

# MOVING NORTH

*Robert Andrew*

Winner of the Sir Edward "Weary" Dunlop Award for 2015

For me the new year of 1943 began with the submission of an application for a commissioned officer's course. This was at the suggestion of my boss, the Signals Officer of my unit, 5 Fighter Sector Darwin. We had worked together in this new but vital unit, established soon after the 'big do' of 9 February 1942. Its function was the control of the air defence of the Darwin region. Although I had been a sergeant for only a few months, he must have thought I was a likely candidate for a job similar to his. In what little spare time was available I had been studying Air Force Law. This was not the most exciting of subjects but essential knowledge for those in positions of authority. Obviously, I was beginning to take the idea seriously.



*Berrimah Hospital*

*NT Government*

The trip from our quarters in the former Berrimah Hospital out to Fighter Sector's Operations Room, well camouflaged in the bush, was becoming more difficult because of the flooded track. The wet season was at its height. My transport was a heavy American Indian motorbike. We named it "Bertha" and she was not greatly loved by those who had to make this hurried journey when an air-raid alert had been given, often at night and with no lights permitted. As NCO in charge of the unit's Signals personnel I tried to be in the Ops Room on all such occasions. This building was the second home of the control centre, the first having been a rudimentary affair badly located in scrub south of the RAAF aerodrome and built almost entirely as a do-it-yourself project by the airmen of Fighter Sector. It was a facility very urgently required. The new establishment at Berrimah was a great improvement, both operationally and in the standard of accommodation.

So life seemed to be going along quite smoothly but, for me, there was a surprise just around the corner. On 13 January I was told that I was posted to 77 Squadron and had to report for duty there the next day. I thought this a bit tough after ten months hard going in Darwin and, before long, the possibility of some leave down south. I soon discovered the reason. My offsider, another sergeant, had been the intended subject of the posting but had dropped a metal

deed box on his foot a few days earlier. The MO deemed him unfit for the move. So a minor happening caused a major change for me.

On arrival at 77's camp at Livingstone Strip, about 34 miles 'down the track' from Darwin, I made a further discovery – the squadron was about to move to Milne Bay. With some reluctance I was obliged to revert to camp life in the bush after three months in more comfortable barracks at Berrimah. At dawn on 18 January all the squadron ground staff and equipment pulled out of Darwin harbour aboard the US Liberty Ship *James Russell Lowell*. Many of these ubiquitous Liberty Ships were named after American literary notables. Ours was sunk a few months later.

The previous few days were hectic, packing up all the squadron's equipment and visiting a couple of nearby units to scrounge some essential items we lacked. In the middle of this I was ordered to Area Headquarters, further down the road, for an interview in connection with my commission application. This could have resulted in a very different change in my immediate future. But my luck was out. The officer I was to see could not be found. It was just another foul-up of the kind experienced by most members of the services.

So there I was, unexpectedly a member of a fighter squadron leaving Darwin by ship. We were rather crowded as the troops settled down in the hatches. It was generally considered to be 'hot as hell down there'. The trick was to spend as much time as possible up on deck. One escape I had was to join the ship's wireless operator in the radio room. A swimming pool was rigged up in one of the holds and was well patronised. The ship had an all-American crew and how we envied them at mealtimes! As our line of airmen passed by the window of the crew mess on their ways to collect bully beef and army biscuits from our mobile kitchen tied down on the deck, each could see the Yanks tucking into chicken, ice-cream and similar dishes. Our American allies were certainly well equipped in every way.

RAAF Hudson and Beaufighter aircraft kept an eye on us for the first day or so. The chief concern was the possibility of Japanese submarines being in the area. Lookouts were posted, there were rafts all over the place and we carried life jackets at all times. I managed to sleep on top of the hatch rather than down in it, possibly one of the few perks of rank. On such a beautiful night it was very pleasant, spoiled only by morning rain. With no Jap interference the voyage was becoming more like a pleasure cruise. Apart from captain's inspections, boat drill and some lectures, we were free to 'bludge'. A rare period of relaxation. There was plenty of time for reading, writing or just sun-bathing. The view starboard became more interesting as we turned south from Torres Strait. The Great Barrier Reef and the many islands gave us much to look at.

Our ship docked at Townsville on the night of 24<sup>th</sup> January. Earlier in the day all those looking down from our deck were delighted when a RAAF launch with some girls aboard came by. It was confirmed that we were indeed back in civilisation. Trucks took us to Garbutt RAAF Station where the only sleeping accommodation available was the floor of the recreation hut. This was due to the fact that Townsville, as the main departure port for convoys heading for New Guinea, was a very busy place. The troops soon found their way around and it was good to have some leisurely days in a lively town.



