Story of John Arthur Richards

I was born the 25th or 26th June 1922 in the maternity hospital in Subiaco, a suburb of Perth. Until I was 20 years of age I celebrated my birthday on 25th, but when I needed my birth certificate to join the RAAF in 1941 I found that my official birthday was stated as 26th. My mother, being a very strong minded and obstinate lady, maintained of course that the registry office was wrong. My mother never, to my knowledge, **ever** admitted to being wrong.

My very first memories are of living in a small weatherboard farmhouse close to the banks of the Arthur River with my father, mother and my baby brother, Stan. There was a dilapidated three wheel bike, there were pet ferrets and there were four-gallon kerosene buckets with large marron caught in the river with their large tails periodically flipping over the top of the bucket; before the water grew hot enough to turn them from black to red.

When I was about six we moved to work on another farm in the Wagin shire. The nearest school was Wedgiegarrup, seven miles from our home. When I turned seven it was decided that the only way to start my formal education was to ride a horse to school. Dad bought a two-year old chestnut filly for me. When he explained to the previous owner that I was to ride her to school the immediate response was, "She's three parts thoroughbred Jack; she'll kill the boy." Fortunately for me I wasn't aware of all this till much later in my life. Over the next few weeks I watched as Dad broke her in to bridle and saddle, and after he'd ridden her for some time he then started to train her to stop so soon as anything fell from her back. He did this by tying half a bag of chaff on the saddle. Every time he pulled a string to let fall the bag he stopped her and rewarded her with some oats. It was now time for me to learn to ride, which I did in the home paddock recently ploughed. Every time I fell off Heather stopped and lowered her head to the ground waiting for me to catch the reins and give her some oats from my pocket. I then had to find a post in the fence from which I could climb back into the saddle. While I had a number of spills early in my school days, I didn't ever break anything and Heather always waited for me to climb on again. She was my first real responsibility, as I had to groom her and look after her without help from my father or mother. Up till when she died at the age of fifteen she was a wonderful companion, though I rode her to school for only two and a half years. By the time I was nine or ten we had moved again to lease a farm which was only a mile from a school to which my younger brother and I walked.

The year was 1932 and we were in the grip of the terrible depression. We were fortunate in that we could grow our own vegetables, had our own eggs, and so long as the bank didn't know too much about it, even kill our own meat. One of my most vivid memories is of Dad arguing for two hours with the private wool buyer over a farthing a pound for the wool clip (eight and a quarter or eight and a half pence). He

lost the argument. He had shorn the sheep himself with hand shears as we couldn't afford to pay shearers.

The other was the squealing of the pigs when Dad decided to kill for the Christmas meat. They started well before he reached the sty, yet at other times were quite happy to see him coming with the swill bucket. The only Christmas present for my brother and me was the blown up pig's bladder to be used as a football. Entertainment for the district was restricted to an occasional dance in the district hall, and now and again a surprise party where most of the district having been alerted, would descend on the homestead of the unsuspecting hosts with some form of hamper. Games would be organised and all would conclude the night's entertainment round the family piano for a singsong. By the time the horses got us home the sun would quite often be lightening the night sky. Poor as we were, we had a piano, for Mum was a talented pianist. She only had to hear a song sung once or twice and she could play the melody by ear. She was determined I would learn to play and I had many early morning lessons, but unfortunately the sounds of my brother kicking the pig's bladder football in the back yard had much greater drawing power; eventually even she had to give up on me.

Apart from the usual farm chores of milking and gathering eggs, my brother and I were responsible for the flock of Muscovy ducks, which had been bred from a clutch of eggs supplied by a family friend in Collie. It was watching the drakes mounting the ducks which first aroused my interest in sexual matters. When a hen which was clucky and couldn't be discouraged from the activity of preventing laying hens getting to the nests by the usual methods, my brother and I threw them into the dam where a particularly randy drake was swimming. By the time the hen had been mounted and had its head held under the water a number of times, during the sexual encounter with the drake, it was either drowned or very unclucky. Mum often wondered aloud at our success with clucky hens, but I don't think she ever knew of the drastic steps we often took.

Though he worked very hard on the farm, and even took jobs away from the farm in order to make enough money to pay the annual rental, Dad eventually decided to give up, and we moved to Montrose. This was the home built by his father on the block he had originally taken up. On this small selection we ran a few sheep and cattle. As it was on the Albany Highway 12 miles South of Williams, in the Tarwonga district, my parents started a small district store and cafe mainly for the truck drivers who carted goods for the towns South of Perth. Though the Albany Highway was still mainly gravel in 1933, there were large numbers of trucks on the road, serving towns not adequately served by the Great Southern railway. Mum and Dad were often up late at night and again in the early hours of the morning cooking bacon or steak and eggs for hungry truck drivers. This was the first time that I remember, that the family ever had any spare cash.

