



# Yarns in the Tent

Mateship in 3 Squadron RAAF  
North Africa & Italy  
1942-1945



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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by Margaret Deacon

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*Yarns in the Tent: Mateship in 3 Squadron RAAF North Africa and Italy 1942-1945.*

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In the book, *Anzac Memories*, the notion of 'Mateship' in relation to wartime experiences as a characteristic of Australian service personnel has been explored; looking at the relationship that troops had with their mates as they became their 'family' far from home shores.<sup>1</sup> Already crucial meanings have been identified which will be applied here to the daily lives of servicemen in No.3 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force during the Second World War years of 1942 to 1945, to emphasise the importance of male comradeship under appalling circumstances. While there appears to be no comparable account of these experiences in other squadrons this work will contribute to the overall social history of war by providing a personal insight into how lives were lived with 3 Squadron and the importance of the quality of mateship. This thread will be interwoven through the seven major themes which have emerged: living conditions; how weather impacted on their lives; camaraderie and morale; recreation leave; fear and dangers; communication with loved ones in Australia and the post-war relationships of the men. Military administration imposed operational regulations for the benefit of crew and the above themes show what impact they had on the lives of the crew.

The small body of existing literature has addressed the general topic of mateship during wartime and assists in an understanding of the importance of this relationship. The bond connecting soldiers in the Great War, as depicted through letters and diaries, illustrated that special characteristic of Australian service personnel, and the need to offer support to each other in wartime is vividly portrayed in both *The Broken Years* and *Anzac Memories*. Their focus on the social rather than the military aspect of war brings to our attention the inner feelings expressed by men in the field of battle. Bobby Gibbes' engaging autobiography<sup>2</sup>, based on his diaries written during the time as a pilot with 3 Squadron, provides details on life and operational experiences in North Africa and Italy, for which he was highly decorated. The text, *3 Squadron at War* describes the history and the significant contribution the Squadron made together with other units of the Desert Air Force towards the ultimate victories in North Africa and Italy, and praised the support of ground crew as being vital in that success.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on interviews and diaries, the relevant stories and anecdotes will demonstrate the importance of social connections to complement the military aspects of

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<sup>1</sup> Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, Melbourne, 2013, p.50.

<sup>2</sup> Bobby Gibbes, DFC, DSO and Bar, Autobiography, *You Live But Once*, 1994, self published.

<sup>3</sup> John Watson, W/Cdr. and Louis Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, 1959, Introduction, p. xi.

their daily existence. The substantial number of transcripts of oral interviews in the Australian War Memorial has produced a rich source of material from pilots and ground crew. Edward Stokes, the interviewer on most occasions, has elicited treasured sentiments, thus enabling the reader an increased understanding of the way of life, the tragedies, the humour, the challenges and the depth of feeling and emotion experienced by these men.

In his trips around New South Wales, Charles Bean (later to become Australia's official WW1 historian) concluded that the Australian bush lifestyle exhibited the best attributes of races in the English-speaking world. In efforts to conquer their inhospitable environment Australians had acquired personal traits of 'resourcefulness and independence'.<sup>4</sup> To outwardly show regard for a mate is not the Australian way, as it would cause unease. However, displays of selflessness in assisting others in need are familiar in the accounts related by Bean during his travels in the outback.<sup>5</sup> Bean contends that Australian 'social and political' associations were markedly better than those based on British standards, a consequence of the harsh and remote bush environment promoting that 'quality of sticking to your mates through thick and thin', while at the same time transcending the class structure.<sup>6</sup> Mateship was a 'particular Australian virtue, a creed, almost a religion' and 'above all they fought by it'.<sup>7</sup> The widely held view of the advancement of the colonials in Australia also brought with it a certain nervousness of their work ethic and social conduct given its significant convict history.<sup>8</sup> Anecdotes are rife about the Australian soldier's 'reluctance' to salute their superior officers as they thought little of them as a 'class'.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, officers in authority were mistaken in their beliefs if they expected challenges in training ordinary troops in the systems and procedures of war.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> C.E.W. Bean, *On the Wool Track* in Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, Melbourne, 2013, p.56. It is acknowledged that the men of 3 Squadron were not only Australian born but consisted of different European and Asian backgrounds. James Oglethorpe, Historian, [www.3squadron.org.au](http://www.3squadron.org.au), email communication, 18 September 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Bean, *On the Wool Track*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Cornstalk Publishing Company, Sydney, 1927, pp.114,126.

<sup>6</sup> Bean, *On the Wool Track*, pp. 152-153; Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p.56.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian soldiers in the Great War*, Melbourne, 2010, p.112.

<sup>8</sup> Bean, *On the Wool Track*, Graeme Davison, 'Sydney and the Bush: An Urban Context for the Australian Legend', *Historical Studies*, 18,71, October, 1978, pp. 191-209, Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1981, pp. 63-84, 126 in Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, 2013, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne, 1978, p. 280.

<sup>10</sup> Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. 279. In Bean's quote on this page he explains the discipline of boys being raised in the bush where they learn the skills of a soldier at an early age.

The principal duty for 3 Squadron after it was formed in Point Cook in Victoria in 1916 as part of the Australian Flying Corps was in intelligence work and combat operations over the front line. Successes during this latter part of the War resulted in records of bravery and courage and led to the formation of 3 Squadron, R.A.A.F. in 1925.<sup>11</sup> Training exercises, meteorological work and aerial survey-mapping were undertaken in the ensuing 14 years. Upon the declaration of war on 3 September 1939, the Squadron was placed on standby and training intensified in all facets of air organisation in liaison with associated defence forces. A year later the Squadron landed in the Middle East. So began the early days of the Desert War using Gladiator and Lysander aircraft.<sup>12</sup> Pilots were then issued with Hurricane fighters, Tomahawks and Kittyhawks and in November 1944, Mustangs.<sup>13</sup> There were usually 24 pilots in 3 Squadron in North Africa and Italy.<sup>14</sup> The Squadron Leader retained the highest rank followed by Flight Lieutenants and many further ranks down to Aircraftsman Grade 1. Ground crew outnumbered aircrew and covered many trades and professions.<sup>15</sup> Regulations and instructions were imposed by the Military which required adherence and these included water restrictions, the digging of slit trenches, censoring of mail, and black-out requirements on artificial lighting at nights. On the other hand, leave was granted where possible, alcohol allowances and Comfort Fund Parcels, entertainment and spiritual support contributed to the lifting of morale.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the entire period while 3 Squadron was in North Africa, water was a precious commodity and its judicious use was imperative; to the extent of sharing bathing water. On arrival in Egypt all crew were given a 'pep talk' on water shortage, personal hygiene and sanitation.<sup>17</sup> Most of the time there was one bottle of water allocated to each crew member per day, and for a couple of months in Libya a half bottle per day was the issue for washing,

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<sup>11</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, pp.3-8. It was originally named No. 1 Squadron, *3 Squadron News*, 3 Squadron RAAF Association, Vol. 19 – No.3, September, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, pp.11-17; James Oglethorpe, www. email communication 18 September 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, pp. 22,28,43. Hurricanes were delivered early in 1941, Tomahawks in mid-1941 and Kittyhawks late in 1941.

