

Not all work and no play:
The experience of RAAF airmen in Britain during the Second World War
by Harriet Lobb

Introduction

Roughly 27,000 Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) pilots, navigators, wireless operators, gunners, and engineers served in the European theatre during the Second World War through the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS).¹ Over half of these highly trained Australians flew with Royal Air Force (RAF) Bomber Command squadrons based in Britain. While historians have focused predominantly on the training and operations of Bomber Command squadrons, operational flying made up only a brief part of an RAAF airman's experience. Adequate rest from the physical, emotional, and mental stress of air operations was crucial in sustaining the flying capacity of skilled aircrew that had had an enormous amount of time and resources invested in their training. This project seeks to paint a larger picture of the life of RAAF airmen attached to Australian bomber squadrons (Nos 460, 462, 463, 466, and 467) in Britain. Through the examination of a number of diaries written during the war, as well as recollections in memoirs and oral histories produced sometime after the war, this paper explores what RAAF airmen did when they were not on operations and how they dealt with the stress of Bomber Command.

The stress of Bomber Command

Aircrews flying with Bomber Command were required to carry out 30 operations on enemy targets in order to complete a tour. Operations were highly stressful. Aircrews had to endure arduous outward journeys to successfully bomb targets and return safely to base. They also had to grapple with external factors out of their control such as tough weather conditions and the risk of being hit by flak or fire from enemy fighter planes. Most recollections in the diaries and memoirs of RAAF airmen suggest that tension reached its peak when their aircrafts were situated right above the target prior to dropping the bombs. According to Flight Lieutenant Francis Dixon of No. 467 Squadron, "you felt as though you were a sitting duck in mid air" for up to 30

¹ John McCarthy, *The last call of empire: Australian aircrew, Britain and the Empire Air Training Scheme* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1988).

seconds while the bomb aimer sought to achieve maximum accuracy. Dixon went on to recollect how the aircrafts swiftly dispersed “the moment that the bombs are gone ... so that you confuse anybody who might have been sighting.”²

The stress of flying such dangerous operations was heightened by the unfavourable rate of survival for RAAF aircrews in Bomber Command. Historian Denis Richards recorded that Bomber Command lost more than twice as many aircrew on operations as all the other commands put together.³ More than one in three RAAF airmen failed to return from operations with Bomber Command. Of the 10,000 Australian airmen flying in Bomber Command during the Second World War, 3,486 were killed in action. These heavy losses were not cheering for airmen who had 30 operations to complete in order to make a tour. Airmen regularly had to deal with the loss of RAAF counterparts and sometimes close friends. Flying Officer John Holden of No. 463 Squadron observed: “With the loss of your companions – that’s war, to be expected.”⁴ Holden’s somewhat detached attitude of loss is reflective of the affected nonchalant mindset across RAAF Bomber Command squadrons. It was a way of coping.

RAAF airmen tried to regard the risks involved in flying operations with Bomber Command simply as part of the job. As Pilot Frank Ward of No. 467 Squadron recalled, “it became just like going to work every day”. There was a pervasive view that flying missions for Bomber Command fulfilled a sense of duty to the empire, and the high chance of being killed in action was just a risk that RAAF aircrews had to take in order to fulfil their duty. “We were always going to survive,” said Ward, “we talked a lot on those lines.”⁵ The psychological aspect of initial aircrew selection was meant to weed out individuals who were likely to breakdown mentally. However, if airmen failed to detach themselves from the low rate of survival and the stress of flying operations in Bomber Command then they could be susceptible to breakdown

² Flight Lieutenant Francis William Dixon (4129230), Halifax bomber pilot No. 467 Squadron RAAF, in interview with Susan Green for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45, St Georges, South Australia, April 1988, AWM: S00507.

³ Denis Richards, *The hardest victory: RAF Bomber Command in the Second World War* (Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton, 1994), p. 305.

⁴ Flying Officer Edwin “John” Holden (410061), Lancaster bomber radio operator No. 463 Squadron RAAF, in interview with Daniel Connell for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45, St Georges, South Australia, 15 January 1989, AWM: S00511.

⁵ Pilot Frank Ward, No. 467 Squadron RAAF, quoted in “A dangerous occupation”, by Emma Campbell, *Wartime* 61, summer 2013, pp. 28–29.

mentally and in some cases were deemed to have “Lack of Moral Fibre” (LMF). One-third of LMF cases in the RAF occurred in Bomber Command.⁶

RAAF Overseas Headquarters: Medical a Welfare Sections

From early on in the war the RAAF recognised the importance of putting in place measures to sustain the flying capacity of aircrews and avoid cases of LMF. Flight Lieutenant Grayton Brown, a member of the Commemorative Air Force (CAF), was commissioned early in 1940 to liaise with the RAF and collect information on medical matters in the United Kingdom for transmission to Australia. One aspect of Brown’s work concerned the early research carried out by the RAF into problems of operational fatigue. Based on Brown’s findings, the RAAF recognised the need to build a medical service for its aircrew. In December 1940 Squadron Leader E.H. Anderson was appointed medical officer to the RAAF Liaison Staff at Australia House in London. Pilot fatigue was one of the matters on Anderson’s agenda. As the number of RAAF airmen serving in Britain increased, the RAAF Medical Section was established in January 1942 with the formation of the RAAF Overseas Headquarters at Australia House. Anderson was appointed Staff Officer Medical for the Overseas Headquarters.⁷

At the start of June 1942, within six months of the establishment of a medical section in the overseas Headquarters, the Air Board also approved the establishment of a welfare section. Flight Lieutenant P.N. Cochrane filled the sole vacancy for an RAAF welfare officer in March 1943. He alone was required to oversee more than 6,000 RAAF personnel based in Britain at the time. Over the next two years the Welfare Section continued to grow as the RAAF considered its work increasingly and vitally important in sustaining the rapidly diminishing flying capacity of Australian airmen. By 1945, the number of employed welfare staff had risen to 131 officers and men. This staff was to serve over 12,000 RAAF aircrew based in Britain at the time. As stated in an RAAF Overseas Headquarters report, the central objective of the Welfare

⁶ John McCarthy, “Aircrew and ‘Lack of Moral Fibre’ in the Second World War”, in *War and Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1984, p. 93.

