

# The Diary of Flying Officer Fred Thomas RAF



4<sup>th</sup> August 1922 – 17<sup>th</sup> July 1945

Spitfire Mk VIII in R.A.F. 54 Squadron markings – Darwin, Spring 1945



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*F/O Fred Thomas in a Spitfire of 57 Operational Training Unit at RAF Eshott, Northumberland 1943*



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Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> November 1944 – U.S.A.F. John Rogers  
Airport. Oahu, Honolulu.

On the afternoon of the 3<sup>rd</sup> we attended a lecture on safety equipment. i.e. the method of using the American parachutes etc, at Long Beach Airport, Los Angeles. In the evening, the six of us visited the *Bombshelter* a nearby night club of low repute frequented by ferry pilots' wives and the like who are just 'easy meat' for any 'wolf'.

We left there at 10:00 p.m. and wandered back to the airport where we were introduced to the crews of the aircraft in which we were flying. Buck and Bill went the previous night, Tich and Harry went in one aircraft whilst Vic and I had to go in separate kites as we were the heavy weights of the party.

Vic's aircraft preceded mine down the floodlit runway but the one taking George and Harry did not take off due to engine trouble. We were not travelling for pleasure but rather necessity, so we did not have comfortable seats as the aircraft were operational and so full of equipment and junk, but the crews, who were in the front, had a heated cabin and lent me their flying clothing as I had to sit in the tail to avoid interfering with their work in their cramped quarters. I was in the aft part of the fuselage with more room than the rest of the crew put together but as this section of the aircraft was not insulated it is very noisy and cold.

However, it was not long before I had smothered myself with fur lined suits and an acquired blanket, with a pile of engine covers as a mattress and my duffle bag as a pillow.



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I had a marvellous view of the clouds glowing like dull gold under the moon and an occasional view of the silver flecked sea 8,000 feet below. The mad scream of the slipstream and the monotonous drone of the engine gradually diminished as my ears became accustomed to the noise and I dropped off to sleep.

I was awakened by the skipper, a nice although pessimistic individual, who gave me my lunch box, for which I had previously paid a dollar. The contents of the box were, one orange, one apple, a paper cup of cold beans, a piece of cake, three polony sandwiches, a piece of cold tough veal, a piece of even tougher chicken and a few pickles and olives. I nibbled at all of these and donated the remnants to father Neptune.

We sighted the island of Hawaii at 11:30 hrs and passed over the famous Pearl Harbour before coming into land at John Rogers Airfield on the island of Oahu. We touched down there on the 4<sup>th</sup> November, after 15 hrs in the air.

It was terribly hot and as soon as the truck had dumped us and our luggage at our barracks, we washed, dined and changed into tropical kit. The camp is, in comparison to Long Beach, primitive, having dried mud roads which are constantly patrolled by trucks spraying water in an attempt to keep down the dust.

The barrack huts are only boarded half way - the rest of the wall consisting of mosquito netting so as to allow as much fresh air into the place as possible. We sleep on hard canvas beds and our wardrobe consists of a couple of nails - if you are lucky to have a couple. The food is quite good but served in a slap-stick fashion - the cooks use their hands to put bacon, chips etc onto your plate.





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We met Buck and Bill who had not used enough foresight to buy some tropical kit in America and as a result had only their blue uniforms – I can only imagine how hot they were.

On arrival we were told that everybody was confined to camp due to the risk of picking up a disease on the island, but Buck and Bill said that we could get out easily enough. After lunch (we had gained two hours from Los Angeles) the four of us walked up to the gate and in a convincing manner presented our RAF Transfer Cards to the guard. He saluted smartly and we were out! We caught the bus, which incidentally are very dirty, and arrived in Honolulu.

What a place – the whole town, street, shops, cafes etc, are filthy – I was scared stiff of eating anything for fear of catching a disease. We caught the bus to the world famous Waikiki Beach and after wandering along it and stopping for a drink at an Army canteen we came back to town. We meandered through the streets - and American influenced beggars - which are full of shooting galleries and machines which, for a nickel, you can gaze into a box and see photographs of women in various forms of undress.

Constantly, the flat nosed natives and American Hawaiians, bawled at us to have our photographs taken with a Hula girl. For this you stand under a couple of arc lamps and in front of a canvas sea and cardboard palm tree, then a Hula girl, complete with grass skirt and insufficient brassiere, wraps herself around you in a lecherous fashion with her cheek against you and her hands fondling your head. We did no business!

We went next to a Hula-Hula show where, for three hours, we watched a dozen Hula girls dance or should I say waggle their rear ends at the audience and perform amazing



convulsions with their stomach muscles – much to the delight of the sex starved onlookers. They then borrowed our hats and sang a song about their “Breeteesh Boys” who had left them and “when would they com back to their leetle wooden hut”. All this wagging of bums was performed in an atmosphere of bacon rind and burnt pop corns with sweat pouring down our sticky bodies the whole time.

After the show, the manageress called us onto the stage and the Hula dancers gave us back our hats and attempted to reward us with a kiss. Were they annoyed when our arms went out, not to embrace them but, to keep them off!

I think I should tell you what the girls are like. They have a Japanese appearance with their dark skins, jet black hair and almond eyes. They are not, contrary to what the Hollywood producer would have us believe – beautiful. With their flat noses and greasy hair, I think they are repulsive, although when you do see one occasional pretty girl, she really is a “wow”. They are all small, as are the males, who allow their hair to grow long and control it with grease. Nobody wears shoes, the girls wear ‘pereo’s’ which are pieces of gaily coloured cotton material they wrap around their bodies and over their left shoulders. You do not see any grass skirts in the cities. Yes, the Hula girl is really exaggerated, and their bum wagging reminds me more of randy ducks than anything else.

We came back to bed early and tried to sleep in the sweltering atmosphere. We were all in the nude lying on top of our beds with beads of sweat trickling off our bodies. I was awakened at 8 a.m. by Buck and Bill making a noise as they dressed to move off but dropped off to sleep again and awoke with the sun streaming through the room at 08:30.



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We lounged around this morning and went out at lunchtime. Vic and I bought a pair of shaggy swimming trunks and went down to Waikiki Beach. We went into the Officers' Club, changed and plunged into the beautiful water.

I loaned a surfboard and tried riding it – with not a great deal of success. These boards are like heavy coffin lids, pointed at both ends. You lie on them and paddle out to the breakers, the idea is to turn towards the shore and by catching a breaker let it propel you forward at high speed, standing upright on the board. I'll be damned if I know how!

However, we had some good fun and I nearly drowned due to laughing at Vic's attempts. He couldn't even climb out of the water onto the board let alone ride it. The heat was terrific, so we did not stay out too long for fear of being baked by the sun.

Vic took a couple of photographs of the beach so that will give a better idea than an attempted description. After the swim, a Hawaiian band entertained us with their monotonous music and four Hula girls dressed in the usual straw skirts danced for us. This was quite respectable as Hula dancing goes, and we had it explained to us. Apparently, the dancers differ on different islands. Some express themselves purely with their rear ends, some with stomachs and rear ends and some with their hands and feet.

There was a fire in the city as we returned to camp, so we experienced quite a lot of difficulty in catching a bus, which had been diverted all over the place. When we did get back, we found that George and Harry had arrived. George has his hand covered with bandages after trapping it in one of the doors of the Liberator.



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I can just imagine home now, with its cold weather and fogs. Anybody that dreams of visiting Oahu and Hawaii ought to have his or her head examined – it stinks!

Monday 7<sup>th</sup> November 1944 – U.S.A.A.F Canton Island,  
South Pacific.

We arose at 03:00 this morning and having performed our usual ablutions and broken our fast we became airborne in the dark at 06:30. The trip to Canton Island took us 10 hrs 55 mins and did not offer much of interest, as for the greater part of the journey, we flew through very bumpy cloud, or over it. Apparently, there is always a mass of dense cloud in this part of the equator. I flew the machine for about an hour on instruments and what a change from Spits. It is just like driving a bus but is only to be expected when you have 63,000lbs of aluminium and steel in your hands.

In the afternoon we sighted a small uninhabited island and later on, one of the islands on which ‘head-hunting’ is still the order of the day.

We landed at Canton Island at tea-time. This is just a lump of coral reef sticking out of the vast ocean. On it, is one tree and apart from that, there is not the slightest vestige of any form of vegetation. The shape is that of a circle, about two miles in diameter with a huge lagoon in the centre. It is easily the most barren and desolate piece of land I have ever seen. There are no natives or even white women - only men – and, as a result, you could quite easily walk around in the nude. The barracks are small huts each holding eight men





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and the ablutions have nothing to offer but saltwater for either washing or shaving.

In the evening I went swimming in the lagoon and it really was good; the water is both warm and salty but there is the danger of encountering small octopuses. After the swim, I had a dinner of beans and meat balls and then, when darkness had fallen, went to the camp cinema.

This consisted of a white sheet for a screen with logs laid out in rows, for seats - the commissioned ranks are lucky, insomuch that they have, not only one log to sit upon, but one for a backrest. This is all in the open air, so everybody takes a raincoat which prevents being drenched, in a tropical rainstorm. The film was third rate but was greeted enthusiastically by the permanent personnel as it is their one and only form of entertainment.

As I said previously, Canton is just a coral reef and the ground is not sand but coral dust - a very light grey powder, which, in sunlight, is almost white and covers everything, in no time.

Tuesday 8th November 1944

We arose this morning at 06:00 hrs and tried in vain to get a decent wash in the brine. I don't know if you have ever tried washing in sea water, but it is just impossible to get a lather with soap, no matter how much you use, all you achieve is to cover your face with slime.

Our breakfast consisted of two fried pieces of batter covered with maple syrup - a sticky dish if ever there was one. We become airborne in a cloud of dust at 08:00. I am sitting in



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the radio operators compartment writing this and even up here at 8,000 feet there is no need for more than vest and pants.

Wednesday 9th November 1944 - R.A.F Nadi, Fiji.

We sighted the coral reefs of Fiji at 16:00 hrs yesterday, which are really very pretty from the air as they are of a blue-green pastel shade and surrounded by the deep blue sea - quite a sight.

We landed at Nadi, the aerodrome on the opposite side to the capital of Fiji, Suva. The camp is very pleasant and, as always happens when you find coloured labour in the neighbourhood, it is clean and well kept. Once we had washed and hacked off our beards, Vic, the rest of my crew and I went out of camp to visit Nadi itself.

There is no bus service and we had to resort to hitching. We were picked up by an army truck driven by a Fijian who went like a madman and insisted in picking up any fellow fuzzy-wuzzies on the way. The result was that we were packed like sardines amongst a bunch of these natives who give off a nauseating odour.

The Fijian natives are primitive blacks with very bushy frizzed hair, wear no shoes and clothe themselves in any old cast-offs they come across. The males wear a piece of white cotton wrapped around the lower halves of their bodies in the form of a skirt. This apparel must cause quite a deal of embarrassment when sitting down, as I saw that they made a habit of tucking the ends underneath their seat, before adopting this attitude. The women wear a garment like a



night gown, which fits like a sack and stretches to their ankles. The children, of course, run around naked.

There are Indian settlers who wear their native clothing, the children having a gold 'effort', something like a collar stud, inserted into the grizzly part of their nostrils. If I remember rightly, one of the afflictions of the Indians is eye trouble - well, every child I saw had some disease which gave you the impression that it had a couple of black eyes.

Nadi itself is a collection of huts made out of woven bamboo and grass roofed. The natives are an idle bunch and crouch around in the shade. The shops, if they might be called such, are owned by silver smiths who are real artists when it comes to working with silver wire. They do all their work crouched on the floor and spend hours on each piece of work.

The Indian shop owners, as soon as they knew Vic and I were English, adopted a very servile attitude and were easily beaten down - with the Americans, that were with us, they were adamant. I purchased a necklace here. We, of course bought nothing to eat even though we were hungry, for fear of catching some disease or other.

We all piled into a Jeep to go back to camp and the M.P. who was driving stopped to speak to a native girl. She was dressed in a poor imitation of a civilised girl's - silk stockings, shoes and a very short, tight skirt which accentuated her pot belly and her fat behind.

It was clear to us, before we were told, that she was the village whore. Apparently, she was the nearest thing you could get to a white girl. The soldiers, after a few months, no matter how good their intentions at first, could not



discriminate between her and a white girl as she was the only one that sported anything but a night gown. This seems a pretty bad show to me but, cut off from the civilised world, it is not long before some men's animal instincts come to the front. Apparently, one of the previous C.O.'s of the station used to live with some girl – of French blood.

I heard a joke about a fellow who had just been posted to Nadi. He asked an old timer, "how long is it before you look upon these black girls as white girls?", and the old timer replied, "which black girls?".

All the way back to camp the M.P. slowed down and yelled at the fuzzy-wuzzies to get off the road. On arrival back at camp, which, by the way, is built in the native manner of spliced bamboo, we ate and then went to the picture show.

This was the same layout as the one at Canton and in the middle of the performance it started to pour down with rain and drenched everybody – but not a soul moved and everyone sat there watching the show as if nothing had happened.

We went back to our billet, treading warily amongst the hundreds of big toads that had come out in the dark and settled down to a good night's sleep with the mosquito net tucked in around us to avoid the incessant dive bombings of those creatures.

The trip across from Nadi has nothing of interest to relate as we just seemed to be hanging in a cloudless sky above a very calm ocean, the whole way.





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Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> November 1944 – R.A.A.F. Amberley,  
Queensland, Australia

We landed at Amberley aerodrome at 15:00 hrs and found Buck and Bill waiting to greet us and show us to our quarters. In the evening, we went to the camp concert but as the concert party did not turn up, a film was shown and we were entertained by Gene Autry, about a *Texas Moon* – or something.

The next morning, being Friday, we went along to stores and changed our atrocious R.A.F. tropical kit for Australian kit, which is ten times better. It is annoying to think that although we are foremost in all Air Forces, in practically everything, yet the tropical kit issue is the laugh of, not only our fellow servicemen, but those of our allies. The long trousers I had, were so narrow that to put them on I had to take off my shoes and hold them up by expanding my chest - obviously, I never wore them. Why the authorities don't realise that inferior kit gives the wearer an inferiority complex, beats me. Whoever is responsible for clothing must be a stupid old bugger, as we have to improvise such things as detachable wings and belt hoops, ourselves.

In the burning heat of the afternoon, Bill, Buck and I went into the town of Ipswich. Vic, being 28, considers himself past the adolescent stage in which one goes sight-seeing. He is either too idle to put himself about or else he is one of the unfortunates who walk around in semi-blindness.

