Lives of an Australian Airman; Letters to a Daughter.

by

J.D. McCredie.

To my family, and especially my daughter Sally, to
whose persistence this work owes its origin
and
to those former comrades whom I have wanted to
honour in this personal account.

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forget P. and D.

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Foreword.

In 1972, my wife and I went to Jakarta where I was to serve, for the following two years, as Minister at the Australian Embassy. We sent our fourth child, our fourteen year old daughter Sally, to board at Clyde School, Victoria.

It was during her second year there that she started to ask questions about what I did in the war. This was something which I had never discussed with my family, or anyone else for that matter, and none of her older siblings had ever shown any interest so I took it at first to be a one off interest.

Sally persisted and when she asked me whether I had ever heard the well-known p.o.w. version of Colonel Bogey about Hitler and his cronies*, which one of her school friends had related, I was stirred into action. I realised that there was much which I had not thought about for twenty-eight years which could interest someone on the threshold of becoming an adult.When I sat down to write the first letter I had no idea that I would be committing myself to a correspondence which would ultimately total about eighty thousand words. She had unlocked the past.

Sally kept the letters and gave them back to me upon my retirement from the Foreign Service. Re-reading them at a time when there has been a revival of interest in participation by Australians in past wars, I have been aware of the lack of attention which has been given to the efforts of the 1300 Australian airmen who served in many capacities with RAF squadrons in India during World War 2. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that there were no RAAF squadrons in India The tendency of historians may be to research national units and we do not have annual squadron re-unions in Australia where memories are revived and memoirs inspired. But, in World War 2, under the Empire Air Training Scheme, those of us who served overseas were part of one Air Force, whether we were on actual RAAF squadrons or not. The story of Australian air crews in India forms a part of British Commonwealth history which can never be emulated, and it seems important to remind the present generation of Australians

of the closeness of the ties which we then enjoyed with our Commonwealth brothers-in-arms.

I have condensed the original letters without greatly altering the original wording though there has been some consequential re-arrangement of the content and a final letter had to be written. Sally had joined us in Jakarta before the series was finished and momentum was lost, but the final letter is roughly what it would have been if written twenty-eight years earlier. After consideration, I decided to keep the original letter form in which the story was written since it conveys a sense of immediacy which I have found too difficult to reproduce otherwise.

I have entitled the volume "Lives of an Australian Airman... Letters to a daughter." Like cats, most wartime airmen had numerous lives! The letters tell the story from a single individual's viewpoint, but I have sought to relate the events in which we participated to the wider context of the war. I have also aimed to show something of the reflections we had and the reactions and diversions which kept us going, the importance of esprit de corps and camaraderie and, above all, of good leadership and example in maintaining our sense of purpose.

As in all walks of life, my war turned up a variety of characters, good blokes and less good blokes, heroes, journeymen, eccentrics and incompetents both full and part-time, amongst which last the reader is entitled to identify myself.

*My family has persuaded me to quote the text for the benefit of those unfamiliar with this great example of the humorist's role in maintaining morale in a p.o.w. camp.

"Hitler, had only one, brass, ball,
Goering, had two but ve..ry small,
Himmler, was somewhat simmler,
But poor old Goebbels, had noebbels, at all."

Melbourne,
16 June, 2002.

Dear Sally,

When I signed off last week, we had become a fully operational squadron. We had lost our first crews on ops. Others had come back with varying degrees of damage. We had adopted, as though it were original to us, that song to the tune of Clementine which probably served every bomber squadron in the RAF. There were those amongst our numbers who never tired of the sound of their own maudlin rendition of it. The words went something like this;

"Three shot down above the target,
Two force-landed in the drink,
One crash-landed with his wheels up,
Bleedin' 'ell, it makes you think.

Chorus:

Ninet-nine squadron, ninet-nine squadron,
Though we say it with a sigh,
We will do that bloody milk run
Every day, until we die."

And it's true that the tears would occasionally roll down the cheeks of some, like Bill Bowler, as they shouted these words at the top of their loud, if not always tuneful, voices. They were not really tears for poor old Harrison or his crew, nor was it the sheer, poetic beauty of the verse which evoked this reaction. No, I expect it was mad Carew's at its wicked work again, reminding us of our own mortality.

But songs like these did have a morale-building, or sustaining, purpose. Even if only sung when you were in your cups, it made it harder when you were sober to turn round and say, "No, to hell with the milk run. I've had enough of this sticking my neck out."

