# *AS IT HAPPENED*

## *BY*

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### TIGERS MEET IN MID-AIR

When the Second World War broke out, I was eighteen years of age.

Just after my nineteenth birthday, in March 1940, I enlisted for aircrew training in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). Like hundreds of others, I was placed on the Aircrew Reserve.

After being called up on 3rd January 1941 I became a member of No. 10 Course at Somers in Victoria.

Three months later, eighty of us found ourselves en route to South Africa on the passenger liner 'Ceramic'. From Durban, we travelled by train to Bulawayo in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to commence pilot training under the Empire Air Training Scheme (E.A.T.S.).

Forty of us were sent to No. 27 EFTS at Induna, some nine miles east of Bulawayo. Here, my pilot training very nearly came to a nasty and sudden end.

On my third time in an aircraft, my instructor and I were climbing out to the training area. Only one other Tiger Moth was also on the climb to the same training area. Both instructors were explaining to their respective students, the effects that movements of the controls had on the aircraft instruments.

We were passing through twelve hundred feet when suddenly, the second Tiger Moth came hurtling into our starboard side with a sickening crunch. The two Tigers rolled over, locked together, both wooden propellers being chewed down to the boss (hub). Our rear end was a shambles and the other aircraft lost part of its top port mainplane (wing).

At about seven hundred feet the two aircraft broke apart and I nearly bailed out (we all wore 'seat' type parachutes). However I remembered that, the day before, we had been told we must ask the instructor before taking any action, so I called out to him
"Do we bail out"?

"Hell, no!" he replied. "Your 'chute won't open in time. We're too low".

With the naivity of the inexperienced, I asked "What do we do"?

“Say your prayers” was the terse reply.
Hell’s bells, I was told that flying would be exciting, but I didn’t imagine that it would cause the adrenalin to pump to such a high degree.

Flying Officer James had been an instructor for four years, so his responses were instinctive. I can still visualise his hand going up to thumb off the fuel cock which was situated just below the fuel tank. Then rapidly, he turned off the magneto switches to ensure that there would be no sparks.

We crashed into a patch of ‘lion thorn’, port wings first. There was an awful crunching noise, and I was flung into my safety harness. The harness took the initial shock, then its rear cable broke. My head hit the instrument panel, leaving me with a nasty bump on the side of my head.

Flying Officer James and I were both wearing flying suits and flying boots. We both came out of that lion-thorn bush fairy-footed, like characters walking on water.

Some twenty minutes later, the fire-tender and ambulance arrived and we were whisked off to sick quarters. Flying Officer James had twenty stitches in a gash in his leg, and he also had three broken ribs. After an hour in bed, I was able to convince the Medical Officer (MO) that I was not in shock, so I was released.

A late breakfast followed, and I then reported to the Chief Flying Instructor (CFI) who assured me that no blame would be attached to me. He went on to say that I would be sent home to OZ and given an honourable discharge.

“But Sir, you just said it was not my fault” I objected.

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh! Do you still want to fly”?

“Well” I replied, “I didn’t come all this way to give up the moment something goes wrong”.

I received a typical British response. “Gad! That’s the spirit. Take my ‘chute out, get one for yourself, and I’ll be right out”.

I remember it being a tense moment as we taxied out, but forty minutes later, after rolls, loops and spins, I still had my breakfast.

“You’ll do, O’Connor” was the CFI’s judgement when we returned.

As a memento, I still have the roundel (circular aircraft identifying mark) from that crashed Tiger Moth.

## MANY AN ANXIOUS MOMENT

After six wonderful months in Bulawayo at No. 21 Service Flying Training School (SFTS), we finished our training on twin-engined Airspeed Oxfords.

We were then transported to Egypt on the 40 000 ton Mauratania troop ship. From there, a dozen of us were flown by B.O.A.C. to Kenya, with an overnight stop at Khartoum.

Based at Nakuru in Kenya was No. 70 Operational Training Unit (OTU) where we ‘crewed up’ and converted to Blenheim bombers.

