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# ***Roseville to 'Prunesville': the ups and downs of a boy airman in England in World War II***

an address<sup>1</sup> to the Institute on 19 January 2010 by  
**Flight Lieutenant S. J. Doyle, RAAF (Retd)**



*Stuart Doyle was stationed in England serving with Bomber Command during World War II. Here, he shares some light-hearted and humorous recollections of his English sojourn.*

I was born in Roseville, a northern Sydney suburb, and was educated at Barker College, where I joined the cadets as a private and, after several years, rose to the rank of private. On one field exercise, the officer-in-charge said: "If north is here, and on my right hand I have east, what do I have on my left hand, Doyle?" I dutifully replied: "A wart, sir!" We were given Martini Henry rifles, which had been out-of-date in about 1890, but, not withstanding, were taught to pull them apart and put them back together blindfolded. Asked to name the main parts of the Martini, I replied: "My mother says one-third gin and two-thirds whisky, sir". I was known as the 'school fool'!

## **Enlistment in the Royal Australian Air Force**

In World War II, 760 from Roseville went to war, the majority of whom became airmen. I enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force and was posted to Bradfield Camp three times. The first time, my father was the adjutant; the second and third times, he was the commanding officer (CO). I had no friends among my Air Force colleagues with 'the old man' as CO, because we got all the rotten jobs.

While I was at Bradfield, there was an outbreak of hepatitis in the camp. The locals got a bit excited about this and made strong representations that airmen be not permitted on the local bus. On one occasion, with the bus about half-full of airmen and half of local residents, my friend Stan lay back in his seat, put his hands on his throat, and made coughing and spluttering noises. I announced: "The doctor thinks he has hepatitis". From then on, we had the bus to ourselves.

After training, I went on embarkation leave in Roseville. Now, Roseville was patriotic. In the cinema, you couldn't hear what was on the screen for the clashing of knitting needles – the ladies knitted 68,041 pairs of socks. The Roseville Patriotic Committee got the service personnel from the area, who were about to be embarked, up onto the stage at the cinema and made each of us a presentation consisting of a cake of

soap, a steel mirror, a roll of toilet paper and some razor blades – these were expected to last for three years! When we reached England and started flying, we ran out of toilet paper pretty quickly!

## **Travel to Europe**

We were shipped from Melbourne on the *Mariposa*, which had an American in charge, Colonel James Burr, FA. We thought we knew what 'FA' stood for, but it turned out to be Field Artillery. Leaving Melbourne, we turned left and wallowed around in the Pacific for about 10 weeks, before eventually reaching Panama.

During the voyage, they put a very large steel pipe across the back of the ship and on the top of the pipe they put lavatory pans. When the ship rolled, all the contents of this pipe ran down to the lower end and came up between the legs of the person enthroned there – great fun to watch. Bluey told us his dad said: "On a troop ship, the way to clean your clothes is to tie them to a rope, throw them over the stern and they will get washed in the wake". Bluey tried this, but after about 10 minutes, the rope parted and Bluey's gear drifted off into the Pacific.

The *Mariposa* went through the Panama Canal. With German submarines rampaging around the Caribbean, we made three attempts to get up to Boston. The third time, the captain put his hands over his eyes and simply said: "Let's go". We embarked on the *Queen Mary* in New York. There were 30 Australians and 12,000 Yanks – a very juvenile bunch from the United States backblocks. The Yanks eventually went to Sicily and Italy where we understand they were slaughtered. After 10 days, we reached Scotland.

## **Secondment to the Royal Air Force**

Greenock, Scotland, where we were initially located, was part of 'Prunesville', the home of Pilot Officer Percy Prune [see box next page]. Our first contact with the Royal Air Force (RAF) came when RAF be-medalled, veteran warrant officers took us in hand. They were determined to break the colonial spirit; and they did. On our first morning there, we were lying in bed, when a loud speaker played a tune signalling 'get out of bed'.

<sup>1</sup>Attended by 90 members and guests

After 10 minutes, having not moved, the hut door opened and in came a warrant officer who said: "All right, youse Australians, get out of bed. The whistle's went!" "Where's it gone, sir?"

