A Navigator's Tale

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WINNER OF THE 2003 RAAF HERITAGE AWARDS

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A NAVIGATOR'S TALE

I have written this narrative so that my family may share my pride in having served as a member of the Royal Australian Air Force.

I entered the Service in 1941 as a 20-year-old eager, naive, innocent youth—quite unprepared for service life, but I consider the time spent as an airman very rewarding.

I respectfully dedicate this tale to my parents as an acknowledgment of the anguish I must have caused them during my service.

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CHAPTER I

A CHALLENGE

New Years Day, 1944, dawned bitterly cold at the isolated Royal Air Force (RAF) base at Talbenny in South Wales; the air in the Nissen sleeping hut where I had slept just as cold, the coke stove standing silently in the centre, so different from its warm glow hours before. The temptation to stay between the blankets was almost overwhelming but I had to be airborne later that morning as the navigator of a three-member crew of Ferry Command. The coming missionn would be my first operational flight as a member of the RAF. At 1125, I joined my fellow crew members—my captain, an Irishman named Patrick Murray, known to everyone as Paddy, and our wireless operator, James Draper, known as Ginger because of the colour of his hair—at the pristine Wellington bomber No JA535 standing in a dispersal area at the base. Our task: to fly this aircraft to Rabat in French Morocco, North Africa, and then return to Wales by whatever transport was available. If everything went according to plan, we would reach Rabat within two days, leaving behind the cold Welsh wintry weather for the North African sunshine.

Earlier in the war Paddy had volunteered as a soldier and served in France as a member of the British Expeditionary Force, but during the evacuation of the army from France in 1940 he had been severely wounded on the beach at Dunkirk. I had asked him about his experiences on the beach, but he was not able to recall what happened. The whole event was, to him, just a haze. After hospitalisation, he re-mustered to the RAF and earned his pilot wings at Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia. He was of small build, compared with Ginger or me, smoked a pipe when not on duty, was always ready for a game of cards, but rarely volunteered any information about his army service or his career prior to joining up. Of an impassive nature, not prone to aerobatics, he was content to fly the compass courses I gave him. Ginger, who came from Wigan, was also a quiet type. When flying, with his ears engulfed in his earphones, he seemed to spend all the time with his head over his radio stand, writing to his girlfriend. How he could compose a letter when his ears were filled with the stridency of radio signals and static was beyond me. He was a good wireless operator and never hesitated to give me assistance if requested.

Two years had passed since I joined the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) for training as aircrew, under the provisions of the Empire Air Training Scheme. I had graduated from nine training establishments in Australia, north-eastern Canada, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Finally, after all the hours spent in classrooms and training aircraft, I had reached my ultimate ambition: doing something constructive for the RAF. This operational flight was not as dangerous as that which I believed faced my fellow trainees from Somers in Victoria. About 100 of us had begun our RAAF service there as members of No 24 Initial Training Course in January 1942. The other trainees went to Canada and England many weeks before me, because I fractured the scaphoid bone

in my left wrist playing football at Port Pirie, and was forced to remain in Australia until granted a medical clearance. My fellow trainees were probably now members of Bomber Command.

Wellington bombers were urgently needed in North Africa. I had been recalled from leave in London to rejoin Paddy and Ginger, whom I had last seen at Limavady in Northern Ireland when, as members of a six-man crew, we had first flown together in Wellingtons in July 1943 at a Coastal Command training unit there. Our training had finished in November 1943, but the RAF seemed uncertain of our future and sent us on indefinite leave.

At Talbenny, South Wales, in the last two weeks of 1943, we had conducted air tests on the new Wellington bomber including a heavy-load take-off at the maximum permitted load, a fuel consumption test over the Irish Sea, and swung the compass to register the deviation of the particular compass needle in the cockpit. All these tests completed, we were authorised to leave for Africa on New Years Day. As a safety precaution, the aircraft required an inflatable fuel tank to be installed in the centre fuselage. This was to be carried out the following day at Hurn, to increase the operating range of the aircraft, and ensure adequate fuel for the long flight to North Africa.

The journey to Rabat was planned for two stages. The first was to Hurn, an airfield on the English south coast—a flight of 80 minutes in daylight. As the navigator I should find this flight across the Bristol Channel, Somerset and Dorset relatively easy. I expected the second stage from Hurn to Rabat in Morocco to be more difficult. Flying throughout the night, the flight would take about nine hours—leaving England from above the Scilly Isles, across the Bay of Biscay, down the coast of Spain and Portugal, and turning left at Cabo de Sao Vincente for North Africa—with few navigational aids to assist me. One of the other navigators experienced in flying to Rabat assured me there should not be any problems. His advice: when you reach the Scilly Isles, just turn to the south and fly until the flashes of the Spanish lighthouses come into view. It would then be easy to get a fix (work out my position).

After a night in a strange bed at Hurn on New Years Day, and having to pass the time until our planned take-off at 0100 for Rabat on 3 January, we caught a bus into Bournemouth for a meal and perhaps the movies. Being mid-winter, the only afternoon show was a live performance of a pantomime, so we sat with a mob of yelling children and watched *Puss in Boots*.

For the flight from Hurn to Rabat, our instructions were to climb slowly to a height of 10,000 feet by the time we reached our first turning point: the Scilly Isles. Our route passed close to Plymouth, where barrage balloons could be a danger. The balloons would not be visible in the darkness, but if we strayed towards them their proximity would be indicated by a warning radio signal in our headphones. On arrival above the Scilly Isles, my intention was to set a southerly course across the Bay of Biscay to a point ten miles west of Cape Finistere, north-western Spain.

The Bay of Biscay had a reputation of being a very hostile area to both shipping and aircraft because of the enemy U-boats operating from Brest on the French coast. To reach their operating areas in the Atlantic Ocean and to return to their bases, the U-boats were forced to travel part of the way on the surface to charge their batteries. Because of the successful activities of the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy during daylight hours, this surface crossing had to be made under the cover of darkness. To hunt these U-boats at night, the RAF had equipped a number of Liberator and Wellington bombers with the latest radar, and a retractable 24-inch searchlight known as a Leigh Light. The radar was to search for the U-boats cruising on the surface, the Leigh Light to illuminate them for the attack. To counter this, the Luftwaffe had stationed at Brest a squadron of Junkers 88 night fighters incorporating a high-powered light to hunt the Liberators and Wellingtons. We were especially warned to keep a lookout for these enemy night fighters with their lights when crossing this stretch of water.

I was in the operations room at Hurn at 2300 to give myself sufficient time to do all the calculations for the proposed flight. Having laid out my chart and maps on the large navigation table I drew in the legs of the route on the chart, measured the bearing of each, and stepped out the distances with my dividers. To calculate the courses to be set on the compass it was essential that I had the latest meteorological forecast, giving details of the wind speed and direction for each leg of the route. The accuracy of the meteorological report given to me was totally dependent upon the prompt and timely receipt of weather data from reporting stations throughout the United Kingdom. To obtain particular information for the area west of France, aircraft based on an airfield near our base in Wales made long flights, twice daily, over the Atlantic, south of Ireland. These aircraft, fitted with highly accurate weather instruments and a sophisticated radio altimeter, made it practical to fly over the water and record variations in the barometric pressures in the area, which were essential for accurate weather forecasting. Using a hand-held Dalton Computer, I calculated the magnetic compass course for each leg of the journey based on the winds forecast by the meteorological section. If these were accurate I could expect an uneventful flight; if incorrect, the aircraft could soon wander far from my planned route. One navigational aid I could rely on were the flashes of the neutral lighthouses on the Spanish and Portuguese coasts. Shown on the map with details of their colour and flash patterns, they would be invaluable and with two lights visible, I could take bearings of both with a prismatic compass and fix my position. On a clear night the lights could be visible for over 50 miles.

By midnight, my planning was complete and I was ready to go. At 0030, a truck arrived to take us to the Wellington. We all had our parachutes and Mae Wests (life jackets). I had my full navigation bag of charts and maps; Ginger, his code books and the sandwiches; and Paddy, the six vacuum flasks of hot sweet coffee. Because of the total blackout, it was a slow journey around the airfield perimeter track until the truck reached the Wellington standing alone in the darkness. It took only a few minutes to load up our equipment. Making my way inside the aircraft, I saw the large inflatable fuel tank in the centre of the fuselage, which held the additional fuel for the long flight. At 0100 it was time to climb out of England, so I stood alongside Paddy as he taxied the aircraft along the dimly lit perimeter track around the airfield to the end of the runway.

With the aircraft lined up on the runway, as Paddy checked the magnetos, I glimpsed ahead the two rows of tiny runway lights showing the way, and standing there I quietly prayed the weather would be kind and our journey safe. Within a few moments, it was brakes off, full throttle into the darkness. My estimated time of arrival at Rabat was 1000. I admired Paddy as he circled and climbed above Hurn, relying on the small, dimly lit instrument panel in front of him. As I looked down the airfield lights suddenly vanished, leaving total darkness. Finally at 1,000 feet, he swung the Wellington onto the course I had given him and we were on our way to the Scilly Isles, climbing to 10,000 feet. With the country below totally without lights, there was no way I could see if we were on track. My plan was, if uncertain of our position when we were due to reach the Scilly Isles, to turn left on to our course for Spain.

About 30 minutes after take-off, I was standing alongside Paddy talking about the calm conditions prevailing and listening to the comforting roar of the starboard engine, when the noise suddenly vanished, the propeller quietly spinning in the slipstream, the aircraft turning towards the silent engine. Engine failure was a new and unsettling experience for me, and I realised in the ensuing seconds that although an empty Wellington could maintain height on one engine, we were carrying all the extra fuel for the long trip. Maintaining height with this extra load was, in my opinion, very doubtful. Anxiously I looked at Paddy, who had swung the rudder to port to offset the swing towards the silent engine, at the same time intently studying the instrument panel. He finally turned a fuel cock, changing the source of fuel to the silent engine, which in an instant responded with its usual roar, and the aircraft became stable again. The whole incident only lasted a few seconds, but it shook me and was enough to demolish my confidence in having an uneventful flight. That one of our engines stopped from lack of fuel meant that the particular tank in use had not been checked while at Hurn, raising the spectre about the port engine. The only probable explanation I have for the event was that the ground staff at Hurn missed replacing the fuel used from a particular tank on our transit from Talbenny to Hurn.

Finally relaxed, a few minutes before my estimated time to reach the Scilly Isles, I went forward, laid beside the bombsight, and looked down through the glass panel in the floor. Dimly, I saw white breakers on islands two miles below telling me we were right on our predicted track, and I gave Paddy the new southerly course. The flight seemed to be going well. The next positional fix I planned to obtain would be from the Spanish lighthouses. If everything went according to my plan, their welcoming beams would be visible after two and a half hours of flying. It was a great night for flying, for conditions were calm. The moon had not yet risen—above us a canopy of stars, while just below now was a pattern of scattered white clouds.

At about 0230, while enjoying a cup of coffee and a sandwich, I heard the engines increase power and felt the nose of the aircraft drop. In answer to my anxious question, Paddy answered that he had seen a bright light in the cloud tops on our left, which could be a German JU88 night fighter that had picked us up on radar. Our best defence: to get into the clouds below and keep changing course. We hid in the clouds for about 20 minutes, changing course frequently, but whatever we did we couldn't shake the

enemy fighter off, the light being always there whenever we peeped above the clouds. Suddenly, we burst out of the clouds into the clear night air and visible low in the east was the bright light that I recognised as Sirius, the brightest star in the heavens. What a great relief to realise the danger existed only in our imagination! But then Paddy asked for a course to set on the compass, and my problem was that I had no idea where our wanderings had taken us. We could now be 50 miles closer to France, or further out over the Atlantic. We were lost. Telling him to revert to his original course, I sat in my chair and tried to get a grip on myself. For a few seconds I felt a sense of panic, but there was nowhere to run. I had never felt so lonely. This was something I had never envisaged and I couldn't ask the others for help. In fact, there was nothing to be gained by telling them how I felt. I just had to get control of the situation myself. Theoretically, I should have recorded all the compass headings of the aircraft for the past half-hour in my navigation log, but when you imagine you are being stalked by an enemy fighter, calmness and reason are not always present.

Sitting there, I realised I could calculate our position from the stars shining in the night sky above us by using the aircraft sextant and fixing our position, called an astrofix. But 14 months had passed since I attended the astronomical navigation course at Nhill in Victoria and I hadn't used a sextant since then. To add to my problem, I didn't know the names of the stars shining in the Northern Hemisphere, and could I recall the mathematics needed? Studying the page dated 2/3 January in the Air Almanac from my green navigation bag, I read the names of the three particular stars to use, but which were they of the stars shining in the heavens above me? On first glance, there seemed to be thousands sparkling in the clear night sky above. Standing with my head in the perspex astrodome with the planisphere, or star atlas, in my hand, I eventually picked out the three nominated stars. One was Polaris which, always shining above the North Pole, would give me my latitude.

Anxiously I found and tested the sextant, which to my great relief operated correctly. Giving my watch to Ginger to accurately note the time of each sighting, I put the sextant to my eye in the astrodome and carefully began to record the elevation of each of the three stars, and in ten minutes I had the elevations I needed. To convert them to lines on the chart was the next problem. Slowly I recalled the mathematics I had been taught at Nhill. From the elevations, I drew three straight lines on the chart. The next step, to transfer the first and second lines forward on the chart to allow for the distance travelled to the time of the third line, which created a pencilled triangle on the chart with 50-mile sides. Not very accurate, but it showed our position somewhere within the triangle. Having achieved this approximate fix, my confidence returned. I took another set of sightings. This time, to my great joy, the triangle was quite small; a good astrofix. Confidently, I gave Paddy an accurate course to set on the compass to reach the turning point off Cape Finisterre. Now relaxed, self assured and fortified with hot coffee, I used the sextant for the third time and was back in control of the situation.

With 20 minutes to go before reaching the Spanish cape, it was time to search for lighthouse flashes and I asked Paddy to scan the darkness ahead. At last he called me to the cockpit and pointed ahead to a tiny red flash. Comparing the pattern of the flashes

with the lighthouses marked on the map, I pinpointed its location on the north-west tip of Spain. It was a great relief to establish contact with the world below, and also to confirm the accuracy of my work with the sextant. Soon we reached our turning point and time for a new course to the south. If all went well this would take us to a point off Cape Raso, close to Lisbon, the capital of Portugal. When first light came, I could expect to see the Portuguese coastline about ten miles off the port side of the aircraft. As the first glimmers of pre-dawn light crept over the eastern horizon, I took my map to the astrodome. Spread out before me on the left of the Wellington was the coastline and countryside of Portugal with mountains in the background. Checking the coastline with the map, I obtained a positive fix. After such a stressful night, I was relieved to see the section of the coastline I had predicted. Conditions were perfect; with the clouds left behind, visibility was excellent. Passing Cape Raso, another new course; this time to Cape St. Vincente, the turning point at the south-west tip of Portugal. Soon it was time for the final leg of the journey to the airport just north of Rabat. Flying over the calm blue ocean, I was looking forward to seeing the African mainland. After about half an hour, I went into the cockpit and stood beside Paddy. The golden sands of the Moroccan coastline came into view, with the sun shining on the distant white buildings of Rabat on our right. At last, we were on the ground taxying to our parking space. For me, it had been a traumatic journey of ten hours. It was close to 1100 before all the formalities regarding the handing over of the aircraft were completed. All we wanted now was a meal and a sleep, for we had been on the go for 28 hours.

After a welcome brunch from refreshing American rations, we were shown to the airfield transit accommodation—stalls in a large set of concrete stables, possibly previously occupied by the mounts of the French Foreign Legion, with two beds in each stall. The whole arrangement was airy because of the retention of the typical stable half-doors; everything looked spotless with white pillows and sheets. I couldn't have cared about the conditions, for I would have slept anywhere. Woken at 1800, we enjoyed another good American meal, later joining the local American personnel for an outdoor screening of a Danny Kaye movie. Sitting on canvas chairs in the balmy evening air, the scene was so different from the bleakness of Wales.

Next morning came the treat of a marvellous American breakfast of pancakes, maple syrup, eggs, bacon and coffee, without any sign of food rationing (in the RAF, the usual ration was one egg a week). At 1500, a British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) Dakota aircraft landed and picked us up for the short hop to Gibraltar. The Rock looked very awe-inspiring as we circled prior to landing. Our instructions: be back at the aircraft by 2330. In the meantime we were free to explore the township, and taking the opportunity the three of us walked the short distance down the main road into the shopping area. The atmosphere as we walked among the shops was exciting. Display windows were stocked with souvenirs and food was for sale including fresh fruit I had not seen for months, such as oranges and bananas.

Standing on the tarmac just before boarding the aircraft, the scene across the frontier was so dissimilar from night-time in the UK. The town of La Linea was a blaze of lights with a backdrop of twinkling lights from the villages on the Spanish countryside. The BOAC

Dakota left the Rock at midnight, and nine hours later landed at Whitchurch Airport near Bristol. I did not find the flight back relaxing, sitting on a tubular framed canvas chair in a darkened cabin with blacked-out windows. When flying I always needed to know what was happening, but here I was isolated. What a great relief, after nine hours, to hear the undercarriage being lowered, signifying the end of the flight. After passing through customs we boarded an airport bus to the Bristol Railway Station to wait for a train to Haverfordwest, and then transport to Talbenny. We had been absent from England for 33 hours. Upon returning to our base, two days elapsed before my nerves had calmed down enough to enable me to comprehend what was printed in the daily newspapers.

CHAPTER II

LEARNING ABOUT LIFE

A completely new lifestyle faced me when I entered the RAAF No 1 Initial Training School at Somers on the shores of Western Port, Victoria. I expected to learn to be an airman, and later in the year to graduate as a member of a bomber crew. The preceding day, 18 January 1942, had been my 21st birthday. I was a very immature youth, having grown up in a restricted Christian household where association with girls was not encouraged, dancing considered sinful, my social activities restricted to the Ormond Presbyterian Church and its youth fellowship. I was totally unprepared for service life. I had volunteered under the provisions of the Empire Air Training Scheme in late 1940, while working as the accountant at Avant Engineering, which specialised in the mass production of brass fittings. Avant Engineering had been awarded a contract by the government to supply small brass components to the Maribyrnong Munition Factory. My responsibilities were keeping the accounts and ensuring we were prompt with our deliveries.

Leaving Caulfield Grammar School just before my 15th birthday in January 1936, I had no plans for the future except to find some type of employment. Walking along Bourke Street in Melbourne, I met a fellow student from school who was the office boy at Alfred Edments, a large variety store in Bourke Street. He intimated that if he could find a successor, he would be promoted to junior clerk. The next day, I was interviewed and appointed as office boy. I now realised I had a career and a future as a clerk in an office, later as an accountant; and for the first time decided to put my head down and study. Attending accountancy evening classes on three evenings a week at the Victorian Railways Institute for the ensuing four years, I passed all the requisite examinations to qualify for membership of the Federal Institute of Accountants. Following my acceptance as a Provisional Associate at the age of 18 (provisional because I was under 21) I read in a newspaper that the Royal Australian Air Force needed qualified accountants and submitted an application. The reply from the RAAF recruiting office said that they would consider my request, but only if I had been rejected for service as aircrew. Being shy, of slight build, having problems with my eyesight, a slight curvature of the spine and with a history of many childhood illnesses including pneumonia, I submitted my application for training as a flier. I firmly believed that because of my past medical history and physical attributes, I would not meet the stringent requirements for an aircrew trainee and would be enlisted as an accountant.

In March 1941, reporting to a building, formerly the showrooms of Preston Motors in Russell Street Melbourne, I joined 24 other volunteers and spent the whole day undergoing medical and intelligence examinations. One of the medical tests used a small box of tiny pieces of coloured wool to test for colour blindness. Part of the intelligence test asked us to answer 60 questions in two minutes. At the end of the day

I found myself, to my great surprise, one of five successful applicants sworn in as a member of the Royal Australian Air Force Reserve, which was something I had never envisaged.

As proof of my membership I received a lapel badge and documentary evidence that I had enlisted—which was of great importance in case the army or manpower authorities claimed me, as all young men of my age group were being called up for army service. It was fortuitous I had evidence of my membership in the reserve, because a month later two burly military policemen came to my office at Avant Engineering and questioned me, but after examining my documents they quietly went on their way. I suspect someone had suggested to the manpower authorities I was evading my call-up for service in the army.

Now a member of the Reserve, I learnt the RAAF was not yet ready to cope with the rush of aircrew volunteers and was instructed to continue at the office until required. There were classes to be attended at the Glenhuntly State School each Wednesday evening where all the trainees were introduced to a revision course. 'The 21 Lessons' covered a wide range of subjects, with all the exercises set out to be completed. The initial test in mathematics was the addition of two lines of figures. The breadth of the subjects was of great assistance to me, especially those I had not mastered at school. As an enthusiastic group of students, there was no skylarking in this classroom and to maintain our zeal, a visit to the Laverton airbase was arranged. Travelling by steam train from the Spencer Street Station, we were let loose to wander through the hangars and look at pre-war aircraft and equipment.

We were issued with a comprehensive typewritten explanation of Air Force law to be studied. Another hurdle we met was the Morse Code alphabet. To learn this we were encouraged to walk around during the day, repeating the letters aloud: d dah dit=R, d d dit=S, dit=E. We were introduced to the practical operation of radio communication in the flat of a radio ham, where each Sunday morning we tried to receive signals in the Morse Code. It nearly drove me mad as I tried to convert a stream of dots and dashes to groups of letters, but five groups a minute was the best I could achieve. Aircraft recognition was another subject to master. Issued with a book of aircraft silhouettes, we were expected to recognise instantly the difference between a Spitfire and a Messerschmidt, or a Whitley and a Dornier. In wartime, it is essential to know every type of aircraft and be able to decide in seconds whether the aircraft approaching is friendly or hostile.

After being in the Reserve for almost ten months, a telegram arrived:

> REPORT AT 0800 ON 19 JANUARY 1942 TO THE PRESTON MOTORS BUILDING, RUSSELL STREET.

Later that morning in a group of about 100, I marched to Flinders Street Station to board the electric train to Frankston, and on by bus to Somers. Stepping off the buses at the camp we were lined up, divided into three flights, and introduced to our guardians

for the next 16 weeks, in my case: the B Flight drill instructor. He was only a few years older than we were, and was not the type depicted on radio and film; he treated us as human beings. Everything in the service had to have a number, so we became No 24 Course. I was allocated No 410735. Entry into the service meant that we had to have an Air Force rank and were listed as Aircraftsmen Second Class, Group 5 (ACII), the lowest rank in the RAAF; our daily pay: five shillings a day.

Accommodation was under canvas with six trainees to each tent and we were each given two hessian bags, shown a big heap of straw, and instructed how to make our own palliasses. We learnt how to fold the palliasse and blankets each morning before parade. When six were laid out on the wooden floor of the tent at night, there was no spare room. It was definitely a different life style, but I was too tired at nightfall to complain. Life in the camp was a real cultural shock to me. Here I was, suddenly stripped of all my privacy. Instead of the pleasure of lying in the bath at home, I was taking a shower with a dozen other trainees—which was certainly a new experience.

We needed uniforms, and marched to the clothing store to be issued with a blue kit bag and enough kit to fill it: a dark blue uniform for wearing out of camp, blue boiler suits, a waterproof beret, and a wide brimmed hat for wearing in camp. The hat was a problem, for the store didn't have a large enough size for me, which caused me to be reprimanded by officers for not wearing a hat. There were no individual fittings for the other clothing. We were asked what size we wore, and the relevant item of clothing placed on the store counter. So it also was with our boots. These looked so heavy and stiff, and were sheer torture to those of us not used to wearing that style of footwear while having to march up and down the parade ground. There were many suggestions on how to soften the leather to make it more pliable, anything to stop the blisters forming, but to no avail. There was no simple answer: just wear them in, which took about two weeks. When I left Somers, however, they were old friends. Kit bags and identification discs needed to be marked with our air force numbers. Not having our own stencils or punches, we queued up to have these tasks done by a couple of enterprising ground staff. They had a good profitable business. You could say they had a captive market.

Each day commenced with a parade of all personnel on the parade ground. Then came lectures on a large range of subjects including air force law, physics, chemistry, mathematics, and personal health and hygiene. The day usually included an hour of rifle drill on the parade ground. Drilling with a rifle on the parade ground was certainly not one of my successes; always finishing out of line in any movement, confused as to whether I should pivot on my toe or heel. We all took turns to issue orders to the flight, and the commands given had to be precise and in a commanding tone. To nervous trainees like myself not used to issuing orders to a group, and that group of mates waiting to intentionally pick up any uncertainty in the order, it could lead to chaos. It was a frustrating experience, and in my case the squad finished up in the scrub at the side of the parade ground, intent on marching into Western Port.

Most of my fellow trainees were university students or graduates and some found the subjects in the classrooms boring, but having left school at the end of Year 10 I found

the subjects, especially physics, fascinating. I was enthralled to learn about magnetic fields and why a compass needle always points to the north. One subject still causing me a lot of concern was the Morse Code. Each day, we sat at desks and tried to absorb the stream of dots and dashes emanating from a loud speaker. At first, the speed of the stream was slow, but later it built up to 12 groups a minute. I found this very hard to achieve, but at the end of my stay at Somers, I just succeeded. It didn't help in the test that the pass mark was 98 per cent—you were allowed two mistakes per 100 groups. One thing it proved to me, I would never make a good wireless operator. Fortunately, I was never required to touch a Morse key during my service.

On a lighter note, enjoyment was provided in the camp by visiting concert parties. Comprising volunteer artists and chorus girls from all facets of the theatre and concert hall, they offered first class entertainment. Such a group was Porter's Mob, who gave us a wonderful evening of entertainment—equal to anything you could see in the city. Later, a group of artists came who were not up to the high standard set by Porter's Mob. At the interval, a number of the audience decided that they preferred to be elsewhere, only to discover service police stationed at every door to ensure that the entertainers had an audience for the second half of the program.

Our initial introduction to the medical officers came with the first medical lecture, two weeks after our arrival, when the lecturer gave a full and frank explanation of our bodily functions and the dangers that could confront us outside the camp. This subject was certainly new to me; my knowledge of the topic was abysmal, my experience with the fairer sex very minimal and limited to an occasional kiss from one of the girls of the Ormond PFA after walking her home after evening church. I think the lecturer set out to scare us and he certainly succeeded, because two trainees passed out during the lecture. Later that day we marched to the station sick quarters for our injections. Standing in a queue up to the door of the building with bared arms, we silently waited to enter. Remarks from passing senior trainees did not help. At last I entered to see ahead the medical officers armed with their large syringes. Looking at the scene from over my shoulder, the trainee behind me gave a little moan and slowly sank to the floor. All who made it through the gauntlet received three jabs and a vaccination. I do not know what happened to my friend on the floor or the second trainee who joined him. The medical officers were cunning too—they had fixed the day for our vaccinations to suit themselves. The reaction came normally after eight days, when we were on our first weekend of leave. Next came the dental inspection, which did not cause much concern, with one exception. One of my tent mates was called out of class later to report to the dental officer. When we went to our tent at the end of the day, there was Jerry flat out on his bed, minus all his teeth. The dental officer had extracted the lot. It sounds rather brutal, but as Jerry received a complete set of dentures within days, he must have known what to expect but just had not confided in his tent mates.

I had enjoyed very happy teenage years as a member of the Ormond Presbyterian Fellowship, but here life was so different, my formative years having been spent in a restricted world. Having come from a strict home where the family teachings also included the dangers of alcohol and hotels, I was genuinely shocked at the reported

exploits of some of my fellow trainees. Irrespective of that, I found the members of No 24 Course all good company.

After a month I was given weekend leave, and went home proudly wearing my new dark blue uniform and forage cap with the white flash, the badge of an aircrew trainee. Waiting for me when I arrived was an invitation to a surprise party planned for the following night, Saturday, for twin girls, members of the Cheltenham Presbyterian Church. I had first met them a few years before at a Cheltenham Fellowship rally at their church. The party was to celebrate their reaching the age of 21 years. Although suffering from the effects of my vaccination, I was delighted to accept the invitation and join the participants in a decorated barn behind a house at Cheltenham, and to see so many PFA friends. Especially a girl I knew from Hughesdale, Mavis McDonald, whom I had first seen on the beach at Edithvale in 1937, when with a group from Ormond to attend a rally at the Presbyterian Church. Mavis was a member of the Oakleigh Church. I remembered my initial sighting of her because of the striking colour of her hair: rich titian. On that first day at Edithvale, noticing she had difficulty in gaining a seat with her friends at one of the tables set out for our evening meal, I had offered her mine and moved to another.

During the following months, while working as a junior clerk at a motor spares distributor in North Melbourne, I regularly met a group of PFA friends from the Cheltenham and Ormond churches on No 6 platform at Flinders Street Station prior to boarding a Frankston-bound train after work. Included in this group was the girl with the striking hair, Mavis, who travelled with us until she changed trains at Caulfield for the Oakleigh train. Sitting next to her in the train one day, I found her good company and that she enjoyed the same simple pleasures as me. Remembering the saying ‘faint heart never won fair lady’, or especially girls with striking hair, I hesitatingly asked her if she would meet me at the Crystal Palace cinema near the Caulfield railway station on the following Saturday, promising to take her home afterwards. The movie was good, the company enjoyable, and reaching her home I had only about 200 yards to a bus stop for the bus from Oakleigh to Ormond. Later I learnt she was attending night classes at the Emily McPherson College for the subjects of dress designing and cutting, and coincidentally one of her classes was held on the same night of the week as one of my accountancy classes at the Victorian Railways Institute. As we both remained in the city for a meal before classes on these nights, we agreed to meet and have the meal together at the Victoria Coffee Palace on Little Collins Street. Soon we were regularly eating together on these school nights and, when the weather was pleasant, having sandwiches on the lawns alongside the river. She was very pleasant company and happy to meet me at Caulfield on some Saturday nights to see the latest movies. However, exams were looming on the horizon for the subjects of commercial and company law, and with my ambition of passing all the entrance exams for the Federal Institute of Accountants by my 20th birthday, there was little spare time for a social life. I enjoyed her company when we did meet, and was thrilled to see her again and renew our friendship. We had so much to talk about, and meet all the mutual friends we had travelled with on the train before the war. The atmosphere was great and the hours passed so quickly until it was time to go home. Knowing that Mavis would have to catch the train to Ormond for the

bus to Hughesdale, I offered my companionship for the rail journey. We soon reached Ormond, and as I escorted her to the bus I hesitatingly asked whether she would reply if I wrote to her. To my delight, she agreed. I watched the bus pull away from the station, happy in the knowledge there was someone who could keep me up to date with news of my wide circle of Presbyterian friends.

A couple of days after returning to camp, I took my leather correspondence satchel to the recreation room and wrote to her, asking if she would meet me on my next leave. Happily, there was a letter for me within a week. Remembering how I came into possession of the satchel still embarrasses me. Two months before I expected to leave my employment, the foreman suggested it would be a good gesture if my fellow employees presented our employer with a Christmas present as thanks for his generosity. Would I collect sixpence from each member each week towards the gift? This I did, handing over the funds to the foreman. Finally, at the Christmas party at the factory, to my great surprise I was presented with the satchel. To my embarrassment, I realised I had collected for my own gift.

Our commanding officer at Somers, Squadron Leader Brewster, was an understanding officer with a certain mystique about him. While not looking old, he wore three rows of campaign ribbons under the pilot's wings on his uniform. Evidently he had participated in a number of conflicts. Several years after the war, I read that he had fallen from the seventh floor balcony of a hotel in India. There were two other officers in camp at Somers I will always remember. The first was Flying Officer Hubert Opperman, the champion cyclist. The second, Squadron Leader Alan Martin, had resigned his commission to be a trainee.

Our stay at Somers lasted 16 weeks. During the concluding weeks, we all talked and speculated about our future in the Service. Would we be selected as pilots, air observers or radio operators/airgunners? Nearly everyone wanted to be selected as a potential pilot, but as usually only one third of each course achieved this posting, many of the trainees would be disappointed. Finally, we each appeared before the selection board to learn our future. Having gained a prize at school for algebra and geometry, and confident that I could cope with the mathematics of the air observer training, I volunteered for this course. Another reason was that I had reservations as to my ability to fly an aircraft, for it had taken me weeks to learn to ride a bike. When the postings were announced, many of my fellow trainees were very disappointed. When they first enlisted, it was with the ambition of being fighter pilots and flying Spitfires, but now they contemplated careers as 'pencil mechanics' (air observers) or radio operators. For myself, I was happy and looked forward with interest to a new future. Those of us selected to train as air observers were ordered to report on 25 May 1942 to the RAAF transport officer at Spencer Street Station for transport to Mt. Gambier, South Australia. The hopeful would-be pilots were to go by boat across Bass Strait to Western Junction in Tasmania; the wireless-operators, by train to Parkes in New South Wales.

About to leave Somers, we received our first promotion to Leading Aircraftsmen and were permitted to wear the propeller badge on our sleeves. Successful completion of

the course for us all, and our promotion, provided a good excuse for a celebration. On the evening prior to our departure, the 30 or so members of our B Flight went by bus to a hotel in Frankston with our drill instructor for a final dinner together. It was a memorable event for two reasons: I was fined two shillings by our instructor for tipping up a jug of orange drink on the table, and this was the first occasion that I had ever been inside a hotel. The next day, 18 May 1942, we were given ten days' leave. Ten days of relaxation at home, and a chance to renew local friendships. Most importantly, Mavis had agreed to meet me on the Saturday night at the Caulfield Crystal Palace picture theatre.

After a final parade, we filed on to the buses for the ride to Frankston Railway Station. Standing on the platform idly waiting for the train, the scene was changed by one of the trainees starting to sing the Maori's Farewell. 'Now is the hour that we must say goodbye.' Within minutes the entire group became a choir. To me it was very symbolic, for I would never see at least two thirds of the group again. I enjoyed my time at Somers. Living in a tent with five mates was quite a new experience for me, where cooperation was essential. But the food had been good and plentiful and as proof of this, my weight increased by 14 pounds during my stay.

CHAPTER III

CHARTING A COURSE

About 30 fellow trainees joined me at Spencer Street Station for the journey to Mt. Gambier. In the group were the five who had volunteered for air observer training, but the majority were disgruntled would-be pilots. Our journey from Spencer Street railway station to Mt. Gambier took 13 hours; firstly by train through Geelong, Ballarat, and Ararat to Hamilton; then by bus to the Mt. Gambier airfield, which housed the No 2 Air Observer School, to introduce us to flying and the art of being an air observer. The curriculum here was very complex, including navigation, meteorology, maps and charts, photography, reconnaissance, signals, shipping, and the operation of an aircraft. A total of 12 subjects. We joined a similar number of trainees from the initial training school at Victor Harbor, who were pleased to get away from there. Discipline had, in their opinion, been far too strict.

A statement issued by the UK Air Ministry in 1942 declared:

> In many respects, the air observer has the most responsible and exacting task in a bomber aircraft. He must always be alert. He must estimate the course, judge weather conditions, and look out for ice, and keep alternate landing grounds in mind. He must show a marked ability to handle figures and never make mistakes!

The school was housed in a collection of recently erected fibro-cement huts and the sleeping quarters were good, with 24 trainees to each hut, and standard Service beds resembling cyclone gates on trestles with good mattresses—far better than straw palliasses. One disadvantage was that there was no lighting outside the buildings. One dark night, while crossing from our hut to the classrooms, I stepped into a newly dug air-raid shelter and found myself at the bottom on the soft dirt.

Of all the 12 subjects taught at Mt. Gambier, I found meteorology the most difficult. The simple clause in the 1942 Air Ministry Statement, ‘judge weather conditions’, was easy to say but extremely difficult to achieve, for the subject was so vast and complicated, every facet was important. The lecturer on meteorology really knew his subject, but its complexity worried me and I spent many evenings in the classrooms trying to grasp the differences between cold fronts and warm fronts. High and low pressure gradients worried me too. I learnt about temperature inversions—why the wind could change speed and direction with a change in the height of the aircraft. There was so much to learn and to retain, and my success as a navigator would depend on my comprehension of the weather—especially the speed and direction of the wind over the intended route to my destination.