My brother and I walked to school, about a mile, every morning. As I was one of the star pupils, I was set for the scholarship examination in August, 1934. Without the finance provided by a scholarship there was no hope of my parents being able to afford to send me away to High School, the nearest being Bunbury. Fortunately, I was successful and was sent away to board in Bunbury and to attend the High

School there. Though nervous, I was very excited and determined not to let down my parents who were making many sacrifices to give me a secondary education. Two years later my younger brother followed me, and this was a further strain on my parents' meagre resources, as the scholarships only covered the boarding away from home costs. At about the same time my mother gave birth to the third boy in the family, and my parents gave up the Montrose store to work on a farm at the Arthur River. This was mainly to make way for Dad's younger brother Jim, and his mother, to take over Montrose.

At secondary school I was moderately successful both academically and sports wise. Stan on the other hand was a very good student and an outstanding sportsman, and he soon eclipsed me on the sporting field, though two years younger. Throughout 1938 and 1939, I became aware of the possibility of war breaking out in Europe, and became an avid reader of the Biggles books. I began to hope fervently that there would be war so that I could fly fighter planes. However my parents impressed on me the need to become qualified in some profession before they would sign papers for me to volunteer to join the RAAF.

I spent 1940 as a monitor in schools in Katanning and Bullfinch, 1941 in Teachers Training College, Claremont and then was appointed to a one-teacher school at Hyden Rock in the southeastern wheat belt.

At the age of 20 I was in sole charge of a school of 27 pupils from grade 1 to grade 6, and in love with a girl who lived on a farm 97 miles away at Pingrup. I was also eagerly awaiting my call up to join the RAAF, for which I had volunteered late in 1941.

During my three and a half months at Hyden, I learned to smoke, drink beer, play blind bluff poker with men twice and more my age, and ride a motor bike. Smoking I had tried on a number of occasions, but now took up the habit seriously to look grown up. On the first occasion of a dance in the district, I went along with an Irish farming family who had children at the school. After the first dance as was the custom, the MEN of the family drifted outside for a smoke and a beer. Mike O'Brien who was on my right in the ring of men opened the first bottle, and put it to his mouth. After some time he took it from his lips, and I put out my hand saying, "Thanks Mike." To my astonishment he threw the bottle down behind him, saying, "She's finished boyo. Here try this one." After much dedicated practice my limit was half a bottle before removing the bottle from my lips.

Blind bluff poker was played on a Friday night behind the store run by a couple of very shrewd Jewish brothers. The blind man (left of the dealer) paid a shilling for the privilege of last to say whether or not he would play. To go over the blind and thus get this privilege cost two shillings and for the next man four and so on exponentially. Similarly for those who decided to pay double the blind and to play, the bets could be doubled, or a bet could be any part thereof. It didn't pay to be too inquisitive; it could cost quite a lot of money to look. Fortunately I was a quick learner and had some luck, but it still cost me to learn. The store was a little gold mine as it held a bottle licence; a licence to sell beer by the bottle, as there was no pub in this district at the end of the railway line.

In order to visit my girl friend, one long weekend I borrowed a small 250 c.c. farm motor cycle from the O'Briens, to ride the sandy tracks to Lake Grace, as this was the town where her family did the weekly shopping. I had trouble with the bike (dirty petrol), and didn't arrive until 10.30 p.m. Fortunately the family decided to come back to the meeting place at about 11.00, as the bike would have gone no further. After a strenuous and sleepless weekend, I was fortunate enough to find a lift for both the bike and me in a utility truck going to Hyden.

Hyden was a dry wheat district, and was in the grip of severe drought in 1941. Then one evening it started to rain steadily. Ten and a half inches of rain fell in the next eighteen hours. The district turned from a dust-heap to a quagmire over night; most of the dry farm dams retained little water as they lost their back walls under the pressure of water. The school was on a small rise and was completely surrounded by acres of water. We got to the school building by enlisting the aid of those children who came to school in horse and cart. Each morning and evening the ferry procedure took us half an hour. About three days after the deluge a very dishevelled and damp gentleman knocked at the school door. Thinking he was perhaps a new parent, I asked, "Yes, what can I do for you?"

"I'm Mr Jeans, your inspector, young man. Let's see how you have been going here. I've had to leave my car out on the main road."

I'm sure he formed the opinion that I had not been going too well; he didn't start out in the best of moods; but it was of little consequence, as two days later I received my papers to report to the RAAF Initial Training School at Clontarf in Perth. It was with a great deal of relief that I caught the once a week train out of Hyden. I was not to see it again for forty years by which time it was a famous tourist stop because of "Wave Rock".

W A R

Twenty-eight course, RAAF Initial Training School, was made up of older professional men; lawyers, teachers, newspapermen; and youngsters who had just completed their secondary schooling. All had passed a stringent medical examination. There was intense competition in both mental and physical fields as all were aiming to become pilots. Only one third of each intake could expect success; the remainder went to navigation and gunnery courses. I was one of the fortunate ones who went on to Cunderdin to learn to fly Tiger Moths. Failure to go solo before eight to ten hours of dual with instructors, who appeared to hate all student pilots intensely, meant reversion to the navigation or gunnery schools.

