

Grumble, Gossip and Glee: Australians in Canada in the Empire Air Training Scheme

“I suppose there’s sun bathing and surfing everywhere around the Australian coast,” a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) trainee wrote in the pages of a 1941 newspaper.¹ “It’s good to think about sun and warmth, because the temperature here today is 31 degrees below zero.”

Six pages later came a reply from the newspaper’s editors, all Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) trainees: “You Australians are always moaning ... Wait till it’s about 100 below. You’ll be sorry.”

This exchange between Australian and Canadian recruits occurred in the aptly named *Grumble ‘n Gossip*, a newspaper circulated by the Canadian administration of an air force training station in Edmonton, Canada. Within its pages, Australian aircrew fondly remember warmer weather and warn new arrivals about “certain phrases in common use at home that carry entirely different meanings” in polite Canadian society.² Articles are interspersed with reflections from Royal Air Force (RAF) recruits on visits to the United States, portraits of RCAF instructors, and advertisements for the best hamburgers in Edmonton. The mixture of Australian, Canadian and English voices bear witness to the vibrant life of a wartime training station, one in which the bloody combat occurring in the skies above Britain and Germany is notably distant. What were RAAF recruits doing here, complaining about the Canadian climate? In the midst of a new World War, why were Australian aircrew busying themselves as much with learning Canadian slang as with learning to fly?

The presence of Australians in the stomping grounds of the RCAF was facilitated by the Empire Air Training Scheme, an agreement to share in the training of air force recruits established between Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada in 1939. The scheme was a British reaction to the rapidly emerging disparity between the capabilities of its own air force and Nazi Germany’s Luftwaffe. Despite having pledged in 1934 to keep pace with the development of German airpower, by 1935 Whitehall had realised that it could not annually muster 50,000 aircrew from the British population to bridge the gap in manpower, with British recruitment projections forecasting just 22,000 new recruits yearly.³ Neither could it maintain a surplus of fresh graduates ready to replace casualties as necessary.⁴ Compounding this shortage of manpower was a lack of space suitable for the construction of new air force training schools.⁵ Existing British schools also suffered from their geographical proximity to an increasingly hostile Germany, which would leave trainee aircrew vulnerable to encounters with the enemy before they had reached operational competency.⁶

To counteract these difficulties, Britain appealed to its Dominions for support, offering to shoulder a portion of the costs and administrative responsibilities of training air force recruits in exchange for the creation of a single pool of allied aircrew from which the RAF could draw to

¹ Papers of Flying Officer R Maxwell Bryant, Collection 9, Australian War Memorial [hereafter AWM] PR00275.

² Ibid.

³ John McCarthy, *A Last Call of Empire: Australian Aircrew, Britain and the Empire Air Training Scheme* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1988), 13-14; “Empire Air Training Scheme,” Australian War Memorial, published March 25, 2021, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/raaf/eats>.

⁴ McCarthy, *A Last Call*, 13-14.

⁵ “Empire Air Training Scheme,” Part 1, compiled by Flight Lieutenant R J Lindsay, February 1946, AWM 81/4/144.

⁶ Ibid.

defend the empire in European skies.⁷ A key component of this plan was the opportunity for trainees of one nation to complete their training overseas, in the training schools of a different air force.⁸ This approach offered two advantages. First, recruits would gain experience working in a range of conditions without having to fly in combat zones. Canadian training schools were considered particularly desirable for inexperienced recruits, being situated in open and isolated country with clear skies, compared to the foggy and congested airspace of Britain.⁹ Second, overseas training options offered the Australian government a means of overcoming the logistical limitations of the fledgling RAAF. Having been established in March 1921, the RAAF lacked the aircraft and staff required to mobilise and maintain an independent national air force, let alone the roughly 26,000 aircrew the Australian government had pledged to provide Britain by 1943.¹⁰ McCarthy argues that, on the eve of the Second World War, the RAAF could barely be considered “an effective fighting service”.¹¹ Participation in a joint training scheme was a convenient solution to shortcomings within British and Australian national defence capabilities.

Under the terms of the December 1939 Ottawa Agreement, which established the Empire Air Training Scheme and committed Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Britain to participation, Australia would initially allow for two-ninths (22 per cent) of RAAF recruits to complete a portion of their training at RCAF schools.¹² In actuality, the proportion was higher, amounting to roughly 10,000 of the nearly 38,000 Australians who passed through the scheme before its suspension in March 1945.¹³ This occurred in addition to the existing system of transferring RAAF personnel to England for advanced training; 27,000 Australian recruits from the scheme who completed basic training in Australia went on to serve in operational training units (OTUs) in Britain.¹⁴ By late 1940, opportunities to train in Rhodesia (modern day Zambia and Zimbabwe) were established, catering for the training of around 700 RAAF recruits by 1945.¹⁵

A typical training pathway for RAAF aircrew recruits entering the scheme began with initial training, a 12-week course conducted in Australia.¹⁶ Recruits then mustered as pilot, navigator (initially termed “air observer”) or wireless operator/air gunner, after which they began intermediate training. The type and length of intermediate training varied¹⁷ according to an individual’s mustering: pilots and navigators completed approximately 12 weeks at service flying training school (SFTS) or air observer school respectively, while wireless operators undertook a

⁷ Hank Nelson, *Chased by the Sun: The Australians in Bomber Command in World War II* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2002), 41; Chris Clark, “The Empire Air Training Scheme,” Australian War Memorial, published November 1, 2019, <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/events/conference/air-war-europe/clark>.

⁸ “Empire Air Training Scheme,” Part 1.

⁹ Douglas Napier Gillison, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 3 – Air*, vol. 1 (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1962), 79-80; Clark, “The Empire Air Training Scheme.”

