

■ The Next-to-Last Fat Cat Trip

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As Provided by: Gen Bill Webster, 3rd Bomb Group Assoc

A stripped down B-25 named 'Fat Cat' had a long and memorable career in the 3rd Bomb Group (L) from 1943 to 1945. It made many trips from New Guinea to Australia for food, liquor and recreation as well as transporting people for leave and for beginning return trips to the states.

For the first year and half of its career it was the exclusive prerogative of the group headquarters, but in the latter half of 1944 it was from time to time released for the use of the various squadrons. I had one opportunity to make a 'Fat Cat' run to Australia on behalf of the 8th Squadron. I think it was in October of 1944. My flight record (Form 5) does not show the flight, probably because it was not the squadron's airplane, and the flight form may not have filtered down to the squadron. But that is no matter as I have photographs which show 'Fat Cat' and the locations of some of the events and the people involved.

We left Hollandia early in the morning expecting a routine and uneventful flight to Cairns, our destination and source of the goodies we planned to bring back to the squadron. As usual, the clouds over the mountains were well built up, and it was necessary to climb to 17,000 to get over them.

On the other side of the mountains there was a solid undercast probably around four or five thousand feet. We let down to about six thousand and continued. I left my seat and went back to the navigator's compartment to use the facilities there. While back there I noticed there were a lot of American magazines there. As we had very few magazines available to us in the squadron I spent some time looking at them.

While I was reading, one of our passengers, a squadron cook along for the ride to buy fresh food, asked me if I would mind if he sat in my seat for awhile. I had no objection, so up he went. I don't know how long I was back in the navigator's compartment, perhaps as long as an hour, before I went forward again.

When I resumed my seat we were over the water. I asked our co-pilot, BOQ Dunkel, where we were and if he had seen any recognizable landmarks. He wasn't really sure, and then I discovered that the cook had asked if he might fly the airplane for awhile. That was allowed, but Bob apparently had not paid too much attention to the course flown and the time we should have sighted land.

The ocean beneath was a dun-colored brown. That suggested to me that we might be coming down into the Gulf of Carpentaria rather than on the eastern coast of Australia. The water on the eastern side was normally a brilliant blue green. Not being absolutely certain I did not take up a corrective heading, for if I had been wrong we would be going away from instead of toward our destination. We had no maps of the eastern coastal area of Australia. All we had was a radio

facility chart book having an outline map of Australia on the back. There were no navigational or airport radio frequencies of the area shown in the radio facility charts.

I decided to continue on our original course thinking we might see some land before too long.

We tried calling such places as Cooktown and Cairns but received no replies.

Finally, and I have no recollection of how much later, we saw the dim outline of shore dead ahead and were sure that was the bottom of the Gulf of Carpentaria. If we'd had proper map we would have known there was an RAAF station at the bottom of the gulf and would have headed there.

We put out some 'Mayday' calls on the emergency radio frequency but received nothing from them. Then it seemed logical to turn left on a heading to Cairns. It wasn't long before we crossed the coast and knew we going in the right direction. But then the situation deteriorated.

Perhaps another forty-five minutes or an hour later it became apparent that the fuel supply was running down rapidly. So then we began looking for some likely spot to put down. We came upon a collection of buildings, obviously a cattle station, that appeared to be in business though we could not see anyone around or any vehicular traffic.

While we were letting down for a closer look at a possible landing area the crew chief suggested that he bailout for a look at the ground, and if it were suitable he would signal us that it was OK to land. I could find no fault with that even though I knew we would have to put down before long. The jump was successful but did not hit the desired area.

To get out of the B-25 it was necessary to release the hatch in the bottom of the navigator's compartment. The hatch was directly behind the cockpit area and was the normal place for entering or leaving the airplane. The approved bailout procedure provided that the escapee face to the rear and go out feet first.

All very good but, there was no mention of the effect of the slip stream. The crew chief went out rather gingerly and the wind forced his legs back under the fuselage making it impossible for him to get his arms beside his body and be free of the cabin floor.

He was finally pried loose and went out but far beyond the desired drop zone. I was starting down for one last look when another of our passengers, Sergeant Dave Finney from the group inspection section, told me that he also wanted to jump.

I told him it wasn't necessary, but he said that he was due for rotation back to the States the following month and didn't want to take any chances. I felt that was an obvious vote of no confidence, but I had to give him credit for honesty. I never asked the crew chief whether he had any similar feeling. Out Dave Finney went, this time properly without any delay. By then there was no time for another go-round. The fuel gauge red warning light for the left engine was on. I did ask our cook if he wished to jump. He declined the offer and we made our final circuit.