The main difficulty in navigating an aircraft from one point to another is that the aircraft is flying through a body of air that is not static, but moving in one direction. Thus, to an observer on the ground, the aircraft is veering away from the direction in which it is pointed. The movement of a body of air affects us all and is known to us as the wind. An aircraft rarely flies in the direction in which it is pointed, and the navigator must allow for this by giving the pilot a course to fly, pointing the aircraft further into the wind. The calculations used to obtain the correct compass course for a pilot to fly are based on a simple geometric equation that represents the speed and direction of the wind, the aircraft course, and the desired track as sides of a triangle. Where you know the length of two sides of a triangle and the intervening angle, it is easy to calculate the length of the third side, and the other two angles. The three sides of the triangle represent the wind, the course to fly and the desired track—the length of each indicating speed. The whole equation was known to us as the 'Triangle of Velocities'. To make these calculations, I used a hand-held mechanical device called a Dalton Computer, a type of circular slide rule with a perspex centre. The angle between the course set on the compass and the track across the ground below is known as 'the drift'. To assist me, the Avro Anson aircraft was fitted with a type of vertical telescope, which allowed me to look at the scene passing below and judge how much the aircraft was straying off course. In essence, the art of aircraft navigation is the ability to guess, compute, or estimate the speed and direction of the fickle wind, which blows wherever it is so inclined. My whole service as a navigator was a daily confrontation between the wind and myself.

Two advantages that Mt. Gambier had over Somers was regular bus transport between the camp and the local township, and the presence of WAAAFs. A high wooden fence encircled their accommodation huts, known as the 'waaafery'. Fraternisation on the camp was restricted, but it was possible to meet in the township. During the second week there, one of my tent mates from Somers came to me with an odd request. A friendly WAAAF had agreed to go with him by bus from Mt. Gambier to Portland on the next Sunday morning to spend the day sightseeing, providing she could be accompanied by another WAAAF. This presented him with a problem. Would I go and make it a foursome? It was about 1000 when the four of us arrived in a cold and rainy Portland, with all the shops shut except for a milk bar facing the ocean. All we could do was walk about the town, looking at shop windows and sheltering from the rain under shop verandas. Fortunately we could get tea and sandwiches at the milk bar for lunch, but after that there was still nothing to do until 1600 when the return bus was due. It was not a happy group that boarded the bus to return, and the second WAAAF, who was very shy, made no contribution to the situation at all. Perhaps she was like me, wishing she were back in camp.

Transport to Mt. Gambier was only by a small bus, usually packed by trainees and WAAAFs on the final trip to the camp on a Saturday night. The seating capacity was limited to two long seats running the length of the bus; everyone else had to stand. On my first trip back, I stood the whole way. The second Saturday I got a seat, but with others endeavouring to squeeze onto the seat, I was under pressure from both sides. There was a total blackout and I had no idea who sat beside me. I was the meat in the sandwich.

To relieve the pressure, I freed my right arm and placed it behind the shoulder of a neighbour and suddenly, to my delight, I realised from the scent of captivating perfume I had my arm around a WAAAF. We sat silently in total darkness for the rest of the trip with her nestled into my shoulder. Soon the trip was over and I stepped out into the dark night having no idea of her identity except the scent of her perfume. Two weeks passed and I was in the station post office, and standing next to me was a pretty young brunette WAAAF with the same captivating perfume. Her name was Emma, and she agreed to meet me in the township the next Saturday. Later during my stay, on a visit to the town, she asked if we could be photographed together so she could send a copy to her family. The photo was taken by the local photographer, and I thought that was the end of the matter. Not so, however, because the photographer liked his handiwork and had placed it in his shop window, enlarged and framed for all to see.

After two weeks of lectures, I made my first flight in the Service. The Anson aircraft used in our training was known as the 'Aggie', and was a twin engine pre-war aircraft with a reputation for strength and dependability. However, it had one failing: the undercarriage was only activated by hand, requiring 160 turns of a large crank handle to lift or lower it into the wings, this task always being the duty of the trainee-observer. To experience flying, I had flown with Ansett Airways from Adelaide to Melbourne via Mildura during the Christmas holidays prior to my entrance into the RAAF, and was airsick for most of the journey, so I knew what faced me. Getting dressed for the flight did nothing to calm my nervousness. First into the waterproof flying suit, with its strange smell, the close fitting leather helmet and flying boots. Next, the fitting of the parachute harness. I must have looked the bold aviator, but I certainly did not feel so. Clutching my parachute and green bag containing my navigation instruments, I climbed in through the side door of the Anson and sat at the navigation table. With the map and navigation implements before me, I remember feeling I needed all the help I could get. Sitting there, I said a sincere and private prayer, at the same time rubbing the edge of the table with my thumb for good luck. Both actions seemed effective as we returned safely at the end of this first flight, encouraging me to spend a few moments in silent prayer and rubbing the table before all my 526 subsequent flights in the Service.

That first flight to the little town of Naracoorte and back took 85 minutes, and was a familiarisation flight to get accustomed to the aircraft and the routine of taking-off and landing. The weather was blustery and I remember being so sick, possibly caused by the bumpy conditions, but my anxiety could have also contributed to the problem. On landing, I apologised to one of the ground staff about the mess on the floor, but he was not very sympathetic. He just gave me a mop and a bucket of water and told me to clean out the aircraft. After carrying out this extra duty following my next three flights I realised there must be a better solution. Remembering my first flight with Ansett where I had been provided with airsickness bags, the next time I was in the township I purchased my own bundle of strong paper bags. Disposing of the filled bags presented no problem. I furtively dropped them out of the aircraft window on the local countryside. Airsickness continued to plague me for two years, but at least I had removed the need for my cleaning services.

I had been introduced to the theory of navigation within days of my arrival. Seated at a table in a classroom, I made theoretical flights from town to town. Navigation seemed so easy, but doing it in a bouncing aircraft—amid a collection of unsavoury smells of fuel, oil and aircraft dope, together with a sick feeling in the stomach—was, I learnt, a totally different matter. In addition, everything that happened during the flight, every compass course given to the pilot, every recognition of places on the ground below, had to be recorded in a navigation log for perusal by the instructors after the flight.

Each day began when we received the weather report. Where was the wind coming from? The speed over the ground of the Anson could be halved by a head wind, or increased by a tail wind, or we could be 20 degrees off our intended track. As we, the trainees, attained more confidence in navigation, the flights were lengthened to about three hours in duration, usually of four legs: from Mt. Gambier to towns such as Bordertown, Dimboola, Coleraine, and then back to base. The first step of the navigation routine was to set a compass course from our base, calculated on the forecast wind. After flying about 15 minutes, compare the countryside below with the map, to recognise your location. From what had occurred, calculate the prevailing wind and give an amended course to the pilot. Then, having what you thought was the correct wind speed and direction, it should be easy to set a correct course on the second leg. After three legs you must have the right course for the leg back home. In reality though, you could not get lost on that final leg, for the Mount always stood out above the surrounding level countryside.

This was the theory of aerial navigation, but in my experience it rarely happened that way, for too many factors influenced the velocity and direction of the wind. At low levels it was affected by hills and valleys, and at higher altitudes it could be moving in a different direction to that close to the ground. The wind was a fickle mistress and I was never sure of its behaviour; my reputation as a navigator would depend on my ability to judge its moods.

On many of my initial navigational flights, towns seemed to vanish. After giving the pilot a course to fly to a particular town and my estimated time of arrival, there was no sign of habitation at the due time. Many of the names marked on the map were only station homesteads. Sometimes a town marked on the map was only a few houses hidden by trees, such as Harrow, on the banks of the Glenelg River. A settlement that remains in my memory is Padthaway, between Naracoorte and Keith, which was the headquarters of a large farming property set amidst scrub. What impressed me were the many dirt roads radiating from the homestead-like spokes from the hub of a wheel. I have no idea how I came to be flying over Padthaway. Possibly I had wandered off-course on a trip to Bordertown. For 12 weeks I flew all over the Western District of Victoria and south-eastern South Australia. In the early stages, getting lost became a habit, making life very frustrating. On one trip, when I had no idea where I was, the pilot flew along a railway line and I read the name of a railway station as we flashed by. Although low flying was forbidden, it was exciting to fly low just above the railway line. Railway lines were a great help in locating my position, except when hidden by the trees. If I was lucky, once in a while I would sight what seemed to be a ball of cotton

wool resting on the treetops; in reality, the smoke from a steam engine moving through the trees. Finding railway lines in the grain growing area was easier, because scattered throughout the countryside were the tall white concrete grain silos standing out like beacons, every silo meaning a railway siding.

I was not the only trainee to get lost. Early in July, three of us were each detailed to fly a triangular exercise, the outward-bound flight being to Jeparit. The other two navigators had received the same wind speed and direction forecast as me, and I presumed that they would fly a similar track to mine, but to my consternation I saw them diverting away from me. Here were three navigators given the same briefing prior to the flight, but leaving on three different headings. Quickly, I grabbed a map and searched for recognisable landmarks below. Finding my position slightly off-track I amended the course, hoping to get a better fix from Edenhope. Later, Goroke passed by, restoring my confidence. Reaching Jeparit and the turning onto the second leg to Murtoa, I looked to see what the other two aircraft were doing. One was veering away to my right, but the other had diverted by at least 20 degrees to my left. Which of us was correct? Map in hand, I searched for a landmark, but the country below was an area of creeks and swamps, devoid of houses. The aircraft on my left was now just a speck in the distance. Anxiously, I peered ahead until the railway line to Murtoa came into view. Satisfied that I now knew the wind, I gave the pilot a compass course for home, hoping that my problems were over for the day. Later, talking in the hut, I learnt the third navigator had seen a railway line near Minyip and the pilot followed it into Murtoa. I often wondered about the pilots who flew us on these exercises. Flying almost every day, they knew the area but were required to fly the compass courses we gave them, even if they knew we were way off track. One confided to me that he had flown the exercise Mt. Gambier–Dimboola–Coleraine–Mt. Gambier six times in the last ten days and had seen a different part of the countryside each day.

Shipping, both naval and mercantile, was another discipline to be absorbed. We learnt to distinguish between a naval cruiser and a destroyer, and the danger of flying directly at any vessel on the ocean, however friendly it seemed. Maritime flags were also in the curriculum, and the reason ships flew them, as well as the correct masts from which the flags should be flown. I learnt the flag alphabet with every letter being represented by a specific flag. Each merchant ship carried a secret identification schedule, which listed the two flags to be flown each particular day. As part of the maritime studies, I flew out of Mt. Gambier to patrol 20 miles out from the coast and was expected to photograph any shipping sighted. The camera provided was the RAAF F4 camera, with a 10-inch focal length lens; a brute of a thing to hold, being both large and heavy. The only way to handle it was to hold it close to the chest, the right hand gripping the operating handle, the left arm wrapped around the body of the camera. After being on patrol for about 30 minutes, I sighted a small coastal steamer. As we approached, I watched the crew hoist up the correct two flags of the day. Asking the pilot to circle the ship, I got a tight grip on the camera, and managed to take a reasonable photograph through an open window of the Anson. This accomplished, we resumed our patrol. After 30 minutes our time was up, and I gave the pilot a course for base, only sighting the one ship. I returned

the camera to the photographic section, receiving on the following day a copy of my effort as a photographer.

During my teenage years, I had been troubled with spasmodic bouts of abdominal pain and here at Mt. Gambier had to report to the station sick quarters with the same complaint. At the conclusion of a medical examination, the Medical Officer admitted me to the camp hospital. It was like heaven, lying between lovely crisp white sheets, having my meals served by female RAAF nurses. After two days of bliss the pain abated, and I was back at work, back to sleeping between blankets. A letter from my parents expressed their concern about my stay in the camp hospital. Could I arrange accommodation in the town if they came for a weekend? They made the long trip by train and bus and booked into Jens Hotel, the only place available, allowing us to spend two happy days together on the next weekend. My parents left on the Monday morning, hopefully assured that I was well and coping with my new lifestyle.

Flying exercises came to an end on 8 August, and it was time to prepare for the written or practical examinations in the 12 subjects of the syllabus. Failure could not be considered, for this could mean being scrubbed off the course and re-mustered as a wireless/air-gunner, which to me was a really frightening prospect! I spent many evenings with other trainees in the classrooms going through the subjects I had been taught, but I found most of them very difficult. On reflection, I consider my education at Mt. Gambier comparable with what I could have received from a university.

While waiting for the examination results, I was summoned to the chief instructor's office. Fearing the worst, I fronted up to his office to be told, being an accountant, I was to assist him after dinner to compile the course statistical report. We worked until 0300, recording all examination marks and affixing the details to every trainee's logbook. My reward: to be able to stay in bed until lunchtime the next morning. On 17 August, the day before our scheduled day to leave, a couple of trainees published a list of the trainees on the course with brief comments about each. I was described as 'Bombhead, The Boy Wonder'; a reference to my difficulty in getting a hat at Somers large enough to fit me, and my boyish features, which did prove to be a disadvantage during my service overseas when I had difficulty in being accepted by fellow aircrew in the RAF. The comments didn't faze me, however, because my statistical work for the CI had already revealed that my results were in the top ten per cent of the course.

At our final parade on 18 August, our logbooks containing all the course statistics that I had compiled were returned to us, and we heard our next posting would be to Port Pirie, South Australia. Our training there would be all about ballistics, bombs and machine guns. Later, we were taken to Mt. Gambier Railway Station to board the train for Wolseley, on the main line between Melbourne and Adelaide. Emma had promised to come to the station to see me leave. When I arrived, I was surprised by the large number of WAAAFs on the platform. It was plainly evident many of my fellow trainees had also made new friendships. The only difference with me was the inadvertent publicity of my friendship with Emma, publicised by the photograph in the shop window.

The train from Mt. Gambier was similar to what you would see and experience today if you travelled on the tourist train from Queenscliff to Drysdale on the Bellarine Peninsula. Our train looked at least 100 years old. Pulled by a vintage steam engine, the carriages could carry us to our destination, but not in any comfort, without heating and with minimum lighting. We left at 1700 and slowly chugged and rattled our way northwards through the night on the narrow gauge track. There was no rivalry between us for the best seats on the train, just wooden benches. It was useless to try to get some sleep, wrapped in a greatcoat against the draughts, because the noise put a stop to that. Eventually, after five hours, we reached Naracoorte. Average speed: 11 miles an hour. We then sat in the blacked-out station until another ancient little train from the small coastal port of Kingston pulled into the station. This railway line between Naracoorte and Kingston was one of the first lines built in South Australia. Financed by the large land-holders in the area, it provided them with a method of getting their wool and grain to coastal shipping and markets. At last, after another five hours, our train arrived at Wolseley just in time to make the connection with the interstate train from Melbourne to Adelaide.

CHAPTER IV

WEAPON TRAINING

After two enjoyable days of leave in Adelaide, our group assembled at the Adelaide Railway Station on the Sunday evening for the northbound train. At Port Pirie Junction buses took us to a collection of huts at the side of the Port Pirie airfield where the No 2 Bombing and Gunnery School operated. At about 140 miles north of Adelaide, it was close enough for weekend leave in the big city. The purpose of this school was to teach us how to drop a bomb from an aircraft and fire an aircraft machine gun. The conditions were very different from the cold and damp of Mt. Gambier. Away from the Southern Ocean, the days were warm.

The aircraft we used at Port Pirie for training purposes were single-engine Fairey Battle bombers, which had operated over Europe early in the war but had proved to be easy prey for German fighter aircraft. They looked impressive, but proved prone to all types of problems; they were really not suitable for our training for they did not have a gun turret, or a reliable intercommunication system between the trainee bomb-aimer and the pilot. Powered by a single Rolls Royce liquid-cooled engine, it used glycol as the cooling agent in the engine block and radiator. However, they were not designed for use in a warm climate, and were often subject to engine overheating. We were introduced to these aircraft with a short familiarisation flight soon after arrival, then lectures began in the classrooms about the intricacies of aiming bombs and firing machine guns. One lecture dealt with bomb fuses, and under instruction I inserted a fuse holder into the nose of a bomb. Looking at the fuse holder I saw it was stamped with the Avant trademark, probably manufactured while I was supervising deliveries there.

Prior to our arrival, the Japanese Army had attempted a landing at Milne Bay, New Guinea, and all Australia's defence forces had to be mobilised. On 22 August 1942, orders were issued by the RAAF for the formation of a squadron of Fairey Battle bombers for the defence of New Guinea—the aircraft for the new squadron to be those at the school. We arrived when the aircraft were being prepared for the long flight to New Guinea. On the far side of the airfield, rows of tents appeared for members of the new squadron named No 54 Squadron: 'The Fighting 54th', known to we trainees as the 'Frightened 54th'. Fortunately, the landing at Milne Bay was repulsed and our aircraft remained at Port Pirie. We could imagine what would have happened if Japanese Zero fighters had got among them. It was an exciting time, but also a worry because my brother, Eric, an intelligence officer in the RAAF, was living under canvas at Milne Bay.

The successful dropping of bombs on a target called for a coordinated effort between the bomb-aimer and the pilot and an effective intercommunication system was essential because the pilot, who could not see the target below, was required to manoeuvre the

aircraft on instructions from the bomb-aimer. The system installed in the Fairey Battle aircraft was a joke, for all the bomb-aimer relied on when directing the pilot to make small changes to the heading of the aircraft was a system using a length of garden hose. In place of a microphone held over the bombsight to communicate with the pilot, he shouted his instructions into a small tin funnel stuck into one end of the hose. The pilot listened to the sounds that echoed from two half tennis balls incorporated in his helmet connected to the other end.

The bombsight was about two feet long and mounted over a glass panel in the floor of the aircraft. It needed adjustment with details of the wind speed and direction, the speed and height of the aircraft, and ballistic details of the bomb. A successful attack on the target needed the correct wind details, but relying on a report from the weatherman often meant poor results and I found it very frustrating when the estimation of the wind speed and direction was incorrect. The bombsight also incorporated a compass, and when the wind caused the aircraft to drift off course, a mechanism adjusted the sighting drift wires of the bombsight in line with the track of the aircraft. The theory was that once I sighted the target, I could instruct the pilot to make small alterations to the heading of the aircraft, and watch the target seemingly pass down the drift wires until the time came to press the release button. In my experience, however, it did not seem to matter how accurately I set up the bombsight, I always had difficulty in keeping the target between the drift wires. I would lie on the floor over the bombsight and shout 'LEFT LEFT' or 'RIGHT' into the tin funnel, but the aircraft always made a curved approach to the target. Never the relaxed straight line approach. I made seven flights over the bombing range at 7,000 feet and dropped 20 practice bombs with an average error of 125 yards. The flights should have been made at 10,000 feet, but our aircraft had difficulty in reaching that height on a warm day. Actually, two of my flights were abandoned because the aircraft could not reach the reduced height of 7,000 feet because of engine overheating. Down below on the range itself, there were two concrete blockhouses manned by airmen who were able to monitor our accuracy. Each 11½ pound practice-bomb released gave off a puff of white smoke on impact, enabling the airmen below to calculate our impact from target.

Low-level bombing was also on my program with six passes over the target at 800 feet with an average error of 35 yards, which was more to my liking. The pilots that flew the aircraft for our exercises must have been bored to tears, for they had gained their wings in the hope of flying Spitfire and Hurricane fighters against the enemy and now they spent every day flying trainees like myself on dull exercises. Now and then, if the occasion presented itself, they would cast off flying restrictions and indulge in low flying. On my last low-level bombing exercise, after I had dropped the final practice bomb, the pilot put the aircraft into a tight turn, dived towards the ground and hurtled over the native scrub. It was all right for him, he was strapped in his seat but I was lying on the floor near the bombsight, forced against the floor by the centrifugal forces created by his throwing the aircraft around. When able to get on my knees and look out, I realised we were travelling only feet from the ground. To add to this, the pilot was occasionally making slow turns and dipping his wing tip into the top of grain growing

in the fields. I was very happy to get back on the ground for even if he did not value his own life, I still had a lot of living to do.

We had weekend leave in Adelaide every fortnight and I took every opportunity to join other trainees at the unlicensed Grosvenor Hotel on North Terrace. One weekend my mate, the instigator of the disastrous trip to Portland from Mt. Gambier, announced over breakfast on the Sunday morning at the hotel, that he had promised to meet a local girl but now wished to be elsewhere. Did anyone want to take his place? As the thought of the girl being left standing on the safety zone did not appeal to me, I volunteered to take his place. I walked along North Terrace to the appointed place, the tram stop in King William Street and introduced myself to the sole girl on the tram stop. Her name was Joyce and proved to be good company. She was proud of her city and after the rest of the morning spent looking at the shops in Rundle Street and the city gardens, she suggested we went by tram to a local beach for lunch. After a very enjoyable meal of fish and chips on the beach, it was time to go back into the city and collect my kit, and join the other trainees at the railway station. I had spent a pleasant day in her company, which was more enjoyable to me than sitting at the bar of a hotel saloon drinking lemonade with my fellow trainees. I never felt comfortable in a hotel; the only occasion I had ever been in a hotel was at Frankston. We agreed to meet two weeks later and this second time, as I approached the tram stop, the only occupant was a WAAAF. It was only when I crossed from the footpath I realised it was Joyce, who had enlisted over the past two weeks. Now, both being in the Service, we could use the Adelaide service clubs to dine and talk.

An invitation came for an Australian Rules football team from the trainees to visit the nearby town of Crystal Brook to play against a local team. Those of us who went across to Crystal Brook were billeted with local families. Our hosts were very hospitable, and arranged a dance after the match for us to meet the local girls. Just prior to this, while playing football at the camp, I fell and injured my left wrist which became very tender to touch and especially painful when firing the Vickers machine gun. I reported to the sick quarters, and was assured that it was just a sprain and would soon dissipate, but the pain persisted. After enduring the soreness for another two weeks I complained to the senior medical officer, who took me to the Port Pirie Hospital for a x-ray. The diagnosis: a broken scaphoid, a small bone in the wrist at the base of the thumb. On returning to the camp, the medical officer encased my arm in plaster from below the elbow to the palm of my hand but instructed me to continue flying.

After two weeks of bombing, the course switched to gunnery, dealing with the Vickers and Browning machine guns. My first introduction to the Vickers .303 machine gun was frightening. A six-inch square red gum post was set up on the range for my first burst. It was shattered in seconds. One day in the future someone could be firing at me, which was a terrifying thought. Aerial gunnery training was very primitive. Wearing my leather helmet and goggles, I stood in the fuselage of the aircraft with my head and shoulders in the slipstream behind the pilot, and attempted to pour a stream of bullets from the Vickers machine gun into a drogue towed by another aircraft about 100 yards away. The aircraft did not have a gun-turret, just the machine gun on a moveable mounting,

and I had to be careful not to put bullets into my own aircraft tail. We always flew with another trainee and prior to take-off each of us were given a drum magazine of bullets to be fired, the bullets having been dipped in slow-drying paint which left a coloured ring around each bullet hole in the drogue to indicate the percentage of hits. Having my left arm and wrist in a plaster cast, firing the shuddering machine gun was very painful. A few words to the pilot of our aircraft prior to take-off were effective in increasing my score. He just flew closer to the target drogue than usual and on one occasion, I put 24 per cent of the bullets into the drogue. We must have been very close.

The regular letters from Mavis about her family and about our mutual Presbyterian friends were always welcome. She surprised me with the news that she had enlisted in the Australian Women's Army Service and was doing her rookie training at Glamorgan, a requisitioned Melbourne Anglican Girls college. Her younger brothers, Clement and Malcolm, were already serving with the AIF in northern Australia and her father, a builder, now a member of the Civil Construction Corps, was repairing the damage caused by the enemy air raids on Darwin. The family had already experienced the tragic side of the hostilities. Her sister Winsome, who later followed Mavis into the AWAS, became engaged in 1940 to a boy from Lockington, Victor Johnstone. She had farewelled him as he sailed from Australia to complete his pilot training in Canada, only later to receive the news he was missing; it was later confirmed that he had been shot down and killed during a bombing raid on Cherbourg.

After eight weeks of bombs and guns, it was time to move on to Nhill in Victoria to learn about the heavens and how the stars could show us our position on the map.

CHAPTER V

THE NIGHT SKIES

Laden with our kitbags, we sleepily climbed out the train at Nhill at just past 0100 on 19 October 1942, and an hour later were trying to get some sleep at the No 2 Air Navigation School at the Nhill airfield. In our first week we learnt the theory of using the stars as an aid to navigation and how to utilise a star atlas or planisphere; to identify the stars necessary to calculate our position on the map; to achieve an astrofix. The sextant has been used by mariners since the 18th century to measure the altitude of celestial bodies to provide them with their latitude and longitude and consists of an arc of a circle, marked off in degrees, with a moveable radial arm pivoted at the centre of the circle. A telescope mounted rigidly on the frame is lined up with the horizon. The radial arm, on which a mirror is mounted, is moved until the sun is reflected onto a half-silvered mirror in line with the telescope and appears through the telescope to coincide with the horizon. The angular distance of the body is read from the graduated arc of the sextant. From this angle and the exact time of the day, the latitude is determined from published tables. From the setting of the sun, the mariner could obtain his position or fix by measuring the elevation of particular stars in the heavens. Denied the horizon at night for the base of the elevations a different type of sextant was required, incorporating a small illuminated circular spirit level into the sextant which, by the use of movable mirrors in the sextant, the operator could sight the star through the tiny illuminated bubble of the spirit level and know when he was holding the sextant perfectly level, thus giving a true elevation of the star.

Sitting on a chair outside our sleeping hut with my elbows resting on the armrests, I found little difficulty in sighting a star through the tiny illuminated bubble to obtain an accurate elevation. Doing this during a flight in an Anson aircraft was difficult, for a characteristic of the Anson was that it did not fly in a perfectly straight line. The flight path resembled a slight helix, with the fluid in the circular spirit level influenced by the aircraft movements, causing the bubble to wander all over the level. It was a tricky business to keep the star in the bubble for the two minutes required for the sextant to take a reading. Because of this motion, one recording of the elevation of the star was not sufficient. The sextant incorporated a clockwork mechanism that registered the elevation every two seconds and at the completion of the two minutes, the sextant indicated the average elevation of the 60 readings. It was essential that the correct time—to the second—was available and the time of the sighting recorded. This was possible because we had been issued with Omega wristwatches at Mt. Gambier, which were excellent timekeepers—mine to the second. To provide a facility for the use of a sextant in an aircraft, a clear astrodome large enough for the navigator to hold the sextant to his eye was installed on the top of the fuselage. To find our position on the map we needed the elevation of three widely spaced stars, and to achieve this we had, in addition to the sextant, the air almanac and the planisphere. The former, a publication

setting out details of the stars to use on a particular night; the latter, a type of star atlas showing the position of the required stars in the night sky.

The November nights during our stay at Nhill were usually clear and ideal for our training. The moon or the planets were of no use to the astro-navigator, a bright moon on a clear night outshining all the stars in the surrounding sky. The initial task of learning to recognise particular stars from the thousands in the night sky seemed impossible to me on my first sight and I wondered how I would ever be able to identify those needed. However, by constant reference to the planisphere the night sky finally became familiar, some stars being easily recognised by their colour, others by their proximity to identifiable groups of stars.

The secret of being a good operator of a sextant was to practice as much as possible. Many nights I sat with other trainees outside the huts to take sights on different stars. My logbook records that I took 100 star-sights from the ground during the four weeks of the course, with an average error of just over two miles. An error of two miles was just not achievable in the air. My average error during the navigation exercises at Nhill was eight miles in calm flying conditions, but using a sextant during a bombing sortie over enemy territory could certainly result in very doubtful results. The effect: bombs were dropped miles away from the target. From each sighting of a star, a line was drawn on the map at 90 degrees from the line of sight; three stars presenting a triangle of lines. If the readings were good it would produce a small triangle, if not a larger one, but at least you knew that you were somewhere in the triangle. In practice, navigators were lucky if the astrofix was within ten miles of the true position.

Flying normally began each night at 2000, when we struggled to put our theoretical training into practice in the area north of Nhill. Leaving the airfield, our routes took over darkened towns up to the Murray River, from Tailem Bend to Echuca. Except for the bright lights of a Japanese prisoner of war camp at Renmark, our operating area was devoid of lights; perfect for our training. Hampered by the plaster cast on my wrist, I initially had difficulty in holding the sextant but I eventually worked out I could operate it by resting it on my plaster cast. It was important to me to complete the observers' course successfully and remain with the friends I had made in No 24 Course. My initial efforts at finding my location in the dark were very disheartening but I was not on my own in this respect. Like many of the others, I lost my way in the black night during the early stages of the program, and could not find the Nhill airfield at the end of the trip. All was not lost for there was always a helping hand. At 2330 the rotating light beacon at the airfield was activated to guide us home. On two nights I found the flash of the light in the far distance an immense relief, because I did not have a clue about where I was in the darkness. There was a lot of truth in the maxim that was current with us at Nhill.

'Only birds and fools fly, and birds don't fly at night.'

While the RAF persisted with astro-navigation as the principal method of finding a target at night, the Germans had perfected a system of radio beams to guide their

bombers on raids over the United Kingdom, which utilised two beams transmitted from separate areas in Europe intersecting over the target. All that was required was for the pilot of the enemy bomber to listen to one of the radio beams and follow it until he heard the signal from the second beam and know it was time to commence dropping his bomb load. It was only later in the war that British scientists came up with a far better radio system called 'GEE', an exceptional aid to navigators.

Nhill was a friendly little town and the congregation made me welcome when I attended the local Presbyterian Church. One weekend, I received an invitation to stay with a family on their wheat farm. The family had two teenage daughters, and as the elder daughter had become friendly with another trainee who was a regular visitor, I completed the foursome. The family was very kind, but without any kind of transport all we did was sit around in the shade and talk.

Our training as air observers concluded on 10 November 1942 with a passing out parade, signifying we were qualified to act as members of a bomber crew. Presentations were made of our air-observers half-wing or brevet, and the insignia of our new rank. To a few, the single sleeve ring of a pilot officer; to the majority, the sergeants' chevrons or stripes. I was now a sergeant with no need to wear the white flash in my forage cap. Passes were issued for a welcome eight days leave—our first leave for six months. For all my friends it was their embarkation leave, but I was ordered to return to Nhill until my fracture was healed.

Returning from leave, I found a spare bed in the sergeants' hut and ate in their mess. The cast on my arm was still a nuisance, but now one of the WAAAF staff in the mess was able to cut up my food. I just had to wait until my bone fracture had healed and the plaster was removed. Eventually, after four weeks of idleness of wandering about the camp with nothing to do, and being paid to do it—a new experience for me—I was sent on a night flying exercise to Renmark and Mildura to practice with the sextant, and, a week later, a daylight exercise to the Loxton area. During the day, if I saw a pilot taking an aircraft up on local flying, I didn't hesitate to ask if I could go along. They were happy to have me, for in return I relieved them of having to crank up the undercarriage. Finally, on 22 January 1943, an x-ray at the Nhill Hospital showed the fracture had healed and I was granted embarkation leave of eight days, with instructions to report to the Royal Agricultural Society Showgrounds at Ascot Vale on 31 January. I had worn the plaster cast for 17 weeks, a relatively long time, and had lost touch with all my mates in No 24 Course.

The eight days at home passed quickly. I spent it partly spent with my parents, partly renewing my friendship with Mavis. Early on 31 January 1943, I said farewell to my parents and walked to Ormond station on my way to the Showgrounds at Ascot Vale. On arrival, to my surprise, I was paraded before the CO to explain why I had reported a day late. Production of my leave pass showing this not to be so was sufficient to have the matter dismissed. This unexpected hitch over, the orderly room began the paperwork for my embarkation, but I seemed to be the only one leaving. As part of the program, I received some change of address cards setting out an address in Canada, to be filled in

with my name and address to those I wished to be notified that I had gone overseas. At 1700 I found myself on Station Pier, Port Melbourne, looking up at an American ship, *Rochambeau*, moored alongside the pier. With my kitbag on my shoulder, I climbed the stairs to join about 20 other Australian airmen who had boarded the ship earlier in the day. I was pleased to see my fellow travellers, but not so happy to learn that they had been fed at 1600 and the galley was closed for the night. Happily, my plea to the cook for food succeeded and I received a large bowl of hot mixed beans, which was very enjoyable and my first taste of American rations.

At 1900, a tug came alongside and the ship moved away from the pier and turned towards Port Phillip Heads. A quiet departure from the deserted pier, no streamers or well wishers. Usually airmen going overseas had to spend up to a month at Ascot Vale waiting for overseas transport. In my case, however, within hours of reporting I was sailing down the bay. The ship had brought a large contingent of American troops to Australia and was now returning comparatively empty to North America.

CHAPTER VI

OUTWARD BOUND

I had very mixed feelings standing alone at the ship's rail, watching the Port Phillip Bay coastline slowly pass by, because I had expected to be home for tea with my parents and had arranged to see Mavis at the Caulfield Crystal Palace cinema on the next Saturday night. Two and a half years would pass before I saw her again. Another cause of this feeling was that I did not know any of my fellow travellers, being a late arrival. Standing there after passing into Bass Strait, I was intrigued by the constant changes in course of the Australian naval frigate ahead as it led us through Bass Strait into the Tasman Sea. It seemed so unnecessary for us to have an escort with the Pacific war being so far to our North but I learnt later Japanese submarines were very active, sinking many ships off the Australian coast.

Originally, the sergeants in our contingent were allocated sleeping quarters on a lower deck of the ship, but our officers protested against this accommodation, resulting in our being allowed to sleep in wall bunks on the main deck behind canvas screens. I took a top bunk, not realising the steel decking was only about 15 inches above the bunk. Next morning, on hearing the unfamiliar reveille, I sat up and nearly knocked myself out.

The American food was excellent, but it took us time to familiarise ourselves with the way the galley served it. Each meal was served on a pressed metal tray with depressions to take the different courses. One for the main course, another for the china soup bowl, others for the sweets and the crackers. Coffee was the only beverage provided by the galley so we protested and asked for tea that the galley had promised. We did get tea—iced tea—which was not what we had in mind. On the fourth day of our journey, we sailed into Auckland Harbour to receive a tremendous welcome. Being Sunday there were crowds of people on the wharf, some offering to take us to their homes for the day, and the cinemas were open with free admission. It was a happy day. Later that night we cast off and set course across the Pacific.

For four weeks we sailed across the Pacific Ocean, the weather was kind, the ocean living up to its name, until at last the coast of California appeared on the horizon. The crossing had been very pleasant, enhanced by the provision of enjoyable food and an excellent library on board, finally sailing under the Golden Gate Bridge to a rousing cheer from our fellow American passengers. For about an hour the ship hove-to in San Francisco Bay, finally tying up at a pier at the foot of Market Street. As soon as the ship berthed members of the FBI came aboard, and along with the entire contingent I was photographed and fingerprinted, before being permitted to leave the ship and free to explore San Francisco, with orders to report that evening to the Oakland railway station across the Bay. It was very exciting to be there, and with a small group from the ship I rode on the cable cars and did the usual things tourists do. We found ourselves as

curiosities because the local people seemed to have never heard of Australia or knew in what part of the world it was situated. One of our party was even asked where he learnt to speak American. Several of us entered a bar in Market Street for a drink but the barman refused to even serve me a glass of lemonade for, in his opinion I was just a teenager and too young to be in his bar.

At dusk, after crossing the bay on the ferry to the Oakland railway station, we were allocated our own section of the train for the journey to Vancouver in Canada; two carriages that converted from day to night travel, plus a dining car. This was luxury travel indeed, far better than sitting up all night in a cold railway carriage. At 2000, we pulled out of Oakland station to the clanging of the locomotive's bell, and it was time to answer the steward's call to dinner. After an exciting day and a very enjoyable meal, I slid between the sheets of my bunk and drifted off to sleep, lulled by the gentle rocking of the carriage. Early next morning, I opened the window blind to look out on a veritable white Christmas scene. The train was high up in the Cascade Mountains, the countryside carpeted with snow. The view was magnificent, with white-covered mountains in the distance, snow everywhere, several feet deep, and every tree in the valley and on the mountains on both sides of the railway line wearing a white winter coat. To keep the tracks clear, the rotary snowploughs had, in places, carved a passage through the snow, piling it higher than the top of the carriages. Lying in my bed, enthralled with my first sighting of snow, I heard the steward announcing that breakfast was about to be served and it was time to get dressed and walk to our private dining car—another new experience.