¹⁰ Alan Stephens, *The Australian Centenary History of Defence, Volume II: The Royal Australian Air Force* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 29, 68; Nelson, *Chased by the Sun*, 41.

¹¹ McCarthy, *A Last Call*, 30.

¹² Stephens, *The Australian Centenary History of Defence*, 62.

¹³ Ibid, 70; “Empire Air Training Scheme participation,” Royal Australian Air Force, no date, <https://www.airforce.gov.au/about-us/history/our-journey/empire-air-training-scheme-participation>.

¹⁴ Nelson, *Chased by the Sun*, 44.

¹⁵ Clark, “The Empire Air Training Scheme.”

¹⁶ *Air Crew Entry Under the Empire Air Scheme: Notes for the Information of Candidates Regarding Entry into the Royal Australian Air Force as Air Crews*, in Papers of Warrant Officer Gordon Charles Alcorn, Collection 3, AWM PR04564.

¹⁷ Exact course lengths within each training phase varied between each air force and were also repeatedly revised over the course of the war in response to changing demands in manpower and the operational competency displayed by graduates. See John Herington, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 3 – Air*, vol. 3 (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1954), 108.

24-week course at wireless school.¹⁸ Navigators and wireless operators completed an additional bombing and gunnery course lasting four to eight weeks, with the latter then undertaking a short course in astro-navigation.¹⁹ The RAAF's *Notes for the Information of [Air Crew] Candidates* noted that this intermediate training phase offered the possibility of a posting to Canada, Rhodesia or England.²⁰ Successful completion of intermediate training in any country would, for the majority of Australian recruits, lead to service in an OTU in England before joining an RAF squadron and undertaking active duty.²¹

The terms of the Ottawa Agreement and the Australian government's formal announcement of the scheme to the Australian public drew heavily on the rhetoric of empire. Australian Minister for Air and Civil Aviation, J. V. Fairbairn likened Australian participation in the British-led defence project to a "Cub" answering the "Lion roar".²² In a public radio broadcast, Prime Minister Robert Menzies declared that Britain's "effort is our effort, [her] success will be our success", thereby linking the strategic priorities of the two nations.²³ This understanding was also conveyed through popular representations of the scheme, which the Australian press described as working towards the creation of an "Empire Air Armada".²⁴ Under the scheme, Australia's air war was seen as taking place within the broader aims of the British war effort. This representation of the scheme cohered with the strategic wisdom underpinning the Australian government's defence planning at the outbreak of war, which prioritised defeating Hitler in Europe.²⁵

The desire to do one's duty to the empire was a key motivation for enlistment in the Australian armed forces, as is evident within the reflections of several of the scheme's graduates. Squadron Leader Arthur Doubleday noted "a lot of the Mother Country attitude" had spurred his decision to join the RAAF in November 1940, as well as a "great feeling of loyalty to Britain".²⁶ Following the announcement of war, Flight Lieutenant Robert Murphy recalled a feeling that "we've got to get behind England and help," while Flying Officer Harold Wright enlisted out of "respect and regard or even love, for the old Empire".²⁷ However, a sense of duty towards one's imagined community does not explain what attracted Australian men to the RAAF rather than the AIF or Royal Australian Navy. As Wohl argues, the 1930s marked a peak of Western civilian interest in the technology of flight, accompanied in Australia by the romanticisation of the pilot and air warfare.²⁸ Such romanticisation was facilitated by the public's fundamental ignorance of the reality of air combat, in stark contrast to the knowledge of the brutality of trench warfare that

¹⁸ Papers of Warrant Officer Gordon Charles Alcorn, Collection 3; Gillison, *Australia in the War*, 108.

¹⁹ Gillison, *Australia in the War*, 108.

²⁰ Papers of Warrant Officer Gordon Charles Alcorn, Collection 3.

²¹ *Air Crew Entry*.

²² Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 10 May 1940, 702 (F. J. Fairbairn, Minister for Air and Civil Aviation), http://historichansard.net/hofreps/1940/19400510_reps_15_163/.

²³ Prime Minister's Press Statement, 11 October 1939, item 5, AWM138.

²⁴ "How to Join Empire Air Armada," *Argus*, October 14, 1939,

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/11254352?browse=ndp%3Abrowse%2Ftitle%2FA%2Ftitle%2F13%2F1939%2F10%2F14%2Fpage%2F603686%2Farticle%2F11254352>.

²⁵ McCarthy, *A Last Call*, 62; Tony James Brady, *The Empire Has An Answer: The Empire Air Training Scheme as reported in the Australian Press 1939-1945* (Newport: Big Sky Publishing, 2019), 29.

²⁶ Arthur William Doubleday, interviewed by Laurence Field, Sydney, November 9, 1988, AWM S01276.

²⁷ Robert Basil Gray Murphy, interviewed by Edward Stokes, location unknown, January 31, 1989, AWM S00523; Harold John Alfred Wright, interviewed by Edward Stokes, location unknown, May, 1989, AWM S00582.