After eight hours of dual, listening mainly to caustic comments about how I wasn't able to do much that was right; I disconsolately landed the Tiger preparatory to completing the day's flying to be told, "O.K Richards, I'm off before you kill me and yourself. Get this bloody thing up into the air, do one circuit and then see if you can get it down again without doing too much damage to it." The reference to one circuit was significant as myth had it that a sprog pilot in the previous course had lost his nerve coming in to land and done 29 circuits on his solo only landing then because he was about to run out of fuel. On my first approach I realised I was far too high as

I came over the drome fence and so decided to risk the wrath of the instructor by going round again. At the end of the next circuit the landing was quite smooth surprising both the instructor and myself. There followed another fifteen hours of flying, learning all the finer points of flying and aerobatics. I had been a very good gymnast at school and this stood me in good stead at this stage of my flying instruction. However it was the only time in all my flying that I was able to experience the thrills of stall turns, loops and spins, as I was to end up flying heavy bombers, as were all of the pilots from this and later courses.

During Initial Training School and the time I was at Cunderdin, I took every opportunity to visit my home in Katanning, and my girlfriend at Pingrup. Fortunately one of the station administration flying officers was a Katanning man and he had a Ford V8 roadster with a dickie seat. This meant he could take four passengers, and there happened to be four of us from Katanning. On long weekends we usually were able to arrange leave together and made the seven-hour trip to Katanning late Friday night. Mum and my young brother Bob were living alone as Dad had volunteered for the army. After a short sleep I was up at 7.00am Saturday morning to prepare Mum's Dodge roadster for the 50-mile trip to Pingrup. Because of the petrol shortage, the dodge ran on gas from a gas-producer, which burned charcoal. At the age of 20 I was flying an aeroplane and driving the dodge round Katanning both without a license. By Sunday evening I was again in the dickie seat of the Ford V8 on my way back to Cunderdin to fly early Monday morning. This exhausting but rather carefree life ended with a posting to Geraldton to learn to fly the twin-engine Avro Anson. Here again there was considerable pressure to succeed in the classroom and in the pilot's seat. Errors or any sign of airsickness meant immediate posting to navigation or gunnery school. This was followed rapidly by blind flying school at Point Cook in Victoria and the last leave before posting overseas. The pressure was such that I find it very hard to recall details of this time, but a few are worth recounting.

While waiting for transport overseas I spent some time in Melbourne, able to renew acquaintenship with Uncle Ernie's family. Dad's brother Ernie had married Mum's sister Elsie, so these were real first cousins. Uncle Ernie was much shorter than Dad, but like many small men was very pugnacious. He loved his football, but when with him at a match I soon learned strategic withdrawal methods as he invariably ended up in a vigorous argument with somebody twice his size. His favourite riposte was, "Garn, what would you know about football, you big galoot! Come on then put up your mits." By this time I was in a very friendly conversation with somebody well away from the action. Uncle Ern thought much more highly of my brother Stan, who came to Melbourne later. In his last year at Bunbury High School Stan had won the Australian Schools welter-weight boxing championship in 1941. Stan later spent some months in Melbourne awaiting transport to the Pacific islands as an RAAF ground staff instrument maker. In Uncle Ern's eyes he was a much better Footie companion than I.

On one occasion I was late back to barracks after a visit with my cousins and so was confined to barracks for three days. I was not given any duties, there were probably none to be done, and spent most of the three days in the sargean't mess.

The only liquor available was a crate of cherry brandy, which was being sold for threepence a glass. I'm afraid even now; fifty odd years later, the sickly sweet smell of cherry brandy turns my stomach over. My self-inflicted punishment was much worse than that which the C. O. meted out to me.

At last we embarked on a troopship to transport us to San Francisco. The majority of troops were American G.I.s returning from the Islands battles. I remember very little of this trip, except that I learned the intricacies of the game of craps. Again a quite expensive learning curve. The entry to San Francisco and the train journey across America to a holding camp between New York and Boston were revelations. It wasn't hard to convince American civilians that Sydney was still surrounded by a high wall to keep out the blacks, or that the eagle symbols on our shoulders meant that we belonged to the U.S. Eagle squadron that had fought in China. The latter belief resulted in a quantity of free beer in the New York bars. I turned twenty-one while on leave in New York, and five of my fellow pilots joined me at "The Golden Horseshoe" nightclub to celebrate. When the bill arrived I said to my companions, "O.K. Charlies, everybody had better dig deep, or we'll be washing dishes for the duration." Our combined total wealth didn't even get close to the amount at the bottom of the bill. Just as we were to throw ourselves on the mercy of the waiter he left us for a minute to return, pick up the bill and take it to another table occupied by a middle aged couple. When he returned with the bill it was marked 'Paid'. Before leaving the nightclub I went to thank the couple for their generosity. As a result they took us all home to a sumptuous apartment, and next day took us to Coney Island and other New York sites; a very generous couple.

