

The Luck of the Draw.

Chapter 4.

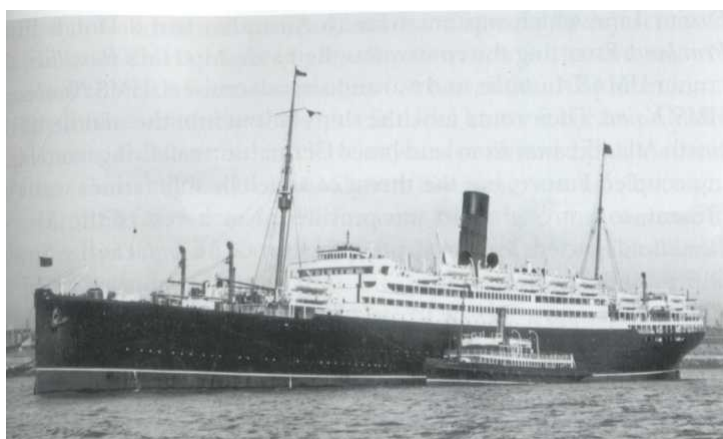
A Mediterranean Cruise...with a difference.

The *Franconia* gradually developed a list and just as gradually righted itself a couple of times each day while tied to the wharf. If we were served soup at a meal when it was at its maximum lean, we only got about half a bowl which did not please us at all. The entrance to the docks from the river was blocked by a caisson, a concrete structure which was floated into position at high tide and then flooded to block the entrance to prevent the water draining from the dock at low tide. However, some water escaped and the *Franconia* sat on the bottom as the water receded. Having a V shaped hull rather than a U shape, it developed a substantial lean twice a day.

It was an intensely boring period being stuck on board a ship that was going nowhere. That probably highlighted the excitement when the *Andes*, a smart looking liner, tied up to the side of the *Franconia*, which was moored just inside the entrance to the dock. The *Andes* was obviously preparing to sail on the next high tide and she was carrying hundreds of brides of American servicemen. There were rumours that some of the *Franconia*'s passengers finished up in America but I can not say that was a fact.

We sailed on the next high tide after the *Andes*. There was a heavy fog and fog horns moaned and bells on buoys clanged as we slowly moved down the oily looking waters of the Mersey into the Irish Sea. It was now autumn in England, there was a nip in the air and fog shrouded the Mersey as the ship moved towards the Irish Sea.

There was nothing to be seen so time was spent playing cards, singing bawdy songs and listening to sailors telling yarns as only Pommy sailors can. Before long, we were into the Bay of Biscay and it lived up to its reputation. Two corvettes, about a kilometre off each bow, escorted the *Franconia*, but most of the time we could only



The Franconia.

see their superstructure. As the ship ploughed its way through the mountainous seas, one of my mates said, "I bet they serve greasy pork for lunch today". One look at the greasy pork dished up that day and I raced up on deck and took some deep breaths but was not sea sick. In fact, that was the only occasion that the prospect of being seasick ever crossed my mind.

We passed through the Straits of Gibraltar in the early morning so we did not see anything of the famous rock but as daylight broke, we found ourselves in the middle

of a gigantic convoy. There were ships of all shapes and sizes as far as the eye could see all travelling at the speed dictated by the slowest. About half way through the day, the *Franconia* picked up speed and soon left the rest of the convoy behind. We sailed close to the island of Panteleria, off the coast of North Africa. A few months previously an allied fighter made a forced landing on its neighbouring island, Lampedusa, and the island surrendered to the pilot.

The eastern Mediterranean was flat and glassy like the Atlantic had been off west Africa near Freetown seven months earlier. The only disturbance to the surface was the wake of the ship with the bow waves breaking about half a mile behind. The *Franconia* was the same ship that Eric White, a Bairnsdale WW1 soldier, mentioned in his diary in 1915 as passing through the Suez Canal. The gun on the stern to which he referred was used to give the ship's gunners some training as they fired at a target which had been dropped overboard.