The steam engines pulling the long train were massive, and were using so much water and fuel it was necessary for stops to change engines every couple of hundred miles. While this was happening we were able to leave the train and wander about the station. At Klamath Falls, because of the duration of the stop, we had the opportunity to do sightseeing in the town. I had always been a train enthusiast and here were the actual locomotives I had read so much about in railway magazines. At one change-over, I saw one of the unique oil-burning Southern Pacific engines with the engine controls at the front of the boiler; the crew controlled the train from a glassed-in cabin at the front. The railway in this area of the Rockies passed through many long tunnels, and this revolutionary design protected the engine crew from the smoke and fumes. It was an unforgettable journey along the Pacific coastline of America, with superb scenery, comfortable accommodation and enjoyable food. Other places I remember passing through were Eugene, Portland and Seattle, before finally reaching Vancouver. During the journey, I had wandered along to the end of the train and entered a special lounge carriage with a gentleman sitting reading a newspaper. It was a beautifully maintained carriage, but the Governor of the State of Oregon was not keen to have me as a fellow passenger; his steward was very courteous as he accompanied me to the door.

Having a few hours to spare before we boarded another train to cross the mountains to Edmonton, a group of us hired a taxi and made a tour of Vancouver. A very beautiful city. Leaving Vancouver, the mountain scenery on the journey was magnificent; the train travelling on ledges carved out of the sides of the rugged snow-covered mountains.

Jasper railway station was unique with a massive Indian totem pole standing on the railway platform. Here we had a snow fight and I learnt the hard way that a snowball can hurt when it hits you behind the ear.

I vividly recall the night we arrived in Edmonton. We had been in heated railway carriages for three days and disembarked into the heated station waiting-room, and in this heated atmosphere awaited our transport to the Royal Canadian Air Force No 3 Manning Depot. When the transport finally arrived, however, we were astonished to see not a bus but a tray truck; a typical truck with slats along each side used to carry bags of mail. We piled on our kitbags and climbed aboard, with the intention of standing on the truck for the trip through Edmonton. The temperature was at 20 degrees below freezing, and the bitter cold forced us to huddle on the floor behind the kitbags, discovering how cold Canada could be. To make matters worse, we did not have any cold weather clothing. The clothing was issued later that night and was excellent, including rubber over-boots, heavy underwear and leather fleecy lined mittens (ie. gloves) with only one compartment for the four fingers, which were all very necessary. Laden with all our new winter clothing, we had to slip and slide along the ice-covered roads back across the camp to our sleeping quarters. It soon dawned on us it was not wise to walk on ice, wearing shoes with leather soles. We were all carrying our new over-boots in cardboard boxes but no one had taken the trouble to show us how to fit them over our footwear.

I have never been so cold in my life, for if my memory is correct, the temperature never rose above zero degrees Celsius during my stay at Edmonton. On my first visit to the sergeants' mess I noticed a large block of ice on the footpath, which was still there when I left Edmonton. Shortly after arriving, my throat became very inflamed and I needed a cure from a local chemist. In the years prior to leaving home, the radio stations in Melbourne had been promoting a cough mixture, *Buckley's Canadiol Mixture* with a reputation of having been very successful in preventing severe chest complaints in the blizzards of Canada. My problem was that the local chemist had never heard of it.

One facet of Canadian life we had to cope with was the unusually (to us) high temperature inside the buildings at the camp. So high that we only needed a sheet on the bed at night, although there were icicles hanging from the spouting outside the windows. Moving between the

sleeping quarters and the sergeants' mess was a major operation. Greatcoat, scarf, mittens, cap and over-boots on before leaving; walk the short distance across the snow and ice; then shed all the gear before entering the dining room. Our establishment being a transit camp, there were no activities for us, no classes, no flying. Every afternoon we went into the city for a meal and the movies. One of the odd things about Edmonton was that the local laws forbade the opening of movie houses on Sundays. So they opened at midnight and when the films finished, special trams waited outside to take the patrons home. On my first Sunday evening, accompanied by another Australian, I attended a local Presbyterian church. At the conclusion of the service we were invited to join the young people who were moving into the church hall for fellowship and supper. We were made very welcome, and at the close of the fellowship one of the members took us to her home to have more coffee and talk. We sat around the fire with her parents and talked for hours, finally getting back to camp by catching the first tram, at the conclusion of the local cinema at 0300.

Edmonton is situated on the northern arm of the Saskatchewan River and each winter the river freezes over. A yearly sweepstake is run on when the river ice would break with a peg drilled into the ice and connected to a device on the highway bridge over the river. All the citizens gambled on the exact day and time the peg would be free. In our last week at Edmonton, crowds gathered around the bridge to wait until the break came and the winner collected his considerable prize money.

CHAPTER VII

CANADA

After four weeks, orders came for us to move east. Our departure from the Edmonton station was hilarious. With all our Canadian friends, we were standing beside the train when suddenly, without warning, it imperceptibly commenced to creep forward. It was everyone for himself in the race to the end of a carriage and the scramble up the stairs. The railways had allocated two sleeping cars and a dining car for the Air Force contingent, and on boarding we found that we were sharing the sleeping cars with some Canadian girls on their way to a WCAAF rookie camp. To provide sleeping accommodation, beds were folded down from the ceiling on both sides of the aisle to provide the upper bunks, with the daytime seats providing the lower bunks with large curtains running the length of the aisle to provide privacy. The girls were with us for two interesting days.

The journey eastwards took five days passing Ottawa, Montreal, then Quebec, bound for the town of Summerside on Prince Edward Island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Instead of changing trains, our carriages were added to whatever train was going our way. At the city of Quebec one of our group had a problem with a railway porter. The sergeant had evidently been drinking bootleg grog on the train and, fortified by this, had decided to take an extension ladder he found on the platform into the carriage. Unfortunately the ladder was too long and stuck out of both sides of the carriage, delaying the departure of the train. As the porter only spoke French there was an impasse, until he brought a small set of steps to the carriage, which were exchanged for the ladder, and the train was then able to leave the station. Once on our way, we travelled north and west through the Province of New Brunswick to the ferry terminal at Bayfield on the southern coastline of the Gulf of St. Lawrence for the journey across the Northumberland Strait to Prince Edward Island. Once across the water, it was only a short train journey to the little town of Summerside. Climbing down from the heated train, the vista in all directions did not offer the prospect of an enjoyable stay, because snow was falling and it was very cold; maybe not as cold as Edmonton, but the biting wind heralded rough flying conditions. Buses awaited us for the short ride to the local airfield where the RCAF No 1 General Reconnaissance School was situated. One advantage here over Edmonton was that the school was situated in one large complex, with the classrooms and the living area under the one roof, removing the necessity of adding warm clothing to move from the dormitory to the mess.

Prior to the entry of the United States in the European War, the Americans were supplying the RAF with combat aircraft under the terms of the Lend Lease Agreement, a problem being the delivery of the aircraft across the North Atlantic Ocean. Pilots were available to fly the large numbers available, but deliveries were restricted because of the

scarcity of skilled navigators. To fill this shortage, a training program had been set up at Summerside to qualify navigators for the long flight over the ocean.

The first three days after our arrival were spent learning about Arctic flying conditions. A system of ascertaining the speed and direction of the elusive wind by flying the three sides of a triangle and noting the drift on each leg was explained to us in the classrooms. On 8 April 1943, wearing all the warm clothing I possessed, I stepped out from the flight office and trudged across the snow-covered tarmac to a waiting Anson aircraft to join a pilot and wireless operator. Once airborne, we flew across the coastline and I saw the whole surface of the gulf was covered by broken sheets of ice. Looking below and judging the drift of the aircraft using the vertical telescope was difficult but, surprisingly, the theory explained in the classroom was effective, giving me the wind speed and direction. Knowing these two factors was the foundation of all aircraft navigation, although there was the disadvantage of the loss of time taken to fly the three courses. An unforgettable part of this flight was seeing a polar bear with her cub on an icefloe.

Later navigation exercises were cross-country flights between towns on the island and the southern coastline of the gulf; later still was a flight to Amherst Island in the centre of the gulf. It was difficult work in the bitterly cold rough weather with my ever-present nausea. Apart from the turbulent conditions, there were two flights I remember: one a success, the other a failure. The first was a long flight of almost 200 miles across the ice floes of the gulf to carry out a reconnaissance of the port of Sydney on Sydney Harbour, Cape Breton Island. This was one of the large islands comprising Nova Scotia, which must have been first settled by migrants from the British Isles. The names of the towns confirmed this: Dunvegan, New Waterford, New Glasgow, Oxford and Halifax, even a lake named Loch Lomond. I had no difficulty in locating Sydney after 90 minutes over the broken ice. Now to make a sketch of the town and the port facilities, which would be difficult, especially as the subject of the drawing changed its perspective as the aircraft flew around the area. Crouched at an open side window of the Anson with a large pad on my knee, I tried to sketch the harbour, port facilities, township and the railway system hidden under a blanket of snow. Round and round the port we flew until I completed the task. It was as if I was drawing some object slowly rotating on a stand. The second flight included being lost over the frozen gulf, and flying towards the southern coastline of the gulf in search of a landmark to fix my position. The pilot finally found the coastline but I couldn't recognise anything in the snow-covered countryside below, until at last I picked out the shining black rails of a railway snaking through the snow. I asked the pilot to follow them, hoping they would lead me to a recognisable town, which was OK until the lines disappeared into a tunnel and I was lost again, forced to ask for the airfield radio beacon to be activated to assist us back to Summerside.

One navigation exercise in the curriculum was based on a reconnaissance flight from an aircraft carrier. The exercise was very difficult and quite inappropriate, for there was no chance that we would be operating from an aircraft carrier. The flight was more relevant for the Royal Navy, being based on flying out from a carrier on a fixed bearing until time to turn back and rendezvous with the carrier after it had steamed for two hours. On

this particular day I was sent as screen navigator to support a trainee who was having problems with his work. Not having a carrier available, two points on the north coast of the island, 40 miles apart were designated to simulate the passage of the carrier. Flying out over the ice of the gulf on the required bearing presented no problem and I saw no reason to interfere with the other navigator, for on my first glance his original pencilled air plot on the chart seemed correct. The whole crux of the exercise was the calculation of the time for the pilot to turn back, and the necessary course to reach the mythical carrier in its second position after exactly two hours. After 50 minutes flying over the gulf, I looked over the navigator's shoulder only to find that his chart was a mass of pencilled lines. His first attempt to calculate a time for the pilot to change course to reach the mythical carrier being unsuccessful, he had made a second air plot on the chart but unfortunately had got confused between the two sets of pencilled lines on the chart. Now we really had a problem. I should have got involved earlier but it was cold, the weather rough, and having to sit near the tail of the aircraft, I was sick. I endeavoured to follow his plot on the map, but it was too late. The time to turn to the return track was critical, and the pilot anxiously asked awkward questions about this and what course to set on the compass; our problem was that we had two answers to each of his questions. After a hurried discussion, I suggested the other navigator give the pilot the average of the two times and courses. We could not expect to finish up over the second point on the coast, but the error should not be too great. But we were wrong and must have been way off course, for after an anxious hour on the return flight there was no sight of our objective—in fact there was no sight of any land at all. Once again it was necessary to request the radio beacon at Summerside to be activated.

A problem affecting all of us at this camp was the boredom at night. After the evening meal there was nothing to do except retreat to the large hall filled with double deck beds, which acted as our dormitory; the weather far too cold to go outside the overheated building. We usually just sat on our beds and read, talked, or played cards until lights out at 2130. It was here I learnt to play patience or solitaire for there was little else to do. One Sunday evening, to get away from this atmosphere, wearing all my warm clothing, I walked through the snow into the township and to the Presbyterian Church where maybe I could meet some young members as happened at Edmonton, but my effort was in vain. In fact, no one seemed interested in me or talking to me at all. The only break from the tedium was mail from Australia, a visit to the camp post office being a daily routine. Letters from Australia were very welcome, and especially those from Mavis, which always lifted my depression. Reading her letters, she seemed to be enjoying her service in the AWAS as a clerk in the officers' records section of the Military Secretary's Branch, Land Headquarters, and stationed in the new Albert Park barracks. After a stay at the NCO school at Darly, near Bacchus Marsh, she had been promoted and now carried the two chevrons of a corporal on her right sleeve. Quite a change from being a cutter in a leading fashion house in Flinders Lane, Melbourne.

I spent six very cold, tedious weeks at Summerside. Flying conditions were atrocious and it was a different world to what I was accustomed, with the rough weather, bitter cold, encompassed by whiteness with clouds above, snow and ice beneath. There was an additional problem caused by the closeness of the North Magnetic Pole making the

compass needle up to 40 degrees from True North. Life was so different from Nhill, where the weather had been balmy.

I found the navigation exercises at Summerside very difficult. Being lost over the snow-covered ground, or the ice on a number of occasions, did nothing for my self-confidence. Later I learnt how my stay there, although considered by me to be irksome, was instrumental in determining what work I did in the RAF when I reached England.

Completion of our stay at Summerside, on 15 May 1943, brought welcome release from classrooms and rough weather with ten days leave. A small number of the trainees were ordered to report after their leave to a RAF base in the Bahama Islands, for service over the Western Atlantic. The remainder, including myself, were to report to Halifax, Nova Scotia, for passage to the United Kingdom. Ten days meant a week in New York, which was too exciting to pass up. We were a very happy band who boarded the train at Summerside for the crossing to the mainland and the long rail journey ahead. Going on leave meant no sleeping cars or dining car this time; just sit up all night and buy whatever food was available, but the travel conditions on the train were no hardship because we were so glad to get away from Summerside. Reaching Boston on the second day, it was necessary to change trains for New York. Having time to spare before our train left, four of us hired a taxi and asked the driver to show us the city. One of the party wanted to see the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, that famous college of science and engineering; another asked to see the site of the 'Boston Tea Party' where insurgent Americans in 1773 boarded English ships and hurled several chests of tea into the harbour. I was just content to relax in the back of the taxi and view the passing scene.

Arrival in New York was at midday. Once off the train our entire group made a beeline to the Anzac Hostel, run by a Miss Luxton, proving a wonderful base to see the city. The hostel provided bed and breakfast at minimal cost. Shortly after our arrival, a mate and I were given the address of a New York couple who had asked for two Australian servicemen to join them in their apartment for drinks and later for dinner, because their son was serving in the US Army in the Pacific. They made us very welcome, presenting each of us with an American silver dollar and a pipe with a pouch of tobacco. I still have the silver dollar but, not being a smoker, the pipe stayed in my kitbag. Later, when stationed in the United Kingdom, I experimented with it, but decided I was not a pipe smoker. After drinks, we all took the elevator down to the restaurant and were shown to a table. No sooner had we been seated when I was challenged by the waitress. 'Soup or salad?' I was stunned—I hadn't even seen the menu. Commencing with soup as the first course, I had a very enjoyable dinner. Our hosts were very hospitable and when dinner was over, they hailed a cab, paid the driver and instructed him to take us to an armed forces club.

During our stay in New York, four of us were given tickets to a theatre on Broadway where Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians were entertaining the audience in the interval between the films. It was the era of the big bands, with Duke Ellington and his orchestra playing in the theatre next-door. We joined other servicemen in the front seats of the theatre, for it was the usual custom for some servicemen to receive gifts

from the band, and we expected to go on the stage and be introduced to the audience. This night, however, the first serviceman on the stage was an American fighter pilot serving under the Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek fighting the Communists in China. Here was a genuine American hero, one of the *Flying Tigers*. The leader of the band forgot his script—he gave the flier all the gifts. It did not matter, for after the show all the servicemen in the audience were invited to a party given by the band, a great night with magnificent food, music and stunning girls. The party was still going when I left at 0500 because I had purchased a ticket for the 0600 train to Washington DC.

I remember sitting down in the train in Central Station in New York at 0600, and being roused to find the train had arrived in Washington. After a snack at the station, I boarded a bus and, following my usual custom, made my way to the back row of seats. What I could not understand was why everyone on board kept looking at me—not realising that all buses were segregated and white people just did not sit in the black section. Lunch being my next thought, I found a little coffee lounge and was having a meal when a lady and her teenage daughter introduced themselves and offered to show me the city. They took me to all the major tourist attractions: the White House, Congress, the Pentagon, the Lincoln Memorial. We bussed all over the city and they were kind enough to take me to Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington in Virginia. I spent a marvellous day in their company. Before we parted, I suggested that if the daughter could come into the city after dinner, I would take her to a cinema, promising to escort her home afterwards. We met as agreed, and when the show finished we walked to a bus terminal and boarded the bus to her home. It seemed such a long journey, and on arrival I found our ride had taken us out of the District of Columbia into the State of Virginia, and the last bus for Washington had already left.

As I stood there in the dark outside her home, I realised my only chance of reaching the Washington railway station by midnight to catch a train to New York was by hitchhiking on a busy road close by, another new experience for me. Luckily, I had been standing in the dark on the side of the road for only a few minutes, when a taxi stopped and picked me up, the driver happy to endeavour to get to the station in time. I have no recollection of the movie we saw that night, but vivid memories of speeding through the darkened countryside of Virginia, and the empty streets of Washington, enabling me to race onto the platform and get aboard the midnight train with a couple of minutes to spare. My leave in New York was incredible, seeing all those sights dreamt about. The Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, Times Square. At Radio City I saw the famous chorus girls and later witnessed early trials of television, and I walked down Broadway and across Central Park.

Finally, my leave came to an end with another long train journey, this time to the east coast of Canada, to the port of Halifax. After reporting to the RCAF transport office on arrival, I joined some other Australians from Summerside and we were taken to the embarkation depot, where the French luxury passenger liner, *Louis Pasteur*, was at the dockside taking passengers for the Atlantic crossing. I had seen her sister ship, *Normandie*, in New York. Before we, the small group who had just arrived, could board the ship, we were taken to the port medical centre to be instructed about the dangers of

lack of oxygen. Inside the centre was a decompression chamber, a long cylindrical tank with an airtight door and glass portholes. Ordered to enter and be seated, we donned oxygen masks that covered the face from just below the eyes to below the mouth. Attached to the leather flying helmet, the whole effect was the resemblance to the head of a pig. The door securely locked, pressure in the chamber was slowly reduced to that which we would encounter when flying at high altitudes. On instruction, four of the group removed their masks and as I watched them, their lack of oxygen soon became apparent, their heads falling as they lapsed towards unconsciousness. Within seconds the instructor replaced their masks and they rapidly recovered, oblivious as to what had happened. The message to us was clear: always check your oxygen equipment before flying. I envisaged having to experience lack of oxygen also, but as the liner was about to sail, I was excused the exercise. Fortunately for me, I was never required to use oxygen, for all my flights in the RAF were made at less than the critical height of 10,000 feet.

At last, with our kit bags on our shoulders, we stood on the wharf with the liner towering above us waiting to be allocated space on board, but there must have been difficulties in locating room for us. Finally, accommodation was found and we followed a seaman up the gangplank, across the deck, through one of the large lounges to the stairs, which went down and down, almost to the keel. Our accommodation for crossing the Atlantic was a small store room filled with mattresses; an adjacent mess room, which had long tables and forms fixed to the floor, acted as an eating area for 50 men by day, and using the mattresses, a sleeping area by night. At night the occupants of the larger room collected their mattresses, which they just placed on the floor, on and under the tables, and slept there. No need for blankets, for it was warm in the hull. The five of us got the best of the arrangement, being able to sleep on the mattresses during the day as well as at night. The toilet facilities available to us were appalling, both to see and smell. Situated against the hull near the keel, I resolved to use them as little as possible. Out on the Atlantic, I found it unsettling to go up on deck because there was no sign of a naval escort; the ship relying on its speed for safety. There could be a U-boat periscope behind every wave. Another risk was that if I went on deck after the crew had finished for the day, and got lost in the ship, I would be forced to sleep in a passageway until the crew came on duty the next morning. It was not possible to walk far because security grills divided the ship into sections. To pass the five days of the ocean crossing, I retreated to the mattresses; only getting up for meals, usually consisting of porridge for breakfast, fresh bread, margarine, hard boiled eggs, with baked beans and tinned meat for the other meals. My crossing of the Atlantic was traumatic, being confined to a small cell deep down in the ship, and was a dreadful experience.

At last the ship docked at Liverpool, and on the wharf a train awaited to take Australian airmen to Brighton on the south coast, where the RAAF had established No 11 Personnel Centre from whence we would be posted to Royal Air Force Operational Training Units (OTUs). I will always remember my first meal in England served as soon as we boarded the train. Big plates of bully beef stew and pint sized mugs of tea. After having existed on bare rations for five days on the ship, the meal tasted delicious. Another long railway journey, this time in English carriages with small tables between each two rows of seats,

ideal for the travelling cooks to serve food. Sitting at the window I watched scene after scene change as the train made its slow progress southwards. In the midlands, the towns were packed with rows of terraced houses with blackened walls, dominated by pitheads and slagheaps.

As night settled on the countryside the blackout shutters were drawn. In the carriage, the tiny blue lights were too dim to read by, and too bright to make sleeping easy. We slept as best we could until just before dawn when we arrived at the Brighton station, but no transport awaited us. We just put our kitbags on our shoulders and marched through the deserted town to our billet.

CHAPTER VIII

ENGLAND

Accommodation for RAAF non-commissioned officers at Brighton was at the Grand Hotel on the promenade, overlooking the English Channel, where I shared a room on the second floor with three other sergeants. All the furnishings of the hotel had been removed for the duration, but the service beds were comfortable, and looking around it was evident that the Grand Hotel had been a first class establishment. All our meals were served in what had been the peacetime banquet room, the highlight of the room being a remarkable mural taking up one complete wall. Once settled in the centre, and the usual service registration forms completed, we were free to wander through Brighton and the nearby Sussex countryside. Being midsummer, the pleasant weather made travelling a delight, either in buses (which were still running), or when riding along the country lanes on hired bikes or tandems.

When I heard an air-raid siren for the first time in Brighton I started to look for the nearest shelter, but soon realised that the local people were not taking the matter seriously, learning later that the air-raid sirens in Brighton sounded in two stages. The normal siren sounded when enemy aircraft were in the general area, usually on their way to inland targets and not a threat to Brighton. When the resort was threatened, possibly by hit and run raiders, a second warning was activated with a series of sharp shrill tones reverberating through the area. Brighton did not suffer much bomb damage during the war, but everyone had taken precautions to protect themselves and their possessions. In one house I was shown the family air-raid shelter, a specially fabricated steel dining room table. The table, including the legs, was made from thick steel plate, accommodating the whole family during an air-raid. Daytime cinemas and live theatre were both operating, and also vaudeville shows similar to those you would see at the Tivoli back in Melbourne. With a couple of mates I attended a vaudeville matinee, *The Chocolate Coloured Coon*—a very enjoyable afternoon.

Soon after arrival, my promotion to flight sergeant was promulgated. This permitted me to now wear a crown above my sergeants' stripes, with the resultant increase in pay. If I kept a clear record, I could expect to be promoted to the rank of warrant officer, first class, in May 1944. The crown, made of brass, caused a few problems for Australians, not having been issued with a cleaning kit. Being unable to polish it up to the standards of the RAF resulted in criticism from RAF officers for having unpolished badges. Later, however, the RAAF issued all flight sergeants with blue enamelled crowns to obviate this problem.

I was given a week's leave enabling me to go to meet my English relatives: my Uncle, Aunt, and teenage cousin Edsel. They took me to see all the historical buildings in London: St. Paul's, Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace. They were very kind to

me, telling me that I would always be welcome at their home on my future periods of leave during my service in the United Kingdom. It was an offer I was happy to accept, even later when it seemed the RAF could not decide my future and sent me on several periods of indefinite leave. My relatives were very generous with their hospitality.

Australian servicemen in London had a favourite meeting place, the Boomerang Club in the basement of Australia House, where we exchanged experiences and heard about fellow airmen from Australia. On this, my first leave, I was saddened to hear of the death of one of the members of No 24 Course from Somers, Alwyn Till. Alwyn, the only son of orchardists in the Ringwood area, was so like myself, his childhood and teenage years being based on his church and his love of the simple pleasures gained from his participation there, being a teacher in the Sunday school. That he was the first to be killed, and so soon, came as a shock to me. It seemed so unfair and gave me a lot to meditate about my Christian Faith.

The air-raid sirens in London sounded nearly every night while I was on leave. Most of the residents of the Romford area where I was staying preferred to remain in their houses, unless the bombs started to fall close by. By the time I reached England the persistent heavy bombing had abated, although there was always the possibility of further raids. My uncle's house was built on a slight rise, and looking out of one of the first floor windows I watched the defence of London when raids took place, with the searchlights, the bursting anti-aircraft fire, and the glow of the fires in the city.

Little damage was visible around Romford, although the area had been bombed when I first went there on leave. One evening, one of the bombers strayed off course and a bomb fell close by. There was a large explosion, followed by the noise of breaking glass: the explosion had shattered all the windows of the houses. I heard the sirens of the fire brigade and an ambulance, but thought it was wiser to stay inside rather than wander

about in the total blackout. The local authorities were very efficient and repairs were started immediately after the all-clear had sounded. A team of workers were on the job early the next morning removing all the broken glass and replacing the window panes with thick black paper to preserve the black-out requirements; the glaziers coming later in the week to replace the paper with panes of glass.

At Brighton, the pleasant summer days passed with little to occupy our minds except to speculate as to where each of us would be posted. I was enjoying my stay until, after six weeks of idleness, my name was included in a list with 11 other navigators. On 8 July 1943, we were instructed to make our way by train and ferry to the RAF No 7 Coastal Command OTU at Limavady, Northern Ireland, where we would be trained on twin-engined Wellingtons to be members of Coastal Command crews guarding Allied shipping. That I was not going to be a member of Bomber Command was a great relief, for the casualties were very high, but the prospect of flying for hours over an unfriendly ocean did not fill me with joy, being such a poor swimmer. Ever since my childhood, I had always had a fear of open water resulting from the time I was caught in an undertow at North Road Beach in Brighton, Victoria, and had great difficulty in regaining the beach.

CHAPTER IX

NORTHERN IRELAND

To reach Limavady, our small group travelled by train to Stranraer in south-western Scotland, the terminal for the ferry to Northern Ireland. We arrived as the long summer twilight was ending and darkness settling over the blacked-out town. After spending all day on the train we were anxious to have a meal, but an inquiry to the stationmaster about food proved negative. The town was closed up, the whole area deserted. At the terminal, a blacked-out deserted ferry slowly rocked on the slight swell alongside the pier. No provision had been made by the RAF for our food or accommodation; there was no alternative but to walk on to the ferry and just sit in the cold and darkness until sailing time the next morning. At 0800 the ferry sailed with 12 very cold and hungry Australians among the passengers.

At Larne, across the Irish Sea, a train bound for Belfast stood at the platform. Before boarding, however, there was a rush by our group to nearby shops for food. Soon we were at Belfast and on the Londonderry-bound train, travelling through the beautiful green Irish countryside of little villages and farm houses to Limavady Junction. A diminutive train awaited there to take us to the township of Limavady; the only intermediate station on this short branch line was a picturesque tiny station in the grounds of a country estate. Reputedly the landowner only gave permission for the railway line to cross his estate on the condition the builders constructed a station for his personal use, and every train travelling on the line was required to stop at his private station. On all the trips I made, I never witnessed a passenger board or leave the train.

Limavady is located on the eastern side of Loch Foyle, not far from Londonderry. Our base was about five miles inland from the town, one of two in the area providing air cover over shipping on the western approaches to ports of the western coast of Scotland and England. The second airfield, Ballykelly, was built by the Americans. It had acres and acres of concrete and is the only airfield I know of where a train line ran across the main runway, and where the flight controller had to coordinate with the local station master while aircraft were operating. On one of our flights from the Limavady airbase, I actually saw a train steaming across the runway.

I caught my first glimpse of the aircraft I was destined to operate as I stepped off the train. In the sky above the station, a Wellington bomber and a single engine training aircraft were engaged in a mock dogfight. As I watched, the smaller aircraft simulated an attack on the Wellington, with the larger aircraft attempting to manoeuvre out of danger. It was exciting to see this heavy bomber, which was now so much in my thoughts, but three weeks passed before I had the opportunity to fly in one.

The RAF base was dispersed, meaning the buildings were scattered over the verdant Irish countryside, causing us to spend a lot of time walking between the hedges lining the country lanes. Being July, mid-summer, the days were pleasant but the nights were cold. The sergeants' mess was two miles from the airfield, and the Nissen huts where we slept were a further two miles away. Occasionally transportation was available between the mess and the classrooms situated alongside the airfield, but usually we walked. The Nissen hut, normally the only type of accommodation I experienced on RAF stations, served its purpose very well and was constructed of curved corrugated steel sheet on a concrete slab, in a shape very much like half a barrel. For comfort at night a pot-bellied coke stove was provided in the centre of the floor, and living at the latitude of 55 degrees north, it was essential we had the stove alight at night. Plenty of coke was accessible alongside the huts, but the problem was the coal and wood needed to start the fire, usually obtained by lifting a piece of coal and some wood from the kitchen area of the mess before walking back to the hut. When the stove was alight it was filled with coke, and by midnight most of the chimney would be glowing red hot. The next morning, however, the fire would be out, the hut icy cold.

The 12 of us from Brighton joined 24 pilots, 12 wireless operators, and 24 air-gunners—all members of the RAF—with training beginning immediately, and all specialising in their particular fields. For the initial two weeks, I was back in the classroom to learn the special skills needed to find my way over large stretches of featureless water, with more navigation exercises in the dependable Avro Anson aircraft flown by staff pilots. The exercises were similar to those I had carried out at Mt. Gambier and Summerside, with one important difference. Mostly the flights took me way out over the Atlantic. I was never happy out there, so far away from land, because the ocean below always looking so inhospitable, doing nothing to ease my anxiety or nausea.

After all this initial training, we were given seven days to form 12 crews to operate the Wellingtons. I watched my fellow Australian navigators join crews but no pilot showed any interest in having me. Probably they were put off because I looked like a young teenager. On the seventh day I learnt one captain was not showing any desire to form a crew, as all he wanted to do was to play cards. I felt it was up to me and approached him during his game. In answer to my query, he confirmed he had not selected his crew. I told him I was to be his navigator because there was no one else! Thus I became navigator for Sergeant Paddy Murray. Paddy and I flew together for almost two years, during which time we made 421 safe flights. Paddy (an old man, by RAF standards, of 29 years) came from Ireland; the second pilot, Jim Tracey, was a former policeman from London, while Tom (Ginger) Draper, the wireless operator, was from Wigan; the two air-gunners were Wilf Vernon and George Davis.

This was how I became a member of a Wellington crew, comprising airmen no one else wanted—a heterogeneous crew. We were all nervous about each other's competence in the operation of this new type of aircraft—especially about Paddy, our new captain. In the first two weeks of our stay at Limavady, while I was flying navigation exercises in Ansons, Paddy was learning the technique of piloting the Wellington. On 31 July, the flying instructor had gained enough confidence in him to allow him to take us, his full

crew, on a local flight restricted to circling around the area, with the instructor sitting in the second pilot's seat. Led by Paddy, it was a tense crew that climbed up the ladder under the nose of the aircraft for the first time, to be met by the smells of aircraft dope, oil and petrol in the interior of the Wellington. The initial landings by a pilot of a strange aircraft are never easy, and when Paddy brought the aircraft down towards the runway for the first time there was no chatter on the intercom. Everyone was very quiet. It was not a smooth landing, and as the aircraft rolled down the runway after a series of little hops, an anonymous voice broke through the silence on the intercom: 'We've landed'.

From left: Carl Lawson, Ginger Draper, Paddy Murray, Roy Shallcross

Now recognised as a crew, we familiarised ourselves with the Wellington and learnt its capabilities. Nicknamed 'Wimpy' after a character in a cartoon series, it was a good aircraft, undertaking almost every duty and role for an aircraft of its type. Designed as a bomber, it was equally effective as a torpedo-strike aircraft or submarine hunter. Assembled from strips of metal riveted together to form a lattice, covered with fabric, the Wellington was capable of withstanding considerable punishment. The geodetic construction produced high strength at low weight, and it was even known to flex its wings during rough weather. My first impression of the Wellington was its size—much larger than the Anson or the Battle aircraft in which I had previously trained. Being fabric-covered it was draughty, but of all the aircraft in which I flew, it is the one that I remember with the most affection.

The models of Wellingtons we flew were powered by two Pegasus 1050 hp engines, providing sufficient power for normal operations, but there was a feeling among crews that it did not perform adequately on one engine. Losing the power of one engine over the ocean could mean ditching (landing) in the sea. A later model of the aircraft was powered by Hercules 1735 hp engines, giving greatly improved performance. But here a new problem arose: with this increase in engine power and the fitting of larger propellers, the blade tips passed within inches of the side windows of the cockpit. Waving from the cockpit could now mean the loss of fingers. The correct procedure for ditching was part of our training: how to evacuate the aircraft, how to operate the inflatable rubber dinghy. My point of exit was through the opening on top of the fuselage after jettisoning the astrodome. Whistles were issued to us all; the reasoning being that if crews ditched at night, these whistles would enable the crew to keep in contact. I attached mine to the collar of my battledress, wearing it for the rest of my service. Fortunately I never blew it in an emergency. My working area in the Wellington was satisfactory; with a small well-lit chart table, a comfortable chair, and a warm air outlet nearby making the area cosy. Alongside the chart table were my airspeed indicator, compass, and altimeter to keep me in touch with what was happening up front. Ginger sat at his radio only a couple of feet away across the passageway.

Once past the challenge of our first flight as a crew, the flying schedule began with exercises under the supervision of an instructor. One of these was a joint radio exercise with a destroyer out in the Atlantic, where the destroyer was required to home on our radio transmissions and direct us to its position. Instead, we were given reciprocal bearings, ie. an error of 180 degrees. Instead of approaching the destroyer, we were flying further and further out over the ocean. After about an hour of this, with the wireless signals fading, the instructor scrubbed the exercise and we returned to base. These exercises with an instructor continued until 9 August, when we were finally permitted to operate without supervision. It was important, as members of a crew, to build up confidence in each other. In all my previous flights my objective had been to satisfy instructors, but now it was time to convince the crew—primarily Paddy—that I was competent. It was also imperative Paddy believed me whenever I answered his question as to whether it was safe to descend to a lower height if flying in cloud.

Clothing for these flights was the usual RAF flying kit, which comprised flying boots, a waterproof coverall, long underwear, a long white jumper with a roll-neck known as an 'aircrew frock', an inflatable life jacket or Mae West, a parachute and harness. The harness was worn at all times when flying, the parachute clipped on only in emergencies. The parachute was made of white silk, and it was a painstaking job for the parachute section to fit the enormous area of white silk into an easily handled container. A pull on the rip cord handle and it would spring out and fill with air. On one of my first flights in a Wellington, I mistakenly lifted the parachute by the rip cord handle and in seconds was engulfed in white silk, which filled the whole fuselage. The rest of the crew had a great laugh, but I was faced with the prospect of fronting up to the parachute section with this huge bundle of silk, costing me a large packet of cigarettes given to the parachute section.

Navigational exercises took us all over the Hebrides off the western coast of Scotland and out over the North Atlantic, where I could practice what I had learnt in the classrooms at Summerside regarding navigation over an ocean. Over this vast expanse of water a different navigation technique was needed, for I could not check my position by comparing the scenery beneath the aircraft with a map. One day we spent an hour skimming across the ocean, climbing to streak over the islands of the Hebrides, dropping down to just above the ocean on the other side. It was exciting stuff, and for the first time I experienced authorised low flying. I was warned to be very careful with my navigation when flying out of the base, because the western boundary of Loch Foyle was part of Ireland—neutral territory. On the few night exercises we flew in the area, it was fascinating to see the lights of the houses and villages on the far shore of the loch. The principal navigational aids available to me when flying away from land were radio beacons positioned along the Scottish west coast, with each transmitting a radio signal that was received by a rotatable aerial, housed in an egg-shaped housing above the wireless operator's position in the aircraft. Each beacon had its own individual radio frequency and Ginger, by first tuning into the frequency of the particular beacon, and slowly turning the circular aerial inside the housing, could hear the signal strength rise and fall and give me the direction of the beacon, relative to the heading of the aircraft. Knowing the location of the beacon, it was a simple matter to indicate the direction by a line drawn on the map, and by using two beacons a fix could be obtained. The direction of the surface wind was visible by looking down at the ocean. When there was a steady wind blowing across the top of the waves or swell it raised a fine spray, which formed on the crest of the wave, the waved moved on, leaving the spray behind. When viewed from above, the wave appeared stationary, the spray moving upwind and was seen as a series of fine lines called 'wind-lanes', indicating the wind direction. Looking down, I knew that the wind was blowing along the lines, and the actual direction by the spray on the top of the wave.

