

# Harry McArthur's war

By Harry McArthur

In the middle of 1942 I applied to join the Air Force, knowing that I would not be called up before my eighteenth birthday in October. The information that came with the application form was printed on brown paper\* and had been run off on a Gestetner.

The call up came soon after my birthday; I caught the train for Auckland on the 4th of December. The Limited used to leave about 7 in the evening and the Express left about 3 p.m. A few minutes later, a daily train ran to Auckland, for the use of the Forces. An intake of 100 was going to Whenuapai and Hobsonville. We arrived in Auckland about nine next morning and were taken to our Air Force stations by truck.

Of the 100 in the intake, I was the only one coming directly from civilian life; the rest were transferring from the Army. We lived in huts a couple of miles up the road from RNZAF Whenuapai, near Riverhead. Our time was divided between aerodrome defence and study. For the morning we had lectures and in the afternoon we engaged in army type activities.

Soon after our arrival we were lying in a semi-circle being instructed in the loading and firing of our rifles using dummy ammunition. One round went off. The exercise was stopped in a panic and other live rounds were found among the dummies. A few days later a Hudson bomber dived through the roof of a concrete hangar, killing four experienced airmen. If there had been any worry about the 'live' dummies, the crash, which we had to guard briefly, took that away.

The pay for an AC2 (Aircraftman 2nd class) was eight shillings a day which compared favourably with my civilian salary of £95 plus £25 boarding allowance. Board was thirty shillings a week. The Air Force pay, with no essential expenses, made life comfortable.

At the end of April 1943 we went by train to New Plymouth and spent the next six weeks at Bell Block. Rotorua was the next station and much talked about in advance. We were there for eight weeks, housed in tents, in huts and in Brent's Hotel. I had four weeks in the huts and four in Brent's. We were marched around the town for lectures in various buildings and NCO's on the street corners made an effort to smarten us up. Among the subjects was astro-navigation, and men would busy themselves in the evening, in the streets, knowing that a certain star would be above that power pole at a known time.

We now stated our preference for a particular job in aircrew, and the experts checked us over. We each had an interview with a psychologist who asked, 'Why do you want to be a pilot?' No matter what we felt about things, we said nothing patriotic. In due course I went to EFTS (elementary flying training school) at Harewood with the other trainee pilots. My landings were horrible, so I was not allowed to go solo and was grounded after 11 hours' instruction.

Back in Rotorua we were issued with extra clothes for Canada, and then went home for final leave of about a fortnight. My parents lived near Blenheim. Afterwards I caught the train to Picton, and when I got to Wellington I went to the reporting station, RNZAF Waterloo, on 2 October 1943. We were taken by train to the wharf two days later. Our troop ship the *Nieuw Amsterdam* was tied up about opposite where the stadium is now. Before the war she had been the luxurious 35 000 ton flagship of the Holland America Line. We were put in what had been the cinema, with bunks five high, with the least possible space between rows. Each had canvas laced to a steel frame, and was hinged like a shelf with chains to support it.

Friends and relatives of the local servicemen gathered outside the iron fence and stayed until we sailed, with no idea when it would be. I felt sorry for them and their troops on the boat and was pleased that I'd come a distance. We sailed about 4 pm. The boys included Australian airmen, a few British soldiers, many American servicemen going home and 800 German prisoners. Troopships had floors constructed in the holds, and the prisoners were on the bottom deck. They were brought up each day for exercise, as were a dozen Americans going home to jail. One rated a couple of guards, and we wondered what he had done.

The food was poor and many suffered from diarrhoea and vomiting by the time we got to the tropics, where we saw small Asians or Lascars bared to the waist in the heat, dragging massive containers of food. Watery custard was a daily offering. A shipboard cartoon had the navigator telling the captain, "14½ more custards to port". They held a practice with the Bofors anti-aircraft guns, putting a smoke device up and firing at it. One shell exploded soon after it was fired and someone got a minor injury, so we retired below decks.

On the Friday of our second week the swells gave the impression that we were nearing land. We approached San Francisco early next morning and went under the bridge about 8.30. First off were the American prisoners who went in an open motor boat to Alcatraz. It looked a grim fortress, in keeping with its reputation. Many of us decided that our first meal that day would be on shore. We disembarked about 6 p.m. and were given four hours' leave before we reported to our train. We travelled up through Oregon all next day, enjoying comfort and good meals.