## Pilot Officer Percy Prune

Percy Prune was an imaginary figure much loved by airmen serving with the RAF. His 'Pruneisms' appeared monthly from April 1941 in the Air Ministry's *TEE EMM*, the training memoranda circulated to RAF and Fleet Air Arm bases. They sought, in a light-hearted way, to improve efficiency in training and operations – they succeeded!

Prune is credited with creating much Air Force slang, including 'prang' (meaning an accident), 'wizard' (meaning splendid), and 'bind' (meaning a nuisance or bore). Similarly, 'gen' meant information, 'duff gen' was bad information and 'pukka gen' was good information.

Prune is best remembered for his Awards of 'The Most Highly Derogatory Order of the Irremovable Finger' with its dark black ribbon and light black stripe. It was bestowed on those who had made bad mistakes and the Awards were published in *TEE EMM*. The Irremovable Finger was awarded with one, two or three joints, depending on the gravity of the offence – hence Prune's somewhat impolite expression: "Pull your finger out". Landing at the wrong aerodrome earned one joint, landing with wheels up – two joints, and very serious, but often hilarious, errors – three joints.

Another interesting episode was a church parade. "Right-ho, this is a voluntary church parade and it is compulsory that youse go. I want the Church of England people over there, the Presbyterians over there and the Catholics down there. The rest of youse – pick up papers on the parade ground."

One day we were told to fall-in in "halphabetical horder". So, while we were shuffling around falling-in, one of the chaps, with cigarette in mouth and cap on the back of his head, was asked: "What is your name, sir." "Phelps" "Well get felled-in with the F's".

Flying started and we quickly learned not to fly under 500 feet over a convoy as the navy were a bit trigger-happy. Now, German flak bursts with black puffs of smoke, whereas Allied flak bursts with white puffs. We were stooging along in our old Wellington at about 300 feet, when all of a sudden the navy opened up and were pretty close. One of our crew said: "Gosh, we better get out of here." Another of the crew said: "It's all right. It's white. It's ours!"

When we returned from operations, the aircraft, most of which were four-engined, would go into a holding pattern around the aerodrome waiting to be called in to land. Any aircraft which had "sick" people on board and fired a red Very light was given immediate priority and, if an aircraft had only three engines

operating, it was given some priority. Over the ether came: "'S' Sugar to Control Tower; two engines, two engines; emergency; only two engines." The control tower immediately replied: "Roger; immediate landing; immediate landing; Runway 24". In came a Wellington – it only had two engines anyway!

## Leave

The Air Force, overall, was great fun – leave especially! On the first leave I had in London, I hopped on a tram. I was sitting there very proudly in my little Air Force uniform when up came the conductress and said: "I'd watch it, laddie. If you don't get that uniform off, the police will catch ya!" So, there I was, about to kill Germans and save England – oh how embarrassing!

On another leave, we went to High Wycombe, which had a lovely cathedral with a high steeple, on top of which was a big round ball, hollow inside to accommodate mediaeval sentries. We climbed the steeple and into the ball, which we started rocking. I suddenly had images of this round ball, with a crew of five, bouncing down through all the counties and ending up in the Channel. So we climbed back down the steeple into the bell room. On the bell room wall, servicemen had written their names and addresses. Shorty wrote his name and official address, 'AUSPO, London'<sup>2</sup>. We decided to give the bell one almighty clang, although bells were only supposed to be rung in the event of an invasion. It went 'bong' and about three hundred-weight of dried bat's poo and bell rope fell down on us. We decided that we had seen enough of High Wycombe!

Shorty later got a letter from a young girl from a regional industrial area who said she had heard there were some smashing dance halls in London. Of course, she also knew how to get a trip to Australia after the war! Shorty, however, was being true to his Women's Auxiliary Air Force girl on the squadron, a 'chop girl'. Girls who went courting with blokes who later were shot down and killed – they had 'got the chop' – became known in the RAF as a 'chop-girls' and, if this happened two or three times, the poor kids were treated like lepers.

Shorty, however, thought he could break the hoodoo, so he went out with this chop-girl, but things got a bit hot with the letter writer. We advised him to break it off. He asked me to write a letter so I wrote: "Dear Muriel Sprigs, With great sorrow, we regret to tell you that your pen pal, Shorty, has been shot down and killed". Sure enough, a fortnight later, that is what happened! So, we had put the mockers on him – and the chop-girl may have had an effect, too!

