

A Gentleman and a Rascal



LAURA COLE

Autobiography
by
Brian Buzzard

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CHAPTER 23

Life as an ageing war veteran

Front Cover: I wish to thank artist Laura Cole for her kind permission to use the second painting from the triptych **Kimberley Grasses**.

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CHAPTER 23

Life as an ageing war veteran

I have been in pretty good health most of my life, although I knocked myself about a bit with self-inflicted wounds. I was staying with Elsie at Claremont, after I had been to see a Claremont Football Club training session. After training, I always had a few drinks with my old mates. The next morning after I got up, I felt rather giddy and then pains started in my chest. Elsie rang for an ambulance and they carted me off to Gairdner Hospital. Not long after they took my particulars, the same ambulance crew came into the hospital ward and carted me off again. I was too crook to ask what was happening. I finished up in Hollywood Hospital. I heard later that I had a veteran's card on me which entitled me to free treatment at the Hollywood Hospital. A couple of days later, I was taken to Royal Perth Hospital to have an Angiogram test. They took me back to Hollywood for the night, then back to Royal Perth Hospital where I was given a heart by-pass. They told me that three arteries were blocked. Ten days later I was sent back to Hollywood for recuperation. That was eleven years ago and I have not had any sign of head problems or angina since, "touch wood".

When I returned to Kintail Road, I lived there for another five years, until I grew tired of looking after a house on my own, particularly the garden. I had lovely fruit trees which needed spraying and I could never get someone to spray them when they needed it. I had muscat grapes, lemons all the year round, oranges, grapefruit, mandarin, a large passionfruit vine, a fig tree, a loquat, and two plum trees. My friends and neighbours made fig jam every year. I picked the figs mainly for them, and to return the favour they would make me a couple of bottles of fig jam, my favourite.

I decided to sell the old house which I had had for over thirty years, and look for a unit. My friend Elsie had a unit in Victoria Avenue in Claremont,

which was a large one on the sixth floor, and no garden. She also decided to sell and we each bought a unit, which were being built in Henley Street, Como. The TPI Memorial Estate was building equity owned units; 80% for the owner and 20% for them. We were both allocated a new unit each, which overlooked the Collier Golf Course. After about three years in her unit, Elsie took ill. After some time in and out of Mt Henry Hospital, she decided to sell the unit and move into the Hostel at the TPI Village which had just been built. She was allocated a lovely room overlooking the Como High School and some attractive trees and native bush.

The rooms are similar to a good sized motel room with your own bathroom, toilet, heating, and a small fridge. There is also room for a couple of lounge chairs and a good sized bed. You are allowed to have your own microwave if you do not feel like going down to the dining room. There is plenty of built in wardrobe and cupboard space and you have your own direct phone number.

The four Hostel houses have ten residents in each one, and one is reserved for Alzheimers patients. I am sure that you would not get any better hostel accommodation anywhere else in the world. Carers are on duty in each house from 7am to 9pm and there is a duty carer on all night to take care of any emergencies. All rooms are equipped with emergency buttons so that if you need assistance, there is someone there to help you any time, day or night. Elsie made the best of life in the hostel, but the pains she had all over her body got worse, and it was diagnosed by the medicos as arthritis. She had another stay in Mt Henry where one of the specialist doctors recommended that she be taken to the Royal Perth Hospital to have a scan. Many years ago she had a breast removed because of suspected cancer. After the operation she was given a clearance and she had to be checked every two years. It was suspected that the cancer may have gone into the lymph glands but a succession of xrays showed no sign of cancer. It was only after the Cat scan that they diagnosed cancer which had gone right through her spine and had been there for a few years. She had been on pain killing pills for years, which we now know to have been useless.

The poor woman had suffered excruciating pain for years. She was given morphine which eased the pain considerably. Even though the morphine eased the pain, the cancer had taken too much of a toll and she passed away ten days after being admitted to Royal Perth. Her two daughters were present when she died peacefully, during the early hours of the morning. I had lost another very dear friend.

