

In His Own Words ¹

William (Bill) Henry Saunders – An Account of my WWII experience. RAAF Service Number: 49384

When I first decided to enlist in the early years of the War, I considered joining the Army and made initial inquiries. During this process I discovered that before I could take on active duty, I would have to have any health issues attended to by the Army including repairing my teeth. I decided to do this privately rather than turning myself over to the military dental surgeons. In this pause in signing up, I made the decision to enlist in the Air Force instead.

I completed the enlistment process in 1941. My eyesight was not perfect, so I was signed up as a Signaller, my first task was to complete initial training. I was stationed at the Royal Exhibition Buildings and marched down to the original Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) each morning with other trainees to complete technical training. Post my training period I was stationed first in Adelaide and then Cairns.

During October 1942, two RAAF attack squadrons arrived in New Guinea. I was part of these squadrons, arriving in Port Moresby from Townsville on the 11 September 1942 in a flying boat. The Japs were still bombing the place in daylight and during the night. I was attached to the Port Moresby Signals Unit as an electrician and looked after the flying boat tenders. There was a sheet metal workshop there and I took it upon myself to alter the light shades over each of the work areas, using skills learnt previously as a sheet metal worker, so that no light escaped thus providing easier working conditions and better blackout protection. This action was a factor in me being made a Corporal.

¹ A personal account of time spent in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) 1939-45. The account contains facts summarised by Bill from a book titled 'RAAF in the Pacific, 1956'. Minor edits made by Carol Kelly.

NOT FOR SALE.

In the Field, Wednesday, January 6, 1943.

Vol. 1. No. 48.

GUINEA GOLD

ENEMY SHIPPING SMASHED IN RABAUL RAID

NINE VESSELS HIT WITH 1000lb. BOMBS

WAR SUMMARY

NEW GUINEA:—Allied troops close in on Sanananda.

NORTH AFRICA:—Fighting French repulse Axis attack at Sonnedok.

RUSSIA:—Progress being made by Soviet forces on all fronts. Huge captures of booty.

NORTH AFRICA

AXIS SPIES SHOT

A COMMUNIQUE issued by General Giraud, French High Commissioner in North

Field Marshal Wavell



AMERICAN heavy bombers wrought havoc among shipping in an attack on Rabaul harbor on Monday night. Nine vessels were destroyed for certain, and another was probably destroyed, their tonnage being estimated at over 50,000.

General MacArthur's communique announcing the raid states that a direct hit with a 1000lb. bomb was scored on a destroyer-tender with destroyer tied alongside, and eight other ships were hit with 1000lb. bombs and left either enveloped in flames or sinking.

The communique added that enemy fighters attempted interception, and that six were shot down in air combat. One of our bombers is missing.

It was during this time in Port Moresby that we lost the only member of our unit to die during our tour of duty. We were being drilled in the use of hand grenades and he stood up too early, wanting to see the result of the blast and immediately dropped to the ground. When the medical team investigated, they found a very tiny piece of shrapnel had cut through his clothing and entered his heart, killing him instantly.

There was no civilian population in Port Moresby, and I was given the opportunity whilst working on the flying boat tenders to visit a native village 40 miles along the coast. Two doctors needed to be transported to the village and a small boat was to be used to do this. I was assigned to the boat as a crew member. The native village was made up mainly of women and was a bit of an eye exercise. We slept on the boat overnight.

One night while working on a flying boat tender, I was prevented from going back out to the flying boat with a lit blow torch by a chap coming out of the hut nearest the jetty where the flying boat was moored, with the words "put that bloody thing out!" There was a real chance that I would have blown the jetty, flying boat and myself sky high as there was so much fuel around.

Another night, during a midnight air raid with sirens blaring and bombs going off, I discovered that even though I was sleeping in the centre of our 40-man hut, I could easily be the first person to leap into our outside trenches for shelter. My self-satisfying speedy exit quickly turned to dismay as everyone else jumped on top of me! I experienced about 50 air raids and remember one in particular during the day, I was making my way to a supply depot across the valley from our camp and looked up to see the bomb bays opening on an enemy aircraft and the bombs begin to fall. They landed on the depot and killed three men.

One morning we were surprised by a very low flying aircraft that came over our camp with no warning, we evacuated our tent rapidly only to discover it was one of our own. A message was received shortly after – *its time you camouflaged your tent!*

I spent a lot of time at the air strip watching the planes take off and saw my first Japanese prisoner there. He was in a pretty sorry state.

After a while our planes began to get on top of the Japanese Forces, but we had to wait until the Yanks arrived before we put a stop to the air raids on Port Moresby. At the finish the Japanese were losing all their planes on daylight missions.

Our planes based at Port Moresby were mainly from No 22 Boston and No 30 Beaufighter Squadrons. The Australian Infantry Force (AIF) was smashing its way back through the Kokoda Pass towards Buna, and the RAAF squadrons operating as part of the US 5th Air Force, gave splendid support – bombing, strafing, dropping supplies and flying out the wounded. Before the end of the year the Japs had lost Buna and Gona. Two US soldiers, Tiny and Tim, that we had befriended in St Kilda when they arrived in Melbourne earlier lost their lives in this area.

Meanwhile, off the coast of New Guinea, we were being pushed steadily towards Lae and Salamaua. On March 1, 1943 a Japanese convoy of 22 ships was sighted in the Bismarck Archipelago. A RAAF Catalina played an important part in the shadowing of the convoy. When it turned into Vitiaz Straight, on Wednesday, March 3 the RAAF Beaufighters, Bostons and Beaufords took part in the attack. The Beaufighters leading in the low-level attack planes and smashing ack-ack batteries while the US Mitchells, Fortresses and Bostons did the bombing. The convoy was entirely sunk. All the soldiers on the ships were

lost, but if the Japanese had landed our defences may not have been good enough to defeat them.

