**Recollections of War Service, WW11 – Thomas LeRoy Stratford. Service Number 126702**

At the outbreak of the Second World War I was an apprentice Joiner at John Sharp and Sons in South Melbourne. Although I tried to enlist on a number of occasions I was deemed to be working in a protected industry and was not accepted into the armed forces. As northern Australia came under attack, and more resources were required, a relaxation of the protected industries rules took place. I was finally accepted into the Air Force on the fourth of February 1943.

I was assessed as appropriate to be trained as a radar operator even though I was not happy working with things electronic and queried the choice, but there was no choice, you did as instructed. Rookie Training was at Shepparton Show Ground which I remember as generally being a toughening up or lifting ones fitness camp. There was lots of marching, early morning exercises every day, commando type training (crawling under wire, vaulting obstacles etc), days on bivouac and training in unarmed combat which thankfully I have never needed.

Tomatoes were plentiful at Shepparton and appeared on three meals a day but the camp supply evidently became fly blown which resulted in virtually the whole camp suffering diarrhoea. During the night the guards could be heard calling ‘who goes there’ but the retort was often ‘get out of the way it’s too late’

At the conclusion of rookie training we were transported by bus and train to Richmond airbase in NSW, where I undertook radar training. As I was departing Shepparton I crossed paths with Dexter Jones who was coming in to rookie training. Dexter was the son of hardware store owners in Mentone and I knew him before enlisting. In an uncanny twist Dexter and I also crossed paths at Darwin and in Labuan at later stages in the war.

I struggled to complete some of the radar training course as electronics was not my best suit and made attempts to transfer elsewhere but there was no choice. At completion of training the group, which were to become 321 Radar Unit, were despatched to northern Australia. The trip was train journeys from Sydney to Melbourne, Melbourne to Adelaide, Adelaide to Quorn where being in June/July I remember having the coldest night’s sleep I ever endured. A final train journey took us to Alice Springs. We were then loaded on to road trucks for several dusty day’s journey north to Larrimah.

I remember that at one overnight stop on the road I perhaps got off on the wrong foot with another radar operator B.P.Coe. Coe had been tagged with the nickname ‘Tarzan’ when he scaled a tree to gain a better view at grenade training, the Sargent began referring to him as Tarzan, it stuck. Coe had also grown an ugly black moustache which others had teased him they would shave half off one day. On this overnight stop Coe and I were detailed to clean up after breakfast before packing our own gear for the days transport. For some unknown reason Coe did not turn up and I got left to do the whole clean up. On my return to our tent to pack an officer challenged me as to where I had been. I was responding when Coe appeared so I gave Coe a thump and replied ‘ask that bloke’ Coe finished up out the end of the tent and this may have contributed to a later frightening encounter.

After a final rail trip from Larrimah in cattle wagons we arrived in the Darwin area at 88 Wing and were allocated to a marquee where we made up a bunk, a palliasse (jute bag filled with straw) on the ground. On the first night at 88 Wing I was on guard duty till midnight and had to find my way to my bunk in unfamiliar surrounds in complete darkness amongst twenty bodies in the marquee. I stumbled across a couple of sleeping bodies and suddenly heard a rifle being cocked and it was suddenly thrust in my face. A voice bellowed ‘ya not going to touch my mo’ it was Coe. Fruitless negotiation ensued until I finally said, I’m going to bed, turned my back and went about finding my bunk. I didn’t sleep much that night and next morning it became apparent that most of the blokes in the marquee had been woken by the commotion but they lay doggo, not one was game enough to join the dispute for fear of stirring Coe into action. Facing the barrel of a .303 proved one of the more frightening events of my war service and to this day I can still see Coe and his rifle.

Darwin (88 Wing which was inland) was remembered for its freezing cold nights when six blankets were required for warmth but by 8.00am it was quite warm. PT started each day at 6.00am until breakfast. To this point we still didn’t know where, when or what we were to be doing and in fact still didn’t know we were the nucleus of 321 Radar Unit.

