Lindsay Caddy

Ordinary Heroes

WORLD WAR II

MY STORY
Maddy

Meekatharra to Milne Bay

Lindsay Caddy exchanged his long-held ambition of being a bank officer for a gruelling communications role in World War II New Guinea.

Top: RAAF veteran Lindsay Caddy looks through an album of photographs depicting his World War II experiences. Above: Mr Caddy in jungle rig on Kiriwina Island off New Guinea, December, 1943.

IT IS a long way from arid Meekatharra in WA's wild north-eastern backblocks to the feild jungles of New Guinea and the islands of the South-West Pacific.

Just ask 79-year-old City Beach resident, Lindsay Caddy. He knows exactly how far.

Born in the tough pastoral and mining region, schooled there and later in Geraldton, Mr Caddy graduated and went to work in the Commonwealth Bank. The first steps in a conventional and secure career had been taken. "My ambition in life was to be a bank officer," he says.

But the clouds of war that had been brewing far beyond WA's wide horizons finally burst. Mr Caddy enlisted in the RAAF in April 1942, though the bank deferred his departure until the end of the year. "I might say that I was like any 18-year-old at the time — I was itching to get into any of the services," he says. "In particular, I wanted to be a pilot."

To this day he is bemused about the basis of his rejection for a place as an aircrew. He was told his mathematics were weak. "But I'd been using mathematics in the bank," he says. "Everything was done in my head — passbooks, ledgers, everything."

But the real reason was that a number of soldiers in the 7th and 9th AIF Divisions, which had returned from the Middle East, had transferred to the RAAF. There were plenty of volunteer pilots and other aircrew.

Eventually, Mr Caddy was mustered as a wireless telegraphist. After rookie training in Bassedean, he was sent for advanced training to Point Cook in Victoria.

"That was the wireless school where I started on my morse code training," he recalls.

"It was most peculiar. We spent three weeks in the 'singing class', as they called it: 'dit-dah A, dah-dit-dit-dit B, dah-dit-dah C' — we'd call out. Remember, it was the 1940s and morse was used for communications throughout the world. We'd go from 9 o'clock to 12, an hour for lunch, and back from 1 o'clock till four — 'singing' all day. And it sent a few fellows what we called troppo. Some of them were quite sick. They just couldn't hack it. It was pretty concentrated. Within three weeks you know what you're singing about."

After passing the course in eight rather than the standard 13 months, Mr Caddy was posted to 24 Squadron, which flew Vultee Vengeance dive bombers. His war was to see him take a trajectory, beginning in 1943, that went from Mascot Race Course in Sydney, an RAAF administration point, to Milne Bay in New Guinea and beyond.

"It was a rotten place to be," Mr Caddy recalls. "It rained every day and night. We walked around in mud up to our knees almost every day."

But Mr Caddy was bonded for equally fetid and far more dangerous climes. His group was posted to Kiriwina Island, 200km east of New Guinea.

"It was about the size of Rottnest," he says. "We had six or eight squadrons there flying sorties against the Japanese. I was there for six months and from my recollection there were 20 air raids, always at night. They'd skip-bomb the island, then come back and do it again. Our squadrons of bombers used to go up and give them the works on New Britain, during the daytime actually."

"The Allies had several radio operators dropped behind Japanese lines. They'd sit up in a tree and despatch messages to a particular frequency, which we'd listen to."

On his first day on the coral city, Mr Caddy's unit was bombed by Japanese aircraft. They could not quickly dig slit trenches. The hardness of the coral terrain stymied their efforts. Shrapnel shredded the tops of their tents, but no one was injured. "You got used to it after a while," he says, laughing.

Part of his duties on the island involved what was known as the Spotters' Watch. "Between two and four o'clock on certain mornings of the week we had a listening watch," he explains. "The Allies had several radio operators dropped behind Japanese lines. They'd sit up in a tree and despatch messages to a particular frequency, which we'd listen to.

"That was the Spotters' Watch. It was all the information on Japanese movements they'd spotted. It was all morse and coded and went straight to our code room. We didn't know what was in the messages. They were very astute radio experts, mainly from the AWA Operators and post offices from all around Australia.

"For us, between two and four in the morning was a hell of a time to be keeping awake, but we had to do it. The information was vital, though we never ever found out what it was. It was all classified."

A number of the spotters were discovered and beheaded.

Even after the Japanese surrendered, Mr Caddy's unit had a heavy workload, constantly processing communications from RAAF HQ in Melbourne, working 12-hour shifts. His final posting was to the former Japanese forward command area in Rabaul on New Britain, where there were still more than 100,000 Japanese troops.

Mr Caddy says he attended the first war crimes trials in the South-West Pacific on Rabaul. He recalls a litany of crimes by the Japanese to do with rape of local women and torture, which must have been shocking to a young man from tranquil Meekatharra, even given the experiences he had endured to that point of the war.

"It was something I felt that I would never forget," he recalls. "Just the fact of being there and looking at the reaction of the accused Japanese, to think that they would just stand there, and not object much to the evidence given. But they scowled when they said their piece to the blokes in charge of the investigation. They pretty well all (got) death sentences. They looked as though they were expecting it. It was something I will never forget."

Among Mr Caddy's lost war-time experiences was something for many typically Australian — a horse race. On Australia Day 1946, the army organised for a number of horses, one for each unit, to be brought down from the mountains.

"It was a terrific race meeting, for all day," he says. "Each unit was betting on their horse, they had bookies — it was a real Aussie knock-out."

Mr Caddy returned to Australia in March 1946, having had one home leave in 3½ years at war.

Rod Moran