Early Monday afternoon we reached Vancouver and had a few more hours' leave. That night we boarded a troop train and stayed on it until Thursday morning. Probably on account of the length of our journey we received very good treatment; the accommodation and food were wonderful. The carriages were at least half as long again as New Zealand ones and much wider, with a wash room at each end. They took about 22 passengers, with a double seat available to each by day. At night, two double seats made one bed and another bed was pulled down from the roof. The dining car meals were luxury. Early on Thursday we left the train and travelled north to Paulson, our Royal Canadian Air Force station. We had come half way across North America.

Paulson was about ten miles from the nearest town, on the featureless prairie. We lived in long huts which were well heated. Our course was to start in three weeks. We all went to Winnipeg for a week. There was a scheme for hospitality for Commonwealth servicemen; and the Canadians kindly took us into their homes then, and again at Christmas. It must have been an effort, as the war had been going for four years. In England we were to experience similar hospitality on our first leave.

I had my nineteenth birthday at Paulson. Everyone wrote letters, and we made a daily trek to the Station post office to see if mail had come. A common form for writing was the aerograph, which was micro-filmed and sent to New Zealand where it was processed and restored to the original size. All mail was censored and occasionally a letter would arrive with bits cut out.

Twenty-four New Zealanders were on the course and five from the United Kingdom. We wore a white flash on our caps to show that we were air crew trainees. Eleven of us did 51 flights, learning to drop bombs and to use the 303 Browning machine guns. For bombing we went up in Ansons, with six 11½ pound bombs to drop on six runs, one at a time. Day bombs gave a puff of smoke when they hit the ground; night bombs gave a flash. We noted the time that our bomb landed, and observers on the ground plotted where it landed. Our result was the size of the circle that went around our six bombs. Wind speed and direction were critical. We set them on the bomb sight, with height, air speed and the terminal velocity of the bomb. I was the trainee bomb aimer guiding the pilot and pressing the button when the target reached a point on his sight. We had to retract the undercarriage manually, 127 turns of a handle by the pilot's seat. The trainee bomb aimer usually landed that chore. For landing, the wheels ran down freely.

We practised air gunnery from a Bristol Bolingbroke aircraft. A Lysander towed a drogue, at which we fired with the two Brownings, each using 600 rounds a minute. Every fifth round was a tracer.

It snowed at Christmas and we did not see the ground again until after graduation in Winnipeg, at Easter. The temperature stayed below freezing for the rest of our time at Paulson. The locals said, 'You should have been here last winter when it hit minus 60!' Some of us were invited to go curling in town. It was played with a 42 pound lump of granite with a handle on top. A player would launch the granite towards the target marked on the ice. Being so heavy, the speed was slow. If his team judged that it would undershoot, they swept frantically with straw brooms just ahead of it. If he bowled it too strongly, the opposition would leap in and sweep to make it go further still.

School had won a pennant for hours flown, in competition with others, and was keen to retain it; but it had no special interest to us! Paulson had never neglected a chance to keep that pennant for hours flown.

We were told one day that we would parade in the drill hall at 11 next morning, in our best blues. The whole station was paraded, perhaps 1500 men. An airman was going to be drummed out. We never found out what his crime was. At 11 a.m. this miserable little fellow was marched in under escort. The Commanding Officer said, 'Mr Station Warrant Officer, do your duty', and he pulled the buttons off the man's tunic and hat. The man was then marched out with a drum beating, his tunic open and his hat hanging over his face. We heard that the civilian police met him at the gate. I don't enjoy recounting this, but I set out to write what I remember. Immediately after the parade we were back in battledress, helping No. 7 Bombing and Gunnery School retain the pennant.

In February 1944 we moved to Winnipeg for a six week course. There I recorded 24 day and 20 night hours in 17 cross country flights dropping one bomb each time. The station was largely civilian run—even the pilots were civilians—with good food. At the end, about ten of us graduated with commissions as pilot officers, and the rest as sergeants. We learned our fate as the instructor, a Flight Lieutenant, read out our names: 'Pilot Officer Matthews, Sergeant McArthur' and so on.