<sup>14</sup> Alan Righetti, Interview, Veterans' Affairs, Sept 2003, p.18; <http://www.3squadron.org.au/subpages/AWRighetti.htm>, accessed 29/12/2013.

<sup>15</sup> Reg (Slim) Moore, personal communication, Margaret Deacon, 29 August 2014, James Oglethorpe, email communication, 18 September 2014. Ground crew trades included engine and airframe-fitters, armourers, electrical-fitters, airframe-riggers, cooks, drivers and general-hands.

<sup>16</sup> These factors will be referenced as they are addressed individually.

<sup>17</sup> William Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service, 3 Squadron, RAAF, 1940-1946*, transcribed 5 May 1988, Beresfield, NSW, p.36, copy held by Margaret Deacon.

shaving and drinking, hence beards were commonplace.<sup>18</sup> The 'crook' water in that area was drawn from wells and required strong chlorination, and tea made it barely palatable.<sup>19</sup>



Figure 1. Map showing the "Western Desert" of Egypt and eastern Libya.<sup>20</sup>

To wash their bodies, the ground crew would combine some water from their water bottles and draw lots for first "in the tub" - I copped third in', wrote one, or they would swim in the sea if possible. As 100 octane aircraft fuel was more plentiful than water, the crew washed their clothes in it.<sup>21</sup>

It was usually a team effort by ground crew when digging slit trenches as a safety measure when the Squadron arrived at a new airfield and it was a task undertaken before tents were erected.<sup>22</sup> The ground was often rocky and difficult to dig deeply, so rocks would have to be piled up around a shallow dugout.<sup>23</sup> On one occasion a German attack at tea time caused

<sup>18</sup> Reg (Slim) Moore, Interview, voice recording, Margaret Deacon, Springwood, 7 November 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Moore, Deacon Interview, 7 November 2013; Felix Sainsbury, *Ground Crew: a Middle East Diary*, Carlisle, 2001, 2 June 1942, p. 53.

<sup>20</sup> Figure 1. Map showing the western desert of Egypt and eastern Libya.  
<http://www.3squadron.org.au/indexpages/history3a.htm>, accessed 27/09/2014.

<sup>21</sup> Felix Sainsbury, Armourer, *Ground Crew: a Middle East Diary*, Carlisle, 2001, 16 December 1941, 27 January 1942.

<sup>22</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 26 January 1942.

<sup>23</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, pp.39,44.

frantic scattering from the mess tent and crew diving for cover while holding plates full of



Figure 2. Antelat, Libya 17 January 1942. Crew from No. 3 Squadron digging a trench outside tents.<sup>24</sup>

bully beef stew.<sup>25</sup> German aircraft bombing near the camp and airfields caused a scurry of bodies into trenches, 'shrapnel flew over from everywhere' and 'the blast going over the slit trench was **very** frightening'. 'We were flat in the bottom (of) our slitty ...just a mess of heads, arms, bums and legs, everywhere'.<sup>26</sup> On one hot summer's night during a raid Slim Moore and his mate, Butch even found themselves in a trench together in only their birthday suits.<sup>27</sup>

January 1942 brought heavy downpours and flooding to the northern coast of Libya at Antelat where an advance party of 3 Squadron had set up a new operational landing ground. This was short-lived as the Germans were gaining ground and retreat was necessary.<sup>28</sup> In the worst rains for ten years trucks, equipment and aircraft became bogged during the rapid withdrawal. Demands on ground staff grew as combat operations stepped up with associated aircraft maintenance during dust storms later in the month.<sup>29</sup> Kittyhawk pilot Russell recognised the valuable contribution of the ground crew saying 'how those men

<sup>24</sup> Figure 2. Antelat, Libya 17 January 1942. Crew from No. 3 Squadron digging a trench outside tents. <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/023309/>, accessed 27/09/2014.

<sup>25</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 28 September 1942.

<sup>26</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 20 May 1942.

<sup>27</sup> Tom Russell, Tribute to Peter (Butch) Cuthbert, Ft Sgt. Wireless Mechanic, on Peter's death June 2010, p.2. The base at Agnone beach in Sicily was hit by a German raid at night with destruction of aircraft and personnel killed from other units. <http://www.3squadron.org.au/subpages/ValeCuthbert.htm> accessed 5/08/2014.

<sup>28</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, pp.47-48.

<sup>29</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 21 January 1942.



performed and serviced those aircraft and engines in the conditions they had to work under is an amazing thing'.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, weather conditions in North Africa tested the crew's ability to efficiently service aircraft, and frequent diary notes reflect the challenges imposed on them. Dust storms caused untold problems on weapons and engines. While that environment proved to be a significant physical ordeal for the ground crew it was compounded by the heat, flies and mosquitoes most of the time in North Africa.<sup>31</sup> During pauses in operations and in severe sandstorms time was spent in the tent with flap securely closed covered by a blanket as they 'sit and swelter in the tent oven'.<sup>32</sup> The sun became a dull red glow resulting in darkness so the hurricane lamp was lit while 'we open a tin of bully beef and a packet of dog biscuits for our meal'.<sup>33</sup> Freezing dusty winds and poor visibility in early January 1943 led to the diary note 'much more of this and a man will be properly brassed off'.<sup>34</sup> Memories of home and landscape spring to mind evocatively as Sainsbury reminisces on Wattle Day (1<sup>st</sup> August) with the yearning for smells and sights of the Australian bush 'instead of this rotten, godforsaken, dusty desert'.<sup>35</sup>

The weather in Italy was vastly different from North Africa and working conditions were significantly affected by cold and snow. On arrival at the Cutella Landing Ground on the beach of the Italian Adriatic coast, the Squadron contended with a 'roaring gale and icy sheets of stinging rain, hail and snow' with which they struggled for the next four to five winter months.<sup>36</sup> At an airfield on the coast further north at Fano a canopy was required to cover a Mustang aircraft as protection against the snow while working.<sup>37</sup>

Various initiatives provided some simple comforts to 3 Squadron men. Australian Comfort Fund parcel deliveries every two or three months were a boost to morale throughout their

<sup>30</sup> Tom Russell, Flight Lieutenant, Interview, Edward Stokes, 1990, p.23, The Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the war of 1939-1945, [http://static.awm.gov.au/images/Transcripts/S00945\\_TRAN.pdf](http://static.awm.gov.au/images/Transcripts/S00945_TRAN.pdf), accessed 2/01/2014

<sup>31</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 21 January, October 1942, Tommy Jones, Diary, transcribed by Margaret Deacon, original held by Richard Jones, 19 Clarinda Road, Essendon, Victoria, 25 August, 14 October 1942.

<sup>32</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 21 January 1942.

<sup>33</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 21 January 1942. A dog biscuit was a form of hardtack or hard biscuit mainly used by sailors, Macquarie Dictionary, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, 1990.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, Diary, 3 January, 1943.

<sup>35</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 1 August 1942.

<sup>36</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, 1 January 1944, p.181.