Dawn on 6 August 1943 was clear, and promised good weather for flying. After a morning spent in classrooms, we climbed out of Limavady at 1610 for a tour of the Hebrides. Leaving Northern Ireland over the mouth of the River Bann, we turned northwards to the Isle of Islay, and on this heading passed over Iona and on course for the Butt of Lewis. Soon we passed the Isle of Mull, crossed over the rugged mountains of the Isle of Skye, the fishing port of Stornoway, and reached 58.30 degrees north, the most northerly point we achieved. I seemed to be the only member of the crew busy because Paddy and Jim, sitting in the cockpit up front, were enjoying the sunshine and the scenery while the Wellington automatically flew straight and level. Ginger was writing another letter to his girlfriend in Wigan; George, one of our gunners, sat in the comfortable seat in the rear gun-turret; the other, Wilf, relaxed on the aircraft bed.

Turning around the Butt of Lewis we set course for North Uist, taking us southwards over the Western Islands, past Barra and back to base. We landed at 2040, our flight having taken four and a half hours—the longest we had made. This duration gave us the right to a fried egg on top of our meal on returning to the mess, which the RAF insisted all aircrew should have at the completion of a long flight. It always seemed incongruous to see a fried egg on top of a roast dinner, but always acceptable. To make

the day enjoyable the weather had been kind, with the added good feeling that we were never far from land in case of engine trouble.

Flying north on a further exercise towards Islay, we saw ahead a large convoy comprising about 50 merchant ships of all types, in five lines with naval craft at the front, back, and each end of the lines. We continued on our course, very interested in having a look, when suddenly a puff of white smoke appeared in the sky about two miles ahead of us. One of the escorting warships had fired a smoke shell to warn us off, reminding us of our instructions: never fly over a convoy. Quickly Paddy took the Wellington away from the area, but it made a mess of my navigation. Later we were detailed to make two flights to the lonely island of St. Kilda, out west from the Outer Hebrides. The initial flight over the vacant ocean to the island and return took just over four hours, arriving back at 2000. We were just finishing our dinner, including the fried eggs, when we were detailed to repeat the flight, leaving at 0200, returning after dawn. It was hours before I climbed between the blankets, but the second flight was much easier, for I knew the wind speed and direction from the earlier trip.

As we approached the northern Irish coastline on the last leg of one of our exercises, Paddy called me up to the cockpit and pointed out a rock formation ahead known as the 'Giant's Causeway'. Looking down, I saw a mass of irregular hexagonal rock columns at the water's edge. There must have been at least a thousand, probably caused by the rapid cooling of lava as it reached the sea. Many legends relate to its formation, but the one I prefer is the one told to me by Paddy; that the causeway was formed by a race of giant warriors under the leadership of Finn MacCool, as a pathway to Staffa on the Scottish coast, enabling him to visit his sweetheart across the water.

As a part of our training, instruction was given about defending the aircraft against enemy fighter attack. The Wellington had two powered gun-turrets, one at the nose of the aircraft, the other at the tail. When under attack, the navigator's duty was to stand with his head in the perspex astrodome on the top of the fuselage to warn the pilot when to commence evasive action. The difficulty I had was to retain my footing while the aircraft was being thrown around the sky. To gain experience in operating the gun-turrets and the twin Browning machine guns, I was detailed to climb into the forward turret. Nervously I opened the doors in the nose of the aircraft and clambered in. Once seated, with both doors closed, I gingerly grasped the control handle and pressed the trigger. The two guns came to life, one each side of me, each firing 1,000 rounds a minute—a mixture of explosive, armour-piercing, incendiary and tracer ammunition. I must have only pressed the trigger for about ten seconds, but the spectacle was frightening. The noise, the streams of tracer bullets from the guns cutting the air in front of me, the smell of the cordite, and my ever-present tendency to airsickness made the whole experience one not to be repeated if at all possible. As the navigator, the care of pigeons was a new responsibility for me, for each Wellington flying over the ocean carried a crew of eight; the normal crew, plus two homing pigeons in a tiny cage. The theory was, should we be forced to ditch in the ocean, I would be calm enough to place details of our latitude and longitude in a tiny container on the pigeons' legs and release them after I reached the rubber dinghy.

Seeing Limavady below as we flew out on exercises, I visited the township when I was free, and found the buildings very impressive, being mainly of Georgian design. The whole area was dominated by a large church, with its spire towering above the countryside. On my return to the mess, and relating how I spent the day, I was amazed to be told that Limavady was a Protestant town, having been settled by Protestant Scots. The thought had never occurred to me that towns in this delightfully picturesque land could be labelled as Protestant or Catholic. In fact, I had no idea of the religious ill-feeling existing in Ireland.

To break the monotony of the camp, a group of artists from ENSA, the organisation that provided entertainment in service camps, made the long journey from England to provide us with good music. The group was small, comprising a soprano, a baritone, and a pianist. Each was an excellent performer in their particular field and they provided a cultural oasis amid our nights of boredom. We heard each singer perform individually, then together as a duet, accompanied by the pianist who was superb on the keyboard. A very enjoyable evening.

Since my stay in the station sick quarters at Mt. Gambier, my health had been excellent but now my abdominal pains returned. The Medical Officer did not seem too concerned, but as a precaution I was admitted to the base hospital for my condition to be monitored. Once more the delight of sleeping between sheets on a good bed and being tended by female staff, but within days the pain dissipated and I was back with the crew. A couple of days before reporting my condition, feeling off-colour, I had stayed in the hut spending the day lying on my bed, hoping the pain would go away. It was a miserable day for flying, with low cloud covering the nearby mountains. As I lay there I heard a Wellington circling above, seeking a break in the clouds. Suddenly, ‘crunch’, then silence. The Wellington had flown into a nearby mountain. I phoned the airfield immediately, and within minutes the sound of the ambulance and fire tender sirens drifted up from the airfield, but on their arrival all I could do was indicate the general direction of the crash site. When low cloud covered the area, the relative closeness of the mountains to the airfield was a concern to all of us. Flying in these conditions and wanting to reduce height, the pilot had to rely solely on the advice of his navigator. On days when we were caught in these situations, we always descended over the sea prior to crossing the Irish coastline. On one occasion one pilot of our group, assured by his navigator that their aircraft was over water and it was safe to descend, slowly lost height. Suddenly he felt the aircraft shudder. The retractable radio aerial trailing behind and below the aircraft must have caught up in a tree, proving that the aircraft was certainly not over the sea.

A memorable weekend during my stay at Limavady was spent making a trip to Dublin with another trainee. It was easy to get across the border to Dublin by train, but there was a problem about wearing our uniforms in a neutral country, the Republic of Ireland. I managed to borrow a sports coat, and with my dark blue pants, had no problem. My mate, a RAF trainee who had proposed the idea of going to Dublin, would not be so lucky as the Irish could recognise the light grey colour of the RAF. Fortunately he was able to borrow a civilian suit. We reached Dublin by overnight train on the

Saturday morning, and after first booking into a hotel in the centre of the city, began our sightseeing. Situated at the mouth of the Liffey River, which divides the city, Dublin was a city of old majestic buildings, bridges and wide avenues. Founded so many centuries ago, it was interesting to walk through the wide streets, and not worry about the blackout after dark. With no need for food coupons, we enjoyed lavish meals. For my initial meal I ordered steak and eggs, but when served the steak was on one plate, the two fried eggs on a second. We had the pleasure of each eating our way through a large box of unrationed chocolates at the cinema, spending two happy days, and were back at Limavady after breakfast on Monday morning. Comments from my fellow Australians were that I had been foolish. Not only was I away from the camp without a leave pass, but I had gone to a foreign country and had I had an accident, the repercussions would have been frightful.

The food served in the sergeants' mess was only adequate, but sitting on my bed one autumn evening I longed for a warm drink and supper before climbing under the blankets. Discussing this with a fellow Australian, I learnt supper was available at a nearby Irish farmhouse, and as he was about to go himself he invited me to accompany him. We walked about half a mile along country lanes in the blacked-out countryside to a farmhouse, where I paid a shilling to the lady of the house and entered her kitchen to an unforgettable scene. A peat fire in the fireplace radiated warmth throughout the room, and laid out on the table were sandwiches, freshly baked cakes, scones and biscuits. An extra sixpence bought a boiled farm egg.

The culmination of the navigational exercises in the training schedule at Limavady was a challenge. I was instructed to navigate our Wellington out over the Atlantic to an isolated rock, shown on the map as Rockall (UK), 250 miles due west of the Outer Hebrides. I learnt from one of the other Australian navigators who had completed the exercise that Rockall was appropriately named, being just a very large isolated rock standing out of the ocean. I had to be successful on this flight, for my own self-confidence, and I needed all the help I could get from the other members in the crew. Success would depend on Paddy ensuring that the aircraft kept to the compass courses I gave him, because a couple of degrees off-course would make a big difference over the 350-mile flight from Limavady. Finding the objective at the first approach was essential too, to prove myself to the rest of the crew.

About one hour out from the Outer Hebrides, we sighted ahead in the distance a large passenger liner steaming towards the United Kingdom. On closer inspection, the ship was easily recognisable from its size and three funnels as the Cunard liner, *Queen Mary*, probably carrying a large contingent of American troops. I had previously seen this great liner in Sydney Harbour earlier in the war, when it came with two other large passenger liners to pick up Australian soldiers for transport to the Middle East. *Queen Mary* was sailing on a straight course and, from the size of the bow wave, must have been travelling at over 30 knots. It was steaming alone, no sign of a naval escort, the speed of the liner making it safe from U-boat attack. Another reason for the lack of an escort: most naval vessels were not fast enough. The giant liner looked so majestic trailing its wake across the ocean. Looking down at the liner I remember thinking that,

to the troops on board, our presence would be a sign that land was near, their dangerous crossing of the Atlantic almost over.

With Paddy at the controls, and Ginger manning the rotating radio antenna giving me bearings on the Scottish radio beacons, everything was going well, but I decided to check my calculations of drift by dropping a smoke float that emitted smoke on impact with the sea. I requested George to man the rear gun-turret, and when he was ready I dropped the smoke float down the aircraft chute, asking him to pick up the smoke in the optical gun sight of his turret. From this action, he told me how much he had rotated the turret to sight the smoke, this small angle giving me the actual drift of the aircraft. After two-and-a-half hours flying over the ocean, I nervously went forward into the cockpit to stand behind Paddy. To my great delight, at my predicted time, I saw ahead and below a great monolith of rock towering out of the ocean, with waves crashing against its base. It was Rockall, the apex of an undersea mountain. To me, that sight made all my effort worthwhile.

Our training here finalised, our orders were to make our way by train and ferry to No 1 Torpedo Training Unit on the banks of the Firth of Clyde at Turnberry, Scotland. The whole group of us, 12 crews, boarded the Belfast train at Limavady Junction, unaware that we would be too late to reach the ferry before sailing time. This resulted in our arrival late at night at Belfast railway station, cold and hungry. Our accommodation there was a transit camp, where we were given a meal and shown sleeping accommodation of a sort: three-plank wooden beds, reminding me of the wooden troughs used for feeding pigs. One board at the bottom, with a sloping board along each side; one blanket each, but no pillow or mattress. It was a case of wrap yourself in the blanket and lie down on the bare boards. Early next morning, we left Belfast on the train to Larne for the ferry to Stranraer. Across the Irish Sea, then another train to Turnberry, Scotland. At this new school, our training was to specialise in how to sink ships by torpedo. Up till now, our training had been designed for service in Coastal Command keeping watch over our shipping. Now we had a radically different future: to sink enemy shipping. Probably in the Middle East!

CHAPTER X

SCOTLAND

The name of our new base, Turnberry, is synonymous with the game of golf because Turnberry Golf Club is one of the premier clubs of Scotland. Situated near the coastal village of Girvan on the eastern coastline of the Firth of Clyde, it is the maritime gateway to Glascow, with the island of Ailsa Craig rising like a cone from the water about ten miles from the coast. Early in the war, part of the fairways served as a training camp for army commandos. After some of the bunkers were filled-in, several fairways levelled, and a runway built, it was used by the RAF for the No 1 Torpedo Training Unit. Here, Paddy was instructed in the art of attacking a ship with a torpedo, with the rest of us in the Wellington as passengers. To provide a target, navy personnel manned an old ferry, which steamed up and down the firth. Paddy was especially warned not to attack the wrong ship, for flying towards a friendly merchant ship could result in a hostile reception. In fact, never fly directly over any ship, however friendly it looks. The adage was: never rely on the gun crew knowing the difference between friendly or hostile aircraft.

It was imperative the attacking aircraft was close to the water when the torpedo was launched. The pilot also had to be very watchful when there was no wind and the water very calm, a condition known as a ‘grey-out’, the risk being that a pilot cannot distinguish between the sky and the sea, and could fly into the water. Earlier in the summer this did occur on the practice area of the firth when, on a very still day, the water surface without a ripple and the Glasgow smog permeating down to sea level, one aircraft crew, preparing to make a practice low-level attack on the target ship, not having a firm horizon to guide them, flew into the sea. A second crew, circling above while waiting their turn to attack, went down to investigate and did likewise.

Our first practice attack was frightening, with an instructor at the controls of the Wellington to show Paddy how to make the attack flying only a few feet above the water, racing the aircraft towards the target ferry. Looking over the instructor’s shoulder, I was sure we would ram the target. Suddenly, he pulled back on the controls and the Wellington zoomed over the masts, with only feet to spare. On our next flight, with Paddy at the controls, the instructor sat in the second pilot’s seat and tutored him on his first attempt, with the rest of us sitting very quietly inside the aircraft, each with his own private thoughts about what we were doing. In my opinion, there was no need for the rest of us to be in the aircraft with Paddy at all. But he must have satisfied the instructor, for later in the week we were let loose to carry out our own practice attacks.

Practice or dummy attacks on the ship were made without dropping a torpedo, accuracy being measured from photographs automatically taken when Paddy pressed the release button. For our first attempts the ship was stationary, but for later attempts the attacks

were made with the ship sailing at prescribed speeds, each speed requiring a different aiming point ahead of the ship. Paddy learned to judge the speed of the target by the size of the bow wave, making over 60 attacks with the camera, a dicey business. Attacking ships at night presented a problem because of the lack of illumination. If the moon was shining, the reflection of the moon on the water, known to us as the 'moon path', was used to silhouette the target. When the moon was not visible, another aircraft dropped parachute flares about one mile abeam of the target, allowing the attacking aircraft to see the target silhouetted against the reflection on the water from the light of the flares.

Finally we were trusted to carry a torpedo and launch it at the ferry. The use of actual torpedoes was very limited, because on rare occasions the mechanism to emit white smoke from a spent torpedo failed, resulting in the loss of the expensive equipment. At 1400 on 22 September, with a torpedo slung in the aircraft bomb bay, we climbed off the runway to discover whether our training had been effective. Within 20 minutes Paddy had the Wellington racing over the water towards our target. In seconds it seemed, those of us sitting in the fuselage felt the aircraft surge forward as the torpedo dropped. Once safely over the masts of the ship, Paddy brought the aircraft quickly around, giving us the pleasure of seeing the wake of the torpedo indicating a successful strike. My recollections of aerial torpedoes are that they were smaller than standard naval torpedoes; the motor being a semi-diesel type, with a variable speed setting to drive the torpedo at 40 knots. Dropping the torpedo started up the motor powering the torpedo's propeller, and a device attached to the tail ensured the torpedo maintained a horizontal position as it dropped into the water.

In early October 1943, our training was complete; we were qualified to join a torpedo squadron. One ominous sign was an order to hand in our battledress uniforms and replace them with khaki coloured shirts and uniforms for use in the Middle East. However, there was uncertainty as to where we were actually going; possibly we could be hunting enemy shipping in the Mediterranean. But nothing eventuated and we were sent on indefinite leave. Going on leave from Turnberry meant going by train to Glasgow and making our way in the city from one railway terminal to another. We arrived at Glasgow late at night and managed to get a four-wheeled trolley, and we loaded on our kitbags and sundry gear. As we were hungry by this time, I went to find the service canteen and get food for the night-time journey. When I returned, I could not find the rest of the crew. They had gone to another railway terminal and I did not have any idea where it was situated. Stepping out from the well-lit station hall, I found myself in a totally blacked-out city. Not only could I not see anything, I did not know where to go. Clutching my bag of buns, I promptly collided with my first pedestrian. Slowly regaining some night-vision, and aided by the comments from the unfortunate citizens I met, I eventually joined the rest of the crew.

Being given leave was wonderful for the RAF types who were able to go home to their families and girl friends. To the 12 Australians at Turnberry, there was the problem of where to spend the leave, and the added worry of getting weekly food coupons for our hosts. Fortunately I could stay with my relatives in Romford, but after three idle weeks moping about the house I started to think the RAF had forgotten about me. I

worried about being a burden on my relatives, for I could not spend every day at the Boomerang Club or sightseeing in the city, and was forced to spend many days in the house. Realising that I was getting fed up with the situation, my aunt understood my problem and took me to her local shopping centre and introduced me to a young friend of hers, Margaret, who worked in a local delicatessen. Now I had someone to take to dinner or to a cinema.

At last in the middle of November, after being adrift for almost eight weeks, relief came in the form of a telegram:

REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO RAAF LIMAVADY, NORTHERN IRELAND

Once more I boarded a train in London and made the long journey to the ferry terminal at Stranraer, but this time, learning from what happened previously, I made sure I had food and drink to carry me over until arriving in Ulster the following morning. Most of the 72 airmen from the torpedo course at Turnberry were at Limavady when I arrived, but there was little organised for us. The only exciting event that happened on this second stay was when an aircraft was reported missing, believed to be down in the Atlantic, north-west of Eire. An air search was mounted to look for survivors, with all station aircraft participating. I was appointed as navigator of a scratch crew made up of our instructors, and was given a specific area of the ocean to search. At the briefing I learnt that on reaching the area, I had to provide compass courses for the aircraft to fly back and forth across the designated area, each crossing being two miles distant from the previous one.

We reached the search area and began to criss-cross the ocean, with every vantage point in the aircraft manned by the crew. The weather was bad, flying conditions rough, and looking down at the ocean swell below I realised any survivors in an inflatable rubber dinghy would have little chance of survival, even if they managed to board it. Suddenly, my thoughts were shattered by a call from the pilot asking for a course to reach the nearest land because he thought one of the engines was losing power. The nearest land was Eire, a neutral country, but that did not worry me because I had seen the state of the ocean and to me, a poor swimmer, any solid ground would suffice, for the thought of ditching our aircraft in the swell I could see below horrified me. We had been assured a Wellington would float long enough to enable the crew to scramble into a dinghy, but I was not convinced. Happily, after about ten anxious minutes, the pilot decided that his fear was unjustified and, to my great relief, requested a course back to base.

This stay at Limavady lasted five boring weeks, with no classes and only one flight a week, then once again indefinite leave, which on this occasion lasted six weeks. The one good sign during our stay was receiving instructions to hand in our khaki uniforms and get replacements in the usual colour, in my case dark blue, which indicated that we would not be going to North Africa, but probably to Bomber Command. To all of us at Limavady, it seemed that the RAF still did not know what to do with us. Years later, on reading an aviation magazine, I came across a possible reason for our weeks of idleness. We had been mere pawns in a power struggle at the highest level of RAF headquarters

between Bomber Command and Middle East Command regarding our future. Bomber Command was suffering heavy casualties from the nightly raids on Germany, and as we from Limavady comprised 12 fully-trained Wellington crews that could be thrown into the offensive immediately without further training, Air Chief Marshal Harris, the head of Bomber Command, argued that if the Middle East needed Wellington crews they should set up their own operational training units and train the crews themselves.

During this stay at Romford, I learnt that my cousin Edsel and a friend, Les Smith, had booked into a holiday camp in Surrey for a week, and would be happy for me to accompany them. The Tree Tops Holiday Camp, situated near Guildford, Surrey, was a small family style camp run by the Merritt family. For two days I wandered with Edsel and Les along paths through the countryside. Very restful, until a phone call from my aunt brought my holiday to a halt. Another telegram had arrived:

REPORT TO NO 300 FERRY TRAINING UNIT TALBENNY IMMEDIATELY.

Being posted to a Ferry Training Unit could only mean one thing. I must be going overseas! But where? And to add to my confusion, I had just handed in my khaki uniform.

After getting my kit together, I contacted the RAF transport office to learn my new base was in South Wales, and I needed to catch a train from Paddington station to the town of Haverfordwest, where transport would be available. I had been stationed in England, Ireland and Scotland; now it was to be Wales. Paddington station, the London terminus for the Great Western Railway, was crowded. On the platform uniformed personnel, with kitbags at their feet, were saying goodbye to friends and lovers. Anxiously I searched the crowd for a familiar face, but without success. Possibly the other aircrew from Limavady were already at Talbenny. The train pulled out at 2000, and sitting in the darkened compartment as the train made its way through the blacked-out city and countryside, I felt so alone, compounded by having to listen to my fellow passengers speaking in Welsh, positive they were discussing me from the way they kept looking at me. One incident I recall about this journey was when the train pulled up at a town, and in the moonlight I saw, close to the line, a building with a faint light coming through a blackout curtain. Looking at the window, I visualised beyond the curtain. It was someone's home, with warmth and comfort, which was far better than sitting lonely in this cold railway carriage, not knowing where I was heading. To add to my gloom, because of all the uncertainty about my movements, I had not had any letters from Australia for about two months, and it could be a long time before the RAAF headquarters tracked me down.

CHAPTER XI

FERRY COMMAND

I reached No 300 Ferry OTU at Talbenny in South Wales on 4 December 1943. The sun was just rising on this very cold mid-winter morning as I stepped out of the train at Haverfordwest, the town awakening under a blanket of snow. Happily I found a small transport awaiting me. Surprisingly, I was the only airman to disembark from the train. The airfield was situated on high ground close to St. Brides, in an area devoid of any natural attraction. Being on that part of South Wales that stretched out towards the Atlantic, the area was subject to storms sweeping in from the west.

After leaving my kitbag at the guardhouse, I walked down to the sergeants' mess for breakfast, hoping to see some familiar faces, but to my surprise the only ones I knew were Paddy and Ginger. I had expected to see all the airmen from Limavady. Even the other three members of our crew were missing. Apart from the three of us, the whole group must have been posted elsewhere, including Jim, our second pilot, and our two air-gunners, George and Wilf, who had borrowed ten shillings from me before going on leave. Probably they were all now flying in Bomber Command. Discussing this new development over breakfast, we could find no logical reason for the break-up of our crew, seeing Bomber Command was endeavouring to get as many trained Wellington crews as possible to continue the bombing of Germany. At the time we presumed the reason was that Paddy was of small stature and would have had, in our opinion, difficulty in reaching the rudder pedals of the new heavy bombers coming into use, such as the Halifax and Lancaster.

Years later, after reading a history of the Empire Air Training Scheme entitled *A Last Call of Empire* written by Dr. John McCarthy, Associate Professor of History at the Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, a possible explanation for our posting became evident to me. In his book, Dr. McCarthy asserted the RAF considered navigators trained at schools in Australia, such as Mt. Gambier, far superior to those trained in the United Kingdom. In addition, those navigators who had graduated from the General Reconnaissance School at Summerside, Prince Edward Island, should be reserved for operations over vast areas of water, such as the North Atlantic, the Caribbean Sea and RAF Coastal Command. As confirmation of this assertion by Dr. McCarthy was the posting of several of my fellow-trainees from Summerside to the Bahamas at the completion of our course, and my posting on arrival in England to a Coastal Command OTU in Northern Ireland. I believe my training at Mt. Gambier with that at Summerside was the probable reason for our posting. When I could have been posted to a bomber or to a torpedo squadron in the Middle East, someone in the RAF headquarters must have decided that as I was trained to find my way over vast expanses of water, I should be in a position to exercise those special skills and be employed in Ferry Command, posting me to Wales with my captain and his wireless operator. I now

feel, with a certain amount of pride, the reason for the posting to Ferry Command was my training as a navigator, and not Paddy's physical characteristics.

The CO at Talbenny was not happy to have us on his establishment, for it was evident we were unexpected; he did not want us, and had no plans for our employment. Later, when he had the opportunity to get rid of us, he did so. After spending two weeks of idleness in the sergeants' mess, Paddy was finally told what work we would be doing: flying new Wellingtons to Rabat in French Morocco, and returning to the United Kingdom by whatever aircraft passed through Rabat. This posting to Ferry Command was to us a superb streak of good luck. We had been very fortunate. To aid us as members of Ferry Command, we were issued with two important documents, to be carried at all times. The first identifying us as members of the RAF Ferry Command, requesting all government bodies to assist us to return to the UK as soon as possible. This slip of paper proved to be a very convenient document to possess, enabling us to travel anywhere without leave passes or travel warrants. The second, known as the 'Gooly Chit', was carried by all aircrew operating over North Africa. Printed in both Arabic and English, this printed sheet of paper requested all Arab people to treat us as friends and assist us in returning to our unit; recommending our correct behaviour, should we meet Arabs in the desert; and setting down a few useful words to assist us in communicating with them.

The Wellingtons were flown from the aircraft factory by members of the Ferry Pilots Pool, Women's Section. One of the criteria used to judge a pilot's skill was the gentleness in which the aircraft wheels first touched the runway on landing. There was always an audience of interested watchers when an aircraft was seen approaching. The scene was engrossing to watch as a Wellington made a perfect touchdown, with a girl about my age in the pilot's seat, having flown it from the factory single-handed. When each aircraft arrived, a week of testing was needed to ensure its readiness for the delivery flight to Rabat. All the equipment in the aircraft had to be tested and calibrated, also the performance of the Bristol Hercules 1675 hp engines. Regulations required two air tests to be made; firstly, a heavy load take-off test with the aircraft carrying a full load of fuel. Although the aircraft should have no problems in getting off the runway fully loaded, it was imperative to remain in the air for at least two hours before landing. This restriction was essential to reduce the fuel load until the total weight of the aircraft fell to a safe level for landing. Secondly, a fuel consumption test, which guaranteed we did not run out of fuel during the long delivery flight, was carried out by using only one fuel tank for an hour and recording the amount of fuel required to refill the tank. On some of these flights we flew a designated route, passing over cities such as Cardiff, Rugby and Doncaster, but on others the only instruction received was to go northward over the Irish Sea. On these days when we had a free hand, we flew past Holyhead in North Wales to Douglas, capital of the Isle of Man, where Paddy's wife was living. Down to 500 feet, we circled her house to be rewarded by seeing her waving to us. The Isle of Man, originally a part of the Norse Kingdom of the Isles, was now a self-governing Crown Dependency. It had an elected parliament comprising the House of Keys and the Legislative Council, with power to make laws governing its citizens. I believe, as a resident, Paddy's wife was not subject to compulsory war service.

These proving flights were not without danger. One day, the Tannoy loudspeakers throughout the camp erupted with calls for ambulances and fire tenders. The pilot of a Wellington had reported problems in controlling the aircraft and was having difficulty in making it back to the runway. Everyone stood around outside the buildings to watch the aircraft attempt to land, only to see it crash on to the station armoury, setting off a series of explosions and a veritable fireworks display with rockets shooting up into the sky. The fire tenders and ambulances were quickly on the scene, but sadly, there was only one survivor from the crew.

An important task to be performed on the new aircraft was to swing the compass and note the deviation of the needle. Compasses do not point to the geographic north pole, but to the magnetic north pole located in northern Canada, and the angle on the compass between the geographic north and the magnetic north is readily available from the map in use, known as the variation. In addition to this, every aircraft has an independent magnetic field when the engines are running, further affecting the compass needle. To record this latter effect we taxied the aircraft to an unused runway, and as Paddy slowly pointed the Wellington at eight different compass headings, I walked behind with a hand-held prism-compass to record each aircraft heading from 30 yards astern. It was a windy job, standing in the slipstream, but carrying out this task enabled me to record the deviation of the particular aircraft compass needle throughout the 360 degrees. The compass courses given by the navigator to the pilot incorporated the variation, and it was the duty of the pilot to make the corrections to these by reference to the deviation recorded on the card I inserted in a holder above the compass in the cockpit.

Talbenny was an isolated aerodrome with very little of interest outside its boundaries. Apart from an occasional visit by an ENSA Concert Party, time passed slowly in the sergeants' mess, but being the Christmas season, permission was granted to the members of the mess to hold a dance on New Year's Eve. One problem was the shortage of partners, as there were only a few sergeant WAAAFs on the station. As a solution, the organisers placed a notice in a shop window in the nearby town, inviting any local girl to come to the dance, with transport provided between the town and the base. Being shy and never having learnt to dance, always feeling uncomfortable with girls on the dance floor, I waited until suppertime at about 2300 before joining the proceedings. The mess seemed alive; everyone was having a good time. In the recreation room the tables had been folded, the seats pushed against the walls. Streamers hung from the rafters with sprigs of holly, the floor liberally covered with French chalk, providing a very satisfactory dance floor. The visiting girls were freely giving of their favours—although, on second thoughts, the word 'freely' was not the most appropriate word to use.

The following day—New Year's Day, 1944—Paddy, Ginger and I flew out to begin our first delivery flight of a pristine Wellington to French Morocco. Not only was this our first delivery flight, it was the start of my operational flying. Appointment to an operational squadron or unit was the whole objective of aircrew training. Two years had passed since I entered the RAAF at Somers to commence my training, and now I could play some part in the war effort as a member of a Wellington crew. My future participation in the war effort had, during the past few months, been very uncertain

because I had originally trained to be part of Coastal Command to keep watch over shipping. Suddenly my future had changed; in October 1943, I expected to operate with torpedoes against enemy shipping in the Mediterranean, but now was a member of Ferry Command delivering aircraft to Africa. Each task had a different life expectancy. For Bomber Command, crews were lucky if they survived the 30 sorties that constituted a tour of operations. Flying with torpedoes, three attacks on shipping, if you were lucky. In Ferry Command, nine months of active flying was considered a tour; 18 months, two tours; and you were rested. Having begun my first delivery flight as a member Ferry Command on 1 January l944, I could now look with a considerable amount of confidence to 1 July 1945, when my two operational tours would be completed.

We were detailed to deliver a second Wellington on 20 January 1944, our departure point from England was an airfield at Portreath, Cornwall. Located near the south-western tip of England, the airfield's main purpose was to provide landing facilities for the Hurricanes and Spitfires of Fighter Command. It was a grass field without paved runways, but was suitable for Wellingtons. We were warned before leaving Talbenny about a smaller grass satellite field near Portreath, which was too small for a Wellington. We could have landed on this satellite field quite safely, but it would have been far too short to permit us to get back into the air. Leaving England from Portreath instead of Hurn on the south coast shortened the night flight by at least an hour. No need now for the extra fuel tank, and we would not have the worry of the barrage balloons on the south coast either. On the ground at Portreath before lunch, we spent a few pleasant hours exploring the nearby fishing and holiday town.

At 0230 we climbed into a clear night-time sky for our second transit to Rabat. Every flight was different and on this particular night, when everything was going to plan and we were about 40 miles from the Spanish coast, the darkness ahead was split by several searchlights probing the night sky. As we watched, the Spanish anti-aircraft batteries started firing, creating a spectacle of bursting shells amidst the searchlights. Probably an air-defence exercise, but they could have been shooting at one of our aircraft straying over the coast. Our orders were to keep at least ten miles from this neutral coastline at all times and as I was relying on the sextant for our position, which could have an error of at least ten miles, I changed course to take us at least 20 miles from the Spanish turning point. Once on the ground at Rabat, and having reported the searchlights and anti-aircraft fire, it was time for brunch, where we learnt of a delay on return flights to the United Kingdom, meaning that we might have to spend a few days at Rabat. But with the weather glorious and the American rations very enjoyable, this prospect was no hardship, for it was very pleasant relaxing in the sun and enjoying a break from flying. We sat around for four days until a Dakota of British Overseas Airways came from Cairo to collect us. The flight to Gibraltar was uneventful, then we were told on our arrival that our return-flight would be further delayed because of problems with the aircraft. We were well cared for by the RAF for the next two days, ultimately reaching Talbenny on 29 January after being away for nine days.

One of the delights of Gibraltar was the many shops on the main road selling souvenirs, food and fresh fruit, owned by Spanish civilians who returned across the frontier to

La Linea at the end of the day. Traffic lights had been installed where the main road crossed the aircraft runway to ensure that the civilian cars and pedestrians were kept back when aircraft were operating. I purchased a bunch of bananas, three feet long, to take back on the aircraft, which created a stir on the Bristol railway platform because bananas were not available in the United Kingdom. I found out later that some fruit given to a WAAAF in the kitchen of the sergeants' mess at Talbenny worked wonders, with all my laundry done and neatly pressed.

Although Spain was neutral in the war, this detail did not restrict spying on activities on the runway from a high tower standing close to the fence on the Spanish side of the frontier neutral zone, from where all activities on the runway could be monitored. It was a little unnerving to realise that, as we stood waiting to board the aircraft, someone could be watching. The observer would know our time of take-off and certainly our route. Flights on the route from Gibraltar to England were considered by the warring nations to be civil flights for the carriage of diplomats. Earlier in the war a passenger, bearing a striking likeness to Mr. Churchill, boarded the midnight flight to England but regardless of the agreement that these flights would not be attacked, the Luftwaffe was waiting for the BOAC aircraft and shot it down. All on board were listed as missing, including the leading English stage and screen actor, Mr. Leslie Howard, returning to the United Kingdom after entertaining the troops in the Middle East.

Portreath was again our departure point from England on 1 March 1944. In the briefing room, just before boarding the aircraft, we were confronted by one of the medical staff who insisted on vaccinating us against smallpox. Having been vaccinated at Somers on joining the RAAF I protested, showing him evidence of this in my pay book, but my protest did not help, I just had to bare my arm. The rumour was the health authorities were worried about a possible smallpox epidemic. Airborne at 0230 we sat down for brunch at Rabat at 1000. Seven hours later, a Dakota called in to take us to Gibraltar. At 0700 the next morning, we were back in England at Whitchurch Airport, but getting away from the airport was not easy this time because another airport medical officer insisted we bare our arms for vaccination. I showed him the entry in my pay book recording that I had been vaccinated the previous day at Portreath but I was wasting my time, for no matter how much I protested or the evidence written in my pay book, he maintained that you could not go to Africa one day and return the next. Hence my third vaccination. In addition, a new player appeared on the scene: a customs officer who insisted in searching my sole piece of luggage, a holdall containing my camera, parachute and harness. I was even required to empty the pockets of my battledress; his only find was my camera. Confiscating the film, I was warned that I would hear further on the matter, for taking cameras on flights was not permitted; the only reaction being a letter from the Customs Department enclosing my negatives and prints of all the photos.

We turned southward at the Scilly Isles to cross the Bay of Biscay on these delivery flights; the first five hours were boring for Paddy, sitting alone at the controls in the darkened cockpit, parted from us by a blackout curtain. To relieve this boredom Paddy, who had been an altar boy in Ireland, recited parts of the Mass on the intercom, and

Ginger, a Methodist, gave the responses which Paddy had taught him. Possibly, Paddy found this reassuring; I certainly got comfort from it. Listening to the ritual reminded me of my four years spent as a boy chorister at St. John's Anglican Church in Latrobe Street, Melbourne, singing almost every Sunday morning and evening over that period of my childhood.

Not all these transit flights were accident free. Climbing up from the Portreath runway one night, one of the dual escape doors above the aircraft cockpit blew open. It had not been secured correctly and the slipstream was blowing through the aircraft like a gale, forcing the forward door down, with the other door driven back against the fuselage. We needed both doors closed. Being close to the airfield we could have returned and fastened them, but landing with a full load of petrol would be dangerous. Ginger made an attempt to close the doors and had his head and shoulders out of the cockpit, trying to grab the open door. Suddenly I realised he was slowly being sucked out by the slip stream and grabbed him by the legs and pulled him back into the cockpit. That ended any attempt to close the doors, and we put up with the cold blast for the whole trip.

The coming of first light heralding the dawn on these flights was always an exhilarating time for me, for I could see from the scene to our left how accurate my work had been with the sextant. On one trip, when first light was just creeping over the eastern horizon, I took a map and joined Paddy in the cockpit with the intention of comparing the map with the coastline that should have appeared on the left of the aircraft. To my great surprise, however, the coastline was about ten miles on the right hand side of the aircraft. We were flying over Portugal, and looking down through the glass panel under the bombsight at the scene directly below I saw, to my horror, a broad carpet of twinkling lights. Below us was the neutral city of Lisbon, the capital of Portugal. Quickly, Paddy swung the aircraft to the right to move out to sea and as he did so I glimpsed, far below us, the silhouette of a Spitfire fighter of the Portuguese Air Force coming up to escort us on our way.

