



AS IT HAPPENED

BY

MURRAY MAY

OH, TO BE IN AIRCREW!

Visualize me as an 18-year-old, waiting in the Recruiting Office in tropical Townsville, Queensland, to be interviewed for possible acceptance into an aircrew category of the RAAF. The year was 1940.

The door to the interview room opened to disgorge another hopeful young man who had just been through the mill. Ever the opportunist, I stopped him and said urgently, "What questions did they ask you"?

"They wanted to know what colour the posts were outside the Recruit Centre, and which building down the street flew the Australian Flag".

Quickly I darted outside and took note of those aspects and a few other items that could trigger similar questions. When my turn for interview came, sure enough the question was asked about the colour of the posts. I furrowed my brow in thought for a few seconds, then said brightly "Oh yes. They were chocolate and green". The question about the building which flew the Australian flag took a little more pondering before I answered correctly.

To my youthful eyes, the elderly interviewers must have been nearly 40, and were obviously, in the parlance of the day, 'shell-back permos'.*

When they questioned me about which aircrew category I preferred, I immediately answered clearly and crisply "Pilot". No full-blooded young man would want to be anything else would he? In addition, my application showed that I had achieved high marks in maths and physics, so my confidence was high and my head was held higher as I left the Recruit Centre feeling just a bit like a future Biggles.

In time, my piece of paper arrived, telling me that my powers of observation and mathematics abilities had impressed, accordingly, I was categorized as Trainee Observer (now navigator) and placed on the RAAF Aircrew Active Reserve.

Returning to Brisbane, I harassed the Creek Street Recruit Centre with weekly visits, asking when my call-up was coming. After a number of visits a uniformed gentleman told me that as I was so anxious to put on a RAAF uniform, I could be accommodated if I

accepted an appointment as Trainee Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, and would receive a call-up within a week. I would do my training in Canada and of course, once in uniform, I could apply for remuster to another aircrew category at any time(!?).

What would you have done if you were an 18-year-old who had grown up in the post-Depression era, and to whom even a train trip to Townsville was an exciting adventure? Yes, naturally you would want to visit Canada with a probable progression to the UK - travel beyond belief! At that age any person is invulnerable, so I naturally chose the venturous path.

Ah, well! If I had trained as a pilot, my chances of survival may have been drastically reduced. Who knows? In addition, in later years, I would not have experienced the strange coincidence of studying for my Master of Science degree in the same Canadian city (Winnipeg) where I had trained as a Wireless Operator 25 years before.

** 'Permo' was a word which was applied to pre-WW2 Permanent Air Force members.*

'Shell-back' was a term (now out of favour) derived from a four-legged slow-moving creature with an impermeable outer covering. It retracted its head and did nothing at the first signs of danger.

IT WAS FRISIAN COLD

Following my training I was posted to the UK for operations in the European Theatre of War. Rapidly, I completed my operational training and was posted to No. 53 (RAF) Squadron, Coastal Command, based at Northcoates (UK), just south of Hull. The squadron was equipped with Lockheed Hudsons.

On 8th April 1942, we were tasked for a reconnaissance mission over the North Sea at very low level. As an aside, during the whole of my operational flying in Coastal Command, I never once used oxygen. Use of oxygen was mandatory over 10,000 feet, and in our operations, we never reached that height.

During that particular mission, we were briefed to reconnoitre as far as the Frisian Islands and to attack opportunity targets. Just off the Frisians, we sighted a convoy of ships and were preparing to attack when we were hit by anti-aircraft fire from the ack-ack ships protecting the convoy. We were badly damaged and forced to crash-land in the sea about 50 metres off shore from the Island of Sylt, on the border of Germany and Denmark.

As the skipper was preparing to ditch, the German shore batteries fired on us with a massive racketsy onslaught which was earsplitting because of their close proximity. Why we were not blown out of the sky I will never know.

As I clambered out of the Astro Hatch on the top of our sinking aircraft's fuselage, I was horrified to see 2 German ME109 fighters coming at us, flying at between 50 and 100 feet on what appeared to be a strafing run. They must have been about to press the firing button when my body appeared. I didn't see my whole life appear before my eyes - there wasn't time. Bracing myself for extinction, I couldn't believe my luck when they both overflew our aircraft without firing. Obviously, not all Luftwaffe aviators were tarred with the Nazi brush!

The word 'luck' is used in a relative sense as we still had to survive immersion in the freezing North Sea waters, knowing from briefings that 15 to 20 minutes was a long time in survival terms.

Our navigator, Canadian Dave Moran followed me out of the Astro Hatch. We inflated our 'Mae West' life jackets and as I slid into the water I called out to him "Come on, we'll need to get to the shore in a hurry". As an Australian I didn't believe Dave's reply - "I can't swim"!! I was already committed to the bitterly cold waters and I struck out for the shore. Looking back to the sinking aircraft, I saw that Dave hadn't moved an inch and I realized that he wasn't joking. I was already feeling the effect of my freezing environment and was faced with self-preservation or the possibility of being a deepfrozen life saver. Service mateship carries with it deep-seated responsibilities so I turned around to go back to collect him. He would have been picked up eventually by the Jerries but in the likely time frame he would have died from hypothermia.

