



## **AS IT HAPPENED**

**BY**

**GLEN WILLIAMS**

### **SOME FRUSTRATIONS BUT NO REGRETS**

In 1942, at eighteen years of age, the time had arrived for me to become embroiled in the Coils of War. I had a burning desire to become a member of RAAF aircrew, and I convinced a tentatively reluctant father to sign an agreement for me to enlist.

Following interviews, intelligence and medical tests, I was sworn in on the RAAF Aircrew Reserve and after some months, received my call-up.

My first frustration developed when my employer successfully appealed against my release from his employment under Manpower Regulations. He had employed me as a seventeen-year-old fresh from Grammar School, and was generously disposed toward me, having plans for my future within his protected industry. We discussed our differing attitudes at length, and he finally agreed to release me with mutual good will and respect.

Accordingly, at the ripe old age of nineteen, I became AC2 Williams, sharing with all other trainee aircrew, the lowest rank in the the Air Force, Aircraftman Second Class. That was one class below newly enlisted ground-staff (guards for example) who were AC1s (Aircraftman First Class).

Trainee aircrew wore a white flash in the front of their forage caps (uniform head gear). Ground-staff, who had no flashes in their caps, told all the girls to steer clear of the 'white flash boys' as that was an indication that they had contracted VD.

Categorized as a future 'Wireless Air Gunner', I trained in Australia at Bradfield Park and Parkes (NSW) and West Sale (Vic), graduating as a Sergeant. Following embarkation leave, I sailed on a Liberty Ship, the 'Sea Corporal', for San Francisco.

Life went along swimmingly, with some leave before departing Angel Island by troop train for the long trip to Cape Shanks near New York, some leave (to recover), then boarding the 82 000 ton 'Queen Elizabeth' to the United Kingdom.

Heading for Glasgow, we were shadowed one day by a German 'Condor' aircraft as we travelled 'U-Boat Alley'. British Intelligence sources, via a Warwick aircraft of RAF Coastal Command, subsequently revealed that a German submarine Wolf Pack was waiting ahead. Not willing to accommodate the demise of the 'Queen Elizabeth' and her contents of 'flesh and fowl', the ship reversed her course for some time, then continued via

Greenland, which must have been confusing for the enemy. We arrived in Scotland's Clyde River a day or so behind schedule, but that was certainly better than not arriving at all.

We went to Sussex in the south of England and were accommodated in very basic NCO transient quarters in the Metropole Hotel at Brighton which was part of the RAAF Personnel Depot. From there a number of us were sent to Whitley Bay, near Newcastle upon Tyne in England's 'north country', in the county of 'Tyne and Wear' to indulge in physical activities to help keep us fit.

RAF Advanced Flying Unit (AFU) Babdown Farm in Gloucestershire was my first flying appointment. We flew in Airspeed Oxfords.

Start/stop. Start/stop. Frustration was setting in as my next posting was announced. I went to Pembury in South Wales for air traffic control duties. That was not what I had travelled halfway around the world to achieve, so I applied to be posted to an operational squadron as a straight gunner.

Success! I was posted to a refresher course. Not just across the street or around the corner, but to Bishops Court in Northern Ireland. I travelled from England to Scotland then to Northern Ireland all in the one day - my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday which ironically, happens to be on St. Patrick's Day.

Now a Flight Sergeant, I was made flight commander of our Gunnery Flight for the duration of the course. One of the members of my flight was RAF Sergeant Dick Attenborough. He must have taken note of my instructions at the time, because he now bears the title of Lord Richard Attenborough.

That start finished with another stop, for no sooner had the course finished than VE Day arrived and the European War was at an end.

Overcoming my frustration, I volunteered to fly on Lincoln bombers with Tiger Force in Burma. The re-organization of the RAF to throw extra weight against the Japanese was a time-consuming process. So much so that Harry Truman had ample time to consider and decide to throw a couple of atomic bombs onto the Island of Honshu, ending that war also.

Ah, me! What to do? Thrown on extended leave with thousands of RAAF blokes to roam the UK like a feral band, I was soon running out of money. My solution was to do a wool-classing course with the Technical College in Bradford, Yorkshire which, as everybody knows, was where the finest of British wool blankets were made (and still are, I assume). Finally, my ship had been readied for me, and I joined a milling throng on the Aquitania, arriving back in Australia in late November 1945.

Once more overcoming my frustrations, I realized on the way home that my love affair with RAAF aircrew was far from over. A thought began to percolate through my grey matter that I would apply to remain in the RAAF.

So it transpired that, after about two months' home leave, I reported to Bradfield Park (Sydney) and signed on as a Warrant Officer Wireless Operator for further service. That took me initially to Tocumwal on Liberators for a short while, then the squadron was disbanded. Start/stop again, but at least I was flying and enjoying the close camaraderie which was common to all involved in military flying.

