

SECOND WORLD WAR

On 16 August 1941, I joined the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). We did all our ground training subjects at 3 ITS at Sandgate where the Eventide Home is now. We had to do a lot of maths.

Training included two and half miles back and forth across the Hornibrook Highway to toughen us up. That's the original highway across to Redcliffe.

Why the Air Force? I was attracted to the RAAF. My Dad had taught Wing Commander Lock Wackett. He was a fighter pilot in World War I and he also helped to design the Wirraway, the only fighter plane Australia ever built, and the Wackett Trainer. When he came back from the war, he went into commercial flying in Melbourne. As a child I grew up knowing the stories about him. It made the Air Force more interesting to me.



After completing the ground subjects, we went to Bundaberg on Tiger Moths, and from Tiger Moths, we went to Ipswich. We'd just land in paddocks, no runways. After graduating from the Tiger Moths, those suitable were chosen to be pilots. Vince Howard, a schoolteacher from Proserpine, topped every ground subject, but when he tried to fly a plane, he'd get sick and vomit all over the place. I was chosen to be a fighter pilot.

I graduated at Urangquinty (Wagga Wagga) on 8 March 1942. On receiving our wings, we were all posted immediately to England.

We sailed from Sydney and went around to Western Australia across to Cape Town. We were taken off the boat there because there was information that the German subs and U boats were active in the area. The Westlander sailed out and was sunk by German subs. We were fortunate to be on shore. We were put on another boat and crept up the west coast of Africa, and landed in Freetown. From then on, we set sail and eventually landed at Liverpool in England on 18 November 1942.

I started off as LAC2 and after six months you graduated to LAC1. On arriving in England, I became a Sergeant Pilot in 610 Squadron. After six months you automatically graduated to Flight Sergeant. After two years you graduated to a Warrant Officer.

On arriving in England, not having any experience or having ever seen a Spitfire, we were given two days' familiarisation. I'll never forget the Spitfire, the top fighting plane in the world at the time. I remember you sat in the plane and got familiar with the instruments and so forth. You had to get down to the end of the runway and get up as quickly as possible because all the motor was enclosed and it would overheat rapidly unless you got up in the air. So, I opened the throttle, took off, and before I knew where I was, I was halfway to Ireland. I remember thinking to myself: I got this bloody thing up here. How in the hell am I going to get it down?



No, didn't think much about all the loss of life. Didn't enter my head. The squadron consisted of about 18 pilots, but we weren't together, we were separated, because the Germans had spies all over England.

I think it was the second night we arrived at Bournemouth, a posh seaside town; they let us know by spraying us with bullets, the Fokwulfe, the ME109s. Our stay in a posh area like Bournemouth only lasted a few days.

We were shifted into country areas —farmhouses, anywhere. We were woken at 4 am in the morning. One of the sergeants would come around all the billets. By 5 am you had to be at the base and be advised as to what was going to take place during the day. I was 24 at the time.

Flying was flying —the excitement. Strangely, I didn't worry. Some of the experienced jobs were nerve-wracking, especially when you take off and fly and deliberately attract the German guns.

I remember the second trip I did — we took off, got to the French coast, pulled back on the stick, and got up to 5000 feet. We attracted most of the enemy fire. In the meantime, crew from other planes had come in behind and they'd attack from behind.

