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## **Robert Raynes Royle**

### **RAAF No. 403035 – Flying Officer**

#### **WAR SERVICE:**

I was working at Quabothoo, Coonamble when war broke out in 1939. At Kings I was in the cadets, which were compulsory and spent over a year in 1936 with the 28<sup>th</sup> Battalion light artillery at Lancer Barracks, Parramatta. They had just converted from horses to tractors, but the 18 pounders still had big steel wheels. The top speed on a first class road was 6mph. We wore britches and leggings with spurs – a left – over from the horses – and emu plumes in our slouch hats like the old Light Horse.

When the Empire Air Training Scheme for aircrew started, I applied immediately and went on the waiting list. I entered No. 9 Course on 7 December 1940, but was rejected as a pilot because of slight astigmatism in the eyes. I was accepted as a Wireless Air Gunner at the recruiting centre at Woolloomooloo. We were sent immediately to No. 1 Initial Training School at Somers, Victoria where we worked like hell for four weeks without a break.

A failure in one of the nine subjects meant exit from the aircrew. After a weeks leave at Newport, where my family had rented a house, I was posted to No 1 Wireless School at Ballarat, Victoria for a six months course; it had been a three year course before the war. The work was intense, and most of it foreign to me. The final month introduced us to flying and putting into practise in the air what we had learnt on the ground. We flew in DC2's. Out of 108 on the course I came 3<sup>rd</sup> overall; and topped the course in sending Morse (24wpm).

The next posting was to No. 1 Bombing and Gunnery School at Evans Head for four weeks. We flew in open cockpit Fairy Battles which had seen service in France. We did air to air to ground exercises apart from the theory of gunnery, stripping and assembly, fixing blockages in the dark, etc. At completion we breathed a sigh of relief when we received our Wings and Sergeant stripes. Only one from the course received a Commission.

After a weeks leave we went to the Embarkation Depot at Bradfield Park, Lindfield and two of us – Eldon Beale and I were posted to England. The others went to Singapore. We left Sydney on the 'Awatea' (August 1941) a modern trans-Tasman Union Line ship which was later sunk off North Africa. The 6" cruiser 'Sydney' escorted us all the way to Vancouver via Auckland, where we picked up New Zealand Aircrew trainees, and Suva.

Eldon and I were the only fully trained Wireless Air Gunners on board as the other aircrew were going on to Canada to train, so he and I did Aldis Lamp watches on the bridge everyday for four hours. We were exempt from other duties, and the experience was a great help when we had to use the lamp on operations when over convoys.

At Vancouver we marched through the streets and boarded a CNR train for Halifax. The trip took five days. We spent two weeks at Halifax waiting for a

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convoy, and then left on the 'Empress of Asia' – about 45,000 tons – with 55 other ships and an escort of destroyers. The convoy travelled at 6 and a half knots and took two weeks to get to Liverpool. We were attacked by a pack of U Boats, several ships were sunk, so we scattered and went independently for the last few days.

Bournemouth was the Dominion aircrew arrival centre. We spent a short time there before being posted to the Wireless School at Yatesbury in Wiltshire for a refresher course. We flew over Dover once – the pilot had a girlfriend there – and went right through over 40 Messerschmidts, which were heading in the opposite direction. They took no notice of us.

Our next posting was Cranwell, where there was an Operational Training Unit (OUT), the last training before going operational. We flew Whiteleys as we were going to be sent to a Whiteley Squadron. Eldon was still with me. It was then December 1941 and bitterly cold, and I developed bronchial asthma. After spending a week in hospital I went before a Medical Board at Haltham, Buckinghamshire. They said I should be sent to the Middle East immediately.

I returned to Cranwell, Lincs. Where we were doing long trips in our Whitleys. These aircraft were Britain's earliest heavy bombers, with Twin Merlin Rolls Royce engines and a crew of six; Captain, 2<sup>nd</sup> pilot, observer/navigator and three wireless air gunners who looked after the wireless set, radio telephone, radar scan, front Frazer-Nash turret with one Vickers gun and rear turret with four Browning guns. While at Cranwell I was sent off to do a short course in the new radar searching equipment. It was all so secret that there were no notes and we were not allowed to take notes. On completion I received an extra sixpence a day.