One day three volunteers were appointed; Bart Brown, Kevin Holland and Tom Stratford. We were ordered to pack up and get ready to leave on that truck over there. The truck ride took us to the wharf at Darwin harbour where we were off loaded at a large freight shed which had one end blown out of it. An army transport unit were off-loading crates and various equipment and stores in the shed and we were directed, by one Pilot Officer Stitt, to set up camp in the shed and guard all this stuff. We had to look after all our own needs including cooking. After a couple of days another load of gear arrived which had to be kept separate from the first stack, and PO Stitt had no one to look after this gear. We advised PO Stitt that if it was placed up close to the existing equipment with a dividing line we could guard the lot. PO Stitt was appreciative of the offer and kept us in food fit for princes for the time we were in the shed.

At first, we were unsettled by the noises in the shed but after we worked out it was bats coming and going we settled down. Things were uneventful although one night when I was on guard I heard footsteps approaching, easily recognisable army boots, in the gravel. A couple of men’s voices were audible and the silhouette of a face appeared at the door then disappeared. One voice said ‘was the door shut’ but the quick reply was ‘no, there is a rifle pointed at us’ Footsteps retreated back down the road.

Some of the gear had been opened by the army transport soldiers and when our eventual Commanding Officer, Daryl Oakes, arrived he was not pleased. We were not going to accept the blame but identified the army blokes as the only others who had access and thus we were not popular with army transport.

After a few days there was an order to pack up. Men arrived from the group who had travelled to 88 Wing and the gear was loaded onto a small freighter, the Alagna. More men arrived which were identified as a guard unit. We embarked and spent a couple of days on the water. The weather being pretty rough, sea sickness was prevalent, fortunately I was not struck down although I felt pretty close at times. The worst was when I was on ‘Jap sub watch’ on the stern or the ship. The ship heaved so much that the prop was coming clear of the water below me and along with feeling poorly I had little chance of seeing a periscope, or anything else, if there was one lurking.

The ship called at Milingimbi to pick up a couple of men, one being quite unwell and would have been transported back to Darwin. The ship then anchored well off shore from Yirrkala. A construction crew plus the main body of 321 Radar unit had been landed ahead of the Alagna from a ship called the Southern Cross. They had commenced construction of some facilities including a mess hut, kitchen, orderly room and a water tank and stand connected via pipeline to a nearby creek. Water from the creek was drawn upstream from the aboriginal camp and mission station. For obvious reasons water quality was a problem.

The Southern Cross had towed a barge and this plus row boats were used to transfer engines (power generation), the radar tower and equipment and general supplies to the beach. Fuel drums (44’s) were pushed over the side of the ship to float to shore, but most drifted several miles down the beach and it was a major task to roll/drag them back to the camp. At one point I was directed to attempt to use the Missioner’s horse to drag some drums back to camp. Not being a horseman I found this difficult. As the equipment and stores hit the beach it had to be dragged beyond the water line and amongst the trees to camouflage it and later carted up to the camp. The radar mast and equipment had to be carted up a small hill where it was to be erected. No vehicles were present, just a hand cart. The green and brown tree ants fell every time we bumped a tree and promptly used their pincers to cause havoc and weird antics among the men, who quickly removed shirts and shorts to pick the ants off. At the end of each day we were very tired boys but we were up the next day to start again.

The first night at Yirrkala was under a rough tent and then the second day we were to set up our own tent with three others. I was again allocated with Kevin Holland, Bart Brown and one other. We met the Missioner, Rupert Kentish, with whom I got on well. He advised me on dealing with the aborigines, who largely lived as they had done before white man arrived in Australia. The aborigines observed our every move, wore virtually no clothes and carried spears, which was their method of hunting and living off the land. Spears were quite off putting to the new unit but it was also a pleasure to watch the aborigines spearing fish.

The construction crew left with the ship and 321 Radar unit had to complete all the construction ourselves. It transpired that I was the only man with experience/training in building and built shelves and other fittings and shelters from scant resources and tools; some packing cases from the radar gear, a small amount of corrugated iron and some trees cut by the construction crew.

All the radar equipment was dragged up the hill. A small hut to house operations known as the ‘Doover’ was built to house the radar screen, equipment and the operators. The radar mast was supplied with instructions for construction (a meccano set). CO Oakes and Radar Mechanic Fred Koochew were skilled at electronics but they had no idea of assembling the mast. I found myself up the hill unpacking and assembling the main bits but I was lost when it came to piecing the radar electronics together.