That was a period of post-war reconstruction and reorganization within the RAAF, and although not exactly a static occupation, I was lapping up the experience and the variety of duties.

From Tocumwal, I was posted to Special Duties Flight at Richmond, flying in Beaufighters and working primarily with radar on Army and Navy co-operation activities. Then on to RAAF Rathmines on the shores of Lake Macquarie, flying in Catalinas on Air Search and Rescue operations and reconnaissance around New Guinea. We were also involved in flying the Commonwealth Disposals Commission around all wartime bases in New Guinea, New Britain (Rabaul) and Bougainville. Those were all places where surplus wartime equipment and materials were being auctioned for removal and sale to a starved domestic market.

My next appointment was to administer the Marine (Search and Rescue) section at Rose Bay (Sydney) for several months during which time I agitated for another flying posting. That resulted in a posting to No. 37 Squadron at Schofields in (then) Transport Command, flying in Dakotas. A further posting took me to No.38 Squadron, still at Schofields and still flying in Dakotas, carrying out 'courier' runs to Japan until Qantas took over the service, flying Lancastrians.

Shortly after that stint, I was a member of ten Dakota crews sent to the UK and then to Lubeck in Germany, 230 kilometres from Berlin, to participate in the Berlin Airlift. My skipper was Flying Officer Dave Evans who, like Dick Attenborough, must have taken note of my advice, because he was later to become an Air Marshal as Chief of Air Staff (CAS). (In an aside, as CAS, he pinned pilot's wings on my eldest son Ron, at a graduation ceremony at RAAF Base Pearce (W.A.) in 1983). Flight Lieutenant Dave Hahn was second pilot and Warrant Officer Dave Benson-Inglis was navigator.

Following a decision to restructure crews to one pilot, navigator and wireless operator, Dave Hahn was checked out as aircraft captain, and he, Dave Benson-Inglis and I flew as a crew for 226 flights to Berlin. Once a fortnight, we would fly to the UK for two or three days to get a replacement aircraft.

We flew on the Airlift from August 1948 until the lifting of restrictions by the Soviet Union. We were on call at all times, and were granted seven days' leave each three months, returning to Australia by RAF York in late November 1949.

RAAF Rathmines became home base once more, and our duties included Air Search and Rescue (ASR) detachments to Darwin for periods of four months. The RAAF was responsible for all ASR as it was known then, until, I think, about 1970 when the whole arrangement of Search and Rescue was placed under civil control.

As I indicated earlier, my flying career was stop/start, and that continued with a posting to ATC Headquarters Hobart (Tas.) on recruiting duties until 1953. Once more I successfully agitated for a flying posting, this time to No.10 Squadron for maritime reconnaissance duties on long-nosed Lincolns, based in Townsville. It was in Townsville, in 1953, that I was married in a Service wedding, and our reception was held in the Base Mess.

Operating from Townsville's Joint-User (Military/Civil) airfield at Garbutt, we covered Darwin Search and Rescue detachments, Morotai (New Guinea) and general coastal duties. Finally, I applied for and was granted, a posting to Amberley (Queensland) prior to my discharge in 1955.

Stop/start, flying and non-flying, up and off all over the place like a Will-o'-the-Wisp. But do you know what? I never regretted one moment of my time in the RAAF.

### Post Script

During May 1999, I met up again with Dave Evans and Dave Hahn when I was invited to Berlin as guest of the Berlin Gratitude Committee to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ending of the Berlin Airlift. My son Ron, now a Qantas 747 pilot, accompanied me.

### LAUGHTER IN THE AIR

In those halcyon days of flying i.e. the late 1940s and early 1950s, before correctness in communication for external radio transmissions (R/T) became mandatory, military aircrews sometimes adopted a nonchalant attitude to the use of the airwaves.

Non-conformist transmissions often took the tension out of the highly disciplined art of flying. I must admit that the lower speed of flight and laid-back aircrew attitudes in those times encouraged a certain laxity which is unacceptable in the twentyfirst century's high-tech and high-speed activities and procedures.

So let us look back to a time when flying was fun, and share with me a few amusing communications.

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Visualize if you can, four months of sitting on our collective butts on Air-Sea Rescue (ASR) standby in Darwin, far from our base at Rathmines on the shores of Lake Macquarie near Newcastle in New South Wales.

Then move your minds forward to us as a crew flying in our Catalina on the final leg of our journey home. We were on the coastal route Townsville to Newcastle, droning along hour after hour on automatic pilot, required to report only each half-hour, minds in neutral, bored and feeling drowsy.