I told the co-pilot that until we were nearly down and I could see how things looked to not lower the gear until I gave the signal.

As we approached a fence line the ground looked pretty good so I gave the signal and shortly after we were bumping along over some fairly level hard ground and came to a halt without any problem.

We stood around for some time congratulating ourselves on our exploit and waited for someone to come out from the station to welcome us. The crew chief eventually showed up carrying his parachute. He said he had landed in an area covered with some low lying trees and scrub and populated with a very large number of kangaroos.

Dave Finney landed nearby and joined us quickly. When it was apparent that no one was coming to greet us we trudged into the station. Don't remember now how far it was but perhaps five or six hundred yards.

When we reached the station there was a considerable bustle of activity. From later knowledge we learned that this was a typical out back cattle tableland station. The main house was of considerable size, two stories high, with a covered porch on all four sides. We introduced ourselves and were invited to have a cup of tea and an assortment of cakes and cookies.

After we inquired if there were some way we might obtain some aviation fuel we were told that they would call the nearest inhabited place, a railroad station 70 miles away. The station master would then call the RAAF station and explain our situation.

The rest of the time there was an interesting and enjoyable experience. Our hosts were very hospitable and provided us with everything necessary. The family was named Stewart, but I don't remember any individual names. I don't know whether the master of the house was the owner or lessee of the spread but didn't think it appropriate to ask.

Naturally we were a little curious as to why they had not come out to see us after we landed. Finally later in the evening we could not contain ourselves and asked Mr Stewart about it. I remember his answer very well. He said, "The women thought the Japs had landed, but I told them that was nonsense and to get busy getting the tea things ready."

When I asked why they did not come out he said, "I knew you'd been in. The nearest other place is the railroad stop and that is 70 miles away." Good answers.

The call was made to the railroad station and the message passed on. Later we learned that the RAAF would truck us in some fuel the next morning. There were several outbuildings in the place. One was a two story building used as a bunkhouse and school room for the children. We were put up in the bunk house and slept very comfortably.

The station was an interesting place. It was entirely self-contained. I don't remember whether there was an electric generator or not. Water was supplied from a well with the water pumped by a wind driven propeller just as in parts of the American west. There was a shower room under

the water storage tank. As obviously the only source of water, the shower room had a large number of frogs and amphibians in residence.

We were treated very well and did what we could to convey our thanks. We gave the women one of our parachutes. In those days they were made of silk and were apparently capable of being put to good use. We also gave them fuel from one of our main tanks. They could use that to boost the octane rating of the poor stuff available to them.

That main tank had only six gallons left in it. We had landed without a moment to spare. Six gallons in a main tank would not have allowed us another circuit. It might have kept the engine running perhaps four or five minutes.

We had asked previously that the RAAF advise our people of our safe landing. They did us that favor and later we found there was no concern in our group because we had landed at a place that was carried on the maps as an airfield. It was known as Miranda Downs. You could tell it was an airport because there was a twenty foot pole with a 55 gal drum mounted on the top. That signified a place suitable for the medical and school people to land their light aircraft. That was the only airport facility.

We were well treated and greatly appreciated the hospitality. Don't remember much about the food except that the dinner entree was mutton.

The next morning an RAAF crew rolled in with two trucks and five or six drums of aviation fuel. While we were being refueled I managed a ride in a truck to determine how much of a take-off run we had. Turned out we had about 1200 feet before the first fence line. That was enough as 'Fat Cat' had no armor, armament, or any other excess weight. With full throttle and about 3/4 flaps we were off with room to spare.

We made a circuit and a wing down salute to our hosts and were off to Cairns.

Had a little fun after takeoff. I told the co-pilot to tighten the throttle brake firmly on takeoff as I might need two hands to horse the thing over the fence. He perhaps overdid it a bit because the handle came off with the throttles completely locked. By dint of putting a foot on the console and using both hands it was possible to move the throttles with some difficulty. When we reached Cairns we made the approach with four hands, my two hands on the control column and the co-pilots pulling back on the throttles as needed. We made it without incident.

Before collecting our goodies we made a side trip down to Townsville to get some new props for 'Fat Cat's' engines.

At that time Townsville was the major support base for airplane parts, replacements, and major overhauls. We hadn't been there long when the crew chief told me that the maintenance people said we didn't need new props. I'm no mechanic so I could not evaluate that opinion. I went to see the head of the maintenance section and explained our situation and what we wanted.

All I remember of the head of the maintenance section was that he was a lieutenant colonel and had a Roman sounding name ending in 'ius.' After listening to my story he picked up the phone and called someone down the line.

I remember his words perfectly. He said, 'These guys are from a combat outfit. If they want props, they get props.'

