

# A Gentleman and a Rascal



Autobiography  
by  
**Brian Buzzard**

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## **CHAPTER 6**

### **Enlistment in the RAAF**

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

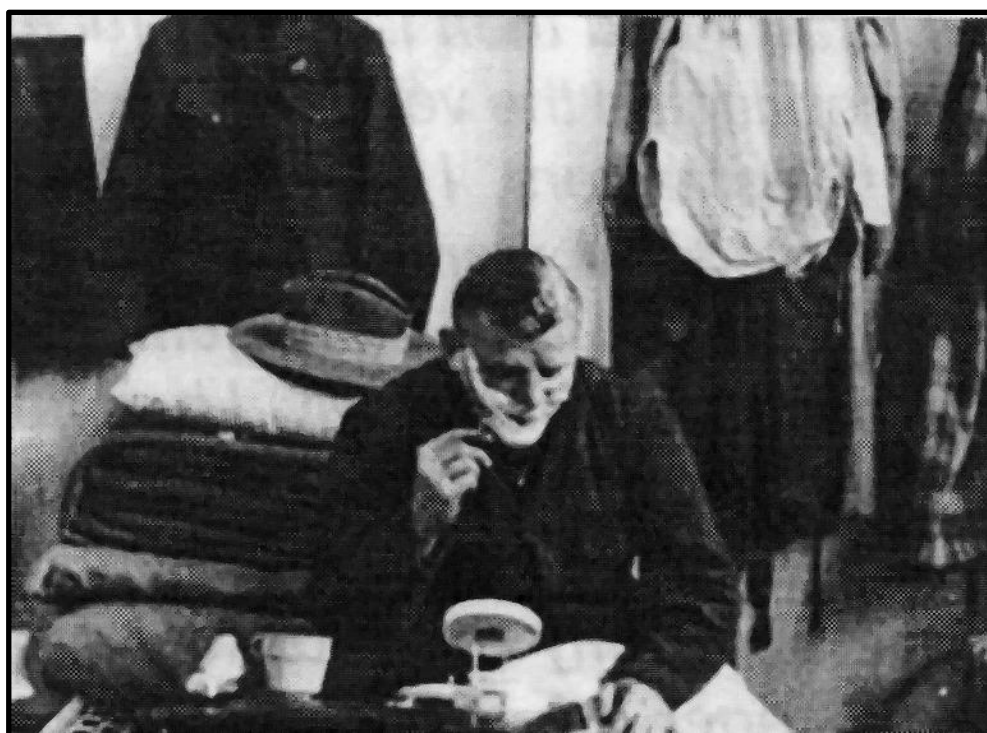
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## CHAPTER 6

### Enlistment in the RAAF

In 1939, while I was still at Bruce Rock, I enlisted in the RAAF soon after war had been declared. I was put on a waiting list and it was not until May, 1940 that I went away to do my training at Laverton and Point Cook. During that time I spent some time at the Melbourne Technical College, after which I returned to Point Cook, where I qualified as a wireless, air-gunner. (WAG's)



**Brian shaving.**

**"Just to show that we had to rough it during training at Point Cook".**

During our training we were sent to Laverton, then on to do part of our wireless training at the Melbourne Technical College. We were quartered at the Melbourne Show Grounds in the Horse Pavilion. We were taken to the school each day, including Sundays by truck. We then went on parade to see if anyone had jumped off the truck on the way in. On Sunday after the numbers were checked there was a religious service for all except Catholics and Jews. We were asked to

fall out and we were marched up to St Francis Church which I understand is the oldest Catholic church in Victoria. The first time about twenty Catholics fell out and marched to St Francis Church, where we were welcomed and after mass were given morning tea and coffee with all kinds of beaut cakes.

Naturally we told all our mates and the following Sunday the Catholic number grew to about fifty. That was not so bad, but the message really got around about our beautiful morning teas which were supplied by the ladies of the church committee. On the third Sunday, over one hundred, more than half the numbers on parade fell out and the CO soon woke up to the racket and sent us straight into the classroom. That was only for one week though. He told us on parade the next week that he had checked our records and he knew who were Catholics so we went back to our number of about twenty. The large numbers had embarrassed the Ladies Committee because there was not enough cakes to go around. It was humorous to see the non-Catholics who did not know when to kneel, or sit and stand, or genuflect and to give the responses. Just as well the priest only gives out a bread wafer and not wine, as they do in other religions. They would have had to get in a ten gallon keg to satisfy our mob.