²⁸ Robert Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight: Aviation and the Western Imagination 1920-1950* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 2005); Suzanne Jillian Evans, "The Empire Air Training Scheme: Identity, Empire and Memory" (doctoral thesis, University of Melbourne, 2010), 26, <https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/items/4db43c12-7242-55e0-ac4b-51a5d42bc743>.

had been gained from the First World War. “I’d seen so many films and horrible things from the first war of the trenches,” recalled Flight Lieutenant Fraser Falkiner. “I thought, well if I’m going to do something, I’d sooner do it in the air force.”²⁹ Public notions of the magnificence of flight were arguably encouraged by the prohibitive cost of flying lessons, which few families in Depression-era Australia could afford.³⁰ In some cases, enlistment in the air force was a convenient means to pursue a childhood dream without the associated cost, and with the added bonus that one would be paid to do so. For Flight Lieutenant Jack Donald, “there was no question of patriotism” in his decision to join up: “it was just a matter of getting free flying.”³¹

The prospect of travelling to Canada under the scheme does not appear to feature in veterans’ recollections of the decision to join the RAAF. While RAAF recruitment material encouraged men to enlist so as to fulfil their responsibility to their nation (“This is a Man’s job”, declared a 1941 recruitment poster), training in Canada does not seem to have been specifically touted as an enticement, even where such material highlighted the possibility of “going places” with the air force.³² This may have resulted from the fact that selection for training in Canada did not follow strict protocols, but instead appears to have been either a matter of luck, or a case of volunteering. Regardless of the method of selection, RAAF recruits reacted to postings in Canada with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. Flight Lieutenant Murphy recalled that the “thoughts of going to Canada were fantastic. It was just like an exciting trip”.³³ Writing to alert his parents of an overseas posting in January 1941, Leading Aircraftman (LAC) William Hawes assured them that the “last bunch” of Australians sent to Canada had a “great time”.³⁴ For young men whose capacity for travel was otherwise limited by financial and familial obligations, the journey to Canada was a major departure from typical life in Australia. This contributed to feelings of anxiety. Despite his reassurances to his parents, Hawes wrote of his unease at “this going away business” and the anticipatory loneliness he felt at the thought of being so far from family.³⁵ On the eve of his embarkation for Canada in June 1941, LAC Sydney Patrick recorded in his diary “a queer feeling in my stomach that one does get ... when one is about ... to enter the dentist’s chair”.³⁶ He “wondered secretly” if he would ever see Australia again.³⁷

Before Japan’s entry to the war³⁸, the typical passage to Canada involved a sea voyage via New Zealand, Fiji, or sometimes Hawai’i, before docking at mainland United States or Vancouver on Canada’s Pacific coast. The remaining distance to the training schools was covered by truck or

²⁹ Fraser “Jum” Falkiner, interviewed by Susan Green, location unknown, April, 1988, S00508.

³⁰ Evans, “The Empire Air Training Scheme,” 48.

³¹ Jack Donald, interviewed by Edward Stokes, location unknown, July 4, 1990, AWM S00952.

³² Walter Lacy Jardine, *This is a Man’s job! Join the RAAF*, 1941, photolithograph on paper, 49.5 x 64.8 cm, AWM ARTV04283, Canberra, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/ARTV04283>; Artist unknown, *Going places! How about you?*, circa 1943, photolithograph, 76.2 x 50 cm, AWM ARTV04296, Canberra, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C99763>. The Australian Press reported on the experiences of Australian aircrew training in Canada throughout the war and published numerous photographs depicting trainees’ daily life in a foreign environment. While the exact impact of such coverage – if it had any at all – is not known, it must be acknowledged that some recruits to the Scheme may have been encouraged to enlist by the possibility of international travel.

³³ Murphy, interview.

³⁴ Papers of Flight Sergeant William George Hawes, Collection 3, AWM PR85/043.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Papers of Flight Lieutenant Sydney Denis Patrick, Collection 1, AWM2017.636.1, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2733483>.

³⁷ Papers of Flight Lieutenant Sydney Denis Patrick, Collection 1.

³⁸ In the final years of the war this voyage was rerouted through the Pitcairn Islands and the Panama Canal to avoid enemy encounters in the Pacific.

rail. The three- to four-week trip represented an enforced interregnum in training, with ample leave available for recruits to explore the exotic locations they were passing through. The dominant position the voyage to Canada occupies in the diaries and correspondence of recruits is unsurprising. Although trainees were required to attend lectures at sea – four a day, in LAC Hawes' case – the tedium of lessons was interspersed with the excitement of onshore leave at Suva and Auckland.³⁹ LAC Maxwell Bryant described going “all round” the latter, “vist[ing] all [the] famous spots”, while in Suva he encountered “a really beautiful green country of palms ... [and] banana trees”.⁴⁰ For Warrant Officer Gordon Alcorn, “travelling the world by boat” was nothing short of “a wonderful adventure”, and particularly for someone who “had only been as far away as Melbourne” from his hometown of Singleton, New South Wales.⁴¹

The approach to Canadian training stations by rail was often a highlight of the trip. Alcorn's comments on his trip through the US to Vancouver illustrates the general feelings of RAAF contingents: “We were very excited and happy travelling in a foreign country. We are all 19 years old.”⁴² This leg of the journey offered Australians a chance to experience scenery they had previously only encountered in guidebooks, newsreels, or artwork. Pilot Officer Fred Dyer likened his view on a train from Vancouver to Calgary to an illustration from “a first class tourist booklet”.⁴³ Warrant Officer Jack Garland recalled sighting “log cabins as we have only seen in tourist leaflets or at the movies”.⁴⁴ Recruits' first glimpses of the Rocky Mountains left a lasting impression. LAC Bryant described “snow topped, fir covered mountains ... a really delightful experience for we people from the land of the plains”.⁴⁵ “A very beautiful sight,” Hawes wrote in a letter home.⁴⁶

This enthusiasm extended to recruits' first impressions of training school. LAC Kenneth Wright initially described Canadian training school as a “luxury” when “[c]ompared to camp life in Australia”.⁴⁷ This feeling was buoyed by the eagerness of locals to meet the foreign servicemen. Nell Charlwood, a resident of Edmonton, recounted her excitement at the arrival of Australian and New Zealand recruits bound for Number 2 Air Observer's School, located on the town's outskirts at Blatchford Field.⁴⁸ These recruits represented an exotic cohort for the “a very small” and out of the way city.⁴⁹ Canadian enthusiasm manifested in goodwill towards those wearing the blue RAAF uniform. “From the very start,” Flight Lieutenant Garth Clabburn wrote in a reflection of his training, “the Canadian people were the most perfect hosts. You could walk nowhere without some kind person ... offering to drive you to where you were heading”.⁵⁰

RAAF trainees received a significant number of invitations to spend their evenings and weekends with Canadian families, who took it upon themselves to act as tour guides and surrogate relatives. In its October 1944 report, the RAAF Liaison Office in Ottawa described Canadian hospitality as “wonderful. Practically everywhere, the Canadian people have taken

³⁹ Papers of Flight Sergeant William George Hawes, Collection 3.