We found the town much like home, apart from the heat and the subsequent difference in the buildings etc. The night back at camp was spent in agony due to the absence of mosquito nets which keep off those "Angels of the Devil". I have had previous experience of mosquito bites but not



nearly so bad as these, for when I awoke, my face, arms and feet were covered with blemishes, which really stung and the more you scratch, the worse they become.

The next day, we caught the train down to Sandgate, near Sydney, a distance of 13 miles which took us over two hours. The carriages of the trains in this state, although they are about the same size as ours, have a very narrow gauge, which makes them anything but stable. Smoothness of travel seems to have been the last thing the designers thought of. As an example, we were talking to an old chap in the 'smoking lounge' (that sounds very pukka, but don't be deceived, actually it is just a small section of the carriage containing seats on both sides and a couple of armchairs in the middle). Well, due to the rocking of the carriage, the old fellow was thrown out of his chair and ended up on the floor with the heavy chair on top of him.

In this country, every state has a different rail gauge, which is very detrimental to inter-state travel as you have to change and unload freight at every border. However, I gather that the adoption of a standard gauge is one of Australia's primary post war plans. The carriages are about twenty years out of date and belong to the era in which over decoration was the thing.

There are two classes of travel, first and second, but this does not mean anything. Apart from there being no noticeable difference of carriages, you do not get a different type of individual, as nobody takes the slightest notice of the class on their ticket and just sits in whatever seat happens to be empty. Due to the sultry atmosphere, every window is wide open and you cannot sit many minutes before being covered in grime and soot thrown back from



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the engine. You honestly need a bath and change of clothing after every trip.

We landed at the seaside resort of Sandgate at 15:00 hrs and after being treated royally, were soon at home in the mess.

On Sunday morning, the 12<sup>th</sup> November, we borrowed a couple of canoes from the gym and by 08:30, were having a wizard time on the beach, catching huge light green jellyfish with our paddles, being careful of course not to touch them as they sting - George found that out for us.

Woe is me, for I am now paying for my folly, due to my underestimation of the sun and I am now in agony with a beautifully tender lobster pink back. In the evening, we went to the cinema and then, to bed.

### Monday 13<sup>th</sup> November 1944

The reason for our leaving America so quickly was because a telegram arrived from Australia saying we were 'urgently required and had to be given the highest priority'. So, playing on this once more, for fear of being sent on a two day and night journey down on the train to Melbourne, our R.A.F. headquarters, in this country, fixed it so that we flew down. Our route order read as follows: "urgent replacements for Spitfire Squadrons. A delay of 24 hours would be detrimental to the war effort". We really began to think that we were important personages.

We arose this morning and were taken out by transport to the aerodrome - it shows how important they think we are when I tell you that we were allowed to bring all our kit with



us by air and not, as is usual, 65 lbs of it. This is a privilege and rarely granted.

We took off at 11:15 hrs in a Dakota DC3 together with some sixteen passengers. The journey was very bumpy, and the other passengers soon used up the supply of waxed brown paper bags carried in case of air sickness. I was scared stiff, as I learned later were the other boys, that I should fall to the depths and become ill myself, as we look upon airsickness as a regular sailor does upon sea sickness – a thing for land lubbers.

We stopped to refuel at Sydney but due to the weather, could not continue and had to stay the night. The truck taking us to the Officers Club in town, broke down, so we got a taxi and left the truck driver with his head in the bonnet. The club is a very pleasant place and everything is done to make you feel at home.

The similarity between Australia and England is really amazing. Apart from minor differences, such as seeing a lot of houses with no chimneys and the verandas which hang in front of every shop so that you can walk throughout the town in the shade, or sheltered from the rain, it is often hard to realise that you are not at home.

The next day we completed the journey down to Melbourne and were soon at the R.A.F. headquarters pumping dozens of questions at the O.C. He fixed us up with our pay and made arrangements for us to have fourteen days leave in Melbourne – all this after a terrific rush across the Pacific and down from Brisbane – such are the workings of the R.A.F. If the Luftwaffe are less efficient than we are at times, it is God help them.





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After we had left the R.A.F. station we climbed back into our truck and drove through the pouring rain to the Australian Comforts Fund – a society which caters for all the wants of servicemen, such as entertainments, billets for leave, etc.

They fixed us up with beds in the Returned and Leave Soldiers, Sailors and Airmens Club, which is situated halfway up St Kilda Road in the suburban district of Melbourne. It consists of two big private houses – one for officers, one for other ranks and it really is extremely comfortable, having lounges, writing rooms, etc. The only snag, if such it can be called, is that we have to arise at 09:00 hrs so as to be in breakfast by 09:30 and have to vacate our beds by 10:00 so that our rooms can be cleaned.

Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> November 1944

Yesterday, Buck and I went to a dance, where we were practically swamped with invitations, but only accepted two. This evening, Vic and I went to the A.C.F and were given complimentary tickets to the Tivoli, the best theatre in town.

After Radio City in New York, the show at the Tivoli was, of course, in our eyes, only very third rate and to me, it seemed that the whole cast, and all that were responsible for the sets and dresses, had an idea, but just could not put it over. One scene consisted of a number of pretty, muscle legged chorus girls dressed up as Nell Gwyn, Cleopatra etc, in modernistic costume. This was intended to be a serious scene, but I could not help chortling at the costumes, which were built around the head gear. This consisted of huge haloes of weird designs fashioned out of cellophane on wire frames and the whole thing perched very precariously on



the wearer's shoulders. It was a pathetic display of futuristic design taken to an impossible extreme. The best act of the whole show was the juggler who performed amazing contortions and tricks with anything from small tables to billiard cues. There were, of course, the usual jokes from which, one can immediately judge the standard of the show.

Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> November 1944

Thursday morning was spent in the rain, hunting for a camera – how I regret not having mine with me. In the afternoon, we went to the “Australia” cinema and enjoyed *The Tale of Two Cities* but had, at the same time, to put up with the usual American Travel Picture. There seems to be one of the latter in practically every show and I think it an extremely good piece of propaganda on the part of the Americans, to produce these things and put them out to the world. It is from such films that the average man judges America.

How misleading and how disappointed the tourist must be to go to “Romantic America’ and, instead of finding beautiful mountains and exquisite waterfalls, find it is to be the ‘abomination of desolation’, except for some minute segment. As it happens, the Australians – like us, take everything with a pinch of salt but even so it is amazing what a terrific impression Hollywood’s products have upon the masses.

In the evening, we went to St Kilda beach which is the counter part of the South Shore at Blackpool in practically every detail. In fact, if you put Luna Park in Blackpool nobody would guess the difference. We went on the Big Dipper etc, much to the delight of Bill who is like a big kid at



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times and whoops with joy at the slightest bump of a Dodgem. Being tired of this, Vic suggested that we went ice skating at the St. Moritz, nearby. I have never, if I remember rightly, had on a pair of either roller or ice skates so you can imagine the result. I did most of my skating on my behind – but even my inability to cope with this new sport paid its dividends, for when I fell, I, like a drowning man who will clutch at a straw, grabbed out and clutched at anybody nearby. Well, as was only natural, I grabbed at a couple of girls and from then on, I was set for the evening. Vic called me a ‘wolf’ but I was only lonely. After the rink closed, I took one of the girls for coffee, the other having chivalrously found an excuse for going straight home, and then, took her home.

Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> November 1944

Yesterday I went to the skating rink with the boys in the afternoon but on my own in the evening as they wanted to go on the booze.

Today, we caught a train and went to a party given for us by Mr and Mrs Beardsall in Hignett. We had a very enjoyable time singing and the like and earned about 10/- for the Red Cross by playing our game of “Bottle”. This is a simple game in which all the participants sit around in a circle and count off, but as soon as a number containing either seven or a multiple of seven is reached, the individual, whose turn it is to count that number, either says “Bottle” or contributes a predetermined amount to the Red Cross. Then the numbers go around in a reverse direction.

We left there at midnight promising to go to tea, some day, with a Scots couple, who were at the party.



Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> November 1944

Sunday, as is the same at home, is a day of rest and treated as such. In the morning, Buck, Bill and I (Vic not having returned from his escapades of the previous night) went around to headquarters to see if any mail had arrived.

On the way, I prevailed upon Bill and we went to a service at Christ Church. Buck, being a staunch Roman Catholic, refused to come with us. He is typical of one of that faith – has a mind mapped out by his Church leaders and cannot flex it enough to see any other point of view.

Bob may argue that this is a good thing and that in it, he has the strength of the Roman faith. Myself, I want to belong to no creed which will not allow me to appreciate another. The Roman idea may have been the only way to deal with the masses in the Middle Ages but surely the intelligence and understanding of the average man of that age and this age has altered somewhat. Today, a moderately educated individual should be capable of making up his own mind. “But they do”, say the Romans, “we only guide them”. I disagree – but then I may be wrong as I have not studied it – but I am only judging from conversation and action.

Roman Catholicism, as, I think, have all our other sects, including my own Church, become more of a business than a religion.

I often wonder how many of us Christians who “boldly” stand up and recite the creed, would endure the tribulations the founders of the Church had to endure. Am I willing to die for my faith? How many would? – I wonder!





Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> November 1944

This evening the six of us caught a train to Elsternwick to fulfil a dinner engagement with Mr Wilde who met us previously. Both he and his wife are English and as is usual amongst the English, one finds out of of England, extremely patriotic and full of admiration for the “old country”, whose faults are soon forgotten and so appears to be the only country in the world.

We had a very enjoyable evening, starting with an excellent meal of roast beef and good old Yorkshire pudding which was not comparable to mother's but quite good all the same. Mr Wilde did everything humanly possible to give us a good time and even went so far as to get some girls – although he could not get enough to go around. George and Harry of course swiped one each.

I have noticed in the service that the married friends I have, are usually the ones who go after the girls but I suppose this is only the natural reaction after living with a wife, for it appears that sex is like eating – once you have experienced it you need it.

Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> November

On Tuesday I accepted an invitation to a dance in the suburbs and duly arrived at Hawthorn to be sadly disappointed. There was a great similarity between the dances we used to attend at Walton in the good old days and the one at Hawthorn. There was the usual village band and the usual village plebeian who tried to entertain the younger generation with archaic music hall comedy, such as the donning of ridiculously small cardboard bowlers and



artificial moustaches, and by the band of old men, whose sense of rhythm was about as out of date as their acting.

Disappointed in the dance, because of the abundance of boys due to the fact that each girl turned up with a partner and consequently we 'free lancers' were left high and dry, and disappointed in the type of girl that were present, I left in a depressed mood and went skating until 22.00 hrs when I returned to the R.S.H and went to bed.

Wednesday found Vic and I at supper with Nyan Marshall, a charming girl. Signe Alstergren, her Norwegian friend was also there as was some other girl by the name of Pat.

This girl, Pat, was a stupid creature who seemed to delight in contradicting every statement that was made and I found great difficulty in talking to her politely and keeping my temper. We were arguing about the social status of the schoolteacher who, to me, is about the most important individual in any community and as such, should be paid for her or his work, well enough for he or she to enjoy the life of the community doctor.

Pat was, apparently under the impression that a vocation should not reap any financial benefit as the individual gain repayment, not in kind, but in the pleasure of teaching and if a rise in wage was to be given, teaching would attract people as a money-making business. I never heard such drivel.

At the end of the evening, Vic and I escorted Signe back to her home where we were offered drinks. Vic wanted whisky and from the half tumbler of the stuff that Signe offered him, it was apparent she did not know much about drink. I choked myself with some sticky red-current concoction.



Today, Thursday, Vic and I went around to Signe's for tea. They have a beautiful house which made me, as usual in visiting such a place, desire to settle down and devote my life to getting a little more worldly comfort.

This is a bad show, as I know that I shall never really be happy in acquiring worldly wealth, as all I want to do is to serve humanity in some way or another, gaining pleasure in giving and helping rather than receiving and being helped. Yet, can I honestly blame myself, if at times, after wandering over the face of the earth, living out of kit bags and trunks and carrying my bathroom in a little waterproof bag, never having a peg to hang my towel on, or a wardrobe to hang my suits, for more than a month at a time, I feel that it would be good to stop in this mad rush of living and give a little worldly comfort to those who are dear to me. "He that putteth his hand to the plow... "

It was not long before we were mixed up in the usual tea party in the garden, holding a cup of tea in one hand and a plate of cakes in the other, and cursing the fact that the Creator did not give us a third, so that we could partake of the food.

In the evening a walk was suggested, of which I was rather glad as I took advantage of Signe's desire to walk, rather than amble like Vic and Nyan, to get this girl on her own. As I had previously surmised, Signe had something on her mind and her superficial self-confidence merely hid an unhappy individual.

It was the all too usual case of the parents' inability to realise that their children do grow up and are not always in the stage of adolescence. It makes me really proud of my



mother and dad, who have always given me the opportunity to decide my own life and have advised me rather than ruled me. I got a great deal of pleasure, as always, in trying to help the girl with a little comfort, and I think I was successful. Later on, we went skating, having at last dragged ourselves away from Mr Alstergren who would, I am sure, have preferred us to keep him company for the evening.

Friday 24<sup>th</sup> November 1944

I arranged to meet Signe this afternoon to go to a show and did not feel too happy in leaving Vic to see *Fantasia* on his own as I am sure he realises that I cut him out as far as Signe goes. The show did not materialise, and we found ourselves walking in the beautiful Botanical Gardens taking in the delightful 'flora' with the aid of warm sunshine.

Our conversation bordered in the ridiculous at times, but occasionally some serious point or other was discussed and from these I was able to sum up my company. This girl really appeals to me, but I don't think it is anything more than relief from the monotonous company of my five friends. I am always wary about girls as I have a "pash" on one in 'every port' and after I have left her for a month, I have forgotten her. You never do get the opportunity to get to know any girl well enough as you are always packing your bags and moving on to the next station.

As a result, I have met dozens of really good female companions in my time but can't pick out one that I honestly preferred to the rest. I find some girl and fall for her knowing full well that I shall probably never see her again, so do no harm to myself. This is probably the sign of





my 'putting away childish things' and wanting the love and care of a woman to replace my mother, whom I see so very rarely. My mother's love can never be substituted as she means the world to me, but I do get a little satisfaction by knowing that somebody is interested in me and finds my company congenial. One gets tired of being surrounded by men.

I met a Major Young at Mr Wilde's party who arranged for me to meet his friend, a Colonel, who, in the last war, spent all his leaves in Wakefield. However, this engagement was cancelled due to Major Young going on leave so, having nothing else to do, I rang up and took Signe skating – the rest of my companions desiring to hail Bacchus.

