Prisoner # 21

JOTO NAI

捕虜
上等無い

John Chisholm Graham

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Dedication

Dedicated to my wife Pamela Lilian Graham

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MW

About the title

Following the surrender of British and allied forces to the Japanese on Xmas day 1941, Jack found himself imprisoned in Sham Shui Po Barracks in Hong Kong along with thousands of British, Canadian, Indian and Dutch military personnel. Right from the start he felt a fierce reluctance to acknowledge defeat and involved himself in several unsuccessful escape attempts. As time went on, he found it difficult to conceal the fact that he had little respect for the Japanese Guards and the Japanese soldier in general. Inevitably, through his failure to salute and acknowledge the supposed superiority of his captors, he was soon in trouble with the Japanese who severely punished his belligerent behaviour. It was not surprising therefore, that some time later, on arrival in Japan in September, 1943 he found that his reputation had already preceded him. During the first parade at Oeyama prison camp and in Jack's own words

"Through the interpreter, the Camp Commandant let it be known, that he was a very strict disciplinarian - as if we had expected anything else - and he already had his eye on certain people. He then read out three numbers one of which, no 21, was mine. Together with the other two villains, I had to stand out in front for the Camp Commandant, followed by the guard, to approach and have a good look at us. Finally he said, "Ni juu ichi ban, joto nai." As this translates as, "No. 21, no good," I thought it was a hell of a way to start out with a new batch of daps! Apparently my misdeeds at Sham Shui Po were catching up with me!"

Thus the title "Prisoner #21, joto nai"

About the Author

John Chisholm Graham was born in Currie, King Island, to parents Thomas and Eleanor Graham, on November 1, 1919. Thomas ran the local King Island Cooperative whilst Eleanor ran the home. John came from a loving home and enjoyed life on the island.

John attended Currie State School, where he received a Grade 7 Merit Certificate, and later reached Sub-Intermediate standard at Swan Hill High School in 1934.

During World War II, John served in the RAAF as a Wireless Air Gunner. After being posted initially to 36 Squadron based in Singapore, he was posted to RAF Kai Tak in Hong Kong. He arrived there in November 1941; just before the Japanese invasion forces attacked Hong Kong on December 8, destroying the RAF aircraft on the ground. After an emergency relocation to Hong Kong Island along

with other members of the British, Canadian, Indian and Chinese Garrison, he was involved in eight days of fierce fighting against the Japanese invaders and was captured after the Garrison eventually surrendered. It was Xmas Day, 1941. He then spent the next four years as a prisoner of the Japanese in prison camps in Sham Shui Po, Hong Kong, and Oeyama, Japan.

John returned to Australia in 1945 to his parents, brother Jim, and sisters, Molly and Margaret. He later met Pamela Lilian Porter, to whom he was married for 50 years. Pam died aged 74 in 1997.

Upon returning from Japan and re-building his life, he furthered his education by completing a Mechanical and Electrical Engineering Diploma, at Swinburne Technical College from 1947-1951. He later went on to work for Richardsons Pacific for 35 years as National Sales Manager, the last five years acting as Research Engineer in acoustics and low velocity air conditioning. He retired at age 73.

John enjoyed many hobbies over the years. His interests included sailing, carpentry, reading, and writing about his life experiences. He wrote *Prisoner #21 joto nai* intermittently over a ten year period, completing it in late 2005.

John recently moved from the family home in Box Hill North, that he hand-built with Pam in 1946, into Lynden Nursing home in Camberwell. On 12 March 2009, he passed away quietly in his sleep at age 89 years. He leaves four children and thirteen grandchildren, and recently became a great grandfather.

They took everything the enemy
could throw at them. They survived war
and they survived hell.

We hope we will never have to face again what they went through;
but should the need arise, we hope we will be blessed with another such generation of men.

Greg Michno
author of
Death on the Hellships

Sergeant John Chisholm Graham

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Foreword

Prisoner 21 joto nai

This is a story of one young man's experience of War. It is also a story of survival against overwhelming odds.

