

## 43 SQUADRON - DARWIN

In 1944 I was posted to Rathmines for OTU onto Catalina Flying Boats. After three months operational training I had 10 days leave at home in Melbourne, during which Norma and I were married (actually we eloped) on 18th July.

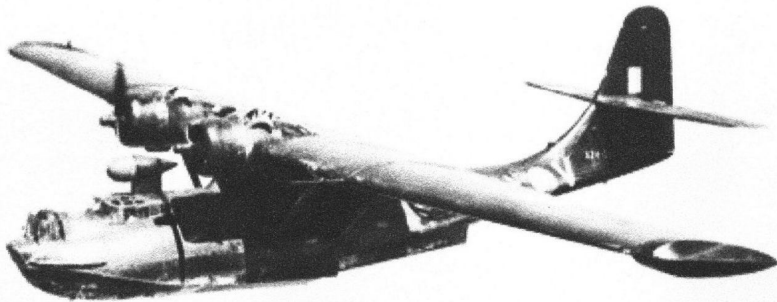


Norma and I had know  
each other since 1928.

I then joined 43 Sqd. at Darwin. Our main task was mine dropping – operating at night laying mines in strategic waterways in Indonesia, Morotai, The Philippines, Hainan Straits and Manila Harbour. These were normally 17 to 18 hour trips.

Our most northerly sortie, which was in fact the most northerly of any RAAF aircraft, was to Amoy in China, near Formosa (now Taiwan).

Years later we were awarded The Philipines Liberation Medal by Philipines government for our valiant efforts!



A Boeing-built Catalina (PB2B-2) Black Cat of No. 43 Squadron.

April 1st 1945 and we had a couple of days rest following our previous mine drop in the Lombok Straits. This had been a 14 hour trip, plus 3 hours from West Bay, with a refuelling stop at Yampe Sound on the way home.

About 1030 hrs next morning I recall volunteering to assist the caterers by manning the soft drink truck to give the boys a hand on their run into Darwin. It was a bit of a change from hanging around Doctors Gully all the time because it could get boring after a while.

We were all getting a bit toey about now. We had had a reasonably busy period with over 20 mine-laying sorties and, according to our reckoning, were within a couple of weeks of the end of our 'tour' (about 9 months) and were sure we would have a reasonably smooth run home from hereon in.

What we hadn't counted on was the fickle finger of fate, and a couple of very shrewd staff officers at Northern Area Command... they won! And we set sail as follows :- Back at base about lunch time and lo and behold, coming across the road from the Officers area was none other than our skipper, one Flt. Lt. Ian Smith. He said that we would be taking off in the late afternoon the following day in an A24-55 (our favourite aircraft) and to pack a bag for a couple of days.

It was customary not to tell the crews of the target etc. until the final briefing an hour or so before take off. On occasions this also applied to the skipper, and I can recall a couple of times when Ian opened an envelope on the aircraft to find the exact location of our target. Next morning, as aircrew we had to check the aircraft, arrange and pick up rations, and make sure that everything in the 'factory' worked! This of course required assistance from the marine section to ferry aircrew back and forth to the aircraft moored in deep water a few hundred yards out, as necessary.



My station as a Wireless Airgunner – in the blister.

On this particular trip we were informed that more than one aircraft was required and left no doubt that this was to be an important mission. In our case the Wireless Airgunners (WAGs) had to check and tune the radios with the HF on a discreet frequency, check the HSV Radar, intercom throughout the aircraft and finally the guns.

There were two .5 Brownings in the blisters, one of which would be manned by the second wireless operator whilst in the target area. From then on most of the crew would attend the final briefing and at the appropriate time head for the aircraft.

Most important from our point of view was that we collect our cypher/code for the trip. Codes changed daily and contained a letter of the day with a series of challenges... give a wrong answer and that was it – no more communication!

Details of the communications, challenges etc. were contained in a lead covered folder (to sink if thrown overboard) with the current pages printed on rice paper (to swallow if captured). Once we were a few miles from base all communication was by Morse code. All the WAGs being checked out at 25 words per minute!



STANDING FROM L TO R. KEVIN McDONALD ARM. .WAL HYNES 1st ENG. .ROSS KING 3rd PILOT. BOB HOPKINS 2.A . .KNEELING. KEVIN KING 2nd W.A.G. . .DICK UDY 1st W.A.G. . . REG MARR (SKIPPER) . .TED RAYNOR NAVIGATOR . .OWEN CREWES 2nd PILOT

As usual, on the night before a mission we would saunter down to the Marine Section and pass an hour or so having a yarn around the jetty. In a way the lads were a bit like family –

they would usually give you a slap on the backside as you climbed into the blister with a casual "good luck", and they would be there, all smiles, to greet you next morning. So it was on the 2nd of April 1945!

With all aboard, everything OK with the A24-55, at 5pm Darwin time we took off into the evening sun. By this time we knew our trip was a travel and we hoped our destination was Jinamoc, Leyte, some 14 hours to the north. It was going to be another long night, but by this time we were getting used to it! After all, what's a nights sleep between friends?

Next morning at 8am, having dodged a mini cyclone and the Japanese air force, we entered Leyte Gulf and couldn't believe our eyes!!! Stretching as far as the eye could see were ships of all types – carriers, destroyers... you name it and they were there! It seemed that there were two American fleets, several British and a couple of Aussie vessels just to make up the number.

It was obvious that the war in Europe was no longer a problem. Keeping watch over all these were several U.S. fighter planes keeping what they called a 'Combat Air Patrol' (CAP). It seemed they didn't want any unwelcome guests! Fortunately we were able to find a small piece of unoccupied ocean on which to land and wend our way between ships up to Jinamoc, for a very enjoyable breakfast.