Shortly thereafter we were given five days pre-embarkation leave and three of us decided to travel to Boston where we approached the Red Cross to seek an American family billet. We were sent to a huge five-storey mansion in Cohasset to a family by the name of Chapin. The family apologised because the war meant they no longer had servants. Consequently three teenage sons would act the servants' roles while we were there. My chief memories were of a glass of Scotch whisky that seemed to be self replenishing. It was always half full no matter how much I drank. Apparently this family owned a half mile stretch of the nearby beach, and one evening we all had a lobster party on the beach; freshly caught lobsters dipped in melted butter. A very generous family.

Shortly thereafter we were embarked on the "Queen Elizabeth" for the dash across the Atlantic. The Australian contingent was a small section of the reported 17000 troops aboard. Each bunk was used for three 8-hour shifts. Again I recall little of the voyage.

So began, for me, the real war. I had always dreamed of flying fighters, and believed I would be good at it, but right from the moment I arrived in England, I was told that I was needed to fly bombers. My first strategy was to say, "But I won't accept the responsibility of a crew. As a fighter pilot if my plane goes down it's only my life at risk." After a fortnight of fighting the inevitable I was interviewed by an Australian Wing Commander, whose final words were, "Right, F/Sgt Richards, are you going to accept the posting or do we ground you and send you back to Australia?" I accepted the posting.

Conversion to Wellington two engine bombers, to four engine Stirlings and finally that great aircraft, the Lancaster bomber followed as quickly as the English weather would allow. Two episodes stand out in my mind from this frenetic period, both relating to the two engine Wellington.

Soon after I had gone solo on Wellingtons and before I was joined by a crew I took off alone in an aircraft for a short visual navigation exercise. There were a few clouds about, but I'd no sooner reached altitude than I realised that there was some nasty weather coming in very quickly, and I decided to get back to my home drome as quickly as possible. However the clouds beat me to it and I was soon hopelessly lost. I knew that I had to get below the clouds as quickly as possible. I let down gently through the clouds knowing that there were probably a number of aircraft in the same predicament as mine. At this time in Britain, there were lots of aircraft using a limited amount of air space. Just as the clouds thinned at the bottom of the layer another Wellington flashed across in front of me at nearly the same height. Another few feet and this story would never have been written. As I looked down I sighted a runway and not caring to whom it belonged I put the Welly down to a pretty shaky landing with a couple of very solid bounces.

On another occasion, after being crewed up, when my regular tail gunner was too sick to fly, we had a standin take his place. It was the first time this fellow had been up in a Wellington at night, and about that time there were reports of German fighters following RAF raids home to shoot down the returning bombers while they circled their drome waiting for landing orders. As I was practising night landings, we took off circled the drome and as I pulled back the throttles to start the landing pattern the new tail-gunner yelled into his mike, "Fighter astern. Weave! Weave!" I pushed the throttles fully forward and started to weave and at the same time trying to gain some height, seeking to get into the landing pattern again as quickly as possible. Again as I pulled back the throttles came the cry, "Tracers! Weave…." This time I turned my head to the right before reacting and noticed the stream of sparks emitted by the Wellington's radial engine exhausts. This was a feature of this aircraft; poor old Merv. was ribbed unmercifully about his first experience of an enemy fighter while he remained with us. Fortunately for him the regular crewmember soon returned to us and Merv was able to escape as a permanent member to a new crew.

At last a quite excited crew received a posting to 467 Squadron, Waddington, a RAAF station just South of Lincoln, and we soon received our baptism of fire. As pilot and crew captain I went on a raid, as a second dickie with an experienced crew, to gain experience. It was a small bombing raid on a target with little defence and so was quite unexciting. Three nights later the crew set out on its first raid as a team. As we reached operational height over the North Sea, I noticed in the far distance the sky full of flashes. Tom, the bomb aimer, and Andy the Engineer, who were the only other crew members who were not too busy to notice, both exclaimed almost in unison, "What the hell is that? You said you didn't see any flak the other night!"

I certainly hadn't seen anything like the pyrotechnic show that was going on up front. Finally as we reached the enemy coastline we realised we were flying into a

severe electrical storm. Lightning played over the fuselage and wings putting on quite a show. Certainly it was as frightening as the first real anti-aircraft barrage that we later encountered. The storm was so bad over the target that the pathfinders were late locating and marking the target and the bombing controller advised us to circle the target area with our navigation lights on till the marking flares went down. As it was a minor target there was very little anti-aircraft fire and no enemy fighters appeared. Such was our unexciting baptism of fire, that we thought the war was going to be easy. Thirteen trips later our thoughts were changed over the second Koenigsberg raid.

Over the next couple of months, we flew operations bombing targets in Germany, France and providing day-light support for the armies fighting their way into France. The instructions for daylight operations were to get into a gaggle, and keep a sharp lookout for bomb bays opening above you. A number of planes were hit by bombs dropped from above. Fortunately, in most cases the nose cones hadn't spun off and so the bombs weren't armed. One Lancaster was reported to have returned to base after having its port inner taken out by one bomb, while another tore a large hole in the starboard wing in between the two engines. What a wonderful plane the Lancaster was!

