

## The Luck of the Draw.

### Chapter 6.

#### The long wait.

Suddenly the war in Europe was over. While people in other places celebrated with dancing in the streets and wild parties, it was very quietly celebrated in our camp near Cairo. We knew the war was only half over and there was a long hard job to be done to defeat Japan. For our crew, it made the loss of our mates only six days before even more poignant. Only one more flight - only six more days and their lives would have been spared.

The posting to Italy was now redundant and we discussed where we might be sent next. We thought that it would probably be Burma. I did not exactly relish the prospect but it seemed to be the most logical place. Then the Australian government ordered that all Australians in the European theatre of war return home. No doubt that it was a good political decision at home but it seemed stupid to me that after all we had been through over the past few weeks, our crew was now to be broken up. Even if our training was not appropriate for operations in the Far East, or the Baltimore was unsuitable, it would not have taken long to retrain or convert to another type of aircraft. Now, I would have to start from scratch again and train with a completely new crew.



We had 5 days leave before being sent our separate ways. We decided we would go to Alexandria the next day. We visited a palace where Churchill and Roosevelt had their first summit meetings and enjoyed relaxing on a Mediterranean beach. We decided to lunch at a classy sort of restaurant where we could dine on a terrace overlooking the sea. We all ordered spaghetti. In due course, the headwaiter arrived and laid out warm plates on our table, then a waiter

arrived with a large silver tray of spaghetti balanced on his fingertips. Unfortunately, as he lowered it to commence serving, he lost control and the whole lot landed on Dave's bare thigh. Dave shot out of his seat like a rocket and, in a few well-chosen words referred to the waiter's promiscuity, his size, his colour and his parentage while the rest of us roared with laughter. Fortunately, the spaghetti was not hot enough to do any real damage but Dave had a red thigh for a few days.

#### Desert Storm.

A few days after we returned to camp, the others received their postings. Stap was assigned to flying senior officers to many places including Tristan da Cunha, one of the most isolated places in the world, in the South Atlantic between South Africa and South America. Dave went back to England and was demobbed from the R.A.F.

because he was a policeman. Alex went off to Khartoum, Nairobi and Mombassa before flying to Ceylon. From there, he was in action in Burma and the Gulf of Siam.

I was now back with other Australians as we waited to see what was to happen to us. Some of my new mates had not been to Alexandria so I agreed to go back there with them for leave. The evening before heading off, we stayed in camp instead of going into Cairo like the great majority on the station. Just on dusk, a large cloud rolled in. It was constantly lit by lightning. We stood outside our tent to watch this spectacular show for about a quarter of an hour when rain sent us inside. Soon it became a regular deluge and the tent started to sag. Desperately, we tried to keep guy ropes tight to prevent it collapsing under the torrential rain. It seemed to be about half an hour before it let up and we breathed a sigh of relief that we had kept the tent habitable. A short while later, two of us decided to see if there was any water in a wadi (shallow depression) about 50 yards from our tent. We took a torch, as it was pitch dark. All around were tents in various stages of collapse and there would be some cursing and swearing when their occupants returned about midnight.

There was no water in the wadi and we walked back towards our tent. I heard a strange hissing sound to our right and, flashing the torch in that direction was astonished to see a broad front of water a few inches deep moving through a line of tents towards ours. We ran to the tent to warn the others and lifted all our gear on the ground onto our bunks just as water started to come in under the tent flaps. The sand on which our tents were pitched was loose and soft so the water quickly gouged around the tent pole, the tent pegs, under the flaps, even around the legs of our bunks. We were soon engaged in a desperate battle to keep our tent and all our possessions intact. The water got to about seven or eight inches deep and was moving fairly fast. Somehow we managed to keep the tent upright but in a very unmilitary like state of disarray. We concluded that water must have become dammed up behind a sandbank that eventually gave way and released the torrent of water upon us.

