
Cecil Lloyd Davies Edwards

MY THIRTEEN SQUADRON RAAF STORY – DARWIN 1942

Who was I?

I was No. 8816 Cpl W/T Actg Sgt Air Gunner C.L.D. Edwards. (Lloyd Edwards)

I was posted, ex 14 Squadron Pearce, WA, January 19 1942 to 13 Squadron (overseas). Our postings in those days was on an individual basis, not as a crew member. Some of the others posted at the same time were to 2 Squadron hence the subsequent intermixes.

I arrived at RAAF Darwin in late January 20 together with another 13 Squadron postee ex 14 Squadron, F/Lt Nicholls, my pilot, and directed to the aircrew quarters and almost immediately contracted Dengue Fever. My fellow WAG's told me not to worry and not to report sick because they will give you a few aspros and tell you to drink a lot of water.

On January 24 1942 I flew to Ambon in A16/123, a new 13 Squadron aircraft flown by F/ON. Lamb, (an ex 14 Squadron now 2 Squadron pilot). Immediately on landing he was allotted A16/57, a 2 Squadron aircraft, in which we did an extensive patrol. On returning to base, La Ha, late evening I saw A16/123. All that remained of that new aircraft we had brought in was a pair of tails. This was my introduction to air raids.

For the next three days we carried out patrols – 2 per day – in A16/57 to monitor the Japanese invasion fleet, taking off first light after a “get what you could breakfast”, returning mid day to refuel and re-arm. (A hot lunch was provided – a can of herrings in red sauce left out in the mid day sun), resuming patrol, finally finishing off the day's work at dusk. Unfortunately by this time the mess had closed down to commence the blackout drill, so what we had to eat was very minimal. During our lunch break we were, on two occasions, entertained by minor air raids.

On the night of January 27 I was transported with our crew to Halong, the flying boat base, where we stayed overnight on the beach without any protection from malaria. At dawn the next day we boarded the Short Sunderland flying boat A 18/13 for our return to Darwin to take over a replacement aircraft. The Short Sunderland was flown by F/Lt J.M. Hampshire. We took over A16/68, a 13 Squadron aircraft and immediately resumed our patrol duties, the final one of which commenced La Ha 3.40pm and ended at Namlea 10pm January 29 1942.

It was during this evening that the evacuation of the 13 Squadron ground staff from La Ha, Ambon, the final lift off which was about midnight, took place. I was, much to my own regret, not involved in this important event. However, I was involved in the evacuation of the 2 Squadron ground staff who were based at Namlea. On landing there I was immediately directed to help in the destruction of anything that could be of use to the enemy. Parachutes were ripped open etc. Ground staff evacuation commenced about 4.00am January 30 1942.

There were three aircraft involved in the evacuation. F/Lt Law-Smith was the first to take off with about 26 ground staff aboard. He was followed by F/O Finlayson, who, because his aircraft had been damaged on landing, could only take about 16. We were next. I was deputed to ensure all our 21 passengers were stripped down to a pair of shorts and shirt. We took off at 4.30am. I believe the Japanese landed there at 11.00am that same morning.

I was told, much later on by the pilot, that a pet bird had been smuggled on board!

On landing at Darwin January 30 1942 I was officially recorded as being "returned from overseas" and rostered for flying duties, the first three of which were with F/O Lamb, but on February 8 I actually became a member of a thirteen Squadron crew with F/O Birley as pilot and Sgt Williss as my co-WAG.

From February 8 1942 until February 16, duties consisted of daily patrols and transport of supplies to Koepang, Timor. At that time the Timor defences were being reinforced. We took off from Darwin mid afternoon to ensure that we landed at Koepang in the dusk. Departure from there for the return patrol and Darwin was at dawn the next day. Aircraft could not be left on the field during the daytime. Staying at Koepang overnight had its good points. Being in transit, the crew were each entitled to one bottle of beer and to enjoy the luxury of strawberry jam on our bread.

