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Serving with the Americans

The unit I was sent to was the 13th Squadron of the 3rd Bombardment Group, United States Army Air Corps, based at Charters Towers, one hundred kilometres inland from Townsville. Initially, the thought of serving with the Americans was quite exciting. The four squadrons of the 3rd Attack Group had been sending detachments to bases at Port Moresby from Australia, to hit back at the Japanese in New Guinea, and the group as a whole had come to be regarded as the premier strike formation in the South-West Pacific Area. The B-25D Mitchell operated by the 13th Squadron was a type that had already achieved quite a reputation as a very effective aircraft, with fairly high performance in comparison to most others that were in service with the RAAF at that stage of the game. There was every reason to see my posting as a very positive move.

When I and four other non-commissioned aircrew arrived out at Charters Towers by rail, we discovered that our new unit was in the process of actually moving to Moresby. There was no question of doing any flying. The aircraft and crews had already left, along with the advance party of ground staff. The Commanding Officer of the squadron, Major Harold Maull, was there to supervise the pack-up, along with about half a dozen other aircrew who were all officers. This in itself presented something of a problem, because the major was not too sure how to deal with Australian sergeant pilots.

What had happened was that the Americans, at that stage of the Pacific War, had not got their training system fully into gear. The result was that they had sufficient pilots to captain each aircraft in a squadron but they were short of copilots, so the RAAF had been asked to provide pilots to make up the numbers. That practice had been going on for at least six months, and there were, as far as I can remember, perhaps two or three RAAF officers already with the squadron when we joined it—some of whom I think we were meant to replace. Maull was not quite sure, though, how to handle the situation of non-commissioned aircrew, as all the American pilots held officer rank, but he made the sensible decision that as aircrew we should eat and be accommodated with the officers, so that worked out reasonably well.

Only a matter of weeks later we found ourselves, with the bulk of the 13th Squadron's personnel and equipment, put on board a liberty ship, the USS *George Matthews*, at Townsville on 24 January 1943. For our journey we were escorted by two RAN vessels, the sloop *Swan* and corvette *Colac*. It is less than 1100 kilometres between Townsville and Moresby, but because of diversionary routing to minimise the risk of the ship being attacked, it was a four-day voyage.

There was another American unit embarked in the *George Matthews*, the 90th Squadron, and it occupied the forward half of the ship, while the 13th was accommodated aft. With so many on board, we were packed in like sardines below deck. It was pretty unhealthy down there. Because it was so unbearable in the hold, most people spent as much time as they possibly could up on deck. The ship's rules placed severe restrictions on going up at night, but if you could get away with it you did. Two meals a day were served, the main one consisting of baked beans, hard biscuits and apple jelly

jam. This diet had dire consequences for me, and bound me up so badly that it was ten days after I boarded the ship before I eventually managed to move my bowels. All in all, the voyage was not the most pleasant experience.

On our arrival at Moresby, we were trucked out to the squadron's new base at Fourteen Mile. This was literally cut out of the jungle fourteen miles from Moresby and close to the Laloki River, which flowed past the southern end of the airstrip. The operations area, dispersal area and operations hut of our unit were all on the eastern side of the single steel-matting strip, while the accommodation quarters occupied an area of small hills on the opposite side. There was a squadron of P-38 Lightning fighters based at the far end of our airstrip, in similar circumstances to our own.

Most of the tented camp was in a little valley, which was a terrible choice because it was stinking hot; if there was any breeze blowing, you did not get the benefit of it stuck down there. I was partnered up with Septimus ('Sep') Gibson, and when we were issued a two-man tent we erected it on top of the ridge. That was also a stupid thing to do, in a sense, since we had to cart our water and everything else up there and it meant a bit of a hike down to get our meals, but it was a lot cooler. With proper mosquito netting, we were actually quite comfortable.

The routine that we settled into at Fourteen Mile over the next three months was both pretty disappointing and frustrating. Apart from the fact that my particular squadron—and I emphasise that *particular* squadron—had difficulty in getting to grips with non-commissioned pilots among its aircrew in the first place, I have to say that in my humble opinion it was not a well-organised unit. They really had not thought about how to handle an intake of inexperienced copilots. There was no set training course, no program of training

to acquaint newcomers with the aircraft and convert them onto what was (for us Australians) an unfamiliar type. As copilots, we should have been brought up to first pilot proficiency so that if our skipper copped it in action then we were in a fit state of capability to handle the aircraft. There was nothing of that, at all. It was more or less suggested that we should read the pilot's handling notes and told that our captain would guide us from there on. There was no encouragement to really become familiar with the aircraft or gain some skill on them.