He was a solid citizen so we had no further problem. Before returning to Cairns we made a short hop to Charters Towers to drop Dave Finney off for some personal business.

My only other recollection of Townsville was our staying at the Queens Hotel, a nice old Victorian place near the shore with large high ceilinged rooms and rather fancy mosquito nettings.

We had a relaxed couple of days while the shopping was being done. There was not too much military activity in Cairns except the Navy's small boat repair station and transient Air Corps traffic stopping there for refueling or shopping.

There was a very nice Red Cross hotel in which we stayed. It was a large place, a two story rectangular building with a covered porch around all four sides inside and a swimming pool in the middle. I remember the food was quite good, though it didn't take much to please us after the New Guinea mess hall fare.

Finally we were loaded and ready to go with fresh food and, most important of all, two barrels of Australian beer.

Being a nice guy I allowed our co-pilot, Bob Dunkel, to have the left seat for take-off. He was a big kid, about 6'2", and very relaxed. When we started our take-off roll he was not holding the control column, but had his left arm resting by the window. About half way down the runway I pulled back the throttles and we came to a stop. Bob asked, 'Why did you do that?' I grabbed the wheel and turned it completely over. The wheel was in a roughly figure eight pattern and rotating it operated the ailerons. We had begun rolling with full right aileron set. We would have been in some difficulty if Bob had grabbed the control and pulled it back to raise the nose wheel when we were nearing take-off speed.

We taxied back to start over. This time Bob held on to the control column from the start, Half way down the runway I pulled the throttles back again. Bob said, 'What is it this time ?'

"We're getting only about 23 inches of mercury from the right engine."

After we returned to our parking space the crew chief had a look at the engine and found that the top (No. 1) cylinder had sheared off from the rest of the engine. There may have been some additional damage not apparent from outside visual inspection. The only solution to our problem was a new engine from our depot in Townsville.

It took about a week to get the engine sent up and installed. So we choked back our disappointment and settled in at the Red Cross hotel.

Some incidental recollections of Cairns.

The group had a purchasing agent staying in Cairns to help such as we in finding the things we needed. He was a major from group HQ. Don't know how long his tour there was, but it seemed a pretty good deal to us. Don't know whether it was part of the package, but there was a young lady also in attendance. She was an Austrian who worked as a bar maid in one of the local pubs. Don't know her name, but she was referred to, appropriately, as 'Schatzie.' She boarded with a couple in town. And we enjoyed evenings there several times.

In those days there were no paved streets in Cairns that I remember, and most of the pubs floors were also dirt. Of course the crew chief was busy getting the new engine in and spent most of his days at the airport. Early on he asked me if it might be possible for him to have lunch and possibly supper at the RAAF mess.

I had a slight acquaintance with the station commander, having given him a ride from Townsville on a previous trip of mine there for spare parts. I thought that contact might ease the path, but no luck. Don't know why, but there seemed to be insurmountable obstacles for our man eating in the mess even though we said we, expected to pay for whatever might be necessary. I told the crew chief the best bet was to have the Red Cross hotel restaurant prepare him a box lunch.

The memories keeping coming back. Bob and I took the narrow gauge railroad down to Innisfail to spend a night. That was an interesting trip. It is a semi-tropical area, lots of rain and the location of extensive sugar cane plantations.

We stayed at a pleasant but unpretentious hotel.

We wandered down to the town hall and found there was some sort of dance going on. Most of the girls there were Chinese from a local Roman Catholic school. They were probably daughters of local sugar cane workers. The padre allowed us to ask the girls for a dance when he was' convinced of the honorable nature of our intentions.

The streets there were also unpaved.

Finally the new engine was in place and we were ready to go. After having given considerable thought to the possibilities of what might have happened on our prior take-off run with full right aileron and a failing right engine, I decided to take this one myself.

The trip back to Hollandia was uneventful, and we were warmly welcomed, particularly for the two barrels of Aussie beer we carried back. We had a pleasant party with the first barrel and the company of a gaggle of nurses from the 5th Field Hospital.

Fat Cat may have made more trips to Australia but not many, as we were getting close to our move to the Philippines.

My one flight with Fat Cat is one of the pleasantest memories of my tour in the SWPA. Considering all the circumstances we must have had more than our deserved share of good fortune.

Postscript:

Several weeks later I made another trip to Cairns, but this time not in 'Fat Cat'. The group had another stripped down B-25. This one was a later acquisition than 'Fat Cat' and did not have its history and aura. It had no name but was known only by its tail number '2222.'