After coffee in a little café on St Kilda beach, we ambled home to Camberwell. I find myself puzzled, as Signe obviously is attracted to me – but is this attraction simply due to the fact that I have helped her, or what? And is my pleasure in her company due to my desire to escape from my dull companions? Shall I continue the friendship? – or would it be better to say goodbye now rather than hurt her later on? She was born on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August and is a definite Leo as myself. I think Mrs MacQuaid could help me here – I shall see.

Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> November 1944 - Melbourne

On Saturday, Vic, Buck, Bill and I were invited by Signe to a cocktail party, given by their friends. We had not to be there until 5 p.m. so we went to a pub that Vic had found. Quite an interesting place where a radio gave a commentary on the races and bets were made with a bookie in the pub. These Australians are great racing enthusiasts and having a bet



on a horse is a thing that is done in all classes of society without any compunction. We met the girls at the pre-arranged time and caught a tram to the party.

We were among the first there and, immediately, Champagne cocktails were thrust upon us. I took some of the foul liquid but refused it later on in the evening when I found my senses becoming a little fuzzy. Our first impression was, that the atmosphere was going to be very 'stuffy' but when the Champagne started flowing, it soon lost its 'stuffiness'. There was an abundance of girls, so it was quite successful. Bill, already spiced with beer, mistook a huge bowl of Champagne cocktail for lemon barley water and drank it by the tumbler full, until someone caught him. As a result, I had to bring him home before taking Signe and another girl to their respective abodes.

Sunday found Bill and I visiting Mrs Beardsall for tea. We had intended to go on a swimming party, but a wound received in the last war put Mr Beardsall out of action. Nevertheless, we spent Sunday afternoon as it should be spent - quietly. At tea we filled our stomachs with strawberries and peaches.

I met Signe on Monday and we went to see Walt Disney's masterpiece *Fantasia* for the second time. I had previously seen it with Gibe when I joined up in London. The music was beautiful, and I have nothing but admiration for Disney's celluloid artists. The main fault I have with interpreting music for the public is that it gives them all the same idea whereas to me, music can only be interpreted by the individual in his own way. By producing such films as *Fantasia*, we encourage the mind of man to become idle and God alone knows how idle this modern world has already made it.



## The Diary of Flying Officer Fred Thomas RAF

I was talking with Signe yesterday, that was Tuesday, about a desire to help humanity and how hopeless it sometimes seems. When you stand aloof from mankind it seems a very easy problem but when you come down to earth and get among them, how different it really is. How long will it be before man reaches a state of understanding when he can follow Christ's teaching and "love thy neighbour". This rule is particularly impossible as we are all so, meanly, concerned about ourselves in our search for personal satisfaction in worldly things.

How often have I seen the rule of 'survival of the fittest'? – all day and every day, yet, we are told that that method went out of vogue centuries ago – I can't really believe that.



Flying-Officer F. F. Thomas, of Wakefield, Yorkshire, gave a message to his mother and father and his two brothers and sister.

Monday 4<sup>th</sup> December 1944 - Melbourne

I went around to Broadcasting House this afternoon, Thursday, and said my little piece into the mike which I hope they received with as big a thrill at home as I got in sending it.

After the recording we were surrounded by a galaxy of press photographers and newsmen and as a result of their insistence, could not drag myself away until 3.40, 40 minutes too late to meet Signe.

*The Argos - Melbourne 1<sup>st</sup> December 1944*



When making an appointment, whether it be with man or woman I always turn up five minutes early and wait five minutes after the predetermined time. This has been the result of being 'stood up' so often by my friends.

However, Signe did not believe in this system and waited for me. In the evening we had dinner with her parents, who were very charming people, but I fear I found their doctor friend and his spouse, a couple of talkative bores.

After dinner we went to see the film *We Are Not Alone*, whose conclusion was not: - 'they lived happily ever after' style but, on the contrary, resulted in a couple of innocents being condemned to death - it was English of course as the Americans seem to pander too much to the desire of the public for happy conclusions.

Friday was spent in a mad rush to pack our kit and transport it down to the station. When this was done, Signe and I went for lunch - my companions preferring the company and refreshment of Bacchus. I was indeed sorry to be leaving the company of one so pleasant as Signe and I think I then realised how good a time we had had. On the way to the station I bought a huge bag of fruit to eat on the train, as so often have I been stranded without a bite to eat.

I also bought some strawberries for Mrs Alstergren as a reciprocation of the pleasant dinner I had had the previous night. However, she never received them, as when we arrived at the station, Bill and Buck were nowhere in sight and rolled up drunk as lords three minutes before the train was due to leave. As they had the luggage tickets, I handed the strawberries to Vic to hold, whilst I went and got our kit organised. We got to the barrier intact when Bill and Buck





decided to find some relief from the afternoon and disappeared. We tried to find them but to no avail and nearly missed the train in the attempt. The train departed and with Signe miles away on the platform, I walked up the crowded corridor of "The Spirit of Progress" and was confronted with Vic - still holding the strawberries intended for Mrs A!

The first part of the train journey was very pleasant, but we changed into a less comfortable train at about 23:00 hrs at Albury. This rickety train carried us to a little hick town where we arrived, looking forward to a cup of tea, at 2 a.m. We were bitterly disappointed, as the platform was deserted and although we scoured every street in our four hours wait, we found nowhere open on this cold night. Harry and I eventually settled down to a couple of hours sleep on the floor of the lampless waiting room, trying to keep each other warm by adopting a position such that my head rested on a hard sack and his on my buttocks - he had the better pillow.

At 06:30 on Saturday morning we piled our kit and ourselves aboard an amazing contraption called a 'rail-car'. This does the 7½ hour run to Parkes, daily, along the single track. It was actually built like a tram car and divided into three sections. The front half housed the first-class seats, sixteen in all, and the driver's cubicle. The rear portion housed the same number of second-class seats, whilst the centre contained freight. The car was driven through a fluid fly wheel by a petrol engine but as there is an acute shortage of petrol, it followed the practice of many automobiles and was equipped with a gas generator using burning charcoal for fuel.



The journey was monotonous and tiring to our, already over-taxed bodies and had not the driver consistently hooted his klaxon at the sheep which strolled onto the line, we may have snoozed off a little.

We stopped at a tiny station and had a most welcome breakfast of tea and a couple of scones. Each one of us trying to out-do the rest in consuming tea in the short stop. The country was very arid, and the vegetation very scant, in the red earth. There were many charred tree stumps, whose lives had been taken from them by the sun.

They are greatly worried about the problem of erosion in this country and you have only to travel through this sector to realise it. Apparently, the farmers boost their stocks of sheep in a good year and when a drought follows, the sheep die of starvation by the hundreds - but not before they have torn up every shred of grass and shrub, leaving nothing to hold the soil down.

On flying over this country, you see stretched below you, vast stretches of dark red earth with practically no greenery or shrubbery. It is a tragic scene, as if only something could be done to stop the wind from blowing away the good earth, leaving sand, there would be great possibilities for agriculture.

At lunchtime we arrived at Parkes aerodrome. What a place - now I understand why the Aussies at home, prefer an English Squadron to one of their fellow countrymen.

The R.A.A.F. has not a clue in a great many things. Every R.A.A.F. type I bump into eventually asks me when the R.A.F is coming out here to get things organised.



## The Diary of Flying Officer Fred Thomas RAF

It strikes me that the higher-ups here, are just as the authorities are, in Training Command, at home. That is, they are regular Air Force officers who, too old for participation in this war, do not realise that the peace time days (when flying was of secondary importance) have gone and that, in all, the R.A.F. in wartime is as different as a Spitfire is to a Fury, to the R.A.F. of peace time. However, it is not their fault that they think they can fight the war efficiently from charts, etc.

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> December 1944 – R.A.A.F Parkes

As I expected on arrival here, we are gradually getting accustomed to the station and do not find it nearly so irksome as we did in the first few days. Our mode of life is practically the same as at home, but it's hard to realise that the comfort we had in the R.A.F. has gone. How little did I appreciate my room on the Isle of Man, with its spotlessly clean linoleum floor and carpets, its soft bed whose linen was always fresh and its sideboards where all my clothes were neatly laid out by Doris, my batwoman.

What a contrast to my present abode. The floor is of plain wood and the walls of cardboard, so thin that I can hear a chap strike a match three or four rooms away. My bed is a crude straw mattress on a springless wire frame. In place of bed linen, I have two filthy blankets and an even filthier pillow. I sleep on top of the blankets with a towel under my head for fear of catching something. To counteract the mosquitos I have a net, issued to me by the Medical Officer when he saw the effects these creatures had on me. Everything becomes covered with a fine red dust in no time.



We started off our flying, well. Harry broke a tail, whilst. George dipped a wing tip on the runway and my instructor, showing me how to land, did the same. We are flying mostly dual, on Wirraways, the Australian corruption of the Harvard, until after our Christmas leave. The fact that we are being shown how to fly is, to me, annoying, as I feel it an insult to my ability. I have been flying for three and a half years without a mishap of any kind – this is good enough for the R.A.F. but apparently does not mean a thing to the R.A.A.F.

An instructor shows me how to do things in a way that I think wrong, but because I am a pupil, I have to copy him. As an example, I give the technique of force landing. Here they teach you to put down your wheels – if it comes off, nothing is said but should you stick your wheels in an unseen rut or hole and go on your back, you are court martialled. At home, we are court martialled if we do a perfect wheels down force landing, as it is against orders. Experience having shown that the risk is not worth it. With this I agree, for having seen a chap go over on his back at home, when trying to make a force landing and catch fire, I shall never put my wheels down, despite what they think.

This business of sticking to the rules is a good thing for the primary pupil, but when you are experienced you make up your own mind, since your idea is just as good as the next fellows, as he probably knows less about the ropes than you.

In the afternoons, the air becomes very turbulent due to the convection currents caused by the sun and as a result, flying is very uncomfortable. So, we start our day at 04:00 and finish flying by noon. We do not get breakfast until 07:30 so I went to the O.C. and asked him to provide a snack before flying as our K.R's (Kings Regulations) order that a





minimum of a hot drink and rusk be given before taking to the air. I have flown before without breakfast, through my own fault of staying in bed, but do not intend to do it whilst there is a cup of tea to be had. An hour of aerobatics on an empty stomach can cause that awful feeling of retching, and an unsettled stomach for the rest of the day.

The afternoon is occupied in lectures which are, in the main, boring, due to their being the repetition of those we have had at home, many times. Occasionally, we do come across something of interest and there are no keener pupils in the classroom than the R.A.F, when this happens.

At 16:30 we pile aboard a truck and are conveyed to the baths in Parkes. Here we enjoy ourselves in a very frivolous manner for the better part of an hour, ducking each other like the children we are, at heart. It is amazing to see this sign of our youth come out occasionally after it has been suppressed so long by conditions of war – a condition which insisted that at 18 years of age, we take upon the responsibility of men.

Mac, one of our fellows was only saying last night how much he has missed that ‘stage of man’ called “youth”. He came in at the age of 19 and is now 24. He had all the skin burned around his eyes and hands when his oxygen caught fire in the Battle of Britain and as a result is marked for life. He has forgotten what it is like to be irresponsible and put aside this cloak of manhood. We are all the same. How much I have changed in the last few years – this I think is one of the things you notice yourself, as your friends at home see you, more or less the same, due to your trying to fit yourself into the life which you remembered at home. But when you are away from these influences what are you like then? Far different, I will wager.



Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> December 1944

Happy indeed have been the last two days, for I received a veritable bundle of mail from home – both from my parents and friends. What better tonic is there for a young man, miles away from his loved ones, than a letter giving him an intimate few minutes with those, far away. I may be a mother's boy and then again may not, but there is nothing I like better or would exchange for one of my mother's letters which are written in a free and frank manner, giving me the impression that she is at my side talking to me, with no "edge".

Then there are dad's amusing masterpieces, but under their frivolity, holding lots of worldly wisdom. I am happy to think that my parents trust me and no longer, as some parents do, beseech me in every post to "clean my teeth" and "wash behind my ears". As I have got their trust, I try to live up to it. Fascinating are Margaret's little missives, telling me of her activities in the last few minutes and giving a very brief but charming description of some newly acquired clothing. Then there are Ida's letters whose sincerity often brings a lump to my throat. I often think of the squabbles we used to have when we were kids and of the way she used to protect me in my delicate youth – now I realise how much a brother and sister love each other when they are parted.

Probably, when this war is over and we return once more to sanity, we shall squabble again, but let anyone try to interfere. Three letters came from Mrs MacQuaid and her daughters whose reassurance I am always very pleased to receive.



Following a couple of days of oppressive heat and dust storms we have been shivering in the last two days. I suppose our blood stream had thinned out and a small drop in temperature has made us feel as if we were at the North Pole. We have not been doing so much flying as we, the R.A.F, being refreshers, have only to do half the number of hours as the regular pupils and as a result, have to stand down whilst they get their hours in.

I heard some depressing news today, that the Jap has air superiority in the Philippines. How this news would startle the people at home who think that the fall of the Nip will follow immediately the fall of the Hun. I am afraid we have terribly underestimated the strength and ability of the yellow races and a great deal of people do not yet realise the power of our adversary in this theatre of the war. The tenacity of the enemy on the islands is beyond belief.

Apparently, in some parts they have covered bulldozers with armour plating and just pushed the earth over the Japanese soldiers burying them alive in their trenches. To them, death is an honour and, so long as they have the strength to depress a trigger, they will keep on fighting.

They do not protect their pilots, as we do, with heavy armour plating, hence the wonderful manoeuvrability of their aircraft. They can live on a handful of rice and although cut off from their supplies with no hope of relief and morale at a disgusting level, they will not surrender but fight until their bodies drop to bits.

The reports about their treatment of prisoners of war vary but having met the fifty Tommies who were picked up from a sunken transport, and heard their description of ill treatment to themselves, I have a pretty good picture of the



conditions that prevail. Apparently, officers are regularly brought out and tortured to death in front of the men, whom they hope to demoralise by such atrocities. 40,000 P.O.W's were sent to work on a railway and due to starvation, lack of medical supplies and ill treatment, 27,000 did not return.

The Allies are powerless, as should they retaliate by ill treating the Jap prisoners we have, it would achieve nothing, as a prisoner is a disgrace in the perverted eyes of the Nip. Thankfully, one does occasionally come across more pleasant stories of Japanese P.O.W's but these are few and far between. The sooner the peoples of the world can realise these things the better it will be for our cause.