Following the Japanese attack on Hong Kong on December 7 1941 a little more than a month after Sergeant John Graham had arrived at his new posting fresh from recruit aircrew training with the RAAF in Australia, he found himself fighting together with RAF personnel and a relatively inexperienced Canadian Regiment against battle hardened Japanese Infantry in the rugged scrublands of Hong Kong Island. By using whatever weapons were available together with WWI vintage Lewis guns salvaged from their Wildebeeste aircraft that had been all but destroyed in the Japanese attack, they were able to form an effective combat team that provided gritty resistance to the Japanese advance for almost a week. Inevitably though, the British Garrison was ordered to surrender on Xmas day and Jack

and his group were reluctantly forced to do likewise. Soon afterwards they were imprisoned in Sham Shui Po Barracks by their Japanese captors.

Apart from enduring the crippling inadequacy of the food and sanitation provided in WWII Japanese prison camps and the resulting infectious and deficiency diseases such as Dysentery, Bern-Berri and Pellagra that eventually killed so many prisoners, they also had to deal with cruel punishment meted out by prison guards for relatively minor infringements. Jack's reluctance to salute his Japanese captors brought him very quickly into contact with Sergeant Inouye Kanao, alias "Slap Happy", a notoriously cruel Japanese—Canadian interpreter whose treatment of prisoners was considered so severe that he was executed for war crimes soon after war's end in 1947. Far from showing remorse for his war-time conduct, it is said that he went to his death shouting Bonzaii!

After spending more than 18 months at Sham Shui Po, Jack learned that he was to be part of a draft of prisoners to be shipped to Japan. Accordingly, on August 15, 1943, 500 men left Hong Kong aboard the "Manryu Maru" bound for Osaka.

Conditions on board were appalling on the voyage and many of the men, even those who were ill, were confined in holds below deck without adequate ventilation or sanitation and very little food or rice. The term "hellship" aptly sums up the conditions on these ships. As if this were not enough, the ever present threat posed by marauding US submarines was always on their minds and for good reason, since the "Lisbon Maru" carrying a draft of prisoners from Hong Kong

had been sunk recently by the submarine USS Grouper with the loss of 843 of the 1800 POW's on board.

Surprisingly, despite frequent submarine scares and the appalling conditions in the holds, the Manryu Maru finally arrived in Osaka after a stopover in Taipei, without the loss of a single life. This was perhaps even more surprising when one considers that the maru codes (used by the Japanese Merchant Marine for encrypting radio messages) had been broken early in 1943 by the Americans. As a result the noon-time position and type of cargo carried by virtually all Japanese convoy vessels were available through radio intercepts to US submarine commanders, making the marus easy targets to find and destroy in an otherwise vast ocean.

After travelling by rail from Osaka, Jack, accompanied by other British prisoners, arrived at Oeyama prison camp in early September 1943 and was put to work in a nearby Nickel refining plant. In many ways the experience in Japan was even worse than in Hong Kong. The bitter cold of the winters, the dwindling food supplies as Japan's Merchant Marine was slowly crushed by the American submarine fleet, the continuing cruelty of the Japanese guards and as if that were not enough several senior NCO prisoners, Sergeant John H Harvey (RAMC), Warrant Officer Henry L "Dixie" Dean (RE) and Warrant Officer Marcus C Tugby (WG) decided to collaborate with the Japanese making life hell for their fellow prisoners. After war's end in 1947, Harvey and Tugby had to face a court martial convened in Ottawa on allegations that they had not only collaborated with the Japanese by improper fraternising but they had also ill-treated fellow prisoners.

If the behaviour of some prisoners bordered on treason, at least this contrasted markedly with the heroic work done by the medical orderlies (Corporal "Taffy" Edmunds) and doctors who struggled throughout the war to "bring the men home". At Oeyama they were lucky to have the services of Lieutenant Commander Sam Stening of the ill-fated HMAS Perth who almost certainly saved Jack's life by using improvised surgical methods at the Oeyama camp. In fact, when Jack saw Sam Stening after the war (he was then a very successful Paediatrician at the Crown Street Hospital in Sydney) he ventured the opinion that at the time he had last seen Jack in Oeyama in 1943, he had not expected that he would survive the war.