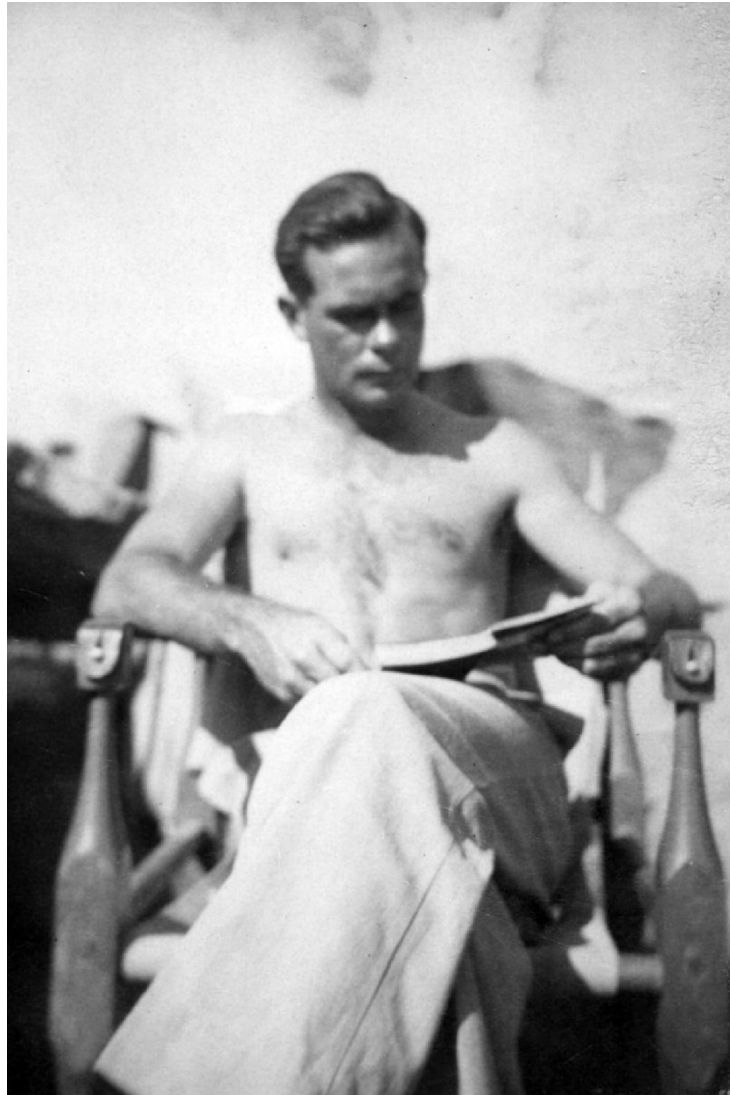
I was in England about 18 months attached to 610 Squadron flying Spitfires, a RAAF squadron attached to the RAF — based at Bournemouth and Biggin Hill and Bolthead, near Plymouth.

There were numerous types of work — you escorted, for example. I remember a Kiwi I was escorting, and the poor bugger, he had a lot of bombs on him to dispose of and he copped a direct hit. One minute he was there, the next minute he was like confetti: the plane, him, the lot.

One good thing, he would have known nothing of it. I was protecting him 50 yards out from German fire. We had radio contact, but you kept as quiet as you could because you'd give away your position.

I left England on 5 October 1943 at the Australian Government's request. I was with another Australian, Mal Payne, a Church of England minister's son. Mal was transferred to New Guinea where he was killed on a Spitfire squadron. I went through the Mediterranean, survived aerial bombardment off the south of Italy from the Germans, eventually got through and arrived at Bombay on 28 November 1943.

From then on, having had the experience with flying, I was posted to 146 Squadron, based in India, a Hurricane squadron. I had six months there and then a complete squadron of P47 Thunderbolts arrived. You were more or less familiar with them.



The Thunderbolt was the largest single -engine, single -seater fighter in the world, supplied from America. That allowed us instead of being on the defence like in England; we were able to be on the attack, to attack the Japanese.



By the time we got out there, the Germans hadn't capitulated, but they were on the receiving end. In Burma, we were dishing it out. We had the pleasure of letting the Japanese know who had the superior air power. The Thunderbolt was a long -range, high -altitude fighter. We could attack Japanese - held aerodromes.



I shared the tent in Burma with a Canadian chap, Charlie Verrier. Unfortunately, he was shot down. The Japanese just cut his throat and left him in the plane.

The CO asked me to go through his possessions. I came across an engagement ring. He was engaged to a French-Canadian girl. I arranged for the ring to be sent home to his girlfriend. It was a nasty feeling.

We were all friends. You were dependent on each and every one. The ground staff—if they neglected their duty, you no longer existed. You depended on them to keep the plane mechanically fit. We were based further east than India in paddy fields—levelled off so the planes could use them as a runway. We lived in tents. One big mess building for the ground staff—everyone and anyone, no superior, no inferior, one group.