<sup>37</sup> Allen Jack Wand, Flight Sergeant, Airframe fitter, Interview, Edward Stokes, 3 November 1990, p.25. Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the war of 1939-1945, <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/S01012/> accessed 2/09/2014.



time in North Africa and Italy.<sup>38</sup> The desire for a cold beer was a constant thought in the desert. Allocations arrived for each crew member and it needed cooling fast. Bottles were placed in a hole in the ground, covered with petrol-soaked sand and they cooled well through evaporation.<sup>39</sup>

Expressions of solace and cheer symbolised what the Salvation Army Corps offered with tea and biscuits, as they appeared out of the blue, and their visits were remembered favourably.<sup>40</sup> An eclectic variety of Mobile Entertainment played a large part in keeping servicemen amused throughout North Africa during the Desert Campaign. The crew seated under the stars were happy to watch a variety of pictures regardless of the storyline. The most entertaining aspect during a film was the riotous 'mob' shouting suggestions to the actors during the 'love and fight scenes', a situation which fostered a sense of camaraderie.<sup>41</sup> Visits by several Nursing Sisters and Voluntary Aids from the 7<sup>th</sup> Australian General Hospital were welcome interludes, and they were opportunities to interact with neat, attractive females instead of 'sunburnt, dirty, dusty looking mates'.<sup>42</sup>

Emotional and psychological comfort for aircrew came in numerous ways. The three Chaplains commissioned as a team to cover squadrons in the Middle East arrived in North Africa early in 1943 and continued into Italy until 1946.<sup>43</sup> The aircrew thought highly of "The Unholy Three". When a padre discovered the lads playing 2Up by their tents on a Sunday morning he asked if anyone would care to attend his Service. They replied 'bring the service here Padre and we will all listen' which he did to a focused audience.<sup>44</sup> On completion he

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<sup>38</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 27 January 1942; Jones, *Diary*, 18 July, 16 September 1942, 25 January 1943, Moore, Margaret Deacon Interview, 7 November 2013. Australian Comfort Fund Parcels were a source of consolation and support during WW1 and ceased at War's end but re-introduced in 1940 to supply a new generation of Australian servicemen and women. The parcels included comb, toothpaste, toothbrush, sewing kit, beanies, chocolate, cigarettes, tobacco and razor blades.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-conflicts-periods/ww2/acf.htm>, accessed 3/09/2014.

<sup>40</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 16 January 1942. The allocation was a bottle of beer per man/week.

<sup>41</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.22.

<sup>42</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, early June 1942, p.18,22. *Love on the Run* with Clark Gable was viewed 4 December 1942 and Marlene Deitrich in *Seven Sinners* 6 January 1943; Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 19 May 1942.

<sup>43</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, p.76; Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 21 August, 11 September 1942.

<sup>44</sup> Fred McKay, Interview, Gail Winkworth, Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in war 1939-1945, p. 7, [http://static.awm.gov.au/images/Transcripts/S00598\\_TRAN.pdf](http://static.awm.gov.au/images/Transcripts/S00598_TRAN.pdf), accessed 2/09/2014.

<sup>44</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, pp.51-52.

‘took hold of the “Kip” put the two pennies on and said “come in spinner” and started the game going again’.<sup>45</sup>

Taking leave was a welcome relief for all aircrew following the pressures of the early months of 1942 and the exhausted lads were able to unwind in Cairo and Alexandria. From Sidi Haneish ground crew in trucks with pockets full of local currency headed with much excitement from the dusty desert towards Alexandria relishing the prospect of ‘palm trees, greenery, ocean’ (Sainsbury’s words capturing his exhilaration and anticipation).<sup>46</sup> Arriving at the Syracuse Hotel with its comfortable mattresses was bliss, and bed bugs were a minor inconvenience. A shave, shampoo and haircut were rare pleasures. Instructions back at camp were to avoid ‘out of bounds’ locations but the men were not deterred.<sup>47</sup> They discovered the Arab bazaars and soon realised their directives were well-founded.<sup>48</sup> Brothels around Sister Street were popular and Games of 2UP and cards were very much a part of activities enjoyed at these facilities, or while waiting in a queue to enter.<sup>49</sup> Relaxation on leave in Alexandria for Bobby Gibbes meant soaking in a hot bath in the hotel while sipping Pimms No.2, watching floor shows at nightclubs and lamenting the lack of female company.<sup>50</sup>

While larrikinism in wartime has not always painted Australians in a good light, it is evident that this trait, especially of the Australian male, reveals itself in outrageous behaviour at times, although easing the pressures of combat. Australians gained a name for themselves for the ‘high-spirited or undisciplined behaviour’ at the RAF Operations Training Unit in Wigtown in Britain and on their departure the Unit Commander told them he was “glad to see the last of you, you trouble-makers”.<sup>51</sup> Aussie soldiers in Alexandria were often seen

<sup>45</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.52.

<sup>46</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 25 March 1942.

<sup>47</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, 22 July 1942 and p. 38. While Shoesmith’s diary was chronological dates were not always specified.

<sup>48</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 16 July 1942. Illegal transactions were commonplace and attempts were made by suspicious characters to relieve them of their hard-earned piastas.

<sup>49</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 25 March – 7 April 1942; Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, 22 July 1942. The Army controlled management of the brothels in order to better serve troops of many nationalities on leave. This was in response to concerns of Allied army chiefs at the high rate of venereal disease in Egypt. Charges were laid and pay was lost when a serviceman contracted the disease, so measures were implemented to monitor the services, Sainsbury, p.44.

<sup>50</sup> Gibbes, *You Live But Once*, p.112.

<sup>51</sup> Peter Stanley, ‘The roundel: concentric identities among Australian airmen in Bomber Command, 2003 History Conference – Air War Europe, p.4,

driving the horse-drawn 'gharry' (taxi) and racing another driver with the 'poor old wog owner sitting in the back hanging on for dear life- just another way for them to relieve the tension'.<sup>52</sup> Shoebridge and his mates bought mementoes of the country, went to the pictures, had a few drinks at the bars and enjoyed the day at Stanley Bay Beach.<sup>53</sup> The Long Bar was a popular bar and restaurant where 3 Squadron officers and ground crew could be found on any day drinking Stella or American beers. Sainsbury's diary depicts his experiences imaginatively,

*'plenty of beer, women, good restaurants, café-cum-nightclubs with dancing and music. Don Page, a 3 Squadron mate was a good trumpet player, and several times we teamed up ...he played and I sang with the orchestra. For this we received numerous free drinks for our mates and ourselves'.*<sup>54</sup>

The Squadron was released from operations and given a two week break from their camp at Amiriya in August 1942. Ten of the ground crew decided on a trip to Palestine on the back of a truck. Jones describes their adventures of vehicle breakdowns, visiting historical sights, air raids, meeting WAAFs, watching movies and picturesque drives in open countryside. It was a time when the men could relax and share fun-filled days without responsibilities.<sup>55</sup>

Short periods of leave in Italy allowed the crew to absorb Italian culture and enjoy a respite from the harsh conditions of the camp. In early November 1943 the Squadron had become 'settled under canvas' at Mellini aerodrome on the east coast of Italy.<sup>56</sup> Extremely cold and wet conditions did not deter operations and crew were faced with freeing bogged vehicles and working in a very uncomfortable environment.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, some crew were freed for five days and they set off on open trucks on a 'fine' and 'chilly' day to cross the Apennines passing through farming communities and apple orchards.<sup>58</sup> After booking in at a hotel in Naples it became apparent that food was very scarce and that 'the war has left its

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<https://www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/2003/stanley.asp>, accessed 18/12/2013, Steve Dyer, *a thirty course war: airmen of the RAAF at war 1941-1945*, Canberra, 1997, p.191.