My Navigator was John Buckland from Melbourne, and my Wireless Air Gunner (WAG) was Gerry Gannan, also from Melbourne. Gerry and I had been at school together at Assumption College, Kilmore.

After completing our operational training, it was back to Egypt for us, as we were posted to No. 14 (RAF) Squadron. As an aside, No. 14 Squadron is now the oldest squadron in the RAF, having been formed in 1915. At time of writing the squadron is serving with N.A.T.O. in Germany.

Life under canvas in the desert was somewhat of a shock after Rhodesia and Kenya. However, we soon settled in to a routine of night bombing, mostly nuisance raids on enemy positions. When I put the four hours night flying in my Log Book, it brought my total night-flying hours, both dual and solo, to 14.5.

Our Squadron was pushed back from airstrip to airstrip due to Rommell's gallop to Egypt. On each occasion, that meant putting up our tent and digging another slit trench, because now and again, the Hun bombed us.

During the stand-off at El Alamein, the squadron was re-equipped with the famous B26A Marauder bombers. The Marauder had an all-up weight of 34 000 pounds (about 15 500 kilograms), a small mainplane (wing) which resulted in its having the highest wing loading and landing speed of all Allied aircraft. Those qualities called for very careful pilot handling.

Being one of the first aeroplanes with a tricycle undercarriage, the Marauder was known as 'The Flying Prostitute' - no visible means of support! Two big Pratt and Whitney radial engines drove four-bladed 14 foot (over 4 metres) diameter propellors which enabled us to wind it up to 310 miles per hour at low level.

When I did my first solo on a Marauder, my total flying time, both dual and solo was 289 hours! However, after a short spell as second pilot, I was given my captaincy and new crew members. Buck and Gerry remained with me.

14 Squadron was to become a long-range anti-shipping outfit. That involved initially, low level ship bombing training and torpedo dropping. It was quite awesome carrying out a training attack against a British Cruiser in the Red Sea. All those big guns swinging around and pointing at us was unnerving.

The day came for us to do our first operational mission. Six Marauder crews, including ours, were called upon to carry out a mine-laying operation in Tunis harbour. That was quite a long flight from Egypt. The mines were of a special magnetic American type which could be pre-set to explode at variables of between 1 and 30 times a ship passed over them. Another significant aspect was that they were not parachute mines, so they had to be dropped below 200 feet!

As it was to be a night mission, at briefing we all wanted to know how we got to fly under 200 feet without a radar altimeter. The briefing Officer struck chill in our hearts when he said matter-of-factly "Well, you will make a landfall on the north-east tip of Tunisia at Cape Bon. There are 200 foot (62 metres) cliffs for some miles to the west of Cape Bon, so you let down in the moonlight until you are just below the cliffs". There were no more questions - we were too occup¡ed with our own thoughts to think about anything else.

Taking off from Shallufa in Egypt, we had two big mines on one side of the bomb bay and a 1 000 gallon (about 4550 litres) tank of extra fuel on the other side. The tactical ground situation was that Rommel had been pushed back and the Allies held Benghasi, where we arrived late afternoon. After aircraft and men were refuelled, we took off just before dark for the three hours plus flight to Tunis.

Thanks to Buck's good navigation, we arrived at Cape Bon spot on our Estimated Time Of Arrival (ETA). Sure enough, we saw with a touch of relief, the cliffs the briefing officer

spoke about. We let down just below them, and noted that our altimeter read minus 30 feet (minus 9 metres).

As we neared Tunis, Buck came forward to take on the role of Bombadier. He wore the winged 'O' brevet, having been trained as both navigator and bombadier. Shortly after, we turned into Tunis harbour.

As we ran in on our mine dropping run, I asked Buck if he was sure it was Tunis harbour. He did not have to answer, for suddenly, on came the searchlights, and flack from anti-aircraft guns began hammering a Marauder about a quarter of a mile ahead. The pilot pulled up and started weaving, but his evasive actions were to no avail. A shell must have hit his mines or fuel tank, for his aircraft exploded into a large ball of orange flame.