As the camp was getting more organised and generated power had been partially connected to run the radar unit, wires were suspended through trees and at one point ran above the galvanised iron roof of the mess hut. During one ‘smoko’ CO Oakes climbed onto the roof of the mess hut with a set of wire cutters and selected one wire then changed his mind and changed it again before finally cutting a wire. With a look of great relief Oakes pointed at the uncut wire and exclaimed, ‘that’s the live wire’ Oakes then proceeded to prepare a junction for the mess hut.

One of the camp cooks had been a baker and as flour was plentiful he identified that if we had an oven he could bake bread. Empty 44 fuel drums were fashioned into an oven and covered with the spoil from ant nests for insulation. I was not sure how he created yeast but the bread and buns produced in this oven were most acceptable.

The missioner had an old bullock which really didn’t seem to serve any purpose and one day it broke into his vegetable garden and did considerable damage. Missioner Kentish gave the bullock to the camp. We had not had any fresh meat since we arrived at Yirrkala. As one member of the unit was a farmer who was confident he could butcher the animal it was shot and butchered. Some of the meat was kept for the kitchen, the missioner was given some and some given to the aboriginals. The rest was swooped upon by the men and cooked to their own liking. I recall that we had never eaten so much charcoal in our lives but having real fresh meat was such a treat, even if it was as tough a meal as we had ever encountered.

Camp life was generally uneventful. We had to carry our rifle at all times, we were instructed to always swim in pairs with somebody on guard as croc’s were seen at the mouth of the creek and snakes regularly caused excitement.

Radar operators were rotated four hours on and eight hours off so we were looking for something to occupy ourselves during the ‘day off hours’ I had observed the missioner’s boat damaged on the beach, it had a burst keel after having been dumped on the beach by a big wave. Although the mission area was off limits to the unit I was able to gain the confidence of missioner Kentish and the permission of CO Oakes to see what I could do to repair the boat. Although I knew little about boat building, I used a few tools borrowed from the missioner and limited materials to satisfactorily effect repairs. I used some pitch to finally seal the repairs and the unit were able to use the boat to go fishing which proved the repairs were a success.

On one occasion an aboriginal boy came with us on the boat and he began holding his stomach indicating he was feeling sick. He just disappeared over the side and although searching hard we couldn’t find him, so in a very worried state we headed back to report to the missioner. On arriving on the beach here was the lad already waiting for us.

While working on the boat on the beach I was often shadowed by the aborigines, sometimes one sometimes many. I learnt that if you wanted them to help they wanted something for it, a cigarette or something that took their fancy. The missioner had instructed me to not ‘pay’ them too much lest they keep seeking more and more.

Whilst working on the beach there was a toddler who was always dirty and bore the brunt of discipline of the older children and teens. I regularly brought food items, army biscuits and cold tea, for myself and the youngster. I learned I had to protect him from the older children and adults until he could eat the offerings or they would take them from him. I also tried to teach him cleanliness. Having a clean tin or jar before he could have food or tea was my rule, he got nothing until the tin or jar was clean, he learned very quickly.

I learned that the toddler was abandoned by his parents who had rowed a canoe to Wessel island and left him in the care of the aboriginal camp.

One day I was unable to source the tools to proceed with work on the boat and the toddler was on the beach in a filthy state and covered in flies, so I took up a piece of soap from the boat (probably used to grease nails and screws) and carried the child to the creek and set about giving him a good scrub. After a short while engrossed in the task I sensed something and looked up to find the bank ringed by most of the tribe carrying spears etc, one was even holding my rifle. Nothing was said but they observed every move I made so I continued to wash the child, keeping him close, giving me time to think until I ran out of soap and ideas. I had no idea what might happen. Eventually I carried the child close and walked boldly up, took my rifle, which was handed back, and the aborigines parted so I could return to the beach. I remained at the beach, keeping the toddler close, till all the aborigines disappeared.

A few days later I was working on the boat when a noise attracted my attention and the tribe came down with spears, some in ceremonial face paint and more clothing (covering) than normal. The toddler was not present at this time and the tribe leader spoke to the tribe and me at length. Finally he turned to the women of the tribe who came forward and presented the toddler, Larrandungoo, to me and the tribe declared me as ba-par Tom.