But survive he did, despite a crippling work load in the nearby Nickel mine, despite the desperately cold winter of 1943/44 in Japan (one of the worst in 25 years) and despite weighing no more than 70 pounds in August 1945 when Oeyama was liberated by American troops and Jack was sent home. Just how close to death he came is reflected in the widely held current belief that had the war continued for another year none of the POWs imprisoned on the home islands of Japan at that time would have survived. As it stood at the end of hostilities, more than a third of those imprisoned during the war would never return home.

Mal Wilkinson

Judi Wilkinson (nee Graham) April, 2011

1

War Breaks Out

When war broke out in September 1939, the enthusiasm that had marked the early days of the Great War repeated itself in the younger generation, which is a sad commentary on the fragility of human memories. To those of my age group, it was an adventure and our principal concern was that it would all be over before we got there. What was going through the minds of my parents', and others of their generation who had experienced the reality of war, I couldn't imagine then, although I do now.

I was eager to enlist, but at that time on King Island the only service you could join was the Army. But my ambition was to be a pilot – preferably a fighter pilot. I wanted to rush away to Melbourne to join the Air Force, but Dad insisted that I wait until my leave was due after Christmas. This was an edict with which I had to comply, although I did so with not the best of grace. I was convinced that somehow peace

would eventuate and spoil my plans. Brother Jim was also anxious to join up; but being under age, he had no show with Mum and Dad. They considered that providing one son was enough.

Eventually, Christmas came and went, and I could go to Melbourne and enlist. There had been many items in the papers advising the educational requirements for the various services. For aircrew, they called for a minimum of an Intermediate Certificate. As I didn't have that, my plan was to join the ground staff, hoping to transfer to aircrew once I was sworn in.

I reported to the recruiting depot in the *Ball and Welch* building on Flinders Street, along with scores of others. There were two desks where basic details were recorded before the medical inspection; one was marked 'Ground Staff' and the other, 'Air Crew'. I joined the queue at the first table; and when I reached it, I had a problem with the first question asked, "What do you want to be trained as?"

The Sergeant taking my particulars ran through the various trades to check on previous experience, and as I had to repeatedly answer "No" to queries on experience in wireless, engines, airframes, et cetera. He eventually said, "Why don't you try aircrew?" Surprised, I said I hadn't thought of that, and continued, "Yes, I do, but as I haven't got my Intermediate Certificate, I thought I would join the ground-staff and then transfer."

He laughed and said, "Once you join the ground-staff, that's where you will stay. Why don't you try for aircrew, if that is where you really want to be? They won't eat you, you know! Things are not as rigid as the papers say – we can't

afford to pick and choose too much. You might be lucky." I thanked him and went across to the other table where a Flight Lieutenant was processing applications.

Keeping my fingers crossed and feeling very much a pretender, I waited for him to speak. The Flight Lieutenant, looking rather bored with it all, reached for a form and began:

"Full Name?"
"Date of Birth?"
"Place Of Birth?" et cetera, until he came to the question I was dreading, "Educational qualifications?"

I mumbled, "Sub-Intermediate," expecting him to say, "Sorry. Intermediate is the minimum requirement".

To my relief, and surprise, he merely raised an eyebrow and continued with his questions. Finally, he passed the form over to me and said, "Check this and sign where I've marked a cross".

I signed, passed the form back to him and said with some trepidation, "Does this mean I am accepted for aircrew?"

Where upon he laughed and said, "Yes, provided you pass the medical. Take this form and go through to the M.O's."

The rest passed like a dream. I can remember having my height and weight measured, my chest sounded, and the other usual tests that doctors do, plus a few new ones. These included checking for colour blindness by using numbers hidden amongst coloured patterns; being spun in a chair – presumably to test for equilibrium – and a test that required you to blow into a tube and hold up a column of mercury for a definite time. By this time, I was quite relaxed and only

blew until it seemed somewhat uncomfortable, which did not satisfy the doctor at all.

"Is that the best you can do?" he asked.
"Oh, I can do better than that, I expect; how long do I have to hold it?" I responded.
"If you can't manage more than two minutes," he said, "you won't be much use to us."

I then blew until I was nearly purple in the face, and scored two and a half minutes. He said, "Okay, go back to the front desk and wait for your name to be called."

