

Albert David Sieber

Time with the U.S.A.A.F.

On completion of my course I graduated as a Sergeant-Air-Gunner. I was posted to No.1 Personnel Depot (1 P.D.) 1 P.D. was the Melbourne cricket ground and we had stretchers in the concourse of the ground – open to all the winds but quite dry.

One day all aircrew were to report to the Quarter-masters store to get our overseas gear. My good mate Charles Kent was about 3 in front of me in the queue, when the loud-speaker said “All straight gunners who haven’t received their gear are to report to the Commanding Officer’s office immediately.” Charles had received his gear, I hadn’t, so I with about 12 others reported to the C.O. When all were assembled the C.O. said “I want 6 volunteers to fly with the Dutchmen, volunteers step forward.” Needless to say no-one volunteered. The C.O. said “Ok, I don’t blame anyone for not volunteering, but I need 6 men to fly with the Dutchmen in B23’s”. We put our names in the C.O.’s cap and he drew out 6. “Those 6 fall out”, they did and the C.O. said “You two are too big for a Bendix turret”, I thought, here I go, I’m short. However he picked two others and the rest of us should go to our beds and wait there.

The next thing I remember is being on the Spirit of Progress train to Sydney. By C47 Dakota aeroplane to Port Moresby, New Guinea. I felt airsick in the C47 and lay down on the floor and allowed the wind coming through in the door to blow on my head. That made me feel better. I had been issued with my tropical gear, khaki shirts, khaki or green trousers, slouch hat, summer flying suit and hob-nailed boots. All my other gear (woolly bull, rubberized-cloth flying suit, inner gloves and outer gloves etc.) was put into a big kit bag and put into stores). I never saw it again. The lost kit and kit bag cost me 5 pounds (\$10) when I was discharged at the end of the war. I took my helmet and goggles with me.

I arrived at Jackson Strip (7 mile) in Port Moresby, New Guinea and was allocated to a tent with 3 other men. We were to eat at the U.S. mess and study the American turrets and guns. I was with many others to fly in American aircraft with the No. 5 Bomber Command Replacement Group – July 1944.

I studied the Sperry mid-upper turret and the .5 machine-gun. We also fired the Thompson sub-machine gun and the .45 automatic pistol. One of the best training implements was the turret with a shotgun in place of the machine-gun. They fired skeet (clay pigeons) from a trap and you tried to shoot it with the shotgun. We also had ordinary shotgun skeet shooting. It was great fun as well as great training.

I was crewed up with a S/L McDonald (called “Flaps McDonald” because of his big ears) but he went south sick so I, and the rest of “Flaps” crew were left high and dry. I was then crewed up with S/L John (Mickey) Finlayson and

was allocated to the front turret, so I had to learn the turret all over again. This was on the next course. All my friends had gone on the previous course.

At this time I became very cocky. I knew it all. Instead of paying attention to the instructors and the 'new turret' I began clowning around to the detriment of the whole group. My new skipper, S/L Finlayson got me to one side and gave me a good talking to. To make it easier for me he included the tail gunner (Frank Kearney) but he was talking to me, I deserved the 'telling off' and I changed my ways. That was the only time Mick had to talk to me. I became a good crew member. Later, on 23 Squadron, Mick often had me up to sit in the captain's place. With the guiding hand of Bill Vine (co-pilot) I piloted A72-103. It was a great thrill for me.

The 20th August 1944 was auspicious in 3 ways. It was my 20th birthday, we arrived at the 531st squadron of the 380th Heavy Bomber Group U.S.A.A.F and it was the day before my first mission. Incidentally it was the day Biak was secured. The U.S. Army Construction Engineers laboured to make room for the advancing 5th Air Force (U.S.A.A.F.) units.

21st August saw me, and our R.A.A.F crew do our first operational trip with the 531st Sq 380th HBG (U.S.A.A.F). We flew with other elements of the 531st Sq to Amahai and dropped 9x500lb bombs. We encountered heavy Ack-Ack (anti-aircraft) fire, but not one of the attacking forces was hit. The aircraft we flew was 42-73134 Milady.