⁷ RAAF Overseas Headquarters report, “Work of Medical Section”, AWM: AWM54, 81/4/125, p. 1.

Section was “to maintain a high standard of morale among the members of the service, particularly those under a great nervous strain through operations”.⁸

The institution of the Medical and Welfare Sections in 1942 reflects the importance that the RAAF placed on sustaining the flying capacity of Australian airmen. According to a report by the Overseas Headquarters, “Each Australian squadron on formation was provided with a RAAF medical officer.”⁹ Interestingly, the RAF did not have squadron medical officers.¹⁰ RAAF medical officers were required to maintain the welfare of airmen in order to preserve the squadron’s operational strength and avoid cases of LMF. Although medical officers were expected to pick up on “any signs of cracking up in crew members”, Medical Officer Andrew Harker of squadrons 463 and 467 reported, “they had no authority to do anything about it”.¹¹ The authority on such cases was placed in the hands of squadron leaders. RAAF squadrons were regularly visited by the Principal Medical Officer (PMO) from early 1943 onwards and “many problems associated with operational flying and aircrew welfare were discussed on the spot with Station and Squadron Commanders”.¹² If LMF cases were detected, they were swiftly isolated by squadron leaders to ensure that such cases did not have a detrimental effect on the rest of the squadron. Historian Mark Wells discussed the “contagious” nature of LMF in the RAF.¹³ He cited Lord Balfour of Inchrye, the Under-Secretary of State for Air: “One LMF crew member could start a rot which might spread not only through his own crew but through the whole squadron.”¹⁴ The perceived contagiousness of LMF was much the same in the context of RAAF squadrons. “There were cases certainly where people were dealt with under LMF and they disappeared,” according to Pilot Officer Arthur Doubleday of No. 460 Squadron, “I believe they were handled pretty well, and certainly there were very little of it.”¹⁵ That there was a perception of few LMF cases occurring in

⁸ RAAF Overseas Headquarters report, “History of Welfare Section”, AWM54, 81/4/125, p. 6.

⁹ RAAF Overseas Headquarters report, “History of Welfare Section”, p. 2.

¹⁰ Dr. Andrew Harker, Medical Officer Nos 463 and 466 Squadrons RAAF, interview, 22 July 1959, AWM: AWM54 481/12/201.

¹¹ Harker interview, 22 July 1959.

¹² RAAF Overseas Headquarters report, “History of Welfare Section”, p. 2.

¹³ Mark Wells, “Bomber Command and Lack of Moral Fibre”, in *Courage and air warfare: the Allied aircrew experience in the Second World War* (London: Frank Cass, 1995).

¹⁴ Harold Balfour cited in Wells, “Bomber Command and Lack of Moral Fibre”.

¹⁵ Pilot Officer Arthur William Doubleday (402945), No. 460 Squadron RAAF, in interview with Edward Stokes for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45, Killara,

the RAAF is more an indication of how it was handled than a reflection of the numbers.

In terms of welfare, the main role of RAAF medical officers lay in detecting and preventing such cases of LMF. According to historian Allen Walker, medical officers sought to address responses that airmen had to danger, anger, and fear as soon as they occurred. It was much more effective for medical officers to offer advice and deal with natural worries that aircrew had before they took hold psychologically.¹⁶ Medical officers also sought to ensure that airmen received adequate rest and opportunities for recreation between stressful operations with Bomber Command. As Walker discussed, with the early recognition of cumulative flying fatigue, appropriate leave could be given to enable airmen to return to operational flying without affecting the overall strength of the squadron.¹⁷ Through the RAAF Overseas Headquarters' implementation of medical and welfare measures, RAAF airmen were provided with a range of extra duties and recreational activities on squadron bases as well as decent leave time and travel opportunities to escape the strains of operational flying.

Downtime: squadron duties and further training

"I look back on the world that I travelled around at the expense of the taxpayer and think about the places that I might've gone and the things that I might've seen but we were too busy."¹⁸ As Dixon recalled, when not on operations RAAF aircrew were kept well occupied at Bomber Command. Airmen were supposed to receive at least 24 hours off in between each operation. During this downtime, they had a number of other duties to fulfil. "Apart from operational flying," Flying Officer Irwin John Dack of 463 recalled, "aircrews had other duties which were required to keep the squadron running efficiently."¹⁹ These duties included carrying out flight tests of any new

New South Wales, AWM: S00546. Pilot Officer Arthur William Doubleday (402945), No. 460 Squadron RAAF, in interview with Laurie Field, Sydney, 9 November 1988, AWM: S01276.

¹⁶ Allen S. Walker, "Medical units in base areas and in the field", in *Medical services of the RAN and RAAF* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1961), p. 208.

¹⁷ Walker, "Medical units in base areas and in the field", p. 208.

¹⁸ Flight Lieutenant Francis William Dixon (4129230), Halifax Bomber pilot No. 467 Squadron RAAF, in interview with Susan Green for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45, April 1988, AWM: S00507.