⁴⁰ Papers of Flying Officer R Maxwell Bryant, Collection 7.

⁴¹ Papers of Warrant Officer Gordon Charles Alcorn, Collection 2, AWM PR04564.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Stephen Dyer, *A Thirty Course War: Airmen of the RAAF at War 1941-1945*, 314, AWM MSS1529.

⁴⁴ Papers of Warrant Officer Jack Garland, AWM PR88/132.

⁴⁵ Papers of Flying Officer R Maxwell Bryant, Collection 7.

⁴⁶ Papers of Flight Sergeant William George Hawes, Collection 3.

⁴⁷ Papers of Flight Sergeant Kenneth Irving Wright, AWM PR91/021.

⁴⁸ Nell Charlwood, interviewed for *Wings of the Storm*, no. 21, AWM F09575.

⁴⁹ Charlwood, interview.

⁵⁰ Papers of Flight Lieutenant Garth Edward Sommerville Clabburn, AWM PR04150, accession no. 2019.22.277, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2689925>.

[Australians] into their homes”.⁵¹ Clabburn was a frequent visitor to the Davis household during his posting to Number 2 SFTS in Uplands, Ontario, and remembered the family attending his wings parade – a form of graduation ceremony.⁵² The family drove Clabburn to the train station to set forth for further training in England, with their parting marked by “a few lumps in throats”.⁵³ LAC Hawes was taken in by the Smith family at Number 4 SFTS in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in 1941. Marjorie Smith wrote to Hawes’ parents about his wings parade and sent photographs of the occasion, remarking that “the Australian lads were so smart that we felt very proud” to know them.⁵⁴ The bond established between the Smiths and Hawes continued, eventually marked by letters of condolence sent to Hawes’ parents following his death on operations in July 1942.⁵⁵

Few RAAF recruits were prepared for the Canadian climate. While the cold and snow were initially a novelty – “[f]ound that it was excellent stuff to throw,” wrote Warrant Officer Garland – the discovery that they could not be easily escaped caused much irritability.⁵⁶ The weather at Number 1 SFTS (Camp Borden) in Ontario was “vile” according to Flight Lieutenant Falkiner, while Flying Officer Wright, based at Edmonton, wondered “how anyone [could] live” through the freezing Canadian winters.⁵⁷ Compounding the shock of the cold was the inadequacy of the RAAF-issued winter clothing, which Garland described as an “obscene joke”.⁵⁸ Pilot Officer Eric Mattingley likened the uniforms of their RCAF counterparts to “horse rugs” and concluded that the Australian equivalents were simply “not designed for these conditions”.⁵⁹ Nell Charlwood remembered her surprise at the “terrible” insufficiency of the Australian winter wear.⁶⁰ Recruits’ initial delight at the central heating available in sleeping quarters and classrooms however, quickly turned to resentment once they realised that the Canadians refused to open the windows to let in fresh air.⁶¹ The more practically-minded engaged in what Mattingley called a “cat and mouse” game with their Canadian roommates, with the parties attempting to open and close windows while the others were asleep.⁶² Wright recalled a more destructive version of this game in which the Australians, physically prevented from tampering with the thermostat by the installation of a protective cage, smashed the windows of their hut.⁶³

Many Australians had never seen snow before and spoke of their first snowfall with great excitement. LAC Bryant was “[p]eacefully tucked in bed” at camp “when somebody yelled ‘it’s snowing’”; the RAAF recruits “flew out of bed”, to the great amusement of the Canadians.⁶⁴ Australians were delighted by the opportunity to learn a new array of sports, even when their first attempts ended in disaster.⁶⁵ “I went to the [ice skating] rink a happy, carefree Australian,” one recruit declared in a *Grumble ‘n Gossip* article. “I came away a broken disillusioned relic of a

⁵¹ Papers Concerning the EATS [Empire Air Training Scheme], Part 6, 338, AA1966/5, National Archives of Australia [hereafter NAA], Canberra.

⁵² Papers of Flight Lieutenant Garth Edward Sommerville Clabburn, 2019.22.277.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Papers of Flight Sergeant William George Hawes, Collection 3.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Papers of Warrant Officer Jack Garland, AWM PR88/132.

⁵⁷ Falkiner, interview; Wright, interview.

⁵⁸ Papers of Warrant Officer Jack Garland, AWM PR88/132.

⁵⁹ Papers of Pilot Officer Eric Mattingley, AWM 92/0249.

⁶⁰ Charlwood, interview.

⁶¹ Donald, interview.

⁶² Papers of Pilot Officer Eric Mattingley, AWM 92/0249.

⁶³ Wright, interview.

⁶⁴ Papers of Flying Officer R Maxwell Bryant, Collection 7.