<sup>52</sup> Shoemith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.22.

<sup>53</sup> Shoemith, *Memoirs of My Service*, 22 July 1942.

<sup>54</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew* 25 March – 7 April 1942; Shoemith, *Memoirs of My Service*, 25 March – 7 April, 10 July 1942. The Long Bar was run by two Greeks who had relatives in Australia and favoured serving Australian servicemen, Moore, 7 November 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Jones, *Diary*, 10 August 1942, Shoemith, *Memoirs of My Service*, 2-9 August 1942.

<sup>56</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, p. 172.

<sup>57</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, p. 172.

<sup>58</sup> Jones, *Diary*, 2 November 1943.

mark here'.<sup>59</sup> Visiting Pompeii was a fascinating experience and Vesuvius could be observed from there, as well as the lava from an eruption six months previously. A service in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Church of Italy appealed to Jones for the 'organ and choir were the best I'd ever heard'.<sup>60</sup>



Figure 3. Map of Italy and 3 Squadron airfields<sup>61</sup>

The lads passed through Sorrento and caught a launch to Isle of Capri where they experienced fine dining and declaring to be 'as far from the war as the poles are apart'.<sup>62</sup> Wannan attended the opera in Italy and during Pardey's leave in that country he recalls being in the audience of a memorable *Carmen* production in Naples with 130 singers on stage and an 80 member orchestra.<sup>63</sup>

Communication from home was something everyone longed for and mail was a significant link connecting loved ones far away. Receiving the Sporting Globe, the Melbourne Sun and other local suburban newspapers and cuttings allowed Victorians to keep updated on their sports idols, their team's wins and losses, as well as community news, even though it was old news.<sup>64</sup> Letters were read and re-read and were shared amongst those who didn't receive

<sup>59</sup> Jones, Diary, 2 November 1943. Moore recalls that the Sqn had provided rations from the cookhouse and the hotels cooked up their meals, personal conversation with Margaret Deacon, 13 June 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Jones, Diary, 3 November 1943.

<sup>61</sup> Figure 3, Map of Italy and 3 Squadron airfields, <http://www.3squadron.org.au/indexpages/dates.htm>, accessed 20/09/2014.

<sup>62</sup> Jones, Diary, 4-5 November 1943.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Wannan, Interview, The Australians at War Film Archive, 2 July 2004. <http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/interviews/1870.aspx>, accessed 30/08/2014; Arthur Pardey, Interview, Margaret Deacon, Voice recording, Cremorne, 9 November 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.23,28.

mail on that day especially fellow tent mates.<sup>65</sup> Familiar and cherished details of families were discussed through the contents of the letters so they all became part of one big family. On return home a crew member felt at ease and immediately embraced his mate's relations and loved ones.<sup>66</sup> One lad never wrote or received mail and it did not concern him as he told his mates his family would be informed if he was killed.<sup>67</sup> A typewriter appropriated in Tripoli was used to write letters home and Shoemith assisted some of the lads by answering letters for them.<sup>68</sup> An officer censored outgoing mail or airgraphs.<sup>69</sup>



Figure 4. 19 October 1942. A group of 3 Squadron personnel in the western desert after the arrival of mail. Chairs are from enemy aircraft and writing tables were originally German petrol cans. Photograph negative by Frank Hurley.<sup>70</sup>

Parcels were also appreciated in addition to letters and these often contained cakes which were shared with tent mates and thus lifted spirits considerably.<sup>71</sup> Moore recalls on a number of occasions receiving a round fruit cake which had been wrapped securely, sewn into a calico bag then sealed in a cake tin which arrived dented but intact. His parcels also contained knitted socks that were traded to the Arabs for eggs – sadly reflecting on the busy

<sup>65</sup> Shoemith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.15.

<sup>66</sup> Vicki Crighton, daughter of Curly Morrison, personal communication, Margaret Deacon, 26/09/2014.

<sup>67</sup> Shoemith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.15.

<sup>68</sup> Shoemith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.45.

<sup>69</sup> Tom Russell, Interview, Margaret Deacon, Sony Voice Recorder, 24 April 2014, Miranda, NSW; Mail was microfilmed and cut to eight millimetres before being flown by Catalinas via India and Ceylon to Australia where the films were processed, and the reverse process would occur for letters from Australia. Moore, Stokes Interview, p.32.

<sup>70</sup> Figure 4. A group of 3 Squadron personnel in the western desert after the arrival of mail. <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/013460/>, accessed 27/09/2014.

<sup>71</sup> Jones, Diary, 10 August 1942, Shoemith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.28, Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 9 February 1942.

women's fingers creating their labour of love for the troops. The arrival of the *Women's Weekly* was always well received especially for the serialised stories, and the lads would often be searching around for missed publications so as not to interrupt the sequence of the storyline.<sup>72</sup>

Numerous members of the Squadron received news during the War that loved ones had died either in Australia or while serving overseas and this left them in a state of despair.<sup>73</sup> Nicholls recalls being given good support from his tent mates when his father died.<sup>74</sup> Squadron Leader Barr was often the one to counsel crew whose relationships had broken down since leaving Australia and their wives or girlfriends were not prepared to wait for them.<sup>75</sup> One member of the Squadron had received word that his sweetheart was marrying another man and he went into a fit of depression while at the camp at Cutella in Italy.<sup>76</sup>

The camaraderie within the Squadron was reflected in the sentiments of aircrew as they arrived in North Africa. Pilots felt very privileged to be posted to 3 Squadron and Righetti felt honoured to be serving under Squadron Leader Bobby Gibbes.<sup>77</sup> He commended the ground crew as 'magnificent' and equates them to 'brothers' for looking after his aeroplane and his 'tucker'.<sup>78</sup> Barr describes a 'family' and a 'team' environment which greeted him on arrival at the Squadron where pilot officers and sergeants shared a common Mess to promote closer interactions, a situation which was not customary practice in Australia.<sup>79</sup> The trust pilots placed in their ground staff was acknowledged. Equating that confidence with 'mateship' ensured that all did a 'perfect job'.<sup>80</sup> Bonds were further strengthened when Commanding Officer Bobby Gibbes and Flight Lt. Nicky Barr, 'bonzer chaps' entertained the

<sup>72</sup> Moore, Deacon Interview, 7 November 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Dornan, *Nicky Barr*, p 95. Nicky's own mother died while he was away at War.

<sup>74</sup> Don Nicholls, Interview, Margaret Deacon, Sony Voice Recorder, Bright, Victoria, 11 November 2013, held by Margaret Deacon.

<sup>75</sup> Dornan, *Nicky Barr*, p 115.

<sup>76</sup> Moore, Deacon Interview, 7 November 2013. A photo of one of the pretty girls was taken down from the tent. While his work never suffered he withdrew into the tent under the mosquito net. Sympathy was not forthcoming. He failed to interact with the other tent mates despite card-playing and cavorting antics around him, and he returned to his former self after a couple of months.