April 6, 1943 Bill Starred ★



The unit I was part of was then flown in a DC3 to Milne Bay and then to Goodenough Island. When we arrived, there were no air raid trenches and we were immediately greeted by a Japanese air raid. It was an awful feeling lying on the ground wedging yourself into any crevice you could find even though the bombs were being dropped over the next hill. When the all-clear was given we dug the trenches in record time. We worked even faster when we were told about the daisy-cutter bombs that took your legs off.

I was part of Number 10 Signal Unit, 22 Squadronⁱ at Milne Bay. There were about 35 of us with a Squadron Leader in charge and a lot of equipment. We lived in tents and had access to a jeep at times. Our job was to put in place an operational wireless unit for the planes in our area and on one occasion to wire up a big marquee with phones for a top-level conference. As our Squadron Leader was not a Wing Commander he was not allowed into the marquee during the conference, so he acted as my *gofer* - a very good one at that.

Another chap and I did all the tree-climbing to put up the wireless aerials and often the local natives got us to knock down the coconuts for them at the same time. Our skill at tree climbing increased our access to the jeeps and a lot of time off! Needless to say, we enjoyed this freedom to explore the local tracks and fishing spots. One particularly memorable time was fishing in a deep waterhole with a local native about my age; I had a hand grenade which I exploded in the water to stun the fish and then we both dived in to recover a splendid haul of large and very edible fish.

It was here however where I experienced another close shave. I was on the back of a truck with a 5KVA generator, going up a steep incline when the driver changed gears and tossed me off the back onto the track with my legs twisted and the generator balancing perilously above me. It took me a few days to get over that one.

From Milne Bay I went to the island of Kiriwina. There were three of us in a new DC3 from the States with all our signals gear - new crew and all - complete with a fighter escort. They really must have wanted our equipment to get there! Once we arrived, we discovered that we were on a very flat atoll, so not many high aerials were required and not much for us to do. I got used to nude swimming while at Kiriwina as we spent most of our spare time swimming in the surrounding sea.

After 15 months overseas, I arrived back in Australia on 11 February 1944 and was posted to Essendon for 6 months and then on to Adelaide for an Electrical Fitters course. I got married during this period and was then posted to 4RSU Oakey Queensland for 8 months. My wife Joyce managed to join me for just 2 days before I was sent to Darwin which was considered too dangerous for the wives to be allowed to follow. Very disappointing for us both. I stayed in Darwin for three months at the very end of the war.

It was during this time that I witnessed the arrival of the remnants of Australia's Army battalions that survived the fall of Singapore and the terrible prisoner of war camps that followed. Among them was the Unit that I had been destined to join had I gone ahead with my first enlistment attempts and not joined the Air Force instead. I considered myself very fortunate.

As the war effort wound down, I was assigned to a convoy of 73 vehicles which were destined for Forbes in NSW. We were paired up, two to a vehicle to share the long drive to Alice Springs. Nights were spent playing cards till late and the days often saw a truck or jeep heading off the road into the desert with both the driver and companion asleep. Another vehicle would peel off from the convoy to give chase and bring the sleepers around with much honking and shouting. Once we arrived in Alice Springs, the convoy was loaded onto railway flat tops on the old rail-track to Marree and then a road convoy again through Peterborough and Albury and finally dirt roads to Forbes where I finished my time in the Air Force. I was discharged on the 4 March 1946.

During this same period, back in New Guinea, the RAAF grew in stature, assembling two squadrons at Milne Bay, one Beaufort and one Hudson. The Beaufighters and Bostons were moved to Goodenough Island with a squadron of Kittyhawks. A Spitfire and a Kittyhawk Squadron were based on Kiriwina Island. From these bases the RAAF took control of the sea lanes south of the Solomons and along the coast of New Britain.

Towards the end of 1943, the Beaufighters and Bostons moved on to Kiriwina, and the two bomber squadrons (now Beauforts) were brought to Goodenough Island, supported by a third Beaufort torpedo bomber squadron. On October 12, 1944 the Beauforts made their first night raid on Rabaul. On November 8, Beaufort torpedo bombers attacked shipping in Simpson's Harbour, while Beaufort bombers bombed the airstrips. The Beauforts made many such night raids over Vunakanau and Lakunai airstrips at Rabaul.

From then on, the RAAF was left to secure the area around New Guinea until the end of the war while the rest of the allied air force moved on to battles closer to Japan.



ⁱ Extract from History of 22 Squadron – National War Memorial site.

22 Squadron's first assignments of the Second World War were as a training unit covering army support and towing targets for anti-aircraft practice. In 1941 the unit was equipped with Anson and Wirraway aircraft and flew seaward patrols along the eastern seaboard. By November 1942 the unit had moved to Port Moresby in New Guinea and was equipped with Boston light bombers and Beaufighters. The squadron attacked enemy targets and shipping in the Buna-Gona area. During an attack on the foreshores of Salamaua, Flight Lieutenant W.E. Newton and his crew were shot down and forced to land at sea. Newton and Flight Sergeant Lyon swam ashore only to be captured by waiting Japanese troops. They were both killed on 29 March 1943. Newton received a posthumous award of the Victoria Cross for his attacks on Japanese positions, making him one of only two awarded to RAAF Squadron members.

In August 1943, the squadron moved to Goodenough Island and continued to search for Japanese barges and vessels used in increasing numbers to supply troops in New Guinea.