⁶⁵ Charlwood, interview.

man”.⁶⁶ At the end of the piece, the recruit announced he had nevertheless purchased his own pair of skates.⁶⁷ Such perseverance was common amongst RAAF trainees, reflecting the increasing popularity of ice-skating and skiing at home in Australia, as noted in an article titled “Ski-ing in Australia” in the same issue of *Grumble*.⁶⁸

A RAAF recruit’s experience in Canada was, of course, influenced by the location of his station and the type of training he undertook. To gain a better understanding of day-to-day life on Canadian stations, it is useful to examine the experiences of two recruits: trainee navigator Max Bryant, and trainee pilot Sydney Patrick, both of whom were present in Canada by the latter half of 1941. Cowra-born Bryant was posted to Number 2 Air Observer’s School, Edmonton, within four months of being called up. Arriving in early October 1941, he recorded in his diary, “A fine station,” noting the heated buildings and generous Canadians offering him lifts into town.⁶⁹ Sydney Patrick’s first impressions of Number 7 SFTS at Fort Macleod, Alberta, in August 1941 were dominated by the poor weather, which resulted in the repeated “scrubbing”, or cancellation, of flying exercises.⁷⁰ Patrick also complained that the Canadian administration “don’t seem to notice the wind” at all, refusing to scrub lessons “until the rooves start coming off buildings”.⁷¹

Bryant’s training at Edmonton lasted roughly three months. According to his diary, it consisted of a mixture of studying theory in classroom lectures and undertaking practical exercises in Avro Ansons in the air. Two weeks after his intermediate training began, Bryant observed that “work is piling up – soon be studying flat out I fear”.⁷² Although trainees could take nightly leave to visit Edmonton’s town centre, Bryant’s course was becoming “so hard we can’t afford to go out at night”.⁷³ The intensity of study was compounded by the regular imposition of exams, the first round occurring in mid-November 1941. Bryant described studying for hours into the night in preparation and despaired that he “still [knew] nothing”.⁷⁴ By 18 November, his anxiety over looming assessments peaked: “If I don’t pass these exams I think I’ll jump in the Saskatchewan [River].”⁷⁵

Given the amount of study required, engagement with the content of training played a significant role in recruits’ emotional wellbeing while in Canada. Bryant’s genuine interest in navigation and bombing is evident in his letters home, which contained detailed explanations of typical training exercises, complete with sketches of his equipment and diagrams explaining the kinds of calculations he was required to perform.⁷⁶ He assured his family, “[b]ombing is good – the most enjoyable thing of all ... There is so much to think of and do that you feel you really are doing something”.⁷⁷ For Bryant and others, strong exam results were highly valued as evidence of their hard work; a good mark was an event to write home about.⁷⁸ Bryant recorded his results and

⁶⁶ Papers of Flying Officer R Maxwell Bryant, Collection 9.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Papers of Flying Officer R Maxwell Bryant, Collection 7.

⁷⁰ Papers of Flight Lieutenant Sydney Denis Patrick, Collection 1.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Papers of Flying Officer R Maxwell Bryant, Collection 7.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Papers of Flying Officer R Maxwell Bryant, Collection 15.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Papers of Flight Officer William Martin Murphy, Collection 1, 3DRL/7733; Papers of Flight Sergeant William George Hawes, Collection 4.

average grade from each round of exams in his diary. In late November 1941 he sent word to his family that he “had come second” in the class.⁷⁹ “I was surprised and delighted all in one breath,” he wrote, especially so since he had been “contemplating packing my kit” after finishing the navigation and mathematics papers.⁸⁰

Patrick also engaged with his intermediate flying training, as demonstrated by his desire to perform well enough to be admitted to a navigational course following graduation from Number 7 SFTS.⁸¹ Upon his arrival at general reconnaissance school on Prince Edward Island in October 1941, however, he found the lessons to be “dreadfully comprehensive”.⁸² Compounding the hard work was the fact that the course had recently been shortened “from twelve to nine weeks” without a reduction in content.⁸³ “[W]e will have to work back three hours or so every night until our eyes drop out,” he complained, noting the course’s high failure rate.⁸⁴ On 20 October Patrick made his most stringent criticism of navigational training: “Why must I work so hard when wars are designed especially for people to bludge.”⁸⁵ This tongue-in-cheek statement contrasts sharply with Patrick’s dedication to service flying training, for which he “undeniably” put in “hard work”, in accordance with his “great ambition” to become a pilot.⁸⁶

Bryant and Patrick’s diary entries during intermediate training reveal, however, that their intensive studies nevertheless left ample time for leisure. By mid-October 1941, Bryant had established a social group that became more tight-knit, consisting of his best friend and training partner, LAC Don Charlwood (author of *No Moon Tonight*), and two Canadian women: Billie Wilson and Nell East.⁸⁷ Billie and Bryant were involved in an on- and off-again relationship while Bryant was posted to Canada; Nell married Charlwood at the end of the war. In the numerous social outings that fill the pages of Bryant’s diary, this quartet appear again and again, accompanying each other to films, dinners at the East household, and trips to popular tourist destinations on the weekends. The intrusion of exams into this busy social schedule was “particularly horrid”, Bryant wrote, “because the girls are offering to teach us to ski, skate, [and] bowl”.⁸⁸ Bryant’s first attempts at skating were disastrous. Despite having “flopped and floundered” on 23 October, within five days he had purchased his own skates and was going to the rink to practice.⁸⁹ In January 1942, Bryant’s repertoire of snow sports expanded to incorporate skiing. “Laugh of the day,” he recorded, “was Don giving up in disgust after sliding backwards down a slope.”⁹⁰

These activities are representative of the experiences of many RAAF recruits sent to Canada under the Empire Air Training Scheme. Recruits tended to make close friends with those of a similar background, but mixed with a broad cast of Canadian civilians, especially Canadian women. Such was the significance of these RAAF–Canadian relationships that official Canadian war artist Molly Joan Lamb Bobak chose to create a mural depicting the Australian experience of training in Canada, gifted to the Australian War Memorial in 1947 in commemoration of the two