Buck had opened the bomb bay doors of our aeroplane, ready to

drop our mines. Suddenly he yelled "Pull up!! Gantry cranes ahead!! Mines dropped".

Reacting automatically to Buck's urgent outburst, I climbed steeply to avoid the cranes, then turned for home up the harbour with the knowledge that our job was done. Relief was short-lived, for almost immediately, from the mid-upper gunner came the sharp call of "Night fighter". A couple of bursts of tracer fire went past us as I dived the aircraft towards the water. At about 400 feet, the fighter broke off his attack, no doubt thinking that we would plough imto the drink. I stopped weaving and levelled out at an altimeter reading of minus 50 feet (15 metres).

After leaving Cape Bon for the three-hour flog home, I wanted to transfer fuel. Both pilots, the Navigator and the WAG had been trained in fuel transfer techniques, so I called Buck on the intercom and said "Transfer 300 gallons of fuel from the bomb bay tank to each of the main wing tanks".

When I checked the cockpit fuel gauges, both read about 50 gallons instead of 350 gallons. Being worried about the fuel gauge readings, I sent the second pilot Carl, to transfer another 50 gallons to each main tank, reminding him to make sure that the big pump was working and to check that the fuse was OK. He was back in about 30 seconds. Lifting the flap of my helmet so I could hear him, he said "You won't believe this - the mines have gone and so has the fuel tank"!!

I then told Buck to have a quick, but good look in the bomb bay. His hesitant reply was that when he went forward to drop the mines, he was not sure of the bomb hook position, so in the flurry of yelling about the gantry cranes and dropping the mines, he must have....his voice trailed off.

"OK" I said. "Carl, you hold her steady while I go back to have a look at the chart. We will have to bail out around the coast, probably becoming POWs".

Looking at the chart, Malta stood out.

"Quick, Buck. How long to Malta"? I asked.

Buck calculated that it would take us about thirty minutes. We had thirtyfive minutes of fuel!

Gerry had his big moment when he sent an SOS emergency signal. All other aircraft ceased transmissions to allow his "Request to land Malta - short of fuel" message to go over the air waves. The message came back from Malta "Air raid in progress".

"Just tell them we are committed" was my reply.

Fortunately, the point of entry to Malta that night was twenty miles south of Valetta harbour. As we ran up to that point, we could see the searchlights and flak. I told the crew that if the raid was still on when we arrived, we would have to bail out.

“Final brief - don’t forget to yell as you float down I AM BRITISH. You know what happens to some Axis aircrew if they come down outside a military area”. Due to the continual bombing they experienced, Maltese civilians applied rough justice to enemy aircrew.

When we reached the entry point, the searchlights were going out and there was no more flak. On arrival over Malta however, there was also no sign of a flare path. Carl, my second pilot, had operated out of Malta on Spitfires which he did not like, so he was transferred to bombers. He knew the approach to the strip, and said “No, you won’t see the flare path until you are on final approach at 500 to 600 feet. They use hooded flares”.

“Right” I replied. “You fly the circuit, and I’ll take the final. Give me a long final approach”.

The ‘fuel low’ light on the instrument panel had come on some time ago, so the mood in the aircraft was tense, to put it mildly.

At about 600 feet, we saw three lights ahead. “That’s all you get” Carl said. “Land to the right of the single light, and on touchdown, aim for the two lights at the other end of the strip”.

Roaring in at 150 mph, we put the landing lights on at about 100 feet, a quick connection and crunch and we were down and the landing light was snapped off. As soon as the nose wheel touched, Carl called out “Put the brakes on”. He continued to bellow for brakes and we came to a halt just past the two end lights.

“What’s the panic, Carl?” I asked.