An American 1st Lt H Woodward bombed Adelaide. He was returning to 529th Sq with a load of groceries, various goodies and some airmen returning from Rest and Recuperation leave. After the take-off in the B24 Lt Woodward decided to "buzz" Adelaide. Unfortunately when he pulled up sharply the resulting "G" forces caused the wooden racks on which the groceries were stacked to break. As the bomb doors were rigged to give way at 100lbs of pressure, the groceries smashed their way out and Adelaide was "bombed" by eggs, oranges, jam, beer, coca cola and other liqueurs etc, fortunately no-one was hurt, although there were several near misses. No action was taken or charges were laid and the whole thing was laughed off as one of those things.

On 25th August 1944 we flew in Sultan's Daughter to strike at Laha. The leader was 1st Lt C. Deaton. The weather was lousy but everything had gone well as we approached the initial point. There was radar-predicted Ack-Ack and plenty of it. The lead aeroplane "Undecided" was hit by shrapnel in No.2. engine causing it to fail. The B24 consequently dropped back putting the rest of the 4 plane flight in danger. The pilot rammed the other 3 throttles forward while the co-pilot feathered the damaged propeller. They were able to retain their leading position and bomb successfully. It was a clear day and I saw our bombs drop on the target. After ordering his crew to lighten the aeroplane, by throwing out guns, ammunition and anything loose, Deaton returned to Darwin quite safely.

Another 531st pilot had flack damage in Patty's Pig and returned safely. It was a pointer to future bad luck for Lt Prest, but more of that later.

31st August 1944 was the end of the month and the end of McArthur's operations in New Guinea. In another couple of days Wakde-Sarmi area operational airfields would be cleared.

On this day (31st Aug) we flew "Toddy" to Liang. The target was clouded, as was Amahai the alternative. So we bombed Cape Chater in Timor. That trip took 9 hours, as did the trip to Amahai while the trip to Laha took only 8 hours 30 minutes.

September 4th 1944, we went in Shi-Chi-Baby with the rest of the 531st to Kendari in the Celebes (now Sulawesi). It was a night trip, which lasted 9 hours 20 minutes. The Japanese at Kendari had not been bombed or raided since July and therefore they were very careless, they had forgotten to blackout. They probably felt immune on that Sunday night. Really they should have had their guard up and be ready. The leading Liberators in the bomb stream couldn't believe their eyes when they saw the ground lighting. They started large ground fires, which assisted the bombers which followed. Our bombs fell on the target. The supply dispersal and maintenance areas were hit by the B24s which bombed the target. Altogether a great success. The trip took 9 hours and 25 minutes night flying.

September 9th we flew Milady on a gunnery exercise, shooting at little islands. September 12th Sultan's Daughter took us on a raid to Heroekoe. The target was clouded over so we went to Liang, that was clouded also. So poor old Lautem copped 17x300lb demolition bombs. I say poor old Lautem because when other places were clouded Lautem or Cape Chater copped the lot. They seemed to be copping it very often.

September 16th saw us off to Kendari again, this time in Male Call. The skipper called up "One minute to bombing". Our navigator, Eric Sperring called up on the intercom "I make it 5 minutes to bombing Kendari". As was usual with the U.S.A.A.F, everybody bombed with the leader. Due to a navigational error we bombed Ambesia instead of Kendari. I saw bombs run along the revetments housing Japanese fighters. Many Japanese fighters were destroyed by bombs. The bombing results although a fluke, due to bad navigation were excellent. A clear sky and no Japanese opposition.

Shi-Chi-Baby took us to Heroekoe on the 20th September 1944. The target was clouded, as was Laha-Liang so we bombed Tep island off Baba. The trip took 9 hours 20 minutes. We dropped 40x100lbs of bombs, enough to sink the island.