Our next operation was, if any such activity could be so described, a fun operation. We were to fly at low level up and down the Burma/Siam railway south of a place called Kyungyang, shooting up and bombing any traffic we could locate on this main Japanese supply route.

It was quite the most picturesque flying that I can remember doing. The railway was at the foot of a valley between mountain ranges, not so far apart and probably averaging about 2000 feet in height. We flew along at a height just about level with the hill tops and then, as we spotted a target would swoop on it. I have no recollection of what we saw or hit, but we swooped seven or eight times before exhausting our bomb and ammunition supply. We would dive in at a fairly shallow angle and the gunners had the time of their lives popping away at each target.

I don't think we encountered any opposition in the form of ground fire. The main hazard was in coming up out of the dive because there was a fair bit of cloud around and, although, according to our briefing, there should have been reasonable room in which to manoeuvre, there was always the risk that one of our mates would make a diving run at the same target from the opposite direction. Although we had all gone out singly, we caught sight of a number of our friends in the target area, and I can remember forming up with Clem for a little while. Then his crew spotted a target, he raised his right thumb to me in the traditional way, peeled off and sank some more teeth into the Japanese line of supply.

Thirteen hours and twenty-five minutes after take-off we were back on the ground at base. It had taken exactly the same time as our previous operation against Hnonpladouk. We had taken off at dawn and landed after night-fall. This was much preferable to the all night ops. we had done from Salbani, We did not have to make up for the loss of sleep in the heat of the day, the aircraft was cool when you entered it and the denser morning air assisted take-off.

The Erk was not one to let the implications of this pass unnoticed. The Liberator aircraft, if I remember rightly, had an unladen weight of about 37,000 pounds and a manufacturer's recommended take-off weight of 59,000 pounds. By raising throttle boost to forty-eight pounds we had raised the take off weight to 62,000 pounds on my previous squadron. The Erk had heard, however, that the American Liberators, based at Ranchi, were lifting off with prodigious weights like 65-66,000 pounds. Their runway

was said to be longer than our 2,000 yards but, even so, the Erk felt that we should be trying to do better, and the early morning take-offs were the obvious times to try. So, for the whole of my time on the squadron we were progressively raising our take-off weights, the point in this being, of course, that the greater the weight, the greater the bomb load that could be carried.

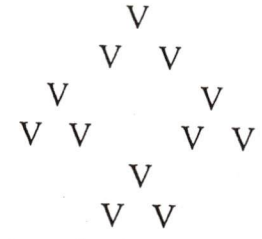
Having started at 63,000 pounds, on lengthy operations we were never less than this at take-off, but on short operations, as the Liberator's maximum bomb load was 12,000 pounds, we may often have been lighter. The additional 1200 gallons of fuel we would carry on a very long trip would weigh about 9000 pounds and this, on one occasion reduced our bomb load to 4000 pounds. But, in the end, we were approaching a take-off weight of 65,000 pounds.

On 13 December, we did our third trip for the month, bridge-busting at a place called Kyaikkatha near Rangoon. This too was in daylight and we flew at tree-top height over the Irrawaddy delta to minimise the risk of interception. Even if a fighter spots you at tree-top height he has problems in taking on a well-armed bomber like a Liberator. He can't use his main advantage, speed, to approach in a dive so that he can close on you quickly, unload his weaponry at you and rapidly dive away. He would hit the ground if he tried! You can make things harder for him by cork-screwing, i.e. not flying in a steady straight course but weaving a pattern of climb and turn, then dive and turn in the opposite direction so that your path through the air resembles that of a corkscrew. This not only made it more difficult for the attacker to focus his sights on you, but also created a greater area of turbulence behind which would affect his ability to take steady aim.

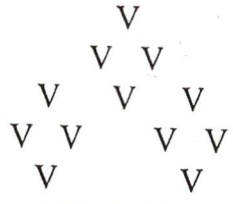
The crew hated cork-screwing, since it shook them around and it was very tiring if you had to keep it up for long. But I practised it quite a bit and on some operations it proved useful. The important thing, of course, was that in all these changes of the aircraft's attitude, you kept going in the same general direction. But I remain grateful that I did not have to do my tour over Germany, where some of the

unfortunate pilots had to corkscrew for as long as five or six hours to put off the radar trackers.