We were posted to No. 612 Squadron, the peacetime city of Aberdeen Squadron, in Coastal Command, stationed at Reykjavik, Iceland. We travelled by ship in early February 1942 from Glasgow with an escort of two modern destroyers. It blew a gale all the way for four days as we went north and became colder every day. U Boats seemed undeterred by the weather. We saw two ships torpedoed, one a tanker.

On arrival at Reykjavik the weather was so foul we had to go ashore in lighters. Westerly's sweep across Iceland from Greenland all winter. It was light for about one hour in February. Our Whitley's were painted white and anchored down to blocks of concrete with iron rings. In our first two days we lost two planes and twelve men, and many more later.

Everything used to freeze, including us. Conditions were harsh by air force standards. We slept in long Nissen huts, about 40 to a hut, with a small stove in the centre, over which we would heat our socks each morning, as they were always frozen stiff. We slept in special double sleeping bags. Food was mostly bully beef and Icelandic cod. Our flying was all U Boat hunting. We hunted them in the Denmark Straits, along the Greenland coast, inside the Icelandic Fjords and we escorted Russian convoys northeast of Iceland. Losses were heavy due to weather conditions.

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I returned to the UK on leave in April, and did another trip to the UK to pick up a new Whitely. In June Iceland warmed up, the Icelandic poppies came out – they grow wild during the short summer – and the Squadron returned to the UK. We were sent down to Thorney Island for a rest because of our heavy losses. Thorney was a permanent RAF base near Southampton. Unfortunately they found work for us, bombing shipping in French ports, so we lost a few more aircraft there. We also took part in the tragic Diappe raid.

In August 1942 our Squadron was posted to Wick on the northern tip of Scotland. It was a cold wind swept area, but a good RAF station. I was still flying with Jack Redman, an Australian. We had been together since Iceland days. There were about four other Australians on the Squadron, no NZ's or Canadians, which was unusual.

From Wick we did anti U Boat sweeps as far north as we could go. We had a range of about 14 hours. We did convoy escorts – mostly heading for Russia – and sweeps into Norwegian Fjords after German shipping. Luftwaffe JU88's made attacks on us but the weather was usually filthy and we always managed to get clear into cloud cover. I may have shot down three or none. It was hard to tell as we always lost sight of them. One had smoke coming from it and I know I hit another two, but they may have got home.

In November our crew was given a short rest by sending us to Leuchars, near St Andrews and Dundee, to do a weeks bombing and gunnery refresher course. At Wick we continued into the winter, and in December I finished my first tour of operations. Several of us finished together and should have gone on rest to Training or Transport Command, but rather than break up crews we continued on.

As with Iceland, we had to fly in the most atrocious gales, and those northern winters consist mostly of gale force winds. Unfortunately we were one of the three RAF Squadrons equipped with radar for hunting U Boats, with both search and homing aerials, so we didn't have to see the water to find our targets. Our usual height was 1,500 feet but we often had to come down to 50 feet because of the weather.

In February 1943 my medical papers came through from RAF Halham. They had taken over a year to catch up with me, and I was posted immediately to 179 Squadron. These were Wellingtons equipped with Leigh Lights, a standard naval searchlight which retracted into the belly amidships. We had the same radar as 612 Squadron, but it was operated from the front gun turret – which had had to be removed.

The idea was to search for U Boats at night, home in on one by radar, cruise in quietly with engines half shut down and switch on the light at a distance of 500 yards and a height of 50 feet. This was fairly tricky at night and we had to do a lot of training for it, both at Chivenor, Devon and at Gibraltar. It was hard leaving my friends in 612 Squadron.