<sup>77</sup> Alan Righetti, Interview, Veterans' Affairs, p.17.

<http://www.3squadron.org.au/subpages/AWRighetti.htm>, accessed 29/12/2013.

<sup>78</sup> Alan Righetti, Interview, Veterans' Affairs, p.18. He arrived at the Sqn on 22 October 1942, and was taken POW in January 1943.

<sup>79</sup> Dornan, *Nicky Barr*, p.28.

<sup>80</sup> Russell, Stokes Interview, p.23,



rest of the crew in their tent and with a 'bit to drink too'.<sup>81</sup> When new reinforcements of personnel arrived in late May 1942 they were immediately greeted with heavy German bombing raids and it was a swift adjustment to the reality of war. The significant effort of aircrew led to Squadron Leader Gibbes organising a beach retreat for those pilots fatigued after lengthy bombing raids and, by giving respite, away from the intense operational environment the desired effect was achieved.<sup>82</sup>



Figure 5. Malta. c. July 1943. Members of No. 3 (Kittyhawk) Squadron RAAF dry off after enjoying a swim in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>83</sup>

The relationship between pilots and ground crew was very sound. The work of ground crew teams was seamless as 30 minute turnarounds for servicing and rearming was rapid in order to be prepared for the next mission. Some work was required by moonlight and no artificial lights could be used due to the threat of German night-bombers.<sup>84</sup> Discussing tactics with fellow pilots and visits to the tents of ground crew to chat about numerous matters, including those related to their aircraft, was considered a great bonding experience by many

<sup>81</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 10 May 1942.

<sup>82</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, p.52.

<sup>83</sup> Figure 5. Malta. c. July 1943. Members of No. 3 (Kittyhawk) Squadron RAAF dry off after enjoying a swim in the Mediterranean ocean. These airmen appreciate the beach after having spent many months in the Desert. Photographer, Laurence Le Guay.

<http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/MEC2118/>, accessed 27/09/2014.

<sup>84</sup> Wand, Stokes Interview, p.18.



pilots.<sup>85</sup> Engineering Officer McRae would walk around the tents at night to 'have a natter' and ask if there was any mail to be censored, or any complaints.<sup>86</sup>

Comradeship and generosity of spirit was never more evident between ground crew than when they assisted each other outside of their own work tasks. Evidence documented in numerous diaries mention pilots and ground crew supporting each other when working on aircraft engines, repairing abandoned bikes and vehicles and setting up electricity and heating in tents to benefit all.<sup>87</sup> The Squadron also seized the opportunity to assist their 'Aussie Mates' in the AIF without reservation when Army Intelligence called on them.<sup>88</sup>



Figure 6. Foggia, Italy. 1943. A Curtiss P40 Kittyhawk fighter bomber of No. 3 Squadron RAAF, having a thorough overhaul.<sup>89</sup>

The first Christmas Day away from home for Tommy Jones was spent at Chell, a stony, treeless plain in the Sahara where he was filling in holes on the new airfield 45 miles south of the Libyan coastal city of Sirte.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, all of the Squadron pitched in to prepare the landing ground on that morning. Later the cooks excelled themselves in serving up 'gazelle

<sup>85</sup> Peter Dornan, *Nicky Barr*, p.59; Walter Mailey, Flight Lieutenant, Interview, Edward Stokes, Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the war of 1939-1945, AWM, 2 July 1990, p.22, [http://static.awm.gov.au/images/Transcripts/S00942\\_TRAN.pdf](http://static.awm.gov.au/images/Transcripts/S00942_TRAN.pdf), accessed 22/08/2014.

<sup>86</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, 25 December 1942.

<sup>87</sup> Jones, Diary, 24 June, 13, 19 July, 11, 20 October, 1942, 8 October 1943; Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.32.

<sup>88</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 27 July 1942. The 2<sup>nd</sup> 28<sup>th</sup> AIF were cut off by the Germans and the Squadron destroyed the German-held area allowing the AIF to break through back to their forward lines.

<sup>89</sup> Figure 6. Foggia, Italy. 1943. A Curtiss P40 Kittyhawk fighter bomber of No. 3 Squadron RAAF, having a thorough overhaul after returning from an operation over Yugoslavia. <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/MEA0863/>, accessed 27/09/2014.

<sup>90</sup> Jones, Diary, 25 December 1942.

soup, roast turkey, pudding, and a couple of bottles of ale and a rum issue'.<sup>91</sup> The supplies, other than the gazelles which were caught locally, were transported from Alexandria 1000 waterless miles to the east, and the pudding prepared by the cooks contained silver local currency "Egyptian piasters" to the delight of all.<sup>92</sup> The pilots showed admiration for their ground crew by serving and waiting on them as is the traditional practice within the Air Force.<sup>93</sup> Christmas Fund parcels arrived with 'goodies', and lunch with liquid refreshments was enjoyed sitting on the ground with the entire Squadron.<sup>94</sup> Many reflected on their loved ones at home and whether their fate would lead them back to Australia by next Christmas.<sup>95</sup>

Receiving positive acknowledgement from high command was a huge morale booster for the Squadron crew and it came in the form of a signal from the Air Vice-Marshal Cunningham highly praising 112 and 3 Squadrons for their 'magnificent work being done by your Kittybombers'.<sup>96</sup> This tribute came after a significant period of combat and a 'record number of sorties by any squadron' during a time when 'ground crew worked like demons refuelling and re-arming each aircraft in a matter of minutes'.<sup>97</sup> Again, congratulations were received from Central Command on their achievements throughout the Battle of El Alamein which began on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1942.<sup>98</sup> During this time significant pressures were placed on ground crew to keep aircraft serviceable, and while listening to endless artillery barrage from the battles nearby.<sup>99</sup> Sainsbury attributes the success of efficient organisation and rapid transferral of camps and landing grounds to the 'cooperation and camaraderie between the boys' in every section.<sup>100</sup> However, a visit to inspect the troops by the lacklustre Duke of York (Gloucester – see footnote) failed to impress the Squadron. He was not amused by an

<sup>91</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, pp.94-95.

<sup>92</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, pp.94-95.

<sup>93</sup> Righetti, Interview, Veterans' Affairs, 25 December 1942, p.27.

<sup>94</sup> Reginald (Slim) Moore, Interview, Edward Stokes, p.31, Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the war 1939-1945, [http://www.awm.gov.au/transcripts/s00985\\_tran.pdf](http://www.awm.gov.au/transcripts/s00985_tran.pdf), accessed 8/09/2013.

<sup>95</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, 25 December 1942, p.44.

<sup>96</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, 30 May 1942, pp.53-54.

<sup>97</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, 30 May 1942, 30 May 1942, p.54. A sortie is a deployment of an aircraft for a particular mission. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sortie>

<sup>98</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, p. 78; In that four day battle No. 3 and 450 Squadrons had flown 133 escort, 155 bombing, 12 interception and 18 offensive patrol sorties. Bruce T. Swain, *A Chronology of Australian Armed Forces at War 1939-1945*, Crows Nest, 2001, p.206.

<sup>99</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 22 October 1942.