Then we went on leave. Many of us made a train journey to Toronto and on to New York. Eric Brady and I travelled together, inspecting Niagara Falls and walking across the bridge to USA, to avoid the high taxi fare. We stayed the night in Buffalo and travelled by Greyhound bus the next night to New York. We spent a few days seeing the attractions of those days: the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty and Radio City, where we saw a programme being made. Singer Kate Smith and pianist Count Basie were among the artists.

We reported at the RCAF Air Force station in Montreal and then went by train to Halifax; the journey took a day and a half. We embarked on the *Empress of Scotland* for the voyage to England with two good meals a day. In cool weather, we did not have the discomfort of the Pacific trip. There were over three hundred in our room in bunks three high. We wondered how far north we went, as it took eight days on a fast ship.

Part of the equipment that we carried was a respirator. As I went aboard with one I was not going off without it, but mine went missing. Our group disembarked at Liverpool at 4 a.m., while many were still asleep. I located a respirator stuffed full of cigarettes, and emptied them only to find a friend's name at the bottom; so I found another.

We landed in England on 20 April 1944 and travelled by train from Liverpool to Brighton. The NCO's were accommodated in the Grand Hotel, which had been taken over by the Air Force. We were mostly a contented bunch and had largely sorted ourselves out on the Canadian course. From now on, officers and sergeants followed different paths, and were in separate messes.

The invasion of Europe was imminent, and the streets of Brighton had tanks parked like cars. Our space in Brighton was needed so we flew by train to RAF Padgate near the Cheshire-Lancashire border. This was not a flying station. In June, we were packed off to Whitley Bay, a holiday resort near Newcastle, where we lived in boarding-houses and had lectures. They even gave us an un-convincing lecture on *esprit de corps*. We saw a film on German weapons and how to use them. We became pretty fit and played rugby on the sand. At night, we patronised the pubs as there was no mess. Whitley Bay was popular for 'holidays at home', and large crowds sat on the beach but few ventured into the sea. On 6 June it was announced to us that the invasion had started.

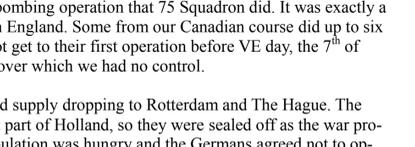
At the end of the month we went to a station called Penrhos at Pwllheli in Wales. I did seven flights from there, dropping practice bombs. It seemed far removed from war, a pleasant area with warm sea to swim in. The locals mostly spoke their own language. Our next station was Llandwrog, near Llandudno, where we did cross-country flights, sometimes with a target. I logged 29 day and 12.2 night hours.

There was a sudden announcement that the Christmas mail for New Zealand was closing. Eric and I needed Christmas cards, so we asked permission to bike into town. As this was not granted, we sneaked off at lunchtime and were back smartly, but we'd been missed. We were put on charge and reprimanded. Flight Lieutenant Ford came into our next lecture and said that I would have to report to the guard room each hour of the evening until midnight. I argued that we had been punished and could not be punished twice for the same incident. He countered by putting me on flying duties for the same period that night.

In September 1944 we moved to the Operational Training Unit (OUT) at Westcott. OTU's were in Bomber Command. We sorted ourselves into crews with pilots, navigators, wireless operators, bomb aimers, gunners and engineers. Each crew had two gunners, a rear and a mid-upper. As bomb aimer, I had the two guns in front.

I was in a crew, but the powers that be pulled me out and put in an Irish bomb aimer whom they wanted to place. I then waited for a fortnight for the next course. The OTU had Wellingtons, so a pilot who had learnt to fly Ansons or Oxfords of perhaps three tons had to start flying an aircraft of 18 tons and his crew went with him. We did six preliminary flights, with circuits and landings and a couple of bombing practices.

Some WAAF's were invited to a dance in the sergeants' mess on 21 December. It was at this function that Betty and I met. You don't actually "meet" at such functions, so we have never met. Betty accepted my invitation to go to the station cinema the next evening, and so it went on.