One thing which we could have done without, at this stage, was any more of the demonstration-type flying over India. You will remember Butch's disaster on the last one of these. But it seems the internal situation in India was still sufficiently volatile to require this and, on 16 December, we were sent on another over Nagpur, Poona, Bombay and back to base, fourteen hours thirty-five minutes of boredom and not one of them to count towards our three hundred hour tour. But there was one satisfaction for me in this. The squadron's formation flying pattern had been changed. Instead of flying in four V's of three, which would look like this;



we were to fly, in future, in three boxes of four, which would look like this;



if you can get the idea. This had merits in the event of fighter attack from the rear as, in V's of three the front V would not be able to fire since the rear V would be on its line. In the new formation, much more of the squadron's fire power would be able to aim at any fighter game enough to take us on.. One result of this re-shuffle was that I came to fly as number three to Sandy Webster, our flight commander. As Sandy led the squadron when the Erk was not flying, this was a good place to be (see above) and I had the satisfaction of knowing that Sandy had chosen me because I flew steady tight formation. In this lay protection because a compact box flying steadily was a much more formidable proposition to attack than one which was all over the sky. The gunners in our box always had steady platforms to fire from.

Christmas was now approaching, but this didn't prevent our going out on 21 December to drop our message, about 12000 tons of it in high explosive bombs , on Japanese bases at Taunggup, on the Arakan coast of Burma. This was to be my last op. for 1944 and I can remember totting up my operational hours; counting the two leaflet raids over France, the two air sea rescues and the ops I had done with 355 Squadron, they came to 141; one more trip and I should be half way there. Surely if I survived that I should be alright; Clem too; I had this feeling that so long as Clem was around I should be and he was as large as life.

Christmas, as it turned out, was to be more of a wreck-reation than a re-creation period. On Christmas Eve, every air crew member received a special Christmas bonus of six bottles of beer... it was Foster's lager which, as an Australian, I was supposed to be mad about. As a non-drinker before I left Australia, I had never tasted it. But, rather than admit as much to my crew, I gave them a dissertation as a good Victorian on the respective merits of Abbot's and Foster's, not to mention Vic. and Melbourne bitters. I even trotted out the old chestnut about Toohey's (Sydney beer). The entries in a beer tasting had been judged by a panel, which had said it would like to have an analyst's opinion on Toohey's. A sample was sent away to a laboratory and had come back with the caption. "This horse is no longer fit for work." The fact that I had never tasted Toohey's didn't deter me. It was a good old Melbourne joke, I thought, but learned the same joke had been told about numerous English beers. Anyway, Foster's received the ultimate seal of approval. There was scarcely an undrunk bottle to be found on the squadron by Christmas morning.

Greg and Ginger Miles were, of course, well on the way towards polishing off the special Christmas ration of a bottle of Scotch and a bottle of Gordon's gin as well. For most of us, however, that lasted well into Boxing day. How it was that nobody died of alcoholic poisoning, I cannot to this day fathom. Certainly, by Boxing Day, Greg had polished off not only his own ration but half bottles collected from owners here and there who had passed out

into gentle sleep. If the Japs had had the resources to attack, I suspect they would not have met much opposition from the RAF anywhere in Bengal over the Christmas period of1944.

This upset the Erk. He had been happy to let us go on Christmas Day but, when nobody turned up at the flights on Boxing Day, he became very angry indeed. As a result he issued a station order that all crews were to get up for dawn bombing practice on 27 December and he repeated the dose on 28 December. Our rest was over and it was good psychology to put us to practice before going out on ops again. It reminded us that our jobs and not our wreckreation came first.

One other thing might be mentioned. We played a lot of sport, cricket, soccer and rugby over the Christmas/New Year period. The weather in Bengal in late December is beautiful, crisp clear sunny days, which is lovely for cricket, but the ground bakes very hard and, of course, we had no water to make a proper grass field. But the country-side around Dhubalia is completely flat and the only hillocks on our cricket field would have been those mounds deposited daily by the local villagers.

We also had the company of a flight of vultures, which fed on the carrion and offal around our base and appeared to inhabit a bamboo grove on the edge of our field of play. The first clout of a cricket ball into their vicinity would send these ungainly creatures into their improbable aerial environment. Whoever has not seen a vulture take off has missed what is surely one of the great sights of nature. It's rather as though one of those old Dutch fish-wives we used to see in Holland has been running away from a sailor, with her black skirts widening and widening, and making a thunderous cracking and rustling as though all the stays were bursting asunder. And then, just as you think this will bring the old girl down she gives a final momentous heave, up she goes and the skirts sustain her in flight. If I choose to remember more about the vultures than the cricket, there is doubtless good reason.

