

Warrant Officer John [Jack] Robert BELL

Jack Bell was born on the on the 20th December 1917 to parents Bert and Carrie Bell in Toowong, an inner suburb of Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.

Jack attended Toowong State School and later Brisbane Boys College where he passed his Junior Public Certificate. After finishing school Jack started work at D & W Murray Ltd- a men's and boy's clothing ware house on Elizabeth Street, Brisbane.

When Jack turned 18, he joined the Militia and became a member of the 14th Field Battery, 5th Field Artillery Brigade, Royal Australian Artillery. Jack specialised as a gun layer on the 25-pounder field gun-howitzer and was promoted to Bombardier[Corporal].

With the approaching of WW2 Jack decided to enlist in the Royal Australian Air Force. Jack wanted to be a pilot but was posted on the 24 May 1940 as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner under the Empire Air Training Scheme. He was sent to No. 1 Wireless Air Gunners School, Ballarat.

Jack completed Course 2 at 1 WAGS passing the Wireless and Morse requirements of the course. In his book ' Jack Bells War' Jack recalls the bleak weather in Ballarat at the time and the spartan accommodation at the Ballarat Show Grounds. Time off from training was spent playing sport and socialising in town. After graduating at the Ballarat base Jack was sent to Evans Head in northern N.S.W. for a four-week course in gunnery. Here he quickly picked up the training on the Vickers machine gun and after completion of the course was promoted to sergeant. At 23 years old he was about to be sent to war.

On the 4th February 1941 Jack sailed from Sydney on board the *Aquitania* bound for Bombay. From Bombay Jack travelled on the *Windsor Castle* to Port Said in Egypt. After several weeks of work parties Jack was assigned to 216 Squadron RAF in June 1941. The Squadron flew Bristol Bombays, a medium sized transport aircraft, and moved stores, spare parts, medical supplies and personnel all over Egypt, Libya.

On the 23rd January 1942 Sergeant Jack bell was assigned to Bristol Bombay Number L 5811 to collect staff and exchange aircrew at Msus. The aircraft was hit by an explosive shell from the ground and exploded. In trying to get other crew out of the burning aircraft Jack's head and hands were badly burned. Twenty-five-year-old Sergeant Anthony Carter was killed.

Jack and the surviving crew were taken Prisoners of War by the Germans. Jack was operated on to have a large splinter of metal removed from his abdomen. As luck would have it the German surgeon was an abdominal specialist who had trained and practiced in England.

Ten days after surgery Jack was transported on a stretcher in the back of a truck to a hospital in Tripoli controlled by the Italians. After a week of care, he was put on a hospital ship bound for Caserta Hospital on the outskirts of Naples. Here he was nursed by Countess Ciano-11 Duce's daughter who showed compassion to the sick and injured POW.

As prisoner's health improved, they were transferred to Italian prisoner of war camps – Campo 65 Gravina-Altamura in Southern Italy. Jack spent 4 weeks at this camp in appalling conditions before being transferred to Campo 57 at Grupignano in the north of Italy. By June 1942 this camp held some 2,000 Australian and New Zealand POW's. Campo 57 was very well established and well regulated with constructed latrines and showers and strict health regulations. The food consisted of the Italian army rations of bread, macaroni or rice and other staples. However, the treatment of POW's was harsh especially if escape attempts were made.

When Italy capitulated on the 3 September 1943 the Germans took control of all the POW camps. After 14 months in Campo 57 Jack and the other POW's were transferred by train wagons to Stalag XV111-A Wolfsberg, in the southern Austrian state of Carinthia. This was the transient camp before arriving at Stalag 1V-B Muhlberg, about 110 k south of Berlin. This camp was run by the Wehrmacht- the German army. [It is estimated that between 1939 and 1945 approximately 300.000 prisoners from over 40 nations passed through the camp. About 3,000 died mainly from tuberculosis and typhus.] Many escape attempts were made with tunnels constructed as escape routes. Initially German reprisals were severe but as the war progressed the guards became more apathetic and corruptible.

Life in the camp was harsh however Red Cross parcels of food and essentials made life a little better for the POW's. As a distraction from the monotony of daily life POW's put-on plays, musicals, ran lectures and also produced newspapers and magazines. On Anzac Day 1944 the Germans allowed the Australians and New Zealanders to have a parade.

On the 24 April 1945 Russian soldiers appeared at the gates of Stalag 1V-B and for the thousands of POW's in the camp the war was essentially over, but the challenges were not yet finished.

Fearing a longer stay at the camp Jack and a group of POW's left the camp and eventually made their way back to England on a Lancaster bomber.

Late in July 1945 Jack and about 4,000 former-Pow's boarded the SS Orion and departed London for Sydney. Crossing the pacific Ocean the news of Japan's surrender came through on 15 August 1945.

Jack was formally discharged from the RAAF on the 25 January 1946 and reunited with his family.

Jack married Dolores Cook a Melbourne girl on the 28 May 1954, and they had a daughter Sandra in April 1955.

As a Victorian resident of many decades Jack has been a strong supporter of the Shrine of Remembrance, the Victorian ex-POW's Association and the Victorian Branch of the RSL. He has assisted both organisations with raising awareness and fundraising appeals for the veteran Community. Jack joined the RSL and has been an active member of the Camberwell City sub-branch. In 2014 the President of the Evans Head Memorial Aerodrome and Heritage Aviation Association asked Jack to become their patron.

Jack is also a member of the AFA Ballarat Branch and on the 28 March 2019 was the guest speaker at the opening of the recently renovated Hut 48 at the Ballarat aerodrome, the official headquarters of the branch and the site of the 1 WAGS WW2 base where Jack graduated as a Wireless Air Gunner.

Jack gave a moving address on his experiences as a POW with a profound message of Respect and Compassion.

Jack will turn 102 on the 20 December 2019.

A truly inspirational figure.

Acknowledgement-

Marcus Fielding- Jack Bell's War

The remarkable story of an Australian airman and POW in North Africa, Italy and Germany