¹⁹ Flying Officer Irwin John Dack DFC OAM (418093), No. 463 Squadron RAAF, *So, you wanted wings, hey!* (self-published, 1993), AWM: MSS1511, p. 57.

aircraft arriving at a squadron base or returned from servicing.²⁰ Rosters were written up for such non-operational flying duties to ensure the workload was spread evenly between crews.²¹

However, “Life on the squadron wasn’t all flying,” according to Dack. Airmen also carried out further training and education when not on operations. They were required to attend lectures informing them on the use of any new or updated equipment or technology which had been installed in the squadron’s aircrafts. “Window crew” was another duty assigned randomly each day; the selected aircrew would be responsible for collecting and stacking bundles of metal foil strips, known as “window”, onto aircrafts for use in bombing raids to confuse enemy radar. Dack recalled a time when he had to tell his crewmembers that they were on “window crew” duty at No. 463 Squadron: “No good, Skip,” said one of them, “I’ve got a date at the pictures.” “Don’t like it at all,” said another, “There’s a dance on tonight at the Assembly Hall, that’s where I’m going.”²² These anecdotes are indicative of the sporadic nature of Bomber Command; it was very difficult for airmen to make plans in their downtime as unexpected squadron duties could always be thrust upon them.

Downtime: recreation at squadron bases and local villages

“Squadron life was not all work and no play,” wrote Warrant Officer Bill Warman of No. 462 Squadron.²³ The recreational experience of aircrews differed widely depending on the standard of facilities at the RAF stations to which RAAF Bomber Command squadrons were attached. Some RAF stations were more comfortable than others. This meant that airmen were content spending their downtime on base. For example, Flight Lieutenant Geoffrey Coombes recalled the “magnificent” facilities at No. 466 Squadron in Leconfield, Yorkshire. He described the officer’s mess “like a hotel” and thought the accommodation, games rooms, and billiards rooms were

²⁰ Dack, *So, you wanted wings, hey!*, p. 57.

²¹ Dack, *So, you wanted wings, hey!*, p. 57.

²² Dack, *So, you wanted wings, hey!*, p. 57.

²³ Warrant Officer Bill Warman (435139), R/AG No. 462 Squadron RAAF, quoted in Antony Granville Batten, *Phoenix: book 2 – the reincarnation*, 1999, AWM: MSS2013.

“terrific.” He admitted: “We were lucky.”²⁴ Well-equipped stations with extra recreational facilities such as this were not widespread. More common recreational activities across RAAF Bomber Command squadrons included: downtime in the mess; film screenings; live performances; sport; trips to village pubs; bike rides; local church services; and hospitality offered by English families living in the countryside surrounding the base.

Downtime at RAAF squadrons generally revolved around the mess. Aircrews were segregated by rank, with an officers’ mess and a sergeants’ mess. The messes provided a hub where the men could gather to receive their daily meals, check the notice board for any local events, or play darts for hours on end. Mess parties were a common feature of the recreational culture of all RAAF squadrons. They occurred in the officers’ mess as much as they did in the sergeants’ mess.²⁵ Flying Officer Edwin Holden of No. 463 Squadron, based at Waddington in Lincolnshire, fondly recalled mess parties that were “fitted in between the requirements of aircrew duties”.²⁶ He recounted one night in the officers’ mess when a “pyramid” was built out of all the chairs after a mess party, with the chaplain’s bicycle placed right at the top.²⁷ Holden remembered the chaplain being “very irate about it”.²⁸ According to Dack, who was of the same RAAF base at Waddington, to prove that someone had climbed to the top of such pyramid constructions the men “might burn their name in the ceiling with a cigarette lighter, or, if it was a ladies night, write it with lipstick”.²⁹ This sort of mischievous behaviour in the mess was not uncommon. On another account at Waddington, members of Nos 463 and 467 Squadrons carried the commanding officer’s car, a “small Ford Prefect”, up several steps and in through the front doors of the mess.³⁰ Mess parties and the shenanigans that ensued were not considered offences, as might be expected, but rather were tolerated. As Dack recalled in an

²⁴ Flight Lieutenant Geoffrey Bernard Coombes (205836) No. 466 Squadron RAAF, in interview with Tim Bowden for the Keith Murdoch Sound Archive of Australia in the War of 1939–45, Sydney, 22 March 1989, AWM: S00551.

²⁵ Holden interview, 15 January 1989.

²⁶ Holden interview, 15 January 1989.

²⁷ Holden interview, 15 January 1989.

²⁸ Holden interview, 15 January 1989.

²⁹ Dack, *So, you wanted wings, hey!*, p. 56.

³⁰ Dack, *So, you wanted wings, hey!*, p. 56.

interview: “These acts of vandalism, although officially frowned upon, were accepted as a most necessary ‘letting-off-of-steam’, never ever really getting out of hand.”³¹

That airmen were allowed to “let off steam” to escape the stress of Bomber Command meant that the excessive consumption of alcohol at mess parties was also tolerated. Flying Officer Clifford O’Riordan’s diary tells of the farewell mess party at No. 460 Squadron in Brighton before they moved to the Binbrook station in May 1943. It was “Quite a bright party”, he wrote, going on to describe how he tried to ride a horse after drinking a “460 special”, fell off, and badly fractured his arm.³² At the official opening of No. 460 Squadron Binbrook on 27 May 1943, King George VI asked O’Riordan what happened to his arm:

*The A.O.C. was there, but I told him the truth. He laughed like hell and said, “Did you borrow the horse or scrounge it.” I told him I scrounged it.*³³

This anecdote shows that a blind eye was often turned on the mischievous behaviour of RAAF airmen during their downtime. Drinking at mess parties was considered an acceptable means by which airmen could relax from operational flying. Excessive drinking and shenanigans after mess parties were thus referred to as “Australia letting off steam” in a number of different accounts.³⁴

Aside from mess parties, film screenings and theatrical productions commonly formed part of the entertainment for aircrew at RAAF squadron bases. As Sergeant Ralph Daughters of No. 462 Squadron recalled, the RAF station in Foulsham, Norfolk was a “basic airfield and facilities for recreation were minimal.”³⁵ Daughters remembered film screenings being about the only activity on base to occupy airmen during downtime. Films of the “American ‘gung ho’ variety depicting Errol Flynn winning the war single-handed” were the sort of screenings at the base that, in Daughters’ description, “gave rise to much hilarity and mirth amongst the Aussies”³⁶.

