

Some Memories... Time in Army & Air Force, and More

Bert Adams, 2026

Transcribed from a handwritten manuscript. An insert the author marked for page 6 has been placed inline at the point he indicated. A few words in the original were difficult to make out; these are marked with [?]. Minor spelling of a small number of proper nouns (place names) has been standardised for clarity.

After Dunkirk, war preparation relied on air bombing. I had joined the Air Training Corps at its inception, 23.10.41. We did part-time training at Ashfield on some weeknights and most weekends. We spent a lot of our time doing aircraft (and ship) recognition, and improving our speed at receiving Morse code. Britain set up the Empire Air Training Scheme, training plentiful applicants in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India (I think), where we trained up to Wings level with some supplies and guidance for consistency from Britain.

At 18 I applied for Air Crew... there was a waiting list of 8 months..., we all wanted to be Spitfire pilots! With Japan in the war, Australia called up 18-year-olds for Army training. I was sent to a new camp, west of Dubbo, for infantry training... the camp had new wooden huts but no beds... just a palliasse [?] stuffed with straw... on the floor. We did a few route marches to end at the assault course ("the mad mile"), some rifle-range practice... and lots more. One day, our corporal invited any of us who could drive to step forward to do a motor course... we all did!... but a few were not selected because they couldn't "double-shuffle". I went, and we did an intensive 1-month course at Moorebank... a lot of practical work during the day, including mending broken tracks on Bren-gun carriers, with night lectures involving a lot about Ford and Chev. engines. There was a written exam at the end where I did so well that our Captain invited me to do a 6-month tech course and become a Warrant Officer Instructor at 19! I didn't tell my father that bit!... just declined... I wanted to train for Air Crew!

So, back to Dubbo... (some) more training, including some time driving Bren-gun carriers and 3-ton trucks.

Finally I got my call-up for the Air Force on 12.9.42, to begin Initial Training at Bradfield Park. There was some emphasis on physical fitness, which sometimes involved running (jogging) to Fullers Bridge and back (uphill). One day my mate and I criticised our P.E. instructor for being too harsh on the "soft" trainees running uphill... and challenged him to a race back to the gym. Perhaps he had access to alcohol in the mess, but we won easily... Army fitness! At Bradfield Park, the 8 or so flights were graded on speed at receiving Morse code, where it continued very efficiently.

After Bradfield Park I was sent for Observer training at Cootamundra, where the initial navigation began. But I had appendix trouble... 2 operations and months of "light duties" before I finally did the course, doing some flying in Avro Ansons... where I got airsick on every flight... twice on the longer flights! Another trainee, "Perko" Poech, also suffered... we did some time on a whirling chair... to no effect.

Then to Evans Head for 2 months of Bombing and Gunnery... the flying part in Fairey Battles... a nice obsolete fighter-bomber (with a Merlin engine!). I didn't get airsick in them... or in any other planes after that... (but "Perko" did). For air gunnery, 4 of us would dip our bullets in 4 different-coloured paints and shoot at the same "drogue" towed near us by another "Battle". One day, I was last to shoot... so after dropping the drogue, the 2 Battle pilots pretended to do a "dog-fight"... during which I enjoyed a "loop-the-loop".

We next went to Parkes for an intensive 4-week course in astro-navigation... just Saturday afternoons free but with lessons at night and the need to do 100 star-shots and plot them in our "spare" time!

At the end of the course we got our "O" wings and most became sergeants (a few got commissions, the rumour being that a moustache helped :). Had a bit of leave, then crossed the Pacific with a ship loaded with US soldiers... some "walking wounded", others on leave... they played a lot of craps. On arrival at San Francisco, we carried our kitbags down the gangplank and were surprised to see (and hear) a lot of Americans dancing and singing as they waited for trams. The song was "Pistol-Packin' Momma, Lay That Pistol Down"... the latest "hit".

60 of us Observers were to train in Canada... doing a 6-month reconnaissance course leading to convoy escort duty across the Atlantic. We liked the idea. But it was cancelled, and we had to go to a northern suburb and get our sea-kitbags (holding flying suit, boots etc.) and load them onto the same troop-train that was to take us all to New York. We were only let off the train at Denver, where the 3 from our compartment were "window-shopping"... an American civilian came up, pointed to our "Australia" badges on our shoulders and said: "Howdy boys... Ah didn't know Australia was on our side in the war".