I waited out the front for what seemed like ages, but was probably only about five minutes. I was then called up to another desk by a second officer. "Congratulations Mr Graham, he said, you have been accepted for aircrew training under the Empire Air Training Scheme and have been placed on the Reserve. In a few days, you will receive the first of a series of correspondence lessons covering elementary air navigation. Return these as soon as you have worked through them and completed the problems, and further lessons will be sent to you. The Training Scheme is just starting up, so you must remain on the Reserve until you are told to report for your training to commence. Any questions?"

I asked the obvious one, "How long will it be before I am called up?" Only to be told that it would be a few months. As it turned out, it was ten months!

Leaving the depot, I walked to Flinders Street Station, thinking, "I am in the Air Force, in aircrew." I could almost feel pilot's wings on my chest! I was dying to boast to someone. I set off for Elwood to tell Aunty Em my news

and to ring home. I might not have been in seventh heaven but I was in at least the sixth!

Arriving back on King Island, and going to work as a junior grocer once more was an anti-climax, to say the least. Playing cricket in the summer months, and then football, merely passed the time. What I was dying for was to escape to the excitement I was sure was waiting for me in the Air Force – if I ever got there, that is! The fact that I had been accepted for training in aircrew, even though I lacked the minimum educational qualifications, gave me confidence; I felt I was on the way to my goal.

Billie Burke, the Post Master's daughter, who was about my age, had blossomed into an attractive lass since I had last seen her. As far as I was concerned, she had the saving grace, of being very friendly, in a sisterly sort of way. Billie was quite a tennis player. It was not one of my skills, and she undertook to teach me after work in the long summer evenings. I was keen to learn; but there was one problem – how to get to the tennis court without being noticed and razzed by the boozy mob that were always around the pub? My solution was to tuck under my arm the tennis racket borrowed from one of my sisters, and sneak past the main street via the Bell Hill. I probably looked pretty pathetic to anyone that may have seen this charade; even if they knew the reason for these manoeuvres. They must have been puzzled if they didn't. Anyway, it worked for a while, as we had the court to ourselves. Billie was a good teacher and I was a keen pupil. This tuition came to a halt when I had to work on my Navigation assignments every night. I was disappointed and so was Billie; but we both agreed that the assignments had to come first.

As the months passed with nothing of interest happening on the European war front, everyone began to feel that this phoney war, as it was called, would peter out, leaving Hitler the winner once again. The British propaganda made much of the small affrays in the air over France, which they said proved the potency of the RAF and its Hurricane fighters; whilst on the ground, the Maginot line was supposedly impregnable. On the wireless and in the newsreels, tales that demonstrated the superior strength of the Allies in every facet of war lulled everyone into a feeling of complacency. So much so, that when the Germans began their sweep through Holland and Belgium into France, we expected to hear daily that they had been stopped in their tracks.

Of course, it soon became apparent, that this was not going to happen, because the much-praised French forces were being swept aside with ridiculous ease. Everyone would stop whatever they were doing whenever the news theme tune came on the air, and gather round to listen with growing apprehension. Awareness grew that the defeat of France, at least, was only a matter of time.

Dad, in particular, was addicted to the news broadcasts, even importing the first portable wireless seen on the Island. He set this up in a position of importance, beside the brass scales in the grocery department. He would emerge from his office to listen intently to the latest war news on 3LO, each lunchtime. He was less than impressed should anyone dare to interrupt this ritual. The culprit, whether a friend or stranger, or even – to their complete surprise – a customer wanting to pay his account, would be ordered to be silent!

The RAAF found a way to make the time pass more quickly for their impatient recruits, while they got themselves

organized. Every two to three weeks, I would receive a large manila envelope branded O.H.M.S. The first of these I couldn't tear open quickly enough, hoping that it would be the long awaited call-up notice, only to find a series of lessons in Mathematics and Elementary Navigation, complete with test questions that had to be completed and returned. Some of it was quite interesting, particularly the navigation lessons and questions. It gave some reality to the fact that air crew training would commence eventually provided, of course, the war had not finished – my greatest nightmare.