³¹ Dack, *So, you wanted wings, hey!*, p. 56.

³² Flying Officer Clifford Timothy O’Riordan (403397), No. 460 Squadron RAAF, diary entry Saturday 15 May 1943, AWM: 3DRL/4164. O’Riordan was killed in action on 29 July 1943.

³³ Flying Officer Clifford Timothy O’Riordan (403397), No. 460 Squadron RAAF, diary entry Thursday 27 May 1943, AWM: 3DRL/4164.

³⁴ Holden interview, 15 January 1989.

³⁵ Sergeant Ralph Daughters (1897788), F/E, No. 462 Squadron RAAF, letter to Antony Granville Batten, quoted in Batten, *Phoenix: book 2 – the reincarnation*, AWM: MSS2013.

³⁶ Daughters letter, in Batten, *Phoenix: book 2 – the reincarnation*.

The RAAF Welfare Section also organised a film series called *News from home* to be screened at squadron bases. Such newsreels were “greatly appreciated by RAAF personnel”; however, criticism was regularly raised at the “failure to include more scenic material” and the underrepresentation of “states other than New South Wales and Victoria”.³⁷ RAAF squadrons were also entertained by live theatrical performances. The Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) was set up in 1939 to provide armed forces in Britain with entertainment. “Saw an excellent ‘ENSA’ play at night, *The passing of the fluid hour back* with Frank Forbes-Robertson”, wrote Flying Officer Errol Crapp of No. 460 Squadron in his diary on Friday 16 October 1942. “Quite a good performance, and well worth the charge of 1/- for seat in the second front row.”³⁸ The ENSA performances were not all of the same standard, however. An ENSA variety show at the same squadron two weeks later was reported by Crapp as “far from first class ... A bit rough and ready, but quite entertaining, none the less.”³⁹

Sport also played a large part in squadron downtime. Different sections formed various sporting teams and played matches against each other. Cricket was a popular recreational sport on squadron bases, as Warman recalled: “The different sections had their own cricket teams and played one another. The Squadron also played teams from outside the drome.”⁴⁰ Football was another common sport at squadron bases outside of operations. Crapp watched a game of Australian Rules football between airmen from No. 460 Squadron in October 1942. While Crapp thought that “Bung Rules” would be a more appropriate name, he noted in his diary that “they seemed to enjoy it, and the run around would be beneficial”.⁴¹

As well as mess activities, film screenings, theatre productions, and sporting matches, RAAF airmen spent a considerable amount of their downtime in local towns and village pubs, and a large number of RAAF airmen found the latter to be the best place to unwind from operations. On 6 November 1944 more than 700 aircraft embarked on a strategic Bomber Command mission to Gelsenkirchen in Germany. Flight Sergeant

³⁷ RAAF Overseas Headquarters report, “History of Welfare Section”, p. 13.

³⁸ Flying Officer Errol Clifton Crapp, navigator, No. 460 Squadron RAAF, diary, Friday 16 October 1942, AWM: PR00144.

³⁹ Crapp, diary, Friday 30 October 1942.

⁴⁰ Warman, quoted Batten, *Phoenix: book 2 – the reincarnation*.

⁴¹ Crapp, diary, Saturday 17 October 1942.

Max Langworthy's crew took part in this daylight raid destroying an oil plant and bombing the small town itself. During the operation, Langworthy's aircraft was hit twice by flak. He also witnessed a Lancaster and its crew blow up right before his eyes. It was only his third operation. He was in shock from the experience, and expressed in his memoir that "it was a black period". Langworthy found himself "in great despair" that he and his crew could complete 30 operations and make it to the end of a tour. He commented: "even some of the most experienced crews were failing to return, I couldn't see how a bunch of amateurs like us could do better." Upon returning to the RAF base at Driffield in Yorkshire along with 13 other crews from the squadron, Langworthy was taken by a fellow airman on a pub-crawl. Drinking provided a means for Langworthy of coping with the stress of the operation to Gelsenkirchen as well as the anxiety he felt about completing a tour, and the distraction of a pub-crawl was "a great help".⁴² This anecdote sheds light on the custom of drinking at local pubs as a method used by a number of airmen to deal with the stress and anxieties associated with operational flying.

Local English pubs provided RAAF airmen with a comfortable venue to unwind outside the squadron base. Airmen flying with No. 460 Squadron in Brighton, Yorkshire, became attached to their local pub in Bubwith (the White Swan Hotel). When members of the squadron signed their names in the White Swan visitors' book, they qualified for membership in "The Airmen's and Arm-bender's Association of Bubwith" and were "authorised to bend their elbow with any crew of alcohol airmen at anytime and in any place wherein said crew may be mustered".⁴³ The White Swan was "The 'spirit' of England," according to Sergeant G.L. Stevens.⁴⁴ "I have never felt so much at home," wrote Leading Aircraftman W.J. Dorrian.⁴⁵ While "Too full for words" was the only comment Flight Sergeant Richardson wrote at the time, the "Remarks" column of the White Swan visitors' book sheds plenty of light on the

⁴² Flight Sergeant G.M. Langworthy (428848), pilot No. 462 Squadron RAAF, quoted in Batten, *Phoenix: book 2 – the reincarnation*, p. 23.

⁴³ Declaration of membership to "The Airmen's and Arm-bender's Association of Bubwith", 30 April 1942, in White Swan Hotel visitors' book, Bubwith, Yorkshire. Signed by members of No. 460 Squadron RAAF and No. 78 Squadron RAF, AWM: 3DRL/7563.