On 25th September Pappy's Passion had unserviceable instruments. It was to have been a reccy mission but we only had 35 minutes of flying. We transferred to Hell's Bells. Hell's Bells is listed as a 530th aircraft, which was shot up over Babo on 5th September. It was reported as sent to Townsville and not returned. This doesn't relate to my logbook. According to my logbook we did a reccy to the Celebes. We bombed Cape Heros in Timor. 2 fighters were seen but didn't attack. The time taken for this was 9 hours 40 minutes daytime and 1 hour 30 minutes night-time.

Patty's Pig took us to bomb Liang on 29th September 1944. We hit the target with 17x300lbs demo bombs. The trip was uneventful and took only 8 hours 30 minutes daytime flying.
So ended September 1944.

October 1944.

Patty's Pig was the aeroplane we used for the gunnery exercise – it was a fighter co-operation job. Eight Spitfires (4 on each bow) took it in turns to attack us. They started to swing back and forth then one would peel off and do a frontal curve pursuit. They came so close I could see that one Spitfire pilot had a red moustache. We gunners had to track them as they came in for their attack. I thought they were coming into the turret with me. I thought one would hit one of the engines as happened with Heavenly Body. A Spitfire pilot, named Kelly was doing fighter affiliation with returning B24s when he flew too close to a B24 and hit the No. 1 engine, taking out the propeller and the front row of cylinders. The Spitfire continued on it's way directly into the sea. Neither plane nor pilot were ever seen again.

On 5th October we were scheduled to go to Makassar in "Cruisin Susan", however just after takeoff No. 4 engine began torching. We flew around Darwin waiting for the others to take off and hoping the torching would stop. It was night-time and the torching was quite spectacular.

The 'torching' was a flame reaching from the engine to beyond the tail-plane. Fortunately the torching was in No. 4 engine and outside the tail-plane. If it had been in No. 3 or No. 2 engine it would have burnt the tail-plane off, then we really would have been in trouble! This flight lasted just 1 hour of night flying.

The flight of 9th October 1944 was perhaps the most dramatic of my time with the 380th Heavy Bomb Group U.S.A.A.F. We were told at the briefing that this would be a milk run. The 4 Sqns of the 380th – 528th, 529th, 530th and 531st each had 6 B24s to bomb the target. The 528th was the lead squadron. We were to fly to the target in formation – bomb in formation and fly home in formation. It was formation all the way there and all the way home. We (Mick Finlayson's crew) were to fly No. 2 to Prest's crew, which was the lead crew in our flight. Prest wanted to fly "Patty's Pig" which was the latest aeroplane in 531st squadron. We were to fly "Patty's Pig" and Prest, who was a good mate of Mick's asked if he could fly "Patty's Pig" and would Mick swap with him. Mick said 'ok' so they went to the Squadron C.O. (an American) who said that the crews could change but the aircraft must remain in the formation originally scheduled. So we flew B24 D44-73481 ESQUIRE (Note – this is a different aeroplane from the one mentioned in Glen Hortin's "The Best in the South-West. That ESQUIRE was 42-73481. It could be the same aeroplane as mentioned in "Best in the South-West" [see page 460] for this aircraft was lost at Samar on 03/09/45 [if I am correct that is March 9th 1945]. According to Hortin it was a B24J numbered J-50-CO).

Anyway, we flew the lead in Esquire and Lt Prest and crew flew "Patty's Pig" in No. 2 position. All went well until we got to Koepang (west Timor) the target. It was radar predicted Ack-Ack (anti-aircraft fire). We didn't expect

THAT! As we approached the target and dropped the bombs I noted that the aeroplane flying No. 2 shot ahead with flames coming from their No. 2 engine. It shot ahead of us and then turned towards us. Bits of aircraft flew from it and towards us. Fire and flames came towards us. I thought the aeroplane was going to crash into us. I thought I saw 3 men get out. The flight engineer believed the aircraft had copped it in the bomb-bay but I thought it had been hit in the wing between the engine and fuselage. The flight engineer thought he saw 4 men get out.