He flicked on a landing light and there, just ahead were rocks and a sharp drop. We had not landed on the main strip, but on a shorter fighter strip! We had just taxied off the strip, when the port engine cut out. No fuel.

We spent a relieved, but uneasy night in a bombed-out church, hoping that our Marauder would be spared enemy bomb damage.

The haggard Group Captain, sleepless from persistent bombing attacks, nearly had a fit when, early next morning, we asked for 600 gallons of fuel. We were back in Benghasi late in the morning, much to the astonishment of the ground crew.

The plus in this story is that, two months later, word was received that Flying Officer John Willis DFM (RAF), the pilot of the aircraft which blew up that night in Tunis harbour, was now a POW!! I found it hard to believe the news. In my view, no-one could possibly have survived that explosion.

The proof was presented to me about ten years ago when John Willis came to OZ to see a POW friend. When they visited us at Mount Nathan on the Gold Coast, my very first remark to John was “How did you survive”?

He explained that he had undone his seat belt on the flight to Tunis and had failed to do it up again. “I guess I just followed the windscreen when it blew out” he said. “After I woke up in a German hospital two days later, they told me that they found me bobbing around in the harbour next morning, kept afloat by my Mae West life jacket”!

## MORE GOOSE-FLESH

On the day of our third operational sortie. a group of nine Marauders, some carrying 500-pound bombs and some with torpedoes, were to attack enemy shipping north of Crete.

We were number 5 in the gaggle (service-speak for "group"). As we accelerated down the strip carrying a load of 4X500 pound delay-fused bombs on one side of the bomb bay, and a tank with 1 000 gallons of fuel on the other side, my second pilot, Carl Long, called the speeds. At 150 mph (American), I eased the control column (yoke) back, but the aircraft remained firmly on the runway. I applied full back trim. As that made no difference, I decided to abort the take-off. I eased the yoke slightly forward as I went to pull the power off, and the Marauder suddenly leapt into the air.

"Bloody Hell"!!! I said. I soon realised (fully justifying the three exclamation marks) that the cables from the control column to the elevators had been reversed. Forward movement was 'up', backward movement into the body was'down'! After porpoising around the circuit at about 300 feet, we managed to get safely back onto the deck with our cargo of bombs and fuel tanks.

When my blood pressure subsided, I discovered that our aircraft had just come out of maintenance and had been rushed onto the flight line with no time to test-fly it. Flying with standard up and down movements reversed was a bit like driving a car at high speed and turning the steering wheel left to achieve a right turn.

Although our experiences to that time had involved some anxious moments, they were only the beginning of more to come.

## A NEAR CATASTROPHE

Our Squadron, No.14 (RAF) was on detachment at Benghasi when the Americans landed in North Africa. About a month after landing, they asked the British for an anti-shipping squadron.

We quickly found ourselves packing our tents and personal gear, spares, and all kinds of bits and pieces into our Marauder. Then a gaggle of 16 Marauders set off for Benghasi, flying south-west to get around the ground fighting, then west across the desert, and finally north, out over the snow-capped Atlas Mountains into Algeria. Bad weather prevented us from landing at Algiers, and we finished up at a French Foreign Legion strip at Telergma, near the ancient Roman city of Constantine. Our first main base was another Foreign Legion strip at Blida (City of Roses), south-west of Algiers.

We followed the Americans east, all the time carrying out long-range anti-shipping missions. Our operational brief required us to fly under 50 feet for each entire mission, because the German radar could not detect us until we were two or three miles from their stations whose positions we knew about.

A typical mission of seven or eight hours would be to cross the Tyrrhenian Sea, north of Sicily, make a landfall at the Isle of Capri, then coast-crawl the entire west coast of Italy and the south coast of France. I have to admit that we did get that lonely feeling, being on our own, so far inside enemy territory.

There were successes and losses, and always a possible reception by ME109 and FW190 fighters when we dared to look into the Italian Naval Bases at Leghorn and Spezia.