⁴⁴ Sergeant G. L. Stevens, No. 460 Squadron RAAF, Brighton, signed White Swan Hotel visitors' book on 7 May 1942, AWM: 3DRL/7563.

⁴⁵ Leading Aircraftman W.J. Dorrian, No. 460 Squadron RAAF, Brighton, signed White Swan Hotel visitors' book on 4 September 1942, AWM: 3DRL/7563.

hospitable nature of British village locals.⁴⁶ Publicans opened their doors to RAAF airmen across the whole of Britain during the war. Local village pubs provided a hub of warmth and comfort where airmen could unwind and escape the stress of operational flying.

Bicycles were a popular means of transport among aircrew. “Most bods had a bike,” recalled Warrant Officer Grant Boys of No. 462 Squadron. “As you were posted to a station someone shifted out and so the ‘treadly’ changed hands for a price. It was a standard five or ten pounds.”⁴⁷ The use of bicycles provided a speedy means of travel between squadron bases and local village pubs. “We spent many a happy hour cycling through the countryside on a pub crawl,” wrote Langworthy of the same squadron.⁴⁸ After the consumption of one too many drinks, Boys remembered such a journey ending up “like a battle ground – bikes in ditches and bodies in ditches, which were usually full of stinging nettles”. He went on to recall “liberal doses of Calamine Lotion being applied to various parts of many bodies” at the squadron’s sick parade the following morning.⁴⁹ The records of squadron bike tours are not all alcohol-oriented. Crapp’s diary described bike-rides from the base of No. 460 Squadron, Binbrook, to the “quiet town” of Selby, the “dead old village” of Howden, or “to give the village the once over” in Bubwith.⁵⁰ “After dinner Dick and I went for a ride on our bikes, just cruising around the countryside,” Crapp wrote in one diary entry. “It was very pleasant.”⁵¹ Bike riding was a popular form of recreation when aircrews were not flying operations. Bicycles were sought after for RAAF airmen based at different RAF stations across Britain.

A small number of RAAF airmen also attended church services in villages not far from their squadrons’ base. Crapp’s diary recorded his experience attending weekly services at the local church during his time at No. 460 Squadron. He described a 6 pm

⁴⁶ Flight Sergeant Richardson, No. 460 Squadron RAAF, Brighton, signed White Swan Hotel visitors’ book on 2 November 1942, AWM: 3DRL/7563.

⁴⁷ Warrant Officer Grant Boys (437388), R/AG No. 462 Squadron RAAF, quoted in Batten, *Phoenix: book 2 – the reincarnation*.

⁴⁸ Flight Sergeant G.M. Langworthy (428848), pilot No. 462 Squadron RAAF, quoted in Antony Granville Batten, *Ivan’s war*, AWM: MSS2011, p. 22.

⁴⁹ Boys, quoted in Batten, *Phoenix: book 2 – the reincarnation*.

⁵⁰ Crapp, diary: Selby [Tuesday 6 October 1942], Howden [Wednesday 7 October 1942], Bubwith [Thursday 8 October 1942].

⁵¹ Crapp, diary, Sunday 11 October 1942.

evening service he attended at the eighteenth century Wesleyan Methodist Chapel at Bubwith on Sunday 18 October 1942: “Service was very simple, but I liked it, and am glad I went.” Crapp and four other RAF sergeants from No. 460 Squadron were asked over to the home of a lady named Mrs Burtis after the service “where we had a sing-song, and some supper”. His diary recounts how they spoke about their church involvement prior to the war and Mrs Burtis suggested that Crapp take the evening service the following Sunday. Crapp declined the offer to read the sermon, saying, “I didn’t feel I could do it.”⁵² He continued, however, to go for a “cup of tea” with Mrs Burtis each week after the Sunday service.⁵³

Local English families living in the countryside around squadron bases were found to offer their hospitality to RAAF aircrews based in Britain. Boys commented on the “welcome” that aircrew from No. 462 Squadron received from local English families. He had “very fond memories of families around the ’drome who asked us for supper and a beer or two”.⁵⁴ Although diary accounts of the generosity and hospitality of English locals were prevalent, airmen also observed the existence of class distinction in the English countryside. Langworthy’s memoir described a notice he saw in the mess, from a lady who lived near the squadron base, offering airmen the use of her tennis court. Langworthy took up the offer and rounded up his crew. After a good hit of tennis and a nice afternoon tea, the lady took Langworthy aside and whispered that “the offer really only applied to Officers!” This anecdote sheds light on the interaction between RAAF aircrews and locals operating within the social hierarchy of the English countryside during the war. “That finished that,” Langworthy wrote. “I wasn’t going anywhere where the rest of my crew wasn’t welcome.”⁵⁵ It is clear that RAAF airmen were loyal to their fellow crewmembers regardless of the class milieu to which they were exposed during their downtime off the squadron base.

Leave: travel to “let the hair down”

“There was one good feature of being on operations,” according to Flying Officer Cliff Halsall of No. 460 Squadron, “that was that you were assured of six days leave

⁵² Crapp, diary, Sunday 18 October 1942.

⁵³ Crapp, diary, Sunday 1 November 1942.

⁵⁴ Boys, quoted in Batten, *Phoenix: book 2 – the reincarnation*.