We spent a month at Oakley, a satellite station to Westcott, doing cross countries usually with a target. I logged 37 day and 33 night hours at OTU. From 19 March to 10 April we were at HCU or Heavy Conversion Unit at Woolfox Lodge in Rutland, for conversion to Lancasters. We were using Mark 14 bomb sights on which we needed to set only wind speed, direction and terminal velocity. Height and air speed were fed in from the aircraft. The bomb panel had a main fuse, a selector switch and a distributor switch. All had to be set before a bomb would release from its hook. There was also a jettison bar which overrode the others.

One day, noticing that the fuse was out I put it in, not realising that the jettison bar had been pushed across. The eight practice bombs fell off, and five exploded. They were just 11 pounds, but each had a detonator. It would have been dangerous had anyone been near, but I was lucky. The damage was a tiny hole on the fuselage. Not much was made of it and we heard that they thought it a hell of a joke.

We were posted to 75 NZ Squadron at Mepal, near Ely. Our pilot was Roy Brinsden; Johnny Sergeant engineer; Geoff Hodgetts navigator; Pat Wilson wireless operator; Jack Weekley mid-upper gunner; Les Reid rear gunner. Johnny and Geoff were Englishmen. New Zealand pilots were later used in the flight engineer job. The Lancaster had four Rolls Royce 1250 horse power engines. The all-up weight was 63,000 pounds.\*\* The aircraft weighed 36,000 pounds; and men, guns and ammunition added 4,000. The petrol consumption was about 200 gallons an hour and petrol weighed 7.3 lbs. per gallon. The petrol needed was calculated on that basis, with an hour's fuel added against adverse conditions. So fuel and bombs made the 23,000 pounds of available payload.

We wore oxygen masks for the duration of a flight. Navigators and wireless operators were warm enough in their compartments and the rest of us had flying suits with electric waist coats, electric boots and gloves. We communicated by microphones in our masks and earphones in our helmets. We all thought the Lancasters were splendid.

Our pilots went on a raid with other crews after we arrived at Mepal. Then on the 20th of April we went on a raid to Regensburg, that day's flight of 7 hours and 20 minutes. This was the last bombing operation, a 75 Squadron did. It was exactly a year since we had landed in England. Some from our Canadian course did up to six operations, but some did not get to their first operation before VE day, the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 1945. It was a matter over which we had no control.

On 29 April and 2 May I did supply dropping to Rotterdam and The Hague. The Germans still occupied that part of Holland, so they were sealed off as the war progressed eastwards. The population was hungry and the Germans agreed not to oppose food drops. We loaded about four tons of food, loosely packed in heavy double jute bags. A bag was about the size that would hold 25 pounds of flour.

The bomb doors were hinged on the outside, opening down the middle and operated hydraulically. For loading they were partly closed so there was room to hand the bags through. They had to be stacked inside on the doors which were near enough to level for the bags to sit there. Some were carried in the containers that would have had incendiary bombs on an operation.

The two flights took 2.40 and 2.25 hours. We had to cross the Dutch coast at 2,000 feet, because any lower we might have set off acoustic mines. The country had been flooded and some churches showed only their spires. We descended to 500 feet and over a large sports area I said the word and the pilot opened the bomb door. We could clearly see people waving, with German soldiers standing among them. It was a moving moment. It was also a brief one as hundreds of aircraft had to cross the sports field.

Some days later I read a book on children in the war. It mentioned the food drops and described the food fluttering down with its parachutes. There were no parachutes.

We also did a flight repatriating Belgians from England to Brussels, and one to bring back men who had been prisoners of war.

Betty and I were on leave in Surrey when it was announced that the next day would be VE Day. We went into London and joined the crowd. From time to time a shout would go up, 'They're out!' and people would rush to Buckingham Palace to see royalty. Later we visited Betty's family in Surrey.

It was known that 75 Squadron would be flying to Okinawa for operations against the Japanese, with six in a crew—all New Zealanders and no mid-upper gunner. Some of us would have an obligation to go, and the rest could volunteer. Men who had been overseas for two years did not have to go. This broke up existing crews. I joined a crew with Binks Anderson pilot, Bert Hincher navigator, Len Lobb wireless operator, Evan Ryan engineer and Tom Harvie gunner. We moved to Spilsby in Lincolnshire and we were going to get Lincolns.