War has not yet started out here and when it does the blood of both sides is going to pour freely. In my estimation it is going to take years to clear this side of the picture for we have a tremendous job on our hands once the last bullet is fired. How are we going to clear it up, I just don't know - and hate to start thinking of some solution, for at the moment, the only solution in my mind, is the mass extermination of the whole yellow race - which is obviously a stupid and useless answer to the problem.

The more I ponder on such issues as this and the problem in Greece at the moment, I feel trapped in a corner with a huge flood engulfing us - did Christ really think that "love thy neighbour" could and would work in the world today?

What can the few do against such terrific 'bad'? Is my only reply to be "faith"? or should I succumb and say, "To hell with it all!"





Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> December 1944

It is now almost a week since I touched this journal but it was not due to lack of desire as so often happens with diaries which lose their interest after a week or so, but it has been due rather to the work we have been doing which has left us with little or no spare time. When we did get a few hours freedom I have been tired, either mentally or physically.

Last Friday night I went to a local dance in Parkes and found that they are conducted in the same way as England but that they do a cross between an old-fashioned waltz and a modern one which is very disconcerting. The rest of my friends were there but did little dancing as they were not in the mood – this, I gathered was due to my dragging them away from their beer before they had soaked themselves. How difficult it is to enjoy oneself when one falls under the spell of drink.

One can quite quickly get into the state where alcohol becomes part and parcel of every bit of enjoyment. If one does enjoy oneself under the influence, I think it is a sign of weakness in so far that one is not capable of doing it on one's own.

At the dance, as is my want, I met a girl – I might add, a very pretty girl whom I have met practically every day since, in the baths. The first day she came to talk to me, the boys let out a huge wolfish bellow at me – I think more of envy than anything else.

This reminds me of the disconcerting news I heard from home, that Les (younger brother) has, apparently gotten himself a girl. From mother's letter it seems that he is quite



serious, but this may be her desire to see him get on in the world - being affected by this association. I can understand Les's point of view as I have been in the same position myself but, I have had 'pashes' on so many that it is becoming a habit with me and nothing else.

I was talking to Vic the other night and saying what a change this travelling may have upon us. Usually, I should be at home and mixing with and meeting a select bunch of girls. In time, I should probably, acting upon my mating instinct, select one of those girls and make her a particular friend and become so friendly that I should "fall for" her. As it is, circumstances have so ordained it that I never have to get so used to one girl's company that I prize it above all others. A few pages back I wrote about a girl in Melbourne who appealed to me mentally, Signe, now if I had stayed down there and really got to know her, I should have become very friendly with her. As it is, after a month away from her, the feeling has waned so much so that when I met the girl in Parkes, Dorothy Hunter, I forgot all about Melbourne.

What a life!

Harry has just jubilantly announced that tomorrow it will be eight years since he met his wife and says he is still in love, proving it by reading excerpts of 'mush' from his wife's mail. Eight years with one girl, God forbid - eight days is enough for me. This business of 'love' I hear so much about must be a strange state to be in. To me it is just glorified friendship between two individuals with sex thrown in. I do not believe in one boy for one girl, as the sex instinct and desire from what I have seen, do not do much discriminating, and one meets dozens of girls one could get used to, mentally.



A letter from Signe informs me that Nyan Marshall, a friend of ours, who was, when I was down in Melbourne, collecting her trousseau before marrying a Dutch officer, has with no stated reason, been jilted. I saw a photograph of the Dutchman and confided in Signe that, late as it was, I thought that it would not go through and if it did, it would be unfortunate. This, I gathered from the fact that, according to Mrs MacQuaid's teaching, astrologically, they were two conflicting individuals.

We have had our exams today and yesterday with quite good results. I got practically full marks in all subjects, some of which, I had never done before but together with the majority of the R.A.F. types, did not make the grade in one part of a subject which is of little importance, so am quite happy.

We have at last finished the first half of the course and were looking forward to our Christmas leave. We were all fixed up for Christmas dinner with the Longmores and Boxing Day with the Beardsalls, the charming people we met in Melbourne. However, we got the news today that our train would leave at 18:00 hrs on the 23<sup>rd</sup> December and not arrive in Melbourne until late on Christmas day, as we are going via Sydney. A beautiful piece of bad organisation on the R.A.A.F's part, or, as I prefer to think, bad co-operation on the part of the railway authorities. I have spent Christmas Eve in some places but never in a dirty, uncomfortable, railway carriage, before.

I heard from Elizabeth Grimshaw who is now settled 'School-marming in Boston' - it is just a year since I saw her.



The broadcasting system is the same over here as America, that is, there are a few stations run on the same lines as the BBC, Government controlled, but besides these, every town has its own station run by advertisements. Even Parkes, a town of about the size of Crigglestone, has a radio station. Their programmes are amazing but tend to become annoying as there is too much advertisement and not enough entertainment. One of the announcers is the most pathetic wit it has been my misfortune to hear. Deaths, marriages and births are announced. Each death followed by a hymn like "The fight is o'er the battle won" and marriages by the "Bridal march" - "Fight the good fight" would, I think, be more appropriate!

For 2/6 you can wish anybody many happy returns and, the other day, some clot of a doting husband wished his wife many happy returns and confirmed his devotion by telling her to look under the settee and she would find a parcel - his present. This struck me as being ridiculous as he had probably been in the same house with her all day. Then there is the stupid woman who comes on and gives all the "social news" - "organised gossip", I call it - telling the rest of the town how well Mrs so and so sold tickets for the local raffle or knitted odd socks for the gallant fighting men. Dance music recorded by English bands is very popular over here.

In the last week there have been innumerable dust storms which are most annoying as nothing escapes them, and they cover everything with a foul red film - give me rain any day.

Christmas is nearly upon us but there is little indication of this. How we miss the Carol singers, the cold weather and the preparations for the great day. What a wonderful





institution we have made of it at home and what happy times we have.

I remember last Christmas carrying a huge greasy turkey with me, from the Isle of Man. Yes, the spirit of Christmas, I have found, is just not there in America and I am finding is hardly here in Australia. They do make some attempt to copy their English ancestors, but you don't see holly, Christmas cakes, turkeys, puddings, nuts and all that goes with our annual celebration. It can hardly be expected though, because the weather is more fit for picnicking and swimming. We shall have to sing Carols to remind ourselves.

Monday 25<sup>th</sup> December 1944

We left Parkes at 18:00 hrs on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and piled into a foul and dirty train for the first part of our journey to Sydney. All the boys had got their beer ration for Christmas leave so, as will be guessed, there was much singing and fun making. You could have practically floated the carriages down to Sydney and a new Crystal Palace could have been built out of the bottles tossed out of the windows.

The night did not pass too pleasantly as we were not in sleeping carriages. Vic was on a luggage rack – at least one half of him was, whilst the rear oozed over the side and he threatened, in his precarious position, to topple off and crown the lot of us. Mac insisted upon taking up three seats, whilst the other four of us had to share the remaining five places. Craftily, I think, I waited until they had relapsed onto a stupor and then settled myself down with my feet on Bills chest and head on Harry's stomach – they did not



know, and I was comparatively comfortable, so we were all quite happy.

We arrived in Sydney at 06:00 on Sunday morning to find the place, as usual on the Sabbath, in Australia, deserted. However, we managed to get breakfast in the Air Force Club – it was not until we had finished our meal and had a shower that Vic and I noticed that we were the only two commissioned types in the place.

After breakfast we went to the station and “flannelled” our way onto the early train at 18:00 instead of the one we should have caught at 22:30.

We spent the afternoon lounging around the pretty Botanical Gardens and walked out to see that beautiful specimen of English engineering, Sydney Harbour bridge. We noticed the increase of British sailors who are practically as numerous as the Yanks. We lounged on the grass and listened to a brass band playing Carols – at least trying to. We watched the way that the girls paraded themselves in front of men, which was as obvious as a peacock’s fan.

At 17:15, we boarded a troop train for Melbourne - what a journey - we had only one seat per person so that when we tried to stretch ourselves out to sleep, we found ourselves rather cramped. Bill stretched out on the floor making exit and entrance very complicated. I found Vic sleeping curled around a seat arm in much the same way as cotton is wound on a bobbin, even though asleep he did not intend to be moved from his share of the seat.

We stopped next morning at Albury for breakfast – two pieces of sausage and a few greasy potatoes. However, being



commissioned ranks we had a tablecloth. We endured the last part of the ride with its dust storms and foul heat, and arrived in Melbourne at 12:30 hrs Christmas Day, feeling very miserable at not having been able to enjoy Christmas Eve and the better part of Christmas Day.

We were disgusted to learn that the Y.M.C.A, which had been informed by the representative back at camp and had promised us accommodation, had apparently never heard of us and consequently could not offer us rooms. However, the Australian Comfort's Fund organisation came to our aid and we are now fixed in a suite at the Commercial Travellers Association Hotel.

We dumped our kit, had a shower and, like dogs after a hare, charged down to the dinning room to satisfy our rumbling stomachs which had, apart from the sausages, been empty for the better part of 24 hours. The meal was, as the Aussies put it, "Fair Dinkum". If they had put the head and claws on my plate, I am sure I should have had the whole turkey. The Christmas Pud and brandy sauce were just "how mother makes" – that is saying a lot.

In true Christmas spirit we ate so much we had to take our time over the coffee to allow the 'fare' to digest and so be able to walk away from the table.

We rested on our beds in the afternoon and then went out to the Beardocks, who we rang on arrival, to partake of their Christmas dinner, which they had put on for us. We had, as usual, a very pleasant evening with these sincere and charming people, but it was not until about 22:00 that we realised how little sleep we had had on the train ride.



Monday 1<sup>st</sup> January 1945

If this is to be a true journal of my experiences then I must hide nothing and be honest, telling my faults and misdeeds truly. I am going to recount my leave here and add no judgement - that I will do later.

On Tuesday, that is Boxing Day, Vic and I were invited to a tennis tournament in Toorak, the 'West End' of Melbourne, but before going there we went to the Australia Bar for a few drinks and met one of our instructors from Parkes who had just received his discharge. Consequently, it was not until 5 p.m. that Vic and I arrived at the tournament to meet the girls. You can imagine us rolling in there - don't get me wrong, we were far from the state when we could not walk straight and lost all our faculties.

The crux of the matter was that I ignored Signe, my interest in whom, as I think said earlier on, had diminished to an unrecognisable degree. When the tournament was finished, Vic went with the girls, but I came home to bed and slept soundly until 08:30 the next morning when I awoke as fresh as the 'proverbial lily'.

Come Wednesday, and in the afternoon Signe's younger sister rang me up and asked me to go to supper that night. This I refused, as I was no longer interested in Signe and she apparently had lost most of her interest in me. However, her mother, after an hour's conversation, persuaded me that Signe had acted upon an impulse and was anxious to clear things up, but her pride prevented her from ringing me. This I am sure is what Mrs Alstergren thought, as both Mr and Mrs Alstergren think I am the 'cat's whiskers' and a desirable match for their daughter. Apart from Mrs A's sincerity I did not want to leave or say cheerio to her





daughter, leaving a nasty taste in both her and my mouths. As a result, I went - through having no other option - to visit them.

I was greeted very warmly by the rest of the family and it struck me that their drawing room was like a businessman's conference - everybody obviously going out of their way to be polite, so as to bring off a deal - it amused me.

All went well until Mrs Alstergren suggested that she and her husband and Signe and I went to see a show and then obviously realising that in doing so, it would not afford much opportunity for a discussion between we two, she determined that we should go for a ride in the car. It tickled me to death, we pulled up beside the beach, the most 'romantic' spot around and started a conversation.

Imagine us, Mr Alstergren discussing the labour situation in America and its effect upon the production of hard wood floors, Mrs A doing her best to help the intended Armistice and Signe sitting in the corner, her pride hurt at my ignoring her stupid catty remarks. Eventually, Signe decided to go for a walk and refused her mother's urging for me to accompany her 'as it was dark'. After all, I was a guest so just did as Signe said she wanted - sat still and let her go alone - this obviously hurt her pride even further, as, like all these stupid girls, she thought that I would beg her to let me accompany her - she obviously did not know me as well as she thought she did.

Up to this point I was willing to co-operate but now I was the one to take umbrage, and Signe, all the way back home did her best to butt into conversation going on between her father and I, with no results. I told her later on in the



evening that I was willing to play ball, but I am not one to be insulted without effect. But I did not tell her that, whatever little feeling there had been left between us, had that evening been completely smashed as there is one thing in this world I cannot forgive and that is 'bad manners'.

On Thursday, little happened as we stayed in bed all day, as an exact opposite to what we are able to do when not on leave - that is please ourselves when we get up. We have been getting so little sleep back at Parkes that we enjoyed every minute on the clean sheet.

At 11 o'clock, the maid, to whom we are a constant source of amusement, and who, if she finds a pair of dirty socks lying around, picks them up and washes them, brought us some tea and sandwiches. This girl has really been like a mother to us and nothing seems to be too much trouble for her. My memory fails me as to what we did in the evening, but I think I went ice skating on my own.

On Friday, Mr Wilde called for us around 11 o'clock. He picked us up in the street last time we were down in Melbourne and took us home to dinner. He insisted that we have a beer with him and then we went around to see the manager of the insurance company, in whose employ he is, and he came out with us. However, we did intend to go to lunch but I, not being over anxious to go boozing, but at the same time not wanting to insult Mr Wilde who is really one of the most charming people I have met, faked illness and left them to return to the hotel and be called for, at 4 p.m.

This, they did and out we drove to Mr Wilde's for dinner. It really was amusing to see Vic and I seated in the dicky seat of the car with our knees perched up as in the days of 1920. We had an extremely good meal, Bill, Vic and me. The other



boys having other engagements. The hospitality shown by those people was really something to write home about.

Mr Wilde even invoked us to take off our shoes and sit with our feet up on the chairs, he had an abundance of cigarettes, which we realised he must have saved up for the last month due to their scarcity. He told us, he realised that, at home, we do things we do not do in other people's houses, so he told us to just do as we wanted, there – he really is terrific. If we mention casually that we like such and such a thing he will move heaven and earth to procure it for us.

All night long we discussed home and as Mr Wilde is the staunchest patriot I have met, he convinced me that an Englishman with English manners and character could really go places in this country or any other, come to that.

Saturday found us, once more at Mr Wilde's for a party. This started off, as is usual, by the six of us boys, Mr Wilde and a friend of his, Major Young sitting down to a wonderful dinner prepared by Mrs Wilde and her two young daughters who because of the insufficiency of seating accommodation retired to the back room and ate their meal there. There, sit the men, eating together, as in days of old, whilst the wife cooks and the children wait upon us.