⁵⁵ Langworthy quoted in Batten, *Phoenix: book 2 – the reincarnation*, p. 52.

every six weeks”.⁵⁶ RAAF airmen attached to RAF stations in England were given rail warrants and food vouchers to use on operational leave as well as an extra five shillings per day through the Lord Nuffield scheme.⁵⁷ “The 30 ‘bob’ per leave was much appreciated,” wrote Halsall.⁵⁸ The types of experiences RAAF airmen had during operational leave varied widely. For the airmen looking to ‘let their hair down’ from the stress of operational flying it was straight to large cities such as London or Edinburgh. The extent of travel and exploration on leave for RAAF airmen such as these included the Boomerang Club in London; visits to various clubs, pubs and bars; and romantic encounters with English women.

The Boomerang Club was “The rendezvous of Australians in London”, according to Warrant Officer Joey Goodwin of No. 460 Squadron.⁵⁹ It was “Australian territory within England’s capital”, for Warrant Officer Keith Woodward.⁶⁰ The Boomerang Club was also the starting point for almost all airmen on leave to London. It spread across two floors of Australia House. As Sir Claude James, Chairman of the Management Committee wrote, the Boomerang Club was “Established as a place of relaxation for Australian Service personnel.”⁶¹ It had an information bureau where RAAF airmen could find out where to stay and what to do in London. Goodwin wrote in a letter to his wife that at the information bureau, “fussy old ladies will tell you anything from the date to the time it’ll take in seconds to get to any particular spot in London”.⁶² The Boomerang Club provided a place where RAAF airmen could meet with friends, read books and newspapers, write letters home, or check the notice board for special events in London. It also had a snack bar and a restaurant downstairs serving high-quality food. The club displayed “fixed settings”, according to Woodward, “But the voices and faces and laughter are constantly changing.”⁶³ It was inclusive of everyone. If airmen arrived alone to London, they were sure to meet someone at the Boomerang Club. It welcomed all RAAF airmen, regardless of rank. It

⁵⁶ Flying Officer Cliff W. Halsall (A418268), No. 460 Squadron RAAF, *An Australian Lancaster air-gunner in the United Kingdom*, AWM: PR00791, p. 115.

⁵⁷ Halsall, *An Australian Lancaster air-gunner in the United Kingdom*, p. 115.

⁵⁸ Halsall, *An Australian Lancaster air-gunner in the United Kingdom*, p. 115.

⁵⁹ Letter from Warrant Officer Joseph Ignatious Goodwin, 5 December 1942, AWM: PR91/181.

⁶⁰ Warrant Officer Keith Woodward, navigator, Nos 467 and 463 Squadrons RAAF, *Australiana*, AWM: MSS1495, p. 34.

⁶¹ Sir Claude James, Chairman of the Management Committee, quoted in Woodward, *Australiana*, p. 35. The Boomerang Club was opened on 30 March 1942.

⁶² Goodwin letter, 5 December 1942.

⁶³ Woodward, *Australiana*, p. 34.

was filled with “different ranks in different dress mixing cheerfully together”, wrote Woodward, who went on to note: “This is Australia.”⁶⁴

“For those few who like to partake of a little liquid morale”, the Codgers Inn, located just off Fleet Street, was around the corner from the Boomerang Club.⁶⁵ A large number of RAAF airmen who ventured to London on leave spent most of their time in the London pubs and bars. After an 11-hour operation to Spezia, Italy, on Tuesday 13 April 1943, O’Riordan touched down at Brighton at 4 pm and left for London within the hour.⁶⁶ His leave to London was spent catching up with friends, going to the cinema, and kicking up his heels at London clubs, pubs, and bars. Staying at the Golfers’ Club, O’Riordan went straight to the Codgers Inn on Thursday 15 April 1943 and “did a pub crawl” with his crew and the wing commander.⁶⁷ The drinking continued throughout O’Riordan’s leave and his diary entry on Saturday 17 April recorded that his night finished at “the old pub in Watling Street”, noting “Stan Ricketts in fine form climbing lamp posts”.⁶⁸ The next day, he remembered “50 Australian airmen waiting outside Codgers for it to open”.⁶⁹ While O’Riordan’s diary is just one example, it is revealing of the drinking culture of RAAF airmen across the board. It was not St Paul’s Cathedral or Westminster Abbey that drew a large number of RAAF aircrews to London: rather, it was the opportunity to escape the strain of operational flying by descending on London’s drinking venues. In a postwar interview Dixon admitted that he did not make the effort to visit cultural landmarks during his leave from No. 467 Squadron: “Only years later when somebody asked what you thought of St Paul’s Cathedral, you have to admit that you didn’t bother to go and see it.” Those who actually troubled to spend their leave visiting landmarks and cultural institutions across Britain were thought of as “squares.”⁷⁰

There are many accounts of the fleeting encounters RAAF airmen had with English women on leave. The diary of Flying Officer Geoff Berglund describes the

⁶⁴ Woodward, *Australiana*, p. 35.

⁶⁵ Woodward, *Australiana*, p. 35.

⁶⁶ Clifford Timothy O’Riordan, Flying Officer, No. 460 Squadron RAAF, diary, Tuesday 13 April 1943, AWM: 3DRL/4164.

⁶⁷ O’Riordan, diary, Thursday 15 April 1943.

⁶⁸ O’Riordan, diary, Saturday 17 April 1943.

⁶⁹ O’Riordan, diary, Sunday 18 April 1943.