We had 3 days' leave from a camp in New York, and then were loaded to bunks below the waterline in the Île de France, which sailed on Christmas Eve but broke down near the Statue of Liberty, and had to be towed back to port. They gave us a sandwich and said you can either get a bus back to camp and get fed and paid, or try your luck in the car park where lots of cars waited to take some of their boys home for Christmas. We all chose that, and 3 of us were taken to a nice home where we talked and drank, and talked and drank... it then dawned on us that Christmas dinner was an evening affair... we did justice to the turkey! We stayed the night and were driven back to camp, paid, and given a few days' leave.

As New Year neared, we were loaded onto the Queen Elizabeth... which had only been partly furnished when acquired as a troopship... there were some cabins, but a lot of its space was fitted up with rows of 3-tier bunks. We got lucky... an inside cabin about 12' x 12", including 6' x 6' for the bath-shower-toilet etc. Along the remaining wall-space they'd managed 18 bunks bolted to the walls! We sat on the tiny floor-space to play cards. We heard that the ship loaded 20,000 troops to cross the Atlantic! Soon after sailing, we were told to "rug up"... they turned off the heating to use all the steam for the engines... (we heard that they exceeded 40 knots while detouring to the north, away from the submarines). We landed at Greenock, near Glasgow, and went by train to Brighton, where the RAAF used the two big hotels, the Globe and the Metropole, for H.Q. and housing. We had a few air raids, mostly just machine-gunning the waterfront buildings. We did some training... I met Syd Paine, helping each other learn the main stars of the Northern Hemisphere; he was also an Observer. I was sent to North Wales for navigation training, and Syd sent to Anglesey, just off North Wales, to train as a Bomb Aimer.

Then we both came to Lichfield, where we "crewed up"... the RAF system was to give us a day in a hangar to "mingle". Syd and I teamed up, but it soon became obvious to most that he stood out... he'd done pilot training on Tiger Moths and Wirraways. A pilot and radio operator, Peter and Eric, from Queensland joined us, so we looked for a pair of air gunners. But they chose us... they had come 1st and 2nd in air gunnery. We trained there, flying in Wellingtons... and did a Bullseye... where a lot of training planes flew towards Denmark, hoping to draw German night-fighters northwards while the RAF made a raid to the south. Then we went to Swinderby to train on Stirlings, and acquire our flight engineer, Don Coutts, who'd spent years as a policeman, much of it at Birmingham... he was aged about 44 and so became like an uncle to us youngsters. Then on to Syerston for training on Lancasters, ending with another Bullseye. Then on to Waddington, a big peace-time base, with 2 RAAF squadrons. We were one of 8 crews to join 467 Squadron; the C.O. was Bill Brill... one of 2 young men from Ganmain who'd enlisted early, both becoming bomber pilots and both doing 2 tours, earning DFC and DSO and becoming C.O.s of bomber squadrons. 5 of those crews ended up killed... despite shrinking territory, German production had stayed high... night-fighters downing a lot of our bombers, even into early 1945. Bill welcomed us new crews and told the many flight sergeants not to bother applying for a commission until we'd done 20 "trips". He had a special interest in our crew because our pilot's older brother had been his rear-gunner on one of his "tours"... and had also been rear-gunner with Arthur Doubleday... the other "young man" from Ganmain... He went on to become a squadron air-gunnery leader... not many of them!

Bill let us do our 1st "op" without our pilot first doing a "second dickie" with another crew. He sent us on a big daylight raid on Le Havre, where there'd be no German fighters... We had one engine knocked out by flak... and, on the way home, our flight leader formatted on us on one engine to give us confidence on a Lancaster! We did our tour with 5 Group, who generally flew

independent of the rest of Bomber Command... in our tour we only took part in one big raid... of 800-odd aircraft, on a daylight target. During the war, the Dortmund-Ems Canal was bombed 10 times. Near Ladbergen, the canal was lifted above a small river by a lot of stone and earthworks; nearby was camped thousands of T.O.D.T. workers, ready to repair a breach, and with time to install a lot more AA guns... making it a dangerous target for us. Barges used it to carry iron and coal for the Ruhr; we did 4 raids there, plenty of "flak". There was also a lot of low-level flak on 3 raids we did, in daylight, on Walcheren Island, where big German guns were pounding the Canadian army on the mainland... hoping to get the port of Antwerp quickly.

Our most important "op" was at Gdynia, inside the Danzig Gulf in Poland. While the main attack was on their naval base there, two of us "experienced" crews were to try to bomb the Lützow... one of 2 pocket-battleships there... a big threat to convoys going to help Russia. 2 crews from 463 Squadron were to try to bomb the other ship. Our first and second "runs" were thwarted by smoke-screens, but our 3rd run was clear... we did a good target-run after suffering a lot of "flak"... coming so close that I clipped on my parachute for the only time... I had visions of our plane being blown apart.

