

John C. Bailey

My name is John Charles Bailey, and I was born in Carnarvon, Western Australia, on 8th December 1922. My father had a team of 24 camels, and carted wool from the inland stations to the port. Later he bought a truck, a Federal Knight Express, but he couldn't compete with a chap called Charles Kingsford-Smith, and moved south to a farm west of Northam in 1929. Bad move!

That year was the beginning of the Great Depression, and after failing to make a living at farming, my father went back to the Goldfields prospecting, while my mother and we children remained on the farm. The bank was unable to sell the farm, so we were allowed to remain there. We were probably better off than in the city, as we had a cow and poultry and a few sheep, and there were plenty of rabbits to trap, which was my job, being the eldest child. It was cold on frosty mornings, though, going around the traps in bare feet, as I had no shoes!

I had correspondence lessons at home until my sister and I were privileged to board for a few years at the Convent School in Toodyay. From there I won a scholarship to Northam High School, but had to leave after year 3 (Junior Certificate) and went to join my mother who now lived in Perth. I worked for the WA Wire and Netting Co. in the office, and then for F.H. Faulding & Co. and joined the RAAF from there in June 1941.

No.16 Course, Aircrew, Empire Air Training Scheme, began at Pearce Airbase on 23 June 1941 with basic training (rookies), with Colin Mason as our drill sergeant (that was before Clontarf). Those of us who had been selected to train as pilots were then sent to 9EFTS, Cunderdin, in August, where my Flying Instructor for the first week was Sergeant Campbell, and from then on it was F/O Chris Burlace, who was an excellent instructor (Chris went on to fly Beaufighters later, but I heard that he had been killed.)

After qualifying as a pilot I went on to 4SFTS, Geraldton, to fly Arvo Ansons, and my Instructor there was F/O Greenwood. I received my Wings on 9 or 10 December 1941, just after Pearl Harbour. For a while I flew with P/O Bob Spicer in No.69 Auxiliary Squadron on various coastal patrols, before finishing at 4SFTS, and then was posted to 25 Squadron based at Pearce, WA in March 1942.

I was assigned to B Flight, commanded by F/Lt. Ron McDonald (who went on to command a Spitfire squadron at Darwin) Ron was a great pilot, and taught me to fly Wirraways. He was especially good at snap rolls! Later Dick Sudlow took over as Flight Commander. I had several different Observers for a while, including Noel Aldous, Dudley Erwin, Harvey Colebrook, but then Jack West became my more or less permanent Observer, and we were a good team. The squadron was very busy then, as the threat of invasion loomed, and we did coastal patrols, mapping photography, night flying, searchlight co-op. In a renewed search for evidence concerning the loss of the "Sydney" Jack and I spent several weeks vainly searching the coast between Geraldton and Onslow. During this time I also flew a Fairey "Swordfish" that the squadron had acquired temporarily.

By this time S/Ldr Fred Williams had taken over command on 25 Squadron. In August 1942 the squadron acquired 9 Brewster "Buffalos", that had been intended for the Dutch East Indies, and eventually I was one of the 9 pilots allotted to fly them. The other 8 were Lew Wettenhall, Ray Knight, John Plain, Phil Crothers, Bill Stevenson, Doug Prowse, Clarrie Scott and "Johnno" Johnson. Later, in early 1943, we moved to the Dunreath Golf Course, which is now the Perth International Airport, and we became a new squadron, No.85. Our CO was S/Ldr Chris Daly (Chris was later killed in a Boomerang in New Guinea). There we flew the Buffalos off the golf fairways, as the first sealed runway had only just begun construction.

Of the 9 Buffalos, one was cannibalised for spares, and I flew all of the 8 over that period.

On 2 May 1943 we were re-equipped with CAC Boomerangs, when F/Lt Roy Goon led the first flight of them into Dunreath, at about 2-30pm. We had never seen a Boomerang before. At about 4-30 the CO told me to take one of them, A46-20, up to Cunderdin for a major overhaul (240 hourly) and then test fly it and return. I had one of the ferry pilots explain the systems, took a brief flight, and flew up to Cunderdin, landing just before dark. I was immediately surrounded by a crowd of instructors and pupils, all asking about the Boomers performance, of which I knew nothing, having had only 50 minutes and 2 landings!

