rough huts covered by tarpaulins. In later years he became an Air Marshal, Chief of Air Staff; then Air Chief Marshal, Chief of Defence Force.

At the end of 1944, No. 75 Squadron moved to Morotai, Halmahera Islands and to Tarakan Island, Borneo. I served as a Flight Commander and for a time was Acting Commanding Officer of the squadron.

I took my discharge in Brisbane in November 1945.