



## **AS IT HAPPENED**

**BY**

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### **WAR!**

That was the banner headline which screamed from the front pages of all newspapers in September 1939. This story however, begins earlier than that.

The effects of The Great Depression were felt later in Australia than in the rest of 'The Civilized World' as it was termed in those times. Existence in the post-depression era was difficult for families, and as the eldest of five children, I had to leave the Perth (Western Australia) Boys' Secondary School and get a job to help contribute to the family income.

In later years, Martin Luther King, the famed Afro-American social justice advocate made an oft-repeated statement "I have a dream....". In 1935, as a fourteen-year-old, I also had a dream. I wanted to become a medical doctor.

The circumstances of my life and of the times were such that logically, such an aim would remain just a dream. Fortunately, three aspects of my nature were in my favour. Firstly, at my age then, I knew nothing of logic. Next, I had great faith that I would achieve my aim no matter how long it took. Lastly, I was a very persistent individual. There was a fourth aspect of my nature of which I was not aware at that time - I was also able to visualize situations which could lead to future opportunities.

Finding a job with an analytical chemist, I studied during some gratis company time as well as attending evening classes. That led to my matriculation in 1938. Seeing the likelihood of a mining/oil boom in Australia, I then took employment as a cadet in the University Chemistry Department in my thirst for knowledge. One of my first tasks was to learn to wield a broom effectively. I also managed to drive the staff mad with my questions.

In 1939, the RAF began recruiting in Australia, inviting applications for short-service commissions. The RAAF had limited pilot training capacity, and processed applications on behalf of the RAF.

Reading the advertisement in a Perth newspaper, my mind raced ahead to the potential of being an RAF pilot. The RAF encouraged its young officers to pursue further education, so I visualized that, if I worked at gaining a degree in oil geology/chemistry and tacked that

onto my pilot's licence, I would be in an ideal position to participate later in an Australian oil and minerals search. That would put me in the money-making business. Having money would be a prime factor in pursuing my dream of gaining a medical degree.

That visualization took five minutes, so I then reached for my pen to apply to join the RAF. I was eighteen.

Subsequently, in the company of twentyone other Australians, I left my country on 21<sup>st</sup> August 1939 on the 'Orama'. Those twentytwo potential RAF pilots learned en route, on the third of September 1939 that now, their big adventure had turned into a trip to

### **WAR!**

In the UK, I trained at RAF Ansty and RAF Cranwell where I gained my pilot's wings. A post-graduate course in navigation was undertaken at St. Athan in Wales, following which I was posted to No.50 (RAF) Squadron. My operational training took place at Oxford where, for six weeks, I flew with Guy Gibson who was later to lead the famous 'Dambuster' raid on the Mohne and Eder dams. Six weeks was a significant factor in another area. It was at that time, the expectation of a pilot's life on my squadron.

My main claim to fame was that at nineteen years of age, I was then the youngest aircraft captain in Bomber Command. I had been fortunate enough to outlive the squadron pilot's life expectation by a factor of four when, on the 10<sup>th</sup> April 1941, we were briefed for a raid on Essen.

Our route to the target took us over Eindhoven in Holland and although we were expecting night fighter activity, there was nothing but stillness and blackness. Suddenly, all Hell broke loose!

Unbeknown to the RAF, the Germans had developed a system of special radar-directed searchlights of a strange blue colour, which were linked to anti-aircraft batteries. Normally, white searchlights roamed the sky randomly, and when an aircraft was caught and 'coned' by several searchlights, anti-aircraft gunners had to estimate the height of their target, so their accuracy was very much a 'trial and error' activity. The blue searchlight system was a very different kettle of fish. The searchlights were directed to their target by radar, and if aircraft were illuminated by one or more searchlights, the gunners then knew the target height and range, so their fire was deadly accurate.

To my knowledge, we were the first to experience that German development and we had no answer to it. My aeroplane disintegrated around me and I was suddenly in free-fall, my hand automatically grasping the parachute rip-cord 'D-ring' which I have no recollection of pulling. I experienced a sense of relief to feel a jolt to my body when the parachute canopy opened. I drifted to earth amid a mass of blue searchlights to

### **INCARCERATION**

Quite surprisingly I was unhurt, but after my parachute descent, I was rounded up and interrogated ('number, rank and name and nothing else'). Following that, I was sent initially to a Prisoner-of-War camp at Barth which was about 50 kilometres north-east of Rostock, near the Baltic Sea.

I remained there exactly 12 months until 10<sup>th</sup> April 1942, when I was transferred to Stalag Luft 3 (East Camp) for exactly one year. On 10<sup>th</sup> April 1943 I was again transferred to Stalag Luft 3 (North Camp) where I met another of the group of twentytwo Australian expatriates, 'Dutchy' Holland.