Our departure point for Rabat on 19 March was again Hurn in Dorset, with the take off at 0130. In the hour before take-off, I was in the briefing room calculating my flight plan for the journey, when I sensed someone was looking over my shoulder. The first thing I saw as I turned was the rows of decorations and the rank of an Air Chief Marshal. I recognised Sir Arthur Tedder, just appointed to command all air forces engaged in the proposed landings across the Channel in Europe, who seemed very friendly, interested in my work and where I was going that night.

We made a further three delivery trips to French Morocco over the next seven weeks. Now spring, the weather always seemed to be perfect for the long flights. After leaving England, we climbed up through the clouds to about 10,000 feet and flew across the Bay of Biscay in the bright starlight over a carpet of white clouds. Now confident in my use of the sextant and able to recognise the stars I required to use, life was quite enjoyable, for I was now making my small contribution to the war effort, although admittedly in a rather safe environment.

Each transit to Africa was different. Halfway across the bay, on one of these latter crossings, the front of the aircraft was suddenly bathed in ethereal light. Surely it could not be a searchlight, so far from the coast, so I went up to the cockpit to see its source. The rotating propellers were ringed with a circle of sparkling light, this eerie scene lasting about half a minute. It was the electrical phenomenon known as 'St. Elmo's Fire', named after St. Elmo, the patron saint of mariners. This flight was a particularly easy one because the weather forecast I received at Hurn was accurate. I had no problems and very confidently gave Paddy a course and arrival time for the last leg to the African coastline. It was time to relax, have another cup of coffee, and look forward to a meal. A few minutes before my estimated time to cross the African coast, Paddy called on the intercom and asked me to bring a map up to the cockpit to tell him our position. Looking out from the cockpit, all I could see was the vacant blue sea with not a sign of land, which really shook me. I told Paddy to fly eastward because we would be bound to strike the coast, for Africa was a big place. Somehow I had miscalculated the wind factor on this final leg.

I reasoned later that Paddy had reduced our height from 10,000 feet to 1,500 feet preparatory to crossing the African coast, but I had failed to realise this. At the reduced height, the aircraft must have been influenced by the strong easterly wind that can funnel out from the Mediterranean area between the mountains on opposite sides of the Strait of Gibraltar, known in fables as the 'Pillars of Hercules'. I should have remembered Paddy would bring the Wellington down to a lower height on this last leg of the journey, but maybe I was feeling lazy or tired after the long night. Within a short time, we sighted the coast and the sunlit buildings of Rabat; the only problem was Rabat was on our left instead of our right, an error of at least 20 miles. For me, a disappointing trip.

A Wellington bomber fitted with radar equipment.

All models of the Wellington went to the Middle East theatre, including one particular variant that we flew: the GR Mark VIII, fitted with the new Radio Direction Finding (RDF) equipment now known as 'radar'. A couple of hours before leaving Talbenny on this trip, I was shown how to understand the blips of the RDF on the oscilloscope, and the new aid did prove useful on the trip, allowing me to monitor our distance from the coast of Portugal. In addition, this aircraft carried a 24-inch Leigh Light that could

be lowered from the fuselage. The aircraft had no front gun turret, with the nose of the aircraft enclosed in transparent Perspex and included a seat for a member of the crew to control the Leigh Light. During the night I envisaged, when first light came, sitting in the operator's seat where I could enjoy the morning sunshine and the scenery of the coastline. As soon as daylight crept above the eastern horizon, I walked forward past Paddy and took my seat in the nose of the aircraft. It was such an unearthly sensation sitting there, seemingly suspended in a transparent capsule, speeding through the air. Below, ahead, and on both sides the scene stretched out to the horizon; Portugal on my left; ahead on my right, the blue ocean; behind me, on either side, the whirling propellers; and above and behind, the windscreen. I was seated for only a few minutes, feeling exposed, and retreated past Paddy sitting alone in the cockpit, happy to return to the sanctuary of my usual work station at the chart table. This particular aircraft had also been fitted with a new navigational aid: a simple film projector above the navigation table, which projected on to the navigation table below details of the stars recommended for use on any particular night. After matching up the times of the sextant readings to a time scale on the chart, it was easy to transfer the sextant readings to the black lines projected on the chart, obviating the need of the mathematics after sextant shots.

The delights of flying regularly to Rabat were numerous. First, leaving the cold Welsh weather for the balmy conditions of North Africa, with the enjoyment of vastly better food on arrival. The flights began with us clothed in warm garb and flying boots, but by the time we reached Portugal, with the Wellington now bathed in the morning sunlight, we could lighten our clothing to prepare for the warmth of Rabat. The weather there, in my experience, was usually blue skies with an ambient temperature of about 24 degrees Celsius. The food at Rabat, catered by the Americans, was vastly different from that of the RAF. Of all the bases on which I served, our base at Talbenny was the only one where I felt the pangs of hunger. The American forces had been at Rabat since November 1942, when they had landed in large numbers as part of the grand strategy to liberate Europe from German occupation. They certainly lived well.

Another advantage of serving as a ferry crew was that after we flew out of England on a delivery trip, the RAF really did not know our precise location. About this time, Great Britain was changing into an immense service camp, and there were American servicemen and vehicles everywhere in preparation for the invasion of Europe. Ginger heard that an American camp was being established near Wigan, and as his Joan lived in Wigan, he was a worried man because the whole area would be filled with Americans in their smart tailored uniforms and their pockets with their higher rates of pay over our servicemen. Discussing his problem at Rabat, Paddy suggested we add three days onto our return journey to enable Ginger to spend two days at home, our return movements always flexible because of weather or aircraft problems. In January we had been away from the UK for nine days, but there had been no comments on our return. Arriving back in England, at Whitchurch this time, we agreed to meet at Talbenny in a three days. Paddy could go to Douglas on the Isle of Man, Ginger to Wigan, and I to Romford.

Leave to Paddy and Ginger was a real bonus, enabling them to go home. I could not do this, but I always had a warm welcome at Romford and possibly Margaret would come to dinner somewhere, or I could meet fellow Australians at the Boomerang Club in the basement of Australia House in London. One problem we had with us on this exercise were our parachutes, Mae Wests and flying boots, which had to be carried on the trains. This was OK for the other two who were going by train across country, but I had to travel on the London underground and with my parachute, some fruit, life jacket and flying boots, my holdall was full, forcing me to sling my parachute harness over my shoulder. I saw a couple of service police have a close look, but the Ferry Command document I carried would solve any problem if I was questioned. The whole arrangement proved successful, allowing me to spend two happy days in Romford; Paddy, likewise in Douglas; and Ginger was reassured Joan was not interested in the Americans.

Standing at midnight one night beside the runway at Gibraltar, waiting to board an aircraft for England, the anti-aircraft defence of the Rock burst into life. Searchlights probed around and above the Rock; others lit up the whole airfield and the frontier zone; and the sky overhead was punctuated by bursting shells and rockets. Someone commented that a Chinese general was visiting this British outpost. On the other hand, maybe the display was to impress the Spaniards across the barbed wire fence. Our guidelines were, if in difficulty during a flight down the Iberian coast, to endeavour to land in Portugal, for the Spanish authorities were not too friendly towards the RAF, and internment in Portugal usually meant accommodation in a good hotel in Lisbon until repatriation was arranged. I learnt that the Germans, in cooperation with the Spanish authorities, had installed a new radio navigational aid named ‘Consul’, covering the Bay of Biscay, with one transmitter at Brest, the second at Corunna in north-west Spain. Although this was a breach of neutrality by Spain, no comment was made by the Allies, for they preferred to let it continue to operate and use it themselves. Each of the transmitters emitted a fan shaped signal, divided into 60 sectors, the signal in each sector having a differing pattern of dots and dashes. To utilise this system, I needed the assistance of Ginger to tune into the frequency of one of the transmitters so that I could count the number of dots and dashes, giving me the bearing of the transmitter. With the bearing of the second transmitter, an accurate fix could be obtained. I believe the system was primarily designed for use by U-boats, but I preferred to use the sextant, which could not be subject to any interference.

Our orders were to return home on the first available aircraft calling into Rabat, bound for the United Kingdom. Sometimes this was a Liberator bomber converted for carrying freight, but not for carrying passengers, as there were no seats available. Because of the number of passengers usually carried, it was necessary for everyone to sit against the wall inside the aircraft with their knees up for the nine hour flight. After my first experience of this, I decided that if any return flight to England was to be in a Liberator, I was going to be one of the first to board the aircraft so that it would possible to go back to the tail where the fuselage was narrow, for the prospect of lying full length on the floor for the flight appealed to me. I achieved this position, only to realise during the night I was lying in front of the toilet door, and everyone walked all over me. One

advantage of returning to England by a Liberator was the longer range of the aircraft, obviating the stop at Gibraltar. Our take-off time was still midnight, but the flight ended closer to London, at the RAF base at Lyneham instead of Whitchurch, near Bristol.

The length of our stay at Rabat depended on the frequency of aircraft returning to the United Kingdom. During one stay at Rabat, having learnt that we would not be returning immediately, the three of us took the opportunity to get away from the airfield to visit the twin towns of Rabat/Sale. I was intrigued by a high minaret visible at the distant settlement and wanted to have a closer look. The whole area was under the control of the United States Army, and we were assured there would be no problems. We reached the nearby main north/south highway and set out over the treeless brown countryside. It was pleasant walking along the deserted highway, the only point of interest was an old Arab gentleman striding along with his staff, followed by a heavily veiled woman carrying a large bundle on her shoulders. Our walk only took about an hour, and on arrival at the outskirts of Rabat I was amazed to see a signpost on the roadside showing Casablanca 70 km. To me, there was a certain mystery about Casablanca, probably brought about from seeing a movie of the same name at Port Pirie, starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergmann. The twin towns of Rabat/Sale are situated at the mouth of the Bou Regree River; on one bank was the French township, Rabat, and on the other, the old Arab settlement of Sale. Rabat dates from the 12th century. When the sultanates of Marakesh and Fez were united, Rabat was made the capital. There were walls around part of the township, partially enclosing the 12th century high minaret that I had seen from the airfield, and the King's (formerly Sultan's) palace. This part of Morocco became a French protectorate in 1912, and the influence of the French was seen in the design of the buildings and the wide boulevards. Most of the buildings in Rabat were painted white for protection against the tropical heat, the white buildings proved an outstanding landmark to us on our approach to the coast after the long flights from England. Sale was a typical Arab collection of buildings; interesting to see from across the river, but strictly out of bounds to allied personnel.

Needing a meal to pass the time until the evening transport to the airfield arrived, the menu on the window of a French cafe looked appetising so we ventured inside. The cafe was clean, the food good, except that my order of ham and eggs was a little novel. The ham I ordered was as expected, but instead of the customary two fried eggs, I received six tiny eggs probably pigeon eggs. We spent a pleasant day in Rabat, seeing a different part of the world, but we were ready for the American army truck when it called for passengers for the airport.

CHAPTER XII

SURGERY

While on leave in London in March 1944, between flights to Africa, I had a recurrence of the abdominal pain that had put me into the sick-quarters at Mt. Gambier and Limavady. One night, at about midnight, it became intense and I needed medical attention. Although there was an air raid in progress, my aunt walked through the blacked-out streets and phoned the nearby Hornchurch RAF base of my condition. This base had written itself into the history books in the days of the Battle of Britain, for the grass field here was one of No 11 Group used by the Hurricanes and Spitfires of the RAF when they rose up and defeated the Luftwaffe. Within 15 minutes, a medical orderly came with an ambulance and took me back to his base, where a medical officer in pyjamas and dressing gown climbed into the ambulance. After a brief inspection, he instructed the driver to take me to the nearby Rush Green Hospital for emergency surgery. Getting out of the ambulance at the hospital it was evident that my condition was considered serious, because the night sister and a couple of nurses were waiting for me and took me to a bed in Ward No 14 for the staff to prepare me for surgery. This completed, clothed in a simple white cotton robe, I walked with the sister to a small room adjoining the ward—the operating theatre—which was extremely Spartan with just a plastic-covered bench lit by a single globe and metal shade. Quite sufficient for the treatment of minor air-raid injuries, but certainly not for major surgery. As instructed, I climbed up and laid down on the cold plastic to wait for the surgeon, who looked only about my age. This did not assure me. Operations shown on television picture a full team of doctors and nurses in the operating theatre. At Rush Green Hospital it was just the opposite, for the only other person present apart from the surgeon was the anaesthetist, holding a bottle in one hand and a mask in the other, who was not much older either. Both looked as if they were just out of medical school, but I could not have cared less. All I wanted was to get rid of the pain. With the mask over my face, someone asked me to breathe deeply. When I started to recover from the anaesthetic, I joyfully realised the pain was gone and I was back in the ward, in a bed so arranged that I was forced to lie on my back, unable to straighten my legs, remaining in this position for two weeks. I was never informed as to what caused the crisis, but considering the severity of the pain and the attention of the doctors and nursing staff, it could have been peritonitis.

German bombers came over the first night making me feel so helpless, flat on my back in bed, listening to the sirens and bombs exploding in the distance. The sister on duty at night was very understanding, and the next night gave me a sedative and continued to do so every night. The whole nursing staff was very kind, but the time dragged. During the first week a priest came, but learning I was not of his flock, he passed on his way. A few days later my aunt came, but I gathered from her comments the hospital was isolated and difficult to reach. At the completion of the two weeks I was allowed to get out of bed and move about the ward, and I got to know something about my neighbours.

Later in the week the hospital arranged a dance for staff and patients in an adjoining room, but lacking dancing skills I decided to stay in the ward. This did not satisfy the sister in charge, who ordered me to put on my uniform and attend. The band was good, but I felt embarrassed having to watch the dancers, and to refuse an invitation from a young nurse who asked me to dance.

Finally, just before three weeks had passed, my new friend from the delicatessen in Romford came to visit me and brought a fresh egg, which I greatly appreciated. Handing over the egg as an addition to my evening meal, we walked through the grounds of the complex, discovering that the hospital was not confined to a large building but was a collection of smaller buildings scattered over a wide area, and was an infectious diseases hospital.

Ward No 14 cared for about 20 male and female patients; the majority were air-raid casualties, including little children with burns. Also in the ward was a member of the RAF ground staff, who was happy to stay in the ward as long as he could, for he was having treatment for a stomach ulcer. He was very friendly with one of the senior sisters and she seemed happy to keep him there. Better to be in the ward with all the comforts of home, instead of being on some isolated airfield. The ward was originally known as No 13, but to placate some members of the management the number was changed. This did not save the ward or the patients and staff, however, because about a month after my discharge I received a letter from my aunt, saying that the ward had received a direct hit during an air raid. Unhappily, several of the staff and patients were killed.

After three weeks I was discharged and taken back to RAF Hornchurch where the Medical Officer, satisfied that I had recovered from the surgery, preferred to grant me three weeks convalescent leave, but was not authorised to do so as I was not normally stationed there. Instead, his instructions to me were to return to Talbenny, and report directly to the base MO and not to the orderly room. Sitting up all night in the train, I reached Haverfordwest at 0600 and was before the MO by 0800. After a full medical examination, he rang the Commanding Officer. I overheard an argument as to whether I was fit to return to flying duties. In the end the decision of the MO prevailed, which upset the CO. This resulted in the CO wanting me, with Paddy and Ginger, off the base. His reason was that he did not want a crew on the base that could not fly. He had not wanted us there in the first place, and now I had given him a reason to move us on. We were ordered to Pershore, the nominal headquarters of the ferry operation, the action at Talbenny being only a detachment.

And so, at 1510 we flew out of Talbenny for the last time, on this occasion as passengers in a Wellington. At 1630 I was before the Pershore MO, who was very sympathetic to my request for convalescent leave and granted me three weeks, and also leave to my two mates. It was late in the day when we reached the nearest railway and I was on the train to London. By the time I reached the London terminus the blackout was on, and the suburban trains had closed down for the night. All I could do was to lie down on one of the seats on the platform, cover myself with my greatcoat and await the dawn.

CHAPTER XIII

PERSHORE

This three weeks leave was a boon to my two mates but I felt embarrassed to continually, without any notice, throw myself on the hospitality of my aunt and uncle. On this leave, however, because of my aunt's kind action, I now had a friend to take into London to a theatre instead of sitting at home. Coming back to Romford late at night in the underground showed the courage of the citizens of London who remained in the city during the bombing. They used the underground railway stations as air raid shelters, spending the night asleep on the platforms even when the trains were operating. Their mattresses covered the platform, save for about two feet at the edge for passengers to board or alight from the trains.

Soon my convalescent leave was over and I was on my way back to Pershore. The airfield was in an idyllic setting just north of the Cotswolds between Worcester and Evesham. On returning from leave I had no difficulty in getting a seat on the train going to Worcester, but as Pershore was on a branch line it was necessary to leave the train and wait at a small station for the local train. I was halfway to Pershore on this branch train when I realised I had left my kitbag on the platform. Having visions of having to go to Brighton for replacement clothing, I reported my loss next morning to be told my kitbag was in the camp guardroom. Would I please go and collect it? The town of Pershore was once noted for having one of the largest of all English abbeys, built by the Benedictine monks, but tragically destroyed at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries. It was a pleasure to ride with Ginger through the surrounding countryside, with the added attraction, the beautiful Vale of Evesham. Being springtime, this part of England was so picturesque with the flowers blooming and the fruit trees in blossom.

Having been out of circulation as far as mail was concerned for many weeks, I was anxious to pick up any letters at the camp post office. My parents, who wrote each week, were keeping well, although they worried about me. Mavis had a new interest because the AWAS Land Headquarters had formed a drum band to accompany service personnel at parades and marches, and she was appointed the bass drummer. Needing a suitable drum and associated webbing, she was taken by a sergeant from a regular army band to a large musical store in the city, where they selected a suitable base drum for her to carry on marches. Later came the bearskin, gauntlets and drumsticks. Life for her now was partly keeping officer records up to date and playing with the band in army parades, giving the beat to marching service men and women. From the tone of her letters, she seemed very proud of her new life and the badge of an army musician, incorporating the design of a lyre, sewn above the two corporal's stripes on her sleeve.

Our leave over, our new CO did not want us to be idle, and to check up on our fitness decided that we should simulate parachuting into the ocean and swimming to a dinghy.

Mavis marching as a bass drummer of the AWAS band in the Victory March, August 1945, Melbourne

As we could not jump from an aircraft, the three of us were taken to the public baths at Bath and told to dress in full flying-kit meaning a waterproof canvas overall, boots and a life jacket, and to jump from the top of the diving tower, which appalled me. I could not even remember climbing so high a tower, and being such a poor swimmer I had never dived into the water at all. Reluctantly, clad in flying kit, I climbed the ladders to the top of the tower. Looking down at the water, it seemed so far down. Closing my senses to everything, I jumped. Life was full of new experiences. I hit the water feet first and seemed to be under for such a long time, finally surfacing and paddling to the dinghy. Climbing out of the dinghy at the edge of the pool the order came to jump again, but this time blindfolded, to simulate a night jump. The instructions were that when I hit the water, to swim towards someone blowing a whistle. That was the end of the session for me. I quit.

Shortly after this episode, we were allocated another Wellington to be prepared for passage to Rabat. Five days were sufficient to complete the tests, and on 8 May we flew out of Portreath at midnight, reaching Rabat at 0700. Two days were spent waiting at Rabat on this trip, until a freight Liberator called in and took us to the RAF base at Lyneham. Breakfast was served in the sergeants' mess where we waited until a Wellington came in from Pershore to collect us. Four days after our return another new aircraft was prepared for transit, but this time the first flight was very short. For some reason, which I cannot recall, Paddy decided as soon as we were airborne to get back on earth as quickly as possible, making a very tight circuit of the airfield, to be back on the runway within minutes. Then it was back to the sergeants' mess to await instructions. Spending these idle days, Paddy learnt from one of the other captains that our CO

believed all flying personnel should hold commissioned rank. Within days, the three of us had lodged our applications and been interviewed. It was then a case of wait and see. Having just recovered from this excitement, we received surprising instructions to report to the No 107 Transport OTU at Leicester East, where a new career lay ahead operating Dakota transport aircraft, the workhorse of the RAF.

I had enjoyed making the trips to Rabat as a member of a Ferry Command crew. The excitement of the night take-off; the challenge of navigating through the night using the sextant; the sense of achievement I felt communicating with the now friendly stars above; seeing my pencilled triangles based on my star readings slowly march along my required track on the chart; the joy of seeing the sun rise over Portugal, with the expectation of an American brunch with pancakes, eggs and bacon after we landed in Africa. These past five months were a very pleasant and rewarding interlude in my service.

CHAPTER XIV

A NEW CAREER

The Dakota aircraft flown by the RAF, known as the C47, was essentially a Douglas DC3 low-wing monoplane aircraft, powered by twin 1000 hp radial air-cooled engines with a reinforced floor and double doors on the port side of the fuselage. Being a modern aircraft, it differed from the Anson and Fairey Battle aircraft I had experienced. Not designed as a military aircraft, it was a derivation of the Douglas DC2; an early civil airliner that had gained a lot of favourable publicity when it came second against all comers in the London to Melbourne Air Race in 1934. Being a civil aircraft, the crew accommodation was far superior to the other aircraft I had operated. For crew comfort there were padded crew seats, sound proofing of the cabin, even carpet on the cockpit floor. There were no individual seats in the passenger or freight section, just a collapsible seat along each sidewall. To carry wounded personnel, there was provision for 24 stretchers, which could be suspended from webbing down the sides of the cabin. In addition, the cockpit was fitted out with two complete sets of controls, increasing our crew numbers from three to four. Sergeant Carl Lewis, a Canadian, joined us as second pilot.

Having to convert to this new type of aircraft, it was back to the classrooms for the four of us. Paddy and Carl were kept busy learning about the aircraft and its flying characteristics; Ginger was introduced to the American wireless equipment, while a new radio navigational aid with the code name of GEE was explained to me. Originally proposed to the Air Ministry prior to the war by Dr. R.V. Jones, a young scientific adviser to the ministry, the system was rejected; the RAF maintained that the use of the sextant could not be subject to interference, as would a radio system. It was only when photographic evidence showed that bombs were being dropped miles from the target that the Air Ministry relented and this new navigation system was introduced. From my own personal experience I found the system wonderful; it enabled me to find my location within seconds. A simple explanation of GEE is that there were three radio transmitters—a master and two slaves—on a 200-mile base in England, sending synchronised pulses. What the receiver in the aircraft did was measure the infinitesimal time differences between the pulse from the master and each slave, which were indicated on a cathode-ray tube facing my chart table. Reference to a map showing a network of lines gave me my position. To navigators like me, this invention was like manna from heaven. I was given practical experience on it in an Airspeed Oxford, which was not a popular aircraft, but one advantage it possessed was that the undercarriage was raised hydraulically. No need for trainees like me to have to crank up the wheels, as on the Anson. I spent two weeks stooging around the Midlands with my face close to the cathode-ray tube, learning to make sense of the lines and blips flickering on the screen.

During our stay at Leicester East, the newspapers were full of speculation about the proposed Allied landing on the European north coast. On 4 June, we were astonished to see that all the Dakotas and gliders on the airfield had, overnight, received a dramatic change to their camouflage, with three wide white stripes circling the fuselage of each, just forward of the rudder and around each wing, with striking effect. Hopefully an effective insurance against friendly anti-aircraft fire. Two days later, on 6 June, the BBC announced a huge invasion fleet was approaching the French coast in Normandy. During the next days, I took every opportunity to visit the operations room to read the latest intelligence reports. We now realised our future. When our training at Leicester East was complete, we could expect a posting to replace crews lost from the transport squadrons taking part in the invasion, with Dakotas dropping paratroopers to capture vital bridges and towing gliders filled with troops behind German fortifications.

Horsa gliders after the Normandy landing.

When Paddy had qualified to pilot the Dakota, we flew across from Leicester East to Rugby, Ludlow, Llangollen and return. Using GEE, I found it so much easier to navigate and fix my position, far easier than taking a map into the cockpit and comparing it with the countryside below. Later we made a similar flight, leaving Leicester East at 2300, going to Worcester, Newbury and return. No need for the sextant when flying over Great Britain and Europe, for GEE was a magical aid. This area of England, known as the Midlands, was so different from anything I had experienced because all the previous training establishments had been close to a coastline, making map reading easy. Here we were over an area with canals and multiple railways going in every direction, and I found it very confusing to look down with map in hand and recognise any particular place on the ground. On one occasion, however, faced with a short flight covering

30 miles from Leicester East, I did decide to use the map and navigate visually, but it was a big mistake. When we had climbed to 2,000 feet, I could not see the ground at all, because below me was a sea of thick smog. I realised it was time to get busy with GEE and revert to what I should have done first; learning from that experience that smog in the Midlands could be unbelievable on a still day. One advantage from flying in the Dakota was that I seemed to have lost my tendency to be airsick. Possibly because this aircraft had been designed to carry passengers, it was more stable in flight.

The towing of Horsa troop gliders was part of the curriculum. Made of a wooden frame covered with fabric, they could carry 29 soldiers or a jeep or trailer into battle. Realising the success of the enemy with this new method of troop movement, the Chiefs of Staff instituted research into how the allies could learn from the enemy, and tests were made on the types of gliders available from British manufacturers and what aircraft could tow them. Two gliders were selected, the Horsa and the Hamilcar. Other tests resulted in the selection of the Dakota and the Halifax to tow the troop-carrying Horsa gliders, and the Albermarle bomber to tow the giant tank-carrying Hamilcar gliders. The Wellington was also tested as a potential tug, but because of its type of construction it was found unsuccessful—the strain from towing caused considerable damage to the fuselage. Gliders in use today have slim graceful lines enabling them to utilise air-currents and stay airborne for a considerable time, but the Horsa glider, with its angular shape and protruding undercarriage, could not glide far at all. When towed into battle, it remained attached to the towrope until very close to the designated landing area. When the glider pilot recognised his particular landing spot, he cast off from his end of the towrope and pointed the glider towards the ground, pulling out of the dive at the last moment.

The procedure for operating with gliders required them to be placed at the end of the runway prior to towing. Each Dakota taxied onto the runway and the 350 foot long nylon towrope was plugged into a connection at the tail of the aircraft. With the towrope attached, the Dakota crept forward to take up the rope slack and the aircraft throttles opened up for the take-off down the runway. Because of its design the glider could become airborne before the towing Dakota, and it was imperative the glider kept as close to the runway as possible when first airborne. Going too high when the towing aircraft was still on the runway was dangerous, for this action raised the tail of the towing aircraft, thereby destroying the lifting effect of the aircraft wings. With a glider in tow, the Dakota cruised at about 120 mph. The correct position of the glider was slightly above or below the Dakota; it was never to be directly behind, as the slipstream of the Dakota caused the glider to oscillate and lose control. The first British glider pilots were officers from army regiments, and it was a mark of distinction for them to wear their glider pilot wings on their army uniforms. Later in the war, because of casualties in the ranks of these original glider pilots, these duties were allocated to surplus RAF sergeant pilots. Piloting a glider in an operational sortie was a one-way ticket to danger, because the flight always ended with the glider pilot on the ground in the midst of a battle.

I made one flight in a Horsa glider. After standing close to the runway, watching gliders being towed into the air, I approached one of the glider pilots and asked for a ride. Within minutes, I was seated in the co-pilot's seat, ready to go. Looking ahead through

the windscreen, I watched the towrope attached to the aircraft ahead become taut, and begin to pull the glider down the runway. It was an eerie sensation sitting beside the glider pilot as we flew along without the roar of engines, but with the continual high pitched scream of wind and slipstream forcing its way through the seams in the fabric covered fuselage. The flight lasted 25 minutes until we were back over the airfield and casting off from the tow, the pilot pointed the glider straight down towards the ground. Watching the ground coming up rapidly really scared me, because the glider pilot waited until the last moment before pulling out of the dive and rolling across the grass. If he did it to frighten me, he certainly succeeded. But now I had a new type of entry to put in my logbook:

22 June 1140 Horsa Glider 25 Minutes

One flight was enough for me.

For another phase of our training, we flew to a Manchester Civil Airport at Ringway, where the No 1 Parachute Training School was based. The purpose of our visit was twofold; first, to provide an aircraft for the training of paratroopers; and secondly, to instruct us how to carry out this work. This school was founded in 1940, following the success of the German parachutists, with the aim of forming a battalion of 500 soldiers capable of parachuting into battle. Although under the control of the army, it was soon realised the lack of army personnel with parachuting experience made it imperative the operation be a joint effort with the RAF, who cooperated in the venture, agreeing to provide instructors with the essential expertise. With the dropping of paratroops being a new method of warfare, and not having a comparable aircraft to the German JU52 transport with its side door, the initial training of volunteers was mainly by trial and error, with the first volunteers jumping from a pre-war bomber.

It was only when the Dakota became available, that the rate of deaths and injuries was finally diminished. To provide for the dropping of paratroops from a Dakota, one of the doors of the passenger cabin was removed and a static line installed, the forward end attached to the cabin roof behind the cockpit bulkhead, the other above the exit door. Prior to jumping, each parachutist clipped his parachute release tape to the static line to ensure his parachute would open. Red and green lights controlled by the pilot were placed above the doorway to indicate the correct time to jump. The parachutists jumped as rapidly as possible, for the fewer seconds between the first and last, the nearer they were to each other when they hit the ground. With the aircraft flying at 100 mph a gap of one second between each paratrooper resulted in a distance of 50 yards on the ground. We flew into Manchester on 27 June and spent the day under the tutelage of an instructor who showed Paddy the correct aircraft flight altitude for dropping parachutists.

After dinner in the sergeants' mess on this first day, having been allocated my accommodation, and the weather pleasant, I stepped out of the airport and walked towards the centre of the city. To me, I felt I was making a pilgrimage to Manchester, the city my parents always referred to as 'home'. Here they spent their childhood, married, and was from whence they migrated to Australia in 1912, with my then four year old

brother. They had the opportunity to go to Canada or Australia as assisted migrants and chose Australia, because they believed that my brother would have a far better future there, better than that which faced my father. At 14 years of age, my father became an apprentice in an iron works, working a 12 hour day, having breakfast at work. It must have been a big decision for them, never having been away from Manchester before, and I recognise their courage for which I will be always grateful. I had no idea where they lived prior to parting from all their friends and relatives, but as I walked though the buildings of the city, I felt good that I was recognising the sacrifice they had made, at the same time acknowledging my English heritage.

The trainee paratroops had made their initial jumps from a wicker basket suspended from a captive balloon, and having passed that initial test, they graduated to jumping from a Dakota. Two days after our arrival, we took on board ten pale trainees to make their first individual jump from an aircraft at 1,000 feet. With their jumping instructor standing at the open door, encouraging and possibly giving them a little push, each nervously jumped out. Later that day we embarked a further ten trainees for parachuting as a group, or in army terms, a 'stick'. On this flight I learnt, to my horror, that as navigator it would be my task on an operational jump to take the place of the jumping instructor and stand by the open door to act as dispatcher. On approach to the dropping area, the red light glowing was the signal for the soldiers to stand in single file and clip their parachute straps to the static line. Their duty was also to ensure the paratrooper in front had his parachute strap attached. Standing alongside the first parachutist at the open door, I was told to watch for the green light and when it shone, to yell at the first paratrooper and hit his shoulder and ensure I did not go out too, for I was not wearing a parachute. When the green light came on, out they went into space. I found the scene awesome as I stood, with a firm grip, beside the open door watching them leap out. When all had left, the straps to their parachute covers trailing in the slipstream needed to be recovered, which was a job for Ginger and I down on the floor at the open door, hauling the straps and covers back into the aircraft one at a time. While waiting to taxi to the runway on one of these initial flights, I spoke to a rather pale soldier sitting in our aircraft and asked him why he had volunteered to be a paratrooper. I learnt that he had just become a proud father, and his wife needed the 40 per cent increase in his pay that his new classification would provide; an extra two shillings a day.

On our last day at Ringway, 17 newly graduated paratroopers climbed on board with all their kit. Their training completed, it was time to report to their new regiment. We left Ringway and headed south towards their base at Netheravon on Salisbury Plain. This troop movement was unconventional, however, because they were to parachute on to the grasslands near their base. On approaching the area, Paddy switched on the red light and I took up my post beside the open door as dispatcher. A few minutes later, when close to the Netheravon base, the green light shone and they parachuted down. Once the area was clear of the parachuting soldiers and the covers recovered, we landed, handed over the balance of their kit, and returned to Leicester East.

Our training back at Leicester East now had another new focus, with the parachuting of wicker panniers of supplies and ammunition. For this, both aircraft doors were removed

and roller conveyors installed in the aircraft passenger cabin, enabling the panniers to be pushed down the aircraft and out the door. Each pannier had a parachute attached to the top with a strap to be clipped to the static line in the cabin. When it was time for the drop, the green light shone and the panniers were pushed out the door by four members of an army support unit; the parachutes floating the panniers to the ground. The final exercise was at Leicester East, a spectacular mass drop of paratroops, with all the Dakotas on the base taking on board a full compliment of 20 soldiers. On becoming airborne, the aircraft formed into an operational formation, ending in the mass jump near Netheravon. We were now qualified for posting to an operational Dakota squadron.

On 15 July 1944, a Dakota of No 512 Squadron flew into Leicester East and took the four of us to Broadwell, our home base for the next 11 months. In the period between my departure from Brighton and joining No 512 Squadron, I attended four operational training units (OTUs), which were not without danger. Flying at an OTU was just as dangerous as operational sorties. There were many reasons for the high casualty rate at OTUs, probably due to the lack of experience of the trainee crews.

On a happier note, while at Leicester East I received my last automatic promotion: to Warrant Officer First Class. This would be my final promotion, unless my application for a commission was successful. I was still with my mates in the sergeants' mess, but I now had a little more money to spend. This rank, the highest available to non-commissioned officers, was usually reserved for airmen who have made the service their career and who were responsible for order and discipline. One evening, showing my new badge of rank to a mate in the sergeants' mess, I heard an elder permanent warrant officer standing behind me, grumbling that it had taken him years to reach his rank, and now they were giving it to young sprogs like me.

CHAPTER XV

No 512 SQUADRON

Being collected from Leicester East by a Dakota of No 512 squadron was a definite improvement to having to make our own way there by train. When Paddy, Carl, Ginger and I arrived and reported to the orderly room, we were allocated four empty beds in one of the NCO Nissen Huts. No explanation was offered as to why the four beds were empty. Possibly the previous occupants had been casualties over Normandy on D-Day. Being together in the one hut enabled us to continue as a unit, flying, eating and relaxing together.

No 512 Squadron was formed on 18 June 1943 from one of the flights (sections) of No 24 Squadron; its original task was to supply the route to Gibraltar and Algeria in support of the North West African campaign. In February 1944, a change of task came with its transfer to Broadwell as one of two squadrons operating from there, as part of the five squadrons of Dakota aircraft based in the area, comprising No 46 Group, Transport Command. The official insignia of No 512 Squadron showed a sword superimposed on the head of a horse with the motto, 'Pegasus Militans', which could be translated as 'The Militant Horse'. The squadron comprised 27 Dakotas, in three flights of nine aircraft. The primary duty of the squadron was to provide close support to the army in Europe.

The Broadwell airbase was situated in a very picturesque area of gently rolling hills known as the Cotswolds; the countryside included many stately, well-maintained country estates and little quaint villages of workers' stone cottages. The base, named after a nearby village, Broadwell, was close to the Broadwell Grove estate, noted for the beauty of the manor and the handsome gardens, which included a paved lovers' walk meandering over the green fields. In one area where the walk approached a paved country lane, there was a stone-lined tunnel so wanderers had no need to climb the dry stone walls to cross the lane. Cycling along the surrounding country lanes with their dry stone walls was a great way to spend a day off flying duties; the surrounding villages were so picturesque with old cottages and inns. The only ugly aspect marring the tranquillity of the scene was the sight of weapons of war visible along the lanes at 50-yard intervals; stacks of wicker panniers, filled with all types of ammunition from rifle bullets to howitzer shells. All ready for us to parachute to the army if required, each stack was clearly sign-posted with the type of ammunition, making it easy for the army to collect, bring to the airfield and load on our aircraft whatever was needed.