It was on a day-light that we suffered our first actual contact with flak, carrying home some sixty odd small holes in the fuselage and wings. Fortunately none of the crew was injured, though Tom the bomb-aimer gasped as a hole appeared between his legs as he sat over the bomb sight, and there was a hole in the fuselage next to where the Wireless operators head would be most of the time that he was in his seat. Shooie said he must have been leaning forward, concentrating on the radar screen for it to have missed him.

The following night at the local pub, we were discussing the near misses when Tom said, "Hooray for leave, we must be due for some aren't we Skip?". I was busily trying to get to know better the lady who was playing the pub piano, "I'm not interested in the war at the moment Tom, go and talk to the lady's husband, while I concentrate on Doll here!" Jack and Doll owned a farm about ten miles from the base and it looked as if we might be right for a good veal steak dinner. The only way you could get a good feed of meat was to know a farmer who didn't declare all the calves born. We'd already had some illegal eggs from the Car Colstin farm. My voice wasn't all that bad and I was accompanying Doll with a rousing chorus of "Roll me over in the clover……."

" Hell man, come on you have to apply for some crew leave."

The upshot was that we got our leave for 17 days, had our veal steak dinner at the farm and then headed our various ways on leave.. The crew had invested in two pretty ancient Austin sedans, had filched some petrol from the base supplies, added some of Bob's coupons to our own meagre ration and the six of us headed South for London. We didn't get further than Nottingham, but had a great time. As we neared the base on our way home, the conversation automatically turned to questions of what would be our next target

It had been decided to bomb Koenigsberg in East Prussia to show support for the communist forces. It was one of the longest air raids of the Second World War, and at first rumour had it that the plan was to continue on to a station in Russia to refuel before returning to base. However the final plan was to return to a field in Scotland for refuelling purposes. At the debriefing after the raid it soon became apparent that there had been a balls up and the target had been missed. Sure enough, the following Thursday afternoon we were briefed for the second Koenigsberg. Right from the start there were problems. As Stocky went to reopen the side door into the fuselage, having forgotten to check the outside of the rear turret, he shouted up to me, “Hey this bloody door hasn’t been fixed, remember it jammed last time when we came back.”

I climbed back over the main spar to check and sure enough real force had to be used once the handle had been activated. “Report it to the ground staff and tell them to pull their finger out,” I said to Stocky as he climbed out and I returned to the cockpit to run through the final checks. Just before take-off time Stocky reported, “They reckon it’s fixed but it’s still a bit dicky, what will we do?”

I queried the crew during the intercom check and as nobody was unduly concerned, we decided to go with it, and off we went to do one of the longest raid of the war a second time. As before it was great seeing the lit up cities as we passed over neutral Sweden but the reception over the target was altogether another matter. The Germans had obviously realised that the target would be done again, and had beefed up the defences. Tom the bomb-aimer said, as we started the run in, “Skip, have you noticed those blue search-lights; they seem to be hard to shake, once they’ve latched on.”

“Yeah Tom, let’s steer clear of them as soon as we’ve got rid of the load.”

“O.K. Skip, target coming up, left left, steady. Left, steady, steady. Christ there’s another kite copped it in one of those blue bastards. Steady steady, nearly there, steady. Right. Bombs away. Look out mate here comes a blue bastard.”

“Fuck it! He’s on us. Hold tight. Shit we’re coned. Jesus! Fire in the port inner. Andy feather that prop. Feather Andy; and foam. We’re being hit with every thing. Feather that bloody engine.”

“Skip! It won’t feather. We can’t put the fire out. It’s no good.”

A quick glance at the instruments showed the port inner rev. counter off the clock. The flames from the engine had engulfed the port wing.

“ Jump jump! Jump jump!” I yelled into the intercom.

I watched Merv. go past down the steps to the bomb aimer’s hatch to eject. Everything was happening as if in slow motion. Yet I knew that if I didn’t quickly get myself down those same steps in a hurry it was the end. As I left the seat, Merv reappeared up the steps motioning that he would clip on my chest parachute; he’d forgotten that I had recently been issued with the new seat type permanently attached to my harness. Nothing could be heard above the scream of the runaway port inner engine, so I just pointed to my bum and waved him back down the steps, following as quickly as the wildly gyrating plane would allow. I watched him

somersault head first through the hatch. Then I was sitting with my legs through the hatch and my right hand in the parachute toggle. I tumbled headfirst through the hatch. My next recollections were kaleidoscopic. A sore spot on the back of my head. A gently floating sensation. Every piece of bright metal in the sky appearing to be coming straight towards me, but never reaching me. Finally the parachute toggle attached to a piece of wire in my right hand. When I became sure that the tracers weren't actually aimed at me, I started to think about landing. In a burst of light I noticed a parachute floating about a hundred yards off and some way below me. Looking down it became obvious that I wasn't going to be able to see the ground as I neared it. I decided that I might get some idea by dropping the toggle as I approached the landing. It didn't work. As I let the toggle go I landed heavily. Instead of being fifteen to twenty feet above the ground, I had been two. After I'd recovered the breath knocked out of me I reeled in the parachute, tucked it under my arm and called, "Are you there Merv?" On about the third call, Merv appeared out of the darkness with his parachute.