**Brian in uniform.**

After finishing my training at Point Cook, a group of us were sent to Melbourne, RAAF Headquarters, where we waited until the Catalina Flying Boats arrived in Australia. When they arrived, we went as a group to RAAF Rathmines in New South Wales, near Newcastle, which had been set up as a flying-boat training base. Quite a few others who had completed the course were sent to 10 Squadron which was a RAAF flying-boat squadron in England. In June 1941, after a sixteen week course at Rathmines, where we learnt to convert to new wireless equipment and where we were trained to become sailors: rowing boats, sailing them and handling the crashboat in case of an emergency. That was one of the happiest times of my life but that was soon to end because everyone but me was sent to Port Moresby. I was kept at Rathmines as an instructor on aircraft radio and did not join my mates in Port Moresby until April, 1942. At that time, the war

had been going against us and the Japanese were advancing on all fronts. Scotty Allen was the man the RAAF needed to take charge of the Seaplane Training School at Rathmines. Apart from being a famous aviator he was the most qualified airman I have ever met. He had a first grade Pilot's Certificate and was a certified aircraft navigator, engineer and a radio operator. The only things he did not seem to like were our machine guns. I did not blame him as they were made in Belgium in 1919 and were being used in the 1941 war. We were later equipped with American .5 Browning machine guns. While Scotty was a wonderful chap in many ways, he had a rather quick temper and could not tolerate mistakes, which happen all the time when you are in training. That is what training is there for, to iron out your errors. One day while we were doing circuits and bumps, which teaches the pilots the differences between landing and takeoff with flying boats in comparison to land planes, the trainee pilot had to have a go at landing and take off on his own, after being shown how in a demonstration by Scotty. During the trainee pilot's practice Scotty sat next to the pilot and had a dual control so that he could take over if anything went wrong. This day something did go wrong and Scotty lost his cool.



Eighteen days of the six months I was instructing at Rathmines.  
Rather boring.

2-12-41	0955	S/L CHAPMAN	INSTRUCTION	RATHMINES - CIRCUITS & BUMP	1-50
3-12-41	1415	S/L CHAPMAN	BOMBING TEST	SWANSEA AREA	1-35
4-12-41	0815	S/L ALLAN	FERRY TRIP	RATHMINES - ROSE BAY	45
4-12-41	1000	S/L ALLAN	FERRY TRIP	ROSE BAY - RATHMINES	35
5-12-41	1505	S/L ALLAN	FERRY TRIP	RATHMINES - ROSE BAY	55
5-12-41	1705	P/O HIGGINS	FERRY TRIP	ROSE BAY - RATHMINES	50
6-12-41	0900	P/O BOLITHO	MOORING PRACTICE	RATHMINES - LOCAL	2-00
8-12-41	0905	P/O BOLITHO	CIRCUITS & BUMPS	RATHMINES - LOCAL	1-40
9-12-41	0935	S/L CHAPMAN	FERRY TRIP	RATHMINES - SYDNEY - RATHMINES	1-30
9-12-41	1640	S/L CHAPMAN	INSTRUCTIONAL	RATHMINES LOCAL	1-10
10-12-41	1900	S/L CHAPMAN	INSTRUCTIONAL	RATHMINES NEWCASTLE	2-30
10-12-41	2130	P/O HIGGINS	CIRCUITS & BUMPS	RATHMINES - LOCAL	1-00
10-12-41	2230	P/O BOLITHO	CIRCUITS & BUMPS	RATHMINES - LOCAL	1-05
11-12-41	0915	P/O HIGGINS	INSTRUCTIONAL	RATHMINES - LOCAL	2-35
12-12-41	1545	S/L CHAPMAN	GUNNERY	RATHMINES - ROSE BAY	55
12-12-41	1645	S/L CHAPMAN	GUNNERY	ROSE BAY - RATHMINES	50
13-12-41	1010	S/L CHAPMAN	CIRCUITS & BUMPS	RATHMINES - LOCAL	1-40
17-12-41	0825	S/L ALLEN	INSTRUCTIONAL	RATHMINES - 50 MILES RADIIUS	2-40
18-12-41	1030	S/L CHAPMAN	FERRY TRIP	RATHMINES - ROSE BAY	55
18-12-41	1220	S/L CHAPMAN	INSTRUCTIONAL	ROSE BAY - RATHMINES	45
18-12-41	1400	S/L ALLEN	CASH LEADINGS	RATHMINES - LOCAL	2-10
TOTAL TIME					128-45 14-40