The Mathematics included Algebra, Geometry and Trigonometry and was heavy going; a case of going back to school, and something I did not relish very much. I found, somewhat to my chagrin, that I needed assistance particularly with Algebra. I eventually had to pocket my pride after having to redo successive answers. Nell Farrell, who had previously tutored me in an aborted attempt to gain my Intermediate Certificate by correspondence, came to the rescue. Nell was a rare specimen on King Island at that time. She was a university graduate with a Bachelor of Arts Degree. Her time spent tutoring me was paid for by Dad, as I supposed he felt it added to the education I should have had anyway. Nell's tutoring was sporadic. It depended on me arranging for assistance each time I ran into trouble, and her ability to slot me in, in the evenings, with her own private time table.

1940 dragged by at a snail's pace. In spite of the turmoil on the other side of the world, nothing seemed to change in my life. There was work at the store from Monday to Saturday noon, cricket and some fishing during the summer and autumn, football from April on, and a steady, if not

entirely absorbed, diet of Maths and Navigation from my Air Crew Reserve correspondence course.

Stock-take at the store began in October and was an interesting change from the daily stint of filling orders. The country orders arrived per favour of Mal Lynch's shirt front, (Mal's shirt front was his hold-all for orders and any messages he was given) as he travelled his route to the north of the Island each week; orders were also given to us by customers in person when they came to town.

Stocktaking consisted of recording the contents of each shelf, counting the number of bolts, screws, bags of sugar, pounds of butter and cheese, and so on, and recording this on the stock cards attached to each location. This made the working hours pass quickly enough. Some of the odd items that you came across during this process added a degree of interest to the process – for example items such as coffin fittings, required identification by Fred White, who was responsible for all the bits and pieces of strange hardware a country general store had to carry.

As the airmail was delivered each day, my hopes were raised daily, and daily dashed – still no call-up! By November, I had almost given up hope. I had tried, with a fair degree of success, to put all thoughts of the future to the back of my mind. So much so, that when the official documents did arrive in their important looking envelope, I had not even bothered to check the mail when it came in, as had been my habit – a habit which, no doubt, irritated the office staff. Instead, I was outside in one of the bulk store sheds with Fred, recording the stock as he called it out to me. It was Bob Keating who brought me the envelope. Throwing it up

to where I was perched comfortably, about six feet above the floor on a stack of bags, he said, "I reckon this is what you have been waiting for Jack!"

And it was.

I was to report to the Air Crew Training Depot in Flinders Street, Melbourne, on the 11th of the month. I was to bring only one small bag, and the enclosed documents with me. It took a few moments for this to sink in, and then I jumped up, shouted at the top of my lungs – something stupid I suppose, although I can't remember what, and promptly fell off the stack onto the concrete floor below. My leg had gone to sleep! It must have hurt; though there were plenty of bruises the next day, I didn't feel a thing!

I don't remember much about the following week, except that I finished working at the store. Stan Barr (Dad considered it wouldn't look right should he do it himself) made a presentation on behalf of the staff. I received a wallet of real Moroccan leather with, I was delighted to see, a five pound note inside. There was a presentation from the Football Club as well; I was given a cigarette case. I then flew to Melbourne to stay with Auntie Em at Elwood over the weekend. I was ready to report, as required, on the 11th.

2

Joining Up

About a hundred men reported to the RAAF Recruit Centre and filled out yet more forms. There, we were asked to state our preferred aircrew category. Needless to say I put down pilot, feeling a thrill go through me as I did so. I felt I had it made – in capital letters!

Then we had a final medical examination. I suppose it was to make sure that we hadn't lost any component parts, or contracted any dreaded disease in the months we had been waiting in the Reserve. These formalities were soon over, and we were loaded into a fleet of buses heading for Somers where the RAAF had established the No.1 Initial Training School for the recruits in the Empire Air Training Scheme.

Using the existing buildings of The Lord Somers Boys' Camp as the nucleus of the school, Somers had become quite a township.