In 1988, I started to get pains in my chest again and I was given an xray which showed that I had fluid on my lungs. I was given Lasix tablets which seemed to clear the fluid on the lungs. This went on and off and sometimes made my legs swell up with fluid. A larger dose of Lasix cleared it away and I was fine again. My doctor advised me to see a specialist at Hollywood Hospital in 1994. He confirmed that I had fluid on the lungs and told me he wanted me to do some tests. An appointment was made for 11am and I was told that I should be able to leave the hospital at 2pm. Terese took me to the hospital and was told to come back at 2pm to pick me up. I went into the surgery on time, and after what seemed to be about a half an hour. I began to feel very uncomfortable with the instrument down my throat and into my lungs, which was there for my doctor to have a good look. The doctor withdrew the instrument and I began to bring up blood. I felt very seedy and was taken back to the ward. A little while later a nurse said, "We have come to shift you". A couple of people just wheeled the whole bed out of the ward and into the corridor I looked up and saw a sign which said Palliative Care. I knew what that meant, because my sister had passed away there a few years previously I breathed a sigh of relief when we passed that sign and asked where I was going. The nurse replied, "The Intensive Care Ward".

Terese came to pick me up at 2pm as arranged and was told that I had been shifted to Intensive Care, so she rushed up there and found me bleeding and with an oxygen tube up my nose, trying to push oxygen into my lungs. When she asked what had happened to me, she was told that I had a haemorrhage in my lung and that I needed to be kept there for a few days. I had been given a calming down needle and was not quite

aware of what was going on, but I did not like the look on her face. I stayed in Intensive Care for a week and then was put back in the ward. I felt much better by then and the haemorrhage had cleared up. I was aware that I had an oxygen cannula in my nose twenty four hours a day, and I kept asking when I could get rid of it. Their reply was, "You will have to ask the doctor who did the job on you". He used to call on me every day, so I mentioned to him that I did not like the tubes up my nose. I asked him what was the score and when could I be discharged. He said, "I am afraid that you will have to have oxygen for the rest of your life and that he was waiting for an oxinator machine to be allocated to me, and a few bottles of oxygen which I would need if there was a power failure or strike." I told him that I did not like that life sentence and asked what had happened in the surgery. His reply was, "You had a haemorrhage." The one good thing was that he had snipped a bit out of my lungs which he had examined for positive or negative cancer. "You are fortunate that the tests proved to be negative" he said. I accepted that as some consolation. He told me then that my complaint was diagnosed as Interstitial Fibrosis of the lungs. I later asked him and several other doctors what had happened to me. The standard reply was, "It was one of those things".

I had to go back to Hollywood and have a test about once a month. That test required that I blow into tubes and balloons. Something came out on the computer which the doctor had a look at, and mostly after a few questions he would tell me that he was pleased with my condition. That blowing into the instruments used to really knock me about, and it took me a few hours to get over it. I put up with it until three years ago when I was at a Catalina Club annual luncheon where I had a yarn with Geoff Nylon who hails from Kojonup. Seeing me on oxygen he asked me why, so I told him of my experiences. He said that if I wanted to get another opinion on my complaint, he thought that he could arrange it. He contacted his daughter Sue Morey who has been at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital for twenty six years, and is in charge of the ward where the chest patients are treated. The Veteran's Affairs, who I cannot speak too highly of, had altered their policy and allowed ex- servicemen and women to be treated at any government or nominated hospital. Previously, we had only

been allowed to go to Hollywood unless they approved it elsewhere, and it could only be under specific circumstances.

Not having many happy memories of Hollywood, I felt quite justified in trying out Gairdner. Geoff said that Sue would contact me and have a yarn, and he asked her to get me an appointment with Dr Bill Musk. Sue made the appointment and Dr Musk turned out to be Professor Musk who is a top man in chest complaints. He arranged for me to have a blood test every six weeks or so, to check the oxygen content in my blood. He knows, and I do too, that they cannot cure me, but they can make the rest of my life as pleasant as possible. I can never repay them for their thoughtful kindness. At the age of eighty two I have had a good innings. I realise that I am not going to be here much longer, and I feel that it is good time to say thanks a lot to all who have helped me. The doctor who did the bronchoscopy operation did not intend to do me any harm, so I also forgive and forget the incident. Dr John Greenham has also been a good friend to me as well as a medico. I knew his father quite well when he was a Wing Commander Doctor in the RAAF and in charge of the airforce hospital at Nadzab in the centre of New Guinea, and afterwards when he practised in Midland. He was the President of the Legacy Branch in Midland, and Ted Hayes and myself were the two legatees in Toodyay which was part of the Northam Branch of Legacy.

