

Off to the Middle East

On their first trip out to the ME, Eric Lloyd remembers coming in to land at Luqa on Malta when his skipper Don Saville made a very low approach, too low in fact for the aircraft to be identified from the IFF³ signal. They scampered out to sea, hotly pursued by Bofors gun shells, gained height, were properly identified and allowed to land without further incident. Aircrew having reached Egypt were returned to Britain to ferry out more aircraft. They generally 'proceeded' from Heliopolis by air transport across the Sahara via Khartoum to Lagos, a place of great significance in Squadron mythology. They were then transported by sea via Freetown back to Britain.

In Freetown, Lovelace and another airman bought a case of Booth's dry gin which was only allowed on board the yet-to-be commissioned aircraft carrier HMS *Archer*, after the CPO affirmed that the ship's cook needed it for a cake he was baking. Into the cake was poured three quarts of so called 'lemon mix' which, with the addition of the gin, became in fact a 'lemon flavoured extract' of 47% alcohol by volume which naturally resulted in the whole ship's company getting roaring drunk.

The ship's captain was not overly impressed and trans-shipped the 'drunken Air Force' in the middle of the night to board the *Donottar Castle*. In the process, Jim fell overboard among the sharks but was rescued by two sober sailors and awoke two days later as the ship was leaving port, quite 'starkers' and covered by a grey blanket. Eventually he was dressed in an Aussie hat with NZ hat badge, naval square rig jacket, Army shorts and socks and Navy work boots. He looked so bizarre, when he reported to RCAF HQ in London, that he was put through the missing airman's identity drill. He established that he was who he said he was and was then informed that he had been commissioned for the past twelve months.

The Bill Fordyce Story

Bill Fordyce had already had his share of adventure before he flew an aircraft out to the Middle East. He had been a member of the CMF before the war and spent the first 11 months of his service training men in AA searchlight drill. He had volunteered for the RAAF and was eventually called up on No. 5 Course in August 1940 under the EATS. He completed ITS at Somers, EFTS at Essendon and SFTS at Wagga on Ansons before being posted to the UK via Canada. This last posting was not without its danger as the ship ran into an iceberg while crossing the Atlantic, was completely immobilised and, a sitting duck, had to wait to be towed back to Canada.

Bill then found himself on another vessel and part of a large convoy which eventually reached the UK. Being far older than most aircrew, and destined for multi engined aircraft, he was posted to OTU at Moreton-in-the-Marsh on Wimpeys. On completing this training, he was posted to 458 at Holme-on-Spalding Moor, some months before the Squadron was posted to the ME to reinforce the Desert Air Force. When that occurred, he flew an aircraft out to the Middle East and, like most aircrew at the time, finally reached Egypt after a long wait on Malta. There he found that he had been posted back to the UK to collect another aircraft. He was flown across Africa to Lagos via Khartoum, then returned to the UK on an aircraft carrier which may have been the one from which Jim Lovelace and the 'drunken air force' were removed on a similar operation.

Back in the UK the Squadron converted to torpedo-carrying aircraft but Bill had to go to

³ IFF- Identification Friend or Foe - a system to identify enemy aircraft.

hospital for an abdominal operation. After recovering, he was posted back to the Squadron where he took over a crew all of whom were unknown to him, except the tail gunner George Crompton. They set out for the ME via Gibraltar, made a landfall which, due apparently to a navigational error, brought them over El Fuka (which unfortunately was not the Nile Delta) just as Rommel's Africa Corps were passing through on their retreat. The Wimpey provoked a couple of German 109s into action and when Bill's aircraft was hit, George Crompton was killed - but not before he had knocked out one of the enemy attackers.

When the Wimpey caught fire and ditched somewhere between six and eight miles off shore, their dinghy was sunk by the remaining 109. The surviving crew, all of whom were slightly burned and injured, swam ashore towing the navigator who had been more severely affected. Once ashore, they fell into enemy hands and were taken to Benghazi, now POWs. The members of the crew were separated, with Bill as an officer, being flown to Italy and the rest of the crew, who were all non-commissioned, departed by ship. As another example of inevitable wartime tragedy, their ship was intercepted by the British Navy and sunk with the loss of all personnel, including Bill's crew. This happened towards the end of July 1942.

Bill spent the next twelve months, until September 1943, as a POW of the Italians. During this time he wrote to the Air Ministry giving an account of their trip from the UK and asking that George Crompton be considered for a DFM. Just under twelve months later he actually received a reply which stated that in the case of an airman killed in action only a MID or VC were applicable and in this case neither was deemed appropriate. On the capitulation of the Italians, Bill and the other POWs were taken over by the SS and transferred to Germany to Stalag Luft III, the site of the famous tunnel escape.

At end of March 1944, Bill was No. 84 of the 250 men who were to take part in the 'Great Escape' bid, but several tunnel collapses and an air raid on Sagan, forced the closure of the tunnel with Bill the last to enter in daylight at about 6 am. Five Australians escaped through the tunnel with Bill being the only survivor, after the others were caught by the Germans, handcuffed and shot. Jim Holliday, another member of the Squadron, was also in Stalag Luft III but did not meet Bill until after the war at one of the Squadron reunions. S/Ldr Douglas, who had been a flight commander on 458, was also in this Stalag.

The war lasted another fourteen months during which time the prisoners were all taken out of Stalag Luft III before the Russians arrived and walked to a camp at Milag-Marlag Nord where they spent quite some time. They were then walked in advance of the British Army to Lubeck then back to Tarmstedt where they stayed until war's end. No effort was made by the RAF to repatriate them so they travelled in small groups to Antwerp from where they were finally flown back to the UK.

Travelling East

For the Squadron groundstaff, the voyage to Egypt was nothing if not indirect. Before boarding the good ship *Mataroa*, one of the airmen had procured a gramophone and one record entitled, 'My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean' which was played continuously night and day in their sleeping quarters. However, it was repeated just once too often and met a watery grave - 'My Bonnie' definitely now 'lies under the ocean'. The ship moved out into the Atlantic and called in to Freetown, but the troops were not allowed ashore.

One depressing experience was to see a Sunderland crash. It turned out that the engine rocker gear had been lubricated with soft soap instead of the appropriate grease and it only just got airborne before it 'went in'.

The arrival of the party at Durban caused some small consternation. AIF servicemen had been there and left behind a rather ambivalent reputation as Australians. As a thank you for looking