Most of the camp was comprised of rows of fibrolite barrack huts, each about 60 feet long by about 18 feet wide, with a door at each end. We passed through the gates and drove along the hut lines to a chorus of, "You'll be sorry!" – the standard welcome for all new recruits, as we found out. We came to a halt on the Parade Ground. Here, the Camp Commander, Squadron Leader White, a retread from the First World War, and an original member of the Royal Flying Corps (the forerunner of the RAAF), waited to address us. I can't recall what Tommy had to say, probably the usual clichés about King and Country, but we were suitably impressed.

Then, the Regimental Sergeant Major, a most dapper little man sporting a Clark Gable moustache, whom we soon got to know as the 'Boy Bastard' (BB), gave us the order to form three ranks, facing the front – pilots on the right, then observers with air gunners on the left. After about five minutes of confusion during which the BB nearly had a coronary, three groups in three ranks emerged for Tommy's examination – he was unimpressed. He had about eighty would-be pilots, twenty or so Observer candidates, and a lonely six or so Gunners. This obviously would never do, so addressing the pilot hopefuls, amongst whom I was trying to be inconspicuous, Tommy asked for some common sense. He pointed out that not all could be pilots and called for volunteers to move to the other two groups. No one budged. We all wanted to be pilots – preferably fighter pilots. An impasse, or so we thought.

The solution to the problem, whilst hardly scientific, was exceedingly simple.

"Those with names from A to G move one pace to the left."

We did so rather suspiciously. We soon found our suspicion to be well founded, as we were now observers. I was devastated – my career as a pilot had lasted as long as the bus ride!

I soon found out that it could have been worse because once we settled down, it was apparent that there were still too many pilots, whilst the few potential gunners looked very forlorn. This was corrected by the simple expedient of moving more pilots to the gunner group. We all considered the gunner posting to be as low as you could go in aircrew, so being an Observer didn't seem quite as bad after all.

We were then marched off carrying our bags to the barracks where, on a basis of first come first served, we were allocated beds. Each hut housed two rows of beds along its length, each bed separated by three feet from its neighbour. There were some six to seven feet of space between the two rows; so the RITZ it wasn't! Between each bed was a metal side table containing a drawer, and a cupboard with one shelf below it. The beds consisted of a galvanized pipe frame covered with link wire. They were mounted on hinged pipe legs, which were splayed outwards against stops. We soon found out it was possible to stand the legs vertically, which, if unnoticed by the unwary, led to a crash landing when sat upon. Bedding consisted of a mattress stuffed with wool, three grey blankets, and a blue and white striped pillow with wool filling. The mattress was folded S-shaped and set at the head of the bed. The blankets folded as follows: one was to form an 18 inch bandage enclosing the other two which were folded to about 30 inches x 18 inches in area. This sat on the mattress with the pillow on top. All bedding was dressed from the right too, of course; you are in the Air Force now you know!

Each hut had a small separate cubicle at the far end. This was the lair of our master in most things for the next couple of months – the Corporal. Each hut had a Corporal in charge, in most cases much older than the majority of us and usually a permanent member of the Air Force. His job was to ensure that we were 'where' we where supposed to be, 'when' we were supposed to be there, answer all questions on procedure, and maintain, 'Good order and discipline'. This last requirement was a Godsend to any with problems of self-importance or latent sadistic tendencies. He was in charge and 'don't you forget it!' We were lucky with our Corporal for although we often thought him a pain in the neck, he was no Simon Legree. He seemed to know most of the answers to our questions and only became objectionable on those few occasions when his superior, the Boy Bastard, was in the vicinity. This, we accepted as the defence mechanism it was.

Our first official outing found us marching to the Quartermaster's store, or rather, much to the Corporal's disgust, moving as a shambling mob. Here we passed in line along a row of store men presiding over piles of clothing they doled out to each of us. As we left with kit bags full of shirts, underwear, shoes, uniforms and the like, we again lined up for the Corporal to march back to the huts, without dropping too much en route – hopefully!

Back at the hut, we were told to dump everything on our beds and then 'fall in' again outside. Our destination this time was the sick bay, for what he said was a 'short arm' inspection and 'jabs'. Most of us guessed what jabs entailed, and the few men of the world amongst us informed the more innocent that the inspection was to establish that we

hadn't been misusing our 'family jewels'. This latter exercise, while very embarrassing, was no cause for worry, but the jabs generated the inevitable fainting attacks. You would be surprised at how many.

