

RAAF: true World War II stories

...from the men who helped win the war in the air

Memoirs from Ian Robinson, RAAF 459 Squadron

459 Squadron was formed in February 1942 to be a naval co-operation unit for general reconnaissance over the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Born in Melbourne, Australia, I joined the RAAF at the age of 20 and was given basic training as a mechanic in Adelaide, Melbourne, and at the RAAF base at Bairnsdale, in country Victoria. I remember one horrifying incident there when a Hudson bomber was to do a mock bombing run on the 'drome HQ, and 15 lads decided to take up the offer of a thrill ride. The plane made a low-level dive, pulled out and the port wing fell off, causing a huge explosion right on the 'drome. Within a few minutes we were handed a chaff bag and told go out and pick up the body parts. I picked up a couple of feet but really the men were all blown apart; it was a wrenching experience that I've never forgotten. Of course we never had any counseling to get over it. I was only 20 years old at the time - and if there was room on the plane I would have been one of the fatalities.

After four months the OTU was transferred to East Sale, where I worked on Beauforts - a locally-made medium bomber. I recall one particular instance at 1 OTU when at about 10pm the whole base was placed on high alert, the rumour being that a Jap sub was sighted off Lakes Entrance. With all aircraft (Beauforts and Hudsons) parked in a neat line they were most vulnerable to attack. The order was given to disperse all aircraft in adjoining farmlands preferably with trees to hide them from observation. Nothing eventuated and the next morning we had to find the aircraft and return them to the dispersal. Boundary fences had been demolished to move them and everybody was amazed at the positions that the aircraft were found in - since they were parked in the middle of the night.

It was a big scare for everybody - a realisation that the war had come not just to regions off Australia's northern coast, but also as far south as Victoria.

After OTU training I was ordered to report to the Melbourne Showgrounds where about 60 airmen mustered waiting to embark a ship. We changed our Australian Pounds for American dollars, caught a troop train to Brisbane where we boarded a US troop ship, the SS Lurline, which sailed as soon as we'd boarded. How cramped it was! We slept on deck in six-tier bunks with only a canvas blind to shelter us from the elements.

We were posted to the Middle East and left with thousands of servicemen bound for Bombay, India. I had several turns of keeping watch for submarines, rumoured to be operating in the Indian Ocean. We had a 0.5-inch machine gun and a box of ammo for anti-sub watch, a ludicrous weapon to defend a ship - and on top of that we hadn't received any training for loading or firing the weapon anyway. Fortunately the trip was uneventful. Transiting to Egypt aboard the former P&O ship Ormonde, I was posted to RAAF 459 Squadron at Gambut, just outside Tobruk.

Scorpions were plentiful in the desert, and they became our squadron emblem.

We slept six to a tent, with just a ground sheet and blanket on the desert sand. We worked at that stage on Hudson bombers whose operational duties were anti-submarine sweeps of the Mediterranean Sea, and occasional bombing support to desert army operations. We worked hard to keep our squadron availability at 97%, and this was a record for the region. Water was incredibly scarce - only a gallon a day per man, so we washed our clothes in 100 octane aviation fuel which was plentiful.

My job, after I was promoted to Fitter II E (mechanic) was to maintain the engines of "my" plane, to refuel the aircraft, warm up the engines, make sure they were running perfectly and all readings were correct on the instruments in front of the pilot. I looked after the personal aircraft of the Commanding Officer, and on many occasions he would take me up for a test flight. One time he was going to HQ and simply said "jump in Robby, I'm just going over to Group HQ for a few minutes." On one of these flights the tail wheel wouldn't come down for landing, so I had to crawl into the tail of the aircraft and use an emergency lever, tugging it to set off an explosive charge resulting in the wheel lowering to its correct position.

At times other squadrons used our base - they were either RAF or American squadrons. It was always a pleasure to see the Yanks as they brought all sorts of goodies with them - and even a canteen with real food, sweets, soft drinks, toiletries, and once the latest movies. Under control of the RAF, we could never understand why they would never give us canteen facilities and our diet was appallingly bad - we

suffered "desert sores" frequently, caused by lack of fresh food and no vitamins. Two men even went mad, poor buggers, due to the conditions in the desert.

The Italians sometimes sent planes over to bomb us. We had nowhere to hide, no bomb shelters at all, so it was fortuitous that they were incredibly inaccurate.

Just before D-Day, not that we knew it as such, about 50 wooden mock-up planes and rows of tent were placed on our airfield to make the Germans think that a couple of extra squadrons had arrived. To the German recce aircraft taking photos from high altitude it would look like the Allies were planning a landing in Greece. After the war we found out the ruse worked - the Germans had moved two extra Divisions into Greece in view of the apparent strengthening of our forces in the Middle East. We never knew the state of the war in Europe or the Far East, and we didn't even have a wireless until someone built one. This cobbled-together set would, however, only receive the German propaganda station.

Moving to Haifa, the squadron was ordered to send ten aircraft to Cyprus, and since one of the planes was mine, I went along. We never found out what it was all about, but then after two weeks we flew back to Benghazi - a barren strip - for months. At one stage it rained (almost unheard of) and our tents were submerged for three days. Following Nazi defeat in the Med, the squadron was posted again, this time bound for England, and we embarked a troop carrier at Alexandria. Sleeping in hammocks well below the waterline, I remember the feeling of coming under U-boat attack and the sound of the US Navy dropping depth charges.

In England we were based at Chivenor, but within a few days the C.O. announced that bomber command had caught the feared snorkel-equipped U-boats in their pens and destroyed them. Consequently, 459 Squadron was no longer required. My next posting was to RAF 461 Squadron, Pembroke Dock, a Sunderland flying-boat base. I arrived the day before VE Day. Given a seven-day leave pass, I went to London to join the celebrations before returning to Pembroke and a posting to 466 Squadron, at Driffield, Yorkshire. Within a few months I was on my way home to Australia - with my English bride following many months later on a "War Brides" ship.

Ian Duncan Robinson. RAAF Fitter II E 1942-45

Ian Robinson, left, with tent mates in the desert - note the bandaged hand and marks on right leg due to desert sores.