My first flights in the RAAF  
Fairy Battles and Avro Anson

Date	Hour	Aircraft Type and No.	Pilot	Duty	REMARKS (including results of bombing, gunnery, exercises, etc.)	Flying Day
12 FEB						
3 FEB	1345	A/30-8	P/O BARKER	W/T EXERCISES	POINT COOK - ESSENDON	20M
3 FEB	1445	A/30-8	P/O BARKER	W/T EXERCISES	ESSENDON - BAGGUS MARSH - POINT COOK	1 hr.
7 FEB	0920	A/30-8	P/O BARKER	W/T EXERCISES	POINT COOK - GEELONG - POINT COOK	2 hrs.
13 FEB	1340	DH86 A3M	FLT. KINGSFORD-SMITH	W/T EXERCISES	POINT COOK - ESSENDON	30M
13 FEB	1445	DH86 A31-1	FLT. KINGSFORD-SMITH	W/T EXERCISES	INTERMEDIATE LANDINGS	4-5M
13 FEB	1600	DH86 A31-1	FLT. KINGSFORD-SMITH	W/T EXERCISES	ESSENDON - POINT COOK	20M
14 FEB	0915	ANSON A/39	FLT. WILSON	W/T EXERCISES	POINT COOK - WERIBEE - POINT COOK	1 05
19 FEB	0920	A/30-8	P/O BARKER	W/T EXERCISES	POINT COOK - WARRNAMBOOL - POINT COOK	2-05
20 FEB	1415	N 1236	L. A. C. GARRINGE	W/T EXERCISE	POINT COOK - BALLARAT - HAMILTON	
					CHAMPERDOWN - POINT COOK	2.55



The trainee pilot had to take off from the water, circle round after climbing to about seven hundred feet and then land the plane again, not stopping but touching down, settling on the water, then giving the throttles full bore and taking off again.

While all of this was going on I had three or four wireless operators doing a conversion course on the modern Bendix Radio which was totally different to the old English Marconi sets which they had trained on, and which were still being used in the Avro Ansons. It was quite easy to operate the new equipment but we also had to learn the basics of doing running repairs, and to generally know where to look for faults if they occurred. We carried a few spares and an auxiliary motor, but normally the power supply was from one of the engines. If you had your set attached to one motor and the motor went out of action for any reason, the set would have to be changed over to the other motor. During training, we had to do this all the time because the pilots were taught to fly and to land on one motor. The plane could not get off the water on one motor if it had any sort of a load, but while it was not common, landing on one motor was done. It was always a bit hair-raising, particularly at night with no flares and with only the plane's headlights.

Part of the wireless operator's job was to climb out of the nose hatch of the plane and stand on a narrow platform, about four inches wide, with a gaffe in one hand, hanging on to the hatch with the other while the pilot taxied the boat up to the buoy. This was not easy for the pilot or the wireless bloke to do in rough water, or with too much wind, because he could miss catching the buoy rope with the gaffe. The gaffe was six foot long with a solid wooden handle. It could get heavy on an outstretched arm and if it was dropped, the wireless operator had to jump into the lake, hang onto the buoy, curl up a few feet of rope and throw it to another bloke who stood on the precarious step on the bow to catch the thrown rope, because there was no spare gaffe. As soon as the rope was held between the plane and the buoy, the pilot would cut the engines and the noose would be