It was largely an uneventful voyage and the ship reached its destination at Port Said in Egypt at the northern end of the Suez Canal. Like South Africa, there was a very large workforce to unload the ship's cargo, but instead of the European style of clothing worn at Cape Town, the labourers wore the style of dress common in the Middle East with a type of turban for head gear. Some of us were detailed to ride the 100 mile journey to Cairo on the trucks carrying our kits bags and other gear. After the chilly autumn weather we had left behind in England, the Egyptian sunshine was welcome but we found that travelling in an open truck it was cool enough.



As we set out on the 100 mile drive to Cairo, we took in the strange sights and sounds, and smells, of a culture very different from anything we had seen before. The men were almost all dressed in what, to us, looked like a long nightshirt and wore a turban-like headgear. The women were almost all dressed in black and wore veils that covered their faces except for their eyes. At

frequent intervals along the roadside were small shrines where the faithful could carry out their obligation to pray five times a day. Frequently, fellahin could be seen riding along on a donkey followed by four wives and their children on foot, all carrying quite substantial loads. In the towns, there were a few men wearing western style clothes, and their headgear was usually a fez.

As we skirted the Nile delta, we saw the intense agriculture being carried on as it had been for hundreds of years. There was no motive power except for man and animal power. It was not that which surprised me because back home on our farm, we did not have a motor of any description either - not even a motor car. The surprising thing was the odd combination of animals that were being used, such as a donkey and a camel harnessed together pulling a wooden plough. One could imagine the same methods being used two thousand years ago. But there was one thing that was very familiar to us. The roadside was lined with gum trees. Someone grabbed some leaves and crushed them and we all gathered round to savour the smell of eucalyptus. The

buildings in the villages we passed through were of the most basic construction - nothing more than sun dried mud huts. The most striking thing though was the demarcation between the irrigated and the non-irrigated areas. The lush green of the cropped land gave way to desert sand in a matter of an inch or two. The currency was the Egyptian £, which was divided into 100 piasters, each of which was divided into 100 centimes. A centime certainly was not worth very much.

From Cape to Cairo.

When I passed through the Port of Cape Town nine months earlier, the thought did not occur to me that I might be at the northern end of the continent of Africa before the year was out. A brand of cigarettes was called "C to C" meaning Cape to Cairo but we reckoned it meant Camel to Consumer.

About four hours after we left Port Said, we arrived at our new home, the Heliopolis Palace Hotel. Heliopolis is an outlying suburb of Cairo. The Palace Hotel was in about one acre of grounds surrounded by a wall about 12 feet high. We were now virtually under the control of the R.A.F. as the Australians were far outnumbered by Englishmen.



Heliopolis Palace Hotel.

We had to start to adopt the words and ways of the British in the Middle East. "Tiffin" was the word that applied to morning tea and it was a fairly rigidly kept ritual. "Talla heena" was Arabic for "Come here" often preceded by "Ishma" meaning "Hey You". "Mafeesh falouse" meant "I haven't

any money". "Waahid, itneen, talaata", etc. meant "One. Two, Three" etc. "Dhobi" was laundry and a "Dhobi wallah" was a laundryman. We did not have to do our own laundry or make our own beds or keep our rooms tidy. Our house boy did all this kind of work. He was about seventeen and already had two wives who, he said, were working hard to help him pay for a third. The reasoning was that the more wives the less work there was for each of them.

We were not exactly welcomed with open arms by the bulk of the population. A couple of times we were hastily issued with a revolver and five rounds of ammunition when it was feared the hotel was going to be attacked but fortunately nothing eventuated. In fact, Egypt was not, at that stage, at war with Germany. That did not occur until six months later, just days before the war in Europe concluded.

We were excited about the prospect of seeing Cairo. A tram to the city ran along the street at the front of the hotel. As we went through the front gate on our first venture into the city, we were besieged by hordes of youths selling a great variety of goods, such as trinkets, leather goods, watches, their sisters, No. 1 French girls, to name just a few. Some of the most persistent didn't look more than 10 years of age. They would have been aware that there was a new bunch of servicemen at the Hotel and were out in force but they were as persistent and annoying as Australian bush flies all the time we were in Cairo.

