

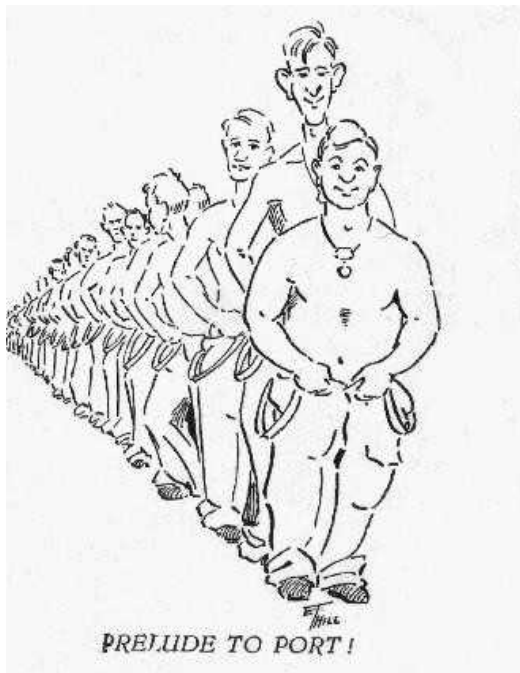
The Luck of the Draw.

Chapter 2.

At sea

After the *Nieuw Amsterdam* left Australian waters, she headed into a massive westerly swell. As its bow plunged into each huge wave, it would hesitate before it broke through and plunged into the following trough only to repeat the exercise as each succeeding wave followed, 50 metres or so apart. This meant during our walks around the decks, we would alternate between almost running as the ship plunged into a wave, which slowed her progress, and finding each step difficult as she lurched forward into the troughs.

Early in the voyage, we were given do's and don'ts aboard a troop ship. There was no smoking on deck or singing at night as either could attract the attention of an enemy submarine which might be on the surface recharging batteries. If anyone fell overboard, the ship would not attempt a rescue as it would jeopardise the safety of the ship and passengers. The ship changed course about every ten minutes. Lifeboat drill was carried out frequently and randomly. At the sound of a series of blasts on the ship's siren and alarm bells ringing below decks, everyone grabbed their life jacket and raced to their assigned boat station where they remained until checked off.



The days passed uneventfully. A lot of time was spent gazing at the sea as it slid along the sides of the ship, or watching the flying fish. Usually, an albatross or two would be gliding effortlessly alongside the ship. We continued our efforts to sharpen up our Morse code and aircraft recognition. The emphasis of the latter was now more on the aircraft used in the European theatre. There were movies and in the casino enterprising entrepreneurs had just about every form of gambling available. Each day a sweep was conducted on the miles travelled by the ship.

It was at this time that we were introduced to the 'short arm' inspection.

All the troops were lined up on deck and ordered to drop the strides. A medical officer slowly walked along the line inspecting appropriate places for evidence of unauthorised little passengers. There were regular lectures and films on the sexually transmitted diseases which graphically illustrated the consequences of promiscuity. Usually, one or two fainted during these sessions and we wondered whether they had weak stomachs or guilty consciences.

Shortly after six o'clock one morning, the ship heeled over dramatically as she did a tight circle. As we raced on deck to see what was going on, the word went round, "Man overboard". A British soldier had deserted in India and somehow made his way to Australia. He had been caught and was being returned to England in the ship's brig for court martial. As he was doing his supervised early morning exercise on deck, he leapt overboard. During a brief search, there was no sign of him and the ship got under way again. Ironically, a couple of hours later the ship again deviated - this time to investigate a large rubber lifeboat wallowing in the sea. We passed close enough to ensure that there was no-one lying in the bottom of it. These two incidents put a dampener on the generally high spirits of all on board.

Durban

A day later, we were advised that the following day we would be disembarking at Durban, South Africa and going into a transit camp for about a week while repairs were carried out on the ship. We were warned of several things. Australians were not popular in South Africa following the exploits of the A.I.F. 6th Division several years earlier. They had done unthinkable things like using the rickshaw boys as passengers and getting between the shafts themselves and having races in the streets. Others had carried a small car up the post office steps and tried to post it home. We were told to always go around at least in pairs because of the "OB's", an anti-British element in the Afrikaner population. We were also warned off Cape Brandy. It was apparently a particularly potent brew.

As we entered the port of Durban the next day, a lady wearing a long white frock and a red hat stood on the end of the pier singing. She was a legend. Her son was missing believed killed but she was convinced that he was suffering amnesia and that one day he would return on a ship to Durban. She believed that the sound of her voice would bring his memory back and for many years she serenaded every ship arriving and leaving the port of Durban.