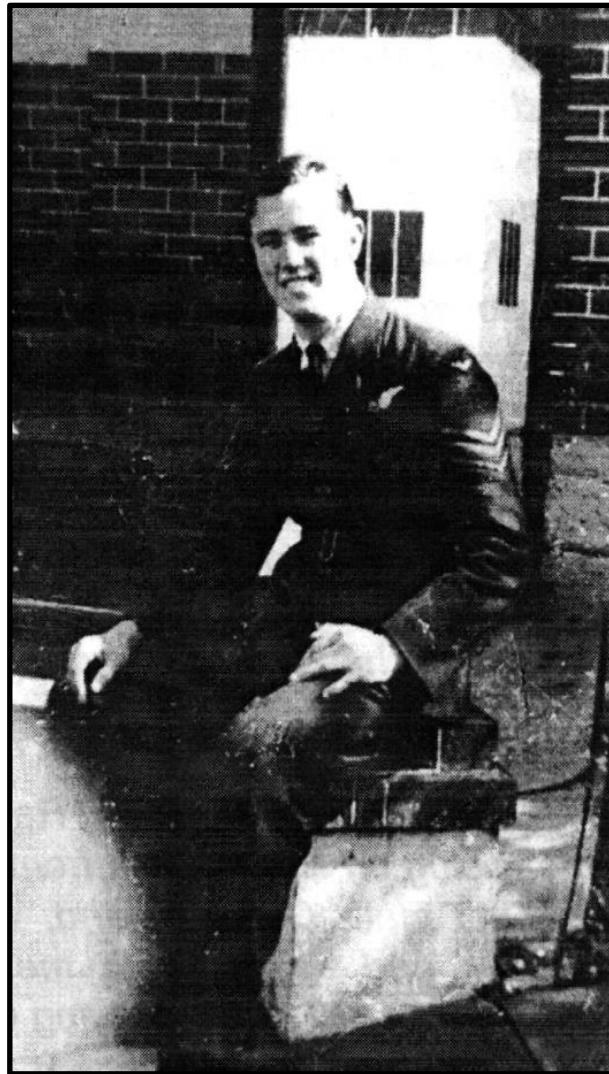
secured to the bollard on the nose of the plane. That was one cold, wet and dangerous job, so we tried very hard not to drop the gaffe. All of the radio chaps had to learn the job and nearly always, on the first go we would miss, but after some practice and one time in the water we became very efficient. If you missed it in training, it did not matter much because it gave the pilot more practice. All he had to do was turn the aircraft around in a semicircle, using his motors and rudder to get as close as he could to the buoy. That is not easy in a strong wind and rough water, and Lake Macquarie was inclined to get fairly rough now and again. More so than the Swan River because it had a two hundred and eighty mile circumference and a wide opening to the sea between Belmont and Swansea.

On the day in question I had a young trainee, who was small and very lightly built, doing the job for the first time. I did not know that Scotty had already decided that we had done enough for the day, and I had already sent the young chap out to do the job of mooring up. He missed the first time when he should have been able to grab it. Also, he was a bit frightened of the water because he could not swim, which we found out later. After a second attempt and another miss I could see that Scotty had lost his patience and his cool. He yelled out to me, "Brian, get that useless bugger off the bow and go and do the job yourself. I want to get ashore as I have a lot of work to do. That chap is as useless as tits on a bull. " I had to call the trainee in and do the job myself. We persevered with the skinny young chap and he became a hell of a good radio man. We used a launch to teach him how to grapple with the rope on the buoy and although he was of small build and strength, once he got the knack of it he became quite proficient. We also taught him to swim. He completed nearly two thousand hours on Cats, mostly up north on operations, so he was well worth persevering with. I reminded old Scotty later about his "tits on a bull" remark and told him how the lad had come good. He only grunted.

After he had trained a large number of pilots Scotty was sent to Lake Boga, just off the Murray River near Swan Hill, where the RAAF had built a flying boat repair depot. He was appointed Commanding Officer and was just the man for the job. He supervised the engine changes and repairs, and flight tested every plane that came out of the base. Lake Boga had such a good reputation that the American Catalinas based on the Swan River flew direct across country to Boga for major overhauls.

After a while, instructing started to get to me like it did to Scotty. I became rather intolerant, especially after a few new lads on the circuits and bumps got airsick, sometimes all over the wireless and the instructor. I paraded to the CO and asked him to get me out of the dead-end job and to send me up north to rejoin my mates, who were in Port Moresby doing what they called "Cook's Tours. " They were spending a week or so at Kavieng, New Britain, Rabaul, Lae, the Solomons and down to Noumea patrolling the oceans. The people in the towns and the plantation owners on the various islands were most hospitable to the crews and it really was a first class "Cook's Tours". The CO at Rathmines contacted Air Board with my request, but by the time I got the reply and was sent north, the "Cook's Tours" were over because the Japanese had upset the applecart by declaring war.