Dave clung to me as a limpet mine clings to the hull of a ship. My swim strokes shortened as my arm muscles felt the drag effect of propelling two bodies through the icy murk towards the relative safety of the shore. I learned very quickly how strong was the urge to survive and we eventually reached the shore almost frozen stiff. Even the sight of Jerries waiting for us with rifles and fixed bayonets seemed more comforting than the deathly cold water.

We were briefly interned and were then placed on a train for Hamburg prior to onmovement to Dulag Luft. On the way we were fed black bread which I initially rejected. However, a hungry week later when being transported to Lamsdorf for POW incarceration, the black bread tasted like cake!

LAMSDORF YEARS AND 'THE MARCH'

For most of their stay at Lamsdorf, 84 RAAF POWs were billeted together in one barrack - No.18A. Placing prisoners of one nationality together was not normal German procedure and was, in fact, unique. Thereby hangs a tale.

Hitler was enraged by Churchill's refusal to apologise for incidents in raids on Dieppe and Sark. In typical style, he ordered that 1000 prisoners-of-war were to have their hands tied as a punishment, designed to make Churchill apologise. He was careful to designate that those prisoners who were on forced labour programmes were not to be tethered in that way.

Aircrew at Lamsdorf were senior non-commissioned officers and were accordingly excluded from forced labour so we became perfect targets for hand-tying and made up the bulk of the 1000 POWs. We were tied by crossed wrists each day for approximately 2 months then in handcuffs daily for a further six weeks. That punishment was very stressful and demeaning and downright humiliating when attending calls of nature.

The POW Escape Committee organized swaps for men selected for working parties. Work parties at factories and mines experienced low security and offered good opportunities for escape. For some reason, at about the hand-tying stage it suited the German Administration to clear one barrack, No.18A, to house all the Australian airmen. That situation existed for the next two years thus providing an opportunity for a large group of we Australians to develop our talents in countering security, overcoming problems and developing a close sharing mateship in handling German-imposed chores. Lamsdorf Barrack 18A mateship has lasted until the present day.

In late 1944, Lamsdorf was in the path of the advancing Russian army and the German High Command took the decision to evacuate all fit Allied POWs from the prison. So it was that on 22nd January 1945, all relatively healthy Allied airmen left Lamsdorf to march

west. There did not appear to be any specific destination, we just kept moving westward in what proved to be the most harrowing ordeal of our entire incarceration.

Rations were so scarce that they were almost non-existent. The trek took place during the coldest winter Europe had experienced in years and our clothing was inadequate to cope with the freezing weather in which snowfalls were measured in metres. Memories of my North Sea experience returned to me initially, but this trek was immeasurably worse. The cold was constant and raw, we were marching by day, night brought primitive and unheated resting places, further and further westward, as days turned into weeks. We were losing what meagre body fat we had, growing thinner and thinner as a result of our scanty food ration.

After the first 20 kilometres or so out of Lamsdorf I tossed away about 50% of the possessions I had in my backpack, and as we progressed, food was ever on our minds. A New Zealand soldier and I strayed away from one of our nightly barn stops in an effort to get some food from the local inhabitants.

We were asking the question "Haben Sie essen" (have you food?) and like phrases when an angry SS officer suddenly came roaring at us while unholstering his Luger. I thought that we would be shot for sure but instead I was on the receiving end of a jackboot up the rear end. Both of us received more of the same treatment all the way to a jail which I found subsequently was a Gestapo post. That was where I picked up lice which did worry me a lot. I knew that hundreds of Russians had died in Stalag VIIIB from lice carrying typhus before I arrived there in April 1942. The lice flourished in all the hairy spots and I recall catching and cracking them during the infrequent rest periods.

I had the same clothes on for ten weeks straight and with dysentery for the last few weeks of the march, the clothing would not have been passed to the Salvation Army as discards!

Cold, cold, cold!! I remember sleeping in the snow on several nights. About six fellows would pool their blankets, which were at that stage the only possessions carried, and draw lots to see who drew numbers 1 and 6 positions. They were the really cold spots because you only had a body on one side of you.

During the march I found that the basic requirements of life were not wine, women and song. In a survival situation when one was starving, it was a case of every man for himself. I can recall that on the odd occasion when a sympathetic bystander threw a portion of food into a group of us marching by, it would result in a clawing and shoving match. On reflection at a later date, I thought "Did I really act like that? Where was mateship"? It just depends on how hungry you are. A starving body does not recognize camaraderie when it is in survival mode and the sustaining of life is reduced to basics.