So we approached the new year and, on New Year's Eve, received our briefing for the operation which we were to commence very early on New Year's morning. The target was a bridge near Kyungyaung on the Burma/Siam railway. We were also given a general briefing. The Japanese were moving much stuff up the Burma coast in small coastal junks, launches and prahus. If we spotted any, we should treat it as an opportunity target. Our half inch calibre machine guns would be capable of cutting them in half.

We took off at dawn and, since our route went close to heavily defended areas in Rangoon and Moulmein, we went out in loose formation, tightening up as we flew from Pagoda Point across the Irrawaddy delta to Kalegauk Island. This was to be our rendez-vous point also for the return journey but, having got there, we broke formation, dropped altitude to ground level and, one by one, sped across country to our target. I remember our run in quite clearly. Pat and Rajah brought us in like a dream, right over the bridge. Out went our eggs, a very heavy load.

"I think we got it skipper", called Bill Bowler from the rear turret. "There's junk and stuff flying everywhere."

"Terrific work, Rajah", I said. Even if we had not destroyed the bridge, I was confident that our photographs, taken by the synchronised cameras, would show up pretty well. We had gone across the bridge dead centre. The only problem was whether I had taken her in at the right height. If you went in too low the bombs, which were loaded horizontally on the aircraft, did not have time to drop their noses which was necessary so that they would dig in and explode where they hit. If the bombs stayed flat, they could bounce off the surface like a stone off water and their forward speed would have them exploding well clear of the target. But time would tell and I thought that if subsequent reconnaissance showed that the bridge had been destroyed, our claim to it would probably be as good as anyone's.

I suppose I was pretty elated after this. Here we were, a new year, on our way back from a successful mission, half

way through my tour. It seemed only minutes before we were back at Kalegauk and one of our aircraft was already there circling, awaiting the rest of us to resume formation. What was he doing? Of course, he'd spotted a junk which was hidden away in a little cove on the east coast of the island and was diving on it.

"Anyone know who it is?" I asked.

"I think it's Clem. He's flying Snow-white, isn't he?"

That was enough. If it were good enough for Clem to go in it was good enough for me and, barely remembering to put my mixture into rich and the pitch of my propellors to fine, I said;

"I'm going in. Gunners let 'em have it."

We turned around in a medium diving turn half way through which I began to see the red tracer bullets streaking all around us.

"They're shooting at us, Skipper", came from Rajah, in the unenviable position of having done his job only to see some other silly bugger getting into unnecessary trouble.

"I can see that", I replied, "Let 'em have it."

"Skipper", came a scream, "Clem's had it."

We were directly over the junk, about to clear the island, when there was a noise like an exploding bomb to my left. The aircraft shook violently. Taffie, kneeling calmly between Greg and me yelled;

"Skipper, the port inner. The oil pressure's dropping."

That's where we'd been hit. Without thinking, my hand went instantly to the port inner emergency feathering button, which I had memorised so faithfully after the runaway prop episode. No time to go through normal feathering procedures. If it didn't work the other way it would be too late to use the emergency button. I must

have hit that button one hundredth of a second after Taffie identified the problem and, miraculously, it worked. If it hadn't we would have been in real trouble. A wind-milling propellor creates tremendous drag and we were so far from home and at such low altitude that we might not have been able to get there. But the miracle happened and the propellor feathered under pressure from what must have been the last skerricks of oil in the engine. We had been hit by a twenty millimetre armour piercing shell which had gone right through one side of the engine and out the other.

Having cleared Kalegauk Island, I headed out to sea and Pat and I decided to take a course rather to the south of that which we had come out on, thinking it would be better not to be observed returning in a crippled condition. We could not, of course, rejoin the formation, since we could not keep pace with them and would not have the safety of numbers on the way home.

Unknown at first to me, there was trouble in the rear. The aircraft had also been hit amidships, just behind the bomb bays, with a considerable amount of ironmongery. Bass, who had lowered himself from his turret to see where he could help, had gone back and now came forward with the message;

"There's a fire amidships skipper."

So that was why there was no noise from the rear. The intercom had been cut. I had my hands full flying the wretched kite, however, and the only thing I could think of to reply, as Bass reported later, was;

"For Christ's sake put it out, and you help him Taffie."

