

Raymond George Fowler

Service in the RAAF in WWII

I made application to the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) to enlist in March 1941. I was put on the Reserve list and called up on 5th June 1941, where I went to Pearce Air Force Base, WA, for a few weeks of receiving numerous needles and doing various drill actions, including lots of marching. On completion of this basic training course, the squad was posted to Adelaide, SA, to undergo an engineering course. The results of the course determined what you were trained for. Those receiving top marks were given mechanical duties, second group became airframe fitters and the third group became general hands.

Those allocated as Mechanical Fitters were sent to Melbourne, Victoria, to complete a further course of engineering to qualify as Mechanical Fitters. While doing this training, we were accommodated at the Flemington Racetrack. On completion of this course, I was posted back to Geraldton, WA, as an Aircraft Engineer. Geraldton was a bomber pilot training centre, with the pilots training on twin-engined machines. However, they couldn't get replacement parts, so the mechanics had to strip engines from damaged aeroplanes to keep the others flying.

I arrived in Geraldton in February 1942, just before the Japanese bombed Darwin and down the north-west coast to Broome. To show how prepared we were for defending ourselves, all we had were a few old .303 rifles with a few bullets for each rifle. These were stationed around the airfield perimeter. Fortunately, the Japanese didn't come any further south than Broome.

I was only posted to Geraldton for a short while, before being posted to Cunderdin WA, my hometown. Cunderdin had the Number One flying school for recruit fighter pilots and they had their initial training here in Tiger Moths. While serving at Cunderdin, the Australian Defence Forces commenced their move into Papua New Guinea (PNG). With very few aircraft available, Aircraft Fitters were asked if they would consider transferring to become Transport Fitters and go to PNG to service the mainly road transport there.

As I farmer, I considered this extra training on road vehicles would be an advantage to me when I returned to the farm, more so than on aircraft, so I changed over and was posted to Sydney, NSW, to do a further course on Road Transport. On completion of this course I was posted to Point Cook, Victoria. However, I only remained there a short time, as I was given pre-embarkation leave and then went to Townsville, Queensland, to join the 16 Shipping Stores and Transport Unit.

On movement to PNG, the main party of the unit travelled on a passenger boat, but as Transport vehicles and equipment were the last to be loaded onto the cargo ship, we had to travel with them on this ship. It was not a very nice trip.

Arriving early in 1943, when the Japanese were at their peak, with most of the Australian Air Force squadrons in England, we had nothing to protect us. We were consistently bombed, with one particular day, when they came over all day with groups of twenty-five dropping their bombs. It was estimated that around 1,000 aeroplanes came that day, so things were pretty lively. I was based at Port Moresby most of the time I was in PNG, except for going to Milne Bay for a short time. It took five tries before I finally arrived at Milne Bay. Two flights were turned back because of bad weather which prevented us flying over the mountains, two because Japanese fighters were there, but the fifth time I made it.

Arriving back in Port Moresby after my time at Milne Bay, I found that the 16 Shipping Stores and Transport Unit had packed up and returned to Australia, so I was transferred to 24 Wing, where I stayed until I returned to Australia in 1944.

In 1944, the Americans came to PNG in their thousands with all their fancy equipment and the Australians were superseded, or at least that is what I felt. With this massive build-up of US troops, they needed food and materials more than manpower, so the Australian Government started to release farmers so they could return to their land and start producing crops, meat and wool. I made application to be released and was placed on the Reserve List, and returned to my farm, which I had prior to enlisting. I remained on the Reserve List until 1947, when I was officially discharged.