On Sunday, New Year's Eve, we were invited to a party given for us by Mr & Mrs Longmore. We duly arrived at Malvern Station and were picked up by Tom at 4 p.m. When we got to the flat, Mr & Mrs Beardsall were there, so we had tea and then at about 7.30 we had dinner with a few more guests, who arrived. Having cleared all the sherry, we cleared the table. At about 21:00 hrs the guests started pouring in until there were 56 people in the place – all in the small flat. I was sitting on the floor with somebody's legs



entwined about my neck. Everything was going well until midnight when, in the true Scots spirit, we brought in the New Year with “a wee doch an’ doris”.

As we had been drinking beer all evening the whisky just made us inebriated – we were all six at the party; Vic, Bill, Harry, George, Mac and I, and somebody suggested that we should go around letting in the New Year.

Our first port of call was an old spinsters party and were they delighted to see us – they said they had not seen anything like it since they left England and that must have been quite a while ago.

Our next port of call was a party where we were completely ignored so, on leaving, we each procured a beautiful flower about the size of a saucer and wore these as buttonholes. Not content with this, Mac, Buck, and a corporal whom we had met previously at a party at Beardsalls, proceeded to deflate the tyres of each car, outside the house.

From there, we called on another house who gave us some concoction to drink which really finished me, for when I came back to Mr Longmore’s, we started singing at the piano. After that, I remembered very little, apparently, as I was told afterwards. I decided it was time to go home to bed so, donning my hat and coat, got as far as the door where they persuaded me to stay. I went into the one and only bedroom to take off my hat and tunic but finished up by getting into bed beneath all the hats and clothes of the guests which were on top of the bed. Eventually, I was joined by Harry, George, Mac and Bill – all in one bed where we slept until 10.30 the next morning. Vic stayed drinking all night and caught the 7.30 a.m. train on New Year’s Day, travelling all the way, wearing a woman’s hat.





I awoke on New Year's Day feeling very fuzzy, so, bidding a hasty goodbye to Tom and Mrs Longmore, back I came to the hotel and climbed into bed where I stayed until 7.30 p.m.

On arising, I had a shower and did not feel much better as I went out and had a meal, my first bite since the tea on the previous day and then, thinking the coolness of the rink would do me good, went skating.

I came back at 11 p.m. and found Harry out to the world on his bed. I awoke him and he told me he had been to the races with a party and had guzzled 5 glasses of beer between each race – there were 7 races. He had a lucky day and won £10.

The rest of the leave was spent very quietly trying to recover from our celebrations. Although the boys continued with moderate drinking, I had had enough to last me a long, long, time and proceeded to resort to my hobby of ice skating.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January I took a girl who was the friend of Major Young's daughter and who, after seeing my photograph in the paper, had corresponded with me as her parents were born in Wakefield. She said she could skate so I thought this would be an excellent opportunity to carry out a 'date of compunction'. Alas, I spent two or three hours practically carrying her around the ice, mainly trying to impress upon her the rudiments of the game. After this ordeal, as previously arranged, we met Major Young and his daughter and the four of us had 'high tea' down on St. Kilda beach – the South Shore of Melbourne. I left them rather hastily on the pretence of having another appointment but in fact to retire to bed.



The next night, after wandering around the shops and collecting a watch I had bought which took ten pounds out of my pocket, I found that I had nothing to do as all the shows were crowded and all booked up. I rang up Nona, the girl I met at Mr Wilde's party and took her skating. What a contrast to the skating date of the previous day. Nona started at 20:00 and hardly came off the ice until the end. She raced me around that ring until every muscle in my legs ached and, but for the excuse of leaving the ring for a few minutes to have a cigarette so as to get a slight respite, I am sure I should have been unable to walk home. Still, it was my own fault – I asked her to go skating and skating we went.

After the ring, we went down to Luna Park and had a couple of rides on the Big Dipper which left me cold. Coffee and sandwiches followed at a little café I know, which has subdued lighting - an asset for 'pitching woo'! – (Romeo that I am, I know all the "joints"! ). We started talking there and the next thing I knew we had walked all the way to her home at Toorak and I was shaking hands with her and bidding her goodnight at 4 a.m.

These girls just lap up anybody that talks – or, let me not deceive myself, tries to talk, about anything but the trivialities of life. I enjoyed it, as it does me good to express my thoughts aloud to a willing listener for it allows me to straighten a lot of my ideas out. I caught the usual 'Rocking Horse' (small all-night trams which, due to their short wheel-base, pitch and toss like a rowing boat on the ocean), which as usual, was full of the same old 'Casanovas' returning to bed after entertaining their ladies all evening, as tired as if they had done a day's hard work. The things



## The Diary of Flying Officer Fred Thomas RAF

we men endure to gain favour in the eyes of the sex we acclaim as inferior.

Our last day of leave was spent quietly resting for the ordeal of our tedious train journey to Parkes. We arose at lunchtime and enjoyed the usual steaks and eggs then, after booking for a show in the evening, we dropped in to a News theatre, having nothing else to do. We went to the show in the evening and enjoyed Eddie Cantor in *Show Business*, returning home to sort out our clothes and pack for the return.

On arrival at the station the next morning to catch the 07:00 train, we found Mr and Mrs Wilde and family waiting to greet us and see us off. Just to show how wonderful these people are - Mrs Wilde handed us a box of wizardry - cooked food which she had prepared at 05:00 that morning - and we appreciated those beautiful sausage rolls and cakes later on in the day.

Luckily, we, arrived at Cootamundra at 20:00 that evening and, were able to get a bed at a hotel until 05:00 next morning and so, unlike our previous journey's pause, where we sat and shivered all night on the station, we slept soundly. The next morning, we caught the railcar previously described and arrived back at camp at lunchtime, Saturday the 6<sup>th</sup> January.

Friday 12<sup>th</sup> January 1945

We started work in earnest the day after we returned from leave by rising at 03:30 hrs. I took off on my first flight in a Spitfire VC in Australia an hour later. As I rambled down the runway I had to turn on my cockpit lights to see my



engine instruments as the dawn had not yet arrived. The inside of my cockpit was aglow with the red lights (red, as this colour does not dazzle) and the outside was a murky darkness.

I climbed away and flew around the town of Parkes which I could just distinguish below me, with all its inhabitants still clinging to their beds. After a while the sun gradually came out of its hiding, heralded by a glow of light on the horizon – the land lubber spends much energy to climb a mountain and is rewarded with such an impressive view.

After the light had come I spent the next hour frolicking around the sky much as a child does when splashing around in a paddling pool, I was master of myself and machine – climbing, diving, looping, rolling in quick succession, perspiring like an over-soaked sponge from the exertions, but enjoying every minute of it.

We finish our flying at 11:30 hrs, have lunch and then attend briefing at 13:00, which consists of a discussion about the mornings flying and an explanation of the following day's exercise.

I went up with the flight commander as the leader, Mac was number two and myself as number three on a 'tail chase', the day before last. In this exercise we get behind each other in that order: - the leader, then number 2 and number 3, at a distance of not more than 100 yards and off we go, weaving and careering around the sky – the leader, doing his best to shake off the followers.

It is a very interesting exercise and requires all your energy and skill to stay on the tail of the aircraft in front, particularly when you are flying as number 3, for you are





following an aircraft which is flying violently, in an attempt to keep on the leader's tail.

You have to forget all about being the right side up or you are lost – I prefer to get to within about 40 or 50 yards and stick there through thick and thin, riding the rudders and stick like a cowboy on a 'bronco'.



*Spitfire Mk. VC RAAF Parkes 1944/5 – fitted with tropical air filter. Note the red centre of the roundel is missing to avoid confusion with Japanese aircraft*

I was following Mac up in a roll off the top and had just got to the position where we were inverted and ready to do a half roll to bring ourselves the right way up, when Mac did a 'flick' (an uncontrolled roll) and went into an inverted spin, which is a state where you are upside down.

Besides losing all control of your machine, you are, due to the effects of 'G', pressed out of your seat, with all your blood rushing to your head.



He seemed to go down a 'helluva' way before managing to get out of the spin and when he joined us, he was considerably shaken.

Such incidents are more the rule than the exception in this particular branch of flying and we look upon it that way, and are not really alarmed by such things.

Tonight, I went into the bar and, much to the astonishment of the barman, who was pouring out beer like a peace time garage-man does petrol, I ordered a Pashenella, a drink made of the juice of passion fruit to which is usually added figs. The boys had been drinking since teatime so as usual, they were 'well on the way' and were disappointed that I would not join in with them and to use their words - 'be like one of the boys'.

I am now faced with a new problem which I have every intention of overcoming. It is one thing to be teetotal but another to have drunk with them as I did at Christmas and then refuse drink. There were suggestive remarks that I was 'toffy-nose' - anybody appears 'toffy-nose' to a drunk when he disagrees with him - that I tried to be a 'goody goody' and many other hints which make one feel uncomfortable when made by one's friends.

However, I am afraid that these had no effect upon me and made me feel a little pity for their stupid mode of life. While they were drinking, I had been talking to an Aussie in another room about music, whilst listening to a concert on the radio. He was a sane and sober chap whose company I subconsciously compared with that of the fellows whom the service had deemed, should be companions of mine, for a long time.



This is one of the big reasons why I seem to write so much about the girls I meet. As fellows they are quite nice chaps but I, unfortunately, prefer the company of such men as Allan Smyth-Osborne who thinks about things other than those which have an immediate effect upon his physical welfare. I believe in fitness of body and mind as being essential to a happy life.

I have always been keen on sport, as this allows me to keep in condition, the machine, the creator gave me to house my mind. Whenever this machine is allowed to rust by inactivity, or is polluted by any disturbing drink or food, I am annoyed with myself for allowing such desecration to occur. At the same time the mind must be exercised as it is the best thing we have. So many people, take more care of their clothes than they do of their minds. In this, I have the reason for finding my companions, at times, so uncongenial as to be boring and leave them, to find sympathy in outsiders. I have not the slightest doubt that this is a mutual feeling. How I long for the company of people who sense the higher side of their character and try to improve their lot rather than let it stagnate during their short span in this life.

I believe that I am able to make the following statement, with my own experience as a support. I have derived pleasure from the sordid side of life and had fun in night clubs, low music halls, burlesques and strip-tease shows, bars, etc. On the other hand, I have derived pleasure from good music, the Church, good conversation and good company. For myself, I prefer the latter type of happiness, anytime. How many people in their pandering of the body have their eyes closed to the inescapable state of happiness I call 'mental pleasure'.



Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> January 1945

I have just recovered from the ordeal we underwent the day before last in the bush. We have not been flying since Friday, due to the Spits going unserviceable and making any set flying programme impossible - as a result, maintenance have asked us to test the aircraft on the ground until tomorrow, so that they can get a chance to make all the aircraft once more, fit for their duties. It is understandable as the Spitfire in this climate reacts in the same way as if you put a thoroughbred racehorse on duty, as a pack animal in a desert - it just cannot cope. Furthermore, there is, out here, a shortage of trained ground staff which again is understandable as the Aussies have - and are still - putting up a very good war effort with their eight million population.



In the meantime, we have had quite a lot of spare time, which I personally have enjoyed, swimming in the pool at Parkes and coming back in the evening to listen to some





good music on the radio. Life has been very pleasant, and I have had cause to reflect upon saying "war is hell".

On Monday it was decided that we Spit types should be given a chance to test our toughness and, at the same time, learn something from an exercise which simulated, as much as possible, the position we might be in if we baled out, or had to crash land, either down here, or up north.

We ate a hearty meal at 10:30 hrs and having had enough experience about walking and climbing I craftily borrowed a pair of secondhand boots from stores. Off we set in a truck and drove 35 miles through the swirling dust into the bush. The W.A.A.F driver nearly cancelled the whole exercise when she ran the truck off the road, which had become soft due to the previous night's downpour. With much sweat and groaning we got the truck back onto the road and reached point "X" at about noon. We collected our kit, a water bottle, a tin of bully and a map, each. The map was an aeronautical 4 miles to the inch type which was pretty useless for walking and proved to be so inaccurate, as far as contours and creeks, that it was put away in disgust.

We were in parties of five, each party having a haversack containing first aid kit, a monstrous revolver and, of course, red signal cartridges - to be fired off if we were unlucky enough to be in distress. The O.C. who came back in the truck bid us goodbye by saying "well boys if you don't make it tonight, you had better lie up and come back tomorrow"!

Off we plodded, over the rocky ground, cracking bone-dry twigs and branches under our feet. I went ahead and soon found myself on my own, with not a soul in sight.



But, whilst I was crouched on the ground (not sitting for fear of being nipped in an uncomfortable spot by the huge red ants which swarmed everywhere) trying to work out a course to reach home, with the aid of my watch, the sun, and a few bits of twigs set on the ground, up came Mac and George, with the haversack.

Then followed quite an interesting little discussion on navigation and George and I took quite a while, trying to convince Mac that north was in the same direction as the sun and not opposite, as in the northern hemisphere. Having finally deduced a direction, we stumbled off through the undergrowth, being cut by the prickly grass-like vegetation and fighting off the creepers, which sought to embrace us, at every step. A straight course was impossible, so we frequently had to pause and re-adjust ourselves. We finally hit a dried-up creek, which we followed, as it roughly went in the direction we intended to follow.

This part of the walk, even though hard work, was at the same time, very pleasant, bringing back, to my mind, the many happy days I had spent tramping over the mountains at home. At regular intervals wallabies (small kangaroos) 'guanans' (huge beautifully coloured lizards about five feet long) and other reptiles and animals scampered away from us, seeking protection in the dense undergrowth.

There were of course many birds and the like, which were of so many and varied shapes and colours, that my memory cannot recall one of them now, enough for me to describe it. We came, eventually, to a small pool of water supplied by a spring and waterfall. So here we paused and after stripping, had a dip – wary, at first, as we did not know what kind of reptile may be lying under the murky water.



Mac was complaining of a blister on, of all parts of his anatomy, his rear end. This apparently was caused by the friction set up by his two cheeks rubbing together. The posture he adopted to dip this part of his body into the cooling water, and no other, was, to say the least, amusing.

After this refreshing interval we set off once more, climbing a mountain and eventually coming across a sheep station where, upon asking to replenish our empty water bottles, we were made very welcome and tea and cakes were provided. Apparently, living out there in the lonely bush, visitors are few and far between and, naturally, always welcomed as a break to their monotonous existence.

The remaining fourteen miles was a "bludge" and at the end of it, we three would have made quite a picture. I was in front, with my shirt wrapped around my waist, together with other impedimenta, such as water bottle and signal pistol and the haversack on my back. George followed and was so tired that he dare not stop for fear of being unable to start once more and Mac brought up the rear (he had been relieved of his share of the equipment from the start), groaning and bending double every hundred yards or so with a pain in his stomach and bewailing the blister on his rear end.