Next morning, ours was the only tent in our section left standing. There was scarcely any sign of where the others had been because the water had virtually excavated the sand around any solid object, which then fell into the hole and was promptly covered by sand. Men were wandering around looking for some clue as to where their tent might have been. They would have all lost precious letters from home, photographs, souvenirs etc. and were a sorry looking lot. Any service gear was replaced that day. One told us of his experience coming back to camp on the tram-cum-light rail the night before. About half way along the high-speed section, the line goes under a road and the tram raced into about five feet of water in the cutting at high speed. "There were sparks flying and women screaming", he said but apparently no casualties

Later that day, we went to Alexandria on leave. At the end of May I finally got posted to a transit camp which was the first step on the journey home. I was not at all impressed to discover that it was back at Shalufa. It was not the same place where we did our OTU. This camp was at the end of the airstrip from which we operated. A Squadron of four engined Liberator Bombers now occupied the base. I don't know what their duties were but several took off every morning at about 6.30. They roared over our camp only a few feet above us and we would curse them for waking us, and turn over and go to sleep again. That was until some idiot pilot decided to cut his engines - and every tent was empty in a flash. One morning, a couple of Egyptians

were working on the flue of the cookhouse when these planes were taking off. A pilot spotted them and came straight at them. I am sure that if they hadn't jumped the slipstream would have blown them off the roof.

The month of June dragged by. We had no parades, no lectures, no inspections - and no indication of a boat home. There were plenty passing down the canal but there were all filled to capacity with the sick and wounded, the ex-prisoners of war and others from Britain with a greater claim than we did. We filled our time reading, playing cards, swimming, going to the camp picture shows, and trying to write letters when we had nothing to write home about. As time passed, the writing on my letters home got increasingly large as I tried to fill up an airletter home. Previously, I had written as small as possible to get as much in a letter as I could but now there was simply nothing that I had not written home about before. I wrote about the films I had seen, the books I had read, even hands I was dealt playing bridge.

Stop and go.

Finally, near midnight on July 1, we were all lined up on the parade ground to be transported to Port Tewfic to board a troop ship for home. An important announcement was made over the loud speaker. There were six non-commissioned officers more than there was space for on the ship. The six most recently promoted were to be left behind. I had been promoted to Warrant Officer on June 6. It was hard to be cheerful when saying good-bye to a group of fellows all excited about going home. I had been in close contact with them for a couple of months. My deep-sea gear had to be retrieved from the truck on to which it was already loaded. We could only take a haversack of personal gear on board with us and the rest of our gear went in the hold of the ship (called deep-sea gear) which was to be delivered to our home addresses.

The Egyptian summer was now starting to get really hot. Temperatures exceeded 100<sup>0</sup> every day. We seldom wore much more than shorts and were becoming the same colour as the locals. Occasionally someone would try to get a cricket match going but it was pretty futile as the ball stopped as soon as it hit the sand. A few football matches were arranged but as some played rugby league, some rugby union, some soccer and some Aussie rules, it generally degenerated into a rough and tumble. At times, we went for a swim in the Bitter Lakes. I was sitting on the end of the jetty one day when some character pushed me off. My feet slipped down a barnacle-encrusted pile, severely lacerating the soles of both feet. The high salinity of the water stung like blazes but probably contributed to a fairly quick healing. I did hobble about for a few days though.

There was no difficulty in getting a leave pass to go to Cairo although we were always worried stiff that a boat might suddenly materialise while we were away. We needn't have worried. To get to Cairo, we hitched a ride about eight miles to the Suez - Cairo road and from there hitched a ride to Cairo. It was 90 miles but we knew that any vehicle heading along that road was going to Cairo because there was nothing but desert in between. Usually, we scored an Army truck but sometimes we were lucky enough to travel in something more comfortable. In Cairo, we would stay at the New Zealand Club until our money ran out and then return to Shalufa. During one such visit, we watched the results of a British election as they appeared on a ticker tape

machine. It seemed unreal that Winston Churchill, our hero and we thought the poms' as well, should be defeated.