We found ourselves based at Bone, near the Tunisian border for a few weeks. Then the British and American forces took 200 000 Axis prisoners, and the squadron moved to a strip on a dry salt pan at Protville, south-west of Tunis, and we continued to harass enemy shipping.

One night, at about midnight, our Commanding Officer, Wing Commander Dick Maydell DSO DFC, came to our tent and rudely awakened us. "Warrant Officer O'Connor" he said "We have a special mission to do. You and Warrant Officer Ken Dee are the only ones I would trust to do the job. Dee and I have been out for 8 hours today, so I would like you to do it". It was to be a 3 a.m.take-off, so there was no chance to flight-test the aircraft.

On the dot of 3 a.m. we roared off down the flare path. My second pilot, now Bill Sheppard from Gympie (Queensland), called "Rotate" at 150 mph. I eased back the yoke and called for "gear up". Just at that moment, there was a definite thump. We had hit something.

Startled, I looked at Bill and said 'What the Hell was that'?

When I looked back at my instrument panel, the instrument-flying facility Artificial Horizon (AH) indicated a wing down to the right and we were slowly losing height. I made quick corrections and we climbed away, eventually flying parallel to the flare path, where we were able to note that our AH was 15 to 20 degrees out in its registrations. It was a starry night, so we had a visual horizon of a sort. Accordingly, I elected to cage the AH and carry on without its assistance.

The mission was successful, and as always after action, I sent Gerry, our WAG, for a walk through the aircraft to ascertain any damage. There was only one casualty - his loop aerial, encased in a streamlined egg-shaped fibre container, normally positioned on the belly of the aircraft and between the two propellors.

Some 8 hours later, stiff and tired, we were back at Protville. The propellors had hardly stopped turning, when someone opened the forward hatch and pulled down the ladder. Next moment, the Commanding Officer was in the cockpit. He let fly. "O'Connor, I am disgusted with you. I thought you had more brains. You are a bloody idiot to beat up the camp area in the middle of the night".

Our camp, with all its tents and paraphenalia was spread over a large area about a quarter of a mile north-west of the runway.

Bill and I were flabbergasted. "Begging your pardon, Sir' I said. 'No way did we do a beat-up".

"Well then, what do you think this is'? he asked, holding up a piece of loop aerial. "Yes it's off your aircraft. You hit a tent pole in the middle of the camp area after your take-off last night".

I went on to explain that we hit something on take-off and found that we were turning right and losing height. The Boffin as he was affectionately known, was not convinced.

As soon as we vacated the aircraft, I went to the nose-wheel compartment and stood up inside it. To my great relief, the inside of the compartment was splattered with big feathers, bones and dried guts. I called The Boffin to come and have a look.

In more placatory tones, he said "It could be one of those large night owls from this area. Well you were very lucky O'Connor, and you are exonerated. I did not really feel that you were the silly type".

Apparently, we had plucked the tent off three sleeping bods, and it had been estimated that our prop-tip was only about four feet from the ground, with our wing-tip about two feet lower. Fortunately, the tents were dispersed and well-separated.

For some time, I worried that, had we hit the ground with all that fuel and explosives, dozens of our mates would have joined us in that big airfield in the sky.

A few years ago, on a visit to Perth, when I met up with Ken Dee, he asked “Do you remember the night you hit the tent, Neil”?

Remember it? I’ve never been able to forget that near catastrophe!

Due to the nomadic style of our squadron’s disposition, the administrative boffins in London obviously found difficulty in passing on what may have seemed to be details of minor importance. When Ken and I were posted to the U.K. we found that we had both been commissioned nine months earlier, and I had been awarded the DFC six months earlier.

*Archival note:*

*Ken Dee DFC (he with the baby face) was later a member of the Permanent Air Force, transferring to the Special Duties category of Administrative Officer.*

*I was privileged to know him, and confess to having shared an occasional (?) noggin with him. Ken retired from the RAAF with the rank of Wing Commander.*

*E.C.*