All members of the crew were startled to hear the urgent tone and loud voice of the Second Engineer, Sergeant 'Huck' Flynn saying "Captain from Engineer, reporting"!

The skipper replied "Engineer from Captain. Go ahead".

"Captain, there's a motorbike just passed us on the starboard side without sounding his horn"!

Laughter rang throughout the aircraft, and we were suddenly wide awake.

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During the Berlin Airlift, RAAF crews, flying twin-engined Dakotas, used both Tegal and Gatow Airports but primarily Gatow which was also used by the USAF, flying four-engined Skymasters.

The cargo-carrying capacity of both types of aircraft was widely disparate. We could carry only 9000 pounds (4088 kilograms) of freight over a short haul, and Skymasters were capable of carrying many times our load.

The size of the aeroplane did not matter to the Berliners. Being a part of their food-supply system was the important aspect. However, there was much good-natured banter between Australians and Americans socializing over the airwaves at Gatow.

There was also a procedural difference in the use of callsigns. The Yanks used aircraft identification numbers and we used the (then) phonetic alphabet, with a three-letter callsign, normally prefixed by 'Dakota'. The use of 'Dakota' usually brought responses from Yank Skymaster pilots, such as "Waddaya doin' flyin' a twin-engined 1936 matchbox"?

On a particular day, we taxied behind a presumably empty Skymaster heading back to his home base of Rheim Maine. The Skymaster pilot called the Control Tower "Gatow from Two Four Three, are we clear on three"? That was Yank-speak requesting a three-engine take-off.

The Control Tower replied "Standby" then "Two Four Three, you are clear on three, clear for take-off".

Our skipper decided to remain anonymous for aircraft type as well as create a bit of a giggle, so he dropped 'Dakota' from his transmission which was "Gatow from Charlie Item Dog, are we clear on two"?

The Control Tower replied "Standby", then "Dakota Item Dog, you are clear on two".

It seemed that every Skymaster on the ground and in the air was involved in cat-calls, but it was the final one, when a Yank voice said "Goddam Aussies" that made us feel proud to have ourselves recognized as taking part in the greatest food airlift in history.

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On another occasion at Gatow, we were following a Skymaster for take off using the same runway. As the Skymaster began his take-off run, we were cleared onto the runway. I was flying as second dicky (second pilot) to Dave Evans on that flight.

After his take-off, the Skymaster was at about three hundred feet when both starboard motors cut out, and the plane began to sink. Dave was just about to open the throttles for take-off when he said "S..., he's going in ....."! The aircraft yawed and sank to about 100 feet or less before steadying, then started to climb away. Slowly, very, very slowly, the Skymaster gained altitude. When the plane had yawed its way to about a thousand feet, a laconic Yank voice came over the ether "Not bad for two fans, huh"?

A lot of relieved laughter and chit-chat followed that transmission.

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About two o'clock one very wet and stormy morning, we were approaching Berlin and the skipper changed frequencies for Templehof Airport in time to hear a Control Tower transmission "Triple Deuce, this is Templehof Control. Continue your descent on instruments".

The aircraft replied "Templehof from Triple Deuce. There will be a slight delay, I cannot locate one of my oars".

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Gatow again, with a Yank voice saying:

The man in the ship  
To the man in the Tower  
Give me the word  
And I'll pour on the power.

To which Gatow replied:

The man in the Tower  
To the man in the ship  
Pour on the power  
You give me the s...s.

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## **POSTSCRIPT**

Please allow me to make some observations about that wonderful aeroplane known to the RAAF and to all Australians as the Dakota, first flown in 1936.

The aeroplane was also known as the Douglas DC3 and the Douglas Skytrain. The U.S Army knew it as the C47, and the U.S, Navy called it the R4D. A version which carried only troops was called the C53.

It was the world's first successful commercial airliner which was readily adapted to military use during World War II. In the mid-1940s, all but 25 of the 300 airline planes operating in the United States were Dakotas.

Its wartime adaptations were simple and effective. It was used to:

- Transport 28 passengers.
- Transport 28 fully laden paratroopers.
- Perform as a Medevac aircraft carrying 18 stretchers and a medical crew of 3.
- Transport military cargo and anything else which would fit through the cargo doors and weighed not much more than 3 American tons.

This special aeroplane was even converted to an efficient high-speed glider by removing the engines and other non-essentials, and fairing over (covering) the empty engine cowls. As a glider, it could carry 40 fully armed troops at a top towing speed of 290 miles per hour (464 kilometres per hour), which was 90 mph faster than any previous glider, and 26 percent faster than its own top speed as a transport aircraft. (Acknowledgements to Encyclopaedia Britannica)

'Twin-engined Matchbox'? Match that, Skymasters!!