The camp to which we were taken on the outskirts of the city had not been used for a while. It consisted of rows of brick walled huts with concrete floors. The walls were about six feet high with a big airspace between the top of the walls and the roof. They were surrounded with grass at least three feet high which natives were busy cutting with sickles. On arrival, we were handed Hessian palliasses and told to fill them with the freshly cut grass. I thought the authorities were ignorant if they didn't understand that the fresh grass would sweat. Even so, it seemed better than sleeping on the bare concrete but on the first night I awoke in a lather of sweat. I rolled up the palliasse and used it as a pillow, sleeping on the bare concrete for the rest of our stay there.

Each row of huts was patrolled by an armed guard supplied by the South African army and each hut was required to have one man awake and a light on at all times. This was to safeguard our possessions from residents of the Indian village across the road. One night, a sleepy sentinel saw a black hand come over the wall and feel around for something to steal. He gave a shout and took off after the offender. As he ran down the line of huts, a voice behind him kept calling "Drop". The offender escaped over the perimeter fence and the guard demanded to know why our hero had ignored the call to drop. "I thought it was the Indian you were calling on to drop", he

said. "Why did you want me to drop?" "So I could shoot him", was the reply. That was our introduction to the harsh realities of life in some parts of the world.

On several evenings we sat around just outside the camp gate talking to Indians from the village across the road. We were interested to learn about their views of the country in which they lived. It was a new experience to see "Whites Only" signs on all kinds of facilities. We learned that the term 'non-whites' applied to a wide range of people. The Indians made it clear that it was the Afrikaners, not people of British stock, who kept them repressed. I was not impressed with the future of the country given the obvious hatred that existed between the races.



Merv. Holland, Tom Chapman and self with rickshaw boy.

There were many sights and customs that were new and strange to us. Rickshaw boys dressed in elaborate garb of feathers and horns who would deliver a kick like a horse to a bell underneath the rickshaw to attract attention. It was incredible the way they could balance themselves against the weight of their passengers on downward slopes and take enormous strides. We wondered how they were going to stop when traffic lights turned against them. It was a bit of a culture shock to see bare-breasted Zulu women with babies tied to their backs window shopping in the centre of the city.

Merv. Holland had his nineteenth birthday while we were in Durban and four of us dined out for a total price of 16/- (\$1. 60). One day, Merv. and I

were trying to make a date with two attractive Afrikaner shop assistants. It got me a little annoyed when they frequently talked to each other in Afrikaans and giggled. I thought of a plan and said to Merv, "Wangaratta Mallacoota Yarrowonga". Merv cottoned on immediately and being South Australian replied, "Onkaparinga Malala" and laughed uproariously at his effort. The girls got annoyed when we declined to translate what we had said and the conversation was terminated by mutual agreement leaving two girls astonished to know that Australia had its own language too.

We were a little frustrated by our inability to see African wildlife in its natural habitat, as we were not permitted to venture far from Durban. We were told however that wild monkeys could be seen if we took a tram to Burman Drive. At the terminus, there were some fairly rugged hills covered by thick undergrowth. We thrashed our way through this for half an hour or so without any success. We were still dressed in our heavy blue winter uniforms and the heat and humidity had us all in a lather of perspiration so we decided to call it a day. As we returned to the tram terminus, a family of monkeys was playing happily in the middle of the street.

After eight days in camp, orders came for us to re-embark on the *Nieuw Amsterdam* and I was delighted that we were returned to the same cabins which we had occupied previously. After settling back in to our quarters, we went up on deck to watch

proceedings on the wharf. A succession of trains arrived carrying more passengers for the troop ship. There were Tommies from the British army returning from service in India; there were Italian prisoners of war; there were Cape Coloured servicemen; and there was a train load of six hundred Polish women who had endured unbelievable hardships over the previous three years.

Having left Australia with about 2,000 R. A. A. F. personnel, the *Nieuw Amsterdam* was now carrying over 8,000 troops.



Troop Deck Accommodation.

It now required eight sittings to cater for everyone each mealtime. As we left Durban, the lady in white was at her post on the end of the breakwater singing to the departing ship. Our next port of call was Capetown but we had to be content to see what we could from the deck of the ship as no leave was allowed. The rumour was that it was because of bad behaviour by soldiers of the 6th Division, AIF some years before. It is certainly an impressive setting for a city with Table Mountain as a backdrop - the famous 'tablecloth' draping the mountain for most of the time we were there.

Apart from admiring the view, we watched native porters loading stores through a small door low in the ship's side. They carried cardboard carton after carton aboard and there was much speculation as to what they contained. This question was answered when one porter dropped his load and sausages scattered over the wharf. The unfortunate man received a number of resounding smacks across the face from his foreman for his carelessness. It was strange to see a grown man just stand and take such punishment without any attempt to protect himself or to retaliate. He and some of his mates swept the sausages together with their hands, loaded them back into the carton and duly delivered them on board. We all made a mental note not to eat sausages on the rest of the voyage.