After burying the parachutes, we took stock of our situation. We each had a water bottle, a small torch and a map of the area around Koenigsberg. We tore the insignia off our battle dress blouses, made an estimate of where we had landed based on our run-in direction, and decided we should try and reach the coast to steal a boat in which to get to neutral Sweden. It was 1.50 am on a moonless night. After walking for about an hour we stumbled on to a rail track. Just as the sun was rising we reached a small station/goods shed on the edge of a village. As it sat on stumps and was raised about two and a half feet off the ground, we decided to hide underneath for the day. Throughout the day Germans worked on the floor above and chickens scratched about under and near the goods shed; we had had no food since four o'clock the previous afternoon.

"As soon as those sods above leave I'm trying for one of those chickens," said Merv. Not long afterwards all went quiet on the floor above, and we heard sliding doors closing. A white hen ventured quite close to where we were lying each with a large stone in hand. Together we threw and hit the fowl on the side. Squawking loudly it fluttered down the embankment on to the tracks, with Merv scrambling after it. He quickly put a stop to the squawks, and we plucked and gutted it quickly, eating the egg yokes. We now had to decide whether we could risk a small fire under the goods shed. We dug a hole and lit a small fire, holding the chicken over it. However there was quite a lot of smoke so we had to extinguish the fire, and eat the warmed but uncooked meat. We walked through two more uneventful nights, lying up during the day in a broken down barn where we found some turnips to eat. On the fourth night we were feeling pretty dis-spirited but pressed on, at one stage meeting two other men walking in the opposite direction. To a question in an unknown language we answered, "Nix schpreken sie deutsche, Italien," which seemed to satisfy them, and on request they gave us a cigarette each. We had only walked another two hundred yards when an army truck swung round a corner in front of us and veered off the road into the ditch. There was no time to avoid being caught in the headlights. As we went to walk past the truck the cab door opened. A S.S. Officer stepped down from the cab, holding out his arm in front of me. I was sure we were to be captured but fortunately picked up the word "licht" in the German sentence. I

realised that he wanted a light for the cigarette he held in his hand. I held up the half-smoked cigarette as he placed his in his mouth. Fortunately he held my hand steady. “Danke,” he said and turned to give an order to soldiers piling out of the back of the truck. I was still holding my breath twenty yards up the road.

By this time our once replenished water bottles were empty and it was imperative that we find water. At the next village we split up to walk round a house looking for the large water barrel in which many of the village houses catch rainwater. I heard footsteps coming toward me, “Did you find any Merv?”

“Was dischт?”

A very tall old German was standing in front of me.

As Merv joined us, “Italien, Vater, vater”, I said. It had worked before.

“Ah, vater.” He pointed to a small structure some 20 yards away, and led us to it saying, “Ah, vater.”

We filled our water bottles as he turned to go back to his house, “Auf Weidersen.”

As we set off again, Merv said, “Jesus that was a close shave; where’d he come from?”

“He must have heard us and come from the house. I thought it was you.”

Round the next bend we were met by a platoon of Luftewaffe guards, who were obviously waiting for us. As the command, “Halte,” was given there was the distinct noise of rounds chambered and we did not argue. We realised that the old German had rumbled us and the ‘Italien’ joke was over. We learned later that the old man at the house had been a prisoner of war in Britain during the First World War. He’d recognised that I’d spoken English and alerted the nearest Luftewaffe station.

After a short march along a deserted road, during which the loaded rifles burned a hole in my back, we were placed in an army truck and taken to a room where we joined crewmembers, Tom, Andy and Stocky. We were in this small prison room for about twelve hours, during which we went through all that had happened to each of us since my orders to, “Jump! Jump! Jump! Jump!”

Stocky, the rear gunner’s comment was, “Hell I only heard the first ‘Jump!’ I didn’t wait for any more.”

Angry villagers had surrounded Tom the bombaimer as he landed, and he was lucky that a platoon of Luftewaffe guards had arrived in time to rescue him.

That day we were travelled under guard in a train to an interrogation centre in Frankfurt, where we were interrogated for about ten days, given very little to eat, and at times questioned while the interrogating officer sat down to a hearty meal.

To all questions, as previously briefed by our intelligence officers at Waddington I gave the standard answers, “My names is John Arthur Richards, my rank is Flying Officer and my RAAF number is 427149.”

The usual threats were made, “You are a spy. Where are your RAAF insignia? You will be shot as a spy unless you can substantiate your RAAF identity by giving us your squadron and the station you flew from.”