We flew out to Gibraltar in February 1943 where the Squadron was based, but it had detachments at Malta, Algiers and Agadir. We began operating immediately. As U Boats had to surface to recharge their batteries and they always did it at

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night, our Squadron attacked many subs. If we didn't sink them we gave them one hell of a fright. When the light was switched on, U Boat crews were usually on deck getting some fresh air. They would suddenly be floodlit with a blinding light and half fall down the conning tower in their hurry to submerge.

However, one night one of our crews switched on the light to find the submarine standing high in the water, instead of crash diving, and German Gunners with dark glasses manning six 20mm cannon, which had replaced the standard 3.7" gun. After that episode we had to fit fixed front guns, but we lost many aircraft from both anti-aircraft fire and those who flew too low and hit the water.

I enjoyed the sunshine after northern latitudes. Our crew was twice posted to Agadir, then in southern French Morocco on the edge of the Sahara. U Boats were re-fuelling in the Canary Islands, and we hunted them at night. Our crew had several narrow escapes, including having to crash land at Blida, Algeria in the dark.

On one trip well out into the Atlantic our Observer omitted to navigate, as he was relying on the radar. When the radar and radio-transmitter went dead, I homed the loop aerial onto the Gibraltar radio station carrier wave. The Observer said we were over the Atlas Mountains in Morocco and we should fly north. I said we were over the centre of Spain and should fly south. Fortunately the Captain believed me and we landed safely. The petrol ran out before we finished taxiing. Our C.O. immediately recommended me for a Commission, and the Observer was reprimanded.

In July 1943 I finished my second tour of operations and we flew back to England. Soon after takeoff the engines played up and we nearly came down in the sea, but got back to Gibraltar safely. While on leave in England my Commission came through, so I reported to Haverford west, South Wales as a Pilot Officer instead of a Flight Sergeant. This was another O.T.U like Cranwell.

I was one of the Wireless Operator flying instructors and at the end of each course I had to assess whether or not the trainees were fit to go on operations. I enjoyed the instructing. My most exciting experience – apart from having to fly with trainee pilots – was nearly falling out of the hatch of a Wellington. The hatch flew off its hinges when I trod on it and disappeared out into space. The only other occupant on this test flight was the pilot, my old friend Jack Redman. I had fallen half out of the hatch and was hanging by my arms, but he was strong enough to pull me back.

In September 1943 I was posted back to Australia for health reasons – Asthma and nerves – and reported to Brighton, the embarkation depot. I sailed for Halifax from Greenoch on the Queen Elizabeth, the trip taking four days. I had taken fourteen in the other direction. From Halifax we went to Montreal by train, then to New York for three weeks. There were sixteen Australians in our group and we were put on a troop train to San Francisco via, Chicago, Kansas City and New Mexico. From San Francisco we went by ship – the 'Fred C Ainsworth' to Brisbane via Auckland, (it was a Liberty Ship) then by train to Sydney.

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My first Australian posting was to Victory Loan duties. Our team consisted of a Commando, and Army Nursing Sister from the Middle East and New Guinea, a Naval Petty Officer who had been torpedoed twice and I represented the RAAF. With a Victory Loan civilian in charge we toured 106 factories and offices giving talks about what the war was really like. We would then circulate among the staff selling War Bonds. I was never nervous again when having to speak in front of a crowd.

In February 1944 I did an Operations Room Controllers Course at Melbourne. Being the only one who had been on operations, I had an advantage over the others and topped the course. I was inadvertently posted to a Fighter Command unit at Townsville – where I went by train – then joined a Catalina wing at Cairns.

Unfortunately it moved to Darwin by the MV Canberra shortly afterwards. That was an interesting trip up the coast and through Torres Straits. I worked as an Operations Officer at Darwin for some months but contracted dermatitis and had to be admitted to the local hospital.

In February 1945 when it was obvious my skin was getting worse, I was flown to Sydney in a DC3 and entered Concord Hospital where I remained until I was discharged in June 1945. The only redeeming feature of Concord was having my brother Harold there. He had been admitted himself after an accident at Atherton and remained on the staff as an Army doctor.