The CB's had certainly changed the place since we had been there three months earlier as a base for the mining of Manila Harbour in December '44! We had vivid memories of standing ankle deep in mud in our tents and bathing in the sea with special soap provided!

Thus the scene was set for our final fling at the Nips. Although the war was nearing the end, the Yanks were just entering Manila from Lingayen. And they were deadly serious!!

We received our orders and, to cut a long story short, the following is a review of our next few days!!!

Depart :---

Jinamoc	4th April 0945	to	Lingayen	5hr 05	day
Lingayen	4th " 1545	to	Amoy (China), Jinamoc	3.30 hrs	night
Jinamoc	7th " AM	to	Lingayen/Hainan Strts/Lingayen	4.45	12 hrs 35
Lingayen	8th " AM	to	Jinamoc	4.35	
Jinamoc	10th " AM	to	Lingayen	4.40	
Lingayen	10th " PM	to	Hainan Strts / Lingayen		12 hrs 15
	11th " AM	to	Jinamoc	4.20	
Jinamoc	12th " PM	to	Darwin	2.20	12 hrs

From 5pm on the 2nd April to about 9am on the 12th, we had flown a total of 93 hours (60 of these being at night) dropped about a dozen mines (all within about 10 metres of the designated spot). We were also intercepted by a black widow night fighter just north of Formosa at midnight on one occasion, but he eventually gave us a buzz and after checking with his ops went on his merry way!!

We refuelled from tankers or bags at Lingayen and Jinamoc and took a shower on the mainplane whenever possible, and rain permitting. We didn't have much time to socialise with the Yanks who were busy consolidating their landing/occupation of Mindoro. And so we were on our way back to Darwin and home!

On our trip back we were able to overfly Manila. There was a fair bit of activity going on, particularly in and around the big sporting arena. It seemed that the Yanks on the ground were angry about the treatment meted out to their troops at Bataan. In any case it was nice to look at Clarke Field and see the wrecks of Japanese aircraft dispersed all over the place!



The crew at Tacloban, Leyte Island, Philippines on 28 Dec 1944. From left, Flying Officer (F/O) W. J. Cater, Gympie, Qld; F/O S. M. Simpson, Perth, WA; Warrant Officer (WO) J. V. Legge, Brunswick, Vic; Sergeant (Sgt) N. O. Farrar, Mosgill, NSW; Sgt J. C. Hudson, Coburg, Vic; F/O I. S. Smith, Launceston, Tas; and me, WO S. Gibson, Brunswick, Vic.

I believe the Phillipinos suffered about 100,000 dead in the battle. It was also nice to visualise Darwin in the distance where we planned to have a good sleep, shower and shave and nestle in the bosom of home. 43 Squadron never seemed so good!

We landed and were welcomed as usual by the marine section boys with some idle banter, "Thought you had rented a flat in Tokyo". It was nice to see the smiles on their faces. "Bad luck mate," one fellow said. "The tide is out and we have to take you to the main jetty." This meant climbing the ladder at Darwin docks and proceeding to the camp at Doctors Gully by truck. No worries, it was only about 10 minutes away.

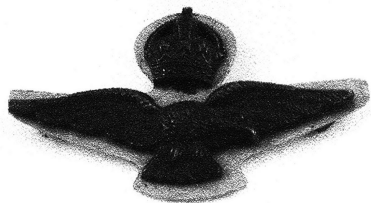
Climbing the ladder to the dock I noticed the Adjutant standing alongside of one of the trucks and thought 'Special welcome today,' but no such luck! The next few minutes once again changed my life completely.

Coming towards me the Adj. said, "Welcome back Sept. Sorry, I have some bad news for you. Your brother David is dying in the Alfred Hospital." He went on to say that they had booked me on the next Dakota out of Darwin and had all my possessions in my kit bag ready to go. Somewhat stunned, I shook hands with my crewmates – some of whom I never saw again – and headed for the Darwin aerodrome. I often wondered who inherited my butterbox cupboard and camp stretcher that had been my home for the last 9 months.

Coming home we struck a dust storm at Oodnadatta and were forced to stay there overnight. Then I had to wait for another aircraft at Adelaide. We eventually landed at Essendon in the early AM, almost at the same time that David died. Not exactly the homecoming I had envisaged... just another of those quirks that life hands out when one least expects it! And so... on with the war!

Ten days leave and I had to report to the Melbourne Cricket Ground, which by now had become a Personnel Depot for the RAAF!

Reporting in, I was introduced to the CO – in one of his sober moments – who told me that I had to report to Point Cook to undergo a Cypher Officers course, and to get myself a new hat badge before I left the MCG. I did so but never wore it. If there was one thing the 'Cat' boys were proud of it was the green saltwater discoloration on the badge that indicated the wearer was associated with the flying boats.



There were about a dozen of us on the course at Point Cook but I don't think anybody, including the instructors, were very interested. Within a couple of weeks we were back at the cricket ground again.

The accommodation for Duty Personnel was under the Stand near the main gate and was primitive and cold at best. I had flown a total of just on 1200 hours operational hours and had the doubtful honour of being Orderly Officer at the M.C.G., saluting the flag on the 'The Oval' as it was lowered at sundown and raised next morning!

I was still at the M.C.G. Personnel Pool when war ended in 1945, and was discharged within three weeks of 'V' Day. Most of the guards around the ground were Sergeant Pilots who had only recently finished their course. Most were discharged without having the pleasure of going to a squadron.