There was another discouraging aspect to matters that emerged, too. By now the US Army Air Corps training system had caught up a bit and there were more of their own copilots starting to come along. Fairly soon some of the captains found they had two copilots allocated to their aircraft, an American as well as an Australian. My captain, Lieutenant Ray Tabb, was one of those. Understandably, any time we were scheduled for an operational mission, he took his American copilot along; obviously he wanted to develop his American copilot rather than his Australian one. The result was that the Australians in the unit really did not get enough flying to develop any real feel for the conditions in New Guinea. In the two and a half months or so that I was there, I only flew a total of about twelve hours. None of that amounted to much, and I notice from my log book that I did flights with Major Maull, Lieutenant Small and Captain McWhirt, as well as with Tabb.

Occasionally when the squadron got airborne for training, I would go along, and perhaps at some point Tabb might want to go back to talk to the navigator, or something like that, so he would tell me to take over the controls until he returned. But as I have said, there was never an ounce of instruction, and I remember one occasion when we came into the circuit Tabb told me to land the

aircraft. By the time I got round on base he could see that I was in big trouble, so he took over. That was the end for me; I never got any more time actually flying our machine.

Without wishing to labour the point, I would emphasise again that the problem was with that particular squadron. I learnt a lot about this aspect from historian Lex McAulay, when he was doing his research on the Bismarck Sea battle. He had interviewed a range of our people who served with American squadrons, particularly in that 3rd Bomb Group, and it became evident that those in other squadrons—the 90th for example—were exposed to a very positive training program; they did gain proficiency on the aircraft, and they participated in operations.

When the Battle of the Bismarck Sea occurred on 3 March 1943, our unit had a part to play in it. All of the Australian copilots in 13th Squadron were champing at the bit, eager to get into it, but few saw any action in that fight. We spent our time just waiting around the operations hut until our aircraft started coming back, then crowded around trying to get some news on what was going on. So I think I was just unlucky being in the squadron I was with. I should say that Tabb, who lost his life a little later on, was a very fine fellow, and I had a great respect for him. The problem I experienced was no fault of his. For what it is worth, I understand that Major Maull was withdrawn and sent home not long afterwards.

The whole matter was resolved the following month, anyhow, as a result of one of the last of the big Japanese air raids on Port Moresby. I recall that on this day, about mid-morning of 12 April, most of the pilots were standing about near the operations hut, which was at the entrance of our squadron dispersal area. The dispersal bays were small clearings just large enough for each aircraft, and these surrounded a bigger clearing which made space for taxiing in and

out. We were talking and waiting to see if anything might happen; the air raid alarm had sounded, but quite often it was a false alarm. This time, though, things seemed to be different. The P-38s from the squadron at the other end of our strip were scrambled, and we could see fighters from other airstrips climbing away.

Then we saw the Japanese bombers—about thirty silver specks in a rough V-shaped formation, high against a brilliant background of blue sky, and coming straight towards us from the north. We were fascinated and continued watching as they approached to almost directly overhead, until someone remarked that if we happened to be the target the bombs must be about due to arrive. This really threw us into action and there was a mass scramble for slit trenches. When life is threatened, it is amazing how many men can fit into one slit trench!

Our move was none too soon, because our dispersal area was indeed the target and bombs crashed all around us. It was scary while it lasted but that part was over in seconds; the next sound we heard was that of burning aircraft. The bombing had been very accurate, and since the Japanese had used fuse extension rods (daisy-cutters) on the bombs, the blast and shrapnel effect on the parked and fully armed aircraft was devastating. Most of our B-25s were either blown to pieces or left as flaming hulks. Some time after the enemy bombers had departed, the fuel tanks exploded on one of the aircraft about fifty yards from where Sep Gibson, Scotty Melville and myself had taken shelter. We were fortunate that no slit trench suffered a direct hit, but regrettably one person was still upright when the bombs burst and the fragments cut him to pieces.

It was a sad day for the squadron, which had been effectively wiped out and would have to wait for re-equipment. This brought matters to a head in the sense that, while taking stock of their

situation, the Americans realised that they really did not require the RAAF pilots any more, so at the end of April we were sent back to Australia. Added to the disappointment of leaving an operational area without having had a chance to really do much was the feeling of not knowing what lay ahead for me from that point on.