The war and my resultant deprivation of liberty had put a spoke in my medical study plans. However, I was able to take advantage of my present circumstances to further my medical knowledge. I told the medical officers at both camps about my medical aims and was given the opportunity of assisting them to care for the sick. Thus my practical knowledge of medical procedures began in that unusual personal situation.

In addition, so that I could get answers to the multitude of medical questions in my mind, it was important to me that I learn the German language. That capability was to become important in another area of future life and activities in Stalag Luft 3. Still with an eye to the future, I also made the acquaintance of a POW who had been a Cambridge Maths Master. His tuition was of great help to me in later Science studies.

Prisoners-of War had a duty of responsibility to escape from custody, or at least to attempt to escape. The North Camp of Stalag Luft 3 had a very active yet very controlled Escape Organization. No POW was allowed to 'go it alone'. More specifically, any escape plan was required to be ratified by the Escape Committee. The reason for that control was that failed escapes brought immediate responses from our captors, with resultant tightened security and invasive searches.

Our Escape Committee had its own agenda which involved developing a tunnel which would permit a mass escape. Any wildcat escape attempt could easily bring the plan undone, so strict control was as important as strict security.

I was one of seven German-speaking POWs who were the only inmates permitted to hold conversations with German guards. In our planning, we had time on our hands, plenty of it, to use in a variety of nefarious ways. Guards had a boring, boring job which they did not want. Their masters worked them long hours and their food was both poor and boring. Psychologically, they were ripe for bribery, blackmail and corruption. which was applied very effectively through the Escape Committee.

Not being claustrophobic, I was selected to become shift boss for the tunnelling which led to the operation which became known in later times as 'The Great Escape'. Our escape organization was remarkable. We had tailors, map makers, forgers, carpenters, electricians, even a sleight-of-hand expert.

Our task became easier when American prisoners arrived. Their Red Cross parcels contained luxuries which were beyond belief in a German society where a tin of Nescafe would bring nearly the price of a house.

A committee of seven POWs rigidly controlled the purchase of escape materials. When the Escape Committee told the Purchasing Committee of their needs, that committee would arrange for the requirements. Through blackmail, bribery and corruption, as time progressed, most of the Germans, including the Guard Captain, were in the pockets of the POWs.

When the tunnelling was complete and escape details were being organized, I was selected as number eight in the first fifteen to exit the tunnel. Gratified as I was, I later withdrew because we decided that there was a greater need for me to remain to care for the sick. Unfortunately, the man who took my place was one of the fifty RAF officers shot by the Germans as the escapees were rounded up.

At two o'clock in the morning, one day in 1945 as the Russians approached Stalag Luft 3, the prisoners were ordered out for a march westward. The senior doctor went with the main body and I remained with the sick who were moved to another camp. Later, RAF

prisoners were separated from other POWs and were driven to Nuremberg in cattle trucks. Still later, we were force-marched to Munich.

Three weeks after arriving at Munich, US General 'Blood and Guts'

Patton's troops marched in and we were

### **LIBERATED**

On 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1945, 200 RAF and 2 000 USAF prisoners-of-war were freed. One week later, we were taken to Rheims in Dakotas and transferred to Lancasters for our flight back to UK soil.

I was able to wangle a trip back to Perth for my 61 days' leave. During that period, I organized an entry to Perth University to start my medical studies.

On returning to the UK, the RAF asked me which branch I wished to serve in as a future career. I indicated that I thought it was time for me to go back to Australia.

The RAF sent me to a Resettlement Centre for ex-POWs. On arrival, I informed the interviewer that I wished to study medicine. My situation apparently presented a bit of a problem, but they compromised by sending me to the Laurence Shearer School at Rugby, to study Science. On learning that I spoke fluent German, the Principal asked me if I would teach the language. I did so, in addition to studying Science at the equivalent of First Year University level. My previous maths studies whilst a POW helped me greatly. In the sporting arena, you may be interested to know that I played rugby for Rugby.

On 20<sup>th</sup> May 1946, I left for Australia and a start to my medical studies, six and a half years on from my original plan to join the RAF. Although not following the programme I visualized as an eighteen-year-old, I must admit that on reflection, the two prime attributes which allowed me to achieve my dream were faith and persistence. I commend them to any would-be achiever.

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### **Editorial Note**

In a book by Helen Harper 'Twentytwo Temporary Gentlemen', Geoffrey Cornish featured as one of the 'Twentytwo' as did her husband James Lee Heron. Of the twentytwo, twelve did not survive World War Two.

During 1993, Geoff received a Rotary award the First Paul Harris Fellowship. He was also made the Gold Coast Citizen of the Year in recognition, among other achievements, of his work in the rehabilitation and recovery of heart patients. That year also saw his appointment as an Officer of the Order of Australia.

Helen Harper quoted Henry Longfellow in defining the life of Geoffrey Cornish:

*"Let us then be up and doing  
With a heart for any fate  
Still achieving, still pursuing  
Learn to labour and to wait".*