*Aerial view of the USAAF installation at Garbutt – photo supplied by George Hartley*

Recalling the trouble-free voyage across the top of the continent is a reminder that after we left Darwin an atrocity took place off the Arnhem Land coast. A Methodist missionary, the Rev Len Kentish, was one of those aboard the small vessel *Patricia Cam* when a Japanese floatplane attacked, killing most of the men. It then alighted nearby and captured Kentish. He was taken to Dobo Island. After the war it emerged that he was beheaded by the Japanese two weeks later. It is sobering to think that our ship passed through those waters just before this tragic event. Terrible things happened.

Some duties were required of us whilst waiting for our convoy to be assembled. The Wireless Operators were put to work in the Station Signals Office and there was some repacking of equipment. This left time for exploration of the town, especially its eating places. Steak and eggs was a popular order; haute cuisine compared to our Darwin tucker. As a good many members of the WAAAF were stationed in Townsville there was plenty of opportunity for feminine company. Some of the troops must have played up a bit, letting the joys of civilisation go to their heads. As a result all leave was stopped for a couple of days. There were good places where one could find a meal and recreation facilities. These included the American Red Cross Centre, The YMCA and St Andrew's Presbyterian Church. On pay parade I drew two pounds, noting in my diary that I was 'spending more than for a long time'. Living among the fleshpots was costing money. But not for long.

Early on 10 February the squadron embarked on a small ship, the *Van Der Lin*. In its previous life it had been a trading vessel in the Netherlands East Indies and it was soon found to be hot and stinking below its deck. There was no hanging around once we were aboard. The convoy left harbour and set course into the Coral Sea. And a very choppy sea it was. Seasickness began to spread among the passengers. This was not going to be a smooth trip like

the one we enjoyed down the Barrier Reef. An increasing number of airmen ceased to be interested in the bully beef meals. This was all the better for those who were unaffected. The best place to be was on deck. I was lucky in being able to sling a hammock there and had plenty of fresh air in which to get a good sleep until, before dawn, heavy rain forced me below. Of the three nights at sea, two were spent on deck, but on the third the weather was so bad that everyone had to stay below. There it was so stuffy some men were having trouble breathing. The whole day brought storms and heavy rain. I managed to spend a few short periods on deck. The wildness of the ocean was impressive. Even more remarkable was the scene on the ship next to ours. Some of the vehicles on its deck had broken loose and were sliding back and forth. I did not envy the blokes trying to secure them. An unpleasant day indeed.

Up on deck the following morning there was fresh air and land in sight. We were at the eastern corner of Papua-New Guinea and entering the channel with Samarai Island to starboard. The beaches looked beautiful. There were palm trees and many huts. Coming close to our ship were some of the local outrigger canoes, known as lakatois. By this time we had several aircraft escorting us. After coming up the long Milne Bay it was dark by the time we berthed at the Gili Gili pier. None of us were sorry to leave that ship!

We were soon at the squadron's campsite and trying to find a spot to spend the night. Some of us were reasonably comfortable on the floor of a native hut only to find we had lots of company; there were rats running over us. The Yanks gave us a good breakfast. They belonged to the unit from which we were taking over. We learned there were three things to watch out for, malaria, Japanese and falling coconuts, probably in that order as the incidence of malaria among Allied troops had been very high. The prevalence of mosquitoes and this nasty disease was not surprising; there was water everywhere. The Army medical people had organised teams of local men to spray the many pools and swampy areas in order to reduce the mosquito population. As protection we had to wear long trousers and long-sleeved shirts, essential attire but, given the hot and humid conditions, not popular with the troops. We were required to take Atebrin and use mosquito nets at night. In addition to the Atebrin, salt and vitamin tablets were a compulsory part of our daily diet. We had thought Darwin rain was heavy but now found Milne Bay beat it easily. The mud was indescribable and our greatest problem, both at the airstrip and in our camp area.

Our squadron used the Gurney Airstrip. It was due west of the wharf and named after Squadron Leader Charles Gurney who died in 1942. Roughly north of the wharf was the second strip, named Turnbull after the Commanding Officer of 76 Squadron who was killed during the earlier Battle of Milne Bay. It was now the home of 100 Squadron flying Beaufort bombers. The airstrip area was a former coconut plantation which had occupied much of the narrow stretch of flat land that ran around the coast of the bay. Beyond were very rough jungle-clad hills and mountains, sometimes rising above cloud. In later years Gurney became the civil airport for the district.

