

## **John Charles Carter Steward**

22<sup>nd</sup> March 1926, Denmark W.A.

When W.W.2 broke out I was still a schoolboy attending the 100-pupil school at Denmark. My father was a lorry driver in the British Army in W.W.1. My mother and sisters and brother, living in central London endured countless air raids during the war. They migrated to Western Australia in 1924 with the Group Settlement Scheme and left many relatives still in England.

This previous experience of war was passed on to me along with the apprehension of the safety of the family members now faced with war again. Consequently the progress of the conflict was carefully followed by them on radio and in the newspapers with frequent discussions on the consequences. Letters from these family members kept them informed of the wartime conditions and their safety. Food parcels were sent on numerous occasions to assist them.

Leaving school in 1940 I was employed as a Telegraph Messenger at the Denmark Post Office, working the telephone switchboard and delivering telegrams. With Australia's involvement it was not long before the effects of war were felt with service personnel being killed or wounded in action. As a 14 year old it was my job to deliver these 'special' telegrams, requiring signature, to the wives and families of these casualties. To entrust this task to a 14 year old of advising a wife or mother their husband or son had been 'killed in action' was quite traumatic but that was the system in force at the time. Like it or not it was part of my duties.

I left Denmark in 1941 to join the W.A. Government Railways in Perth. Here the effects of the wartime restrictions were more noticeable with the 'blackout' regulations, shaded and minimal street lighting, hooded car headlights and all vehicles having a 2-inch wide white line painted round their extremities. Petrol, clothing, cigarettes, tea, sugar and many other commodities were rationed or in very short supply. Hundreds of service personnel from our Army, Navy, Air Force, Land Army and others were joined by men from New Zealand and United States in our streets every day.

In the Railway Marshalling Yards at Midland Junction where I was working there was much movement of military equipment and supplies in transit to various destinations. For a short period I was working in the Midland Junction Railway Workshop. In the fitting shop 'G' Class Locomotives were being overhauled and fitted out for transport to Darwin for military use.

Transferred to Tambellup in country W.A. in 1942 the war situation was not quite so apparent from the severe shortage of young men on the farms. It was not possible to muster sufficient numbers for a cricket or football team even and this was fairly general in all parts of the state.

I did a bit of training with the local Volunteer Defence Corps (V.D.C.) and did many shifts on the Volunteer Air Observers Corps (V.A.O.C.) post in the town. On reaching 17 years of age I enlisted in the Air Training Corps, doing lessons by correspondence with the intention of joining the R.A.A.F. at the age of 18 should the war still be in progress.

On 7<sup>th</sup> March 1944 I passed a test for entry into the R.A.A.F. for Air Crew Trainee. One month after my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1944, I was sworn in as a member of the R.A.A.F. given the number of 442110, and AC2 with the mustering of Trainee Air Crew. The Initial Training School was at what had been Clontarf Boys School on what was then the outer edge of the Perth Metropolitan area. In Course 53B, along with 30 others, mostly in the 18-20 age range we learned the basics of discipline and survival in the Armed Services. As Trainee Air Crew however the emphasis was testing our academic ability to cope with geometry for navigation, physics for atmosphere knowledge, aerodynamics, Air Force regulations and a few more things thrown in for good measure. It was fairly intensive training.

The routine of Air Crew Training was this Initial Training School of one month followed by an exam to decide what everyone was suited for and capable of further training. Top places to Pilots, Navigators, Wireless Air Gunners, Air Gunners and at the end of the line remuster to Ground Staff. Our exam results were that everyone failed!! It transpired that in anticipation of the war in Europe ending, Air Force personnel there would be returned to Australia, take up positions against the Japanese and so less need to train more men for these jobs. The pass level had been raised to achieve this. We were however to be given a second chance with a return to Clontarf three courses later. To fill in this time we were sent off to bases outside the Metro area. With others I was sent to the Elementary Flying Training School at Cunderdin. Here we were allocated any jobs to keep us busy, guard duties, mess duties, gardening and for a while I was on refuelling detail. From the edge of the airfield we watched the trainee pilots do their best to crash the Tiger Moths they were learning to fly then refuel them for another try.

At the end of June we went back to Clontarf I.T.S. to start again on Course 56A. The routine was the same, the exam even harder and the pass rate just one, as an Air Gunner. The rest of us remustered to Ground Staff. Along with others I elected to undertake the Technical Training Course.

To fit in with the time schedule for this course several of us were again 'farmed out' and this time to 10 Stores Depot at Merredin. Here we did as previously any jobs that needed to be done, guard and mess duties, load and unload stores and anything else that could be thought of by the Administration. It was here that I met my future wife. June Sampson (113316) was Clerk Stores at the Depot.

On 10<sup>th</sup> November 1944 I commenced Technical Training Course 496 in the Perth Technical College located on the Esplanade. Our barracks, 5 Service Training School were just across the road in an area now covered by the William Street Freeway ramps.

At the College we had both R.A.A.F. and civilian instructors some of whom had been brought back from retirement to help out. The tuition was very good and although all completely new to me I had no trouble in passing the exam on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1945. My results were such that I was considered suitable to take a course in Sydney to become an Instrument Repairer. This course was to train me to have full knowledge and the ability to service and repair all the instruments to enable any aircraft to fly safely.