After leaving Cape Town, a number of us were assigned to gun watch. The *Nieuw Amsterdam* carried a six inch gun on its stern. We were assigned to anti-aircraft guns mounted on the superstructure of the ship. When we completed our radio school, we were told that, as qualified radio operators, we were supposed to be able to operate any radio equipment we came across. This same principle was apparently applied to gunners because we were given no instruction on how to use the guns, or even how to communicate with the bridge if we saw anything suspicious but we were now well disciplined airmen and did as we were told without question.

The Atlantic.

As the ship headed out into the Atlantic, we resumed the shipboard life to which we had become accustomed except that it was now much more crowded. The first night on gun watch I saw in the moonlight what looked like a post sticking up out of the water. I thought, "My God, it might be a U-boat". It was visible for only half a second in the beam of light from the moon on the water and I did not have time to confirm what it was. At first, I thought it might be a pile of some kind. I was on my own and there was no-one to talk to about it. If it was a submarine, it may have been a friendly one anyway. "There couldn't be a pile way out here", I thought but surely someone else would see it too. I simply did not know what I should do in the circumstances. I half expected a torpedo to smash into the side of the ship and it must have been half an hour before I could breathe easy again. I felt ashamed of my inadequacy with 8,000 people relying on the vigilance of those of us on watch and I decided to keep the incident to myself.

(Decades later, I learned that the only physical contact between Germany and Japan at that period of the war was by means of giant submarines. One was sunk in the Atlantic about that time. If the object was such a submarine, neither vessel would have been interested in attacking the other.)

It was not long before the canteen started to run short of supplies but not before I bought half a dozen large blocks of chocolate which was in short supply in Britain. Our resolve not to eat sausages soon evaporated, as the increasingly meagre meals were almost always sausages. There were so many mouths to feed that there were eight sittings for each meal.

The troops started assembling at the doors into the dining hall as soon as the previous sitting had been admitted. The meals had become inadequate for healthy young appetites. Each table sat sixteen a side and a container holding thirty two rolls was placed in the middle. As the rations got tighter, a race developed to get to a table first and grab a couple of rolls and to hell with the slowest who missed out. Another disadvantage was that those who were forced to sit in the middle were forever passing things like salt and pepper backwards and forwards. Consequently, as the time for our sitting approached there was jockeying for position near the entrance doors. I found to my cost that it was not wise to be near the outside as I was crushed against the doorpost and thought I was going to get a couple of cracked ribs. The whole situation was not to anyone's credit but it served to demonstrate what hunger will do to people.

A break in the usual routine occurred on the day of the "Crossing the line" ceremony. The advent of air travel has almost wiped out this tradition of King Neptune and his

helpers coming aboard to initiate travellers crossing the equator for the first time. There was a lot of fooling about like mock shaving and dunking in the swimming pool which was filled for the occasion. The highlight was when an enterprising gang commandeered a high pressure hose and caught officers and several female passengers who were leaning over the rail of an upper deck watching the antics below in a well executed attack from the rear.



Crossing the line.

A day or so later, the ship was sailing over a sea so flat that it was unbelievable. It was like glass - without a ripple of any kind disturbing the surface except for the wake of the ship. The shining sea and the cloudless sky seemed to merge so that the ship seemed to be suspended in space. The bow waves diverged evenly behind until, seemingly half a mile astern they broke in a mirror image. We were in the doldrums off the coast of West Africa. We anchored off Freetown, Sierra Leone, known as 'the white man's grave'. This was where the Italian prisoners of war were disembarked by means of lighters. The *Nieuw Amsterdam* was soon surrounded by natives in 'bumboats' trying to sell all

manner of things such as fruit and locally made trinkets. One magnificent specimen wearing not one stitch of clothing was soon nicknamed "Sunshine" because he kept singing the well-known song of that name. When he learned that there were Australians aboard, he astonished us by inquiring about Young and Jacksons and whether Chloe was still there. It turned out that he had been a steward aboard a ship but presumably thought that life in Sierra Leone was safer while there was a war on.

Once again, the *Nieuw Amsterdam* set sail in what seemed to be a north-westerly direction. Perhaps it was because the nights were getting longer and colder but the rations appeared to be getting shorter. Someone apparently heard about the blocks of chocolate, which I had purchased soon after leaving Cape Town and offered me four times what I had paid for it. I declined the offer as I was already using them to allay the pangs of hunger. Long before we reached our destination, I had eaten the lot.