“My name is Andrew Richards, my rank is Flying Officer, and my RAAF number is 427149.”

Finally I went before an officer who took a different tack, “Look we know you flew Lancaster J Jig, as a pilot from Waddington, and that you were in 467 Squadron.”

As I opened my mouth to repeat my litany, he said, “All you have to do is remain silent while I repeat, ‘ you flew Lancaster J Jig from Waddington 467 Squadron’, now let’s have no more nonsense. Is that correct?” I remained silent, my resistance was at an end. What was the use.

The next day Tom and I were on a train to Stalag Lufte 1, a prisoner of war camp near a small town named Barth due North of Berlin on the Baltic coast. There were approximately 13,000 allied Air Force officers from many countries held captive in this camp. The majority were American, and the senior prisoner was an American General. We were to remain there till the end of the war in Europe, some nine months later. At last through the Red Cross we were able to write one letter to our next of kin to let them know that we were safe, at least alive.

We soon settled down to camp life. We were housed in blocks with a central passage running the full length of the block. There were five rooms on each side of this passage. Each room was about fifteen feet square and contained nine double bunks for the eighteen inhabitants. For the first five months or so we received regular Red Cross parcels and we lived reasonably well. There was a thriving exchange market in clothes, watches etc. The main items of commerce and exchange were cigarettes, and ‘D’ bar chocolates, the latter being the base rate for all exchanges.

Thereafter, because of the chaotic condition of German transport as the war neared its climax, we lived solely on very meagre German rations; two slices of very thin rye bread per person per day, margarine made from coal, rancid cheese, cabbage soup, and occasionally sauercraut. Our main occupations were; standing in line to be counted, talking about our first meal when released, playing chess or bridge, an occasional game of ‘touch gridiron’ or softball, and making sure that the guards didn’t catch us with the BBC war news which was carried each day from block to block typed on flimsy paper. Orders were ‘Eat it if you look like getting caught’. This news was gleaned from a radio set which had been built into the false bottom of a seat used by one of the German camp officers, who had decided to collaborate. He flew back to Britain with us when we were released, as a reward for his services.

One incident is worth relating. At night dogs were let loose in the compounds as a security measure. One evening just before ‘lights out’, a large Alsation stood outside the casement window looking into the room, housing its eighteen prisoners and the nine double bunks. One chap went to the window and starting lunging at and teasing the dog, while the rest of us crowded round to watch. The dog stepped back a few paces and then raced forward to jump through the window shattering the

glass and thin wooden casements. Eighteen prisoners hit nine top bunks in a rush, while the dog paraded round the room rearing up, snarling to place his front paws against the sides of top bunks. We were paraded outside under searchlights on a quite cold night for two hours as punishment, surrounded by dogs that fortunately were leashed.

As the Russian advanced, there were all sorts of rumours.

All POWs were to be shot.

If not shot we were to be evacuated through Russia.

We were to be marched west, away from the approaching Russian armies.

One morning we awoke to find the guard posts unattended, no guards anywhere. We were informed by our own senior officers that:

They had refused the German commandant's orders to march out to the west, and that now we were in command of our own camp, and we were spared the horrific problems that beset the prisoners who were marched around Germany in appalling conditions, to get away from the Russians originally and later the Americans and British. A debate still continues as to the reasons behind the Germans' determination not to allow the liberation of these prisoners by any of the allied armies. There is certainly a strongly held belief that they thought to use us as final bargaining chips.

A small field force had been set up to run the camp.

Nobody was to leave the camp.

Small parties had been sent out; east to contact the Russians, and west to contact the Allies with a view to expedite our evacuation.

About a fortnight later, we were flown back to Britain packed like sardines into Liberators and Fortresses. Oh! What a wonderful feeling. Apparently the Russians only allowed the American bombers to land after they had secured a renegade Russian General, who had fought with the Germans at the Eastern front, and who was held by the Americans.

We recuperated in the hotel Metropole facing the beach at Brighton. Tom's first statement when we were given leave was, "Let's take Jack up to Car Colstin to introduce him to some first class steak, I've had enough of these asparagus sandwiches." Jack Lindsay had been in the room with us at Stalag Luft1.

We rang Doll and she was enthusiastic so we set off.

After a short visit to the Car Colstin farm, I left the other two to their nefarious devices and went on to the Lake District, staying at a comfortable old pub and doing some hard but beautiful walks. This was a wonderful regeneration, and relieved to some extent the feeling of failure that had been with me from the time that I had had to utter those fateful words, "Jump jump, jump jump." While there was never any recrimination or blame after the war attached to being shot down and taken prisoner I, like many others, felt that we had failed a crucial test.

I have very little recollection of the details of the boat trip back to Australia. The stand out recollection is seeing my mother and my girl friend, Gertrude Carrie, waiting on the wharf at Fremantle and how terribly long it took to berth and to get us off the ship. While in 1939 and 1940 I was excited about the prospect of going to war, and even prayed that there would be a war, I was now sick and tired of the whole affair and longed to get back to peace and to forget it all.