Two years ago, it became too hard for me to keep the unit going, although / received wonderful help from the Silver Chain and Meals on Wheels. My good friends Eric Ahern, President of the TPI Association, and Frank Verdi the Vice-President, arranged for me to sell my unit and I moved into the Hostel at the Village. I hope to stay here until the end. I can manage to do most things for myself, such as showering. Breakfast is brought to me in my room, I go down to the dining room for lunch and have my evening meal in my room. Tea is on at 5pm when I have always been working or in the pub at that time, so I heat the meal up in my microwave and eat it after a couple of brandies and the news at 7.30pm. I do not seem to be able to handle the Swan lager or too many brandies anymore.

The Carers at the Hostel do really care and cannot do enough for you. I really give credit to these girls, because my general health has not deteriorated to any marked degree since I have been here and I owe my special thanks to Donna Cimetta, Christy Stone, Janice Craig-Maugher and the night duty sister Carmel Sturges.

Every weekend, one of my family takes me out for the day, and they call to see me often which is very gratifying to me. I sometimes go down to Terese and Keith's beach house at Peppermint Beach near Busselton for a few days. I have given up going out for just one night, because it is too much trouble for me to pack a bag, an oxygenator and oxygen bottles. Unfortunately I am in an electric wheelchair because it is an effort to walk more than ten yards. No one could have a more attentive and caring family.

Although I have been a member of the RSL and RAAF Association for over fifty years, I do not now take an active part, but every three months, the Catalina Club meets at Anzac House for a meeting, refreshments and a lunch. / also go out to the RAAF Bullcreek Club for a few functions with the Sunderland Flying Boat Club and the Liberator crews and ground staff reunion held once a year. Between my daughter Terese and my friend Ivan Pierce, who flew both Catalinas and Liberators for Qantas, and his wife Connie, there is always transport so that I do not miss any of the meetings.

I have only known Ivan for six to seven years. He lives quite close to me in Como. He had a very distinguished career in the RAAF and with Qantas Aitways during the war, he flew Avro Ansons out of Geraldton in the early part of the war and was engaged in the search for the Sydney when there. He was seconded to Qantas and was one of those who initiated non-stop flights in a Catalina Flying boat from the Swan River to Colombo, now Sri Lanka. He joined as a second officer and very soon after became a captain of the Catalina boat and crew. He did seventy six crossings to Colombo and back to Perth, mostly in Catalinas, but later in Liberators which had been convened to carry cargo and a few passengers. Those

flights on the Catalinas averaged about twenty nine to thirty hours non-stop but sometimes they were known to take thirty two hours. It was known as the flight of the double sunrise. They were great feats of skill and endurance. Ivan stayed with Qantas for a few years after the war and flew to Singapore and other destinations. But that meant that he had no home life so when his two sons arrived he decided to give it away and they bought a farm at Bridgetown. He was there for many years before buying a property in the Duranillan-Darkan area. His son Ian now controls the property and his other boy John is employed by the Agricultural Department of WA. Ivan took over from me as President of the Catalina Club when my lung problem was first discovered. He has become like a brother to me and visits me at least three times a week. He takes me to Catalina Club meetings and functions and does more for me than I can ever repay.

He is doing a great job as our President and along with Mick Michael, the ex-Perth Lord Mayor, Keith Mattingly and myself on a special committee whose function is to find a wartime Catalina and have it placed on the shore of Matilda Bay in the same area that the Americans operated their Catalinas during the war. Very few of the younger generation know or realise that the only defence of the whole of the WA coast was by the American Catalinas which were based on the Swan River and with advanced operational bases at Geraldton and Exmouth. They also had a large fleet of submarines and mother ships based in Fremantle and Exmouth. At that time our own troops, the AIF were still in the Middle East or arriving in Malaysia and Java to be slaughtered or taken as POW's by the Japanese. We all owe a great debt to the American Navy who came to our aid when we needed it. They were the only foreign troops to defend Western Australia apart from a few Dutch soldiers and airmen who were evacuated from Java and Sumatra, and a few British Airforce personnel who arrived later when the European war was over. It was mostly British Spitfire pilots who came to help us and they also did a wonderful job. The Spitfire was the only fighter built at that time which could outmatch the Japanese Zeroes.