I never did find out the cause but one day those of us on gun duty were given extra duties. We think one of our number must have remonstrated with an officer about some of the grievances we had. The extra duties proved to be to carry cases of oranges from deep in the hold up several decks to the galley. There was nearly a riot

when we stepped into the galley to be confronted by dozens of trays of roast chickens ready to be served to the officers.

With the pitching and tossing of the ship and other reasons, it was inevitable that one or two cases of oranges got broken and rather than see the contents rolling around the deck, it seemed reasonable to stick them in our tunics - but one of the Dutch ships officers was not very reasonable and a scuffle broke out when he tried to reclaim oranges from one of our party. It was a very serious situation for physical action against an officer at sea in wartime to take place but fortunately we heard no more about it. We did get to keep the oranges.

Towards the end of the voyage, a ship's magazine was produced. It included an account of the privations experienced by the Polish women on board. It was not until the war in Europe came to an end that we began to understand what horrors these women endured to escape almost certain death in a concentration camp.

(In the 1980s, a report appeared in the daily press of a woman in Britain being reunited with her father after forty years. It described how the family were being transported to Siberia by train when the father left the train during a stop to look for food. The train moved on before he returned. The woman was not reunited with her father for forty years. Her story made it apparent that she was among these women described as Polish WAAFs to give them some small degree of protection should they fall into the hands of the enemy again.

THE POLISH WAAFS

The Polish Waafs! Which one of us has not wondered from whence they came, where they have been, where they are going? Unfortunately we cannot print their full story here, nor a tenth of it. Most of them left Poland in June 1940, and were taken to Russia, where they endured the most rigorous hardships, working in the fields, the mines and the forests.

Hunger, exhaustion, lack of adequate clothing, and dreadful living conditions were but some of the things they had to endure. Many of their kith and kin did not survive, but all had faith in their ultimate delivery to freedom.

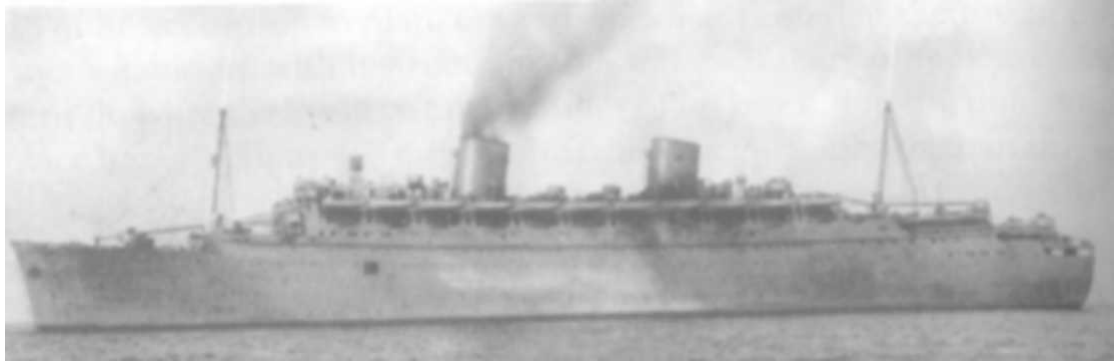
On the 31st July 1941 it came - their "Amnesty", such as it was! Freedom! But nothing else. Then began their trek across Russia, across the Caspian Sea, across Persia, to India, to East Africa, to South Africa. Their adventures were many, their hardships almost unennumerable, but their fortitude, their strength of heart and will were unequalled. And this fortitude, went not unrewarded - Polish girls, we salute you!

And now they are going to England to take their places besides their gallant countrymen who have already written their glorious valour across the skies of Europe, and they are indeed worthy of that valour.

So, let us say to them: "Wielkie życzymy dużo szczęścia powodzenia i fortuny i szczęśliwego powrotu do wolnej Ojczyzny!"

As a human interest story, my local paper published the extract from the ship's magazine and my brief account of my contact with these people. Several weeks later, I struck up a conversation with a fellow passenger on a train from Melbourne to my home town. When I introduced myself, he asked if it was me who sent the story to the paper. On confirmation that I was responsible, he exclaimed, "You could not believe what that report did for my family. My wife was one of those women and until that article appeared our children had no idea of what their mother had endured.")

The navigators among us estimated that we were within one day's sailing from the coast of North America when the ship changed course in an easterly direction. Several days later, we awoke to find ourselves sailing up an estuary between low hills with patches of snow on the tops. A Scottish soldier standing near me was singing "Sailing up the Clyde" softly to himself so identifying just where we were. He was returning home after a stint of eight years in the British Army in India. The ship dropped anchor off Greenock and the task of disembarking the large number of troops aboard by lighter began. At last our turn came and as we drew away from the *Nieuw Amsterdam* we saw for the first time what a fine looking ship she was. Our previous views of her had been so close up that it was not possible to see her graceful lines.



Nieuw Amsterdam.