⁷⁹ Papers of Flying Officer R Maxwell Bryant, Collection 15.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Papers of Flight Lieutenant Sydney Denis Patrick, Collection 1.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Papers of Flying Officer R Maxwell Bryant, Collection 7.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

countries' collaboration.⁹¹ It is important to acknowledge, however, exceptions to this rule: LAC Arthur Williams' letters home were critical of "the number of fellows that think the only way to have a good time is to drink or to go to wild parties" with locals, especially when there was study to be done.⁹²

The quality of a recruit's social life was partly dependent on the location of his station. The short distance between Number 2 Air Observer's School and the Edmonton town centre facilitated an easy flow of recruits to and from the station; a few hours at the pictures or the civilian skating rink was achievable within the nightly leave allowance. In contrast, Patrick's transfer to a rural station on Prince Edward Island for general reconnaissance school represented an apparently fatal blow to his social life. Whilst at Fort Macleod Patrick noted that "the women over here ... make ... it harder to concentrate", he railed against the "droopy little people" in Prince Edward Island's capital, Charlottetown.⁹³ Even the singing lessons available in town were of a substandard quality, Patrick doubting whether his teacher knew "very much about singing" at all.⁹⁴ By 10 November, Patrick concluded, "[a]nother month of this place and I'll be a case for the nut factory – the people are dumb, uneducated, stuck up, poor and without hospitality, may they rot in their own pits of despair."⁹⁵

That the lack of a social scene in Charlottetown would trouble Patrick so much, or that exam performance would dominate Bryant's thinking for weeks at a time, reveals an important aspect of the Canadian training experience: recruits' apparent disconnection from the war itself. Across the diaries of RAAF trainees, remarkably little consideration is given to the death and destruction that continued to sweep through Europe, where the majority would be posted for operational service, and where one in five Australians would die.⁹⁶ This said, it is important to note that recruits were exposed to the threat of death while stationed at training stations. According to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, at least 146 Australian airmen were buried in Canadian war cemeteries over the course of the Second World War.⁹⁷ However, while casualties accrued in training were repeatedly mentioned throughout diaries and personal correspondence, they occupy a position of ambiguous significance. In Patrick's diary entries from 1941, references to training crashes are sandwiched between descriptions of the Northern Lights and announcements of his entry into the reconnaissance course.⁹⁸ The apparent monotony of death is conveyed in Patrick's brief assessment that a "life isn't much in the forces".⁹⁹ A similar nonchalance is evident in references to training casualties in recruits' correspondence. LAC Hawes warned his parents in April 1941 that they would "probably hear in the papers that two of our chaps got killed in a crash here this week".¹⁰⁰ His commentary on the incident was short: "bad luck[,] they were very nice chaps".¹⁰¹

⁹¹ Molly Joan Lamb Bobak, *Untitled* [mural of Australians in Canada as part of the Empire Air Training Scheme], c. 1946-1947, oil and marker pen on cotton canvas, 296.5 x 940 cm, AWM ART36227, Canberra.

⁹² Papers of Warrant Officer Arthur Roland Williams, Collection 1, PR05973.

⁹³ Papers of Flight Lieutenant Sydney Denis Patrick, Collection 1.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Lachlan Grant, "RAAF losses in Bomber Command: understanding the numbers," Australian War Memorial, published July 15, 2020, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/raaf-losses>.

⁹⁷ Commonwealth War Graves Commission [record search for RAAF Second World War deaths commemorated in Canada], accessed February 2023, <https://www.cwgc.org/>.

⁹⁸ Papers of Flight Lieutenant Sydney Denis Patrick, Collection 1.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Papers of Flight Sergeant William George Hawes, Collection 4.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

This attitude, however, is more likely indicative of a desire not to fuel the anxieties of those at home by disclosing one's own fear of being caught in a fatal accident. LAC Edwin Enright emphasised in his letters home, "it's usually only the reckless ones who crash", whereas he had received "the word 'reliable' on all [his] reports".¹⁰² While it may be argued that the regularity of training accidents desensitised recruits to the point of indifference, exposure to or personal involvement in crashes and near misses did leave a lasting impact. Recalling a flying exercise in which he had narrowly avoided colliding with another aircraft, Pilot Officer Mattingley spoke of being "humbled by the enormity" of the occasion.¹⁰³ Warrant Officer Alcorn expressed concern at the numerous crashes at Number 4 Bombing and Gunnery School, Fingal, albeit in far fewer words. "A Bolingbrook [bomber] crashed today," reads an entry from February 1943.¹⁰⁴ "We fly tomorrow. We're flying in Bolingbrooks." Lectures on methods for escaping a burning aircraft disturbed Bryant and Charlwood, who decided to swap lists of personal belongings with instructions on what to do with them "should anything go wrong".¹⁰⁵ This decision came a few days after Bryant recorded a series of training accidents occurring in short succession, including the explosion of a Blenheim aircraft which he had personally witnessed.¹⁰⁶ After drawing up their inventories, Charlwood and Bryant confessed to experiencing a "funny feeling something may happen tomorrow".¹⁰⁷ The difficulty of lessons and the dangerous nature of practical exercises impressed upon some the seriousness of what was to come. What they had learnt, in LAC William Murphy's words, "might mean the difference between getting back to base and not getting back".¹⁰⁸ Guest lectures on the state of the air war in Europe provided by aircrew on leave from active operations further reinforced this appreciation of the value of training. While some of these furnished the recruits with "a truer picture" of what awaited them, however, Bryant suspected other lecturers had been tasked "to sell us the war" and "[p]ainted it as lots of fun".¹⁰⁹