With all that over it was back to the hut, where the Corporal called out the items from the kit list, to ensure we had everything. After castigating those who were short of some items as, "bloody idiots who wasted his time," he told the remainder of us to start sewing on badges, fitting shoelaces and shortening, where necessary, the legs of overalls, whilst he marched the 'bloody idiots' back to make up their kits. Before leaving, he put his spare uniform out for us to use as a model for badge placement. He showed us the position for the eagles (ruptured ducks, as they were commonly known) on each shoulder, and where to sew the strip of white calico to our forage caps.

"That," he said, "ensures that you mob won't be mistaken for real Air Force men!" We worked out that he meant permanent RAAF!

By now, we had begun to get to know one another, although I must admit that I find it almost impossible to recall the names now, something I would have thought impossible at that time. I still have a vague recollection of hazy faces, but the names themselves refuse to come, except in a few rather illogical cases. Ron McGregor, who became my best mate during what proved to be a very short lifetime in his case, is one; Skip (who I felt at the time to be a conceited prick), is strangely enough, another. Why I should remember him and not some of the fellows with whom I had more in common, I don't know, although a psychiatrist could probably come

up with an answer I might not find to my liking. I can't even remember the name of the chap who had the bed next to me, although I remember his capacity to drop off and snore within minutes of lights-out, which meant many sleepless hours for me. That he was also one of the few Tasmanians in the hut would seem, on the surface of things, to be a very good aide-memoir, but it doesn't help my feeble powers of recall. I was not alone in losing sleep, as his snores were really majestic, and anyone that could sleep through them would be able to cope with the noise of an air raid with ease. Being in the next bed, the job fell to me to push and shove the culprit. It did nothing for his temper, of course, nor did it improve mine.

Ron McGregor was good looking, dark haired, and about my age physically; but light years my senior in worldliness. 'Mac' came from a well-to-do grazing family near Stawell and looked on the training as something that was probably a good thing, as long as it didn't get in the way of his idea of a good time too often. In the months to come, this meant he was in an almost constant state of war with authority, a war in which he somehow usually finished up the winner because of his ability to charm. This approach didn't work with others, as we soon found out, unless the authority concerned accepted that the charmer was also in most cases, the ringleader. This, they usually did, as Mac's reputation grew.

After the first day, our training started in earnest with a nine to five routine that didn't seem all that different from civilian life, although much more interesting. The first days were spent briefing us on the subjects to be studied, mainly maths, elementary navigation, signalling, and the like, with

hours of 'Square Bashing' thrown in. There were plenty of grizzles about the latter. "Weren't we going to fly? What's the sense of all this close-order drill nonsense?" No one complained outright, because we soon learnt that this got you absolutely nowhere, except more drill, or possibly should the Drill Sergeant be in a worse mood than usual, 'fatigue' in the kitchen, washing dishes. Still, we maintained the serviceman's right to bitch!

Most of us had done some marching either at school or as Scouts and therefore, thought that we were pretty proficient at this boring exercise we considered a gross waste of time. You had to humour the Drill Sergeant though, for if he had nothing better to do who knew what other bastardry he might think up? Our first efforts were something of a revelation to us however, and must have looked terrible, as so many of us did not seem to know their left from their right foot. This could be very embarrassing, particularly when on the order to "Right turn," you suddenly found yourself a minority facing the majority. You were left not only feeling stupid, but also being reassured you were by the Sergeant, in a voice guaranteed to let everyone know within half a mile of the situation.

We laboured away, gradually becoming more orderly, spurred by the knowledge that we had to show more skill 'or else'. The 'or else', meant that one of our peculiarities: swinging our left arm and leg together; starting off with the right instead of the left foot; or simply day dreaming, would result in being singled out for ridicule, or even worse, extra drill. After two to three weeks of this, we were of the opinion that the Grenadier Guards would have nothing on us, an opinion almost assuredly not shared by the long suffering Drill Sergeant.