Another leave was in London when the Germans were sending over V-bombs. There was a hotel near Piccadilly Circus that had been recommended by other Australians, so I phoned up to book a room. The

<sup>2</sup>Australian Post Office, London, which handled the mail for all Australians in the European theatre.

English voice on the other end said: "Right-o, Aussie, bring her over." The V-bombs, however, ensured that we spent the whole night **under** the bed – a complete waste of a room and a leave.

The Australians played cricket against the Poms during the war a couple of times. We went down to watch a cricket match at Lords. The Australians all sat in the same area of the grandstand and an army chap took control of us. This chap loudly called all Australians who came into the ground over to join us. An Australian came into these hallowed grounds of Lords with a girl: "Come on up here Aussie and bring your crow with you."

When the weather was crook in England, flying was off and that was great. We were invited to visit a neighbouring squadron and played cricket in their mess – we broke every window. We decided to leave before their adjutant saw what we had done, only to find that all of our caps had disappeared. The Poms had taken them up to about 5000 feet and had jettisoned them all over Yorkshire and Lincolnshire.

It was our turn to strike back. On the other squadron, the crew members were accommodated in Nissan huts which were heated by pot-bellied stoves. We went over there, climbed onto a hut roof and tipped buckets of urine down the stove flues. The pot-bellied stoves exploded and there was a dreadful fog. When the victims rushed out, the remainder of our crew were waiting for them with knotted wet towels and gave them a good belting.

It was then their turn. We used to drive back at night from a pub in Lincoln with no lights on our vehicles, so we had to follow the white stripe up the centre of the road. Our neighbours blacked out a section of the white stripe, then led it off the road and up a tree. Our first lot crashed into the tree. At this point, the adjutants decided that they better call a truce before somebody was really hurt.

Then I met Irene, the sergeant in charge of the officers' mess. It would be kind to call Irene "plump", but she was fat – warm in winter and shady in summer. I

began to fear her attentions more than those of the Germans. I was losing weight and couldn't sleep, so it came as some relief when our crew was moved about 20 miles away to another aerodrome. But, not to be outdone, Irene followed us. She had nicked from the mess everything that was on short rations during the war and she made one enormous cake. Irene put the cake on the back of her bicycle, where it hung over like mudguards. Irene then hopped on the bicycle – she also hung over like mudguards – and pedalled against the north wind until she could present us with the cake. To put it nicely, it was bloody awful – one inedible, gelatinous mess. Three or four nights later, Irene's cake was jettisoned over Hamburg. You can just imagine this cake thundering down from 18,000 feet, going through the roof of a house, then through each floor, before ending up in the basement; and the Germans saying: "Mein Gott, the RAF haf got a secret veapon!"

### Home

My flying career came to an abrupt stop after that. I was eventually repatriated on the *Stratheden* and got back to Roseville via Yaralla Hospital, Concord. Roseville hadn't changed very much except that our fathers had. In adjoining houses, we now had Colonel Tarrent, Commander Stafford, Major Young and Group Captain Doyle. I didn't know whether to salute Major Young or get back to calling him Uncle Jim.

I have taken you the full circle – Roseville to Prunesville and Prunesville back to Roseville. Here endeth the lesson.

**The Author:** Stuart Doyle grew up in Roseville, New South Wales, and joined the Royal Australian Air Force in World War II. Initially, he qualified as an armourer specialising in bomb disposal, but transferred to air crew for a safer future only to be seconded to Bomber Command. He flew in Wellington bombers over occupied Europe and was soon in serious trouble. He was repatriated home and spent long spells in Concord's Yaralla Hospital. He joined local government and specialised in protocol and public relations, organising occasions such as Royal visits, very-important-person entertainment and the like, including military Freedom-of-Entry ceremonies. He participated in many community activities on Sydney's North Shore and was the area's first Civil Defence Controller. Stuart is a council member of the Royal Humane Society and has been a councillor of our Institute for 18 years. His community service has been recognised by the award of the Centenary Medal. [Photo of Stuart Doyle c. 1941: Stuart Doyle]



The first time he was in trouble: Stuart Doyle's Wellington bomber after taking heavy flak and crash landing in England [Photo: Stuart Doyle]