The isolation of RAAF trainees from the wider war during training was far from absolute. The lives of the Australian contingent in Canada were significantly disrupted by the fall of Singapore in February 1942, an event which revealed Australia's potential vulnerability to Japanese invasion. Occurring the same month as the bombing of Darwin, the loss of Singapore was a source of great discontent for the RAAF cohort. For Bryant, Singapore and Darwin prompted a reckoning with the reality of his looming operational service. On 15 February 1942, he wrote, "Life doesn't seem so good now with all the danger to our homeland", an admission that sits in contrast to the descriptions of study and socialisation that dominate previous diary entries.¹¹⁰ "Life is very sweet" he added on 27 March, "and more so when I realise how it may soon be gone. I want to go home to do my little bit towards my country's freedom before the race is run."¹¹¹ For other recruits, the prospect of continued service overseas generated "a tremendous amount of bad feeling" towards British and Australian high command.¹¹² The accompanying fall

¹⁰² Papers of Sergeant Edwin George Enright, Collection 1, PR03827.

¹⁰³ Papers of Pilot Officer Eric Mattingley, AWM 92/0249.

¹⁰⁴ Papers of Warrant Officer Gordon Charles Alcorn, Collection 2.

¹⁰⁵ Papers of Flying Officer R Maxwell Bryant, Collection 7.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Papers of Flight Officer William Martin Murphy, Collection 1.

¹⁰⁹ Papers of Flying Officer R Maxwell Bryant, Collection 7.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Bryant would later go missing on operations in June 1943. His body, and those of his crewmates, was recovered from the sea and buried in Amsterdam later that year.

¹¹² Wright, interview; McCarthy, *A Last Call*, 67-68.

in morale was considered severe enough to warrant a series of special visits from the Australian High Commissioner to Canada, Sir William Glasgow, to Canadian stations.¹¹³

According to Flight Officer Wright, Glasgow justified maintaining Australian service in Europe “quite well”, on the grounds that “there weren’t enough planes” available at home to accommodate returning graduates.¹¹⁴ However, a corresponding “bad feeling” was also developing on the home front. By 1944, some airmen reported to the Australian press that they had received white feathers from Australia, the senders accusing them of deliberately remaining in Europe to avoid conflict in the Pacific.¹¹⁵ Flight Lieutenant Thomas Fitzgerald claimed that the trucks sent to pick up his contingent as they disembarked at Melbourne after the end of the war bore the message “Jap dodgers return” on their sides.¹¹⁶ Brady has argued that this phenomenon was an exception to the widespread and sustained Australian civilian support for RAAF involvement in the Empire Air Training Scheme.¹¹⁷ Yet, the continued streaming of RAAF recruits to overseas training and service following the fall of Singapore has remained a point of contention in the historiography of the scheme. McCarthy and Stephens have suggested that Australia’s participation in the scheme after the Fall of Singapore was indicative of its fundamental flaw: vesting control over the operational posting of RAAF recruits in the British Air Ministry, rather than the RAAF.¹¹⁸ Stephens argues the scheme’s diversion of manpower away from Australia during a time of overt strategic need, in combination with the RAF’s policy of discouraging the formation of majority-Australian squadrons and its preference for British candidates to fill command positions, “reduced the RAAF’s contribution to that of cannon fodder”.¹¹⁹ Evans proposed that the Australian public’s “humiliation” at government failure to provide the necessary resources for home defence contributed to the disappearance of the scheme from popular memory of Australian involvement in the Second World War.¹²⁰

There is a – perhaps related – tendency to treat RAAF recruits’ training as a secondary point of interest to an airman’s service on operations. Where the scheme is referred to in veterans’ interviews, it often takes on the status of a prelude to war, in which those who had enlisted waited for their initiation into the ranks of servicemen.¹²¹ This characterisation, however, fails to appreciate that the completion of training in Canada represented a significant portion of recruits’ war experience. For those who received the call-up in late 1943 or 1944, training under the scheme constituted the entirety of this experience, the war being almost over by the time they graduated. Having embarked for training with the RCAF in May 1944, Flight Sergeant Wright had only just completed his SFTS course before he was “put on a draft straight for home” in April 1945.¹²² Nevertheless, it was in Canada that Wright lost “at least six” of his friends in training accidents, nearly joining them himself after a mid-air collision with another aircraft during flying formation exercises.¹²³ “I have troubled dreams,” Wright confided in his diary, “with Cessna Cranes flashing in and out of formation.”¹²⁴

¹¹³ Wright, interview.

¹¹⁴ Wright, interview.

¹¹⁵ Brady, *The Empire*, 149-152.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Michael Fitzgerald, interviewed by Timothy Gibson Bowden, Sydney, March 10, 1989, AWM S00536.

¹¹⁷ Brady, *The Empire*, 152.

¹¹⁸ McCarthy, *A Last Call*, 6-11; Stephens, *The Australian Centenary History of Defence*, 60.

¹¹⁹ Stephens, *The Australian Centenary History of Defence*, 60.

¹²⁰ Evans, “The Empire Air Training Scheme,” 109.

¹²¹ See, for example, interview of Albert Irvine Ray, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1006880>.

¹²² Papers of Flight Sergeant Kenneth Irving Wright, AWM PR91/021.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Regardless of the enthusiasm with which recruits approached the challenges of training, they were real challenges. Canada was not a six-month diversion from real life, but a space in which trainees encountered the very real possibility of death in the air. In this space they established relationships, both amongst their own contingent and with the local population. Romantic relationships – some colourful, many brief, and many lasting – certainly existed between Australian recruits and Canadian women, as indicated by Lamb Bobak's mural. The quantity of relationships that progressed to marriage was high enough to warrant the establishment of women's associations, in Canada and Australia, which aimed to prepare Canadian partners of RAAF recruits for the prospect of migration to Australia and integration into Australian society.¹²⁵ The Canadian days also represented, for those such as Don Charlwood and his wife Nell, the period in which some recruits met their significant other and the place to which they aimed to return after completing their service.