Alex Flemming was also on Catalinas from the early days and became Captain of a Cat crew and clocked up many flying hours. I knew Alex when he was at Guildford Grammar and also when he owned, lived and ran Quobba and another station north of Carnarvon.

Another early bird on Cats was Don Dobson who I also knew before the war and met up with again at Rathmines and Cairns. Don is reputed to have flown more hours than any wireless air gunner, in the RAAF, over two thousand, four hundred hours.

Peter Balston who I knew when he was farming at Katanning also did a good job as a wireless air-gunner on Catalinas. Gill Thurston DFC, from Whyalkatchem and Atty Wearne DFC, of Midland, Fred Carden, Owen Jahansen, Geoff Nylon of Kojonup, Trevor Birch from Waddi Forest, who's wool brand is Catalina. John Baker, AMP State Manager, Ernie Henfry, a great footballer and coach, Lance Stedman are all West Australians who played their part as aircrew on Catalinas.

Another old friend of mine, Eddie Saleeba from Moora joined the AIF and became a prisoner of war in Japan. He was in bad condition when he was brought home by a Catalina which landed him at Crawley right near where he lived at Nedlands. His relatives had gone out to Perth Airport to meet him and never expected him to arrive by a flying boat.

A Catalina American airman Chuck Farkas, came back to Perth to be with his Australian wife Dorothy. Torrens Hawkes of Dianella was at Port Moresby Fred Robins, who was a magistrate at Albany, and his brother Eric, also played their part as navigators. Fred wrote a book "The Cat Has Nine Lives" which is interesting reading. Joyce Gibbs whose husband "Snow" flew in Cats is a Club stalwart.

As you can see, West Australians played their part in keeping the world, wonder-plane at that time, the Catalina, in the air in our fight for survival.

Four years ago we commenced our search to obtain a Catalina, and we wrote to Mr Clinton, the President of the United States for some help. He did not reply but handed our letter on to the US Navy who do not have a Catalina, because they had sold some and given some to museums in America. They made inquiries on our behalf and were able to tell us of several which were for sale privately by citizens or firms which had no further use for them. Because the American Navy was unable to help us, we formed a committee to seek support from the State and Federal Governments. Sir Francis Burt, who flew in England and Europe on flying boats, and who is a retired Chief Justice and Lieutenant Governor of WA, agreed to act as Patron.

I knew Francis Burt when he was a real rough and tough footballer for Guildford Grammar School in 1932. Christian Brother's College and Guildford played off for the grand final of the Alcock Cup. We won by a small margin. He is an Honorary Member and Patron of the WA Catalina Club. He was also well acquainted with the first American Catalina crews who arrived on the Swan in 1942, after they had been forced out of Manila in the Philippines, then Java and Broome, where they suffered more losses.

Another of our members, Mick Michael ex Lord Mayor of Perth was co-opted to the committee along with Ivan Pearce and humble me. Avis Koenig, who is our very competent secretary, joined the WAAF when they first commenced and became a qualified Radar operator. She was stationed in various RAAF stations including Geraldton. It was there she met her husband Vernon who was an American airman flying out of Matilda Bay, Geraldton and Exmouth Gulf in Catalinas.

They lived in America after the war until Vernon was appointed American Liaison Officer to Australia and to set up radio communications, with the experiments of the space age. He was responsible for the Australian sector of communications when they accomplished the epic operation of landing men on the Moon. When he retired they returned to Perth to live at Mt Nasura near Armadale. Unfortunately Avis lost Vernon who passed

away in 1988. His name and memory is on our honour roll at the Catalina section of the RAAF Musuem Bull Creek.

We then approached Keith Mattingly to take the job as Chairman. Keith had been appointed by our Federal and State Governments to take charge of our Australian 50th year anniversary, remembering the end of World War 2. I spoke to Sir Francis before approaching Keith, and he said, "You could not get a better man. " Sir Francis was right. Keith is a tireless worker and organiser and when he takes the bit in his mouth, he will not let up, just as a good racehorse does.