<sup>100</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 18 October 1942.

incident that caused the parading troops to let out howls of laughter. This situation highlighted the contrasts between the English and Australian cultures.<sup>101</sup>



Figure 7. Middle East. C. 1942. Pilots and ground staff of No. 3 Squadron RAAF during an inspection by the Duke of Gloucester. The Duke is shaking hands with Flight Lieutenant Jock Perrin whilst the CO, Squadron Leader Robert (Bobby) Gibbs, looks on.<sup>102</sup>

Fear was a constant emotion for the pilots when involved in daily combat operations. Pilots took off on dawn operations and failed to return and 'it is not long before his empty place in the tent is filled by somebody else, but the war goes on'.<sup>103</sup> In the early days at the Squadron for Nicky Barr, fear was ever-present but he felt tentative in responding to a variety of air combat circumstances. Discussions with fellow pilots confirmed these natural concerns and his confidence grew with subsequent operations. For those pilots around him whom he observed to display no trepidation Barr believed they had a 'reckless' approach to life.<sup>104</sup> Losing aircraft and pilots was a frequent occurrence but those back at base would always hold out hope that the pilot was taken prisoner.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Gibbs, *You Live But Once*, 18 May 1942, p.123. The Duke pushed Gibbs upright after he tripped over a camelthorn bush while approaching the Duke to salute. The Duke of Gloucester is the Duke who inspected the troops on this occasion as indicated in his Biography. <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/gloucester-first-duke-of-10313>, accessed 26/09/2014.

<sup>102</sup> Figure 7. Middle East. C. 1942. Pilots and ground staff of No. 3 Squadron RAAF during an inspection by the Duke of Gloucester. <http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/SUK14955/>, accessed 26/09/2014.

<sup>103</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 11 January 1942.

<sup>104</sup> Dornan, *Nicky Barr*, pp 60-61.

<sup>105</sup> Righetti, Interview, Veterans' Affairs, p.23.

The irreverence so peculiar to the Australian male, masking empathy and consideration of treasured mates, was apparent in Engine Fitter, Mick (Blue) Glennan's interactions with pilots as he drove them to the airfield. Before dawn lift-offs and after a tasteless coffee and a rough ride in the operations lorry the pilots contemplated what was ahead of them, and nothing would have amused them. That mood was quickly dissipated by the characteristic brusque approach from Mick, followed by instructions 'not to come back until he had his breakfast and not to get 'bloody holed.....'.

'That evoked a suitable response leaving no room for gloomy thoughts... he would see that we were strapped in, hop on the wing tip, guide us to the strip, hop off, grin and give us a thumbs up. He seemed instinctively to know just what was required to send us off with a smile instead of a frown'.<sup>106</sup>

The pressures of standby and awaiting orders to take off for the next operation was a time of heightened excitement and anxiety, generally suppressed as the pilots hung around outside the operation control tent dressed in full flying gear. A certain amount of tension was relieved by chatting, telling jokes or playing card games, but their mind was on their next mission.<sup>107</sup>

When asked in his interview if the tension and anticipation of danger decreased with combat experience Tom Russell responded by saying that it was always there. He recalled Sailor Malan writing that 'if a fighter pilot loses his fear he's of no use to the Squadron'.<sup>108</sup> Russell stated that he had never heard fellow pilots discuss their fears and would not admit to it, and if they did it took a lot of courage. The term 'lacking in moral fibre' was the reason some pilots were sent home.<sup>109</sup> It became obvious to many that when pilots withdrew from the general merriment and antics in the mess and preferred to sit quietly on their own that they were experiencing anxiety and fear.<sup>110</sup> A Commanding Officer found it essential to watch pilots, to check their morale and 'see if they were going to crack up'.<sup>111</sup> There was a lot of

<sup>106</sup> C. Wannan and B. Finch, Tribute to Mick "Blue" Glennan, on his death March 2000.

<sup>107</sup> Dornan, *Nicky Barr*, p 46.

<sup>108</sup> Russell, Stokes Interview, p.30, Sailor Malan, a South African was Britain's premier fighter pilot and Wing Leader in WW2.

<sup>109</sup> Russell, Stokes Interview, p.30,

<sup>110</sup> Gibbes, Stokes Interview, p.16.

<sup>111</sup> Brian Eaton, Interview, Edward Stokes, 22 November 1990, <http://www.3squadron.org.au/indexpages/AWMEaton.htm>, accessed 15/09/2014. The Commanding

empathy for the person who had not finished his tour and was required to return to a 'non-operational job'.<sup>112</sup>

Prior to airstrips being relinquished by the enemy they were mined and roads were also mined by retreating enemy causing danger to the Allies. The tragedy of five lost lives at Marble Arch (mid December 1942) in Libya highlighted the dangers aircrew faced and it sent shock waves through the Squadron as it was usually the pilots and not the ground crew who were more at risk.<sup>113</sup> Air combat increased in the desert in February 1942 as they faced the constant fear of strafing and bombing attacks, 'like hell let loose .....we huddled up in our slit trenches all night, putting extreme faith in our tin hats'.<sup>114</sup>

When any of the pilots were killed there was a level of acceptance with 'a few drinks and singing a few sqn songs, you had to make it a happy atmosphere in the mess'.<sup>115</sup> The loss was ever-present but the crew kept their emotions suppressed until times of more private reflection. Inwardly, the men mused on a sense of gratitude that they themselves had been saved from disaster for another day.<sup>116</sup> After returning from a 'glorious' rest in Alexandria Gibbes reflected on the horrors of war and the possibility of not surviving in this 'forsaken part of the world'.<sup>117</sup> While he did not question the reasons for fighting this War he had doubts as to whether he would be around to see the outcome and considered his fellow pilots also felt 'bitter and frightened'.<sup>118</sup> It was important to Barr when informing loved ones by letter following the death of a crew member that they knew what valuable work the crew member had performed in the Squadron.<sup>119</sup> The immensity of the rollercoaster feelings is revealed when Slim Moore's pilot, Ian Roediger, failed to return from an operation. Moore was told of the crash and described his emotions as he tried to silently deal with his grief.

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Officer shared a tent with the Doctor in order to discuss privately the welfare and mental state of the pilots.

<sup>112</sup> Charles Wannan, Interview, Interviewer unknown, Australians at War Film Archive, no. 2119, July, 2004. <http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/interviews/1870.aspx>, accessed 30/08/2014. A tour of duty for a pilot was 180-190 hours according to Jack Doyle, Interview, Edward Stokes, 5 May 1990, [http://www.awm.gov.au/Transcripts/S00923\\_TRAN.PDF](http://www.awm.gov.au/Transcripts/S00923_TRAN.PDF), 12/08/2014.

<sup>113</sup> Alan Righetti, Interview, Veterans' Affairs, p.22. <http://www.3squadron.org.au/subpages/AWRighetti.htm>, accessed 29/12/2013.

<sup>114</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 13 February 1942.

<sup>115</sup> Righetti, Interview, Veterans Affairs, 2003.

<sup>116</sup> Dornan, *Nicky Barr*, p 51.

<sup>117</sup> Gibbes, *You Live But Once*, p.88.

<sup>118</sup> Gibbes, *You Live But Once*, p.88.