Dirty, fagged out and unkempt we staggered into camp and after 'gluttoning' ourselves on a meal we went to bed. The mosquitos did not annoy us that night.

The next day everyone was complaining of the inevitable blisters and aching muscles.



Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> January 1945

What has happened to the last fortnight?

I have had no social activities at all with the exception of one which I will relate, the reason being that I have been in a mood of “complacent happiness” - if it can be so described. A mood in which I have no desire for company, in fact, I almost shun it - and am content to return to the seclusion of my room which does not furnish me with much company and is more comparable to a cell, in its cold and impersonal atmosphere, than a living quarter.

However, here I am at last, on my own, and meet with no interference in my pleasure, which is the reading of good books. I have read and derived much pleasure from two of Shakespeare’s historical plays, *Richard III* and *Henry V* and for lighter reading have swallowed two books by Raphael Sabatini, whose period writing and style appeal to the romantic side of my taste.

Excerpts picked at random from *The Imitation of Christ* have provided much food for thought, but instead of “reading, marking and inwardly digesting”, I am afraid I have done a deal of expectorating, as I find most of Thomas à Kempis’s ideas and conclusions, although being beautiful as ideals, are at the same time, absolutely impossible in the world today.

Within the enclosure of the cloisters they may seem possible but outside its sanctity, they’re very improbable. Yet, it is good to take a sip of something that is beyond you, once in a while, as I think it raises your determination and adds a spark to your endeavours. It always has amazed me why so few people, of those who recognise Shakespeare as





the best English writer of poetry, actually read none of his works once they have left behind their schooldays of compulsory reading. The plots alone are worthy of anybody's attention, even if, as is generally recognised, they are generally copied from more obscure author's pens. I derive my pleasure not only from the stories but the philosophy that one finds in practically every line.

The C.O. has been constantly receiving calls from a Mrs Brown - in Trundle, who, on getting no sensible acceptance of her invitation to entertain some English chap for the day or weekend, rang up the officers' mess and asked for an R.A.F. officer. I answered the phone and, not wishing to offend the woman, volunteered to go out on my day off and bring another chap, if possible. The boys would have none of it, preferring to stay in, rather than risk being disappointed in a boring day.

As a promise is a promise, last Saturday found me arising at 06.30 in time to catch the railcar to Trundle where I was duly met by Mrs Brown. She proved to be an attractive young woman as far as her torso was concerned but having a none too attractive face and bad teeth. After an embarrassing self-introduction, we crossed the line and went to her home, which was no more than a crude wooden hut with corrugated tin roofing. We were greeted at the door by a bunch of kids ranging in age between 3 and 12, none of which, wore shoes and all of which, were in need of a good scrubbing.

My doubts were realised as I went into the house, for I was taken into what seemed to be a dining room, come kitchen, come living room and introduced to Mrs Brown's mother who, in the fashion of her offspring, was barefoot and wore a dirty cotton frock over her ugly figure - her legs were full



of varicose veins and running sores - as were the legs of the children, I noticed later. She fitted in admirably with the rooms she was in, whose walls were papered with newspapers through which could be seen the cracks in the ill-fitting boards.

I accepted a cup of tea and was left to entertain myself sitting on the only chair, which was placed neither in nor out of the room, but in the doorway, in such a position that I had to, whilst trying to carry on a conversation, keep picking up my legs, to avoid the kids who were running in and out of the house and putting on a display of rolling around the floor, as children are wont to do, in an attempt to impress a visitor.

This I endured for about an hour before suggesting that one show me around the town of Trundle, before lunch. I made this last as long as possible, so as to avoid returning to the house. Before returning I bought a big block of ice-cream for the kids which, if serving no other purpose, kept them quiet for the first five minutes of my return, as they gobbled the stuff up and fought over the last segment.

For the next hour or so I was doomed to be pestered by the children who, despite the efforts of the mother who, besides trying to subdue her unruly flock, was cooking the dinner and ironing, found some great fascination in stroking the hairs on my bare legs, trying on my watch and insisting that I take off my wings and braid, for them to scrutinise. I reached a limit when one of the older boys attempted to take off my shoes and see what they were like to wear.

Throughout this time Mrs Brown Junior had been, I fear, doing her best to impress me and from her I gathered that the youngest girl aged three was hers and she, the mother,



was only 19 years old. I tactfully asked her what her husband thought of her inviting chaps out and she nonchalantly answered that he has his fun in the army with the A.W.A.S (Australian Womens' Army Service) so why shouldn't she? This philosophy of people born and bred in an atmosphere of poverty and remoteness is usual, as I have found in my travels. Lunch was served - sheep's brains - of all things - a dish I dislike!

I was able to be honest in my refusal but as it was, I had determined to eat nothing for fear of catching some infection after seeing the running sores on the occupants of the house. In place of lunch I was offered biscuits and a cup of tea - the latter I accepted. After lunch Mrs Brown Senior came in from work and showed considerable surprise to see a guest still in the house. We retired to the so-called veranda and talked until it was time for my train at 4 p.m.

I have never looked forward to a train so much before and after a steak in Parkes, which satisfied my hunger, I returned to camp, had a thorough shower and gargled with antiseptic - a bottle of which I always have in my kit, and rolled into bed, dead tired with a splitting headache, after the day's strain.

If we were as unruly, when we were young, as those brats, it is a wonder my mother's hair is not silver by now. After seeing this squalor, it made me pine for the cleanliness of my own home, and I thanked God for my upbringing.

I still don't know whether Mrs Brown had some ulterior motive in inviting me out to their place, as anybody with any sense at all could see, that there was not the slightest entertainment available.



Flying events have been interesting on Spits. Two of the R.A.F sergeants with us, got lost doing wheels down landings. One got away with no damage to the aircraft but the other hit a rabbit warren, went on his back and smashed up the aircraft which, by a streak of good fortune, did not catch fire as they invariably do. References to my reactions about doing a wheels down landing, which they advocate at this place, are a few pages back.

Mac the fellow who was shot down and suffered severe facial burns in the Battle of Britain was washed out, a week ago. His flying was not up to the high standard required.

The reason for this high standard assumes a marked importance in this theatre of operations as aircraft cannot afford to be put into the hands of any but the most capable pilots. Spitfires and their spares are manufactured at home and need greater care in this climate. Further spares are very, very, scarce as each screw has to be shipped all the way from home – a tedious job!

Consequently, unless they are absolutely sure in the cockpit, they will not risk losing or damaging an aircraft.

Harry is down in Sydney having an operation on his heel and so we have seen the last of him. Buck Ryans has proved very satisfactory although he has turned up at the flight in the mornings apparently showing every sign of a previous night's org







*F/O Fred Thomas - RAAF Parkes January 1945*

My words have come true as far as the other boys go. (If I am to honestly bewail my faults in this book surely, I am justified in manifesting my virtues)

I have been given every reason to believe, from the flight commander, that my companions are not what they might be - this I do not put down to one reason - but in my own mind you cannot fly and drink, and the occasions when they have not been drinking they have been staying up late and playing bridge, instead of going to bed and refreshing their minds and bodies for the duties of the following day. In turn, they have all been cautioned that they do not reach the required standard and unless they improve, they will have to be sent back home. In a bumptious way, I have heard them excusing this fact to each other, unaware that the



flight commander had told me all about them, in confidence, and asked me what I thought of them.

This question was difficult to answer. If I had been honest, my reply would not have been very complimentary and I may have judged myself, in my conscience, as a Judas. If I had been complimentary, I should not have been honest, so I had to evade the answer as best I could, so as to honour the confidence put in me. The boys have noticed that I have been given positions of leadership in formations which they think has not been justified. Positions which I have been able to cope with, efficiently. Naturally, despite their professed dis-interest, the thought of me leading them has caused them to be envious.

I particularly noticed this when I led a section one morning (sections are invariably led by experienced instructors as, on his ability, depends the whole success of the enterprise). After that, I was jokingly, yet not without an obvious bitterness, referred to as "The Ace".

I do not like defeat in life and as a result, to avoid this end, try to put my best into anything I do. Obviously, a teacher thinks more of a conscientious pupil so why the boys, who profess to be "disinterested" in the whole business, should show envy, can only mean that their profession is false, and underneath, they would like to do as well, themselves. At the beginning of the course I was openly derided for going to bed early and not drinking, but these remarks fell on "stony ground". Now, they unconsciously flatter me by following my example, as they have, in the last few days, in an attempt to pull up in the last minute - which may prove too late. Now, it would be my turn to laugh, if I had any desire to retaliate.



Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> January 1945

Yesterday the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester arrived in Australia to take up the post of Governor General and what a terrific welcome they have been accorded. The Aussies have afforded them a big place in their hearts, particularly the two young Princes, on whom, the Australian women folk doted.

The press has been devoted, practically completely, to the news, and pages have been denoted to photographs of the Royal Family, whilst the magnificent advance of the Russians to within 50 miles - or as the news more aptly puts it "within three hours motoring time" - to Berlin has become insignificant. The presence of Royal blood in this country will form an even firmer bond between the "old country", a presence which the Aussies consider a high privilege. There should not be the slightest fear of Australia swinging to America now - how I admire the statesmanship of our crafty politicians - they always seem to do the right thing at the opportune moment.

Friday 10<sup>th</sup> February 1945

I am writing this on the last night, but one, of our embarkation leave and will endeavour, as far as my memory allows, to recount the events of this leave.

After being kept back an unnecessary day at Parkes, due to the inefficiency of the stupid adjutant who, although notified of our intended departure weeks ahead, omitted to book seats for us on the train which catches a straight through connection to Melbourne. However, our relief at leaving Parkes made us forget this incident and it was with



happy hearts that we climbed aboard the truck to take us to town. Bill was, as usual, under the weather and, as usual, behaved foolishly. Why he drinks I just don't know, except that it may be an opportunity to deceive himself of his complex. However, I guess that all men would like to, and generally do, try to overcome their complexes by one way, or another - some use drink, others arrogance or ostentation.

The train left at 19:00hrs and arrived at Harden at 23:30, where, after suppressing the impertinence of one of the railway guards by impressing upon his grey matter that, as a passenger, I held the power of dealing with his insolence where it would hurt the most, that is in being able to report his conduct and jeopardise his job.

Until I dropped off to sleep, I was "entertained" by Mac who recounted the sordid and repulsive details of his sex life.

We arrived at Albury at 16:00 Saturday and found no connection until the following day so Vic and I booked a room at an hotel - at least I booked a room whilst Vic slept on a bed on a veranda. In the afternoon we went to see the film *Going My Way* and then I adjourned to the lounge of a good hotel with the boys and had dinner. After that, a binge followed, which I unobtrusively left, and wandered to an open-air dance. Talk about girls, there were dozens of them, so picking out one, I got to work. She missed her bus at midnight so I had to walk her home, a distance of about three miles.

There should have been a bus back but suddenly all traffic ceased so I set off to walk. After being on the road for about  $\frac{1}{2}$  an hour, I discovered the reason for the lack of traffic. A





bus and car had collided, with the result that the narrow road was blocked.

Eventually, I got back to Albury and bumped into two N.C.O.s walking around the deserted, yet brightly lit, streets as they could not sleep for mosquitos. I rolled into bed at 03.30 and had to be awakened by Vic who doused me with cold water so as to catch the 04:30 train to Melbourne – needless to say I slept all the way and awoke to find the train in Melbourne, at lunchtime.

It was not long before we were all installed in comfortable rooms at the R.S.L. on St. Kilda Road – that is Vic, Bill, George, Mac and me. In the evening Bill and I went to the service at the Cathedral – one of the ugliest churches, internally, I have seen. The service was quite good, particularly the sermon, but I must admit that the rendering of the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis did not impress me, as they were sung as an anthem so that I could not sing but listen and try to follow the choir. After the service one of the parsons buttonholed us and took us into the church hall, where a cup of tea and biscuits was had by all.

We only had three days leave but Mac and George went around to the R.A.F. mess and met the A.O.C. who, upon hearing of the brevity of our embarkation leave told them to tell S/Ldr Russell that we had to have more. This extension was duly granted, and we did not leave until the following Sunday.

Mac, who was considered unsuitable for ops in this part of the globe, left us at the end of the week, so the general idea seemed to be to have a farewell binge, which was to last all week. However, I did not fancy spending my leave under the



influence, so wandered around on my own. Two evenings, I took Maria out and arrived back at the R.S.L. in the early hours of the morning.

The rest of the time I spent washing out clothes, seeing a show or, more generally, shaving. I met an old chap in "Gibby's" whilst having dinner one night, who took me around to his home to meet his family. I left well after midnight promising to have tea with them on Saturday afternoon – an engagement I had to cancel, as Mr Wilde, unknown to me, had arranged for us to have dinner at his home. Mr and Mrs Wilde and their two young daughters amaze me - they cannot do enough for us.

After dinner – a delicious effort – we had a discussion, or should I say, "hate session", on Roman Catholicism and Communism. Mr Wilde failed his finals in an attempt to enter the Church and then took up insurance, in which, he has done very well. For two years he lectured on Political Economics so he should know something about the subject.

He maintains that Hitler, Franco and Mussolini are but puppets in the hands of the Vatican and through them the Pope hopes to gain Roman Domination. From what I have seen of the intrigue and underhand methods of the R.C.'s, who have now become a business or political organisation underneath the pretence of representing a faith, I think there may be something in it. Stalin wiped out the Roman Catholics and Russia went ahead, until opposed by the Germans who apparently have strong Catholic feelings.

Hitler, Franco and Mussolini are supposed to have Roman Catholic leanings and if they have, I have not the slightest doubt they are controlled by the Vatican. Franz von Papen the old German Chancellor is a devout Roman Catholic and



handed over the Chancellorship of Germany, to Hitler – why?

However, although I have not the slightest doubt of Mr Wilde's words, one has to be careful before making judgement as it is possible to prove that black is white from assumptions. Nevertheless, my own experience, I think, sways the balance in Mr Wilde's favour.

On Sunday morning I went to early communion at Christ's Church and really enjoyed the service – there were only a few there and it was held in the Lady Chapel. I get more out of a small simple service than one of much ostentation, as I feel more in touch.

After the service the congregation of 20 or 30 retired to the Vicarage for coffee and biscuits which was rather a nice gesture on the Vicar's part. He told me I could go and stay with him on my leave – an invitation I doubt whether I shall be able to accept.