It was, no doubt, in part because of the "wares" mentioned above which were so vigorously promoted that there was a much greater emphasis on health and hygiene in our lectures. The water supply was very suspect but, to everyone's relief, it was safe to drink beer. Soft drinks were also reliable. We all knew, of course, that germs could not survive in spirits. We were treated to films, in glorious technicolour, of the effects on various parts of the anatomy of sexually transmitted diseases. A couple of fellows fainted during the films and there was much conjecture on whether they were extra sensitive or whether they had guilty consciences. It was not uncommon for several to faint when we were receiving injections. Sometimes, two or three in a row would pass out. There were quite a few diseases for which we had to be immunised so there was a fairly regular parade for that purpose. Some of the worldlier wise claimed that there was now a new drug that fixed these complaints up in no time at all. It was called "penicillin".

After travelling about half a mile from the Hotel, the tram into Cairo changed character. Down came the pole and up went the pantograph and it became a light rail vehicle with its own right of way and covered the six miles to Cairo Railway Station in very quick time. There it reverted to a tram and travelled sedately along the city streets to its terminal.

The first impression of the city was noise. Every driver seemed to be constantly blowing the horn, probably because there were great numbers of people walking on the streets as well as the footpaths. Mixed up with the traffic were donkey carts and all kinds of vehicles. Even the tram conductors used whistles sounding like party whistles to communicate with the drivers. There were bars and clubs for the entertainment of the troops and they were strictly classified. There were some "For Officers Only", others "For Non-Commissioned Officers Only" and still others "For Other Ranks Only". Some clubs and bars, as well as whole areas, were "Out of Bounds". We soon found that "hostesses" who were perpetually thirsty and would, apparently, do anything to persuade someone to buy them a drink, inhabited the clubs.

There were also large numbers of beggars on the streets, many missing an arm or a leg or two. The legless squatted on a square of wood with a caster at each corner and propelled themselves along with wooden handles. It was said that many of these were mutilated at birth by their parents to give them an edge in the highly competitive life of begging. One girl of about sixteen regularly got on the tram while it was waiting at the terminus and displayed the stump of her amputated leg while whining for "baksheesh". It was hard to ignore the poor unfortunates but we would have been perpetually bankrupt if we gave in. The wait for the tram to move off was usually full of interest. It was right in front of a bar and it was not uncommon for a brawl to break

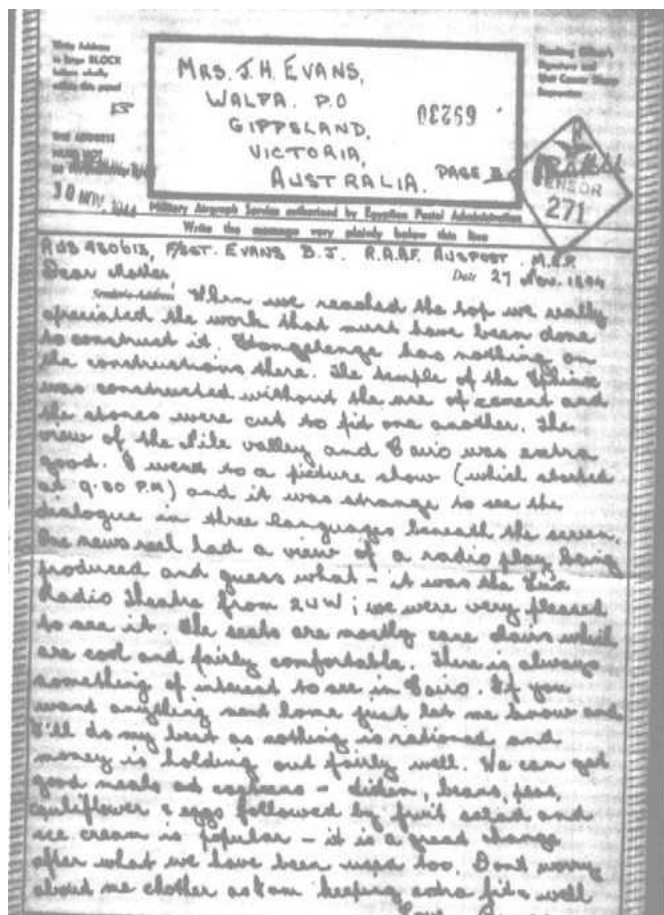
out in the bar and spill out on to the street. If servicemen were involved, British Red Caps (Military Police) seemed to appear from nowhere.