⁷⁰ Dixon, interview, April 1988.

relationship he formed with a lady named Joan, who lived in Lincoln near No. 463 Squadron, Waddington. The diary tells of the telegrams he sent her, the dates they went on and the welcome distraction Joan made from his squadron life. In one particular diary entry on Wednesday 12 July 1944 Berglund wrote about the date on which he took Joan to see “Destination Tokyo”. He walked Joan home and was about to part ways on her doorstep when “Her sister throws a cup of water over us, from an upstairs window.”⁷¹ Practical jokes aside, Berglund wrote that he still had a “good night”.⁷² When Berglund was granted nine days leave on Tuesday 1 August 1944 he called Joan that day to let her know he was off to Edinburgh. While Joan “seemed disappointed at my leaving”, there were no strings attached for Flying Officer Berglund.⁷³

During his leave to Edinburgh he explored Edinburgh Castle, took a trip to the zoo, saw a few films at the cinema, spent many afternoons lazing about in the park, consumed copious amounts of tea, ice-cream, and fish and chips, and went dancing most nights at the “Palais”. The entry for Wednesday 2 August 1944 reads: “Met Margaret Marshall, a WAAF, on leave and had a wizard time.”⁷⁴ Thursday reads: “Both Margaret and I thoroughly enjoyed ourselves.”⁷⁵ On Friday Berglund “Was victimised by Doris (a Scottish lassie) and was a success to take her home.”⁷⁶ On Saturday: “I meet some more sweet lassies, Maisie and Betty.”⁷⁷ Sunday: “the girls Agnes and Margaret are all right.”⁷⁸ Monday: “Majorie wants me to spend next leave with her. I don’t know.”⁷⁹ Tuesday: “Have a good time with Doreen.”⁸⁰ And on Wednesday: “Back to camp ... I ring Joan up and make a date for seven ... The end of a wonderful leave.”⁸¹ It can be seen that Berglund did not do too badly for himself during his nine-day leave. Berglund’s unfaithfulness to Joan and the fleeting nature of his romantic encounters with all of the different women during his leave to Edinburgh is reflective of the temporary and detached view that RAAF airmen had. Most airmen

⁷¹ Flying Officer Geoff Berglund, diary 3, Wednesday 12 July 1944, AWM: PR00402.

⁷² Berglund, diary 3, Wednesday 12 July 1944.

⁷³ Berglund, diary 3, Tuesday 1 August 1944.

⁷⁴ Berglund, diary 3, Wednesday 2 August 1944.

⁷⁵ Berglund, diary 3, Thursday 3 August 1944.

⁷⁶ Berglund, diary 3, Friday 4 August 1944.

⁷⁷ Berglund, diary 3, Saturday 5 August 1944.

⁷⁸ Berglund, diary 3, Sunday 6 August 1944.

⁷⁹ Berglund, diary 3, Monday 7 August 1944.

⁸⁰ Berglund, diary 3, Tuesday 8 August 1944.

⁸¹ Berglund, diary 3, Wednesday 9 August 1944.

attached to Bomber Command Squadrons did not get themselves into serious relationships. As Dixon recalled, “There was a general belief, I think, that this was no time to be forming any sort of permanent relationships.”⁸²

There were, of course, airmen whose experiences were contrary to the general view of temporary relationships. For example, Doubleday met his wife at a dance on his third day in England. They were in a relationship for two years before they got married, once Doubleday had completed an operational tour followed by a tour of instruction. “The crew used to go off to London and stay in a boozier for six days,” Doubleday recalled. “I had a home to go to, I had someone who loved me to look after me and to take my mind off all these things.”⁸³ There were others like him who balanced operational service with some sense of home life normality.

Leave: travel to explore, experience, and exercise the mind and body

Although drinking, partying, and erotic encounters with English women did preoccupy leave for a number of RAAF airmen, it was not the common experience shared by all Bomber Command aircrew. A typical trip to London for a number of airmen steered clear of the pubs and revolved instead around sightseeing. An example of this type of leave can be found in a letter dated 5 December 1942 from Warrant Officer Joey Goodwin to his wife, Stephanie. Goodwin’s letter told of how he became a member of the Boomerang Club, used the tube to get around London, and made trips to the cinema and theatre productions. His London experience also encompassed the exploration of a number of cultural institutions and landmarks in London such as Marble Arch, the Tower of London, and the Tower Bridge. “The Tower is an amazing place and is steeped in tradition and history,” wrote Goodwin.⁸⁴ Goodwin described a two-and-a-half-hour guided tour of Westminster Abbey that he did with a couple of fellow airmen. While Goodwin sometimes caught buses or the tube, he mainly walked everywhere. Goodwin described one particular stroll from St. Paul’s Cathedral towards the East End and over London Bridge: “Lanky had told his wife he’d spit over London Bridge and into the Thames for luck for her,” he wrote. “I did the same

⁸² Dixon, interview, April 1988.

⁸³ Doubleday, interview with Edward Stokes.

⁸⁴ Goodwin letter, 5 December 1942.

for Stephie and for Joey.”⁸⁵ Goodwin’s experience of London is reflective of a number of RAAF airmen who did not drink excessively and sought to take their mind off operational flying by making the most of the cultural attractions available to them in Britain.

Visits to relatives and friends as well as organised home-stays throughout Britain were also popular with RAAF airmen requiring a more relaxed leave from operations. A number of RAAF airmen were put in contact with distant relatives or family-friends that lived in England. Robert Hilliard, a navigator from No. 466 Squadron, was put in touch with his elderly cousin and spent one period of leave at her council flat in Glasgow. They visited a number of local attractions and made a trip to Greenock. “Although it didn’t bother me,” Hilliard recalled, “she turned out to be a strict vegetarian and a confirmed pacifist.”⁸⁶ Despite her vegetarianism, Hilliard’s elderly cousin still bought him meat with his food coupons. She also shared her pacifist views and explained that, “she could be gaoled for what she was saying”.⁸⁷ Hilliard assured her that “as she was not attempting to persuade me to desert the colours, she was committing no offence”.⁸⁸ While some airmen had contacts or made friends with fellow English aircrew and were able to go and stay with their families, others did not have such connections. The Lady Ryder Scheme was an organisation that arranged families across Britain for RAAF airmen to go and stay with on leave. “They enquire your likes and dislikes, and try and billet you where you will like it most,” wrote Goodwin in a letter to his wife.⁸⁹ Hilliard also recalled a fond week’s leave over Christmas to a 300-acre farm in Somerset through the Lady Ryder Scheme. “I received a warm welcome in their comfortable home,” Hilliard recorded in his postwar memoir. “A splendid Christmas dinner was served to a gathering of family and relations.”⁹⁰

Some airmen just required a little intellectual stimulation to take their minds off the stress of operational flying. University leave courses provided just the thing. The

⁸⁵ Goodwin letter.