There was an empty space next to our tent where a couple of fellows used to play tennis. It was not big enough for a full size tennis court but they played there for hours every day. There were frequent heated arguments over whether a ball was in or out. The problem was they had no net, no rackets and no tennis balls. We couldn't work out if they were putting on a great act or if they were really going "troppo". We were even more intrigued when several others brought chairs along and sat and watched them. (Many years later, the character, Klinger, in the television series, M.A.S.H., portrayed the same sort of behaviour in a desperate ploy to get himself sent home)

The heat, the dust, the flies and the sheer boredom, added to the uncertainty of how long we would have to wait, was taking a toll on all of us. One evening, an Australian woman came to give us a talk about things at home. I think most turned up for the novelty of hearing the voice of an Australian woman. It was getting a long time since we had gone to a dance or taken a girl to the pictures or even talked to an English-speaking girl. After this lady had told us about the state of things back home, someone said it sounded good and asked if we might be allowed to migrate there.

Another month dragged by and news came of the Americans dropping a bomb equivalent to 20,000 tons of TNT. "Another American exaggeration" was the general opinion. American involvement in the war was regarded with a great deal of cynicism. Most of us saw America as profiteering from the war while Britain, which had been the dominant power, was being brought to its knees financially. In the nineteen thirties, the U.S.A. followed an isolationist policy wiping its hands of any responsibility of what was happening in other parts of the world while Britain tried to follow the role of an international policeman. It was not unusual to hear someone reciting to himself in the nasal twang of Roosevelt, "England wants guns, England wants tanks, England wants planes. England shall have guns, England shall have tanks, England shall have planes. At a price. At **our** price." We felt that the United States was forced into World War 2 only by the attack on Pearl Harbour.

Beginning of a New Age.

We read in the newspapers about this startling new weapon - the atom bomb. Then another one was dropped and suddenly the war was over. We were dumbfounded. Because of the stubborn resistance of the Japanese, it seemed that the war could go on for another twelve months at least as island after island was recaptured. While the rest of the world went mad in celebrating, we got two warm bottles of Canadian beer and an extra 50 cigarettes - and nothing else was different from the weeks and months before. We sat under the stars drinking our beer in what must have been the most low-key celebration of victory in history.

Even the meals were monotonous - bully beef and cucumber day after day - and I hated cucumber. There was also plenty of watermelon but some character claimed the locals bored holes in them and added water from the sweetwater canal to make them heavier. It was, no doubt, untrue but it was very off-putting. One day, an announcement warned us not to drink the water because the treatment system had broken down. Half a dozen reported sick on the strength of the announcement bearing

in mind the warnings we had been given about the "Sweetwater Canal". It was later announced that the fault had been discovered before any of the untreated water reached the camp. Nobody drank water anyway.

For a brief time, another Bairnsdale lad was in the camp. I went to Bairnsdale High School with Ian Redenbach. He became a fighter pilot. We were on the same transit camp at Padgate in England for a few days. I later bumped into him in Cairo before he was posted to Italy. He was shot down and became a prisoner of war for a matter of hours and spent a short time at Shalufa on his way home. I later met and married his cousin.

Another boat - another false alarm. This time the captain said that he only had troop deck accommodation and he had been criticised on an earlier voyage for not providing non commissioned officers with cabins. We would have cheerfully slept on the deck to get out of Shalufa. At times, we walked along the narrow track through the farms along the sweetwater canal, across the bridge near the village to the Suez Canal and went through the motions of thumbing a ride from passing ships. The people on board used to look at us dumbly as though we were some sort of curiosity. Walking along this track one day, an Egyptian farmer conjured up a spit like I have never seen before or since, and deposited it at our feet as we passed. This gesture was more eloquent than words.

One night, I was rostered for duty in charge of the guard. Although the war was over, armed guards patrolled the camp perimeter at all times. The locals were not averse to pinching anything they could get their hands on. A detachment of twenty four R.A.F. Regiment personnel were paraded at the guard house and it was my job to call the roll, march them to the armoury and issue them with rifles and five rounds of ammunition and allot the time and post where each was to patrol. Someone handed me the roll and I marched out briskly to emphasise who was in charge, ordered the group to attention and started to call the roll. As soon as I looked at it, I knew I was in trouble. There was not a name on it I could pronounce - they were all Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, etc. with unpronounceable names. This took the wind out of my sails a bit but I got round it by counting them - to some amusement in the ranks. I then marched them to the armoury and issued the rifles and ammunition.