The squadron was deployed at Exmouth Gulf (Potshot) in an endeavour to protect the American submarine base and mother ship from enemy air attacks from Timor. However the bombers came over at night, and the Boomerang had been banned from night flying, but we flew them at night anyway. Unfortunately they came over at 22,000 feet, and by the time we had climbed to that height they were turning for home and going downhill! However we probably deterred them a little. Radar was not so good in those days.

It was then discovered that we original 9 pilots had not done Operational Training onto fighters, so we were sent over to 2OTU Mildura in Victoria for that training. On completion we were posted to operational squadrons in New Guinea. Stevenson and Wettenhall (later K.I.A.) went on to Spitfires with the other 7 flew Kittyhawks. Phil Crothers and I joined 75 Squadron (Kittyhawks) at Goodenough Island Base in December 1943, where we conducted strikes on enemy targets on New Britain, staging through Kiriwana. Our CO was S/Ldr Jack ("Congo") Kinninmont, who had previously flown Buffalos in Malaya. He was an inspiring leader, highly respected by us all.

In January 1944 the squadron moved to Nadzab, a new base in the Markham Valley in New Guinea, where we carried out strikes on enemy airfields at Wewak and various others of their bases in the area. We also escorted American bombers and Australian dive bombers on various raids along the coast.

In March we moved to Cape Gloucester in New Britain, where we operated over most of the island except around Rabaul, which US forces were engaging. We attacked enemy troop movements in barges, escorted our dive bombers and supported our troop landings.

On 13 May we flew over newly captured Aitape and supported the troops, before moving on to Hollandia at the end of the month. There we flew cover patrols for the Allied landings on Biak Island, and then on 20 July we moved to Noemfoor Island, a newly captured base. There we conducted dive bombing attacks on enemy installations on the mainland.

My operational tour in New Guinea finished on 10 August, after 75 operational flights. In that time we lost 6 pilots killed. I then returned home to Perth on leave until my next posting to 7 Communications Unit, where I was sent to Broome with a Tiger Moth to look after the various Radar Units around the coast and on Cockatoo Island. It was a good spell for over 4 months, after a hazardous operational tour.

Returning to Perth (Dunreath) at the end of February I flew various aircraft on a number of missions in WA until WW2 ended. I was away up north when the end came, and didn't return until the celebrations were over, so missed that!

After the war I worked in the Dept. of Post-War Reconstruction (Rehabilitation of returned Prisoners of War) for 4 years, but office work didn't suit me, so I resigned and went farming. After 2 years working on a farm near Moora, I bought my own farm south-east of Boyup Brook in the south-west of WA, where my wife and I farmed for 22 years, and raised our family of 2 boys and a girl. It was the best time of my life. When the children all left home we moved to Perth, where I worked for 3 years in a Farm Advisory Service and then retired, due to indifferent health.

For many years after the war I wanted to forget all about it, -- the stress of losing my mates, and of not knowing if I would be alive tomorrow, -- all that, and more, was best forgotten, so I put all my effort into building a good farm and raising our family. I was probably quite a pain to my family, being at times very uptight and stressed. It wasn't until recent years that I have been able to recall the memories and talk about the war.

Regarding changes since the war, it disturbs me to see the increasing materialism and greed, the lack of discipline in our younger people, the lack of respect, the increasing violence, the spread of suburbia and destruction of more and more bushland. However there is also increasing prosperity, and motor transport is now incredibly efficient and comfortable.

There have been enormous strides made in aviation. I have continued to fly from time to time, and have done some gliding as well, and only recently sat in the cockpit of an F18 Hornet at Pearce Airbase. What incredible strides have been made! So different from the WW2 fighters that I flew!

Yes, WW2 did have a great impact on my life. I did not expect to return, but I did, and although some aspects of the war have been detrimental, especially to my physical and mental health, other aspects have perhaps been beneficial. I value life, and my family and freedom and my country dearly. This is in contrast to those who have not had to fight for these things, and take so much for granted. This wonderful freedom can so easily be lost.