It had its disadvantages as well, for example, my co-WAG, Paddy Williss did the unthinkable of not shaking his shorts in the morning before putting them on resulting in being stung by one of those well known small Timor scorpions. He had a very uncomfortable ride back to Darwin. It was during this period that I started experiencing minor inexplicable feverish periods.

It was now February 17. You could feel a certain tension in the atmosphere. It was a mid morning take-off. As usual I was doing a pre-flight test of the wireless equipment when the pilot, F/O Birley approached me and asked me if the wireless was 100% ok and added if not we would not be taking off. I assured him that it was fully operational. My co-WAG was nearby and he looked at me in a manner, which said, without the spoken word, "this is going to be a big one". I should at this stage mention that only the pilots were briefed on the duties of the day.

It became known much later that the convoy of ships carrying stores and troops for the reinforcement of the Timor defences had been turned back and was retreating to Darwin. Was this the 'duty'? I must have had an attack of malaria during this day for my only recollection of the days events were after landing at the Drysdale River Mission strip at 5.00pm. I assisted in the refuelling of the aircraft during which I burnt my wrist on one of the hot engines.

The mission monks were having trouble with one of their radios and sought my assistance. I accompanied them to the monastery. I was not sure if I was of any assistance to them but they did get back on the air. (This episode is recorded in the Monk's war diaries). My next recollection is that on waking up the next morning I was in a bath of perspiration, trembling all over and that my straw filled palliasse was wet right through. I must have had another blackout for I next

found myself reporting to a medical orderly at the RAAF Darwin hospital at 7.00pm. He took my temperature and reported the result to the M.O who was attending to his messing duties (having dinner). He informed me that he was instructed to give me a couple of aspros and to report sick the next morning. He was most apologetic and said that it was all he could do.

As instructed I reported sick at 10.am February 19 1942 and as I was having my burnt wrist attended to the first raid started. It was off to the nearest trench with my partly bound wrist. The trench was close by, but being a long single line trench it did not provide adequate protection. The trench was crowded. We crouched down when a Jap Dive Bomber appeared. He had apparently dropped his bomb load elsewhere and was completing his attack with a strafing run. He came at us with front guns blazing but fortunately for us, unfortunately for him, he came at right angles to the trench and too low to trouble us.

A Sgt medical orderly, who was standing next to me was very agitated so I asked him to complete the bandaging of my wrist. This appeared to settle him down. Then I must have blacked out again for I have no recollections of the high level bombing, which took place a little later on. I vaguely remember the high level formations but nothing else until it was all over. When I came to I found myself in our living quarters with a bunch of other wags including my co-WAG Paddy Williss.

We decided that it would be wise to report to our flight office for further instructions. This we did, only to find out that the hanger had been totally destroyed, together with all the aircraft grounded nearby. We noticed the "Castle", the headquarters building, was still standing, so we walked across to it. There was someone there in what appeared to be an Officers uniform, we asked him if he knew what was going on. He turned out to be the Methodist minister attached to the Squadron. He said that as far as he knew they had all gone bush and waved in a northwesterly direction.

My co-wag Paddy, who had been in the Squadron since mid 1941, said he knew of such a place. There had been a mock station evacuation and an assembly point established the previous year. He thought it was 2 to 300 yards up the road and about 400 yards into the bush. We were on our way there when we were stopped at the gates by a Warrant Officer, I think it was W/O Knight, who handed us some ammunition for our Smith & Wesson revolvers and told us to go back to our quarters and await further instructions. This we did and found that our fellow WAG's had found a number of bottles of beer. One of the messes had been broached and advantage of the situation was taken. They invited us to join them. One sip and I blacked out again.

My story continues from 10pm the night of the raid February 19 1942. I found myself on a stretcher waiting to be put on board A16/142, a 13 Squadron aircraft to be flown by F/O Lamb with Sgt Hawkesford, co-pilot, both of 2 Squadron, for repatriation to the RAAF hospital at Daly Waters. The following is purely from hearsay.