This is what Bass and Taffie proceeded to do with the help of Flash, who had been hit in the shins with shrapnel. They also managed to do a professional job of binding Flash who, however, had to be hospitalised and was absent when the one photograph I have of my crew was taken. The fire had started because an oxygen bottle had been hit and had

spread quite a bit before the boys could get the extinguishers on to it.

Jackie Rogers was the other worry. We knew his turret had been hit but we could not communicate with him. Fortunately, by using the auxiliary power pump (the port inner engine supplied hydraulic power for the whole aircraft) we were able to raise his turret and Jackie emerged. Both of his guns had been buckled beyond recognition, and there was splintering of the perspex cover to his turret, but nothing had hit Jackie.

After this, there was nothing for it but to fly on and hope that nothing else could go wrong. We had taken off at dawn and, in normal circumstances, should have been back at base well before dusk. Taffie and I were, it transpired, thinking the same thing. Our speed was reduced and we were taking a longer route home. It would be after 6 p.m. instead of a bit after five when we got back. Instead of daylight, it would be dark. What of our undercarriage? The left wheel was housed in the nacelle of the engine which had been hit. Had it been damaged? Taffie was the first to ask the question.

"How can we tell?" I asked.

"Let it down and take a look", Taffie suggested.

"If I do that", I said, " and it has been damaged, we mightn't be able to raise it again and we will hardly be able to maintain height with it down, let alone reach base."

"We could get to Cox's (Cox's Bazaar), let it down and then, if it looks alright, raise it again and fly on to base."

I thought about this. You were expected to get back to base if you could. The aircraft would need substantial repairs which would not easily be done at Cox's. There would be no marks for landing there if it were considered unnecessary.

"How would you know the undercarriage is alright by looking at it ?" said Greg, who had been methodically helpful and silent all this time. This brought me back to earth.

"Of course, you couldn't be absolutely certain but, if it descended normally and looked alright, you could be reasonably certain."

"Balls", said Greg. "If you land at Cox's you will be handling it in daylight and that's the best chance if there's a punctured tyre, or a wheel collapses. You'd be in a ground loop or worse before you knew where you were at night."

What Greg said appealed to my sense of self-preservation, and it didn't require a vote to tell me what the rest of the crew would be thinking. The decision had to be mine, however, and there was this inner voice saying;

"It's as easy as falling off a log. You managed to land a Wellington on one engine at night and three engines make it a piece of cake."

But Matt had reported our situation to base and I had him tell them of our intention to try out the under-carriage at Cox's Bazaar. To lower it, Taffie would have to use the mechanical winding mechanism, which would of course have been needed to raise it again since we had lost our hydraulic power.

We entered the circuit at Cox's and reported our situation to them, but they had already been alerted by base.

"Lower your undercarriage and come in to land," I was instructed. "Fire and emergency services are on stand-by. An ambulance will be available for Leggett."

I lowered the undercarriage. It looked as sound as a bell. Nostalgically, I thought of base. It was less than two hours flying time away. We could have made it, but it was too late. The decision had been taken from me. There was still the risk of a blow-out. I would certainly get no marks were I to ignore the instruction, return to base and wreck the aircraft, even should we all survive. In we went. There was no problem. The aircraft turned and flew sweetly on its three engines. The runway looked broad, long, immense and welcoming. We came in and touched ground with the lightness of a sparrow. On the aircraft rolled. Brakes

worked perfectly. We came to a stop and were directed to taxi to a parking space just off the end of the runway.

There we left it. It was not our faithful King Kong, which may have been unserviceable on this occasion. It was E.G.919 and I don't even remember whether it had been christened. The next day a Mustang fighter, landing at Cox's, had brake failure on the runway, ran off the strip into EG 919 and they were both written off. But it had not come back for nothing. We were safe.

I was told, on landing, that the C.O. of the station wanted to see me. He greeted me in a typically cool RAF manner;

"Silly bloody way to celebrate the new year."

"I couldn't agree more sir", I said. "Could we get a beer?"

"Sorry", he said, "We're under siege here, you know"*, but pointing to some fellow N.C.O.'s "They'll take you to the sergeant's mess and probably find you a mad Carew's or two."

I needed them. There was a pain in my heart. I had survived, but Clem had bought it. My confidence in the future was disturbed. If Clem had gone, might there not be a bullet with my name on it?"

Your loving father.

*In fact, all Japanese forces appeared to have withdrawn or to be withdrawing from the Cox's Bazaar area at this stage, but the garrison was unaware of this.

Jakarta,
30-9-73.