Wing Commander Baigent, the Squadron Commander had told us that the Squadron had lost 780 men during the war. In 2002, the *RSA Review* gave the number as nearly 500. Possibly they were referring to the New Zealand members. In *Forever-er Strong*, the history of 75 Squadron, over 1,000 are listed as killed in maintaining a squadron of just over 20 operational aircraft. The losses on some raids were sometimes three or four out of 21 aircraft.

Betty and I decided to get married before I left for Okinawa at the start of October. We were married at the Catholic church at Morden on Saturday 28 July 1945.\*\*\* Betty's sister Milly was her bridesmaid and Laurie Luxton was best man. There was a gathering, mainly of Betty's relatives, at her home.

Within a few days the papers carried news of two bombs that had been dropped on Japan. Obviously they were bigger than usual, but each merited only a couple of column inches. We kept training, still on Lancasters, until our Okinawa operations were cancelled.

My log-book has an entry for the 21st of August 1945, 'Air Sea Firing'. We had never done anything like that before. Two ATC cadets came along for the ride. A smoke flare was dropped in the sea and the front and rear gunners fired at it. The cadets had no helmets so we could not speak to them. I used sign language to offer one of them a shoot. He stood in the turret but could not make the guns fire. I signalled to him to give up and thought he understood. However, the guns started when we were over land on the way back. Sign language did not stop him and he fired for a few seconds before I could pull him away.

My last flights were to Bari in Italy, bringing back 20 soldiers at a time. The flight back had to be below oxygen level, so instead of crossing the Alps we used a longer route. We went down on the last Tuesday in August expecting to come back two days later. We were going on leave and Betty was going in to London to meet me at a railway station, probably on the Saturday. At Bari we learned that the August quota had been taken and we would wait until Saturday for our load. There was no way of communicating this to Betty, so she waited an hour at the station before giving up and going home. I made it to London the day after.

The last day of my final leave was my 21st birthday and Betty and I were staying with her family. When Betty would come to New Zealand was uncertain. Many brides and fiancées left in May, 1946 on the *Rangitiki*, which was dubbed a 'bride ship' although it carried other passengers. I sailed on the *Orion* about the start of November. On a previous voyage many Australians had walked off, and before we sailed, 550 of them did so again, with 11 New Zealanders. It had the makings of a voyage with poor conditions, overcrowding and sickness. We were in what had been holds in peacetime, on G deck with only H below us. Before we left, a high-ranking RNZAF officer came aboard and promised things would be better once we sailed, which was impossible. Two days out, the *Orion* stopped. We learned there was a mechanical problem and we were returning to Southampton. A *Daily Mirror* reporter made a story under the headline 'H Deck - Hell Deck' and wrote of the poor conditions in *which* we were being sent home. I later read that English troops walked off the *Orion*. I sent Betty a telegram 'Boat broke' and we enjoyed some leave together, attending a rugby game at Twickenham in which N.Z. Army beat England, 18-3.

I sailed again on the *Rangitika* at the end of the month, in fine accommodation and with excellent food. Nearly 500 warrant officers—which we by now—slept in what had been the tea rooms in peacetime, on the top deck. This caused an upset when naval officers found we had done better than they had; but the rule about not changing accommodation at sea came in useful! I was in charge of our group of warrant officers, M to Z. McArthur was first alphabetically and that was the basis of my appointment. The only job was to write out leave passes for ports but we never got off before Melbourne. The voyage home took six weeks.

When Betty sailed they had engine problems too and spent ten days at Panama, where local American families, who worked on the Canal, treated the passengers with great kindness.

We were back in New Zealand in the first half of January and went on long leave. In March, we reported to Anderson Park in Wellington where we were discharged, handed in all our gear and received a payment to outfit ourselves. The gear was not checked and I later wished that I had kept a bomb aimers' wing.

\* Paper was scarce during the war  
\*\* 28 imperial tons  
\*\*\* Harry always remembered the anniversary, and for the next 60 years he kissed Betty's hand at 4 pm every 28 July.