<sup>119</sup> Nicky Barr, Interview, Edward Stokes, Australian War Memorial, 3 July 1990, p.23. [http://static.awm.gov.au/images/Transcripts/S00939\\_TRAN.pdf](http://static.awm.gov.au/images/Transcripts/S00939_TRAN.pdf), accessed 24 August 2014.

Hours later Roediger turned up on the back of a jeep and Moore expressed his immense relief at seeing his good friend safely back at camp.<sup>120</sup>

Black humour was a well-established means of coping amongst the pilots and shocking comments and retorts were very much based on cynicism. Charles Wannan gives an example of Battle of Britain films where the attitude of pilots is not too serious as they brush aside the sombre reality with dark wit, and thereby boost morale.<sup>121</sup> Consistent with this vein of humour the pilots had set up a gruesome-looking skeleton named Stinky Miller with a Distinguished Flying Cross medal on the chest. It was positioned in the corner of the pilot's mess and 'he was one of the first people' that Wannan saw on arrival at the Squadron.<sup>122</sup> When on the move it was sat up and 'tied to an open truck up front near the cabin....with an Aussie hat'.<sup>123</sup> To anyone enquiring 'it was one of our mates' whom we didn't want to leave behind.<sup>124</sup> Other pranks taken in good humour was the occasion of the 200<sup>th</sup> Victory celebrations, with the attendance of top level commanders at 3 Squadron when alcohol flowed freely and no one owned up to appropriating a staff vehicle and driving it into a dug-in stores tent.<sup>125</sup>

Living conditions were a shock to many of the men on joining 3 Squadron as they adjusted to War and its associated circumstances during the Desert campaign. Sleeping arrangements were six in a tent, three on each side and 'we only took our boots off and had our helmet alongside our head always ready to get out at a minute's notice'.<sup>126</sup> Conditions for ground crew in the initial stages in the desert could be compared to camping on fishing trips in Australia - using a ground sheet on the sand. As time went on, stretchers and other comforts could be obtained from evacuated British bases.<sup>127</sup> Gibbes found the environment not too uncomfortable due to his early outback life in the Australian desert. Limiting water for personal hygiene and consumption was of little concern, and senior officers 'mostly slept on camp stretchers, two to a tent, and the floor of the tent was either sand or hard and

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<sup>120</sup> Moore, Stokes Interview, p.21.

<sup>121</sup> Wannan, Interview, Interviewer unknown, Archive tape 08:31:30:00.

<sup>122</sup> Wannan, Interview, Interviewer unknown, Archive tape 08:33:00:00.

<sup>123</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.49.

<sup>124</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.49.

<sup>125</sup> Jones, Diary, 30 October, 1942; Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, p.79.

<sup>126</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.25.

<sup>127</sup> Moore, Stokes Interview, p.15.



gravelly earth'.<sup>128</sup> The "Pilots' Mess" consisted of two large EPIP tents joined together and the bar was usually absent of alcohol supplies.<sup>129</sup> In between operations the pilots relaxed and got as much sleep as possible – 'sleep was a big thing', and 'food was an obsession'.<sup>130</sup>



Figure 8. Kairouan, Tunisia. c. 18 April 1943. A long line of airmen of No. 3 (Kittyhawk) Squadron RAAF being served lunch rations outdoors on the plains. Craig Twaddle, cook, is seen here serving Leading Aircraftman Tom Jones, electrical fitter.<sup>131</sup>

Each crew member carried their own eating utensils and at meal times queued for food to be dished out adjacent to the tent cookhouse – 'usually meat and vegetable or bits of bully beef with a few tinned spuds'.<sup>132</sup> While on the move the cooks operated under very adverse conditions and, when briefly halted they seemed to create meals in an instant.<sup>133</sup> The mess staff prepared and served meals like old hands 'under some of the worst conditions possible yet they always cheerfully carried out their tiring duties'.<sup>134</sup> Whenever there was a victory

<sup>128</sup> Gibbes, *You Live But Once*, p.54. He was a pilot on arrival in the Squadron and became Flight/Lieutenant then Squadron Leader with DSO, DFC and Bar.

<sup>129</sup> Gibbes, *You Live But Once*, p.54. EPIP stood for European Pattern Indian Personnel tents.

<sup>130</sup> Walter Mailey, Flight Lieutenant, Interview, Edward Stokes, 2 July 1990, p.21. [http://static.awm.gov.au/images/Transcripts/S00942\\_TRAN.pdf](http://static.awm.gov.au/images/Transcripts/S00942_TRAN.pdf), accessed 22/08/2014.

<sup>131</sup> Figure 8. Kairouan, Tunisia. c. 18 April 1943. A long line of airmen of No. 3 (Kittyhawk) Squadron RAAF being served lunch rations outdoors on the plains. [AWM MEC0421]. <http://www.3squadron.org.au/subpages/jones.htm> accessed 27/09/2014.

<sup>132</sup> Robert Smith, Corporal, Radio Maintenance, Interview, Edward Stokes, Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the war 1939-1945, p.16. [http://www.awm.gov.au/transcripts/s01011\\_tran.pdf](http://www.awm.gov.au/transcripts/s01011_tran.pdf), accessed 18/08/2014.

<sup>133</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.32.

<sup>134</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, p.150.



celebration the mess staff excelled themselves by providing an outstanding 'buffet supper and a well organised bar service'.<sup>135</sup> The tributes and generosity of spirit towards fellow crew members is reflected as Felix Sainsbury pays the cooks and messmen huge accolades,

*The cooks are first to rise, and the last to go to bed. A couper's cooker cooks our bully-beef stew, often in dust storm conditions, so the cook had to be quick when he lifted up the lid to give you a ladle of stew and bang it down again...often you feel the grittiness.*<sup>136</sup>

In North Africa much time was spent in the tent to avoid the dust storms when the crew were not flying or working on aircraft and this meant having a chinwag, writing letters, reading newspapers or books and playing games such as Euchre, 500, Crib, Pontoon, 2Up or merely just 'spine-bashing'.<sup>137</sup> Running consecutive 2 Up games every night brought Jones a reprimand, but not to be deterred, he found himself at the adjacent 450 Squadron a few days later for a game.<sup>138</sup>

Two wireless sets purchased from the Army enabled the crew to listen to BBC radio in the tent at nights after tea when they received news of the successes or otherwise of German, British, Russian or Japanese war involvement.<sup>139</sup> Listening to German radio broadcasts was also a source of enjoyment during the Desert Campaign and the song sung by Lale Anderson, *Lili Marlene* was a particular favourite.<sup>140</sup> There was an agreed ritual at 10.55pm when everyone would quieten down and listen to this 'famed German melody' broadcast from Belgrade for Rommel's Afrika Corps.<sup>141</sup> One evening Jones' tent was the place for all crew to listen to Churchill's speech and they then shared cocoa and fruitcake.<sup>142</sup>

<sup>135</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, p.150.

<sup>136</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 19 February 1942. Felix explains the Couper's cooker which looks like a forty-four gallon drum with a copper inside, an oil burning fire underneath with a lift-up lid on top and a tin tube chimney.