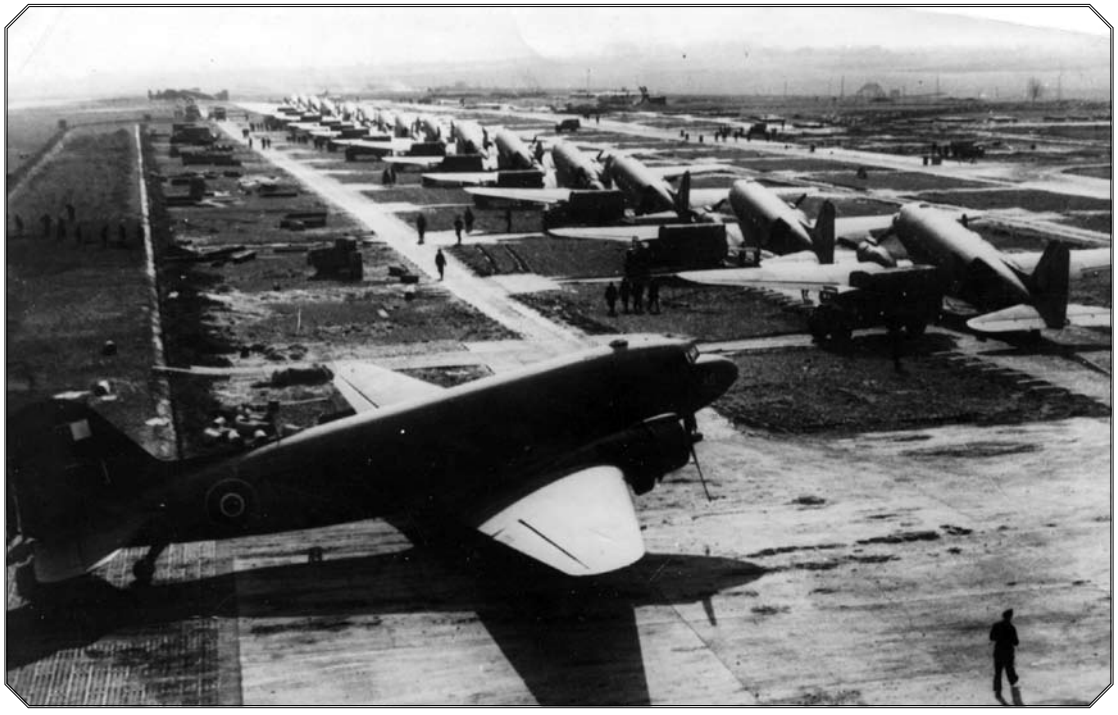
Our first few days at Broadwell were spent learning the layout of the base. That accomplished, we commenced a series of training exercises set down by the commander of B Flight, probably to show whether we had absorbed the training given at Leicester East. A navigation exercise was part of the program. On 22 July, we flew out at 2200

on a flight to Lundy Island, situated off the coast of Devon in the Bristol Channel. Another navigation log to be handed in. A couple of days later, an hour of glider towing. To provide for situations where soldiers were surrounded in battle and needed aircraft to parachute the wicker panniers stacked in the lanes, the soldiers were provided with small radio beacons named EUREKA, which assisted pilots to find the correct place to drop panniers. For three days a EUREKA beacon was placed in different parts of the Cotswolds, for us to home in on to its radio transmission and report its position. Our final training exercise was held at night; the Dakota fully laden with panniers, and four members of an army air dispatch company to push the panniers out. We had just reached the dropping area when the door between the cockpit and the cabin was flung open, and an agitated leader of the soldiers burst into the cockpit with some startling news. One of his men was out! Having visions of someone having fallen out of the aircraft through the open door into the blackness of the night, I quickly leapt to investigate to find the soldier lying prostate on the floor beside the roller conveyor. He was out all right, unconscious. I reported to Paddy and he called off the exercise. We then returned to base, for it would have been too difficult to make the drop with the inert soldier on the floor. New experiences came fast; some of these were plainly dangerous. One day began with low-level glider towing. Low-level flying is thrilling, but racing across the countryside with a glider dangling behind on the end of a 350-foot-long nylon rope was precarious. With engines at full power, we skimmed across the low hills of the Cotswolds. A week later came a night tow at 2300, our first experience of towing a glider at night, fortunately at a height of 1,000 feet. I wondered when we would be scheduled to carry out more rewarding tasks.

A humane part of the squadron duties was the evacuation of wounded personnel from the Normandy bridgehead. Finally, on 29 July, our crew was allocated one of those daily flights to France, to fly out of Broadwell at 1400. Excitedly, after lunch I rode to the B Flight dispersal, and on approaching our aircraft was met by the unexpectedly tantalising aroma of newly baked bread. So different from the usual aircraft smell of oil and petrol, the aircraft was filled with loaves of fresh bread for our forces in the Normandy bridgehead. Two highlights of this—my initial evacuation flight—I always remember. First, just before take-off, a female nursing orderly of about my own age came aboard to tend the wounded on the evacuation flight. With the aircraft filled with the bread there was no room in the passenger cabin, so she came into the cockpit and stood between Paddy and Carl, an excellent place to witness the scenes ahead. Secondly, we were told to leave our parachutes behind, for crews were not permitted to have them when carrying passengers. The planners of the invasion had set down specific air corridors across the Channel for transport aircraft; from Selsey Bill on the English coast to the Normandy bridgehead; and from Cap de la Hague to Christchurch on the return. As navigator, it was my responsibility to see that our aircraft kept strictly to these air corridors. The wind forecast being accurate, the flight to Selsey Bill on the south coast of England was uneventful, and being confident that I had calculated the correct wind for the water crossing, I gave Paddy the course to the bridgehead.

We had flown for about 30 minutes across the Channel when a vast armada of about 60 ships appeared ahead of us of the Normandy coast. Several were unloading at newly

constructed piers, others sunk to provide breakwaters, and a number were beached and unloading through their bow-doors. Crossing the Normandy coast at the designated crossing point at 1,000 feet, our aim was to locate the landing strip, No B14, situated close to Bayeux. As we crossed the coast I could see the spire of Bayeux cathedral, of which I had a particular interest because in Year 9 at school I had studied the Bayeau Tapestry as part of art classes, and I did not think there would be any problem in finding the strip. Relying on the navigation aid GEE I confidently gave Paddy the required course and the number of minutes to reach it, but when the time had elapsed, Paddy and Carl could not find any trace of the strip, although GEE indicated that we were above it. Confused, Carl grabbed a map and they decided to map-read to the strip. But this did not work, for in minutes they were lost. Straying too far from our objective was dangerous as we had not been briefed on the limits of the bridgehead. They flew in an easterly direction over the yellow sands of the Normandy beach, but soon found this was not the way to go. Ahead of us I saw a Royal Navy battleship anchored off the coast fire a salvo of shells from all its turrets towards the German positions on the outskirts of Caen. Finally realising the situation they asked for help. I told them to reverse our heading, and relying on GEE I brought them again over the strip, which was simply an open-weave metal strip with a parallel taxi-strip in a farmers field. What, I believe, caused the problem was that they were used to landing at RAF airfields with distinctive markings, not on a primitive strip on farmland. In all probability, the first approach to the strip had been correct, it was just that they did not recognise it. After cautiously circling the strip and noting the direction to land from the large white 'T' alongside it, Paddy brought the aircraft down. Parking on the taxiway, we joined a queue of six other Dakotas awaiting casualties. Soon the bread was unloaded, but 40 minutes passed before it was our turn to receive casualties.



RAF Transport Command Supports Western Front Assault

Jumping down from the Dakota on arrival, I was thrilled to be on French soil, something I had never imagined when I first reached England. Later in my service career, I was able to visit all the Western European countries. As the five of us stood waiting, a man in an unfamiliar uniform approached me and, identifying himself as an Australian war correspondent, questioned me about my work. In the excitement of evacuating casualties I forgot about the meeting, but later was reminded by a letter from Mavis, telling of her hearing about me on a broadcast on ABC Radio 3LO. Giving my name, the newscast told of the meeting in France and described my work in the RAF. On hearing it, she immediately walked to a public phone nearby and rang my parents, but unfortunately they had missed the broadcast. The radio station was kind enough to read a transcript of the broadcast over the phone to them.

At last, field ambulances backed up to our aircraft, and the nursing orderlies quickly loaded the wounded soldiers on stretchers on to the aircraft. Our Dakota had been fitted with webbing to suspend 12 stretchers in three tiers down each side of the cabin. We evacuated 24 casualties on that first flight. Looking at the sedated patients, tightly wrapped in blankets on their stretchers, I remember thinking that when they awoke, they would be safe in an English hospital. I also wondered what horrific wounds the blankets concealed, for I had seen the large scars on Paddy's body from his being wounded at the evacuation of the British Forces at Dunkirk. After 70 minutes at the strip, we were airborne and on our way to our turning point at Carentan in the west. Then northerly, by-passing Cherbourg—still in German hands, where Victor Johnstone was shot down and killed—to Cap de la Hague on the northern tip of the Cotentin Peninsula. Passing Cap de la Hague, we set course northwards across the Channel to Christchurch on the English coast, and home to Broadwell.

There was an unexpected sequel to my first flight to France. Over half a century later, I received an invitation to attend an official reception to be held on behalf of the French Government at the Victoria Barracks in Melbourne on 6 June 2000, the 56th anniversary of the liberation of France, to recognise the part played by Allied Forces veterans and members of the French Resistance in that great event. With about 100 other recipients, I was presented with an inscribed Diploma of Honour, a book describing the beauty of Normandy, and a French decoration to wear with my other medals.

Of all my flights, these trips across the Channel to evacuate wounded personnel gave me the most satisfaction. Possibly because I was assisting the soldiers who had been fighting the enemy, or maybe it was the pleasure of having a female nursing orderly flying as a member of the crew. This delight, however, suddenly came to a halt after two evacuations. Owing to Carl, our second pilot, who was unavailable for one flight, we had been allocated a replacement second pilot to take his place. Unfortunately, this stranger must have made a comment to the orderly that she did not appreciate; his unacceptable remark resulting in a complaint being lodged on our arrival back at Broadwell. I do not know what action was taken regarding our temporary crewmember, but from that date we were always allocated a male orderly on evacuation flights. From one stupid comment, the whole crew had to carry the stigma.

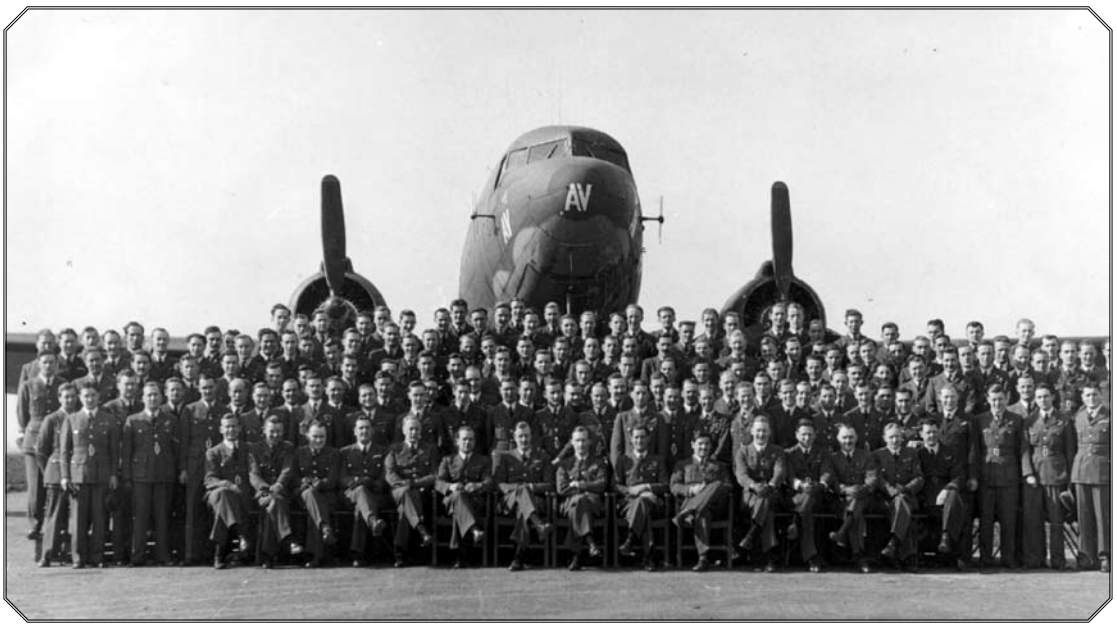
With the Dakota squadrons flying into the Normandy bridgehead every day, there was a great opportunity for crews to indulge in a little smuggling. French civilians were employed to unload the aircraft, and there were rumours at the base that they would pay a good price for a tin of genuine coffee, for all they had known during the German occupation was ersatz coffee. Shortly after our initial crossing to France, there was talk that one crew had managed to bring home a racehorse. These comments about smuggling must have been correct, for later in the year a customs officer appeared on the base to check aircraft both going to and returning from Europe. The success of the landing in Normandy and the advance of our forces made it essential for us to have a negotiable currency for use in the liberated areas of France. A new series of bank notes were issued in 1944 by the French Interim Government, which became available to us at Broadwell. It was recommended that all aircrew flying across the Channel exchange some English pounds for French francs, which would be necessary if we became stranded in France and had to purchase food. Dollars and pounds were acceptable everywhere, but paying the locals with these currencies caused problems, because the locals always had differing opinions on the rates of exchange. Later, it was necessary for us to also carry Belgian francs, Dutch gulden and Danish krona.

After four weeks on the squadron we were given leave. I found this leave different from previous visits to Romford because London was under attack from V1 pilot-less aircraft known as doodlebugs, fired by the enemy from the Pas-de-Calais area in France. This new weapon, carrying almost a tonne of high explosive, was 15 feet long with a wingspan of about 20 feet, and had a pulse jet engine. Launched from ramps, they were reasonably accurate in direction. As to range, it had a nose propeller operating a preset log. When the correct range had been reached, the engine stopped and the weapon dived to the ground. You could hear the engine of the incoming pilot-less aircraft, sounding just like a small motorcycle. I remember standing in the Strand and listening to one approaching, and saying to it ‘keep going, keep going’. If you heard the engine stop it was time to run to the shelter, for the explosion of one of these terror weapons did considerable damage within a radius of 400 yards.

My uniform by this time was showing a lot of wear, so I went to the RAAF Headquarters at Kodak House in Kingsway, London, to seek replacements. The staff were very cooperative, but at first could not find my records. Finally they looked in the officers’ records, and to my joy told me I been commissioned three months previously; great news, particularly considering the back pay. The staff kindly cut off the warrant officer badges from the sleeves of my uniform and handed me a cap, and the rings of a pilot officer to be sewn on my sleeves. Walking along a street in Ilford later during my leave, and wearing my temporary officer’s uniform, two guardsmen came towards me and as they passed, one guardsman gave a very precise ‘eyes right’ and a smart salute. I looked around to see whom he was saluting, not realising the salute was to a very, very, junior officer. Now commissioned, I needed to purchase my own No 1 dress uniform and, given an initial issue of clothing coupons, I visited a recommended tailor in Saville Row—Carr, Son and Warr—to be measured for the uniform.

Returning to Broadwell, I reported my new rank to the orderly room and moved into the officers' quarters, which provided sheets on the bed and a laundry service. I was now a member of the officers' mess but entered hesitantly, for this was new territory to me, and I nervously tried to keep in the background. Fortunately, after coffee and sandwiches at 1600, two fellow Australians recognised I was new, welcomed me, and bought me a drink. I found the officers' mess little different from the sergeants' mess, except for slightly improved food and presentation, for which I had to contribute on my mess bill. It was pleasant to sit in the mess and read the daily papers when I had a break from flying, and to play for the first time the game of shove-halfpenny. Also a new delight was the provision of coffee and sandwiches in the afternoon. But being an officer had one irritating disadvantage: I was isolated from the rest of the crew when not flying. Apart from leave, I had spent every day with Paddy and Ginger for the past 14 months, using the same hut and eating together. But now I was on my own, except in the cockpit, and continued to be so until Paddy received his commission. Now we just met in the briefing room or cockpit.

Since the landing in Normandy, the transport squadrons had operated under the protection of RAF fighters, although I cannot recollect ever seeing one flying close by. The only evidence that they operated over our area of operation came when a Spitfire made a forced landing near the town of Vannes in Brittany. Based at Portreath near Lands End, the fighter pilot, while on a sweep over the area on 25 August, encountered engine problems forcing him to abandon the flight. A replacement engine was required, and we were instructed to collect it and the mechanics, and deliver them to a landing strip near the stranded fighter where ground personnel would be waiting for us. Our first stop at 1100 was the RAF base at Chivenor to collect the engine. As it could be late in the day before we ate again, an early meal was suggested because the loading of the engine onto the Dakota could take at least an hour. Transport was provided by flying control; first dropping me off at the officers' mess; and then Paddy, Ginger and



No 512 Squadron, RAF Transport Command

Carl at the sergeants' mess. We had flown together for over a year but now, because I was an officer, we could not lunch together. In my opinion, all aircrew should have held commissioned rank, for we all shared the same risks.

The building housing the officers' mess at Chivenor looked magnificent with an imposing entrance, columns and paved steps. Entering, I felt that this was part of the RAF tradition. Chivenor must have been a pre-war base because everything visible had a sense of permanency. Inside were superb furnishings and a highly polished floor, which were certainly far superior to that in the temporary buildings on other bases I had visited. As the reason to call at this large base was to collect the Rolls Royce engine, it must have included an engineering wing, and could also have been an officer training college because the dining room was set for at least 500 officers or cadets. Although only a few minutes past 1100, I nervously approached the servery window in the hope of some food and was delighted to receive a roast dinner. While enjoying my meal in solitary splendour, a very senior officer entered to inspect the dining room. Seeing me savouring the good food, he asked a few questions as to why I was in his dining room at 1130 wearing battle dress, white jumper, and flying boots. I do not think he was too happy about it, but there was little he could do because I was passing through on flying duty. In my experience, the wearing of flying kit in a mess dining room was definitely not acceptable.

The Rolls Royce Merlin engine, mounted on its wooden frame in the middle of the passenger cabin, looked a complex piece of engineering and had required the ground crew at the base an hour to manhandle the assembly into position and secure it to the floor. Airborne, we spent 30 minutes flying across to the fighter airfield at Portreath, near Lands End, to collect the mechanics. This grass field was known to us, for earlier in the year it had been our departure point for some of our flights to Rabat in North Africa. The direct route from Portreath to Vannes across the English Channel, under normal circumstances, would have been a short flight. Unfortunately, the specific corridors set down for crossing the Channel required an almost circular flight of over three hours. I located the strip near Vannes at 1730 but the area was deserted. Immediately the Dakota came to a standstill, and we all commenced sliding the engine close to the aircraft door, ready for loading on to a truck. But to our annoyance no truck appeared, and by 2000 we were becoming anxious as the light was beginning to fade. Not only was the truck to collect the engine, it was also to take us to our accommodation for the night. As we waited, a couple of French civilians rushed up with the frightening news that the German army had broken out from Lorient, where they had been encircled by the Americans and were moving down the peninsula in our direction. Hearing this, the decision was made to secure the engine back into its original position in the aircraft and return to Broadwell. In 20 minutes the engine was repositioned, the locks removed from the aircraft ailerons and rudder, and the Dakota ready for take-off. Quickly we raced down the unlit strip in the gloom, on our way out of France. We passed over Cap De La Hague in total darkness and started to cross the Channel. I was anxious about the reception we would receive at the English coast, as the defences did not like aircraft coming towards them across the Channel at night. Finding a passage through the barrage balloons on the south coast would be another problem, but I need not have worried. When 30 miles

from the English coast, two searchlights lit up the night sky ahead, forming a cone indicating the crossing point where we could safely pass through the barrage balloons. It was comforting to realise we had been picked up by radar, that some radar operator had been watching us make our way home. During the flight, Paddy complained that the controls were stiff. On landing at Broadwell, we found that in our rush to take-off, a lock had been left on one of the ailerons. We waited around next day at Broadwell until the position on the Brittany Peninsula was clarified. Finally at 1830, a message came that the German forces were still contained at Loriant and it was safe to return to Vannes with the engine and mechanics. We finally landed there at 2100, this time to be met by transport and extra airmen. By the time the engine and frame were secured on the truck, it was far too late to return to England, resulting in another night to be spent in a strange bed at an unknown place.

Just prior to this flight to Vannes, the German armoured forces had been encircled near the town of Falaise. In a smart tactical move, the American army had left a narrow gap between Falaise and Argenton through which the German forces could attempt to flee. Passing the area after the battle, Paddy took the Dakota low over the battlefield and we saw below the appalling carnage caused by our artillery and rocket firing aircraft. Everywhere in the valley, on all the roads and tracks were burnt out tanks and support vehicles. It was said the German Army never recovered from the Battle of the Falaise Gap. The complete squadron was called upon on 19 August to transfer an army detachment with its vehicles to a landing field close to the front line in France at Rennes. Our particular load comprised two landing ramps, an armoured jeep and a trailer. Walking around while the troops unloaded their equipment, I recognised the men as members of the Special Air Service, the SAS, the elite of the British Army. This small force planned to drive through and create havoc behind the enemy front line. They really looked like tough soldiers, led by a Commanding Officer who held the rank of major and wore the ribbon of the DSO (Distinguished Service Order) with two bars. To be awarded the DSO is quite an achievement; to be awarded three is outstanding.

On 29 August, an operation was mounted by the Allies to provide food for the citizens of Paris, liberated five days earlier by a French armoured division. Every available Dakota, both American and British, took part in the food-lift—reputedly over 900 aircraft. We landed at an isolated airfield near Orleans with our load of food at 1600. It seemed odd we were not taking the food to an airfield closer to Paris instead of Orleans, at least 75 miles from the city. It was explained later that the Interim French Government, under the leadership of General De Gaulle, did not want a vast armada of Allied aircraft flying close to Paris. Night was almost upon us when we completed the unloading of our aircraft and prepared to return to Broadwell. Making our way through the long grass to the end of the runway, the port side of the aircraft subsided. Fearing that the undercarriage had dropped into a hole concealed by the grass, we jumped down to investigate and found the large rubber tyre on the port wheel of the undercarriage had a puncture. Ginger quickly tapped out news of our predicament, but it was totally dark when a reply arrived from Broadwell, telling us that a team of mechanics would bring over a spare wheel next morning. Now we needed somewhere to spend the night. Standing alongside the aircraft and looking at the blacked-out countryside, it was

apparent our overnight accommodation would be our aircraft. For eventualities such as this, we had some iron rations consisting of biscuits, orange juice and boiled sweets. Food we had, but no blankets. It was a case of finding a cosy corner in the aircraft and trying to sleep. Paddy and Carl soon settled down for the night in their comfortable cockpit seats. Ginger seemed untroubled with his head and shoulders resting on his small radio table. All I can remember about that night was lying down on the floor at the front of the passenger cabin, and awakening at dawn at the tail of the aircraft, both very cold and stiff. I had slid or rolled the full length of the cabin during the night. Mid-morning a Dakota arrived with a spare wheel, mechanics, and mechanical jacks to lift the aircraft, and by 1300 the spare wheel was in place and we taxied onto the end of the runway for take-off. The runway at Orleans was not flat; it had a crest in the centre, making the view along the runway restricted. We were poised at the end, ready to roll, when a Dakota came hurtling over the crest towards us. All we could do was sit and watch as it came towards and roared just above us. If we had been a few seconds earlier and had started to move forward, it would have collected us in the middle of the runway.

CHAPTER XVI

FRANCE

On first joining the squadron, I had received a detailed list of all the landing strips authorised for our use in Europe. Some were small airfields close to towns, others really only marked strips of open grazing land. Aerial surveys had been carried out of the whole area by the planners of the allied landings. The strips in the British sector were numbered with the prefix 'B' and the latitude and longitude given, while American strips had the prefix 'A'. Initially, I navigated to these strips by using GEE to get a series of fixes, but later found that I could use it as a homing device, by setting the screen with details of our destination and watching the blips; giving guidance to Paddy to veer right or left, and at the same time giving him the distance to the intended strip.

One of the busiest landing strips we used was at Nivelles, south of Brussels, which had been fabricated by the transport squadrons. The site of the landing strip was first chosen and marked out, then local farmers covered the marked-out strip with straw. Next, into an adjoining field, we flew loads of heavy steel perforated plates, about 18 x 120 inches in size, which were placed on the straw and clipped together to form a steel runway. This strip became the main airport for Brussels until the two airfields at the city were fully operational. It was here that we came close to crashing. The strip, situated on farming land, had a number of trees in the vicinity, including tall ones across the aircraft line of approach, but they were far enough away to present no problem to aircraft making a normal approach. On this occasion, however, Paddy made a lower approach than normal, and watching from the cockpit I realised that unless he immediately took some action, we could finish up in the trees. Anxiously I watched the trees coming closer, until Paddy pulled back on the control column and opened up the throttles to gain more height, but having our flaps and undercarriage down, the response was sluggish. We staggered over the trees, but in doing so our airspeed fell away and we were in danger of stalling. Paddy put the nose down to regain a safe flying speed but not sufficient to stop the aircraft dropping. Suddenly the wheels of the undercarriage hit the ground, resulting in the aircraft bouncing across a 20-foot wide canal before landing on the runway. It was a close call. Another day, while standing around talking to other aircrew at Nivelles and waiting for our aircraft to be unloaded, I noticed a Dakota making its final approach to the runway. The only problem was that the aircraft was going to touch down at the wrong end of the runway. The Dakota was approaching with the wind behind instead of against it. All I could do was watch it touch down, roll along the runway, continue past the end of the runway, through a fence and finish up among a farmer's cattle.

The supply of petrol to our tank columns in Europe was one of the problems facing the planners of the invasion. When the allied tank columns started to push the enemy back, rapid delivery of fuel was essential and Dakotas were often needed to deliver it to the tanks. The petrol came across the Channel by pipeline, and an army installation was set

up to put the petrol into small pressed steel containers, known as jerry cans. Our initial delivery flight with petrol started with making our way empty across the Channel to a landing strip near the village of Thury Harcourt. Looking down at the establishment as we prepared to land, I was amazed at the size of the petrol dump. At a guess, it covered about two acres and contained thousands of jerry cans in stacks up to 12 feet high. Once off the ground, the army quickly loaded us and I was given the latitude and longitude of a field near Amiens where army trucks would be waiting. With the use of GEE, I located the designated landing spot, just a vacant field alongside a road where some army trucks were waiting to unload us. Soon we were on the ground, the petrol quickly loaded on to trucks, and by 1800 we were airborne for Broadwell, only to receive a radio message telling us to land on the strip near Bayeux and stay the night, for the weather in the United Kingdom had closed down. As this strip was under army control, Paddy asked some soldiers nearby if their commander could accommodate us. Shortly afterwards a jeep pulled up, we piled on board and were taken to a large marquee, probably a temporary hospital—the third night I had slept in makeshift accommodation in France. Later, as the allies advanced across Europe, I spent many nights in all types of accommodation because of bad weather; from tents to requisitioned luxury homes.

Brussels, now liberated from German occupation, needed food and all aircraft of the five Dakota squadrons in the group, fully laden with food, made a triumphant landing at the two Brussels airports. On our circuit prior to landing, I was amazed to see crowds of people surrounding the airport. Once our propellers had stopped rotating, we were surrounded by local citizens who were very happy to see us. Our reception with the food in Brussels was quite different from when we took food for Paris to Orleans, with no crowds, no publicity at all. Times must have been tough in Brussels during the occupation. As a souvenir, one of the local girls wrote her name and address on a French five franc note from my wallet. Later in the year when stationed in Brussels I attempted to find her, but without success.

Our base at Broadwell was commanded by a group captain, who lived in one of the local villages but rarely came into the mess. Unexpectedly, the order came for a dining-in night at the mess in the tradition of the RAF, requiring No 1 dress, meaning our best uniforms. A very enjoyable dinner was served, and after the dishes had been cleared from the tables a decanter of port was passed from officer to officer, but not permitted to be placed on the table until everyone had filled their glass. With every glass charged, the station commander rose as the president of the mess and called on the vice-president to propose the toast: 'The King'. To a nervous junior officer, it was a truly memorable night. Another first for me: a glass of port wine. As members of the mess, the army glider pilots stationed at Broadwell were with us at the dinner. I was enthralled with the whole scene, seeing all the station officers in their No 1 uniforms, and the glider pilots wearing their embroidered wings on their individual regimental uniforms. Even a member of a Scottish regiment, wearing his jacket and tartan trews. I could not understand why the station commander would want this formal dinner, but on reflection, possibly he had secret information about what the aircrews and glider pilots would be called upon to do within days; to reach a bridge, known now by historians as 'A Bridge Too Far'. Possibly the occasion was a good luck gesture to us and the glider pilots.

CHAPTER XVII

ARNHEM

I was awoken early on Saturday, 16 September 1944, by an announcement from the Tannoy loudspeaker in our Nissen hut telling us the base was sealed and service police manned every gateway, confining us until further notice. At breakfast, speculation was rife about what was planned for the day. Would we be dropping paratroops or towing gliders? All day I heard engines being tuned and individual aircraft being flight-tested. Later in the day, all aircrew were summoned to the station briefing room. The station intelligence officer began the proceedings with the news that the next day both squadrons would be towing gliders carrying members of the 1st Airborne Division, whose objective was a bridge over the Neder Rjin (Lower Rhine) near Arnhem, close to the border between the Netherlands and Germany.

A large map of Europe was mounted on the wall at the end of the room with a white ribbon indicating our route from Broadwell across England, the North Sea, and Holland to Arnhem. It was to be a maximum effort, called Operation *Market Garden*. The army had gained a salient from Eindhoven to Nijmegen in Holland, and the tactics called for the army to fight their way from Nijmegen to Arnhem. The troops in our gliders planned to capture the bridge ahead of our ground forces, success there enabling the army to cross the river and spread out into Germany. The senior navigation officer explained the route shown by the white ribbon. The first stage of the route was to an assembly point above Hatfield, where all the glider-towing aircraft of the RAF would congregate, then fly eastward to a departure point on the English east coast and across the North Sea to Overflakkee Island on the Dutch coast. The next turning point was at the town of s'Hertogenbosch, then direct to Arnhem. He hoped that the name of Overflakkee was not a bad omen; a reference to the commonly used name for anti-aircraft fire: 'flak'. He assured us that a lot of care had been taken in setting our route away from known enemy anti-aircraft batteries, because with a glider in tow evasive action by the Dakotas was out of the question. Rocket-firing Typhoon aircraft planned to knock out the anti-aircraft batteries before we arrived. Fighter Command was expected to give us full cover against enemy aircraft, for we would be easy targets if attacked by the Luftwaffe. And the navy would patrol the North Sea in case any aircraft or glider ditched in the water. The meteorological officer gave us full details of the type of weather expected on the trip. The day would be favourable, sunshine and light winds. Finally, the station commander wished us well.

I would only be a passenger on this trip, for Paddy would not need any navigation from me, as all he had to do was to follow the leading aircraft. This flight would be my first introduction to hostile anti-aircraft fire and I had a very restless night thinking about what the coming day would bring. How the members of Bomber Command could go on raids night after night was beyond my comprehension. They must have been very

brave. When finally asleep, I had a very vivid dream in which I witnessed a particular pilot of one of the aircraft of our sister squadron, No 575, shot down. At breakfast, I looked at him and wondered about the next few hours.

During the night, all the gliders had been placed at the end of the runway ready for the take-off. From 1000 the Dakotas taxied one by one onto the runway, the 350-foot nylon towropes attached to the tail of the aircraft, then crept forward slowly to take up the slack, followed by full throttle down the runway. At 1012, it was our turn. As we paused to have our towrope attached, I looked out and saw all the WAAFs and other ground staff lining the edge of the runway waving us on our way. I distinctly remember thinking how pleasant it would be to be standing out there on the grass waving, and not in a Dakota about to take off on this mission. In 20 minutes the whole squadron was airborne with their gliders, and into a formation of pairs of tugs and gliders, line astern, following the aircraft of the squadron commander ahead. After about two uneventful hours we passed our crossing point at Overflakfee on the Dutch coast, with no sign of activity below, except for a solitary fire which could have been caused by the RAF. Once across the coast, the leaders of the formation set course for s'Hertogenbosch and then to Arnhem, the final leg of the flight.

Watching the scene from my vantage point in the astrodome as we approached the river at Arnhem alongside another squadron aircraft, I saw that we were the fifth in the left-hand lane. Looking behind I saw a seemingly endless line of Dakotas and their gliders following. The enemy anti-aircraft defences were responding with shells bursting amongst the stream, but our group pressed ahead, flying straight and level, without any visible signs of damage. Within minutes Paddy had taken us close to the bridge and over the landing zone. Suddenly our aircraft surged ahead as our glider cast off from the towrope and dived towards its specific landing spot. Paddy quickly brought the Dakota round in a left-hand turn, dropped our towrope, and I gave him a direct course for Broadwell, my sole contribution to the operation! The trip home was uneventful, but as we joined other squadron aircraft I noticed one of our Dakotas flying with a hole in its rudder large enough for a man to climb through. An interesting sight on our homeward journey was a solitary Horsa glider, floating in the Strait of Dover. Hopefully the navy would have picked up the pilots and soldiers.

All our squadron aircraft landed safely back at Broadwell by 1530, including the one with the damaged rudder, but not so for our sister squadron, which had lost one aircraft. At debriefing after the operation, we learnt that the missing aircraft, flown by the pilot from my dream, had been hit by anti-aircraft fire injuring both pilots, but happily the aircraft had landed safely. News came through later that the navigator, who had never flown an aircraft before, had taken the controls and brought the aircraft down safely at Manston, an airfield situated close to the south-east coast of England; its huge concrete landing area providing a safe haven for the crippled aircraft. After we heard this good news, I overheard another captain ask Paddy whether he thought I was capable of landing a Dakota if he and his co-pilot were injured. I did not hear his reply, but if faced with such a challenge I believed I would succeed as I knew the landing procedure to land the Dakota, having watched Paddy do it so many times, and there would be no

other alternative. It was just unacceptable to parachute down, leaving injured crew members in the aircraft. What did give me a lot to think about at dinner that evening was the vacant chairs of some of our glider pilots who had joined us at the dining-in night, resplendent in their regimental uniforms, now in battledress on the ground in the midst of the battle.

The following day, the squadrons were ordered to repeat the operation and at 1055 we climbed out of Broadwell with our glider in tow. This time, however, while the squadron aircraft and gliders were manoeuvring into pairs, our aircraft suddenly surged forward. We had lost our glider, and to make matters worse, the towrope had detached from our tail. Fortunately this happened above our own airfield, enabling the glider to land safely and not in some farmer's field. Provision having been made for a happening such as this, as soon as the glider came to a halt, a tractor hitched up and towed it back to the runway for the attachment to the towrope of a stand-by aircraft. Quickly both tug and glider were back in the air. As we reached B Flight dispersal, the station commander drove up, and had plenty of questions as to what had happened. In the end our denial of responsibility was accepted. Probably the glider pilot had swung too wide to avoid our slipstream, causing the rope to jerk free.

On the third day of the battle, because of unexpected strong opposition by the enemy, the British ground forces could not reach the airborne forces holding the bridge, who were now encircled and needed a drop of ammunition. During the night, an army detachment stationed close to our base had been very busy collecting ammunition panniers from the stacks alongside the nearby lanes and loading them on to all the station aircraft. Given details of the battle situation, the squadron was ordered to return to the area to parachute the ammunition down to our troops. Boarding the aircraft, I saw that the side doors had been removed and there were panniers standing on the roller-conveyor in the centre of the fuselage. Also awaiting us were the four soldiers whose duty was to push the panniers down the conveyor and out the door when Paddy switched on the green light above the door. I admired these soldiers who flew on supply missions. They were very brave, riding in the body of the Dakotas, not knowing what was happening outside, just waiting for the signal to start pushing the panniers out. Many of them died later when their aircraft were shot down during the battle.

At 1300 we were airborne on our way to the battlefield. We had no difficulty in locating the designated dropping zone, and out went our panniers. There was spasmodic light anti-aircraft fire, but all the squadron aircraft returned safely. At the debriefing on our return to Broadwell, one of the flight commanders reported he had brought his panniers back to base. On approaching the dropping zone, he had seen that the enemy were firing vertically and realised the dropping zone was in enemy hands, so all our efforts were wasted. None of the panniers reached our soldiers on the ground, which did not auger well for the success of the whole operation. Both squadrons at Broadwell were very fortunate during the initial days of the operation. Except for some superficial damage to aircraft from anti-aircraft fire, all but one returned safely.