After I had allocated all of them to the roster, there was a short time before I had to set off with the first party to relieve those on duty. A little fellow came to me and nervously asked me in very broken English if I could change his time to earlier in the night, as he had never done guard duty before. He looked as though he was in his thirties and I told him that that was the way the names had come out and that I could not start shuffling them around now. He then started to put the clip of bullets in his rifle but his hands were shaking so much he couldn't manage it. He asked me if I would do it for him. I thought, "Hell, what might this fellow do when I march up to him in the middle of the night with his relief guard". I took the clip of bullets and put them in my pocket and told him he would be doing duty with an empty rifle. This seemed to make him happier and I reckoned that his main problem was handling a loaded rifle.

## The End in Sight.

On October 2, 1945, the R.A.F. put on a dinner for the last of the R.A.A.F. in the Middle East. There were only sixty of us remaining at that stage. Among those who signed my souvenir menu was Ron Jary who enlisted on the same day as I. His number was 430623 and mine was 430613. He signed my copy of the ship's magazine on the *Nieuw Amsterdam* on the way to England. We returned home on the same ship and were discharged on the same day. Tragically, he was a victim of the massacre at Port Arthur in Tasmania. Another at the dinner was Peter Ross-Edwards but it was twenty years before I met him for the first time.

(On April 9, 1945, 430653 F/O W. Forrester was killed when his aircraft crashed at Foxton, England when returning from a raid over Germany.)

Finally, on October 13, 1945, we boarded the Stirling Castle at Port Tewfic. As we went on board, one of our group said, "Crikey, look at all the white men." Those already on board, even having come from the English summer, were pale and pasty faced compared with our lot. After almost twelve months of Egyptian sunshine, we were as tanned as it was possible to be.

At 10 AM on the first Sunday in November 1945, the Stirling Castle arrived at the Sydney Heads on a perfect Spring day. Hundreds of yachts, cruisers and boats of every description met us and escorted us up the harbour to the hoots and whistles of every ship in port and the cheers of thousands of people. It was an unforgettable homecoming. Overnight, we travelled by train to Melbourne and, through pouring rain but cheering people, drove from Spencer Street Station to the Exhibition Building where our families were waiting to meet us. My mother was a bit uncertain about what changes had taken place in her younger son, whom she had not seen for nearly two years. With produce brought from the farm, a magnificent welcome home dinner was waiting at my Aunt's home in Caulfield. I got less than half way through the first course and, although the last thing I wanted to do was to disappoint them, I could eat no more. My stomach was not conditioned to large meals.



My first night in a normal bed was not a resounding success either. I awoke feeling like something the cat dragged in. I slept on the floor, then on a mattress on the floor for a week or so before I could cope with sleeping in a bed.

The next day, I returned home on the train and the end of an extraordinary experience. I was still two and one half months short of my twenty first birthday. For a long time, I was very mixed up emotionally. I felt that I had enjoyed a "Cook's Tour" when so many had suffered so much. The first person to greet me when the train reached Lindenow Station was Andy Wilson, a mate since childhood, who had been a Prisoner of War of the Japanese for 3½ years. The dangers and frustration and the inconveniences I faced paled into insignificance compared with what he and his mates had to deal with. I rarely missed writing home at least every week and was disappointed each time the mail brought no letter for me. The prisoners of the Japanese were three and a half years without letters or any communication with their loved ones and they had to endure starvation, abuse, and physical violence. Death was never far away.

Although I joined the RSL as soon as I got home, it was several years before I attended an Anzac Day march because I did not think I was entitled to share the plaudits of the public with people with that kind of service. Eventually, I came to understand that that was not what Anzac Day is about. No one asks what you did in the war. Once you enlist, your fate is in the hands of others – often it is the luck of the draw. While the exploits of a very small number become legendary, it is not what one does, but the act of serving one's country in time of war that creates the special bond between ex-service personnel. For those who served together in the same unit, naturally the bond is stronger. Those with whom I had the closest bond lived 12,000 miles away and there was little prospect that I would ever see them again.

I have had no contact with my fellow Baltie crew members over the years except that I have been fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to visit Stap and Mary at home in Tonbridge in Kent on two occasions. When he bought himself a car after the war, he had to take his father to drive it home - he did not have a driving license. He has not flown in an aircraft since the war.