On 20<sup>th</sup> February 1945 I travelled by train from Perth to Kalgoorlie, by 'Troop Train' with its three passenger coaches, cattle trucks for the overflow of other passengers, army tanks, trucks and other goods to South Australia then on normal passenger trains to Sydney, arriving 7 days later.

The headquarters and Barracks for No. 3 Service Training School were at Ultimo in close proximity to the Sydney Central Railway Station. The mess and quarters were in an old engineering workshop, a huge brick building with an overhead gantry crane still way up in the roof. Remaining houses were in use as offices, store rooms, Officers and N.C.O.'s messes and the parade ground an area cleared of buildings bounded by disused streets. However we trainees were billeted at the 'Astra Hotel' on the beach front at Bondi. Definitely not 4 star rating as the Hotel had been stripped bare of all furnishings and our palliasses were on the bare pine floors, the mess with very poor food 3 floors down in the old dining room. Each day we travelled by trams to the Ultimo Technical College for tuition by R.A.A.F. and civilian instructors. The course was three and a half months duration and very intensive as an equivalent course would have taken 3 years. We still had our guard duties to cope with as well as all our studies, physical training (swimming at Bondi in July is not recommended !!), parade ground drilling etc.

It so happened that I had done my guard duty stint at Ultimo when the war in Europe ended and V.E. Day was celebrated. That was an unforgettable experience, to be in Martin Place, Sydney, on that day. It was absolutely packed with cheering, celebrating people. At least half were service men and women from all the services including New Zealanders and Americans. All were swapping hats and bits of uniforms, kissing and being kissed by every female present. I still have the picture in my mind of a soldier dancing on the roof of a 'Loan Booth' in the middle of the street, falling off into the arms of the crowd and not touching the ground. Ticker tape was raining down from the office windows above forming a carpet on the street.

In contrast to this was being taken off course at the beginning of June and sent to Lithgow in the Blue Mountains. It is well documented how the 'wharfies' refused to load ships with supplies for our forces in the Islands and our servicemen had to do the job. Our contingent went to Lithgow to load up bombs for our Air Force from their storage point in the old railway tunnels as part of this exercise. These disused railway tunnels housing the stored bombs and other explosives were guarded by dogs hooked onto a long wire that went back inside the tunnel and outside into the steep sided tunnel entrances. The permanent guard camp was built as a mock town complete with butchers shop, store, hall, bakers and normal housing. From the air it looked like a very small hamlet in the bush as further bomb and explosive dumps were hidden under trees and nets. We were there for a week and it was freezing cold with ice forming on the tents overnight!!

Our course finished on 29<sup>th</sup> June and my posting was back to Western Australia to 85 Squadron at Pearce. It was a 'Spitfire' Squadron and had just been relocated from Maylands. Transport to W.A. was to be by rail but a group of R.A.A.F. were diverted and we joined the HMT Arundel Castle for the sea voyage Sydney to Fremantle. The ship was used to transport repatriated ex prisoners of war and service personnel from England via the Panama Canal to Sydney, Fremantle and then I presume returned almost empty to England. Our route was well South across the Bight as there was believed to be a Japanese submarine lurking there waiting for

passing ships. Luckily we did not encounter it.

I started my duties at 85 Squadron Pearce on 23<sup>rd</sup> July and found there was little to do as the aircraft were mostly in a 'standby' situation with the war gradually running down. Routine maintenance was all that was being done and aircraft operating time was virtually nil.

Two months later I was in the Hollywood Hospital following an acute appendix attack while on leave in Perth. The operation and complications kept me there for a month so that when I returned to Pearce it was to find that 85 Squadron had been disbanded and all personnel moved on. I was absorbed into the staff of Pearce on general duties until eventual discharge from the R.A.A.F. on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1946.

When the war in the Pacific did end I was in Perth for the celebrations of V.P. Day, marched in the parade and took part in the general feeling of gratitude the conflict had ceased. Life could return to normal for the thousands of service men and women and their families. Those who had lost family members in the conflict would always feel the loss of course. I was very thankful my brother, serving 4 years in the A.I.F. in the middle east and the islands, had survived but saddened by the death of a close cousin as a P.O.W. on the infamous Burma Railway.

There were no problems returning to civilian employment as my previous employer – W.A. Government Railways – was obliged to find a job for me. This occurred immediately to a similar position I was in prior to joining up thus picking up my life from a 2-year break.

My life in the R.A.A.F. was not the traumatic experience of so many others as I did not participate in any action at all. On joining the service there was the possibility of being in extreme action and danger volunteering as I did for Air Crew where life expectancy was inclined to be rather short. I could consider myself lucky to have missed out on that action and danger.

My education was broadened and I gained a maturity probably not possible without my service experience. Today, 60 years on, I look back on it as a brief interlude in my life but having an important bearing on my future. In this period I did meet my future wife and we celebrate 60 years of marriage in 2006, have two daughters, 5 grandchildren and 5 great grandchildren. In that alone my service in the R.A.A.F. was well worth it all.