During the time that I was an instructor at Rathmines, a Catalina went missing on a ferry-flight from Suva to Rathmines. My best mate Geoff Ireland, who had joined up, left WA, and trained with me, was a wireless operator in the crew of the missing Catalina. I was the wireless operator on the aircraft that was sent out to Noumea to search for them. The only trace we could find was a fairly large oil slick. We had to abandon the search after a few days because we could not find any other debris and there was no sign of the life boats.



**Geoff Ireland W.A.G.**

**"I left W.A., trained and joined the same squadron with him in Port Moresby. He was lost on a flight from Suva to Sydney while ferrying Catalinas."**

Geoffs death did not affect me greatly at that time because I had become accustomed to losing a mate quite often. However, a few months ago the Catalina Club made a request in the "Can You Help?" column of the West Australian. The relatives of the WA lads who had lost their lives on Catalinas were asked to send or deliver a postcard sized photo of them, preferably in uniform, to the Catalina Club. We had just organised a display section and built quite a few new showcases and cabinets at the RAAF Museum at Bullcreek WA, including an honour board for all of the WA men and women who

served. Those who lost their lives are marked with an asterisk. The Catalina Club has been allocated a section at the museum to display memorabilia, books, Catalina parts, log books, badges and other items of interest. I had a call from Geoff Ireland's nephew who said that he would bring a photo of Geoff around to me because he remembered that I was one of Geoff's wartime mates. He gave me a beautiful photo of him, but it was too much for me and it was only then that I shed a tear in his memory. We have managed at last to get most of our lost mate's photos, but after that initial look at Geoff's photo the others did not affect me.

A great friend of mine, Bernie Harte met me when we were doing our wireless operator training at Point Cook. We were sent to Rathmines together to do the flying boat conversion course, and then later we were both attached to 20 Squadron stationed at Port Moresby. Bernie had been a radio technician and announcer at Kingaroy, Queensland, Joe and Flo Bjelke Peterson country.

He was a great help to me in explaining the workings of a radio transmitter receiver. I feel that I would never have passed the ten month, wireless course exams without his help to qualify as a wireless operator in air or ground duties. The course we did in the 1940's was the same as the permanent airforce standard and was not easy. The course was considerably shortened on the arrival of the Empire Air Scheme. We had to learn a lot of the theory of radio and electronics, which was quite unnecessary to fight a war.

I was also best man at Bernie's wedding before he went to New Guinea and we have kept our friendship alive ever since. He came to Perth and stayed with me in 1994 so that he could attend our International Catalina reunion, which was held in Perth at that time. His daughter has also become a great friend of the family. Like myself, Bernie lost his wife at an early age. His family are wonderfully considerate and attentive to him, the same as mine are.

Bernie kept up with his work on radio and TV and also began writing articles as a free-lance correspondent for several papers. He had a very good record in the RAAF. He went on many dangerous operations and is very lucky to be still with us.

Two of his stories tells of some of the difficulties he encountered.

### *Timor*

*"Five months earlier - in August 1942 - we flew across to Portuguese Timor, then occupied by the Japanese. Our mission was to bring out 13 sick and wounded Australians, being members of a platoon of commandos of an Independent Company, AIF. We arrived at the rendezvous at dusk, suitably timed not to disturb the Nips unnecessarily.*

*Our big problem was to sit our Catalina on the open sea on the edge of the surf. The next problem was to stop her from being washed ashore, knowing that one light anchor would not hold, so we took a couple with us, plus a few drogues. Using a couple of rubber duckies we took a long rope ashore and with the ready co-operation of able-bodied independents fastened it to a coconut tree. The rope then became our lifeline.*

*For the next six hours or so, taking it in turns, we worked our way along the rope in our rubber duckies carrying supplies ashore for the commandoes moving into Dutch Timor. Each parcel had been wrapped in an oilskin groundsheet, to keep the water out. Just as the last roll of the surf dashed onto the beach, willing helpers would grab us as the ducky turned turtle spilling its contents.*

*On the return journey to the Cat we would take one passenger at a time avoiding the huge float coming down on our head, as we manoeuvred our way along the rope. We had to be off the*



water before dawn to avoid the regular early morning Japanese coast patrol by Zero fighters. But luck was against us. As dawn broke, we could only get one engine going, which meant going round in circles until we dropped anchors again, standing out to sea. Things were getting a bit sticky what with 13 soldiers entombed in our Cat, avoiding being washed ashore, and still no second engine.