Keith took to the task immediately and with Sir Francis's approval he arranged for Greg Norman the golfer to become a patron also. We have received letters of support from Sir Charles Court, Sir James Cruthers, Sir Ernest Lee-Steere, the departments of CALM and Tourism, the University of WA, the Subiaco City Council, the Maritime Museum Fremantle, the RAAF, the RSL, Mount's Bay Sailing Club, the American Embassy, the Australian American Association and many others. People who were in the Sea Scouts Sailing Club at Pelican Point during the war and who were taken under the wings of the Americans helped the Americans in every way possible. Phillip Pental, MLA, our member for South Perth, arranged for a meeting of our committee with The Hon, Richard Court, MLA and he showed a great deal of interest. He has requested that we obtain firm quotes for aircraft from Canada and America, and if the quotes are realistic he would be prepared to send two or three people, including one from our committee to inspect one. I had the high honour of being asked to do the inspection, but I had to decline because I felt that I would be lucky to get as far as Sydney, let alone America or Canada.

Firm quotes are being sought with an option with reasonable time to arrange to get over there to do the inspection and negotiate. The chances of obtaining an old wartime Catalina for display on Crawley or Matilda Bay are improving every day. We have already received some donations to our cause without asking, among those are Jess Carpenter and my friends Marion and Bill Chitty.

It will be a proud day for the Catalina Club and its many friends and supporters when we see an old, wartime Cat land on the Swan and tie up to the buoy before being pulled ashore by a tractor, never to fly again. It will be dedicated to the American crews who manned the submarines and Catalinas and who lost their lives on our behalf. It will also be dedicated to the three hundred and twenty two Australian aircrew killed in Catalina operations mainly in the New Guinea area, and those who later flew out of Damin and West Bay which is at the tip of the Truscott Airbase, established in 1944, in the WA Kimberleys. Most of those men lie in unknown graves in the islands and seas, north of Australia.

Confirming arrangements for the Catalina memorial.

*Mr Gaetan Berlanger Canadian Aircraft Sales
939 Route 220
Bonescours (Quebec) Canada JOE : 140*

Dear Mr Berlanger.

The Catalina Club of Western Australia advises that funds for the desired Catalina are probably going to be available. So an updated quote is required for your WARTIME(WWI 1) PBY-5A. Include history of war service.

Price delivered to Perth should be firm for at least 30 days. I will send your quote to:

*Ivan Pierce, President
Catalina Club of West Australia
14 Abjornson St
Manning WA 6152 AUSTRALIA*

Quote should be broken down as follows:

- 1. the aircraft fully described*
- 2. blisters half open for gunner*
- 3. painting, blister installation*
- 4. delivery to Perth with complete details -fuel, oil, crew compensation & expenses, landing fees, permits*
- 5. spare parts, only for flight safety to Perth - no other spare parts are required*
- 6. other items you feel are required but not specified above*

*Very truly yours
John Hamilton...*

John Hamilton of Columbia USA: "I was one of the three crew members of the B-26 Marauder Martin that crashed into the sea north east of New Guinea who was picked up by RAAF Catalina A 24-21 on Easter Sunday, April 6 1942. What a magnificent experience it was to be one of their first customers, but, the island was "Kiriwina", not Woodlark as reported.

At the time my unit, the 19th Squadron of the 22nd Bomb group USAAF. was stationed at stock route airstrip, a satellite strip of Garbutt RAAF aerodrome. Thanks to our rescuers I soon recovered from the ordeal and went on to serve another three years in the SWPA, much of the time on loan to the RAAF as a liaison officer.

After 35 years of employment as a field engineer, I retired in 1987 and looked back on things I should have done but did not do. Among them was to make a serious attempt to locate and personally thank the RAAF Catalina crew who saved our lives.

For two years, I unsuccessfully searched for information in both Australia and the United States. It was only just prior to visiting Australia in late 1989 that I received the telephone number and address of Terry Duigan, the pilot of A24-21 on April 6 1942. While

staying in Cairns I made my first contact with him and requested the names and addresses of his crew on that day. In 1990, I attended the Catalina National Reunion at Nelson Bay, NSW, and had the extreme pleasure of presenting six of them with a Certificate of Thanks, signed by myself and the two other surviving members of my crew.