All drill up to this moment had been marching; eyes right, halt, left turn, left wheel, double march and so on. At least we knew the commands and obeyed them efficiently enough for our boredom to become rather obvious. Whether the program was arranged by the planners so that rifle drill would be introduced when this point had obviously been reached, I don't know. But if that were the case it says something for a knowledge of human psychology not normally considered to be part of a Drill Sergeant's make-up.

Our conceit was rapidly punctured as rifles were dropped on our toes, or on those of our neighbour, on the ground, or somehow became entangled with bayonet scabbards. It was almost as if the damned things had minds of their own, and they weighed a tonne! In spite of our early ineptness we gradually gained some proficiency and with it, some enjoyment until of course the mental comparison with the Guards again occurred to us. We really believed our own self-assessment so when told that a dozen of us, including me, had been selected to form a guard of honour for a visiting 'Brass Hat', we felt it was only to be expected. We were, after all, 'rather good.'

The guard duty came and went. Twelve AC2s in immaculate blue uniforms and shining boots, and holding rifles with brightly shining bayonets fixed, stood rigidly to attention and presented arms as ordered. They were inspected by the said Brass Hat, were photographed, and finally dismissed. We were quite disappointed when the photographs did not appear in the paper – until we saw the photos. We then realized that we owed a vote of thanks to the person who had decided that the press could live without pictures of the No.1 ITS' challenge to the Guards. Our perfect straight

lines formed a bow. Some of us stood 'Chins in, chests out,' in the approved manner. Some did the reverse, and the slope of no two rifles matched. We were Dad's Army, years ahead of our time!

Everyone had to learn the parts of the Lee Enfield rifle and the Browning machine-gun, whether training as a pilot, observer or air gunner. But as this was the prelude to time on the rifle range, no one questioned the need for rifle expertise in future aircrew. Shooting a rifle, or to a lesser extent, a machine-gun is to some degree like driving a car; everyone considers himself an expert, at least until they come to do it. Most of us had used .22 rifles or air guns at some time. I certainly had, and to hear the talk, never had such a group of 'Daniel Boones' ever appeared in one spot before. We were ALL dead shots! Maybe?!

Anyway, we soon found out that there is little similarity between using a .22 and firing a .303 rifle, let alone a machine-gun. The Lee Enfield was extremely heavy, kicked like a mule, and deafened you. We also decided they were probably not very accurate; the ones we had were old, and our results gave credence to this theory. As for the Browning machine-gun, that was just the .303 rifle 'In Spades'. It seemed to weigh several tonnes, kicked up one hell of a row, and literally sprayed the bullets in the general direction it was pointed, as it vibrated and tried to walk away from you. Forget about bull's eyes – anyone hitting the target was thought to be either dead lucky or a crack shot. The thought of firing a machine-gun from a moving plane at another moving plane, after the difficulty experienced in hitting a paper disc a hundred yards away, crossed our minds – or it did mine anyway.

On the first weekend, we were given a one-day pass. It confined us to the local area, as it was intended to do. The theory being, I suppose, that there would be little opportunity for even the most determined backslider to get into trouble by sampling the delights of downtown Somers, Bunyip and similar hubs of activity. Arriving in Bunyip with McGregor and two other blokes, I saw little reason to doubt this theory. A couple of shabby little milk bars, a pub – well that's something at least, we thought – a sprinkling of houses and a couple of churches appeared to be all that was on offer. We retired to the pub to consider a plan of action. No girls, at least no one worth chatting up, no picture theatre, practically no people – it was not promising, not promising at all! The alternatives seemed to be:

1. have a few beers, then wander back to camp or
2. have lots of beers and stagger back to camp.

Alternative number two passed with acclamation!

I can't claim to remember very much of the proceedings, and I don't think that anyone who was still with us could either, apart from our adventures on our bleary way home, that is. The picture you need to see is not very unusual. Four very drunk, very noisy, very unsteady Air Force recruits, heading in what they hoped was the general direction of camp, vaguely aware but not really caring all that much that they were overdue on their leave pass, mainly because they were no longer capable of coherent thought. They sensed a need for caution and silence if they were to run the gauntlet they imagined they had to run in order to avoid the Service Police they were sure were lying in ambush, ready to nab them red-handed and throw them into the camp hoosegow.