Naturally, one of the first things we wanted to do was to see the pyramids which were



A very fuzzy photo taken on top of Cheop's Pyramid.

on the opposite side of Cairo from Heliopolis. On the way, we had to cross the Nile, the world's longest river, with its Arab dhows and their distinctive sails. After having a look at the Sphinx and several temples nearby, we took a close look at the Pyramid of Cheops. In fact, we climbed 450 feet to the top - and it was some climb. The photograph taken at the top is very fuzzy but some idea of the size of the stones used to build the pyramids can be gained. We climbed up a corner of the structure as to go straight up the side was too steep. The top thirty feet was removed years ago to build a mosque in Cairo. I don't know how they got the stones down again. I presume they just levered them over the edge and let them go. The whole experience was a bit mind numbing. We knew very little about Egyptian history but no one could view these massive structures without being overawed by the skills and effort that had gone into the construction.



A visit to Cairo Museum was also a high priority. There we viewed the fabulous relics recovered from the tomb of Tutankhamen some twenty years previously. This Pharaoh's mummy was inside three coffins which in turn were inside three sarcophagi, each of which were covered with gold and inlaid with precious stones. The outermost one was about four feet by four feet by seven feet long.

It took several airgraphs to write home about our activities in the first days in Cairo. One of these is reproduced. The airgraph was the fastest way to write home. The original was written on an A4 sized page and then microfilmed. When the film reached Australia, it was enlarged to about the size and quality of the example. There

was a quicker way to communicate and that was by cable. A three number code was provided for a series of sentences, and you sent the numbers which were transposed into telegrams back home. Consequently, telegrams had a sameness about them all. Although in my letters I say that there is always something of interest to see in Cairo, by time Christmas came a month later, we were becoming extremely bored because the hotel was a transit depot not equipped for training. We did not have the money to keep on sightseeing or going out on the town. We learned that "They also serve who only stand and wait". Consequently, boredom led to a great deal of drinking. In fact, we played cards most of the day and drank most of the night.

On Christmas Eve, I was assigned to guard duties at the main gate from 5.30pm to 9.30 PM. This was the time that the houseboys, gardeners and other labourers were leaving to go home. An Egyptian overseer frisked them all as they left. One must have had something he was not supposed to have because the overseer started yelling at him and then started slapping his face. The fellow just stood and took it without any attempt to protect himself. I thought to myself that a couple of hundred years ago, that was probably how my forebears were treated.

I was getting pretty toey as my time on duty dragged on. My mates were getting a big start. As soon as I was relieved, I headed for the Sergeants' Mess. On the way, I met one of our lot with a bottle of cherry brandy in one hand and a bottle of tomato sauce in the other. He was taking a swig out of each bottle alternately. I knew then that they had indeed got a big start. I don't remember much about the rest of that night but I was ready to catch transport taking the Aussies into the Australian Embassy for Christmas drinks at 9.30 on Christmas morning.

As we celebrated Christmas 1944 at the Australian Embassy in Cairo, we did not imagine that a month later it would have a whole new significance for us. The photograph below taken outside the Embassy shows the rear of the truck that transported us from Heliopolis, with horse drawn gharries that plied as taxis in the background. It was usual to haggle the fare down to about one tenth of the driver's first quote.



Outside the Australian Embassy. 25/12/1944.

By time we returned to the Heliopolis Palace Hotel for Christmas Dinner, we were in very good spirits. The main door to the hotel was accessed by a flight of about a dozen steps. At the top was a small car obviously man-handled there by a number of men who had overindulged. In the dining room, all decked out for the imminent start of the dinner, several others were trying to persuade a donkey to sample some of the nibbles. This state of affairs continued more or less constantly through to the New Year of 1945. One night, in a smoke filled, dimly lit night club, we were entertained by a genuine Turkish belly dancer. The whole scene looked like a shot from the film "Casablanca", complete with fez wearing gentlemen of sinister appearance.