On 24 September, the situation critical, a further attempt to parachute ammunition to our army was arranged for the next morning. Five crews from each of the five squadrons in the group were selected for the attempt, and we were one of the five crews to represent No 512 squadron. For some reason, whenever there was a dicey job to be done, Paddy's name seemed always to appear on the list. I reasoned later why we were always on the list. It was because we were the latest crew to arrive in the squadron, putting us at the bottom of the seniority list. We flew to Down Ampney, one of the other bases in the group for the attempt to be coordinated. On arrival the panniers were loaded, ready for an early take-off to the battlefield the next morning. Following a restless night in a strange bed, I was in the mess for a very early breakfast, but the food did not appeal to me—neither did the prospect of another drop of ammunition. We had been sitting in the mess for a couple of hours waiting for instructions when we heard a very welcome announcement. We were to take off immediately for Brussells and not to the battlefield because the ammunition drop had been cancelled, and the panniers would be handed to the Guards Armoured Division who would endeavour to get through to the embattled forces by road. The reason for the change was that on the two preceding days, Dakotas from other squadrons had attempted to get through, but enemy fighter aircraft had got among the defenceless Dakotas. This resulted in many (reputedly about 50) shot down, with the loss of the aircrew and the army personnel who flew with them. These high losses must have convinced Transport Command our attempt would have been catastrophic for us and our soldier passengers because enemy fighters would have been waiting for us. We flew out of Down Ampney at 0905, arriving at Brussels at 1220, where the ammunition was quickly transferred to the waiting trucks. It was a great relief to pass the task over to the Guards, but delivery by road proved equally as hazardous as by air because the last few miles of the road towards Arnhem was situated on a causeway, making the trucks vulnerable to artillery fire. Many attempts were made to get the supplies through but none were successful. In the end, the order was given for the British Forces to retire, the withdrawal was made on the night of 25/26 September 1944.

Later I learnt of the bravery of Flight Lieutenant David Lord of No 271 Squadron. On his initial approach to the dropping zone, his Dakota sustained anti-aircraft damage and was set ablaze. Because of the damage, the ammunition panniers had to be manhandled out the door. Realising two panniers were still in the aircraft at the end of his first pass over the dropping zone, Flight Lieutenant Lord persisted and made a second pass, even though his aircraft was on fire. This drop completed, he kept the burning aircraft stable in flight to enable his crew to parachute to safety. Flight Lieutenant Lord did not survive the action, and in 1945 his bravery was recognised by the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross.

Extract from English newspaper.

Friday, 17 November 1944.
RAF ‘Continental Air Line’
14,000 FLOWN TO FRONT

Since D-DAY, a group of RAF Transport Command specially formed to cope with invasion traffic, has flown more than 20 million lbs. of vital supplies to forward airfields in France, Belgium, and Holland.

In addition, more than 3,000,000 lbs. have been carried by air to the Continent and 14,000 Service personnel ferried safely over the Channel. On return trips, 900,000 lbs. of freight, 700,000 lbs. of mail, and 9000 passengers have been flown to this country.

This group, which has played a vital role in the onslaught on Occupied Europe, flew more than 5,000 airborne troops to be dropped or landed by gliders behind the enemy’s lines.

Supply dropping is another important part of its activities. Since June, Transport Command Dakotas have dropped 4,000 panniers containing urgent supplies. Hundreds of jeeps, motorcycles, antitank guns and other war materials have been landed in gliders near the front line.

Transport Command pilots and aircrews have frequently had to run the gauntlet of fighters and flak in aircraft that cannot, for reasons of weight, be armed. Some—happily fewer than was feared—have given their lives, others have been wounded.

This work is done by the same operational group that has brought without loss, from the battlefields to Britain, 45,000 wounded members of all Services and forming a considerable percentage of the total casualties. British, Dominion, FFI and even German soldiers and airmen owe their lives to the swift, smooth transit to hospital that this mercy service of the RAF provides.

CHAPTER XVIII

WINTER 1944

With the excitement of the Battle of Arnhem over, the squadron settled down with cross channel flights returning to the normal schedules. Many new landing strips with names such as Lille, Woensdrecht, Ypres, St. Omer, and Antwerp, appeared in my logbook. On one flight to Amiens, I saw in the distance a wide swathe of green with row upon row of tiny white dots. I realised this was a war cemetery, with the vast number of white headstones standing in lines resembling soldiers on parade, evidence of the casualties of the 1914–1918 war.

Early in October, because of the liberation of the entire French coastline, two new air corridors across the Channel were approved for our use, which relieved us of our original long way home from Brussels via Cherbough and Christchurch. I cannot recall the new outward corridor, but the homeward route left Belgium at Cap Griz Nez, past the white cliffs of Dover, entering England over a cape stretching out into the Channel, named Dungeness. In addition to saving time, this new return route to Broadwell took us over a portion of England that I had not seen before from the air; our track passing by the outskirts of London and above towns in the Thames Valley, Epsom, Slough and Windsor. We were especially warned never to stray close to London, especially at night, but most importantly, never to fly over Windsor Castle.

The demand for all types of ammunition kept us busy, including one shipment of very large howitzer shells with the fuse mechanism replaced with a nose ring, enabling them to be secured to loading points in the aircraft floor. We flew to a nearby airfield at Newbury loaded with several; our orders were to deliver them to a landing strip near Verdun, the flight from Newbury to Verdan taking almost three hours. The late autumn day was ideal for flying, with visibility excellent. On arrival, we circled this ancient town prior to landing, and I was able to look down at its ring of medieval forts built so long ago to defend it against the Germans.

On 9 October 1944, we took on board civilian passengers from the RAF base at Manston and conveyed them to a landing strip at St. Dizier in the American sector of Central France. While on the ground at St. Dizier, a message was given to us postponing our return because England was closed down by bad weather. Could we seek hospitality from the local American army commander? He was happy to provide this, giving Paddy—who had been commissioned in the previous week—and I beds in a large tent, which seemed to be a field hospital. Our hosts were very generous, and after an enjoyable dinner we all sat around a fire and I fielded questions about Australia. It was evident that they knew little about Australia. Previously, when forced to spend the night in Europe, the meals provided had been from British field rations. On this occasion it was refreshing to again enjoy the more lavish American food, which we

had first experienced in French Morocco. With no sign of the weather over England improving on the following day, we were forced to wait around until the third day. Eventually a message came through that the weather at Manston had improved. Could we try to get back? Possibly flying conditions there would be good enough for us to make an attempt. Weather conditions at Manston were poor when we arrived, with low cloud over the landing field, but we landed safely with our passengers happy to be back in England. We planned to leave immediately for Broadwell, only to be told to shut down our engines, resulting in another night to be spent in a strange bed. The stormy weather continued to upset flying schedules. We never knew when we left Broadwell in the morning where we would be sleeping that night. Early in November, returning across the Channel after delivering freight to Lille, Ginger received a message to divert to Tangmere and again to seek bed and breakfast. The orderly officer did not have any spare accommodation, but as a last resort let Paddy and I use the rooms of officers who were on leave. I had a good sleep because I was weary, but Paddy had what you could call an interesting night. At about 0600 he felt some movement in his bed and something warm and cuddly behind him. Turning over he saw the horrified face of a young lady, who took no time in getting dressed and fleeing down the passage. She had mistakenly thought her boyfriend had come back early from leave.

Being diverted because of fog in winter was one of the hazards of our job, but usually there would be somewhere in the British Isles where the weather was clear. At Broadwell, even if the cloud was down to 400 feet, I could bring Paddy above the runway using GEE. As a last resort, we could have landed at an airfield where a system, officially named the 'Fog Investigation Dispersal Operation', was installed. This safety system, known throughout the service by the code name of FIDO, used heat to disperse the mist and fog that occasionally closed runways. It saved many aircraft and fliers, but at a cost of millions of gallons of petrol. Before its introduction many aircraft had been lost because of low cloud, denying bomber crews a safe landing on returning from a bombing mission. The only alternative available to them in these situations was to point their aircraft out to sea and use their parachutes. The runway where FIDO was installed was lined on each side with multiple petrol burners which, when alight, created walls of orange coloured flames, heating the air and so clearing the atmosphere above the runway. My only experience of a FIDO installation happened late one afternoon while returning in deteriorating weather to Broadwell from Brussels. We were down to 500 feet, flying through low cloud when, through the intervening low clouds below, I glimpsed a runway lined with the glow from petrol burners. I was all for landing then and there, but Paddy kept on, landing safely at Broadwell. That the burners were operating at the time we passed over the installation indicated that some other aircraft was in distress and needed assistance to land.

There was also an emergency system available to a navigator if he became lost over England or Scotland. Each RAF airfield in the area—and there were many—had a control tower with a local range radio to control aircraft movements, whether airborne or on the ground. With all these radios manned, it was a simple action for a lost navigator to call the operators below by just saying the code word 'DARKIE' on the radio. Late one afternoon, when flying from Holland after delivering a load of freight,

I really had a problem because conditions for flying, to say the least, were turbulent. The cloud was dense, but I was confident there would be no problem because of GEE. Relying on this magic aid, I was really unsettled when the screen suddenly went blank with no lines or blips, giving me no alternative but to call on 'DARKIE', for there was no chance of recognising a landmark below. I can still recall picking up the microphone and transmitting the magic words 'HELLO DARKIE' together with our aircraft call sign. Within seconds my earphones came to life with the comforting voice of a WAAF replying from a control tower somewhere below, giving the name of her airfield, and who was probably hearing us above her in the clouds. Hurriedly I searched the map in front of me, but I could not find the name of her base. Picking up the microphone I made a second request, this time for her latitude and longitude. Given these, it was a simple matter to locate her airfield and work out a course for Broadwell. How we found ourselves so far off track was unnerving. We must have passed through a cold front. The reason that I could not initially find her airfield was, for convenience, I had folded my large topographical map and the location of her airfield was on that part of the map folded underneath.

Flying conditions during the 1944–45 winter were severe with snow, sleet, gales and low temperatures. Early in December, the whole squadron was detailed to fly an army detachment complete with jeeps, trailers and equipment to Europe; our Dakota carried a jeep and two portable ramps. The weather at the time of take-off was very wintry, strong winds and plenty of cumulonimbus clouds south of the airfield—a harbinger of a rough flight. It was comforting to see that our load was very securely chained to the floor of the cabin. Shortly after we became airborne the weather deteriorated further, and with clouds enveloping us, we lost contact with the ground below. Conditions became very boisterous and frightening with the wind tossing us about at will. It was like riding a roller coaster and all I could do was to cling to my navigation table. Glancing through to the cockpit, I saw Paddy and Carl busily trying to keep the aircraft stable. The further we went, the rougher it became. At one stage, I watched all my maps and instruments slowly rise from my table and float to the ceiling, and found myself rising out of my chair because the aircraft was dropping so fast. Seconds later, I was forced into my chair as if I had a heavy weight on my shoulders. Smoother conditions came after about 15 minutes, but then I had the problem of finding my map and navigation instruments scattered about the floor. Towering cumulonimbus clouds glistening in the sunlight had always fascinated me with their beauty. Here was evidence of the massive vertical air currents, both upward and downward, that inhabited them. We had been caught in a massive down draught, then had passed into a rapidly rising air current. The Dakota was a wonderful aircraft for the type of operation required by the army, having security fittings recessed in the floor of the cabin to enable loads to be made very safe. I hate to think what would have happened if the jeep had become loose during the flight.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

In mid-December 1944, the senior members of the officers' mess decided to hold a dance, every member contributing to the cost, the only problem was the scarcity of WAAF officers at the camp. The previous year, when I was a member of the sergeants' mess at Talbenny, we had the same dilemma, but this time we did not have to resort to obtaining partners as in Wales. Here invitations were issued to the nurses of the local army hospital and to officers of the Auxiliary Territorial Service stationed in the district. There being a scarcity of social life in the Cotswolds, the invitations must have been greatly appreciated. The first ladies arrived, and after they had been taken to the cloakroom, the station commander lined up the volunteer escorts and issued his instructions. The first officer in the queue would be responsible for the first lady to emerge and would be her partner for the evening. The only problem was that if the lady was attractive, the senior officers moved in, whereas if not, the original escort was responsible for her entertainment all evening. The evening was very enjoyable, especially the supper, worth every bit of the charge that appeared on my mess bill, because the catering staff did cater a wonderful supper from the rations available.

Four days before Christmas, when returning in heavy overcast from Brussels, Ginger handed me a radio message saying that Broadwell had closed down, instructing us to land at Exeter in Devon where the cloud ceiling was at least 1500 feet, to await further instructions. I am sure the other members of the crew were getting fed up with having to sleep in strange places. The weather was clear in south-western England, presenting no problems in locating the Exeter airfield, and once on the ground the condition at Broadwell was confirmed, meaning another overnight stay in unfamiliar surroundings. After handing over the aircraft to the ground staff, a small transport collected us. First dropping Carl and Ginger at the sergeants' mess, it left the confines of the airfield and took Paddy and I through the rich green countryside, finally drawing up at a magnificent country manor housing the officers' mess. Opening the front door, we entered this stately home to see a decorated Christmas tree standing in the main hall, the anteroom and dining room bedecked with holly and coloured streamers, everything looked warm and hospitable. It seemed to me to be a home away from home for the WAAF and RAF officers living there. I envied the occupants of this country manor for there was no need for them to brave the weather on their way to breakfast; they could just walk down the stairs. These conditions allowed them to wear their No 1 dress uniforms at all times, compared with Paddy and I dressed in flying boots, battle dress, and white polo-neck jumpers. I subsequently discovered Exeter was a fighter base. Fighter pilots always looking upon themselves as the aristocracy of the RAF. It was very unusual for transport crews to call in for bed and breakfast, but our hosts provided a good dinner, after which Paddy and I found two comfortable chairs in the anteroom and enjoyed the newspapers and the fire. The whole setting at Exeter was good, but I am afraid, although

given dinner, breakfast and bedrooms overlooking a magnificent garden, we did not get a warm welcome. They had not invited us to join them for their festivities. We had just been dumped in their laps. However, the enforced diversion to Exeter had allowed me to see another part of the English countryside. Passing low over Salisbury Plain, on route to Exeter, we passed over one of England's national possessions, Stonehenge; a series of concentric circles of large upright stones, erected possibly 5,000 years ago.

About eight days prior to our visit to Exeter, in a last ditch effort to delay the advance of the American army, a strong German armoured force had breached the American defences in the Ardennes and were approaching the Meuse River at Dinant. Because the Ardennes terrain was very hilly, great importance was placed on the road junctions, especially those at the town of Bastogne, where the Americans had been caught by surprise and were encircled.

The second day of our visit to Exeter, the clock reached 1500 before a message came that Broadwell weather had improved enough for us to attempt to return. We were wanted back at base even if we had to fly across the countryside at low level. Soon we were airborne and flying low under the clouds, finally home at 1605 wondering why the CO insisted we return, even at low level. The following morning we were despatched with a load of freight to Brussels and returned, but this could not be the reason for the CO wanting us back at Broadwell. I discovered the reason later that day, Christmas Eve, and it certainly was not the usual Yule-tide Christmas tidings, but an operational order on the mess notice board. Five crews from the squadron were listed for an attempt to parachute ammunition panniers into the encircled American positions at Bastogne the next morning. Among the five crews named for the operation was the name *Murray*. Now I knew why the squadron commander wanted us home as soon as possible from Exeter. What a frightening Christmas Day to look forward to. I did not sleep well on Christmas Eve.

Breakfast on Christmas morning was at 0500, followed by a briefing where we learnt about conditions and what to expect over Bastogne. All of Europe was covered with snow, and low cloud covered the battle field. Flying conditions would be difficult, but by using GEE it was expected that we should have no difficulty in locating the town and our dropping zone close by, amidst the snow-covered countryside. I knew what to expect as we had made a parachute drop at Arnhem, but there the weather had been fine and we had not been forced to approach the dropping area silhouetted against low cloud. Daylight had still to break over Broadwell when we boarded our aircraft to join the four soldiers who were coming with us to push the panniers out the door; they had arrived earlier to load the aircraft. Soon it was time to go, and Paddy had just commenced warming up the engines when orders came telling us to switch off and await further instructions. Switching off the engines meant no heating. It was bitterly cold that Christmas morning sitting in our aircraft, awaiting the signal to restart engines. Daylight slowly crept up over the eastern horizon, but still no voice came from the control tower. Thirty-five minutes went by until our earphones came to life. 'Bastogne is fog bound. You will have to sit and wait for the weather to clear.' So we sat and continued to freeze and the longer we waited, the greater the problem of ice forming on the wings. Much

longer and they would require re-spraying with de-icing fluid. We must have sat in the cockpit for about an hour until the silence was broken by the sound of a Christmas carol coming through our earphones. To relieve the boredom, a member of one of the other crews was singing the first verse of the carol *Silent Night*. Finally, after sitting with our thoughts for almost three hours in the bitter cold, the radio came to life with wonderful news that the operation was scrubbed. What a relief that was! Now I could look forward to the Christmas festivities.

Wheeling our bicycles over the ice-covered road from the airfield to our huts, Ginger and I neared the station chapel. It was now 1000 and the time of the Christmas Day communion service. We were not good attendants at church parades, but this was a special day, considering what had occurred in the previous hours. We parked our bikes and entered the chapel. It was the practice in the RAF for the congregation to be seated according to rank with the officers at the front, NCOs behind them, the remainder occupying the rest of the seats. When we entered the chapel, the chaplain's assistant beckoned me forward, but I sat at the rear with Ginger. We were not dressed for a church parade, wearing flying boots and warm clothing; and the rest of the congregation wore their No 1 uniforms. I felt that it would not concern the chaplain how we were dressed. We watched the others go forward and take communion. When everyone else had been served, Ginger and I took communion together. To me, as a regular member of the Ormond Presbyterian Church, the communion service was an integral part of my membership. On this occasion, I had the heart-felt feeling of thanksgiving for being spared the hazardous flight over Bastogne.

At noon, in the company of some other junior officers, I followed RAF tradition by acting as a drink waiter in the airmen's mess for their Christmas dinner. I enjoyed passing through the tables pouring out beer from a bucket. Later I enjoyed Christmas dinner in our mess with turkey, Christmas pudding and the delicacies that are all part of the traditional celebrations. Turkey was not usually served in the mess, but I heard that one of the Dakotas had flown to Northern Ireland on a training exercise to acquire a number of birds.

Reading the letters I wrote to Mavis over this Christmas and New Year period, it is apparent I was very homesick, longing for the hot weather, the roast lamb of an Australian Christmas season, and my family and friends. The week up to Christmas Day had been very traumatic; being diverted in bad weather, having to find a strange airfield, and returning to Broadwell to be told we had been named as one of five aircraft for an attempt to parachute ammunition down to Bastogne. A Christmas Day I will never forget.

Neither Paddy nor I were prominent in the mess, preferring to keep a low profile and content to play cards when not flying. But when a few crews were required for some parachute drop of ammunition, our crew always appeared on the list. Six times were squadron aircraft loaded for a supply-drop to our ground forces across the Channel in the week following Christmas, but on each occasion the operation was scrubbed, the success of the army obviated the need for our services. Sitting around with our

aircraft loaded with panniers and not knowing whether we would be required to take-off on these supply missions was, for me, the worst part, finding the time waiting very stressful. Others seemed to take it in their stride, but not me as all I could do was sit with my thoughts, too much on edge to even read.

Although constantly flying all over the newly liberated parts of Europe, there were rarely reports of attacks on transport aircraft by German fighter aircraft. They were possibly too busy on the Russian front, or perhaps fuel was in short supply, but it did not pay to become careless. With our advancing army now close to the Rhine River, the RAF brought a number of fighter squadrons and a Dakota squadron closer to the ground action. On 31 December 1944, about 100 aircraft were parked at the two Brussels airfields. Dawn came on New Years Day, clear and frosty. Out of the sunrise came a strong force of German aircraft, which systematically destroyed the majority of aircraft. Our only encounter with a fighter aircraft was with a US Air Force Thunderbolt. It approached us as we flew along at about 1500 feet above Belgium. Compared with the graceful lines of the RAF Spitfire, it looked a very formidable brute. The pilot manoeuvred his fighter alongside, far too close for our liking. Here he was tucking his wing between our wing and tailplane, and by the grin on his face, he was enjoying himself. Two anxious minutes later, he swept away. An idiot.

As No 512 was a RAF Squadron, there were very few officers of other nationalities in the mess. I was one of four Australians, an equal number of Canadians and one American. The American had been in the RAF since 1939. When the United States entered the war, he transferred to the United States Army Air Force. He wore an American uniform but was permitted to remain in the squadron. The squadron had a South African and also a New Zealander but usually they came as second pilots. After a few months they would leave to be trained as captains. When we were converting to Dakotas at Leicester East, we had been given a member of the Royal Canadian Air Force as second pilot, Sergeant Carl Lawson. Later he was replaced by Pete Smith, an Englishman, later a pilot from Napier in the North Island of New Zealand. Our second pilots did not spend much time using the control stick; Paddy enjoyed his job and anyway, the Dakota had an excellent automatic pilot. One morning when flying over Holland, I left my seat and went up front to find both pilots dozing in the morning sun as the automatic pilot kept the Dakota on course.

CHAPTER XX

THE NEW YEAR

In January 1945, the weather continued to be extremely cold, with snow covering most of England and Northern Europe. The sun shone weakly with blue skies on most days, but there was the ever present danger of hoar-frost or rime forming on the aircraft wings during flight. Schedules had to be kept, so flying continued apace. Every flight was different and interesting, with so many new destinations on the map. My highlight of this month was a trip to the Le Bourget, the pre-war civil airport in the suburbs of Paris. It was set in a residential area, but its small size and lack of runways made it totally inadequate for the larger aircraft coming into use. Our instructions: no sightseeing, do not circle the airport before landing, just fly straight in. Once on the ground, we had four hours to spare before our scheduled return flight to England and I was keen to walk into the city, but had to settle for spending the time sitting in the small passenger terminal. As our Dakota rose from the airfield on our return flight at 1520, I saw the Eiffel Tower rising majestically over the buildings of Paris, and would have liked to have gone closer, but we had been warned that the Interim French Government was rather touchy about RAF aircraft flying over Paris.

The signs of the coming spring brought a welcome change in flying conditions, but no relief from the demanding flight schedules. My contribution was 26 flights in 18 days, including five crossings to Brussels. The average length of a flight was 90 minutes, but there were many of only 20 minutes. Any flight, however short, needed the same preparation. Leaving Broadwell on 27 February at 0835 we flew to Croydon airport, the pre-war passenger airport of London. As we approached, visible in the distance was a large tract of land being scarred by earth moving equipment, the start of construction of Heathrow International Airport. Our cargo for this flight was a full load of office furniture for the Istres airfield near Marseille on the Mediterranean coast. The flight took four and a half hours, which gave me the opportunity to see the beautiful countryside of Southern France. It was late afternoon when we left on our homeward flight, the sun in the west casting a golden mantle over the land and touching the snow-capped peaks of the Swiss Alps. I thought our luck had changed one evening when the duty schedule in the mess listed us for a special trip, with a load of freight to be carried to Aden in South Yemen. What a great trip to look forward to overnight! Across France, the Mediterranean, and south along the Red Sea and I went to bed anticipating a wonderful seven days. Reality came next morning because one of the senior officers of the squadron had decided to make the flight himself.

Although the squadron was kept very busy, the flight roster was so organised to give us a day away from the cockpit every seven days. The coming of the pleasant spring weather made riding our bikes through the countryside very enjoyable. One morning, accompanied by Ginger and Carl, we left the camp on our bikes to spend the day enjoying

the rural atmosphere of the Cotswolds. At midday, arriving at a small village, I noticed one of the cottages had a brewery sign hanging outside. Entering, we asked if lunch was available. The menu was very limited, but we did enjoy what our host provided. Boiled farm eggs with home-made bread and butter, accompanied with a glass of beer. The elderly publican and his wife made us very welcome. They were enthralled to have a Canadian and an Australian in their tiny inn, visitors from countries they had only heard about on the radio. Leaving the village, the lane we followed took us alongside a small stream meandering through the green meadows. Crossing a bridge over the stream, we passed a sign proclaiming the name Thames River. The water looked pristine as it began its long journey to the North Sea. Cycling through the Cotswolds was such a wonderful break from the tension of flying and seeing the villages, which had not changed over the centuries, and their old churches, inns and workers' cottages. They had the oddest names—Broughton Poggs, Black Bourton, Skipton Under Wychwood, Stow on the Wold and Moreton in Marsh.

When we first joined the squadron, the flight commander of our B Flight, Flight Lieutenant Cliff Chew, had taken the opportunity to exercise his right of command by displacing Paddy in the cockpit for three flights to see how I operated. When I was commissioned I was fortunate to be allocated a bed in the same hut as him and so we built up a friendship. He later invited me on several occasions to dine with him in one of the old inns in Burford, where we talked about Australia and also his early days in the RAF. Being a flight commander had advantages: he had transport.

On a few occasions I hitchhiked to Oxford to look around the city and the university. Records show that Oxford, situated at the confluence of the Thames (known to the locals as the Iris) and Cherwell rivers, was a religious shrine in the 8th century and the home of England's oldest university, founded in the 12th century. It was very enjoyable to be in Oxford, and walk through the city to see the churches and colleges dating back to that period. After a day spent in Oxford, return transport to Broadwell was not a problem because a little train, comprising a GWR O-6-O pannier-tank steam engine pulling two carriages, left Oxford at 2230 for the village of Fairford. Known to us as the 'Fairford Flier' it was always met at Alverscot station by a RAF transport picking up any personnel and taking them to the base. One evening, after spending a day in Oxford, I missed the train and faced a walk of 20 miles. Walking through the blackout, I found the main road, and started on my way. After a short distance I was fortunately given a ride to Witney, but still faced a walk of ten miles. I arrived at the mess at 0330 only to discover I was not on the flight program for that day.

I rarely spoke to the chaplain in the mess, but unexpectedly he offered me an invitation to attend a function at one of the colleges at Oxford University, an invitation not to be refused. The base was to provide me with transport and a driver. On the appointed afternoon, I was driven there to join a group, mainly of American officers, as guests of the Oxford Union, a debating society of the University. As the only Australian present, I was made very welcome. After pre-dinner drinks, we moved to a dining room for a formal dinner with our hosts, the presiding officers of the Oxford Union in full evening

dress; white tie and tails. Being wartime, with food rationed, it was still an excellent dinner, with the most memorable item on the menu: Roast Swan.

After dinner our guide took us to the debating chamber, a small replica of the House of Commons, where we witnessed an excellent debate on the subject of 'Communism'. One of the speakers was the Very Reverent Dean Hewlett Johnson, known as the 'Red Dean', who at the start of the war had been outspoken against England's participation in the conflict. However, when England became an ally of Russia, he became an ardent supporter. The Oxford Union had previously achieved adverse comment when, in the early 1930s, it had passed the notorious motion, 'Under no circumstances will the house fight for King and Country.'

CHAPTER XXI

CROSSING THE RHINE

The evacuation of casualties and carriage of freight and passengers continued for the first days of March 1945. On 7 March the squadron reverted back to training exercises, and for a week the 54 Dakotas at Broadwell towed empty gliders over the Cotswolds on circular routes, dropping the gliders back at the base. A week later a convoy of army trucks filled with troops appeared, providing each glider with a full compliment of passengers. Once again, we flew around the area and back home. Having to do all this rehearsing, rumours proliferated among the crews. On 21 March 1945 both squadrons, complete with ground staff and equipment, transferred to Gosford, an airfield in Kent. During the next two days the aircraft were serviced and parked close to the runway, the gliders marshalled at the end of the runway. Traffic lights were set up about 100 yards down the runway to indicate to pilots their towrope was attached, and were free to commence their take-off.

The briefing we received on the afternoon of 23 March was very comprehensive. On the drive to reach Berlin, the American and British forces had successfully fought their way across Europe, from Normandy to the Rhine River. We would be taking part in an operation towing gliders filled with airborne troops, to capture the far bank of the river, enabling the army engineers to span the river with a pontoon bridge. Once across, the tank columns would be free to sweep through the industrial heart of Germany. General Montgomery had meticulously planned the crossing, known as Operation *Varsity*, to take place on 24 March. All this was planned to happen just north-east of the town of Wesel at the conjunction of the Rhine and Lippe rivers, north-west of the Ruhr industrial area, with No 512 squadron spearheading the whole armada of aircraft. The projected time of our take-off the next morning was scheduled for first light, permitting us to reach the area close to Wesel at 1000, the predicted finishing time of an intensive artillery barrage by our forces.

We could expect some anti-aircraft fire when we reached the river, but RAF rocket-firing Typhoon aircraft would attempt to silence the guns before we arrived. The Luftwaffe would not worry us, as our fighters would be providing cover for the whole journey. In addition, as usual, the navy had ships stationed in the North Sea in case any aircraft or gliders ditched into the sea. Details of the position of the German forces defending the river bank at Wesel were depicted on a large map, showing that once the British were through the forward defences, the only reserves available to the Germans comprised Hitler Youth battalions and divisions of the German equivalent of Britain's Home Guard: the Volksturm. I always got a feeling of foreboding before flights like this, but seeing our group commander, an air commodore, at the briefing, and hearing he was to lead the great fleet of aircraft in the squadron leader's Dakota eased my worries.

Reveille broke our sleep at 0245, and after breakfast for those who felt like eating came the final briefing at 0400, where the senior meteorological officer dropped a bombshell. Because of changed weather conditions on the route, the squadrons would have to be airborne with their gliders and form into pairs in total darkness, essential to reach Wesel at the designated time. Following the aircraft that took off ahead, in those conditions, with only the faint wing tip navigation lights of the other aircraft to assist, was difficult. Doing this with all aircraft having a glider swinging on the end of a towrope was dangerous.

Climbing down from the trucks that deposited us on the grass in the darkness, we set out to find our aircraft, a Dakota KG348, somewhere among the 50 or more aircraft parked alongside the runway. One or two ground staff had torches, but the rest of us had only starlight to assist us. It was an eerie scene, with aircrew endeavouring to find their aircraft, and small groups of army personnel having a last cigarette before climbing into their gliders. Soon all outside activity ceased, except for ground staff with torches to guide the Dakotas on to the runway. Initially boarding our aircraft for the flight, we found the Americans had provided each aircraft with four armoured vests known as flak-jackets, and 'bone-domes', or protective helmets. I managed to get one of the helmets on my big head, but it was really useless because the Dakota earphones wouldn't fit under the helmet. But the armoured jacket could be useful.

Gathered in the cockpit, we waited for the wing commander to start the operation. At 0600 we heard the first roar of his engines as he took his Dakota and glider down the runway. Ten minutes later it was time for us to move. Aided by the torches, Paddy taxied the Dakota across the grass to the runway for the towrope to be attached. The traffic light changed from red to green, the engines roared and we started to roll; then full throttle for take-off. Within minutes we were off the ground, peering ahead into the darkness for the navigation lights of the Dakota that had just preceded us. We were supposed to position ourselves alongside this aircraft, mindful of the glider dangling behind it. Standing behind the pilots, I could not see anything in the total darkness. When first light came after 20 minutes, looking out from my vantage point in the astrodome, I saw a vast aerial panorama of aircraft and gliders. Paddy and our new second pilot Pete must have got it right, because ahead of us were other No 512 squadron aircraft. I beheld hundreds of aircraft and gliders, above us and on all sides, with American Dakotas towing Waco gliders above us. In the distance were giant tank-carrying Hamilcar gliders trailing behind Albermarle bombers, creating a vast armada of tugs and gliders. Three hours passed before we crossed over Brussels on our way to the river. During this time, Paddy had spoken by the phone line in the towrope to the pilots of our glider, learning our glider carried six soldiers and a jeep trailer loaded with explosives. It was not too comforting to learn what we were towing. Soon we were on the last leg of the journey. My first glimpse of the battle scene ahead revealed smoke covering the whole area, which had been generated to conceal the movements of our army on the near bank of the river. Unfortunately, the breeze was blowing it across the river and over the designated landing area for our gliders. I did not envy the glider pilots having to find their specific landing points through all the smoke. Our approach to the river at 500 feet was an exciting few minutes. I saw the river ahead through the smoke

and the flashes of exploding anti-aircraft fire aimed at the leading aircraft. The aircraft armada had arrived early and the rocket firing Typhoon aircraft had not yet finished their task of destroying the enemy anti-aircraft guns. Definitely the time to grab and don the armoured jacket over my parachute harness. Ahead I saw an American Flying Fortress aircraft circling over Wesel with newsreel cameramen, hit by anti-aircraft fire, slowly floating down in flames. As we crossed the river, the bursting anti-aircraft shells ahead were getting close, but there was nothing we could do to avoid the bursts. Having a glider in tow, we were forced to fly straight and level and stay like this until our glider pilots decided to leave us. They would be busy looking down for their designated landing area, and would not be releasing the towrope until right above it. Suddenly, I heard a large explosion, and our Dakota surged ahead. We had lost our glider, which had either cast off or had been hit and had blown up. Getting back across the river was our immediate aim. A sharp 180-degree left hand turn, drop the towrope, and watch for other aircraft. As we banked to make our turn to get back across the river, something fiery-red streaked past me as I watched the scene from the astrodome. It could have been inches away from me; it could have been yards away. All I knew was that someone below was firing at us. With aircraft all making for the one area to drop their towropes, it was important that another aircraft did not drop their towrope on to us, Paddy told me to keep a close look-out above the aircraft from the astrodome. As I watched, one of our squadron aircraft nearby was hit by anti-aircraft fire and became a ball of flame, with only the cockpit and rudder visible outside the flames. For a few moments it kept flying alongside us, until suddenly it snapped in two, and two bodies fell towards the ground. Within a second two parachutes opened, but sadly the other two members of the crew must have gone down in the blazing aircraft. Once back over the river, it did not take us long to reach the Brussels/Evere airfield and join the other squadron aircraft on the field. Standing there, it was an awesome sight to see the armada of almost 3,000 aircraft and gliders passing above on route to the river.

Later that day, the tragedy of war was brought home to me when the two airmen who had parachuted out of the burning plane came to the mess and asked to see me. Their captain, Cliff Chew, my room mate, had gone down in that ball of fire. They were full of praise for Cliff, who had remained at the controls of the burning aircraft, keeping it level to permit them to parachute out. When they left, I was criticised for not taking them to the bar and buying them drinks, but never ever seeing NCOs in the mess, this idea never occurred to me. I suppose I should have approached our CO and told him of their presence, but he did not mix with junior officers at any time, leaving administration to his flight commanders. The death of Cliff was forcibly brought home to me when I later entered our hut at Broadwell to see the empty bed frame and mattress standing in the corner of the hut, the shelf above it empty of the photos that previously stood there. All the material evidence of his life was gone, but for myself, I will remember him for his action in befriending me when I could have been lonely.

The success of Operation *Varsity*, the crossing of the Rhine, was widely reported in the press. Later, we read that all the members of the US Air Force who participated were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. As for we members of No 512 Squadron who flew that day, there seemed little recognition from the RAF. We did learn later

that the Group Commander who led the armada from the leading aircraft received the Distinguished Service Order. In No 512 Squadron, three pilots were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. There were no awards for navigators or wireless operators, but in reality we contributed little to the success of the operation.

CHAPTER XXII

SPRING IN BRUSSELS

Springtime brought better weather with longer hours of daylight, allowing crews to complete two crossings to Belgium a day. Airborne by 0800 after an early breakfast, back from Brussels for lunch. On the way again by 1400 hours. I was getting tired of it all. Most days consisted of at least four flights, occasionally six on some days. When I arose each morning and cycled to an early breakfast, I was feeling the effect of the long hours in the air. However, once airborne, I seemed to shed the weariness and looked towards the day ahead.

March 4th had been a typical day, commencing with an early breakfast at 0630, and flying out of Broadwell at 0745 for Nivelles with a full load of army supplies, returning to base at 1150. At 1400, again on our way to Nivelles, we received a radio message telling us that our destination was fog-bound and giving instructions to fly on to Brussels. The time was 1740 when we were free to return across the Channel; the last leg of the day was in darkness. We had been on duty for over 18 hours, from an early breakfast to a late dinner, including eight hours in the cockpit. It had been a long day. In the three weeks prior to the crossing of the Rhine I had made 35 flights, including 14 return crossings to Europe, and my weariness and the strain of flying consistently must have been evident.

Relief from my heavy workload came unexpectedly and from a surprising source. Seated in an armchair in the mess late one afternoon following the crossing of the Rhine, and reading the daily newspaper, I realised that someone was standing in front of me to attract my attention. Lowering the newspaper, I recognised the squadron medical officer. Rising to my feet, I was astonished to hear that I was suspended from flying duties until further notice. Report to the station sick-quarters at 0800 the next morning! My workload was no different from other members of the squadron, but possibly witnessing my flight commander and friend Cliff Chew shot down in flames must have affected me. Suspension of aircrew by a medical officer was, to me, very unusual, but he may have been influenced by the new leader of B Flight, who was appointed following the death of Cliff Chew. Whatever the reason, I was delighted to have a rest.