There was no way I could take Larrandungoo back to camp but Missioner Kentish smoothed concerns. I became ba-pa Tom and Larandungoo was my ninni and it was a strict rule that he had to be brought to me when I came to the beach. The tribe accepted to look after him when I was not present. I continued to bring him food but the tribe had to take care of Larrandungoo when I was at the 321 unit camp.

Fresh meat was a treat so Bart Brown and I, through the missioner, sought a guide from the aborigines to help us locate game. On one occasion we were sent off with teenagers and younger children. Bart and I couldn’t believe the stealth with which they could move without disturbing a twig or leaf. When one of the younger children broke a twig or made a noise the elder ones gave them a good belting but they were not to cry, that was a noise. This expedition was fruitless save for a crow up a tree which the kids wanted it shot and with good luck I duly obliged. The children swooped on the carcass and carried it back to their camp, mimicking the shooting, and after widely displaying this crow the aborigines threw it on the fire, burnt the feathers off, and then ate it. On some occasions we did manage to shoot a roo or wallaby which was gleefully accepted by the camp cook.

I was finally sent back to 88 Wing then on to another radar operator task at Lee Point. Fishing in a tidal river which I accessed through a swamp became the spare time activity. Fishing was not productive and after the army engineers closed off a section of the beach front they then carried out an exercise of bridge building across the tidal river followed by the demolition crew blowing it up. Along with a couple of crocs this took the shine off my enthusiasm for fishing.

While I was at Lee Point there was a call for carpenters/body builders and I applied. I was sent for an aptitude test which was mostly a practical and very easy. It was aided by the Sargent with whom I had to work. He was a good bloke and easy to work with. This Sargent provided the tools, equipment and instructions for the task, which proved to be basic and simple. He reported positively to the OIC and the application was granted with a request that I be appointed to his unit but this did not occur as I had spent more than twelve months in the tropics and was due for leave.

It was now about 15 months since enlistment and I was given leave to come home to Melbourne. I had a day or two in the Darwin area and was hitch hiking in the back of a truck when it picked up another hitch hiker. It was Dexter Jones. We had a great catch up about our experiences since our last meeting. He and I met again in Borneo a few months later. After the war we maintained this friend ship until his passing many years later.

I joined a group of others travelling back to Melbourne. Arriving at Brisbane by plane we found that all passenger planes were going north and we had to make our own way south. Not knowing Brisbane the other blokes and I finally arrived at the railway station booking office late in the day. We were informed that the office was closing for the day and we would have to come back tomorrow morning. As we were trying to plead our case two officers emerged from a back office, one was Pilot Officer Stitt from the Darwin Wharf, now Flight Lieutenant Stitt. He recognised me and asked what was going on. Pretty quickly FL Stitt summed up the situation, and despite protestations ordered that these three blokes be booked on the next train south now and that they have seats. We were on the first train next morning, with seats. I became a man to know by my two new friends who I had only met on the plane from Darwin.

After about 10 days of leave I was to report to Fishermans bend in Melbourne but I was able to live at home. I remember this was over the 1944 Christmas period because I was given guard duty at the Coode Island Workshop on New Years Eve 1944.

Fire training was critical at Fishermans Bend and everybody had specific tasks, pumpers, hydrant operators, beaters etc and some checks occurred every day. We were warned a real drill may occur at any time. This test came when a pile of rubbish well away from the hanger and other buildings was set alight and the alarm was raised. First issue was when the hydrant was turned on the water darted along the hose towards the pumper but the pump motor wouldn’t start. Then when the hoses were rolled out they were only long enough to cover the hangar and buildings, so didn’t reach the fire on the airfield. One clever spark jumped on a tractor and hitched up a chain which he trailed around the fire to drag the pile closer to the hangers and thus the hoses. This gave time for the pump to be started and all worked beautifully, even the beaters got to show their skills mopping up the smaller pieces that dropped off behind the chain. A very amusing exercise!

After a couple of weeks working at Fishermans Bend I was sent to Mt Druit (Sydney) appointed to 1st Tactical Air Force 86 Attack Wing No1 RSU(Repair and Servicing Unit), as a motor body builder. Our time was spent preparing to go north as a new unit and we later found this was to S.E. Asia. We set forth by train to Brisbane and straight to the wharf to board a ship named the ‘Seaspray’ which was bigger and much more comfortable than the Alagna.