<sup>137</sup> Jones, Diary, 11 October, 26,29 July, 22, 27 November 1942, 17 January 1943; Felix Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 9 February 1943; Robert Smith, Stokes Interview, p.16. Spine-bashing is interpreted in Sainsbury's diary as lying down.

<sup>138</sup> Jones, Diary, 3, 7 March 1943.

<sup>139</sup> Jones, Diary, 20 June, 5 September, 25 November 1942, 10 February 1943.

<sup>140</sup> Shoesmith, *Memoirs of My Service*, p.31. The German announcers would address particular squadrons on occasions and identify their locations; Robert Smith, Stokes interview, p.23.

<sup>141</sup> Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, p. 57. A fascinating history behind the singer, Lale Anderson and the origins of the song, *Lili Marlene* can be found on these pages.

<sup>142</sup> Jones, Diary, 21 March 1943.

Australia is undoubtedly a sport-loving nation and this became apparent as servicemen during wartime kept boredom at bay and were distracted from the rigours of work and harsh living conditions.<sup>143</sup> Indeed, for many Australians 'playing or watching sport gives life one of its principal meanings', and to follow it and discuss it was to 'uphold the nation and build its character'.<sup>144</sup> Competition was important for the crew of 3 Squadron and cricket, Aussie rules, Rugby League and Rugby Union matches were played frequently within the Wing especially against 450 RAAF Squadron as well as other squadron nationalities from New Zealand, South Africa and the USA. Athletics, swimming and surf carnivals were also popular.<sup>145</sup> All activities ceased at an airfield at Martuba west of Tobruk on 21 November 1942 as the crew sat around a wireless to listen to the Melbourne Cup race when Colonus was victorious.<sup>146</sup>



Figure 9. Fano, Italy. February 1945. Sports day for crew of No. 3 (Mustang) Squadron RAAF in north Italy.<sup>147</sup>

On Felix Sainsbury's departure from the Squadron he expressed happiness in leaving to return home but also sadness in having to bid farewell to his mates, and there is a sense of trying to delay the inevitable. He considers that the bond created in twenty months with his fellow crew will be a long lasting one for its 'loyalty, comradeship, and above all other,

<sup>143</sup> Dale James Blair, *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, Issue 28, April 1996, pp. 1,4.  
<http://www.awm.gov.au/journal/j28/j28-blai/>

<sup>144</sup> Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, Penguin Group, Melbourne, 2009, pp.10,28.

<sup>145</sup> Jones, Diary. Recordings are noted of these sporting activities throughout his diary and are too numerous to mention. Watson and Jones, *3 Squadron at War*, p.112.

<sup>146</sup> Jones, Diary, 21 November, 1942. Cup day had been transferred to a Saturday by government regulations that banned mid-week racing as a distraction from the war effort. Prime Minister, John Curtin's government put in place an austerity campaign that conserved as many resources as possible for war purposes. <http://localhistory.kingston.vic.gov.au/htm/article/473.htm>, accessed 31/08/2014.

<sup>147</sup> Figure 9. Fano, Italy. c. February 1945. Sports day for No. 3 (Mustang) Squadron RAAF in north Italy was a big event. Seen here is the start of the 100 yards sprint race.  
<http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/MEA2220/>, accessed 27/09/2014.

mateship'.<sup>148</sup> In 1946, when Ex 3 Squadron Association in Australia was formed, the opportunity existed for members to visit each other on State Reunion occasions and many took advantage of meeting again with their fellow crew.<sup>149</sup>

As they set foot back on Australian shores it was a strange and sometimes difficult transition for some of the Squadron members unaccustomed to the routines of civilian life. Some had wives and sweethearts who helped to support them in rebuilding their lives together with the challenges of minimal financial and material resources.<sup>150</sup> Some pilots became employed in flying jobs in various private and government organisations while some ground crew propped up bars around the cities and towns as they attempted to define their future directions.<sup>151</sup> Daily visits to the pub for O'Reilly gave short-term relief but only compounded his problems.<sup>152</sup> The war had adjusted their belief systems of 'mateship, the worth of the individual, courage, humour'.<sup>153</sup> They found themselves interacting on a different level with their loved ones and friends, gaining solace in the company of each other and strengthening a companionship and a lifelong bond shaped by shared experiences.<sup>154</sup> They developed certain ways of communicating amongst themselves about their lives and experiences in war.<sup>155</sup>

In departing Australia many of the men of 3 Squadron were unsure of what lay ahead and what it meant to serve their country in war. There was an inevitable change in all the men who set foot back on Australian shores in 1945. They had experienced terror, different races and cultures, extreme weather, harsh living conditions and observed death at first hand. Surviving each day was a massive effort which often required inventive coping mechanisms.

<sup>148</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, 29 March, 1943.

<sup>149</sup> Sainsbury, *Ground Crew*, p.117. At the first re-union on 15 July 1946 in Sydney 92 members attended with other states following and later amalgamated as a National body.  
<http://www.3squadron.org.au/subpages/formed.htm> , accessed 27/09/2014..

<sup>150</sup> Russell, Stokes Interview, p.1; Dornan, *Nicky Barr*, p 263.

<sup>151</sup> Dornan, *Nicky Barr*, p. 263; Walter Mailey, Stokes Interview, p.26; Moore, telephone conversation, 15 September 2014.

<sup>152</sup> O'Reilly, Jack, Interview , Jacinta Cummins, Journalist *The Land*, 25 April 2013,  
<http://www.3squadron.org.au/subpages/ValeOReilly.htm> , accessed 22/09/2014.

<sup>153</sup> Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 2010, p.280. The experiences of WW2 veterans can parallel to some degree the accounts in WW1.

<sup>154</sup> Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 2010, p.280; Stanley, 'The roundel: concentric identities among Australian airmen in Bomber Command, 2003, p.5,  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/2003/stanley.asp> , accessed 18/12/2013.

<sup>155</sup> Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, Melbourne, 2013, p.50.

Together with the qualities of discipline and expertise derived from their time in North Africa and Italy the men also added to their work skill base. The documented accounts of the lives of 3 Squadron crew through the years of 1942 to 1945 indicate how ready and willing they were to join together in a cohesive group in work and in leisure activities. The sharing of family news through their letters gave an insight into each other's personal and community lives back in Australia thus creating a closer bond and a sense of being part of that family unit. Indeed, washing in another's bath water is a clear symbol of that bond through sheer necessity. The dominant theme encapsulated in all the accounts and narratives of the interviews and diaries is the close association which the men enjoyed as a unit and how that comradeship helped to support them emotionally. The essence of mateship was well and truly embedded within the characters of 3 Squadron crew where the distinction between pilots and ground staff was not important and where all crew from drivers and fitters to squadron leaders held a mutual respect. This reflects the egalitarian approach of Squadron members. The trust that the Pilots placed in their direct crew was unshakable and justified.

Edward Stokes, the historian and interviewer, had the innate ability to draw out the innermost feelings of his interviewees by allowing them to express their thoughts and opinions. By asking some hard questions Stokes enabled the crew to reflect on facets of their experiences which may otherwise never have been brought to light. If not for these soul-searching interviews the community would be deprived of a treasured resource, one which adds to our understanding of many aspects of World War Two and especially the history and social experiences of No. 3 Squadron RAAF.

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