During a hectic fortnight after my return to Australia, my girlfriend agreed to become my wife and I fought with the WA Education Department about getting leave to attend university. The Department argued that as I was a fully trained teacher, I was needed in the classroom and wouldn't be granted leave of absence. As they wouldn't budge I resigned and applied for repatriation funding to attend university.

Having arranged my immediate future, I turned my attention to more mundane affairs. First I needed a driving licence so that I could drive my Mother and fiancé back to the family home in Katanning, so I presented myself to the Roe Street police station. The desk sergeant looked at the wings on my battle jacket and asked, "What have you been flying?"

"Lancasters in England," I replied

"Have any problem parking them?"

"No."

"Ok. Let's go for a drive." A hundred yards up the road, he said, "Turn left here, and park 50 yards from the corner." As I parked , I noticed we were outside a pub, and he said, "I reckon you've earned a beer." We went inside had a couple of beers and then returned to the station where I received a licence to drive a truck, a car, a motor bike and a passenger carrying bus. I held that licence for fifty years.

Over the next three years I married, started a family, completed an Arts degree at the University of WA, and successfully applied to rejoin the WA Education Department. My family and I awaited the notice of appointment at my parents' home in Katanning. My appointment came by telegram and read, 'You are appointed head teacher of the school at the number seven pumping station on the Goldfields Water Supply Line.'

After a brief discussion with my wife I replied by telegram, "I refuse this appointment."

I was subsequently appointed to Leederville Primary School, to teach a grade 4 class. Unlike many of the teachers who, after the war, came straight from school to complete a much improved and longer training course than I, I and my fellow ex-service men and women, had had a much more varied life. This I believe was one of the main reasons why we were successful teachers. Over and above my war experiences, I had worked on my brother-in law's wheat and sheep farm to eke out the meagre repatriation allowance while at university, and was seven to ten years older than those emerging from the teachers training courses after the war. After the war there was a rapid expansion of the Western Australian Education system. Consequently after a few years teaching at both Primary and Secondary schools in the metropolitan area, I became the head teacher at Clackline Primary School,

followed quite quickly by promotion as Principal to Wyalkatchem Junior High School, Norseman Junior High School, Mt Barker Agricultural Junior High School and Albany Senior High School, the latter in 1968. By this time my family had grown to four children, two girls and two boys, the last three all attending the Albany Senior High School. They later informed me that it wasn't easy being students in the school where their father was the Principal.

During my years in Albany I became a Town Councillor for two terms and as the Deputy Mayor became Acting Mayor for nine months, while the Mayor, Mr Harold Smith was on leave. In this capacity I chaired a number of Council committees and was appointed as Chairman of the region in the Whitlam Government regional set-up, making for a very busy life.

At the beginning of 1980 I was appointed on a temporary basis as a Secondary General Superintendent of Secondary Education working from the Bunbury Office of Education, and responsible for Secondary Schools from Mandurah round the coast and throughout the South-West to Jerramungup. In 1981 I was confirmed in this appointment. I retired at the end of 1982, having received a certificate in August, 1980, expressing the Education Department's appreciation for the long and dedicated service I had given.

I retired in Albany, being appointed Chairman of the Great Southern Regional TAFE committee set up in 1984. My wife died suddenly of lung cancer in October, 1985. Shortly thereafter I was approached by a Malaysian group of educators and business men to head up a secondary college in Perth. This college, the Western Australian International College, was to be set up to take advantage of the new Australian regulations allowing enrolment of fee-paying overseas students. I declined the first approach to become the principal offered by the prime mover for the group, a Dr Bean San Goh, a Professor of Mathematics at University of WA. I accepted a second approach to become the consultant to set up the college. As it had to be up and running to prepare students for the 1986/87 Tertiary Education Examinations, there was a great deal to be done in a very short time. When I completed this task, I was offered the position of Deputy Director, my main duties being to alert Australian Embassies and Commissions in South-East Asian countries of the changed regulations, to run seminars and conventions for the general public in S.E. Asia, and to interview interested parents and students for enrolment.

As a result of my work in S.E.Asia, I met and married Goh Suan Choo the sister of Dr. Bean San Goh, so now have a Chinese step-family, as well as my own Australian family. At 82 I am still relatively healthy and still enjoy an active life. My mother lived to within eleven days of her hundredth birthday, so I have received some very good genes. I am at present, (2004), the Chairman of Selection Committee for my bowling club, and President of the Royal Air Forces Ex-Prisoner of War Association, a world wide organisation with head-quarters in Perth. I am very well looked after by the Department of Veterans Affairs healthwise, and look forward still to a long and productive life.

I am a self-funded retiree and so still pay taxes. I have had a varied and a fortunate life, probably being a member of the most fortunate generation to have lived, and perhaps ever likely to live on this planet, all things considered.

My children and my step-children are all hard working productive members of the Australian multi-cultural society, and I am very proud of them.