The occasion for this trip was to obtain a load of liquor to celebrate the opening of a group officers club. The club was being built by Navy CB outfit. The Seabees were to be rewarded for their efforts by being permitted to buy half the load the B-25 could carry. Bob Dunkel was again the co-pilot on this venture. In addition to the normal flight crew we had two passengers. One was a Seabee Lt Commander and the other a Major from group along to buy the liquor.

Our flight to Cairns this time was relatively uneventful except for a minor incident after landing. We were directed to our parking place alongside a taxiway. The ground adjacent to the taxiway was not paved but appeared to be gravel. The RAAF type, a Leading Aircraftman, I think, directed us to leave the pavement and park perpendicular to the taxiway. We were about half way around when Bob gave a shout and cut the right engine. We were settling quickly on the right side and finally came to rest on the right engine nacelle. Fortunately when we stopped the prop was situated so that none of the blades hit the ground. Have to give Bob a good mark for seeing the situation and killing the engine so promptly.

The ground adjacent to the runway was fill dredged up from the harbor and was not packed down enough to support much weight. It was so soft that when the right nacelle came to rest the landing gear kept on going until the strut was fully extended.

The station people had no equipment capable of getting us out.

Someone said that similar things had happened before and that our Navy people at the small boat repair station could get us but. I called the station, told them what had happened, and they said they would be right out with a flat bed truck and a tractor.

In a short time the Navy crew came out with a chief in charge. When they arrived the chief paid me a somewhat back-handed compliment. When he saw me he said, "Oh, you're Army. You sounded just like a Captain."

What he meant was that from the tone of my voice and my choice of words on the phone, I sounded like a Navy captain. That accounted for the prompt response. Apparently they had done that kind of work several times before. They pulled us out in short order and to a firmer parking area. After some delay the crew chief did a retraction test on the landing gear, and except for a little cleaning up there was nothing wrong.

We spent the night in Cairns and were off the next day to Rockhampton where we were to buy our liquor.

While in the Red Cross hotel in Cairns we had dinner and a few drinks with the Seabee commander. He confided with us that the major from group had told him that the original deal was off and that the Seabees could have only a third, not a half, of the cargo complement. We didn't have much problem convincing him that we were the good guys and the group had the bad ones.

He then told us that he hadn't told the major that he didn't have enough money to buy half the load. In fact, he didn't have enough money to pay for the offered third. We then told him we would be 'happy to take up the slack. We would provide him the money to pay the difference of the price of the one-third load and the money he had. We agreed he would pick up his allotment, take it back to his place, and we would then go after our share later.

The next day we were off to Rockhampton.

I was not involved in the purchasing. The stuff we bought came from a bonded customs warehouse where we [were] able to avoid any export duty and other taxes. We understood that the Australian government was going to stop permitting the Americans that privilege shortly. Guess they figured they didn't need us any longer for the defense of their territory.

The loading went smoothly enough. Our concern for the weight and balance calculation was rather casual. We solved the weight and balance problem by loading the rear end until the nose wheel began to come up and then began loading the nose compartment until the nose wheel appeared in proper shape. We found that the B-25 could take [approximately] 15 cases of liquor. The load was approximately one third gin, one third wine, and one third spirits, ie, brandy and other odd lots. In addition to the airplane load we each added a couple of cases we could put in our B-4 bags.

Our trip back was relatively uneventful until we got to New Guinea. Over the mountains and beyond there was an undercast and also a lot of thunderheads rising. Fortunately we spotted a hole and could see the ground beneath. I had kept a close watch on the time and knew we were well over the mountains. Also I recognized the nature of the terrain and knew we were over the Sepik River valley. So down I spiraled to get under the stuff.

I think some of the crew may have had some reservations about our going down that way, but I knew where we were. Once under the clouds we were able to get out to the ocean and turn toward Hollandia.

When we arrived there it was almost dusk, but there was light enough to find our area. We buzzed the area and headed for the strip. We were greeted by, a large contingent, including the group commander, Dick Ellis.

Dick Ellis had a highly successful career, becoming Commander of USAFE and retiring as commander of SAC.

Our arrival was particularly welcome as we were delayed somewhat getting back, and it had been decided to open the club on schedule with medicinal alcohol and grapefruit juice (Ugh!).

Bob Dunkel was fast on his feet, and suggested to Dick Ellis that perhaps our effort in returning at that time was worthy of a reward. The colonel allowed as how this was so and allowed us to take three cases from the group load. When everything was finished and we retrieved the surplus from the Seabees, we had managed to scrounge a total of 21 cases. That made us extremely wealthy and allowed to do a number of things for the squadron in Hollandia and later in the Philippines.

That trip was not quite as exciting as the previous 'Fat Cat' one but well worth the effort.