Westward and cold we tramped, ever westward, cold and hungry for 800 kilometres. By the time we reached Allied forces and liberation on 11th April 1945 at Seesen, about 35 kilometres south-east of Hildesheim, we were a batch of tottering skeletons having lost one Australian to privation and one to strafing from Allied aircraft apparently mistaking us for enemy troops.

The day that I was liberated started with five or six of us just walking off into the forest, away from the scruffy bunch of marchers with the guards yelling out for us to come back! I can remember telling them in raw Australian terms what they could do and I really didn't care if I got a bullet in my back. I eventually got to a small village and saw American tanks going through. Deciding that I wasn't going to walk another step, I inflicted myself on a German family in the small township.

I had 'acquired' a bayonet at that stage and I think that initially, they were very scared that the unclean, disreputable skeleton confronting them may try to seek revenge upon them for his condition. They gave me a warm upstairs room and lots of food which I tried to fit into my 'ping-pong ball' sized stomach. My stomach rejected the overload many times that night and I felt very embarrassed as the daughter of the house cleaned up after me.

After a couple of days, I managed to get a ride back down the lines in an American 8th Army jeep. The top reading on the speedo dial was 75 mph (120Ks) and at times the soldier driving it had the speedo needle more than 2 cms past that point. I was thinking how ironically stupid it would be if I finished up splattered all over the road after all I had been through!! Obviously I survived.

On my return to England, I was very depressed - feeling like a stunned mullet most of the time. Unlike today's society, there was no counselling support available, there were too many of us in like state. I kept overloading my stomach which didn't really require a great intake of food. Naturally, my stomach continued to reject it. A final irony was that I was in hospital on VE Day and couldn't even hold down a couple of beers!

Our epic march, never really publicised, left us scarred in a physical and mental sense for a long time. Physically and mentally I recovered and got on with life and living.

LIGHT LAMSDORF RELIEF

After recording some of the traumas of my confined years I must lighten up lest you think that the tribulations left me bereft of humour. I must say here and now that the Australian national capacity of being able to laugh at themselves and appreciate humour in dire circumstances was a saving grace to the occupants of Barrack 18A. Here are two differing Lamsdorf episodes which come to mind and which show two sides of ridiculous humour.

I Win A Raffle

Shortly after I arrived at VIII B, the Camp Commandant Joe Kissel discovered that bedboards had been stolen from Barrack 18B which was then unoccupied. We needed the boards to use for cooking fuel. Joe demanded two culprits. All of us put our names in a hat and guess who won one of the prizes which was 7 days solitary confinement in the Cooler? When I complained that it was the only raffle I had ever won, the boys thought that my situation was hilarious and gave me three hearty cheers.

A Mouse In A Jam

I hold the original document drawn up by Dave Davidner, then the 'Compound Fuhrer', relating to a not very tasteful incident (no pun intended). A Canadian, Earl (Dook) Tilley discovered a mouse in a tin of German jam. Dook said to the foregathered Krieges "I'm so God-damn hungry I could lick the jam off that mouse". Immediately, Dave Davidner challenged him. Tilley" he said "If you lick the jam off that mouse, I'll give you my watch". Tilley clinched the deal with "OK! I'll do it".

A document was drawn up, signed by both Tilley and Davidner and witnessed by Mac Currie and an RAF type named Girdham. That document reads:

" I, David Davidner do hereby declare that if Sgt E. Tilley will hold the mouse by the tail and insert in his mouth and lick the jam off, he can have my watch".

Tilley picked up the mouse by the tail, tilted his head back and opened his mouth. However, he couldn't bridge the gap between his desire to appease his starving stomach and the repugnance of the thought of tasting a tit-bit tainted by a deceased, if not diseased, rodent.

Spurred on by scoffing and innuendoes questioning his intestinal fortitude, Tilley continued for about 30 minutes.

Most likely, he was teasing his taunters.*

Tilley finally declared that he may have misread the messages issued by his abdomen. He wasn't hungry after all! So the little mouse was laid to rest still conveniently embalmed in its shroud of German jam.

**Tilley didn't need to establish his intestinal fortitude - he was a sole survivor twice over. Firstly, when his plane crashed into the Pennines and secondly when shot down over France.*

IN LATER YEARS

As a tailpiece to these brief extracts of memory of my RAAF service and in a complete change of scene, I had the great good fortune to meet the famous legless RAF pilot Douglas 'Tinlegs' Bader at Amberley Air Force Base where I was Dental Officer 1952 to 1958. Ever a thorn in the side or pain in the butt of the German POW environments due to his escape episodes wherever he was incarcerated, the man himself had a very pleasant personality as well as being natural and down-to-earth. I could visualize him as a purposeful individual deliberately hurting German pride with the novelty of his escapades. Douglas Bader was held briefly at Lamsdorf before being transferred to the famed Colditz Castle. Bader was certainly 'King of the Kregies'.