We were marking time on the wharf doing nothing and nobody seemed to be taking charge when an officer came along, it was Flight Lieutenant Stitt who was now in charge of Troop Transport for despatch overseas. He recognised me and took an interest in where we were going and what for but we had not yet been told. FL Stitt suggested I talk to our CO’s and start to get on board lest he would take over to get things moving. I have never seen FL Stitt since although I felt he was now a good friend.

We sailed to Morati where we spent a couple of weeks before we moved to a staging camp on Labuan. The unit arrived off shore of Victoria Town on Labuan while there was still bombing to repel the last of the Japanese from control of the area. There was some excitement setting up the Works Camp with some of the Japanese entrenched in fox holes doing what we were sent to do to them. On one occasion they emerged from their entrenchments and attacked the army transports. The Japanese had been able to steal some uniforms but were known to not have hats. All personnel were ordered to wear hats at all times to ensure identification.

We were called upon to act as guards on transport operations but my rifle was pretty useless from a truck cabin. The Sargent in charge of the kitchen had a Thompson sub machine gun and as I had been working in the kitchen he loaned it to me. On one mission we encountered two soldiers without hats on a rough track. The driver urged me to shoot them but I held back although I kept them firmly in my sights. Fortunately for me they turned out to be our blokes but they did get a pull through for not having their hats on.

Activities were all preparation for the push into S.E. Asia but the Yanks dropped the bomb/s and the war came to a more abrupt end.

Labuan had been devastated and we were given permission to scavenge some materials from damaged buildings to improve our conditions. Of course some people overstepped the mark and materials were taken from the locals so an order was given to discontinue. Two officers had been some of the worst offenders but had been appointed to inspect others and order the return of materials. Being trained in building our hut was well set up and these officers attempted to order us to dismantle and return materials. Incensed at their overstepping the mark I abused them and argued strongly that we hadn’t scavenged good items and were being unfairly treated. Somehow I got away with challenging officers as we heard nothing more.

Our role on Labuan was to repair jeeps, light trucks and some amphibious aeroplanes and all paint finishes in war were matt or non-reflective. Time must not have been critical when the war ended as the unit spent some of its time painting vehicles but with an additive to the paint which gave a high gloss finish. The CO requested his vehicle get the gloss treatment but this only opened the flood gates and all his mates wanted their vehicles spruced up as well. The unit jacked up on the flood of paint jobs and the CO was forced to put a stop to all the gloss painting.

Volunteers were sought for the occupation force in Japan but Repair and Servicing unit and many others had had enough and opted to come home. As a carpenter (c early in the alphabet) I was despatched home fairly early. I flew to Balikpapan on Borneo and was then on a flight to Darwin in a freight hold with no seats. I stood up to look out of an observation turret and noticed oil flowing across a wing from one of the motors. I relayed the observation to the CO who consulted the pilot. Upon checking the controls the pilot was not very pleased with what he had found and immediately turned back to Balikpapan. On landing they found the plane had four minutes left in the air. After a couple of days, repairs were completed and we made the flight to Darwin.

Souvenirs were often smuggled home, tools, firearms, enemy trophies etc. Although I didn’t set out to souvenir items, on the trip home I stumbled on a set of high quality pliers/side cutters, most likely dumped by somebody who got cold feet. They went in my bag and made it home. These pliers have been an excellent tool in my kit ever since and are now cherished by my son in his tool box.

After several days in camp at Darwin we were called to an early morning parade where the PA system announced that a plane was waiting for us at the airport and to get packed promptly. A Liberator bomber took us to Laverton airport where we were loaded into trucks for delivery to Spencer Street station. I was free to travel by train to Mentone for a few days leave although I was not discharged.

I was posted to the Exhibition Buildings in Carlton but lived at home in Mentone. This was a most unfulfilling time in my war service as there was no real objective and I was given a range of lacky jobs. Of most annoyance was the fact that I was expected to front up for inspection in full uniform but was then directed to undertake tasks such as general cleaning and washing floors. This was somewhat humiliating as I was washing floors for the WAAFS but the CO (a female) did accept it was valid to object to the full uniform requirement to perform these tasks. Nothing changed though.

I was discharged from the Air Force on March 7 1946.

Thomas LeRoy Stratford, September 2016