Telling Paddy he needed a temporary navigator, I reported next morning as ordered. The medical officer gave me a very comprehensive medical examination but failed to find any problems. What concerned him was my pallid complexion for I had lost all colour in my face. This could have been a reaction from seeing Cliff shot down a week before, of which I was reminded every time I entered the hut to see his empty bed-frame. Whatever the reason, I was grounded for 14 days, issued with a bottle of halibut oil capsules, and told to spend at least an hour a day sitting bare-chested in the sunshine. As a cure for my condition, two of my friends suggested a pint of Guinness

stout each day would put colour in my cheeks. I gave it a try, but not being a beer drinker I found this type of medicine difficult to take, and soon abandoned the cure. An additional instruction from the medical officer: 'Curtail your social activities!' What activities? Now that I was an officer, any social activities on the camp were denied because the station commander did not allow officers to fraternise with the WAAFs. I envied one of my fellow Australians in the mess, who had married an English girl who lived with relatives in a nearby village, enabling him to see her when he had a day off. My association with the fairer sex was restricted to my visits to my relatives at Romford every six weeks, where I could meet Margaret and take her to an officers' club in the city for a meal and afterwards to a show. During the previous winter when I was a member of the sergeants' mess, on hearing that supper was available at an inn at the village of Langford, I had talked a friendly sergeant WAAF into walking the three miles to the inn. The food was enjoyable, but the long hike both ways in the cold night air put me off any future outing.

Finally my suspension was over, and on 20 April I rejoined the crew, with our first trip from Broadwell to Brunswick, Germany, with army supplies. Then across to Diepholz to pick up some very happy people; 30 RAF aircrew ex-prisoners of war to be delivered to Brussels. On this return flight Paddy took the opportunity to circle low over the German town of Osnabruck in the Ruhr, which had been heavily bombed by the RAF, and looking down on the remains of the town our passengers saw the damage their bombing had caused. Most of the houses remaining were of two-storey brick construction, with the walls still standing, but only empty shells. The firestorms had burnt out the roofs and the wooden floors. Looking at the scene below, all that was visible within the walls of the houses still standing was bare earth.

These trips with RAF ex-prisoners of war were always joyful occasions, with our fellow airmen eager to get aboard and on their way home with their souvenirs. I bought a German parachute from one airman, hoping my aunt could use the fabric, as domestic fabrics were still rationed, but my effort came to nothing. Envisaging that the parachute would be made from white silk. I took it back to Broadwell, and when on leave took it to London. Regretfully, when opened, the material in the parachute was a synthetic material, printed with a camouflage pattern of browns and greens. Our flights to evacuate displaced persons from Germany were more emotional. Referred to by the authorities as 'displaced persons', they had been, in reality, slaves forced to work in appalling conditions in underground munition factories. Showing the effects of their privation in Germany, they were pleased to see us, but were always very quiet on the flight home to Brussels.

Many American Dakota squadrons operated in Europe, but usually in the American sector and we rarely saw them. Their method of operation differed from the RAF, where all our aircraft carried navigators enabling them to proceed independently, whereas the American aircraft flew in a group following a leading aircraft. Should an American aircraft lose contact with his group, the pilot had to rely on map reading to reach his destination, which was impossible when over water. Some days when we reached the French coast to cross to England, we would see American Dakota aircraft circling,

waiting for a RAF aircraft to lead them across the Channel. Lacking a navigator, they did not know the course to fly to make the crossing. Approaching the Brussels/Evere airport at the close of one busy day, we had been beaten to the area by a squadron of 27 American Dakotas who had set up a landing pattern. Following their leader, they had formed a gigantic spiral queue of aircraft. All we could do was to follow the last American aircraft and join in at the end of the spiral. Round and round Brussels we flew, in ever-decreasing circles until finally landing. Then came the problem of finding a parking space.

Although I had been flying for over two and a half years, I never had a desire to try my hand behind the controls because I was very happy navigating. Sitting in the pilot's seat just did not appeal to me, probably because of my lack of confidence. Eventually, one afternoon after crossing the Channel on a return journey to Broadwell, Paddy invited me to sit in the second pilot's seat and fly the aircraft back home. His advice, just watch the instrument panel and keep the aircraft stable and the aircraft on track. Sitting there, nervously concentrating on the instruments, I did not realise that although I was doing what he wanted, the Dakota was gradually losing height. Suddenly, looking up from the instruments and through the windscreen, I was horrified to see the circular tower of Windsor Castle rapidly approaching. I pulled back on the controls and the Dakota responded, roaring over the tower and its flagpole. I distinctly remember seeing the white faces of four people standing on the tower, looking across at me. Visions of a court martial for flying over the palace filled my imagination but nothing eventuated.

In April 1945, there was a rumour circulating among the crews that one squadron of the group would be transferring to a base on the Continent. We hoped it would be No 512, and this time our wish came true. In the last week of the month, orders came from Group Headquarters for us to move the majority of our aircraft and crews across the Channel. Our new home would be the Brussels/Evere airfield, one of two fields on the outskirts of the city. The accommodation allocated to us had been originally built for the Luftwaffe and was superior to the usual Nissen huts. All the officers were housed in a two-storey block of small apartments, each room had two beds, and best of all, a washbasin with running water. To provide hot water for shaving purposes, we were provided with a tiny metal stand to hold a mug of water over a firelighter. The only drawback of the apartments was that they were situated close to the end of the main runway, and it took a while to get used to aircraft roaring overhead, especially at 0500 when the first flights took-off. One of the advantages of being in Brussels was our wonderful cook, who slept in the kitchen and always had a good meal ready for us, whatever time we needed it, from early morning to late at night.

Living in Brussels was an exiting experience. Although we worked long hours in the air, there was so much of interest to see. When not flying, I used all my available time to visit the avenues, the shops, the historical buildings, and the cobbled streets. Someone in the mess mentioned that Brussels was noted for beautiful lace, so on my next day off I found a lace shop and purchased some exquisite pieces to take home to Mavis. To a rail fan the little steam trains that ran along the streets, bringing farm produce to market, were captivating. One of these little narrow gauge lines passed close to the airfield and

I did enjoy seeing these trains, laden with produce on their way to the central market. I had originally taken my bike to Brussels, but soon discovered that cobbled streets with recessed narrow gauge train lines did not make for safe cycling. Coming from a relatively young city like Melbourne, I enjoyed living in a city with such history and atmosphere. As in every newly liberated country, there was political activity in Brussels between the French speaking Walloons and the Flemish speaking Flemings that make up Belgium, and also between those for or against the Monarchy. Our instructions—keep well away from the parliament buildings and all political demonstrations.

The squadron needed a jeep. By some doubtful means, one was procured to give us ready transport, but retaining the jeep was a problem. Our solution: utilise a large chain and lock. Whenever possible the jeep was parked alongside a tree and chained up. Seeing the jeep standing in one of the hangars, and finding it was not required, I slowly engaged first gear and drove onto the airfield. On that wide expanse of the airfield I taught myself to drive.

The April days were glorious for flying. Frosty mornings, followed by cloudless skies with warm sunshine. It was good to be alive. On 27 April we left Brussels with a load of powdered milk in ten-gallon drums for a landing strip on the outskirts of the town of Celle in Lower Saxony. We had been in the air for only a few minutes when Paddy realised the aircraft was flying tail-heavy and asked if we could move some of the drums of milk forward to bring the load closer to the aircraft centre of gravity? My endeavour to do this resulted in an excruciating pain in my lower back, which has taunted me ever since.

Although my back was quite sore I located the Celle strip, and when on the ground I asked about the large camp adjacent to the strip, to be told it was the infamous Belsen Concentration Camp, where the Germans had held and tortured people opposed to the Nazi regime. Two weeks previously, when the British Army reached the area, a truce was arranged with the local German commander, enabling our forces to enter the camp peacefully. On inspecting this ghastly place they found thousands of bodies, and countless prisoners suffering from diseases such as typhus and dysentery. The British soldiers who captured the camp were so horrified with the attitude of the SS camp guards, that a number of the SS were summarily executed by our soldiers. All the sick and the dead had all been removed from the camp in the week before we arrived and the camp was cleaned up. What I could not reconcile was the beauty of the houses of the SS camp guards, and the cruelty that had taken place inside the camp. Surely the families of the guards knew what was happening over their back fences, that people were being tortured and starved to death. Looking down as we circled the camp before returning to Brussels, it resembled, with all the cages, a zoo for wild animals, with not a blade of green grass to be seen. It may be a coincidence, but within a week of the start of flights to Belsen, beautiful pieces of furniture appeared in the mess, which I guess came from one of those charming houses alongside the camp.

Back at Brussels later in the day, because of my back, I sought medical help from a first-aid post set up in one of the hangars. Among the medical equipment was a padded bench

below a framework of electric light globes. My treatment for my painful back: half an hour morning and night under the lights. Following the discovery of camps similar to Belsen, with the accompanying problems of disease, the RAF became concerned about the health of crews flying into Germany. Once again we had to front up to the medicos, this time to be inoculated against a range of diseases, including cholera and typhus.

May began for me with a direct flight from Broadwell to Belsen. Having returned earlier in the week to load up with the petrol for Celle, we had set out in heavy cloud to deliver the petrol the previous day. Thirty minutes after leaving Broadwell, I saw rime or hoar frost beginning to form on the wings of the aircraft, which could destroy the lifting effect of the wings, endangering our safety. Made aware of this, Paddy turned the aircraft around and I gave him a direct course to Broadwell. Shortly afterwards, Ginger picked up a recall signal ordering all squadron aircraft to return to base. When I reached the mess, I discovered that we were the only crew to experience the icing. A recall signal had been transmitted shortly after we had left Broadwell; the recall we received was a repeat of the original signal transmitted 30 minutes earlier.

The following day we had no problems reaching Belsen with the petrol. After 20 minutes spent watching our load being transferred on to army transport, I gave Paddy a course for a landing strip named Mersberg-Leipzig in Saxony in Eastern Germany, an area not known to me. The name of the strip was a misnomer and did not convey definition of its location, because the town of Mersberg was about 30 miles from the ancient city of Leipzig; the strip could be anywhere between. All I knew for certain was the latitude and longitude of the strip where a group of RAF ex-prisoners of war needed evacuation from a camp in the area. It took us 55 minutes to reach the locality, but all we could see below was a featureless plain. No landing strip or habitation, just flat grass-covered grazing land with no sign of the ancient city of Leipzig, or the town of Mersberg. Relying on GEE, even though it was at its extreme range, the transmitters in the UK being distant, I was sure we were over the correct area. Circling at about 400 feet and looking for some sign of activity, Paddy saw below a lone serviceman wearing a dark blue uniform waving madly to us. We lost more height and the stranger indicated it was safe to land on the grass where he stood. Paddy did as suggested and taxied over to him. Jumping out of the aircraft, I was greeted by a fellow member of the RAAF who was there seeking newly released ex-prisoners of war and organising their return to England. Finding the correct area was very satisfying to me, but the height of the grass surrounding the aircraft was a worry. After about 30 minutes, two trucks drew up with 30 happy airmen. Seats were not available for everyone, but they did not seem to care. They were happy to sit on the floor. When everyone was ready, Paddy turned the Dakota into the wind and opened the throttles for take-off, but our progress was very sluggish because the undercarriage had to fight its way through the long grass. Slowly the speed increased until we reached sufficient speed and Paddy was able to lift the aircraft off the ground. It must have been a close call, for looking out through my small side window I saw we just cleared a three-strand wire fence. We were happily on our way to Brussels for a meal. When everyone had eaten, we left on the last leg of our passengers' homeward flight to England. At 1800 their destination came into view: the Wing RAF base. Turning off the runway, we were guided to a large open hangar

where a considerable crowd had gathered. As the aircraft came to a stop I opened the door, clipped the portable steps to the doorsill, and watched our passengers happily step out of the aircraft on to English soil. Among the reception party was a very welcome sight: a bevy of WAAFs. As each airman left the aircraft, a WAAF came forward and accompanied him into the hangar to personally assist him during de-briefing.

It was dusk when we left Wing to fly on to Broadwell. Our route home took us over Oxford, and as we approached the city, I saw ahead, through the oncoming darkness, a carpet of twinkling lights. The streetlights of Oxford were lit for the first time in nearly six years. Surely the war must be over soon! Peace came six days later on 8 May 1945.

CHAPTER XXIII

PEACE

With the announcement of peace came joyous celebrations throughout Great Britain and the Continent. To us at Brussels, however, the cessation of hostilities brought added urgent responsibilities, with many more ex-prisoners of war needing repatriation. We flew deep into Germany every day with supplies, and homeward with happy newly-released airmen. The defeated German military forces were proving very cooperative, but groups of young SS soldiers, calling themselves *Wehrwolves*, had refused to surrender and were hiding in the forests and causing problems for everybody. To counteract this danger, the order came for all aircrew to wear revolvers on flights into Germany. I had been issued with a Smith & Wesson .38 revolver soon after arriving in England, but never received any training in its use.

May was by far our busiest month, with a total of 79 flights totalling 122 hours, probing deep into Germany. Based at Brussels, No 512 Squadron was responsible for all army air-transport in the British sector, and I believe we were the forerunners of British European Airways. Although flying to towns and cities all over the British sector of Germany, we avoided the established airports, probably because they had been destroyed by our air forces, and instead I navigated to new airstrips on the outskirts of towns and cities such as Bremen, Hamburg, Ahlorn and Rheine. One busy landing strip, Luneburg, was situated on Luneburg Heath, about 25 miles south-east of Hamburg. The whole area around the strip was desolate flat country, previously used by the German Army for manoeuvres and armament testing, and where there were always passengers to be collected. When the area had been captured by the British Army, General Montgomery set up his headquarters close by, and it was in a tent on this desolate heath he accepted the surrender of the three German generals commanding the German forces of North-Western Germany. During one stopover, when Paddy and I were standing beside this strip waiting for our intended passengers to arrive, General Montgomery arrived in a jeep with an escort. Seeing us, he gave a wave and boarded his personal Dakota, distinguished by three golden stars painted on the tail fin, which I learnt was a gift from the Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower. Being the centre of such an important area, the Luneberg strip was the only one that provided shelter and food in a large army marquee. There were a table and several chairs for intending passengers, and available on the table a large tin of margarine, a substantial slab of bullybeef and army biscuits. I was always happy to help myself to this food for I never knew when I would eat again or where I would spend the night. It was at Luneberg that I saw representatives of the defeated enemy. A group of about 25 German senior officers, resplendent in their uniforms and each carrying a suitcase, were brought to the strip, escorted by a military policeman, and boarded another Dakota for transfer to the United Kingdom. What struck me was that they did not look like a master race; more like a gathering of weary business executives, with no desire to cause any problems.

Commencing on 14 May, our daily schedule was two trips from Brussels to Luneburg, carrying mail or supplies, and returning with all categories of passengers, both military and civilian. Occasionally, we would digress on the way home and call at the Hamburg strip, if there were any passengers to be collected.

We rose some days before dawn for a 0500 take-off. The weather report on 20 May promised fine weather, but when we walked to our aircraft the whole area was encompassed by fog. The advice we received from the meteorology section was that the fog should dissipate as soon as the sun arose. Climbing through the fog after leaving the runway we soon reached clear air, as the fog was only about 30 feet thick. Once above it in the clear morning air, it was like passing over a white carpet, only broken by the steeples of the village churches poking through. It was a glorious day for flying, with not a cloud above us. The weather report had promised excellent conditions, but carried a warning to watch for possible thunderstorms late in the day.

After a flight of 140 minutes, we were on the ground at Luneberg and waiting to be unloaded. The plan was to return immediately with passengers, but it was at least an hour before two army trucks drew up with 24 members of the 6th Airborne Division returning to Brussels. These soldiers were members of the airborne division we had towed in gliders across the Rhine River at Wessel eight weeks previously. Back at Brussels just before 1100, and at 1300 outward bound carrying a load of freight to the landing strip at Belsen. With the Dakota now empty we continued, finally reaching Luneberg at 1605. Awaiting us were 29 Belgian ex-prisoners of war to be repatriated to Brussels, but by this time the weather was a combination of bright sunshine and scattered thunderstorms. As we flew back towards Brussels, the countryside on both sides of the Rhine was bathed in sunshine, extending to the area surrounding Eindhoven. But in the distance ahead of us, a black cumulus cloud towered over Brussels, drenching it with heavy rain. Landing at the airfield in heavy rain would not present a problem, but as we neared the city, two bolts of lightning flashed down from the cloud to the city below. Knowing that Eindhoven was clear with bright sunlight, Paddy turned the Dakota around and landed there. We had experienced flying in a thunderstorm in France, and the prospect of rough conditions with 29 passengers without seat belts was not on. At Eindhoven, our Belgians were happy to be out of Germany and were taken to accommodation for the night. The four of us were well fed by the army and Paddy and I were taken to a beautiful house, which could have been formerly occupied by a collaborator. The house had been stripped of all the furniture, but the gold bathroom fittings indicated the previous luxurious contents of the building. Looking at the vacant walls, I could see where all the paintings must have hung on the walls. As for sleeping, the army provided us with mattresses on the floor, pillows and blankets. The army had secured the township, but there could be enemy stragglers in the surrounding countryside, and the army warned us to stay in the house. Lying on my mattress, the sound of machine gun fire nearby during the night did nothing to settle my nerves. By 1000 next morning, 28 of our passengers were ready to go, and within half an hour were back in their own country. No explanation was offered regarding our missing passenger. Possibly he may have lived close to Eindhoven, or perhaps he just did not want to go home. Eindhoven was the headquarters of the Philips electrical

empire, with a huge automated factory situated on the edge of the town. The factory was an excellent example of the then modern methods of manufacturing radio valves and electric light globes. I could see no evidence the factory had been bombed by either side in the conflict, except damage to the power station.

Peace having also come to Denmark, the RAF now had a daily service from Brussels to the Danish capital, Copenhagen. On 23 May, we made our first flight on this route, firstly to Luneberg, then north across Schleswig Holstein and the Danish Islands to Copenhagen. As we circled to land, Sweden was visible about 15 miles away across the water. It was quite an experience to land at the Copenhagen airport. We were used to landing at isolated strips, but here, like Brussels, the airport was surrounded by crowds of sightseers. I must confess great pride standing in the passenger terminal, with the word 'Australia' on my shoulder flashes, the object of attention in my unfamiliar dark blue uniform. The colour stood out amid the grey and khaki colours of the other Service uniforms, showing the Danes that Australia was playing a role in the restoration of their country.

Writing up my flying logbook on 25 May, I realised I had passed the magical total of 1,000 hours in the air since that first flight at Mt. Gambier. The day had been routine with a full capacity of passengers to Luneberg, and on return a number of displaced women and children returning to their own countries from detention in Germany, but to me it was a highlight of my service. Later that week, the flying schedule set down a deal with our allies, the Russians. We were detailed to fly to the town of Lubeck at the northern end of the demarcation line between the British and Russian sectors, because the Russians were holding a number of newly-released allied ex-prisoners of war requiring repatriation. I was looking forward to this trip, but it was not to be, for an hour before our scheduled time to leave Brussels, we learnt of a hitch in the program. The Russians were not prepared to hand over our compatriots, unless we took an equal number of Russians to Lubeck in exchange. This resulted in the flight being cancelled, because the Russians in Allied hands refused to be repatriated.

We flew out of Brussels at 0900 on the last day of May and flew empty to Hildeshein in Lower Saxony, picked up 30 British ex-prisoners, and then on to Munster in North Rhine-Westphalia, finally returning at 1435. Time for a late lunch at 1630 then off again, this time to Eindhoven to collect 25 recruits for the Dutch Army, whom we delivered to Croydon, England, and returning to Brussels at 2130.

No 512 Squadron was in the forefront of all the squadrons supporting the army in the war against Germany and had a wonderful record for safety and dependability. As skilled fliers, we were second to none. I had been with the whole squadron of 27 aircraft approaching Brussels aerodrome and watched as they formed a spiral queue to land, with the aircraft being spaced about 300 yards apart. As one aircraft was touching down at the start of the runway, another was rolling halfway down the runway, while a third was turning off at the end of the runway. Today such a procedure would be prohibited, but we were all under 30 years old, there was little flying control on the airfield, and

the crews were flying every day and were very skilful. On a couple of occasions, I saw aircraft take-off down the runway, two abreast.

CHAPTER XXIV

HOMEWARD BOUND

I spent the morning of 1 June 1945 on a flight to Luneberg to bring 30 French ex-prisoners of war to Brussels. Having the afternoon free, and it being a pleasant summer day, I walked into the city. Wandering through the streets I found the garrison theatre. This theatre, operated by the army, provided free entertainment to servicemen and was an excellent place to spend the afternoon. The film shown was based on the life of the composer Antonin Dvorak, with the beautiful musical theme *Going Home*. This was to be my last day in Brussels before eight days leave. As our batman awoke me next morning, I mentioned this enjoyable prospect of eight days leave. His comments were:

'I don't know about leave. You are being repatriated. You are going home.'

My head was full of this joyful news. The movie of yesterday seemed so prophetic. I was going home. I did not know whether to be happy or sad. I was happy to realise that I had survived the European war. Hopefully, I would soon see Mavis and my parents. Sad, because on the coming recreation leave, I had arranged to spend a week on a house boat on the Thames watching the shipping pass along the river, instead of spending the time in the city.

And so, we flew from Brussels to Broadwell, my last flight as a member of No 512 Squadron. As we approached our home base I picked up my microphone, and as was the custom in our crew, made the usual request:

'Hello Whiskers, this is Gratis Able Oboe. Landing instructions, please, over.'

My contribution to No 512 Squadron during the past 11 months had been over 300 flights as a navigator. On some flights, I had just been a passenger, such as on glider towing or homing exercises. On the majority, I had been actively navigating between fields all over England and the Continent. The flights had been almost free of accidents; there was one occasion when the aircraft was being taxied on the tarmac at Broadwell, we had misjudged the distance between a parked truck and our port wingtip, resulting in a foot of the wing being damaged. We thought Paddy would have to front up to the CO, but when we arrived at B Flight dispersal next morning the Dakota was sporting a new wing tip, having been repaired overnight by our loyal ground staff.

Seventeen months had passed since I had made that first operational delivery flight to Rabat in January 1944. I was one month short of my completing two tours of operations, but this statistic was purely academic now with peace in Europe. I had been very fortunate. Possibly I could be flying against the Japanese after I reached Australia.

During that time, I had slept in many odd places. In strange airfield sleeping quarters, requisitioned luxury homes, tents, stables, field hospitals, even on the floor of aircraft. I had been cold, hungry, afraid of what the coming hours would bring, and at times very lonely and homesick. I had seen the utter devastation of war, seen my room mate shot down in flames, and yet in spite of all this, I look back on my service in Europe with pride and satisfaction.

When we reached Broadwell and had parked the aircraft at B Flight dispersal, it was time to say goodbye to my two mates, Paddy and Ginger. For almost two years we had shared our lives, both in the air and on the ground. Our association as members of a crew had begun two years previously in such an inappropriate manner in Northern Ireland, for we had just drifted together as there had been no other choice. We each had a job to do, and were appreciative of the good fortune that we had been posted to Ferry Command, and later, Transport Command. Six delivery flights to Africa, 82 crossings to Europe. A total of 421 flights together.

I had looked on Paddy as a father figure, someone who had experienced life in contrast to my sheltered teenage years, and would have followed him anywhere. In return I had gained his confidence, for he rarely queried the directions I gave him. Ginger had been a good friend to me in all respects, sharing the same small area behind the pilots and enjoying the same pleasures of cycling and sightseeing. My lasting remembrance of Ginger is of him with his head bent over a writing pad, composing a letter to his Joan.

Now it was time to complete the formalities for leaving Broadwell. First, to be cleared by the orderly-room, and secondly, to pay my mess bill and re-direct my mail. During lunch, I sold my bike for the ruling price of one pound. You could buy a sedan for ten pounds, but you could not get low octane petrol to fuel it. Finally, after I had packed my kitbag and tin trunk, a small transport came and took me to the nearest railway station to wait for the little train to Oxford. Then it was onto the mainline expresses to London and Brighton.

I must pay tribute to the RAAF Headquarters at Kodak House, London, for wherever I was posted, my mail always reached me. I must also acknowledge the Australian Comforts Fund for their gifts to me, especially Christmas Day 1944, when the Chaplain gave me a parcel containing a beautiful white jumper knitted by some kind person in Australia. And finally, I must acknowledge the dedication of the RAF ground staff, who serviced our aircraft and equipment. Whatever time we arrived back from a flight they were always there to meet us, and the next morning the aircraft would be 100 per cent and ready for the day's work.

Brighton had not changed much since July 1943, when I had departed for Limavady, although now I was billeted at another hotel because I was an officer. The routine was just the same, waiting for something to happen. The only exciting event was the explosion of a mine on the beach one night, shattering the windows of the hotel facing the beach. On arrival I searched for any members of No 24 Course from Somers, but to

no avail. Maybe they had been casualties in Bomber Command. A happier explanation could be that as their flying had ceased four weeks prior to my arrival at Brighton, they were already on a ship homeward bound.

The RAAF was doing all it could to get us home as quickly as possible. In addition to going by ship, others were being flown across the Atlantic, then by rail to the West Coast of America for passage across the Pacific. One of my room mates, who was leaving with his wife to go to a Scottish airfield for this flight was kind enough to accept a commission from me. Given some money and Mavis' address, he agreed to ask his wife to purchase some ladies' wear in New York, and mail it when back in Australia. She was very kind, and Mavis was delighted to receive the gift.

Peace having come to the Channel holiday towns such as Brighton, the citizens and the tourists resented our presence in their premier sea front hotels and wanted us out of the town, letting us know their feelings from time to time. Sitting on the hotel terrace one evening after dinner, watching the people pass by, I heard a comment: 'Why don't you go home?' If they only knew how dearly we wanted to be home. One Brighton citizen even referred to us as the 'Grandsons of Convicts' in a letter to our CO when complaining about our presence in Brighton. The letter had one good effect. The CO granted everyone a week's leave. On our return, we were given the use of a local cricket ground to play Australian Rules football, but unfortunately the turf wicket area was roped off and useless for our purpose.

After four weeks of boredom, the movement order came. We would be leaving the following morning, and our luggage trunks were to be labelled and taken down to the ground floor, kit bags to be carried onto the train. We boarded a special train at Brighton for the first stage of our homeward journey. After a daylong journey, the train drew up on a pier at Liverpool alongside the ocean-liner, *Mauritania*. I had seen it in Sydney Harbour earlier in the war, when the liner came with *Queen Elizabeth* and *Queen Mary* to take the Australian 6th Division to the Middle East. The rumour was that it was returning to Sydney to collect the silver, crockery and furnishings left behind on the previous visit. We were bunked four to a cabin. Now an officer, the conditions were so different from my traumatic crossing of the Atlantic in 1943. No mattresses on the floor here, but white linen and good bunks, and stewards waiting on the tables in the dining room. There was a choice of courses on the menu. For breakfast, the choice was between kippered herrings or fried eggs and bacon. The white bread rolls on the table were the first I had seen since Rabat.

Our first sighting of land on our homeward journey was the port of Colon, at the entrance to the Panama Canal. When the ship anchored in the harbour we were confined to the ship, but local traders came aboard to show their wares. I purchased six pairs of pure silk stockings, not available in Australia, which cost me the equivalent of a week's pay, but were greatly appreciated when I reached home. Later in the afternoon, a launch came alongside to take off a girl stowaway who had been smuggled on board in a kitbag.

Waiting our turn to pass through the Panama Canal, six of us started a poker game, which became so involved that I did not witness the passage of the ship through the Canal. Once through the Canal, our only port of call before Sydney was at Pearl Harbor, where all on board were allowed shore leave to visit Honolulu, about ten miles away. This was a great way to spend a day. Transport between Pearl Harbor and Honolulu was unique. You had to hitchhike on the main road and all service vehicles were required to stop and pick up passengers. There was so much to see, and after an interesting day in the town, I reached the main road and stood waiting for transport. I was lucky, a large white sedan flying a pennant on the bonnet pulled up and I climbed in. My host: an American admiral.

Early the next morning the order came for all to assemble at lifeboat stations. Fortunately my position on the port side enabled me to see, as the ship slowly circled Ford Island in the middle of the harbour, the sunken battleships, reminders of the Japanese air attack on 8 December 1942.

On Sunday, 5 August 1945, the day we were due to reach Australia, I was up on deck before dawn, looking for the first sight of home. Scanning the horizon ahead, I managed to see a faint indication of land ahead. It slowly increased, to be crowned by the arch of the Sydney Harbour Bridge as a backdrop. Making our slow passage through the entrance to the harbour, I was amazed to see people on every vantage point waving to us. Inside the harbour, the scene was extraordinary. The harbour seemed to be full of sailing boats and all the ferries tooting their whistles and the fireboats spraying water into the sky. 'Welcome Home' banners were strung along the buildings around Circular Quay. Quietly the tugs nosed the ship into a berth at the quay and our journey home to Australia was over.

There was a great hustle, with luggage and kit to be handled and special trains to take us all over Australia. Finally the train for Melbourne left, with 88 airmen on board. I know exactly how many because I found myself as Officer Commanding the RAAF contingent. The train reached Albury at about 0700 and breakfast was served. Having eaten, we crossed the platform for the Victorian train to Melbourne. Buses awaited us at Spencer Street, and we drove through the city to a welcome-home gathering at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

As I entered the gathering of families and friends, I eagerly searched for familiar faces. It was wonderful to see my mother and father, my brother Eric and his wife Jean, and Tony. Standing quietly in the background was someone I was longing to see: Mavis. Soon we reached home and the conversation never stopped until it was time for me to take Mavis home. We walked arm in arm to the Ormond station for the bus to Hughesdale and as we waited, I remembered that it was here she had promised to write to me. She had kept her promise, writing nearly every week after I left for Canada. Her letters kept me going all that time, especially when life got tough, or when I was lonely.

Six weeks later I returned to the Melbourne Cricket Ground, to receive my final discharge papers and any money due to me. Four pence was deducted for a cup that I had broken at Nhill in December 1942.

Mavis McDonald

POSTSCRIPT

Peace had come to the Pacific area shortly after my arrival home, and all Australians were celebrating this joyous event with Victory Marches in cities and towns. It was my joy to witness the Victory March in Melbourne and see Mavis marching as a member of the Australian Women's Army Service Land Headquarters Drum Band. She had been demobbed prior to my return, but had been prevailed upon by the AWAS to wear her uniform again and lead the beat in the march. In addition her employer, A. Lipshut of Flinders Lane, had graciously given her the day off from work so that she could participate.

On the first day of spring, 1945, Mavis agreed to marry me, and on 5 January 1946 we were married in the Ormond Presbyterian Church. During the intervening weeks, we learnt of a lady in Murrumbeena wishing to sell her house, with the proviso that the furniture remain in the house for at least 12 months. This condition was agreeable, and we purchased the house. To guard against squatters who were moving into unoccupied houses, I moved in and lived there as a bachelor until our wedding.

In 1975, we spent three weeks driving through England and I showed Mavis the town of Burford, including the inn where I dined with Cliff Chew. I found the runways and perimeter tracks of the Broadwell airfield, but no sign of any buildings except the concrete shell of the flying control building standing stark against an empty sky. When I knew it, it was alive with many a warm welcome from the WAAF radio operators when we returned at the end of a busy day. Now, it was just an empty shell.

Towards the end of our holiday, we spent a night at the Grand Hotel in Brighton where all RAAF personnel had been billeted. In answer to my enquiry about the mural that had graced the wall of the dining room, the waiter explained it was behind the new panelling on the wall. 'You must have been an Australian airman. We have many like you who come here with their wives on a sentimental journey.'

A week prior to this, when sitting in a pub in Newcastle upon Tyne waiting for dinner, we spoke to an English couple in the lounge. They were very interested on hearing that I had served in a RAF squadron and wished to express their thanks. 'We do appreciate what you did for us. Come and stay with us and enjoy our hospitality for a couple of days. We doubt that we would have come to defend your country.'

UNITS ATTENDED

No 1 Initial Training School	Somers	19 January 1942
No 2 Air Observer School	Mt. Gambier	28 May 1942
No 2 Bombing and Gunnery School	Port Pirie	22 August 1942
No 2 Air Navigation School	Nhill	19 October 1942
No 3 Manning Depot	Edmonton	1 March 1943
No 1 General Reconnaissance School	Summerside	4 April 1943
No 11 Personnel Depot	Brighton	4 June 1943
No 7 Coastal Operational Training Unit	Limavady	9 July 1943
No 1 Torpedo Training Unit	Turnberry	1 September 1943
No 7 Coastal Operational Training Unit	Limavady	29 October 1943
No 300 Ferry Training Unit	Talbenny	4 December 1943
No 1 Ferry Unit	Pershore	17 April 1944
No 107 Transport Operational Training Unit	Leicester East	18 May 1944
No 512 Transport Squadron	Broadwell	15 July 1944
No 512 Detachment	Brussels	25 April 1945
No 11 Personnel Unit	Brighton	4 June 1945

LANDING STRIPS AND AIRFIELDS VISITED

England

Broadwell
Bicester
Blakewell Farm
Chivenor
Croydon
Doncaster
Down Ampney
Exeter
Farnborough
Ford
Gatwick
Gosford
Hurn
Ipswich
Kemble
Leicester East
Lyneham
Manston
Melton Mowbray
Netheravon
Newbury
Northolt
Norwich
Oakley
Portreath
Ringway
Tangmere
Thorney Island
Twinwood Farm
Warmwell
Whitchurch
Wing
Wethersfield

Germany

Bremen/Ahlorn
Brunswick/Helmstedt
Celle
Hamburg
Hildershein
Diepholz
Leipzig/Merseburg
Luneburg
Munster
Rheine
Vorst
Weimer

France

Amiens
Bayeaux
Bailly Sur Compeigne
Douai
Lille
Marseilles/Istres
Orleans
Paris/Le Bourget
Rennes
St. Dizier
St. Omer
Vannes
Verdun

Belgium

Antwerp
Brussels/Evere
Brussels/Melsbrook
Liege
Maldegem
Nivelles

Scotland

Telling
Turnberry

Wales

Talbenny
Llandow

Ireland

Limavady

Holland

Eindhoven
Gilze-Rijen
Woensdrecht

Denmark

Copenhagen

French Morocco

Rabat-Sale

Gibraltar

Gibraltar

OTHER TITLES IN THE SERIES

Secret Action of 305
Smith & Coghlan
Winner of the 1988 Heritage Award

The RAAF Mirage Story
Compiled by Wing Commander M.R. Susans
Winner of the 1989 Heritage Award

Alfresco Flight – The RAAF Antarctic Experience
David Wilson
Winner of the 1990 Heritage Award

Edge of Centre – The eventful life of Group Captain Gerald Packer
Chris Coulthard-Clark
Winner of the 1991 Heritage Award

Beaufighters Over New Guinea – No. 30 Squadron RAAF 1942-1943
George Turnball Dick
Winner of the 1992 Heritage Award

Defeat to Victory – No. 453 Squadron RAAF
John Bennett
Winner of the 1993 Heritage Award

Not to be Shot at or Exported – An Airman's Letters Home 1942-1945
Leslie Howard Sullivan
Winner of the 1994 Heritage Award

Odd Jobs – RAAF Operations in Japan, The Berlin Airlift, Korea, Malaya and Malta 1946-1960
Steve Eather
Winner of the 1995 Heritage Award

McNamara VC – A Hero's Dilemma
Chris Coulthard-Clark
Winner of the 1996 Heritage Award

Skylarks – The Lighter Side of Life in the RAAF in World War II
Eric Brown
Winner of the 1997 Heritage Award

Up and Away – Memoirs of a Pilot in the Royal Australian Air Force 1950-1981
John Jacobs
Winner of the 1998 Heritage Award

How Not to Run an Air Force – The Higher Command of the Royal Australian Air Force During the Second World War
Norman Ashworth
Winner of the 1999 Heritage Award

Dicing with Death – An Airman's Account of his Training and Operations Over Japan
Arthur Sandell
Winner of the 2000 Heritage Award

Ex-Luftwaffe MBE
Frank Korbl
Winner of the 2001 Heritage Award

A Call to Arms – War Service with the RAAF 1942-1946
Diary Notes and memoirs of Arthur Gately
Winner of the 2002 Heritage Award