⁸⁶ Flying Officer Robert Mackay Hilliard, No. 466 Squadron RAAF, *Nothing on the clock*, AWM: MSS1119, file: 419/47/51.

⁸⁷ Hilliard, *Nothing on the clock*.

⁸⁸ Hilliard, *Nothing on the clock*.

⁸⁹ Goodwin letter, 20 November 1942, AWM: PR91/181.

⁹⁰ Hilliard, *Nothing on the clock*.

universities at Oxford and Cambridge put on week-long “general cultural courses” open to RAAF airmen on leave in Britain. “No facility proved more popular,” Flight Lieutenant H.N. Smyth articulated in an Overseas Headquarters report. The university leave courses gave RAAF airmen “an opportunity of participating in a corporate life in the traditional surroundings of such famous institutions”. Although they lasted only a week, the courses were said to have “conferred considerable benefit on those fortunate enough to have been privileged to take them”. Throughout the course of the war, 700 RAAF airmen attended university leave courses in England.⁹¹

There were a number of opportunities available for RAAF sporting enthusiasts on leave to escape the stress of Bomber Command. Airmen could participate in spectate at a number of different sports catering for all levels during their time off.

International, inter-service, and inter-unit sporting fixtures were carried out across Britain in cricket, tennis, swimming, rowing, and rugby.⁹² Flying Officer Ken Bannerman of No. 462 Squadron recalled following the service cricket tests around England with his mid-upper gunner Flight Sergeant Jock White: “They were played at Lord’s, Sheffield and all the other test arenas.”⁹³ Surfing and surf lifesaving competitions were another form of recreation available to RAAF airmen on leave. Accommodation in a residential hostel at Newquay on the coast of Cornwall was “reserved for members of the RAAF wishing to compete in life-saving displays and/or surf racing”. The introduction of surfing and surf lifesaving “created a great sensation” in England and “provided splendid relaxation for Australian air-crew personnel”.⁹⁴ Arrangements were also made between the RAAF and non-residential sports clubs for airmen looking to improve their sporting skills on leave. A number of sporting venues such as the Dulwich Sports Club, the MCC at Lord’s, and the All England Tennis Club at Wimbledon provided practice facilities in squash, cricket, and tennis to RAAF airmen.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Flight Lieutenant H.N. Smyth, “Activities of Education Section: RAAF Overseas Headquarters”, 8 February 1946, AWM: AWM54, 81/4/125, pp. 2, 5.

⁹² RAAF Overseas Headquarters report, “History of Welfare Section”, AWM: AWM54, 81/4/125, pp. 6–7.

⁹³ Flying Officer Ken Bannerman, No. 462 Squadron RAAF, quoted in Batten, *Phoenix: book 2 – the reincarnation*.

⁹⁴ RAAF Overseas Headquarters report, “History of Welfare Section”, p. 7.

⁹⁵ RAAF Overseas Headquarters report, “History of Welfare Section”, p. 7.

Conclusion

These different experiences are indicative of the types of rest and recreation available to RAAF airmen based in Britain during the Second World War. The Welfare and Medical Sections of the RAAF put in place a number of measures, such as leave and recreational activities, to ensure that airmen were able to cope with the stress of flying in Bomber Command.

In the latter stages of the war from 1942 to 1945, the RAF deemed between 300 and 400 cases each year to be LMF. Bomber crews accounted for a third of these cases.⁹⁶ While official Australian records on the subject of LMF are scarce and fragmentary, a few insights can be drawn from the recollections of RAAF medical officers, which indicate that LMF appears to have been less of an issue in the Australian squadrons.

Squadron Leader J.D. Russell, the Australian representative on the No. 1 Central Medical Board of the RAF, reported very few Australian airmen deemed to have LMF from 1943 to 1945.⁹⁷ Squadron Leader John Coto, who served for two years as Medical Officer of No. 466 Squadron, similarly reported no more than two cases of LMF amongst the large number of aircrew who passed through.⁹⁸ While it is impossible to calculate exactly how many Australian airmen were deemed to have LMF, the evidence of Russell and Coto indicate that LMF cases among RAAF squadrons were relatively few.

One factor to account for the low rate of LMF among Australian airmen undoubtedly lies in the astuteness of the RAAF Welfare and Medical sections to put in place measures to help airmen deal with the stress of flying. The RAF did not invest in welfare support to the same extent as the RAAF. Whereas Australians were visitors far from home, and the RAAF Welfare Section therefore provided them with social activities when they were not flying operations, the expectation seems to be that British airmen had homes to go to when on leave. The indication of lower numbers of

⁹⁶ C.P. Symonds and Denis Williams, "Investigation into psychological disorder in flying personnel", AIR2/6252, TNA quoted in Edgar Jones, "LMF: The use of psychiatric stigma in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War", *The Journal of Military History*, 70, 2, pp. 439–58.

⁹⁷ Dr. Russell interview with Allen S. Walker, 25 June 1959, AWM: 481/12/201.

⁹⁸ Letter from John H. Coto to Allen S. Walker, 27 July 1959, AWM: AWM54, 481/12/201.

LMF within RAAF squadrons suggest that the RAAF had better ways of managing their airmen in Britain than did the RAF. The RAAF was effective in providing adequate leave and recreational facilities for Australian airmen to cope with the stress of flying operations with Bomber Command.