"During the flight to Daly Waters the aircraft with 16 passengers on board encountered a severe electrical storm which blew out most of the flight

instruments. The pilot, by the time flown, realised that he had overshot Daly Waters and that he would have to make a forced landing. He could see something white in the distance so started losing altitude to select a suitable site. During this manoeuvre the co-pilot went into the navigation dome to assist. It was in the process of losing height and speed that the actual landing was effected in what turned out to be a lake” It was later found to be Lake Woods. Fortunately it was only about 2 feet (60cms) deep and the plane did a complete ground (water) loop and aquaplaned some distance before stopping. The co-pilot was the only person injured. It was only a minor injury.

We were all able to wade ashore at daybreak and to set up some sort of camp where we stayed for 3 days. On the third night we heard the sound of cowbells in the distance so with the 303 rifle and ammunition, salvaged from the aircraft, 3 shots were fired off. The drovers heard the shots and returned to the pastoral station (Newcastle Waters) and notified the Manager (owner). During those three days I think that I reached a climax for my feverish state started to taper off. We were “rescued” and conveyed back to the homestead and later flown back to Daly Waters in A16/45 the pilot of which was F/Lt Fletcher, of 13 Squadron.

I was discharged from hospital in the second week and placed on light duties. I elected to go down to the airstrip and assist in refuelling aircraft passing through enroute to Darwin. On March 16 1942 I helped to refuel an aircraft, ex 14 Squadron Pearce, enroute to Darwin. It was flown by F/Lt Forman. I had crewed with Clive Forman during my tour with that Squadron the previous year. I was also a friend of both of this WAG’s – Forrest and Gear. When F/Lt Forman returned to Daly Waters the next day without his crew, I asked him what was going on? He informed me that he had landed at Darwin during an air raid and that Forrest had been killed and Gear badly injured.

He was looking for a new crew and asked if I would join him. When I accepted his offer he asked if I knew of another unattached WAG. I recommended Dusty Miller. Dusty, that is how he introduced himself to me, was straight off course and had been helping me in the refuelling process. I did not know to which Squadron he had been posted. We duly became a crew and returned to Darwin where P/OL Angel joined us as second pilot.

As a crew we carried out a number of successful duty flights during the balance of March and into April, the last one being on the night of April 13. This was a shipping strike on vessels in Koepang harbour. This was a three aircraft affair with F/Lt Cook, 2 Squadron, leading F/Lt Forman and F/O Blanchard, both of 13 Squadron. During the bombing run we were attacked by a number of Zero fighters.

Cook’s plane was so badly damaged that he had to crash land away from the harbour. He and his co-pilot, Leithhead, were able to escape and later bought back by submarine. His two WAG’s Sgt’s Witham and Hearle, who were too badly injured accompany them, were taken as prisoners of war and later executed. Sgt Gitsham, the tunnel gunner in Blanchard’s crew was also injured but managed to shoot down one of the attacking Zero’s.

We were also badly shot up and Miller, who was in the turret, was mortally wounded. I mention this particular incident to again highlight the intermix of the two Squadrons, for I found out much later on that Sgt Miller had been posted to 2 Squadron.

Shortly after the above period F/Lt Forman was posted south to NO 1 O.T.U. I thus became one of that small group of unattached WAG's, some of whom had been with the Squadron for more than 9 months. They included Sgt's Eric Robins, Con Foley and Paddy Williss.

The living conditions at Hughes Field were extremely poor, including food and consequently our morale was getting to a dangerous level. The Squadron C.O. S/Ldr Ryland recognised this problem and invited us to let him know what each one wanted. Those with the longest service requested postings south and were granted the desired posting.

I, being almost a newcomer – from mid January, requested to be posted to a more active Squadron. I did not hear the result of this request, but suffice to say, that on July 21 1942 I was transferred on loan to 2 Squadron where I crewed up with F/O Overheu. I mention this aside simply because some 12 months later I became part of the nucleus of his crew when he was posted to a Liberator (B24) Squadron.

I only stayed with 2 Squadron until recalled by the new 13 Squadron C.O W/C Holswich on October 10 1942 to become part of his crew. I stayed with the Squadron until I was posted south, January 30 1943.

During my tour of duties, whilst attached to 13 Squadron, I flew 470 operational hours.