We did many of our earlier "trips" in "D-Dog"; but it was badly damaged when used by another crew and deemed a "write-off". But it got patched up in time for our last "trip", to bomb an oil refinery near Brūx in Czechoslovakia... a long trip. Our pilot said the plane flew "like a brick"... took ages to gain cruising height and behaved crazily doing our regular "banking searches". Then at the target, the bombs "hung up" when Syd pressed the button... we did 2 circuits changing fuses and trying again... to finally leave 20 minutes late, bombs on, to fly home 10 mph slower than briefed... and still needing to divert to the jettison area to get rid of an anti-handling bomb... Syd did that with a wire hook through the floor, carried for that purpose. Our pilot requested a trial of our bombing-wiring... they said OK on a ground test, but he asked for an air test, and it failed... "wiring damage". A few weeks later, another crew took "D-Dog" on a night raid and had an engine set on fire by a fighter... when the pilot pressed the "feather" button... all 4 engines stopped!!! So "bail out, quick". I met the lone survivor (I knew him at Mudjee High School!). He said that only he and the rear-gunner got out in time... but the burning plane landed on the gunner, killing him... unlucky! He was Tom [?] Paine, who was in my class at Mudjee High!

I was then made a Navigation Instructor at Wigsley, a "conversion unit" where crews did their final training before going to a 5 Group squadron.

Late in 1944 Churchill had told the Americans that he could provide a Tiger Force of 800 Lancasters and Lincolns to help subdue Japan. The Americans said: "Thanks, but there's no way we'll be able to build airfields for us and that many... perhaps the best you can expect is enough for 200 planes by mid-year." So the self-reliant 5 Group became Tiger Force... doing some late training using map-reading, astro-navigation (enhanced by the astrograph), H2S and LORAN. It

finally flew to the Pacific, commanded by Wing Commander Rollo Kingsford-Smith ("Smithy's" nephew), but the atom bombs ended the war before they struck a blow!

I came back on the Aquitania via Cape Town. I did 1st year Ag. Sc. in 1946 at Sydney Uni... but the drought that year (just 6 inches for the year at Mendooran!) forced Dad to sell the farm. He got enough to buy a house in town and buy us a tractor and combine to begin wheat share-farming near Merrygoen... (a truck too).

We got lucky... 3 good seasons in a row... we bought a new car (ordered a new header after the 1st crop and bought the local picture-show!). The grazier who'd let us share-farm said "no more"... he rightly went back to more sheep... and before long, wool brought a record "a pound a pound". We kept the tractor and truck, sold the other plant, and I did some contract work with them until 1950, when I did cartage of cement from Kandos to Sydney... (coal shortage due to union troubles) for a couple of years; then bought (and ran) a small sports depot in Mudgee, stringing a lot of tennis racquets. I married Val there and sold out at the end of 1959 to do a two-year training as a maths teacher at Mudgee.

(Val stayed there while I boarded with my sister at Ermington.) I taught junior maths there (and most of the biology) until 1965, when I resigned and rejoined the RAAF to be sent to Wagga, where I taught basic maths, physics and electrical technology for 2 years, then some "instructional methods" to tradesmen to help them train newcomers to their staff. After that I resigned and taught maths at Mount Austin High until I reached 60.

In those 3 years in the RAAF they made use of me on Anzac Days... holidays for most people. In 1965 they told me to take a busload of trainees to Corowa and give the Anzac Day speech. In 1966 it was "go to Culcairn and lead the march". In 1967 they said: "Take a busload of trainees to Canberra and learn to do the sword drill and shout the orders to the troops for a salute to the Governor-General."

I continued to teach maths until I was 60, resigning a day before my birthday, a day before payday. I rang the Department twice about getting paid before going to South West Rocks for a holiday there with Val's sister and her husband, Nero, who had paid an advance on the flat. I called at the newsagent there to withdraw \$2,000... they wanted \$2 to see if I had enough in the account... and came back with a slip showing over \$46,000, including a lot of long-service pay. Sadly, Nero died of a heart attack 2 days later... I bought their (good) car, as June didn't drive.

I joined the Bridge Club in 1969 (I think) and enjoyed a long partnership with Fay Sanderson, where we "invented" our own responses to the ANF Jacoby reply.

I still live at home, where daughter Nancy looks after me very well. Son Bill (with Sue) is due soon for a visit... he checks over my finances and does "odd jobs" needed. Daughter Kim comes down regularly (including Anzac Day) and does a lot of decluttering... and is good company. I am lucky.