On Sunday morning we found the train was full so did not travel to Adelaide until 02:00 on Monday. On Sunday evening the Wildes came around to wish us God speed and gave us a parcel of ham and egg pie – one of Mrs Wilde's specials, which tempted us so much, that we ate it as soon as she had left us. In the evening George, Vic and I (Bill at last having got a date) went to St. Kilda beach for a cup of coffee – I think more in search of fun.

There are two or three “coffee houses” which are exactly the same as night clubs only instead of drinks, coffee is served. Unfortunately, the clientele is not very “good”, yet, it is rather pleasant to think that they are getting their



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enjoyment out of drinking coffee. One can sit and chat over coffee, dance or just listen to the band.

Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> March 1945

We arrived at Adelaide after travelling throughout the night in a cold railway carriage. Buck, after imbibing a bottle of brandy, managed to push his hand through a window and severely cut a finger.

The Hardening Course we did at Adelaide was extremely boring and worthless for, instead of getting us physically fit, we were rocked to sleep by endless lectures on things we already knew.

Unfortunately, we had an Englishman as our C.O. I say English but really, he is the last type you would find in England. He was of the type that go to the Colonies. He had been to Hong Kong and tried to appear, what an Englishman is expected to be, with affected accent and all. This type of individual has done more to harm the English character, as people constantly tell us, on our travels, that we are not what they thought Englishmen were like - i.e. toffee nose and Oxford accent. This fellow had joined the R.A.A.F. and took his job very seriously, that is outwardly - he did no work himself and reigned like a little king satisfying his own ego by dishing out orders that his rank allowed him. As a result, we could not cut many of the lectures, as he sought the slightest chance to give you such duties as orderly officer, as a punishment.

We finished work at 17:00hrs and after washing off the grime accumulated during the hot dusty day, changing and having dinner, I used to go into Adelaide to see a show or go





dancing with Joan Shakeshaft, a friend I met at a party a couple of days after arrival. She is a very pleasant type of girl with a motherly instinct and would do anything for me.

Last Saturday I went to her home at Kapunda, about 50 miles out of the town and had a most enjoyable weekend. On the Sunday afternoon we went gathering brambles and yabbies – the latter being a type of crayfish, about a couple of inches long, which frequent muddy streams. The method of attack is to attach a chunk of bad meat to a string and cast it out into the pond. The yabbies then fasten their claws into the meat and, by a smooth movement, both yabbies and meat are lifted out of the water in a net. The yabbies are taken home in water cans and whilst still alive, plunged into boiling water for a quarter of an hour before eating.

Adelaide is a very clean city, being quieter than either Melbourne or Sydney and more stress seems to be put upon home life. The last tram stops at 23.30, so you have to be respectable and return home at a reasonable hour or else pay an exorbitant taxi fare – exorbitant since, as in most places, the Yanks have been here with their wads of notes.

The city is unusual insofar that the bush comes right down to the edge of the city and not gradually, as in most places. There is an abundance of fruits, particularly peaches, apricots and big meaty grapes. The latter can be picked out of the vineyards without the owner complaining.

On Tuesday morning, the 6<sup>th</sup> March, I arose at 04:30 hrs to start my journey north. I am alone, as Vic and Bill could not get on the draught, so fate has parted me from them, and I really hope I stay apart from them, from now on. We did hope to fly north but unfortunately there is no air transport, so I am going over land.



We boarded the train at 07:30 and arrived at Terowie, where we stayed at the camp until 19:00. As I had had a tooth removed the previous day following an abscess, I did not feel so good, so I got myself into the hospital car and dosed myself with pills given to me by the M.O. at Terowie to ease the pain. As it happened, he must have given me some kind of sleeping pills for I slept most of the way and had to be awakened for my meals. This proved a blessing for the desert is not very interesting at the best of times. As it happened, for the first time for twelve months, it rained, and all the antiquated coaches leaked like sieves and nobody escaped the drips.

The railway up here is most amusing as quite often, the engine stopped and the driver got out, walked ahead to test the rail, came back and on we chugged, axle deep in water. Over the Finke River there, apparently, had been a bridge, but that had been washed away one year and the track lay on the shallow riverbed. They just left it like that, and we rode through the river with water practically coming in at the doors.

We arrived at Alice Springs at 02:30 this morning after being on the train since 19.30 Tuesday night – the rain was torrential and we were wet through before we got to our tin hut which, thank God, did not leak. I cast off my garments, got my two blankets out of my kit bag and snuggled down to a few hours' sleep before breakfast.

When I awoke this morning, the rain was still coming down but after a warm shower and good breakfast I felt on top of the world. I sat around all morning and afternoon feeling secure from the elements in the mess with rain drumming on the tin roof.



At 17.30 I went out with Geoff and Allen, a couple of Aussie friends. We had steak and eggs at a café and then were invited along to a dance. Alice Springs is a small country town set amid hilly surroundings and an amazing contrast to the endless stretch of desert around. Here, life must be rather monotonous, as everybody knows everybody else, as we found out, at the dance we attended. But if you have never had any other life, as a contrast, I suppose you could be quite happy.

Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> March 1945

We arose at 04:30 this morning and after a comparatively light breakfast, were delegated to our trucks. These are of the semi-trailer type with canvas top and into each one, clambered 27 men – plus our kit. There were no seats, so I borrowed the straw palliasse which had served as my bed for the previous night and managed to get down on this, with a couple of blankets on top of me, and my bag and rolled up raincoat, as a pillow. We were packed like sardines and the poor unfortunates who had not the sense to wriggle onto the floor sat on top of kit bags for the rest of the day. Off set the dozen trucks in convoy at 25 mph. I dropped off to sleep, despite the jogging of the vehicle, due, no doubt, to the effect of the sleeping tablets I had taken on the train, to ease my pain, an effect which takes some time to work off.

Every hour we stopped for five minutes for obvious reasons. The country was very monotonous but after the rain, surprisingly green. For miles and miles, the plains rolled away from either side of the bituminous road with not a sign of civilisation to be seen. We stopped for lunch and the cooks, whom we carried, brewed some tea. That and bully



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beef and bread, constituted our lunch. Then, on again until we got to our first staging camp at 17.30. Here we had a very scanty meal and cold shower and then went to the camp cinema. This is typical of the cinemas around here having a projector in a little hut and screen on a couple of poles about 20ft away, the audience squats on the earth floor which, after a couple of hours, becomes far from soft. Added to this, the inevitable ants play havoc with the under pants.

Monday 12<sup>th</sup> March 1945

Today was much the same as yesterday only the country is a little less monotonous. We passed a rock formation which looked like huge marbles and so gain the name of the Devil's Marbles. A little later in the day, a formation of rock on the side of the road had been modified by some patriotic individual and bore the marked resemblance to Churchill's portrait – a charred tree stump represented the cigar. At the staging camp the same show as the previous night was on, so I entertained myself by shaving by the aid of the dim light of a hurricane lamp as the electricity supply was not powerful enough to drive both the film projector and the lights in the tin huts. After this I gluttoned myself on a large tin of pears.

Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> March 1945

The climate is becoming noticeably hot as we move further north, each day and the number of flies becoming greater. What a damned nuisance these insects are, crawling all over your face. I am, at the moment, at Elliot Staging Camp sitting in the mess – the only place free of flies.





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Buildings around here are no more than tin roofs with mosquito net walls. In place of doors, long strips of canvas are hung from the top of the door frame and these move with the breeze, keeping out insects. Those that do enter this building are quickly dealt with by a couple of small lizards which run around on the mosquito mesh, gobbling flies by the dozen.



*Officers Mess - Elliott Staging Camp 1945*

We have only been on the road from 07:00 until lunchtime as, this afternoon, the trucks need overhauling for the final run tomorrow. It is surprising how tired one becomes sitting on the floor of a jogging truck. If you rest your head, the rumble of the wheels goes through every nerve of your body.

What a contrast to civilian life this is? We wash under a trickle of lukewarm water, “go to ground”, as grandad used to say, over a tin bucket, which practically walks away from



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you with the flies. We sleep on a sack of straw and wear clothes which stink with perspiration as no washing facilities are available.

This morning we had a break to make tea and for this we get an old tin can, fill it with water from our water bottles, light a fire of dead wood and boil the water. A handful of tea is thrown in and allowed to brew. Then the concoction is poured out into dirty mugs - what a concoction. Undoubtably there is a taste of tea, but this is often lost when you taste the contents of the tin can which have pervaded the brew.



*Officers Accommodation - Elliot Staging Camp 1945*

It is a good job for me that I am not as fastidious as I used to be and am not put off by the sight of dirt and grime - you'll eat anything when you are hungry.

Often on this trip up, I have thought of the plates of stew Geoff has put aside - one of them would have made me happy.



Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> March 1945

We arose this morning at the usual early hour and got on the road for the final stage by truck. I lay on my back thinking of my youth all morning – it may sound strange saying my youth when I am only 22 but I feel much older than that, needless to say. I was amused to think of the cold winters days I had gone potato picking or pea pulling. Then my spell as a grocery boy, etc. I seem to have done a bit of everything in my time and am glad of it. At 10:00 my reverie was ended by “Smoko” – this is a break in the Aussie services for a cup of tea and a cigarette.

We all piled out of the trucks – there are thirteen in the convoy – and after collecting wood for a fire, we boiled our corn beef tins of water for the brew. The Australians are even bigger tea drinkers than the English and will take the slightest excuse to break off their work for tea.

On we went, through the now pleasantly wooded country, which seems to be endless – until we stop for lunch – three tins of bully and one tine of pineapple between fifteen of us. Billy cans washed, and ‘two-up’ games finished, we climbed aboard the truck and did the rest of the journey through a tropical downpour.

I have seen many types of wildlife on the trip, from wild camels in the desert, wild goats and wild asses, not to mention the innumerable insects.

I am, at the moment, sitting in the mess at Larrimah Staging Camp. This is built of a local tree called “paper-bark” – it is constructed in the “rustic manner” but instead of a hard bark the wood has a peculiar paper-like skin.



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We sleep in tents which are quite cool but overrun with thousands of ants, flies and mosquitos. All kinds of queer things crawl around. At the moment, on the floor in front of me is a huge brown and orange speckled grasshopper and a cricket (which are responsible for incessant squeaking throughout the night) about two inches long – the floor is practically alive with the tireless ants.

All the way up here we have seen thousands of ant hills in the woods. These look like old tree stumps with a point about three feet high. On closer inspection, you find they are hills of hard red dust teeming with ants who have a nasty temper, if disturbed. Then of course there are the moths, with really beautiful colours, which are pictures themselves, but a dammed nuisance when they hit you in the face. The foliage after the rain of the last few days is of a lush green colour and very thick.

These descriptions of mine are hopeless but in the muggy atmosphere with your whole body moist and constantly irritated by biting insects I am afraid I can do no better. We do not leave here until tomorrow lunchtime, as I hope to get a decent night's sleep under my mosquito net, after riding 600 miles on the hard floor of a truck.

Monday 26<sup>th</sup> March 1945

The rest of the trip was done in a very antiquated train which we boarded at 14:00. The troops made themselves as comfortable as possible on the hard floors of spring-less cattle trucks – we commissioned men were more fortunate in having a carriage – which, despite the fact that it was filthy, had no lights or conveniences, was a little more comfortable.





The line seemed to follow the undulating contours of the land with no embankments as a result. Some of the gradients could only be climbed at crawling speed by the under powered engine. In fact, at times we stopped and had to wait for the fire to be restoked and steam to get up before we could attempt the climb once more and when we did get to the top we went like merry hell down the other side nearly bouncing off the rails.

Sleep was very hard to get at first, as we had to concentrate on hanging onto the seat and not rolling off onto the fellows who were stretched out on the floor.

We completed this leg to Adelaide River by 07:00 having done the trip at an approximate average speed of 15 mph – the “Rocket” if I remember used to average 12 mph – not much slower than the “Spirit of Protest” as our train was nicknamed.

Breakfast was taken in pouring rain in the open – but by now we were used to this form of eating and eating bread made soggy by the deluge was no hardship. Almost an hour later a truck took us to the Reserve Personnel Pool where I had my first – I think – experience of shaving in the open in a tropical thunderstorm – it is rather different as every time you get a lather on your face the rain washes it off. We had a meal at this depot and then did the 50 minutes to Darwin in an open truck where we arrived none too dry.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> March I arrived at the mess of 54 Squadron and it was with a great relief that I changed into some clean clothes – the first time since I left Adelaide.



I was occupied in the first few days in getting my usual arrival chit signed by all and sundry and a few days later I was assigned to B Flight and did my first trip in a Spitfire Mk VIII.

We land and take off on a strip that is 1,600 yards long and irrespective of the wind direction we take off down the strip and land up it as there is no taxi-way. On a day with a cross wind this is really tricky especially with a Spit as the grass, which is eight or ten feet high, covers rough ground.

Due to the type of land around here, which makes force landing impossible and invariably fatal, and baling out dangerous, as it is quite possible to die of thirst and hunger only a few miles away from the camp, we have to fly all prepared.

We wear long pants, gaiters, army boots, long sleeved shirt, gloves, Mae West and have a knife strapped to our calf and a revolver, spare rounds and jungle kit around our waist. This jungle kit is full of drugs, concentrated chocolate, a steel mirror for signalling, a small mosquito net etc and our Mae Wests are full of bandages and dressings apart from a couple of syringes of morphine – in fact we are weighed down with equipment so much so that when the Mae West is fully inflated it cannot support you, and you sink!

My first two trips were O.K. and I was impressed by the Spit which seemed to have plenty of urge in the power box. However, landing and taxiing is tricky due to cross winds, the narrow under carriage and the extra long nose of this type of aircraft. Ground crew would sit on the wings to help guide the pilot – but only on taxiing!





On Sunday morning the 24<sup>th</sup>, I took off on a sector reconnaissance. I climbed to 6,000 feet so as to keep a little cooler and flew over to Melville Island which is just north of Darwin.

Finding nothing of interest I turned back towards the mainland to continue my recce and climbed to about 8,000 feet when I heard my flight commander, who had been requested by the ground station to transmit for a "fix", say that he was above the airfield doing aerobatics.

Now aerobatics are done above 7,000 feet so, as I had to cross the aerodrome to continue my recce I thought it a good opportunity to climb up and test my ability to spot aircraft in the sky – a fighter pilot can never get too much practice at this.

Consequently, I climbed to 12,000 so that I could search the area from above but after searching around for a while and not finding him I set off south and upon coming to a cloud bank rolled on my back to dive underneath the cloud.