For some unknown reason, the regular patrol was cancelled that morning, enabling us to have a gander at the faulty engine. As we did not have a full crew on this operation, so as to keep the weight down, working on the faulty engine was a bit of a problem. We surmised, correctly, that the starter motor on the dead engine had been burnt out, pointing to a hand start. In other words cranking it up with a handle just like the old days with cars, except that our crank handle was more than four feet in length. To turn over a huge twin-row aero engine was almost impossible for one man - being me. However the officer in charge of the contingent came to my rescue. For the next hour or so we cranked away until, ten minutes after noon, the engine burst into life. Just before the engine came alive, I well recall the skipper, Gill Thurston, standing on the top of the pilots cabin wringing his hands at the same time smiling. "Bernie, " he said. "This is the most unhappiest day of my life!"

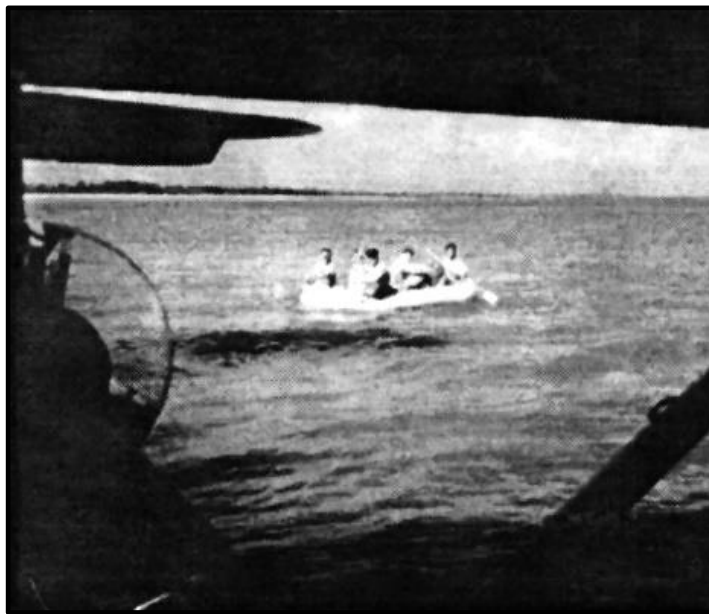
"Well, this is a nice time to tell me." was my quick, exasperated retort. The skipper's comment must have spurred me on. Minutes later we were taxiing for take off, but not before I had a few qualms about staying on board. As soon as the engine came good the blast nearly blew me off the mainplane. However there was a hand grip just below the engine cowling, which I grabbed and slewed down toward the open blister on my belly, while someone held my ankles. It was now 12.20 and thank goodness, we were heading for a take off. A few hours

*later we were back in Darwin Harbour. I often wondered what happened to those commandoes. Perhaps not many would be around today to relate their experience of being entombed in a Catalina with a dead engine.*

*A few days later we flew back to the Darwin area to pick up a Kittyhawk pilot who had come down on the beach at Anson Bay. Some years later someone told me it was Flying Officer John Gorton who was to become our Prime Minister - but I never got around to checking the pilot's identity...*