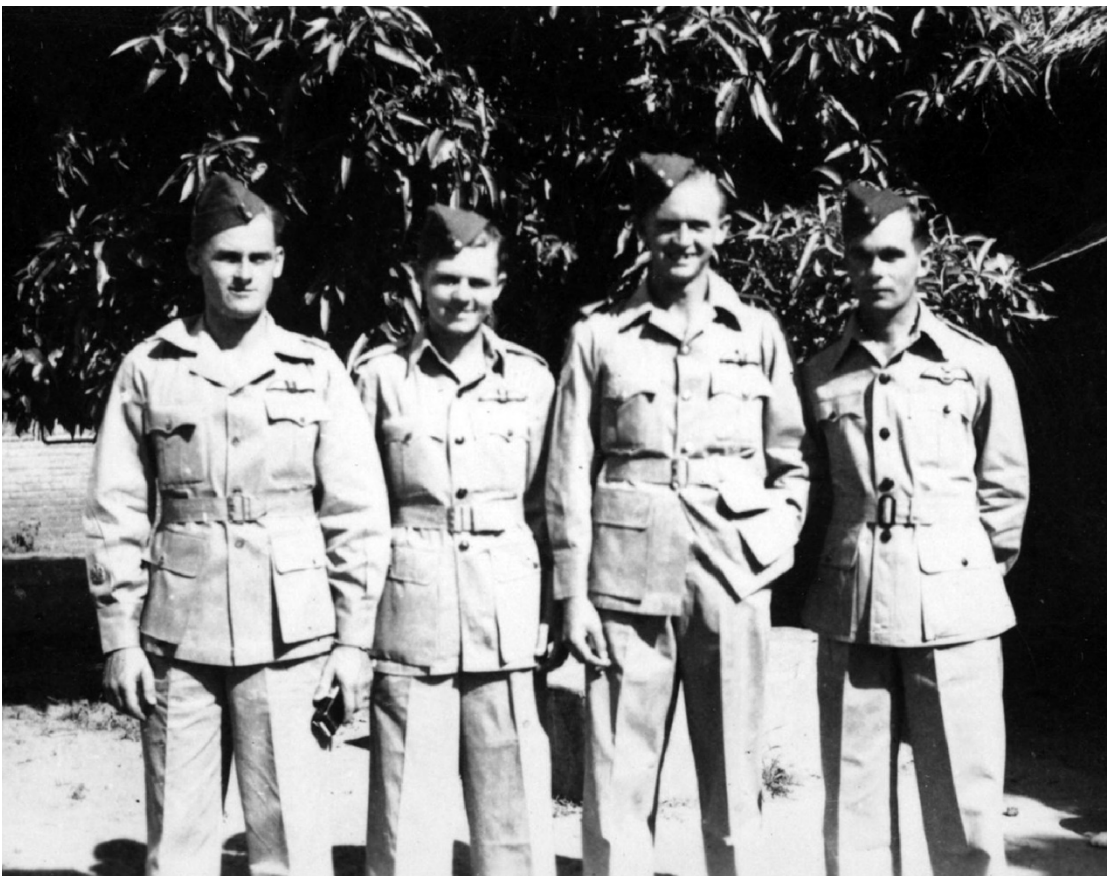


I had enormous success in Burma and I was rewarded for my outstanding flying by being awarded a commission. We were on the attack in those days. At Mawleik I was directed to hit a building with two 500lb bombs and I had a direct hit. The British army and the Gurkhas, when they moved in, confirmed the mission was successful. I was just trying to retaliate for what they did to Charlie Verrier.

I became a Pilot Officer, and then, a further distinction, a Flying Officer. You classed yourself as no better or worse than any other lad. You depended on one another. There were about 20 pilots in the squadron.

The CO would decide if he thought you'd had enough flying for the day, and he'd give someone else a go.

I cheated a bit because I had the board (a graph on which the missions were recorded). I'd drop my time back so I could get more trips. Silly bugger.



What kept me going was the flying, attacking the enemy. Correspondence was almost non-existent because you were up in the front. Very seldom you'd get anything. Very occasionally you'd get a comfort parcel —toothpaste, chewing gum, very bashed up from when it left Australia to when it reached you. You couldn't write to say where you were.



Warrant Officer Kevin Lafferty & Flying Officer Ernest (Digger) Fraser

One chap towards the end of the war took a photo. Digger Fraser and I were probably going off to strafe Japanese and this photo appeared back in Australia with the caption, 'Somewhere in Burma'. They couldn't say where. It had our names on it. First time people at home would have known where I'd gone after England.

In 1945 I was transferred to an instructor's school in Bangalore in the south of India to educate the inexperienced pilots that were coming through. We were experienced pilots from the front being retired to pass our experience on. I felt let down. The war in Germany was over and we only had to finish off the Japanese.

I came home from Burma and was discharged on 4 January 1946 here in Brisbane. There was excitement coming back to all your old friends, but it was sad in some respects. You'd think of this one and that one who'd been killed and hadn't come back.