



## **AS IT HAPPENED**

**BY**

**GEOFF SMITH**

### **THE BATTLE OF HORNEPAYNE**

In October 1942, I was travelling through Canada with a group of RAAF pilots bound for Nova Scotia en route to the UK.

We had been training under the World War 2 Empire Air Training Scheme and were all suffering from breast trouble, specifically left-breast trouble caused by wearing brand new Pilots Wings. Freshly-won wings were noted for causing the left breast of all aircrew categories to be thrust forward slightly as a public display of the fruits of happy misery known as “aircrew training”.

Our “Iron Horse” had stopped at a railway station in Ontario, when nine of us decided to stretch our legs on the snowy platform.

Most of us had never experienced snow, so it was not long before we were all involved in a snowball fight. Someone decided that it would be a good idea to have our photograph taken, not knowing that a historic moment was being recorded.

The photograph shows, through a white speckle of falling snow, a laughing group of young men dressed in the dark blue uniforms of the RAAF (which many feel should never have been changed in colour), white wings standing out whiter than the falling snow flakes and brighter than the snowballs in their hands.

For me, that photograph records and represents two features of life.

The first reflects the pain of war. Within 12 months, eight of those young pilots were dead as a result of being shot down or being forced down. As the only survivor, I was forced to ditch my Lancaster into the North Sea after a raid on Germany.

In that raid, on our run-up to the target, we were caught in a “blue light” searchlight and a resulting massive cone in excess of fifty searchlights with associated anti-aircraft batteries.

It has been said that flack from anti-aircraft fire has three elements. You see it to start with, you hear it when it is close and you feel it and smell it when it hits. That night, we experienced all three.

One of our inboard engines caught fire which we fortunately extinguished, and I closed the engine down. Then a most peculiar situation developed with the rudder of our Lancaster.

For the benefit of non-aircrew who read this story, the rudder provides directional movement of an aircraft and is controlled by the pilot's use of pedals which are connected to the rudder by cables. The pilot has a facility known as a rudder trim which is designed to correct torque (a mechanical rotational effect) on the rudder. Without a rudder trim, steering of the aircraft could be physically exhausting, particularly so in our situation of having lost one of our engines.

Apparently, the rudder trim mechanism had been damaged by flak, but not the rudder itself.

For one and a half hours, I used brute strength to try to keep on track on our homeward journey. I thought I was doing well until a landfall on the Dutch coast placed us a hundred miles north of track. Without going into detail, we were forced to ditch in the North Sea, not far from the coast. Unfortunately, only three of us survived. We were subsequently washed up on German soil and taken prisoner. I spent nearly two years in Stalag Luft 3.

The second feature of life related to that photograph helps to ease the pain of memory through expressions of gratitude by people of two nations who have put themselves out to say "thank you" to me as the physical survivor, and more importantly to me, to express appreciation to those eight young men whose memories have been and are being recorded as survivors of the "Battle of Hornepayne"

After World War 2, as a Flight Lieutenant, I remained in the RAAF until 1954, when I was forced to retire through ill-health.

A short time ago, with a friend, Rob Allen, I was browsing through a photograph album. When I came to the photograph of the nine of us with snowballs in our hands, I told him about the group, but we could only see part of the name of the railway station. What was it?

Rob was intrigued, so he carried out his own investigation into likely place names, and unbeknown to me, wrote to "The Mayor, Hornepayne, Ontario, Canada" seeking confirmation. He enclosed a copy of the photograph and a brief story about the short future of the young pilots and about my survival.

The reply was swift, with a letter arriving a short time later from the Township of Hornepayne Municipal Clerk Ms Susan Smith. She wrote "Our council was very touched by your letter, and wish to advise that the railway station in the picture is certainly the one here in Hornepayne. On behalf of Council, I would like to extend to Mr Smith all their best wishes and we are sending him a picture of our station taken in 1980 as well as a Township pin and golf shirt".

In a very real way, the bond that is so strong between servicemen has been reinforced, and a tribute to my eight young friends has been established.

I related the story to Gold Coast Councillor (Robina Division) Jan Grew who presented the details to Gold Coast Mayor at that time, Cr Gary Baidon and to Council. The outcome was that a letter of greeting was sent to Hornepayne Municipal Council by Cr Baidon. In addition, I was asked to send to Hornepayne a reciprocal gift of a mounted Gold Coast Council crest and a photograph album of Gold Coast places and scenes.

Jan Grew indicated that together with the Mayor and Council she had the greatest pleasure in supporting me and honouring the memory of young men like the airmen in the photograph. "In this instance" she said "We are paying a tribute to a group of young airmen enjoying themselves in a kindred country, perhaps for the last time. Reading this

story may bring home to young people, realisation of the sacrifices made by so many young men and women years ago, and of the debt we owe them”.

For the latter part of this story I am indebted to Gold Coast Mail journalist Yvonne McLean whose words I have used, and to Cr Jan Grew who arranged the interview with Yvonne and did so much to encourage the Council response.

I am well satisfied with the outcome.

## **TEUTONIC ANGELS**

In early 1945, prisoners-of-war in Germany were being moved around for a variety of reasons. During January of that year, POWs from Stalag Luft 3 were subjected to a forced march on a trek, in part, through snow three to four feet deep.

To make things a bit easier for ourselves, we fashioned sleds to carry our possessions. When a thaw suddenly occurred, our sleds became useless, so we carried our personal belongings on our backs in haversacks as we tramped through the slush.

Overhead, the thunder of war continued as USAF Flying Fortresses roared to their daylight targets in Germany. We estimated that they were flying at about 30 000 feet.

Both the RAF and the USAF dropped bundles of “Window” - very thin strips of reflective material which distorted the radio-ranging and direction-finding qualities of the very efficient radar-connected anti-aircraft batteries.

Due to the height from which Window was dropped from Flying Fortresses, the thin metallic-surfaced strips often took several hours to reach the ground. So the aeroplane noise was long gone.

On one occasion, as we splashed our way along the road, we saw two little German girls aged about five or six playing by the side of the road, chattering excitedly to each other and catching strips of Window as they fell.

My knowledge of German was restricted to words like “cigarettes” and “how much”, but one of my fellow POWs was much more fluent in the language. He smiled, then laughed out loud as he heard the chatter of the little girls.

Pressed to interpret for us, he said ‘They are very excited at catching so many “Angels Hairs” which are falling to the ground’.

Now, I’m not normally given to philosophical thought, but it occurred to me that we could learn from those small children who were able to fantasize and discover joy from materials of war.