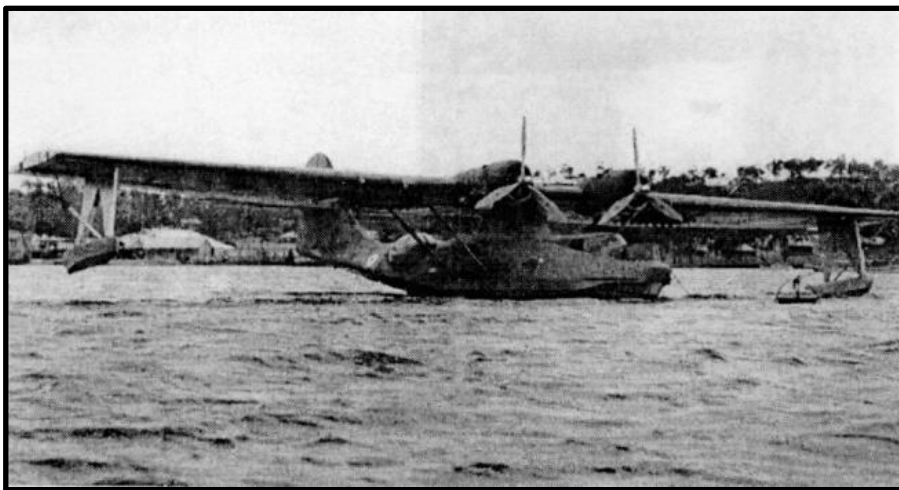
*Bernard Harte*

My friend Bernard has not given the full story he played in getting the engine going. It is typical of him because he is a very modest person. Jack Dewhurst, who was the engineer-gunner on the job and with whom I flew in the same crew later, gave me the facts. He said that if it had not been for Bemie they would never have gotten the aircraft off the water. When the motor would not go after cranking, Bernie suggested to the skipper that he take the starter motor off the engine that was going and put it in to the crook engine. You can imagine what a job that would have been, climbing out on the wing to work on the motors while the aircraft was going around in circles on a choppy sea. The crew had tied a rope around him while he made the exchange. Taking off the useless motor was no trouble, but taking the starter motor off a hot, running engine is no joke. He put the screws in his mouth during the job. If he had dropped one in the sea they would have had to join the AIF company.



**Under command of our skipper, Gil Thurston and my attempts at steering we worked our way ashore to pick up the downed pilot.**

He fitted the starter motor to the dead engine and at first crank, away it went. Any seaman would understand what that job would be like in a choppy sea. It took him nearly two hours to do the job and with a full complement of sick and wounded on board it is not hard to imagine what they all went through, waiting for the Zero patrol to come along and shoot them up on the water. It can be as hot as hell in a Catalina on the water for any length of time, especially in the tropics. I often wonder if there are any of the AIF men still alive who remember the incident and the torture that they must have gone through.



**A24-10, perhaps the most enduring Cat of all, after surviving many missions and several crashes. Still fly worthy in 1947.**

*"The Cat and the Jesus Box"*

*The Jesus Box arrived out of the blue - as it were, toward the end of 1941, a few weeks before the Japanese kicked off the Pacific War, if I recall. We were absolutely astounded when we first saw it sitting in a rack alongside the radio compartment in our Catalina Flying Boat 1424-10. After twiddling a few knobs and having a gander at the screen and the blips it came up during a test run over Port Moresby, we decided this was just the "ants pants" for our type of work - work which involved long reconnaissance patrols over the Pacific Ocean and*

*scattered islands, searching for German raiders and subs, plus anything on the water that looked suspicious.*

*Now with the Jesus box we could see ahead and in the dark. The real name for this wonder gadget was ASV, meaning Air Surface Vessel, but we decided to call it the Jesus Box, with the hope that Jesus would be on our side. In my case he certainly was. Otherwise I would not be writing this narrative. Months after the Jesus Box had earned its salt, technological developments in this field were developing at such a rapid pace that a new name was sought. So the term radar was born and entered into our vocabulary.*

*Bernard Harte*

After returning from Port Moresby and being at Cairns, I was granted three weeks leave and returned to Perth by train. It was to be my only leave in Western Australia in the six years I served in the airforce. Millar and Jack Bailey, Marjory's husband, were on leave at the same time. John was stationed at Geraldton and could not get down to see us. At that time, mum had her own maternity hospital in South Perth, which had been financed by a couple of friends who were doctors. I remember staying there most of the time, sleeping in the labour ward when it was not in use. I attended Jill's christening at the Catholic church in South Perth. I was godfather and the ceremony was conducted by the Rev. Monseigneur McMahon. I was given a train ticket in Perth to travel from Perth back to Cairns. The trip took ten nights. We did not have "sleepers" and were fed by the train kitchen, which was controlled by the army. I was very pleased to get to Cairns. It was a long, very uncomfortable and boring trip. From Cairns, I caught a Catalina to Pott Moresby.