Mick got the hell out of it and turned to starboard (right) – to hell with formation flying. We went over Koepang harbour and out to sea. The tail gunner (Frank Kearney) said he thought 5 men got out. “Patty’s Pig” crashed into the sea. A splash – a puff of smoke and it disappeared – the sea closed over the crash and that was that!! It just disappeared!! We came home by ourselves. Thank heavens Mick Finlayson turned to starboard and went over the sea, because at the turn-off point was where the Ack-Ack concentrated. Had we continued we also would have been shot down.

TENTS

When living with the 380th Heavy Bomb Group U.S.A.A.F we lived in big bell tents with floorboards. The boards covered the centre of the tent. We put our stretchers around the floorboards.

This in contrast to the R.A.A.F tents which had dirt floors, half the space and half the convenience.

RETURN

On return from a trip we went to de-briefing. On the way we got two fingers of bourbon whisky, a cup of coffee and two doughnuts, served by two Red Cross women.

SIX MEALS A DAY

That’s what the Yanks reckoned we Aussies had, breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea, evening meal and supper about 9.00pm. We had an oxygen tank filled with range-fuel hung in a tree. From the bottom of the tank was a thin oxygen pipe ending in a twisted piece of pipe with holes in it. Up near the tank was a tap. We turned the tap on and range-fuel flowed down the pipe and ran out the holes. We lit the fuel and “voila” a fire. We used this fire to boil the billy and make toast. Sometimes we would buy asparagus from the canteen and we’d have asparagus on toast with our tea or coffee (range fuel = kerosene or petrol mixed with oil).

MEALS

The meals in the mess were delicious – chicken, bacon, eggs and plenty of salad. The flying meals were terrible. To drink when flying we had tins of grapefruit juice which when flying at 10,000 got freezing cold. I remember one flying meal vividly. It was wrapped in toilet paper and consisted of a piece of bread on which an egg (fried) straight out of the pan was placed and another piece of bread was placed on top. When I came to eat it the egg was rigid with fat and the bread was curled with dryness. In contrast the meals in

the R.A.A.F mess were very ordinary but the R.A.A.F flying meals were always neatly packed and tasty.

SICK

I was not feeling too well and mentioned this to a Yank. He said "Are you drinking Coca Cola?" I replied that I was. I used to go each evening with my enamel mug. The canteen man would put Coca Cola syrup in my mug and fill it with soda from a soda fountain. This would cost me sixpence (5 cents). The Yank said "Well cut out the Coca Cola". I did and felt much better after 3 or 4 days. I liked and still like the taste of Coca Cola but I rarely drink it nowadays. In fact I rarely drank it after that Yank told me to stop it.



LIFE MEMBERSHIP ALBERT DAVID SIEBER

**Recommended by
Aviation Museum Youth Club**

Approved Division Council
24th September 2003

David Sieber initially joined the Association in 1946. He later rejoined after the completion of country teaching service in 1981. In the intervening years David has been a member of the Australia-Pacific Branch, Museum Volunteer Group and the Museum Branch. He also served on the Museum and Division Committees.

In 1993 David assisted by the late Ern Hanrahan conceived and founded the Museum Youth Club. The concept was to provide a basic aeronautical education to children between 8 and 18 years old in a social and friendly environment. This they felt would fulfil a need not currently catered for by other child and youth organisations.

David Sieber set out to gather sponsorship external to the Association so that less advantaged children could be included. Subsequently, these members became Association members.

Over time the Group grew from strength to strength and today consists of approximately 80 members including 5 to 6 adult leaders providing supervision and lecturing duties.

One method David initiated to increase Museum patronage and to promote the Youth Club was to plan and manage the school holiday activities for school children.

David Sieber with others was also instrumental in starting to gather the Associations oral history.

David Sieber continued to be actively involved in many facets of the Association and the Aviation Museum Youth Club until ill health forced him to reduce his services.

David was awarded the Association's Certificate of Merit in January 1998.