However, when I rolled on my back the engine stopped and my red fuel pressure warning light came on. I rolled straight and level and checked my revs and boost which reacted in a normal fashion to the throttle but not so the engine – the old fan just “windmilled” in the slip stream and I started to lose height. I turned towards base hoping that I could glide the distance and soon determined that I could not make it and decided that by the time I was at 3,000 feet I would bale out.

On the way down I tried everything I could to start the engine. I pumped the wobble pump with my right hand, pulled back the cut out, primed the engine and pressurised the fuel tanks with my left, trying to maintain the gliding speed of 130 mph with the stick between my knees, as this is the optimum.

Sweat poured off me from every pore and by the time I had reached five thousand feet and all my attempts had been futile I realised that this was no ordinary cut out and seemed beyond my power.

I called them up on the R.T and approached the circuit at two thousand feet thinking I could make it. I switched off the engine switches pulled back the pitch lever to lengthen the glide and turned in onto the strip putting my wheels and flaps down at the last minute. I had to pull her around in a steep turn to line up with the runway and rode the controls like a jockey as the kite fought to go into a spin. I touched down – ran along the strip but could not hold it straight against the cross wind despite the use of the brakes. She ran off the runway into the deep grass - I felt a sudden check and automatically ducked my head as low as my straps





would allow and folded my arms, she went up on her nose and with a helluva thunk onto her back.

When the clatter had finished, I opened my eyes to find everything pitch dark and waited for the engine to catch fire and finish me off.

Contrary to all that I have heard about fellows reactions when they face the termination of life – I did not have a vision of my past life nor did I think to pray – I just hung there upside down, the cockpit hood having sunk into the earth. My head was pressed onto my chest and I thought that if the end came, why the hell should I panic – I couldn't do much to avert it, as I was.

I ripped off my helmet and unfastened my safety straps and parachute, but this did not help, for the bulkiness of these and the Mae West, which I could not discard, restricted my movement in the cramped quarters. It was like being inside an oven just waiting for help.

After what seemed ages, I heard the ominous silence (apart from my spinning gyros, which washed out my immediate doubt that I had passed over) broken by some erk trying to break the side of the fuselage, but to no avail. Then voices could be heard, and they managed to chop a hole and let me have some fresh air.

A crane was fetched, and a wire was fastened around the tail. The wire, of course, cut the aluminium so it had to be discarded. A further wait, until they fastened ropes around the tail and this time, lifted the aircraft a few feet. I still could not get out until they had chopped the metal away – the armour plate, which is behind the seat had come forward and barred my exit.



When I did eventually squeeze out, the hundreds of erks, who had been watching for the body to be dragged out, were amazed to find that I could stand up and decline the use of the stretcher, which had been brought out to carry the bits.

The M.O. and an orderly literally carried me, by the arm pits, to the ambulance and whizzed me to the hospital. I was stripped and examined and apart from a pulse rate of 140, and a few bruises on my shoulders, was found to be perfectly intact.

However, the M.O. was still in doubt, not believing that the day of miracles had not yet passed and after a shower to wash all the accumulated mud and sweat off me, and a meal, brought from the mess, he decided to give me a Mickey Finn (sleeping draught).

But before this could be administered my Squadron M.O. came for me and took me from Station Sick Quarters, where I was, to our own Squadron Hospital where the Mickey Finn was taken. I awoke at about 18:00 and left the hospital.

I was very surprised to find that it was the general opinion that I had made a bad landing, as nobody knew that it was a forced landing. Upon making this out in my report, I was cleared of blame. Apparently, a wire fence which was hidden in the long grass caught my wheels and caused the aircraft to turn over.



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Monday 14<sup>th</sup> April 1945

There have been no outstanding events in the last week or two, as I have let my mind be as calm as possible, for, if this attitude is not adopted, I should revolt against the monotony and intangible fruitlessness of our work up here. We do little flying as the aircraft are mostly unserviceable due to glycol pipe corrosion.



Attempts to get these replaced have not borne fruit and we are in the same unhappy position as the squadron was eight or nine months ago. Naturally enough, the delay for these replacements and the cause of the defect have given cause to many and varied suppositions.

Apparently, the glycol fluid is American and has caused some form of electrolysis in the alloy pipes, eating the copper away. There are firms working down south to replace the damage but the Australian character shows its inability to buckle down, and lack of any sign of initiative, so we just wait and wait, in the meantime, using distilled water as a coolant in the few aircraft which are still serviceable.



There are three English Squadrons in this wing and as we divide the duty in three parts, each squadron doing 'Readiness', 'Available' and 'Stand down' on successive days. For 'Readiness' we divide the work between the two flights – one doing the first part of the day and the other, last. The same applies to 'Available', changing on alternate days. On early morning 'Readiness' we arise at 05.30 and tea and toast await us in the mess before we go down to the flights to prepare our aircraft for 06:00.

This, of course, is the theory of the system. Actually, at about 05.48 there is a mad scramble as the boys, half dressed and unwashed, try to swill down a cup of tea before diving onto the Flight truck.

Arriving at the Flight in the dark, we put parachute, helmet, gloves etc, in such a position in the cockpit that, with a minimum delay, we can jump in, buckle the parachute, fasten the safety-straps, buckle on helmet and oxygen mask and scramble.

Even though the chances of being scrambled against a Nip raider are pretty remote, these precautions have to be taken, just in case. Having finished our preparations, we return to the crew room and try to catch up our lost sleep on the hard tables, with a Mae West as pillow, until breakfast is brought down from the mess – usually stone cold.

From then, until lunchtime we just sit and wait. The next time we are on Readiness, we do our duty from noon until 18:00hrs and in the last day or two, we have been having scrambles against Liberators returning from their strikes on Timor.





Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> May 1945

Today is the celebration of V.E. day but as we did all our celebrating last night at a drunken orgy called a Squadron Party everybody had hangovers and no spirit to do much rejoicing. From the glum faces and blood shot sockets (which were supposed to be eyes) in the mess, one would think that we had had another Dunkirk. I could not join the celebrations as I gave my stewards the evening off and as bar officer, I had to remain cold sober so as to carry out the duties behind the bar.

Yesterday was the hardest days' work I have done since I came here. I was on the go the whole day, scrounging "grog", going around in a truck "flannelling" people to spare a little for the insatiable thirst of the R.A.F. In the airmens' canteen, where everybody queued up with knife, fork, spoon and plate, through sober eyes it was amusing.

The C.O. whom I had seen previously having a shower and at the same time smoking a cigar, hanging onto the water pipe for support, stood up on a table to reply to a toast and fell off again. The Wing C.O. was in tears about the victory which I really think he took to heart. All night long, I poured out gin whilst the boys set fire to the dry scrub by firing off all the Verey signal cartridges we had, in an attempt to initiate a pukka Gala Celebration. The C.O's jeep was wrecked, which rather put a stop to the party for, from then on, everybody in the mess started to fight and rather ruined the whole business.

Tonight, I went down to the bomb scarred Church of England, in Darwin and thanked God for the end of this disgusting quarrel which has been raging for nigh on six years. I thanked God I was alive and not like so many of the



fine fellows who have been my friends, unable to see the end of all that we have been working for.

I received a letter a few days ago from Bug's mother letting me know that he had been killed on the 13<sup>th</sup> August in Catania when the engine of his Spitfire cut, on take-off.

Sian Crowe who was with me on the Isle of Man was killed in Burma when a land mine exploded in front of him whilst strafing the Japs.

I could not stop thinking of Bugs and Crike who had thus paid the highest price that can be paid in war. Such chaps as these, young, fit and firm specimens of men all round, had died for us so that we could live in a cleaner and saner world. Crike, Bugs and I had planned to do so much when the war was over, yet I am the only one left on this earth, to see its end and even now, I have not finished with war - for the Japs have still to be beaten.

I find it a very comforting thought to think that if I have to go, which I doubt very much, I shall "meet" these two wizard fellows again, together with dozens more, whom I have known.

Life goes on much the same everyday - the morale is very low due to our not participating in the offensive against the Jap. Last week we were given a glimmer of hope as the head of the R.A.A.F. had been up to see the C.O's of the R.A.F. Spitfire Wings and investigate our unrest. He promised to do something about it by either sending us home, re-equipping us with Mustangs (whose range is greater than a Spits, and would allow us to strafe Timor) or getting us away from the red tape of the R.A.A.F and sending us under R.A.F command in Judea. These alterations are not as easy



as they may seem, for many political difficulties are involved. However, here's hoping.

The other night I sat up talking with a friend until nearly five in the morning and learned many things as I always do in these little discussions. Little things which I hope will be very helpful in dealing with men after the war. I find the opinion very prevalent, that the Church does not make its doctrine clear to people – it certainly was not to me and as a result of my conclusions, would probably give a theologian a nightmare.

This particular friend was an Oxford undergraduate in mathematics and, as such, cannot be expected to take things for granted and I could not explain many things by saying “by faith and faith only, believe”. He needed every detail explaining factually. The other night, he asked me to prove that Christ was not just an over exaggerated fictitious character, existing in the minds of a group of fanatical ignoramuses.

I must admit that this rather shook me somewhat, as I found it very difficult to parry all his attacks on my faith. But I managed, in some way, to hold my own, even though he put down the pros and cons on a piece of paper.

He admitted later on, that he had been more convinced than ever before but would not say he was fully convinced. I am sure that with a little knowledge on the subject I could, more or less, prove it to him.



Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1945

If it can be proved that Christ died physically, was buried and after three days rose again physically, I think anyone would believe that Jesus was Divine and furthermore the Christ.

Con: Joseph of Arimathea was a learned and well-travelled man and as such it is possible that he may have been acquainted with drugs and bribed the soldiers (who throughout generations, have been easy to bribe, particularly in those days, when they were all mercenaries) to administer an anaesthetic to Christ on the sponge.

Pro: Christ as we find in Luke Chapter 23 Verse 26, Mark 15.V.21 and Mathew 27.V.64, was physically incapable of carrying his own cross, which was the usual practice for all the condemned. He was crucified and lingered on the cross for six hours. He refused the wine and gall offered to those about to be crucified, so as to numb their senses to pain, Mathew 27.V.34 and Mark 15.V.23.

Under these circumstances, even with modern medicine, it would be fatal to administer any drug except in very minute quantities. Modern anaesthetics (which I think, one will admit, were far superior to those known to the medicos of that time) can only put a man out for an hour or so and, as we see in Mark 15.V.44, some time must have been spent taking messages from Golgotha to Pilate and the high priest assuring them of his death.

Furthermore, there is even doubt as to whether he actually tasted of the sponge – John 19.V.29 and if he did but breath the supposedly ‘doped’ sponge, the chances of him being





anaesthetized for more than a few minutes are highly improbable.

Con: We find in John 19.V.33 that the soldiers did not break the legs of Christ, as was the normal procedure so it may be indicative of bribery, on the soldiers' part.

Pro: This is hardly likely as it seems highly improbable that every soldier would have been bribed. With both the Jewish Temple Guard and the Romans, their numbers, at such an important occasion, must have been large. It is also hardly likely that the Romans who, by virtue of their army experience, would have had ample experience with dead men, and should have been so easily deceived into believing that Jesus was dead.

Each and every one of the followers of Jesus believed that he was dead physically, as is indicated by the fact that they made normal preparations for his embalming. Simon apparently, from John 21.V.3, returned to his job of fishing together with a number of others. To strengthen this conclusion, we find numerous references to the surprise and astonishment of his followers on hearing of the Resurrection – John 20.V.8.

Mary at first would not believe her eyes that the body she intended to embalm was alive in front of her – John 20.V.15, Thomas was our extremist, demanding tangible evidence – John 20.V.24 - further references are to be seen in Luke 24.V.11 and Mark 16.V.13.

Thus, I believe we have enough proof of the physical death of Jesus which satisfies the first point...

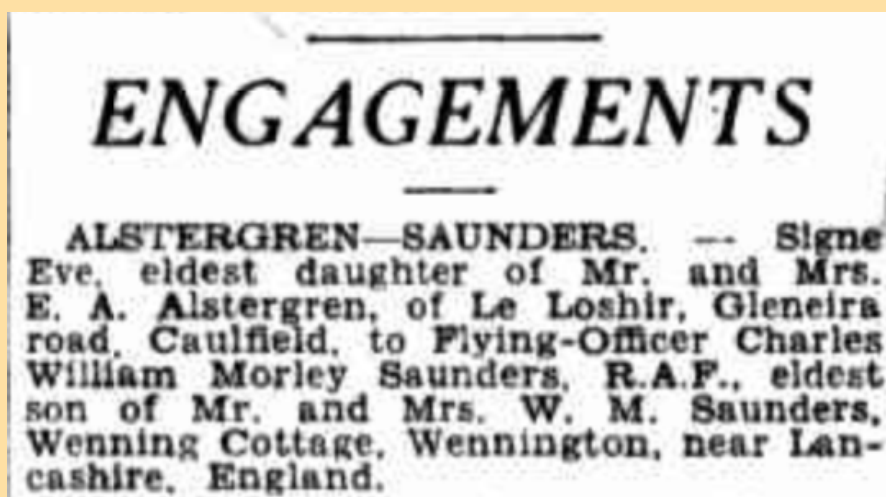


Fred Thomas was killed in his Spitfire Mk.VIII  
Fuselage Code: DL-H  
on Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> June 1945

Atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki  
on 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> August 1945

The Japanese surrendered on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1945, ending  
the war.

*Extract: The Argus - Melbourne 22 February 1945*



# The Diary of Flying Officer Fred Thomas RAF

## Aircraft Incident Report

R.A.A.F. Museum, Darwin, Australia

Aircraft Designation: A58-479  
Type: Spitfire LF.VIII  
Assignment: MT 543

Rec: 1AP ex UK 27/06/44.

Rec: 1AD ex 1AP 24/07/44.

Rec: 14 ARD

Reserve Pool: 05/08/44

Rec: 54 Sqn RAF Natural Metal Coded DL-H 13/08/44

Camouflaged: 7 RSU 11/44

Accident 0937 hrs 17/06/45 during a 15 minute test flight at Darwin. On completion of two circuits of Darwin Strip, was coming in at 1250 feet with gear down when pilot throttled back which resulted in engine coughing with a resultant sheet of flames from engine.

Pilot, Flying Officer FF Thomas Serv#155264 (RAF) appeared to turn aircraft over to bale out as aircraft dived into ground exploding some  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile from the runway threshold. F/O Thomas buried at Adelaide River War Cemetery on the 18/06/45. Aircraft remains Converted to Components at 8CRD. SOC 11/07/45. He was previously involved in A58-474 accident caused by engine failure.



## The Diary of Flying Officer Fred Thomas RAF



*Burial Party - F/O F F Thomas RAF 18 June 1945*