Canadian training under the Empire Air Training Scheme was not a minor point of context within the service history of RAAF airmen. Rather, it was a formative experience for Australian recruits, the period in which airmen first confronted the demands that were to be made of them on operations. When considering the experiences of Australian participants in the scheme, it is important to resist the notion that their service began with the first sortie over Europe. Rather, it began with their entry into training, at which point they occupied an ambiguous position between civilian and airman. A closer consideration of the scheme's Canadian component represents a necessary first step towards comprehending this ambiguity.

¹²⁵ Charlwood, interview.

Bibliography

Primary

AWM Private Records

- Alcorn, Gordon Charles. Warrant Officer. PR04564.
- Bryant, R Maxwell. Flying Officer. PR00275.
- Clabburn, Garth Edward Sommerville. Flight Lieutenant. PR04150.
- Enright, Edwin George. Sergeant. PR03827.
- Garland, Jack. Warrant Officer. PR88/132.
- Hawes, William George. Flight Sergeant. PR85/043.
- Mattingley, Eric. Pilot Officer. 92/0249.
- Murphy, William Martin. Flying Officer. 3DRL/7733.
- Williams, Arthur Roland. Warrant Officer. PR05973.
- Wright, Kenneth Irving. Flight Sergeant. PR91/021.

AWM Official Records

- “Empire Air Training Scheme,” Part 1. Compiled by Flight Lieutenant R J Lindsay, February 1946, AWM 81/4/144.
- Papers of Flight Lieutenant Sydney Denis Patrick. AWM 2017.636.1.
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2733483>.
- Prime Minister’s Press Statement, 11 October 1939. AWM138.

Interviews

- Charlwood, Nell. Interviewed for *Wings of the Storm*. Number 21. AWM F09575.
- Donald, Jack. Interviewed by Edward Stokes. Location unknown, 4 July 1990. AWM S00952.
- Doubleday, Arthur William. Interviewed by Laurence Field. Sydney, 9 November 1988. AWM S01276.
- Falkiner, Fraser “Jum”. Interviewed by Susan Green. Location unknown, April 1988. AWM S00508.

Fitzgerald, Thomas Michael. Interviewed by Timothy Gibson Bowden. Sydney, 10 March 1989. AWM S00536.

Murphy, Robert Basil Gray. Interviewed by Edward Stokes. Location unknown, 31 January 1989. AWM S00523.

Wright, Harold John Alfred. Interviewed by Edward Stokes. Location unknown, May 1989. AWM S00582.

National Australian Archives

Records collected by the Historical Section of the Department of Air – AA1966/5.

Hansard

Commonwealth. *Parliamentary Debates*. 10 May 1940.
http://historichansard.net/hofreps/1940/19400510_reps_15_163/.

Newspapers

Argus. “How to Join Empire Air Armada.” 14 October 1939.
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/11254352?browse=ndp%3Abrowse%2Ftitle%2FA%2Ftitle%2F13%2F1939%2F10%2F14%2Fpage%2F603686%2Farticle%2F11254352>.

Images

Artist unknown. *Going places! How about you?* Circa 1943. Photolithograph, 76.2 x 50 cm. AWM ARTV04296, Canberra. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C99763>.

Bobak, Molly Joan Lamb. *Untitled* [mural of Australians in Canada as part of the Empire Air Training Scheme. Circa 1946-1947. Oil and marker pen on cotton canvas, 296.5 x 940 cm. AWM ART36227, Canberra.

Jardine, Walter Lacy. *This is a Man's job! Join the RAAF*. 1941. Photolithograph on paper, 49.5 x 64.8 cm. AWM ARTV04283, Canberra. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/ARTV04283>.

Secondary

Australian War Memorial. “Empire Air Training Scheme.” Published 25 March 2021.
<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/raaf/eats>.

Brady, Tony James. *The Empire Has An Answer: The Empire Air Training Scheme as reported in the Australian Press 1939-1945*. Newport: Big Sky Publishing, 2019.

Clark, Chris. “The Empire Air Training Scheme.” Australian War Memorial, published 1 November 2019. <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/events/conference/air-war-europe/clark>.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission, search accessed February 2023.
<https://www.cwgc.org/>.

Dyer, Stephen. *A Thirty Course War: Airmen of the RAAF at War 1941-1945*. AWM MSS1529.

Evans, Suzanne Jillian. "The Empire Air Training Scheme: Identity, Empire and Memory." Doctoral thesis, University of Melbourne, 2010. <https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/items/4db43c12-7242-55e0-ac4b-51a5d42bc743>.

Gillison, Douglas Napier. *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 3 – Air*. Volume 1. Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1962.

Grant, Lachlan. "RAAF losses in Bomber Command: understanding the numbers." Australian War Memorial, published 15 July 2020, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/raaf-losses>.

Herington, John. *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 3 – Air*. Volume 3. Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1954.

McCarthy, John. *A Last Call of Empire: Australian Aircrew, Britain and the Empire Air Training Scheme*. Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1988.

Nelson, Hank. *Chased by the Sun: The Australians in Bomber Command in World War II*. Sydney: ABC Books, 2002.

Royal Australian Air Force. "Empire Air Training Scheme participation". No date. <https://www.airforce.gov.au/about-us/history/our-journey/empire-air-training-scheme-participation>.

Stephens, Alan. *The Australian Centenary History of Defence, Volume II: The Royal Australian Air Force*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Wohl, Robert. *The Spectacle of Flight: Aviation and the Western Imagination 1920-1950*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 2005.