During wartime operations the runway and taxiways were unsealed but surfaced with Marsden matting. This was made up of interlocking perforated steel sheets and largely overcame the serious mud problem. Nevertheless, the wet and greasy surface often made take-offs and landing hazardous. Now and again a plane would slide off into the morass alongside the matting. Getting it back onto the strip was a difficult and unpleasant job. Even in a normal

touchdown the aircraft often threw up a spectacular spray of water. There were instances where our American friends, with their huge supply capability, simply left one of their own damaged aircraft on the side of the airstrip. The RAAF might then take the opportunity to appropriate some badly needed component. The Australians were always good at scrounging.

In my first letter home since leaving Darwin I quoted words attributed to Tommy Atkins, the archetypal British soldier, "I've moved from where I was and am now somewhere else". Naturally, when in an operational area, it was not possible to divulge one's whereabouts. How much speculation might there have been amongst the folk back home? We gradually settled in, erected tents, preferably not beneath a coconut tree, and installed telephone lines to the airstrip and neighbouring units. One important mod con was the addition of some sort of flooring in our tents. It was nice to get into one's home-made bed without coping with mud in the process. We learned to do a search for scorpions before retiring. Another feature of Milne Bay.

We built a dugout to house the all-important telephone switchboard. This was a good idea from the security point of view. But there was a catch. When the rains really got going we soon had a foot or more of water in it. It then ceased to be a place in which one could find a bit of peace and quiet. Two weeks of incessant rain upset the feeling that we had settled in pretty well and that all was under control. Moisture got into everything and constant effort was needed to keep radio and telephone equipment operating. Boots and clothing remained sodden. The camp area and walking tracks became quagmires. For days on end flying was impossible. By the end of this period of rain and more rain, morale had dropped somewhat. Night air raids were the least of our troubles. But we rebounded. Spirits rose again, helped by the good news from North Africa; Tunis and Bizerta had been captured from the Germans and a few days later, on 13 May, the Axis armies surrendered. This was the end of the bitter struggle on that front of the war.

Milne Bay certainly did not rate highly in the opinion of those who spent any length of time there. Kenneth Slessor, notable Australian writer, then a war correspondent, gave his description of the place. In terms more genteel than were used by some servicemen, he wrote, "Insects everywhere, earwigs in the wash basin, scorpions under the tent board, and a large tarantula on top of the box in which I keep my clothes. Mould and mildew put their soft, spongy fingers over everything. Even cigarettes mottle with brown spots and droop limply. Matches have to be wax, kept in a tin, or better still, a bottle or jar, sealed up". The author of a book published more recently gave his Milne Bay wartime story the title "*A Bastard of a Place*". Says it all, really! In good Australian lingo, at any rate.

During March–April there was quite a lot of action, sometimes referred to as 'fun and games'. The Bismarck Sea battle took place in early March and proved to be an important and overwhelming victory for our air forces. This foiled the enemy's attempt to land reinforcements on the north coast of New Guinea and relieved the pressure on the embattled Australian infantry, particularly in the Lae area. Our Squadron played only a minor role as we were further to the east and mostly involved in offensive actions nearer our base. But the Bismarck show was a real morale booster for us all.

Then on 14 April it was Milne Bay's turn to be the Japanese objective. Our radar station told us there were about 60 aircraft headed our way. In our language of the day, "it was really

on". Our Kittyhawks and some American Lightning fighters plus the Army Ack Ack gunners had considerable success. Squadron ground staff were exceedingly busy. One disabled bomber crashed in our camp area. The following night we heard Tokyo Rose telling us on short-wave that, in their attack on Milne Bay, the gallant Japanese air force had sunk 11 ships and shot down 44 Allied planes. This took some beating as a piece of exaggerated propaganda.

Much more was about to happen. In June the squadron moved a little further north, to Goodenough Island. It was still based there when, in August, I left to go on leave. Goodenough was quite a good spot, a pleasant change from Milne Bay, but before long 77 left on another move northward. The struggle to slowly but surely push the Japanese out of the Southwest Pacific was now under way.

And what of the application for a commission? I had yet another interview while at Milne Bay, then silence, until, almost a year later and true to the mysterious ways of the Air Force, I was intercepted when about to depart Sydney on my second posting north. I was obliged to follow orders and change direction to report to RAAF School of Administration, Trinity College, University of Melbourne. Six weeks was the duration of the commission course. It was sometimes called the 'six-week wonder course'. Those who passed gained their commission with the rank of Pilot Officer. For the would-be Signals Officers this was followed by a specialist course at Signals School, Point Cook. Those who survived the six-week course could in future, possibly with tongue in cheek, state, "Yes, I've been through Uni".

It was always best to expect the unexpected.



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